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**'Big mobs in the city now':
The increasing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
living in urban areas**

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Abstract

The locations and settings in which Australian Indigenous people live varies, however over 70 % of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia now live in urban or regional urban areas (ABS 2008). Over half of the total population lives in the two states Queensland and New South Wales. The 2006 Census data indicates that 146, 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or 28.3% lives in Queensland. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools in the greater Brisbane area is approximately 29% of the Queensland population. There are other sizeable urban Indigenous populations along the Queensland coast and larger rural towns. The statistics demonstrate that living in urban centres is as much part of reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in a remote discrete Aboriginal community.

Historically, discrete rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been the focus of most of the research conducted with Indigenous populations. These locations have provided researchers with an easily identifiable study population. However, unlike rural and remote communities, identifying and accessing urban Indigenous communities can be much more difficult despite the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas. Limited research has been undertaken on the issues that impact on urban Indigenous communities or have explored methods of undertaking research with urban Indigenous communities. This paper will explore the some of the issues and needs of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in South East Queensland and highlight some of the emerging policy, program and research responses.

Keywords

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, urban, Brisbane, history, library, knowledge

Introduction

Over 70 % of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are now living in urban or regional urban areas (ABS 2008). Over half of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live in the two States of Queensland and New South Wales. The 2006 Census data indicates that 146, 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or 28.3% live in Queensland (ABS 2008:2). Of the total Indigenous population in Queensland, 41 369 live in South East Queensland (ABS 2008: 34). This equals 28% of the total Indigenous population in Queensland. The number of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools in South East Queensland which includes the Greater Brisbane area is approximately 29% (DETA PMRB 2006). Brisbane is the capital city of the State of Queensland. The statistics demonstrate that living in urban centres is as much part of reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in a discrete Aboriginal rural, regional or isolated community or on one of the islands in the Torres Strait. Within this paper the word

Indigenous will refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unless stated otherwise or within a specific context.

There is no single urban Indigenous experience or identity nor is there a single urban Indigenous community in cities and regional areas. The Indigenous population in South East Queensland is a mixture of many different clans, language groups and families, with various connections to communication and traditional homelands. Multiple experiences are illustrated photographically in the work of Aird (2001). The multi-faceted nature of urban Indigenous people and communities presents researchers, planners, policy officers and government officials/workers with a range of issues. Even though there is a large population of Indigenous people in South East Queensland, there is a thin spread of Indigenous children in urban schools ensuring community consultation in regards to educational issues is complex and time consuming. This paper will explore the need for urban Indigenous focused research, policy and programs and some of the issues working with urban Indigenous people.

Indigenous Urban Identities

The House of Representatives Standing Committee of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCAA) produced a report titled *Mainly Urban* in 1992. This report was the first major report that began to articulate the plight of urban Indigenous people despite raising issues for urban peoples some of its statements are questionable. For example, the *Mainly Urban* report gives the idea that urban Indigenous people are successful products of the assimilation policies of the earlier part of this century (HRSCAA 1992). This view may contribute to a belief that Indigenous people living in urban areas are not viewed as 'real' Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders (ibid.).

There also appears to be a view often held by members of the dominant society that those who are 'fair-skinned' are more 'white' than 'black' and therefore cannot be called Aboriginal or Indigenous people. The darker the skin the 'more Aboriginal' and closer to what is considered 'traditional'. There is a lack of understanding by the dominant culture that Aboriginality is a culture. Aboriginal people who don't fit in the frame of reference established by the dominant society fall outside the Aboriginal stereotype and are therefore are not perceived as being different culturally and requiring any specific needs that the dominant society does not require and fulfill.

A study undertaken in Brisbane to examine the issues of urban Indigenous populations, appropriate models of health care and health outcomes, questioned participants about urban Indigenous identity and Aboriginality (Ivanitz 1999). Comments from respondents included "some of them don't even look Aboriginal" and "all the blackfellas have been assimilated and people who live in a metropolitan area are not real Aborigines – they are no different than the average whitefella" (ibid.:2). In these contestations of Aboriginality (which are always on the dominant culture's terms) those Aboriginal people who are able to manage the transgressions between cultures risk being questioned about their authenticity.

There are numerous non-Indigenous people who deny the right of Indigenous people to identify as Aboriginal by labelling, dismissing and minimising. Many urban Indigenous people collectively become an 'invisible minority' as a result of the perceptions of Aboriginality, urban contexts and the distribution patterns. For example the distribution of urban Indigenous students across approximately 500 or 85% of South East Queensland state schools often results in small numbers in each school, which obscures the students' cultural and educational needs (DETA PMRB 2006). Despite the comments which question urban Indigenous identity, Aboriginal people living in urban areas are still asked to "give a 'welcome' or an "acknowledgement to Country" or asked "whether they know, or could they organise, a group to do traditional dancing or play the didgeridoo, or whether they could get an artist to paint a mural or display some art?" (Fredericks 2004: 30-31). Other than the observation of strict cultural protocol in terms of a welcome to Country, acknowledgement to Country or recognising Country, urban Indigenous people are often locked into a cultural paradigm that is a romanticised notion of the pre-colonial past. This continued focus on the 'traditional' cultural aspects and romanticism ignores the presence of the interweaving of many Indigenous people within a contemporary post-invasion historical context. It in effect conceals the ways that Indigenous people use and see spaces in everyday life.

A Historical Snapshot

From the time of colonisation until the 1950s, Aboriginal presence in the cities was generally constructed by the British and European settlers and the leadership that followed, as problematic, poor and marginal. The removal of Aboriginal people from the cities was in part due to the policies that actively displaced Aboriginal people to the reserve lands or to the fringes of the city. There were some families that managed to survive living in capital and large metropolitan cities, even during these years (albeit on the fringes and in some cases in designated areas) and continued to occupy their traditional country, and there are others who sought to live in the cities and have now been living there for several generations.

Over the past 50 years the Aboriginal population in Australia has become increasingly urbanised and numbers have swelled in most major cities. In the past ten years numbers have dramatically increased. The DETA PMRB identified that "Indigenous students numbers in South East Queensland have nearly doubled from approximately 6,400 in 1997 to approximately 12,000 in 2007" (DETA PMRB).ⁱ Indigenous people might leave their home communities in rural, regional and remote areas for a range of reasons, including poor economic conditions, substandard housing, limited educational and employment opportunities and social problems.

With the relaxation of the Queensland Aboriginals Act (1971) which up until the mid-1980s acted as a preventative mechanism to stop Aboriginal people from leaving discrete Aboriginal communities. This resulted in a drift from rural Aboriginal communities and other localities to regional centres, such as Brisbane. This was matched by an academic and human interest in Aboriginal issues in urban areas.ⁱⁱ In Queensland there has been limited growth in the populations of rural and remote

Indigenous communities between 2001 and 2006, suggesting a significant out-migration from these communities (ABS 2008).

The large cities and urban centres now have a very culturally diverse Indigenous population that are derived from all over Australia. Since the 1980s Brisbane in particular has had a growing Indigenous population with now a large number also calling Brisbane 'home' along with many also maintaining a sense of feeling for the people and country of another geographic area that they call 'home'. Therefore, it is important to recognise that there are interconnections between the urban populations and other populations through family and geographic connections, mobility, culture, interests and politics (Langton 1981). DETA PMRB notes that Indigenous students in South East Queensland are significantly more mobile than non-Indigenous students in terms of moving residential addresses and schools (2007).

As a result of the historical processes of colonisation, urbanisation or the Stolen Generations, some Indigenous people living in Brisbane have an Indigenous affinity and an Indigenous affiliation even if they have no home base or a particular Indigenous nation to which they can readily refer (Fredericks 2004). Indigenous people do survive as distinct people in contemporary urban society and also represent both a heterogeneous and a mobile population. It is also a population that is more dispersed and difficult to identify.

Evidence shows that when Indigenous Australians migrate into capital cities they tend to move into areas where there are already concentrations of Indigenous people, which are generally areas of low socio-economic status (Taylor 2006). This trend reinforces existing patterns of social disadvantage. A Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) study found that 80% of Brisbane's Indigenous population were in the most disadvantaged decile compared to 6% of Brisbane's non-Indigenous population (Kennedy & Firman 2004:7). These SEIFA figures also reflect National and international experiences where Indigenous people who live in urban areas suffer disparities in all measurable areas such as lower wages, lack of employment, skills and education, health and housing (Taylor 2008).

Despite the growing urban populations, and the high need, little attention has been given to identifying and meeting the needs, interests and aspirations of urban Indigenous people. It may be linked to the historical idea that Indigenous people somehow 'belong' somewhere else and not in Brisbane and other urbanised areas, or that those that do are no longer 'Aboriginal'. Somehow Indigenous people are from 'communities'ⁱⁱⁱ but the communities never seem to be from the urbanised areas or the geographical areas where urban centres now exist.

The reality is however that Indigenous people living in any major urban area will include people whose ancestors lived on the land now built upon, people whose families moved to the urban centre generations ago (either forcibly or voluntarily), people from rural and remote areas who now spend most of their time in the urban area, and people from rural

and remote areas who are visiting the urban area for various reasons and for various lengths of times.

Historically, discrete rural and remote Indigenous communities have been the focus of most of the research and programs with Indigenous communities. These locations provide researchers, policy officers, government officials and politicians with a captive audience, and an easily identifiable and accessible population. Unlike rural and remote communities, identifying and accessing urban Indigenous communities is much more difficult. The next section will highlight some of the current issues, programs and research regarding urban Indigenous populations in education and health settings in the capital city of Brisbane in South East Queensland.

Education and Urban Indigenous Populations

In 2007 the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts undertook consultations, an environmental scan (social demographic scoping) and a literature review focusing on the needs of urban Indigenous school students with a view to understanding the needs of Indigenous students in the State's most populated area of South East Queensland (SEQ). The results identified that approximately 30% of Queensland's Indigenous state school students attended schools in urban settings in South East Queensland. Furthermore, that some urban schools had significant Indigenous cohorts. Eighty-six schools, including 6 non-state schools in South East Queensland have 50 or more Indigenous students enrolled or at least 10% of their students are Indigenous (DETA PMRB 2007). A large proportion of Brisbane's Indigenous population were additionally in the most disadvantaged Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) decile where evidence has shown that there is a clear link between educational outcomes and poverty of students (ibid). The data showed that Indigenous students in urban South East Queensland generally had lower results than urban, rural and remote non-Indigenous students. For example, by year 7 there was approximately a 30% difference between the proportions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students meeting the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks in South East Queensland (DETA PMRB 2007). Consultation with community members and Departmental staff revealed that Indigenous student needs in South East Queensland schools tended to become invisible and that there is pressure on them to fit into the dominant non-Indigenous culture. This places urban Indigenous students at increased risk of disengagement.

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts noted that the majority of its Indigenous specific educational reform initiatives and resources have historically been focussed on remote communities (DETA PMRB 2006). It additionally recognised that it was impossible to significantly improve the state average or close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students without improvements in urban areas where the numbers of Indigenous students is significant and continuing to grow. Indigenous students' in urban schools have significant needs due to their experience of cultural isolation and marginalisation (DETA PMRB 2007). Some of these issues have been highlighted in the above sections and are addressed in the work of Bond (2007), Fredericks (2004), Ivanitz (1999), Langton (1981), Malin and Maidment (2003) and

Tripcony (1995). These issues can exacerbate the risk of disengagement, poor educational, welfare and labour market outcomes, and perpetuates inter-generational disadvantage. The Department of Education, Training and the Arts, the Queensland Government and the Indigenous community face significant challenges in overcoming social and educational disadvantage and improving urban Indigenous students' educational achievement in South East Queensland. In trying to address these needs the Department believes the way forward involves joint central, regional and school based commitment to persistent systemic action, building the capacity of schools to better understand and effectively work with urban Indigenous students. In 2007 it established a new Indigenous Education, Training and Arts Division and has requested each Education region to develop locally responsive, place-based and data-driven planning focusing on the needs of the Indigenous students in its region whether that is remote, rural or urban. It will now consciously pilot Indigenous education specific programs in urban locations as well as rural and remote regions. The Department is working with the Labor led Australian Government to close the gap for all Queensland Indigenous students in literacy and numeracy and is leveraging Departmental initiatives to address the needs of urban Indigenous students as a priority.

The Indigenous Knowledge Centre and Urban Indigenous Populations

In 2002 the Queensland Government in partnership with Local Governments began to establish a network of Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs). Initially the IKCs were established in remote areas of Queensland to provide traditional library services (including information and communication technologies) as well as a means and a place to capture, share and preserve local history and traditions. The State Library currently supports sixteen regional IKCs, primarily in the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait regions. In 2006 the Queensland Government established *kuril dhagun* in the State Library of Queensland in its capital city of Brisbane. *kuril dhagun* was the first of its kind in any Australian State Library. The Centre welcomes Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn and experience a wide range of Queensland Indigenous knowledge, from the traditional to the contemporary. The name *kuril dhagun* draws its meaning from *kuril* referring to the native marsupial that is found on the State Library of Queensland site, near Kurilpa Point on the Brisbane River. The word *dhagun* means earth/ place/ country. Therefore the words *kuril dhagun* translate in meaning to 'kuril's place' (SLQ 2008).

kuril dhagun has areas for meeting and talking, finding information on Indigenous history, viewing on-line exhibitions; listening to an Indigenous language; learning how to use the State Library; relaxing and watching a movie; taking part in a workshop and learning from or interacting with Elders. The Centre is widely used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with a focus on providing a service for the Indigenous people of Brisbane whose numbers are growing rapidly. Since its official opening in 2002, over 50,000 people have visited *kuril dhagun* either as a tourist, participant, facilitator, client or educator.

kuril dhagun was built specifically to be 'our space': an Indigenous space. When non-Indigenous people enter kuril dhagun they sit within us and be with us in 'our space'. It is a culturally safe place within the larger library. Children are culturally safe in the space when attending child specific programs, i.e. Elders story telling and school holiday activities which combine tasks within the State Library within a cultural context. Establishing a Centre in an urban location as opposed to a remote area did provide some challenges including marketing to a highly diverse Indigenous community within the South East Queensland region. In addition while it is an Indigenous specific space whatever happens there must fit within the guidelines of the State Library of Queensland, for example activities must finish by 8.00pm.

Health and Urban Indigenous Populations

There are a number of recent examples within the South East Queensland region of health focused research which highlight the issues of Indigenous peoples.^{iv} The work of Chelsea Bond (2007) set within the urban Indigenous suburban community of Inala is of particular importance in that it identifies via a participatory action based research process the nature of urban Aboriginal identity and demonstrates how to support the validity and vitality of such identities whilst undertaking health promotion and health education activities. She incorporated an assets-based approach to Aboriginality, community development and health promotion activity, all the while working with the existing infrastructure. The Indigenous and the wider community were engaged in the overall project, which resulted in a strengthening of relationships and a consolidation of community energy and activities. Whilst Bond's work is set within one specific geographical community it does offer learning for other urban communities and disciplinary fields other than health.

The Strong in the City health promotion project undertaken in the early 2000's also focused on the community of Inala along with the communities of Brisbane and Logan. It recognised that urban Indigenous identities have been marginalised to the point that "little effort has been attached to understanding the health of urban Indigenous people" (Brough, Bond & Hunt 2004). The project focused on improving the health and well-being of Indigenous families and supported social capital and the building of sustainable health promotion capacity. It additionally sought to acknowledge and support the resilience and strengths of urban Indigenous people and communities. The project found that the Indigenous communities possessed high levels of bonding social capital and that this was demonstrated via volunteerism and commitment to working for the community. Furthermore, that this resulted in the maintenance of a sense of community. In contrast, the findings show that bridging social capital is "compromised through racism, stereotypes and lack of responsibility and commitment to Indigenous health by the non-Indigenous community" (Brough et.al. 2004). The report additionally asserts the need for the development of health promotion practices within Indigenous health, which acknowledge and act on the upstream factors or social determinants. The Strong in the City project linked education to the health of urban Indigenous people.

The Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) leads and governs the Centre for Clinical Research Excellence (CCRE), which has been funded by the

National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC). QAIHC is the State peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services in Queensland and is the State Affiliate of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). The CCRE research program focuses on the prevention and management of circulatory and associated diseases, such as heart and kidney disease, in Indigenous people living in urban areas. Circulatory and related conditions are one of the major causes of excess morbidity and mortality in Indigenous people in Australia. The CCRE is a partnership between QAIHC and Monash University, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the University of Queensland (UQ), James Cook University (JCU), the National Heart Foundation (NHF), and the University of Wollongong (U of W). The establishment of the CCRE under the Community Controlled model of governance is unique and presents both opportunities and challenges for innovative partnerships between universities and Indigenous community organisations.^v

The Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRAH) recently commissioned a literature review titled 'Health care access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas, and related research issues' as part of its Health Service Utilisation and Linkages Project. The literature review (Scrimgeour and Scrimgeour 2008) outlines the problems associated with identifying a 'community' for the purpose of research involving Indigenous people living in large urban areas and appropriate research sampling methods. The literature review provides a comprehensive snapshot of a range of issues and projects undertaken in urban Australia and can be utilised in a range of fields including education.

Conclusion

The growing number of Indigenous people in urban centres is not unique to Queensland. Over the generations increasing numbers of Indigenous people across Australia have faced the difficulties and pressures of living in urban environments. Some of these were portrayed in the National Museum of Australia's recently staged exhibition focusing on urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and cultures titled *70% Urban*. The *70 % Urban* exhibition at the Gallery of First Australians, the National Museum of Australia closed on the 31 January 2008. One of the striking features of a number of works was the symbolism at play that portrayed cultural knowledge that is both secret and public within urban environments along with the visual depictions of memories and images of past policies and cultural understandings in traditional, colonial and present times.

The growing urbanisation of Indigenous peoples has also occurred in Canada, the United States and New Zealand. In Canada, the number of Indigenous people living in urban centres has grown substantially, with approximately 50% of the urban Indigenous population now living in urban centres. In response, the Government of Canada developed the *Urban Aboriginal Strategy* in an effort to respond to the needs of Canadian Aboriginal people living in key urban centres. It has additionally allocated over \$50 million for the implementation of the strategy. The Government of Canada states that, "the Urban Aboriginal Strategy is a step in the right direction to ensure that

Aboriginal Canadians living in cities across Canada have greater access to the skills and experiences they need to gain access to and succeed in an urban setting” (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2003). Some of the key Canadian urban centres now have Aboriginal policies, initiatives or committees. Some of the work being undertaken overseas may offer lessons for Australian Indigenous urban populations.

As established, there are increasing numbers of Indigenous people living in urban areas. Despite this, many policy and government officers and researchers often appear to minimise or ignore plight of Indigenous urban populations. Until the dominant culture’s understandings of Indigenous people and culture change we will continue to witness stereotypical and biased understandings of Australia’s Indigenous people. A mindset shift is required to unlock the cultural paradigm, which constrains how Indigenous people are understood and viewed. Only in this way can the needs of Indigenous people in urban areas be adequately addressed.

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ⁱⁱ See Brisbane South Education Region 1988; Brown, J., Hirshfield, R. and Smith, D. 1974; Smith, H. 1975; and Watson, 1981.

ⁱⁱⁱ Communities in this context refers to identifiable Aboriginal communities where the majority of residents are Indigenous and which tend to be historically linked to government established Aboriginal reserves.

^{iv} See Hayman 1997; Hayman, Kanhutu and Brady 2002; Kickett-Tucker 1999.

^v See Fredericks 2006; Fredericks and Pearce 2007; and Pearce and Fredericks 2007 for more detailed information.