



**DEAR  
AUSTRALIA:  
SOMETHING HAS  
TO CHANGE**

**AN INSIGHT INTO THE DRUG AND ALCOHOL CULTURE  
CLAIMING THE LIVES AND IDENTITY OF AUSTRALIA'S  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

**BY SOPHIA WRIGHT-MENDELSON**



# contents

1	Acknowledgement of Country
2	Introduction
3	What I'm Doing
4	Why it's Important
5	Quotes
7	Indigenous and non-Indigenous Health Comparison
9	Statistics
10	Sydney Local Indigenous Services
11	NSW Indigenous Drug + Alcohol Support
12	Bibliography



# acknowledgement of Country



I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and I recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.



# introduction

On January 26th 1788, a fleet of eleven British ships anchored on Gadigal land, or what we now know as Sydney Cove.

Within weeks of their invasion, alcohol had become a currency between the colonists and Aboriginal people who had occupied the land for over 60,000 years.

Prior to invasion, Aboriginal people were only exposed to very mild alcohol which was sourced from plants and was traditionally only used for healing purposes.

As generations of Indigenous Australians were brutally forced to assimilate into white Australian society, traditional bush medicines were replaced with spirits and drugs; substances detrimental to the diet which Indigenous Australians had lived off for centuries.

It is widely acknowledged that historic legislation and enforced practices such as assimilation policies have contributed to Aboriginal people being one of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in our nation. The permanent inter-generational trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and the effect has not yet been adequately addressed by the Australian government, which reflects in comparative statistics and research. Thus, drugs and alcohol have become an issue in Aboriginal communities.

# *what i'm doing*

Since the arrival of Europeans in Australia, Aboriginal Australians have suffered a myriad of mental and physical health issues. Indigenous Australians have been subjected to pervasive social injustices, including but not limited to high incarceration rates and removal of children from their families. Although there have been significant improvements in the last century in the support provided to Aboriginal people, Indigenous communities continue to suffer from the devastating effects of alcohol and other drugs. This reality inspired me to interview individuals who have experienced this as Indigenous individuals themselves or as professionals who have witnessed it in their work. These interviews have allowed me to gain insight and clarify questions I had about their experiences. In this process, I have gained a greater appreciation of the importance of taking further action and through this booklet, I hope to inspire others to do the same through what I have learned.

## *why it's important*

While the prevalence of alcohol problems in our Indigenous population is well-known, what is often not recognised is the fact that fewer Aboriginal Australians drink alcohol than non-Aboriginal people. In fact, there are twice as many Aboriginal Australians who do not drink as there are non-Indigenous Australians who abstain from alcohol. Despite this, Aboriginal Australians are 1.5 times more likely to drink alcohol at levels that put their health at risk. While 8% of non-Indigenous Australians binge drink, this figure is 17% for Indigenous Australians.

The prevalence of high risk drinking in Indigenous communities is not only a problem for now, but a problem for the future as current statistics show 48% of Aboriginal mothers reported drinking while they were pregnant. This puts the future generation of Indigenous children at risk of complications like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

It is essential that we understand and are exposed to the truths of this issue, so that in turn we as a country, can take the measures required to support Indigenous Australians affected by drug and alcohol dependency which perpetuates early death, liver disease, diabetes, cancer, family and community breakdown, poverty, critical accidents, unemployment, theft and crime, social problems and incarceration.

# quotes

"You know how you destroy a culture? ...You make sure that kids are born with alcohol foetal syndrome, they won't be able to pass on the Dreamtime and the culture."

Alastair Hope, Western Australian coroner

"I turn away my own siblings if they arrive intoxicated. Some would say this is a rejection of my family. I say it's a strengthening and educating of my family. I will not put my family and our plans and dreams at risk."

Mary Victor O'Reeri, Billard community, Western Australia

"The perpetuating cycles of trauma that have been created and enforced since invasion have had a huge impact on the Aboriginal psyche."  
Mia, 16, Bundjalung

"My brother died from a heroin overdose so I have also been very cautious in my drug and alcohol consumption." - Michelle Lowe, Bundjalung woman

"My father is a drug addict and I have to live with my grandparents, 2 of my siblings have alcohol and drug issues (they live with my mum who is not Aboriginal and she is a drug addict too). I feel very sad that I can't live with my family and I watch all of my friends and they live with happy parents". Miles Baker Hall, 16, Bundjalung Nation

"As an indigenous woman the discriminative stereotypes regarding my culture has been omnipresent".  
Mia, 16, Bundjalung

"It is best practice to have the Aboriginal Community supported by Aboriginal workers. They have a far greater understanding of the inter-generational trauma that Aboriginal people experience, it's the best way to deal with the mistrust that Anglo workers and services have earned among the Indigenous communities and it's a positive role model that tells Aboriginal communities that the misconceptions they battle on a daily basis about who they are and what they are worth, are exactly that – misconceptions.

The most common issues I see with Indigenous clients are:

- Homelessness - usually due to family conflict and always inter-related to poverty. Many of my clients don't have identification so they can't get Centrelink and they can't afford to pay for identification without payments so it's a catch-22. Services like mine will provide brokerage in this type of scenario. So we will pay for a young person to get a birth certificate or proof of age card.
- Addiction - it's not uncommon for it to be inter-generational. And that's true no matter what their cultural background.
  - Teen pregnancy
  - Domestic violence
  - Unemployment
  - School refusal

These are the most common issues I deal with. But these are issues that are common with both Aboriginal and Anglo young people. The two things I see with Aboriginal young people that is much rarer in other cultures is, first, the separation of a young person from their family group sometimes with zero knowledge of where their family are. There is a disproportionate number of ATSI young people in Out of Home Care (absolutely another stolen generation) and they are often not put into kinship care as they are supposed to be. So they will be raised by, usually a multitude of, a white family who does not keep them connected to their mob nor their culture. So they are often looking to reconnect with their extended family but have no documents or information about where they are. The second is the inter-generational trauma experienced by Aboriginal young people. There's been some research recently around the impacts of this but I think we're only just starting to understand the truth of how detrimental it is for each subsequent generation to both carry the previous generation's trauma but to then experience their own. The shortened life expectancy combined with the over representation in every statistic you don't want: jail, addiction, domestic violence, suicide, poor health, poverty (this is what Closing the Gap is all about) makes their individual experience exponentially harder than everyone else's."

Ngaio Chandler

Youth Health Worker, NSW Health



# Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous Health



An interesting way to gauge how to answer this question is through comparing data on the health of Indigenous youth versus young non-Indigenous people and Indigenous older people.

In a self rating system, young non-Indigenous people were more likely to self-rate their health as excellent or very good, compared with either young or older Indigenous people. Older Indigenous people had a higher proportion of disability than young Indigenous or young non-Indigenous people. Young Indigenous people had higher rates of hospitalisation and mortality than young non-Indigenous people did.

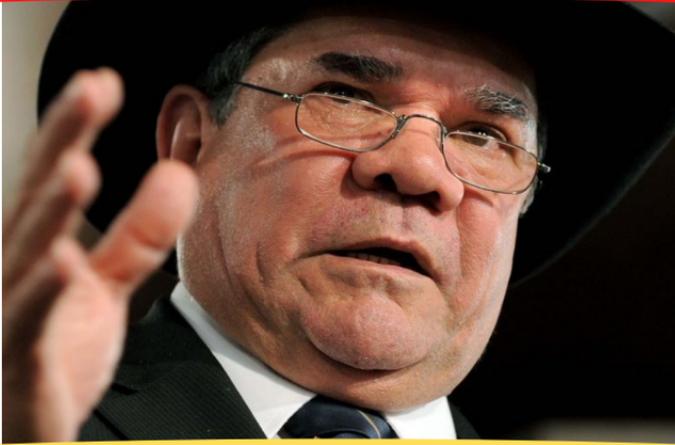
	Indigenous people under 25	Non-Indigenous people under 25	Indigenous people 25 and over
Hospitalisations for injury and poisoning per 1,000 <sup>(a)</sup>	37	23	60
Mortality due to injury and poisoning per 100,000 <sup>(a)(b)</sup>	52	18	87
Hospitalisations for intentional self-harm per 1,000 <sup>(a)</sup>	5	2	5
Mortality due to intentional self-harm per 100,000 <sup>(a)(b)</sup>	29	7	27
% with long-term mental health condition <sup>(c)</sup>	29	16	33

(a) For Indigenous and non-Indigenous people aged 10–24.

(b) Data for NSW, Qld, WA, SA and NT combined.

(c) For Indigenous and non-Indigenous people aged 15–24.

Sources: AIHW analysis of 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (using TableBuilder), National Hospital Morbidity Database, National Mortality Database and 2014 General Social Survey (using TableBuilder).



As the Indigenous leader Mick Dodson (above, director for National Centre for Indigenous Studies at ANU and law professor) stated in 2018 in response to the Uluru statement, "In any renewed talks between Indigenous people and the government, the various proposals put forward with the objective of correcting the injustices imposed on Australia's Indigenous people throughout the history of white settlement ought to be considered, rationally and sanely like adults".



# statistics



In 2018-19, marijuana was the most commonly reported substance used by Indigenous Australians aged 15+ in the previous year

There was a reported 50% reduction of mothers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children that drank through pregnancy, from 20% in 2008 to 9.8% in 2014-15

In 2016, 73% of Indigenous Australians aged 14 years and older reported they had never used illicit substances in the last 12 months

In 2007, the World Health Organisation reported that the health of Aboriginal Australians was 100 years behind the rest of the community

In 2016, there were a total of 2,177 Indigenous drug-related deaths. Of those deaths, 1,704 were accidental

# Local Sydney Indigenous services

## Aboriginal Counselling and Medical

Aboriginal medical service

The number will provide information regarding local Aboriginal counselling and Aboriginal Family Health Workers.

02 9391 9502

## Permanent housing; alcohol use support; family restoration support; permanent tenancy support

Marcia Women's Refuge

02 4628 008

Not only is this organization a refuge, it provides direct support to Aboriginal women and their children to improve outcomes for alcohol use, family restoration, permanent tenancy.

## Legal support

Aboriginal Legal Services Redfern

02 8303 6600

Aboriginal Legal Services is a non-government Aboriginal community law firm run by and for Aboriginal people. They give advice and stand up in court to get justice for Aboriginal men, women and children, assist with police, courts, children etc. Advice is free.

# NSW Indigenous drug + alcohol support



Ice Resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander  
peoples: [https://cracksintheice.org.au/ice-  
resources-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-  
islander-people](https://cracksintheice.org.au/ice-resources-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people)

Moree Aboriginal Residential  
Rehabilitation: <https://marrs.org.au/>

Namatjira Haven Drug and Alcohol Healing  
Centre: <https://namatjirahaven.com.au/>

The Glen  
Centre: <http://www.theglencentre.org.au/>



# *bibliography*

Working with Aboriginal People and Communities: A Practice Resource. (2019). Retrieved on 2 May 2020 from <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent and youth health and wellbeing 2018. (2018). Retrieved on 2 May 2020 from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/atsi-adolescent-youth-health-wellbeing-2018/contents/table-of-contents>

Mick Dodson urges PM to reconsider shameful rejection of voice to parliament. (2018). Retrieved on 2 May 2020 from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jul/04/mick-dodson-urges-pm-to-reconsider-shameful-rejection-of-voice-to-parliament>

Find a specialist homelessness service. (2019). Retrieved 8 May 2020 from <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/services/aboriginal-women-and-childrens-crisis>

Domestic Violence: legal help contacts list. (2019). Retrieved 8 May 2020 from <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/police-law-help/legal-help>

Find your local Aboriginal Legal Service office. Retrieved 8 May 2020 from <https://www.alsnswact.org.au/contact/>

Ice Resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (2020). Retrieved 8 May 2020 from <https://cracksintheice.org.au/ice-resources-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>

Moree Aboriginal Residential Rehabilitation. (2020). Retrieved 12 May 2020 from <https://marrs.org.au/>

Namatjira Haven Drug and Alcohol Healing Centre. (2020.) Retrieved 12 May 2020 from <https://namatjirahaven.com.au/>

The Glen Centre (2020). Retrieved 12 May 2020 from <http://www.theglencentre.org.au/>

Statistics. (2020). Retrieved 12 May 2020 from <https://www.abs.gov.au>

What is reconciliation? (2019). Retrieved 12 May 2020 from <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/what-is-reconciliation/>