

# Victorian Aboriginal Child Mortality Study, 1988–2008

## What?

This study will for the first time address the inaccurate recording of Aboriginal births in Victoria. The project will bring together birth and death information from a number of Victorian vital statistics data sources to give an accurate report of the number of Aboriginal babies born between 1988 and 2008, and the number and causes of death for Aboriginal children passing away during this period.

Linking information on the health of children and young people from different sources will help to determine whether their health status is improving, which health programs are working and which ones are not, the size of the gap in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in Victoria, and what programs are needed to close this gap.

This study will build on past and continuing efforts by State and Commonwealth governments to further reform the quality of Aboriginal data in health information systems and to report on progress towards improving the health of Aboriginal children in Victoria.

## How?

The project will be carried out in four phases over five years:

1. Linkage of birth records to produce a complete and accurate account of births to Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) parent/s for the period 1988–2008 inclusive.
2. Identification of the number, cause and preventability of childhood deaths.
3. Description and analysis of a linked, total population dataset to produce a mortality profile.
4. Consultation and dissemination of findings, and preparation of a major report.

## Why?

Good quality, accurate information describing the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria is needed to determine health status, to plan and deliver services, and to evaluate investment in Aboriginal health. The inconsistent identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin in Victorian birth, hospital and death statistics means that the current information describing the health of Aboriginal infants, children and young people is incomplete and often inaccurate.

## Community involvement

VACCHO is a major partner on this grant with Onemda and is represented on the Investigator's Management Group. The Investigator's Management Group provides guidance to the lead investigators regarding integrity of scientific direction and context and interpretation of research findings, including ethics and privacy considerations. Members of this group are tasked with keeping their organizations informed of progress, findings and any issues that may arise.

In addition, VACMS investigators have kept the Victorian Aboriginal community updated with progress through the distribution of fliers to VACCHO member organizations, by maintaining a website, involving community members in sub-studies, and distributing findings widely.

## Start and completion dates

2008-2013



## Benefits to community

The results of this study will provide more accurate data from which to monitor progress towards improving the health of Aboriginal children in Victoria and reducing disparities between outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. Findings will arm Aboriginal organizations with useful information to identify critical areas of need in their community, lobby for political attention and investment, and hold governments accountable for commitments made.

This study aligns with State and Commonwealth government commitments to 'close the gap' in life expectancy between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, and to 'halve the gap' in mortality rates for children under five years.

It will enable accurate information to identify progress on Closing the Gap in poor outcomes experienced by Aboriginal infants, children and young people in Victoria.

## Funders

Australian Research Council, Victorian Department of Health, and the Lowitja Institute.

## Researchers

Associate Professor Jane Freemantle, Principal Research Fellow, Research Assistants, Ms Dulce Iskandar, Ms Tessa Cutler and Ms Kristen Smith, Honorary Visiting Staff, Ms Grace Zhong, Dr Rebecca Ritte, Epidemiologist and Research Fellow, Ms Bree Heffernan.

## Partners

This research is being conducted with the guidance of a team of investigators from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), the Department of Health, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, and the Murdoch Childrens' Research Institute. The project has been supported by the Australian Research Council, the Lowitja Institute, the Department of Aboriginal Health (Victorian Department of Health), The R E Ross Trust and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

## So far

- Ethics approvals have been granted for the first phase (birth linkage) and subsequent phases (deaths linkage and file review) of the study.
- Amendments were successfully made to the regulations of the Victorian Health and Wellbeing Act to allow identifiable data to be shared between government departments to facilitate record matching between datasets. A report documenting the sources and quality of data describing Aboriginal young people in Victorian health datasets, and the access arrangements for researchers and policy makers wishing to access these data was published in 2009 titled: 'An overview of statutory and administrative datasets: Describing the health of Victoria's Aboriginal infants, children and young people'.
- The birth data has been linked and analysed with the birth report scheduled for release in October. A specific sub-committee of the Consultative Council of Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity has been convened by the Minister of Health to undertake the comprehensive review of over 11,000 Victorian deaths. The review of these deaths is well underway.

## Contact

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