

AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS POVERTY

In 2005, 492,680 Australians identified themselves as Indigenous Australians. This was 2.4 percent of the Australian population. This includes members of the many and diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are rich in history and cultural traditions. Yet Indigenous Australians experience much higher levels of poverty than non Indigenous Australians. Two measures of this are in health and education.

Indigenous health

If life expectancy is anything to go by, Australia is one of the healthiest countries in the world. On average, Australians live to a ripe old age of 80, the fourth highest in the world. This is not surprising, considering Australia is among the 20 countries that spend the most on healthcare relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

What is surprising is that measures of health for Indigenous Australians on average sit at the bottom of this scale, below populations from very poor countries like Guatemala in Latin America, or India and Mongolia in Asia.



Natalie chops onions in her cooking class in Epenarra, Northern Territory. The class is part of a healthy lifestyles program supported by World Vision and the AFL.

- (i) On average, Indigenous Australians will die 20 years earlier than non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous women live 65 years on average, while men's life expectancy is only 59 years.
- (ii) Compared to other Australians, Indigenous babies are nearly three times as likely to die before their first birthday. They are twice as likely to die at birth or during the early post-natal phase.
- (iii) Rates of infectious diseases are 12 times higher among Indigenous people than the Australian average.
- (iv) Diabetes is two to four times more common among Indigenous Australians, and they are more likely to die from it than non-Indigenous diabetics.
- (v) In some areas, as many as one in five Indigenous children under seven have serious ear infections, such as chronic suppurative otitis media (CSOM), and many are left with permanent hearing loss.

Health spending

It is true that more health money is spent on Indigenous people per head. For every health dollar spent on non-Indigenous Australians, about \$1.22 is spent on Indigenous Australians.

Statistics clearly show that Indigenous people need this extra funding. Compared with other Australians, Indigenous people have three times the rate of illness, and those in remote communities have more limited access to health services.

In many cases the higher dollar figure of spending has not lead to adequate services. The solutions are complex. What is clear is an improvement to services is needed.



Education gap

In Australia's highly developed economy, education is the key to a good job and a better life. Passing on knowledge is a valuable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition, yet many Indigenous people are left behind by current educational processes. In 2004, 76.8 percent of non Indigenous students completed Year 12 while only 39.5 percent of Indigenous students completed Year 12.

Only in recent years have health workers discovered that what was considered to be 'slow learning' in many Indigenous students, was in fact due to hearing problems caused by the ear disease, otitis media.

Another factor is poor attendance rates, even where enrolments are on the increase. Many students who feel that their job prospects are minimal, lose motivation to continue with schooling.

Sometimes Indigenous teachers lack facilities and services that other teachers take for granted, due to the remoteness and poverty of the schools where they work.

The remoteness of many Indigenous communities also means that secondary schools may not be available, forcing children to leave their communities if they want to continue schooling. Faced with this choice, many choose to stay with their communities.

Struggling to be good students

It's difficult to study if you're not eating well, have an untreated ear infection or there's no space at home to study.

In Epenarra, in the Northern Territory, World Vision is working with the community to overcome some of these challenges. As a part of the Healthy Lifestyles Program Breakfast Club, school children start the day with a healthy breakfast to help instill simple health routines. The children fill up on flavoured milk, toast and cereal which provides energy to help them concentrate in class.

The health and education of our population is a concern for all Australians. Since Australia is a country spending generously on essential services, we must find ways to ensure that all Australians, in particular Indigenous Australians, truly have a fair go.

For you to do

1. What is some of the evidence that shows the health of Indigenous Australians is not equal with the health of non-Indigenous Australians?

2. What are some of the factors that limit the educational outcomes of many Indigenous Australians?
