

Indigenous MAKE POVERTY HISTORY.

MIPH Newsletter

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In This Issue Take Action



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Dear supporter,

Over Easter the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) announced that they will shortly release new estimates of life expectancy for Indigenous people. This will mean that the previously used 17 years gap will be reduced by 5 years. It is important to note that this is a change in how the gap is measured rather than a reflection on any real improvements.

The ABS has been conducting studies on the best way to estimate life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. According to a discussion paper issued in November 2008:

"Life expectancy estimates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are an important aspect of assessing Indigenous disadvantage. The compilation of accurate life tables to derive life expectancy estimates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians presents particular difficulties. Specifically, the standard approach to compiling life tables and resulting life expectancies at birth requires complete and accurate data on deaths that occur in a period, and an estimate of the population exposed to those deaths at the mid-point of the period. These data are required by age and sex. In the case of Indigenous mortality estimation, this situation is far from being perfect. Both Indigenous population estimates and death registrations have limitations". <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3302.0.55.002#>

Following these studies and consultations the ABS is about to publish new estimates of the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people. The gap is smaller than previously estimated. This is a change in the measurement only however, and the ABS themselves make the statement that it does not measure any real improvements in health. Significantly, although the gap is reduced by approximately 5 years, there are marked differences between States. For example the gap in NSW is 9.1 years for men but in the Northern Territory it is 17.2 years.

No doubt there will be some who are tempted to point to the new numbers to indicate progress in Government efforts to close the gap. Our challenge is to remind people that these new numbers represent a change in measurement methods and that a significant and shameful gap remains, which must still be remedied. Hopefully, in time the new methods will allow better monitoring of the reduction in the life expectancy gap and enable us to be able to hold the Government accountable for closing the gap.

New Life Expectancy Figures

The following estimates are taken from the November discussion paper <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3302.0.55.002#>

1.3 Indigenous Life Expectancy at Birth, CDE Indigenous Mortality Quality Study - 2005-2007

State/territory	Males years	Females years
NSW	69.6	74.8
Qld	68.1	73.5
WA	64.9	70.2
NT	61.5	69.2
Aust.(a)	66.9	72.6

(a) Includes all states/territories.

COMPARISON TO NON-INDIGENOUS LIFE EXPECTANCIES

Table 1.4 presents the difference between Indigenous life expectancy by state/territory (for which data can be compiled) and the Australia level non-Indigenous life expectancy using the CDE Indigenous Mortality Quality Study to adjust Indigenous death registration data.

1.4 Indicative difference in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians - 2005-2007

State/territory	Indigenous life expectancy(a) years	Indicative difference(b) years
Males		
NSW	69.6	9.1
Qld	68.1	10.6
WA	64.9	13.8
NT	61.5	17.2
Aust.(c)	66.9	11.8
Females		
NSW	74.8	7.8
Qld	73.5	9.1
WA	70.2	12.4
NT	69.2	13.4
Aust.(c)	72.6	10.0

(a) Using CDE adjusted approach.

(b) Difference between Australia level non-Indigenous life expectancies (78.7 years for males and 82.6 years for females) and state/territory level Indigenous life expectancies.

(c) Includes all states/territories.

Media Article

Indigenous health gap closes by five years
Joel Gibson Indigenous Affairs Reporter

April 10, 2009

THE Australian Bureau of Statistics will publish a new estimate of the gap in life expectancy between indigenous and other Australians this month - and it is expected to be far narrower than the 17 years widely labelled a national disgrace. But governments will not be able to claim progress in closing the gap because the new estimate, expected to be closer to 12 years, is based on a different statistical method.

The ABS director of demographic statistics, Patrick Corr, said the new estimate had not been finalised but was not expected to differ much from a discussion paper published late last year that put the Australia-wide gap at 11.8 years. "We're just quality-assuring what we're doing now. We've made some slight modifications to the method but they are really not big," Mr Corr said. The widely quoted 17-year gap was derived with a method called "Bhat with unexplained growth", named after the Indian demographer P.N. Mari Bhat, who created it for developing countries.

Mr Corr said it had been deemed inappropriate for Australia and was exposed as flawed by a study in 2006 called the Census Data Enhancement (CDE) Indigenous Mortality Quality Study. Statisticians have declared the previous estimates "implausible" and point out the new method is being refined. But they have received positive feedback from peers in New Zealand and Canada and at Charles Darwin University.

According to the new method, known as the CDE-adjusted Direct Method, life expectancy for indigenous men is estimated at 66.9 years and for women at 72.6 years. It is lowest in the Northern Territory, with results of 61.5 and 69.2 years, and highest in NSW, with 69.6 and 74.8 years.

For men, the difference with non-indigenous people is 11.8 years Australia-wide, 9.1 in NSW and 17.2 in the NT. For women, it is 10 years Australia-wide, 7.8 in NSW and 13.4 in the NT.

The new method "is data-based and does not require assumptions ... It also produces results that are considered to be more plausible, particularly in regard to the coverage of death registrations", the paper reported. The old method required making "extensive assumptions". Although old and new will be impossible to compare, the new estimates will be welcome news for the Federal Government, which has set a target of closing the life-expectancy gap within a generation.

The Indigenous Affairs Minister, Jenny Macklin, said that even with a reduced estimate, "there is no question the life expectancy gap is too wide".

"This is why the Government is taking comprehensive action to close the gap by boosting funding and undertaking major reform."

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/indigenous-health-gap-closes-by-five-years-20090409-a27x.html>

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