

# Indigenous Children Growing Up Strong

A Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

Edited by Maggie Walter,  
Karen L. Martin, Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews



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Editors

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*Editors*

Maggie Walter  
University of Tasmania  
Sandy Bay, Tasmania, Australia

Karen L. Martin  
Griffith University  
Mt Gravatt, Queensland, Australia

Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews  
University of Technology Sydney  
Sydney, Australia

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## Notes on the Contributors

**Wendy Aitken** (PhD) grew up on Flinders Island. Her Boonerwung and Palawa ancestors hail from both sides of the Bass Strait. A lecturer in Aboriginal studies at the University of Tasmania, her research interests include decision-making in Aboriginal policy and the unconscious creation and maintenance of othering in Western society.

**Ian Anderson** (MBBS, PhD, DMedSci (honouris causa), FAFPHM) is the Foundation Chair, Indigenous Higher Education; and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Engagement) at the University of Melbourne. His family are Trawlwoolway with ancestral connections to the north-east of Tasmania.

**Peter Bansel** is a senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology, and a member of the Sexualities and Gender Research grouping at Western Sydney University. Dr Bansel is an experienced qualitative researcher broadly focussed on cultural diversity and equity, discrimination, bullying, homophobia and transphobia.

**Sharon Barnes** is the Research Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Unit in Ipsos Public Affairs' Social Research Institute. Sharon worked as the Community Engagement Manager for LSIC for 13 years. She is a member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and a member of the ABS roundtable on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics. She is an Ngunnawal woman.

**Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews** (PhD) identifies with the D'harawal nation. He is an associate professor within the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous

Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney, and has developed an interest in Indigenous perspectives on racism and statistics. He is also a member of the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network.

**Elena Cooper** has Dharug ancestry but grew up on Larrakia and Jawoyn Country in the Northern Territory. She has a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in psychology and Indigenous Australian studies from the University of Sydney and is currently completing a Master of Clinical Psychology at the University of Technology Sydney.

**Nida Denson** (PhD) is a senior research fellow at the University of Western Sydney School of Social Sciences and Psychology. Her research focuses on race, culture and class, and how they influence and are influenced by educational contexts.

**Mick Dodson** AM is a lawyer and a member of the Yawuru peoples, the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land and waters in the Broome area of the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. He is currently Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University.

**Terry Dunbar** is the director of the Yaitya Purruna Indigenous Health Unit, and a reader and researcher at the University of Adelaide. She has worked for around 20 years in the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and has experience in the revision of the National Health and Medical Research Council's key documents.

**Corrinne Franklin** is from the Wiradjuri nation and is a lecturer within the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. Corrinne utilises her knowledge base from the disciplines of Indigenous studies and human geography to explore the ways in which Indigenous people are affected by their experiences of space and place.

**Ruth Lovelock** belongs to the Anaiwan and Dhungutti people of Northern New South Wales. Ruth is currently a student in the Master of Education Research programme at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research interests include policies and practices relating to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, and whiteness in studies on race and racism.

**Raymond Lovett** is the programme leader for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Research School of Population Health, Australian National University.



Ray is an Aboriginal (Wongaibon/Ngiyampaa) social epidemiologist with extensive experience in health services research, public health policy development and health programme evaluation.

**Joanne N. Luke** is an Aboriginal researcher and PhD student at the University of Melbourne. For the past 10 years Joanne has conducted research with local Aboriginal communities in Melbourne and has been involved in several national and international research collaboratives. Her PhD is supported by the Australian Heart Foundation and will focus on decolonising epidemiology.

**Jasmine G. Lyons** is a research fellow with Onemda Health Group in the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne. Her research focus is on developing and applying novel epidemiological techniques that explore social and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and education outcomes among Australia's Indigenous children and youth.

**Karen L. Martin** (PhD) is a Noonuccal woman with Bidjara ancestry. She has more than 20 years experience teaching in Aboriginal community education services and extensive experience in higher education regarding Aboriginal studies and Aboriginal education and policy development for early childhood education. She is Deputy Chair of LSIC.

**Susan Page** is an Aboriginal academic whose research focuses on the Indigenous studies curriculum and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of learning and academic work in higher education. Susan is currently Professor in the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney.

**Yin Paradies** (PhD) is a descendent of the Wakaya people from the Gulf of Carpentaria. He is Professor of Race Relations at Deakin University with research interests in the nature and manifestation of racism, and its health, social and economic impacts, as well as anti-racism theory, policy and practice.

**Roberto H. Parada** (PhD) is a psychologist and lecturer in adolescent development behaviour and wellbeing in the School of Education, Western Sydney University, Australia. His research interests focus on school bullying, positive learning environments, wellbeing and the application of cognitive and behavioural interventions in schools.

**Naomi Priest** is a fellow at the Centre for Social Research and Methods, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. Her current research is focused on addressing child health inequalities through combating racism and promoting diversity and inclusion.

**Hannah S. Reich** is a script writer. She contributed to the Lancet–Lowitja Institute Global Collaboration on Indigenous and tribal people's health. She works as a research assistant at the University of Melbourne.

**Margaret Scrimgeour** is currently a lecturer in the Yaitya Purrana Indigenous Health Unit at the University of Adelaide. Her research involves education and public health issues and has included education and housing as social determinants of Aboriginal health, and barriers to health care access for Aboriginal people living in urban areas.

**Katherine A. Thurber** is a PhD candidate in epidemiology at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University. Her research focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child health and wellbeing using data from LSIC, and is conducted in close partnership with LSIC research administration officers and staff of the Department of Social Services.

**Michelle Trudgett** (EdD) is an Indigenous scholar from the Wiradjuri nation in Central-West New South Wales. She is the director of the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research provides insight into Indigenous participation in higher education, focusing on postgraduate education.

**Maggie Walter** (PhD) descends from the Pairrebenne people of North East Tasmania. She is Professor of Sociology and Pro-Vice-Chancellor Aboriginal Research and Leadership at the University of Tasmania. She is a long term member of the LSIC steering committee.

**Christopher Wareham** has a PhD in philosophy with research interests including the ethics of community and how it can ameliorate the imbalances created by rational discourse and power asymmetry in contemporary society. Chris is also a poet, who works at the University of Tasmania.

**Alison Whittaker** (BA LLB) is a Gomerioi scholar and poet. She works in research in the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges and the Faculty of Law at the University of Technology Sydney. She specialises in the regulation of violence, Indigenous self-governance, Indigenous epistemologies and critical race studies.

# List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council of Educational Research
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AMS	Aboriginal Medical Services
aPR	Adjusted prevalence rate
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
BMI	Body Mass Index
CRT	Critical race theory
CTG	Close the Gap Campaign
DSS	Department of Social Services
FAHCSIA	(Commonwealth Department of) Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (now DSS)
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
LORI	Level of relative isolation
LSAC	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
LSIC	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NPA	Northern Peninsula Area
PCA	Principal components analysis
PEEM	Parental empowerment and efficacy measure

**xx**      **List of Abbreviations**

PHRA	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board of Australia
RAOs	Research administration officers
SC	Study Child
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
TSRA	Torres Strait Regional Authority
WAACHS	Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey
WHO	World Health Organization

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# 1

## Introduction

**Maggie Walter, Karen L. Martin,  
and Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up strong? This question is the impetus and underpinning rationale of this book. Growing up strong is a multidimensional and multilayered concept that intrinsically extends across histories, our contemporary contexts and our futures. The authors within this book capture some of these varying facets of growing up strong across a range of contexts that are critically important to the future of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. Using data from the first six waves of *Footprints in*

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M. Walter (✉)

University of Tasmania, Sandy Bay, Tasmania, Australia

K.L. Martin

Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

G. Bodkin-Andrews

Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, University of  
Technology Sydney, Ultimo, NSW, Australia

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*Time*: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC),<sup>1</sup> a globally unique longitudinal dataset, each chapter presents a high level analysis of different sets of variables.

Our aim is not to answer all of the questions that can be asked and answered using LSIC. Rather, what we seek is to provide a distinctive, policy informing, insight into the factors and life circumstances that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children growing up strong. More particularly, we place our analysis within the social, cultural, economic and political realities of being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child in contemporary Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a young and growing population. At the 2011 census, the median age was 21 years compared to 37 years for the non-Indigenous population. More than one-third of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander population are aged under 15 years, with similar proportions in this age group across all states and territories (ABS 2012). Knowing how Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children can grow up strong is critical, not only for the health and wellbeing of the current generation, but also for the next generation soon to be born to the growing young adult population.

LSIC is an Australian study. The data, analyses and results presented in each chapter are, consequently, particular to Australia. We make no claim to wider generalisability. Yet, the social, political, economic and cultural positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia is very similar to that of other First Nations populations, especially those peoples who form minorities in other Anglo-colonised nation states such as Aotearoa (New Zealand), the USA and Canada. Therefore, while the stories each chapter tells and the policy framework they inform are Australian nation state specific, it is also likely that many of our findings will have salience for other Indigenous peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms LSIC and *Footprints in Time* are used interchangeably in this and subsequent chapters to describe the study.

## Our Research Methodological Frame

Each set of analyses in this book is framed within an Indigenous quantitative methodology. This means, in summary, that we epistemologically prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and bring an Indigenous worldview to our understanding of what the research problematic might be and how that problematic should be approached. All first named chapter authors are Aboriginal scholars. We all work within the Australian university system but come from different Aboriginal nations and from a wide variety of academic disciplines.

An Indigenous methodological framework is central to how the multi-dimensional concept of growing up strong is understood and interpreted in this book. To grow up strong, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be strong in health, in education, in family, in culture, in their identity and in how they see their own place within Australian society. Within this conceptualisation, growing up strong cannot be separated from what it is to be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, culturally or socially.

The concept of growing up strong also has additional specific cultural dimensions that are critical to how the concept is operationalised within analyses. Being healthy or being educated, for example, is inclusive of, but definitively not limited to, Western conceptualisations of what these states may mean. And rather than being some compromise between Western conceptualisations plus Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptualisations, the Indigenous conceptualisations are prioritised within this book's chapters. This hierarchical placement is not to suggest that Western and Indigenous understandings of "healthy" and "educated" are incompatible and mutually exclusive. Rather we argue that they are frequently highly compatible; however, what they are, is not the same. Good health, from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, refers to the Aboriginal holistic view of health, which means not just physical wellbeing but also social, emotional, spiritual, environmental and cultural wellbeing (Freemantle et al. 2007). Good education, within an Indigenous conceptual framework, refers to cultural and community education as well as academic achievement to non-Indigenous

median norms (Malin and Maidment 2003; Andersen and Walter 2010). Growing up strong therefore is a concept that has significant ontological and axiological complexity.

## What Is the Footprints in Time Study and Why Is It Needed?

The story of, and details about, the *Footprints in Time* study are developed in Chaps. 2 and 3, but briefly it is a longitudinal national panel survey of a sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (known as the Study Children). The study is administered by the Australian Department of Social Services guided by a Steering Committee of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic experts. In 2008 a team of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research administration officers conducted face-to-face surveys with the primary carer (Parent 1) of 1677 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Study Children selected from 11 sites across Australia. The Study Child sample in Wave 1 was divided into two cohorts: babies ( $n = 968$ ) aged between six months and two years and children ( $n = 709$ ) aged between three and a half and five years. At the time of writing, Wave 9 of the LSIC study was being conducted in the field. However, the chapters in this book use data from Waves 1 (2008) to Wave 6 (2013) when the Baby cohort included those aged six to eight years and the Kid cohort those aged 9 to 11 years.

The study is of national importance because, in contemporary Australia, many Indigenous children do not grow up strong. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander marginalisation and inequality is an embedded aspect of Australian society despite a long history of plans, policies and interventions designed to reduce the scale of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives. Overwhelming evidence confirms that in contemporary Australia Indigenous children's physical, social, cultural and economic circumstances remain replete with hazards. The result, for an Indigenous child today, is an expected life trajectory of disadvantage across every socio-economic indicator. Health wise, Indigenous children are less likely to be immunised, have lower nutritional levels and have

higher rates of injury-related hospitalisations. In remote areas, 12% of Indigenous children suffer chronic suppurative otitis media (perforated eardrum with persistent drainage from the middle ear); and significant rates of trachoma and acute rheumatic fever are reported—diseases seldom found among non-Indigenous children (AIHW 2011). An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is still nearly three times as likely to die between the ages of one and four years as a non-Indigenous child (ABS 2011).

National data also confirm that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander households are likely to be poor, over-represented in the lowest income bracket (by 2.5:1) and under-represented in the top bracket (by 1:4) (AIHW 2011). Low income is compounded by a national unemployment rate that is triple those of non-Indigenous workers, ranging from 11% in Tasmania to 21% in New South Wales (ABS 2011). Most Indigenous families also live in rental housing (68%) and 25% live in what the ABS classifies as overcrowded conditions. This varies by location, with 58% of very remote households and 13% of major city households being overcrowded, a rate still three times the non-Indigenous rate (ABS 2011; AIHW 2011). Educationally, achievement disparity starts early. National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy NAPLAN Grade 3 reading results (2012) show Indigenous children to be heavily over-represented in Band 1, below national minimum standard, in every state and territory. Nationally, Indigenous children's reading results are nearly eight times as likely to be in this band as non-Indigenous children (ACARA 2012). Retention rates to Year 12 are rising (47% in 2010), but remain well below those for non-Indigenous youth (79%) (AIHW 2011).

The social, cultural and health context of risk is manifest in very high rates of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander out-of-home care (Smyth and Eardley 2008). Indigenous children are more than nine times more likely to be in out-of-home care and Indigenous youth are 15 times more likely to be under a supervision order and 24 times more likely to be in detention than non-Indigenous young people (AIHW 2012). Since 2008, the 'Closing the Gap' policy framework has directly addressed some of the major risk factors for Indigenous children. The Prime Minister's 2013 report notes an increase in remote Indigenous pre-school enrolments,