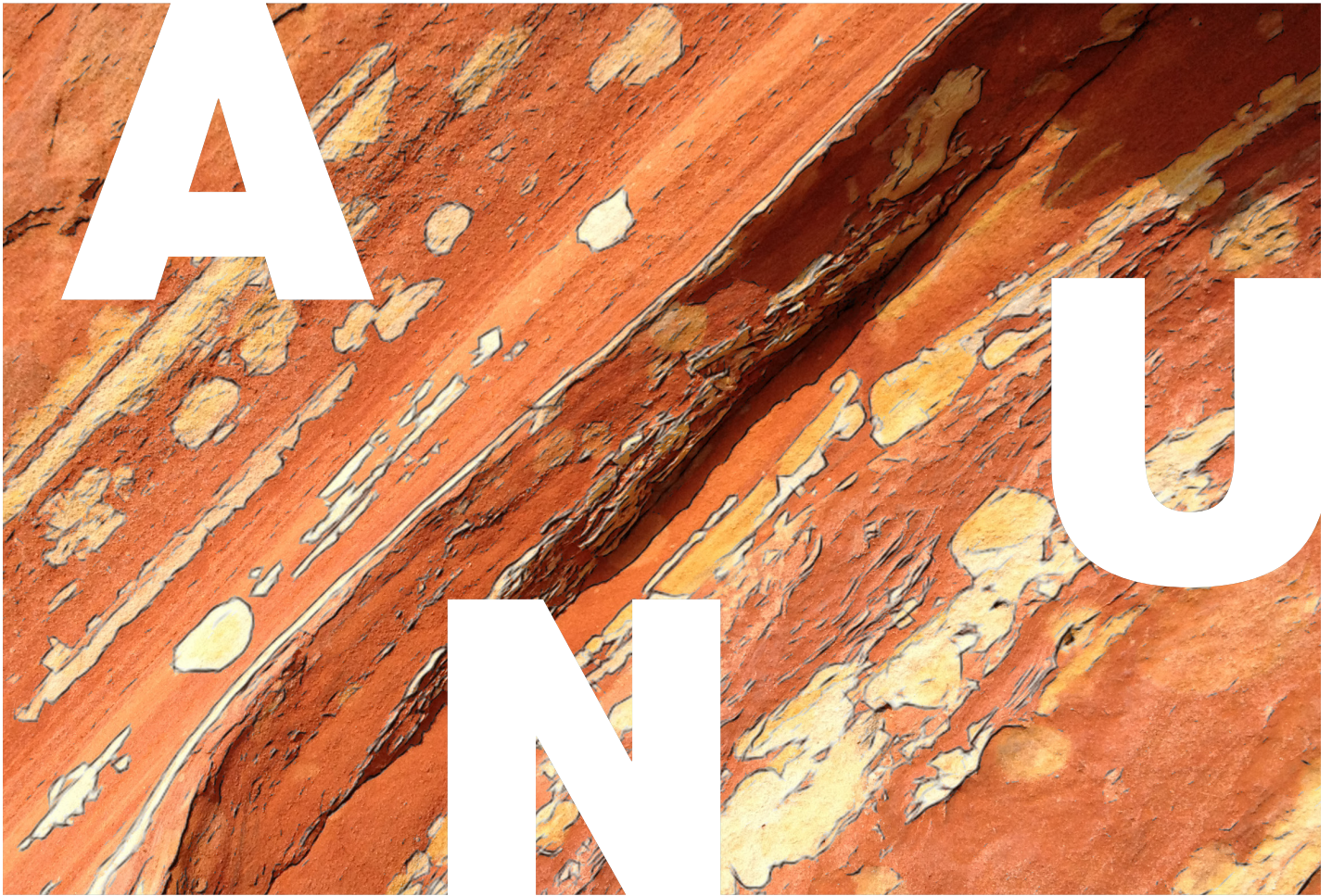




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LESS IS MORE: REFLECTIONS ON
THE OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS
DISADVANTAGE REPORTS

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Sciences**

CAEPR TOPICAL ISSUE NO. 1/2013

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January 2013

Less is More: Reflections on the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Reports

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A version of this Topical Issue formed a submission to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) review of the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* Reports.

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Topical Issue No. 1/2013

An electronic publication downloaded from <caepi.anu.edu.au>.

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In April 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) to:

... produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. This report will help to measure the impact of changes to policy settings and service delivery and provide a concrete way to measure the effect of the Council's commitment to reconciliation through a jointly agreed set of indicators.

The first *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* (OID Report) was released in November 2003 with the fifth edition coming out in late 2011. In its role as Secretariat to the Steering Committee, in 20012 the Productivity Commission has engaged the Australian Council for Educational Research to conduct an independent review of the OID Report.

The 2002 Terms of Reference for the original OID Report indicated that outputs are designed to improve government accountability and contribute to the wellbeing of all Australians by driving better government service delivery. These goals are laudable, but their realisation depends on the production of meaningful comparative information on Indigenous and other Australians. Available sources of such information include administrative data from government contributors, surveys and other sources of data/evaluation as appropriate.

We do not contest these goals, or the fact that the OID Reports appear to conscientiously provide sufficient information on what official data sources contain. Rather, we argue that there is too much reportage of data that does not contribute to our understanding of Indigenous disadvantage. The primary issue is that there is an insufficient attempt to appreciate the limitations of the available data and evaluations. This submission concludes that 'less is more'—that is, the report would add more value by eliminating analysis with only a

marginal contribution to our understanding of Indigenous disadvantage and focusing on particular indicators for which the reliability can be examined. In addition, there should be more time between the reports, as the annual trends in administrative data are likely to depend on factors that are subtle and difficult to model—such as potentially important changes in jurisdictional rules and conditions. In any case, the main reason for producing OID Reports is to reduce long-run disadvantage rather than provide short-run, and potentially noisy, information on outcomes and indicators.

Before such arguments can be made there is a need for some background discussion of issues. The subsequent sections provides some reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the OID reporting process—including an analysis of the ‘what works’ contributions of the report and some argument about the role of evaluation and analysis. The final section concludes, but does so in the form of a plea for more knowledge and less data.

Institutional context

The OID reporting process is one series of publications among a bewildering variety of reports (viz. National Indigenous Reform Agreement and other National Agreement and National Partnership reports—both Steering Committee and COAG Reform Council reports; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Report; Prime Minister’s Report to Parliament; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) publications on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and welfare; Indigenous Expenditure Report; international performance reports). There is clearly potential duplication of information among such reports which cover almost all aspects of Indigenous life (often from different perspectives). This submission does not reflect on any potential duplication, except to say that the OID Reports are relatively comprehensive and provide an overarching framework that helps organise and hence understand data. Diversity of data sources and debate over the meaning of data obtained are important issues in their own right and hence we are not particularly concerned about possible duplication. The fundamental question for this review is whether the reported data actually provides relevant and reliable new information.

One important institution is the Closing the Gap (CtG) Clearinghouse, which has a clear role in evaluating evidence that arguably impinges on the ‘what works’ case studies presented in the later OID Reports. The CtG Clearinghouse summarises and assesses evidence-based research on overcoming disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. It is another COAG initiative jointly funded by all Australian Governments and is being delivered by the AIHW in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Family

Studies. Like the OID Reports, the Clearinghouse uses COAG’s seven building blocks which support the reforms aimed at the six CtG targets to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. The CtG Clearinghouse initially attempted to directly evaluate the relevant programs and associated assessments/literature, but in practice this proved rather difficult to achieve and was well beyond the resources of the CtG Clearinghouse. CtG Issues Papers, which provide a comprehensive review of a large body of literature that determines the overall breadth of the evidence on a specific topic, have proved to be a more useful vehicle, as they have identified substantial gaps in the literature. CtG Clearinghouse Resource Sheets that focus on narrowly-defined issues can also provide a useful summary of the assessments. In the context of current OID review, it is worth noting that independent expert researchers are commissioned for Issues Papers to provide a credible peer-review dimension to the evaluation of the literature.

Strengths of OID process

The content of the OID Reports is organised at the top level of COAG targets and headline indicators and hence is consistent with extant policy orientations of Australian Governments (the OID indicators are provided at Appendix A). The reports bring together an impressive array of comparable data from various jurisdictions that virtually no individual researchers or even discrete organisations could achieve by themselves. The committee responsible for reports have coordinated data collected in very different circumstances. For example, administrative data is collected for bureaucratic reasons and may differ substantially depending, amongst other things, on statutes and rules specific to the jurisdiction in question. It is an enormous and complex task to render potentially disparate data comparable and the OID Reports do a commendable job.

More importantly, the transparency of government processes is enhanced by the large-scale and comprehensive provision of accurate information on services provided and outcomes achieved. While OID Reports are massive documents, they are kept slightly more manageable by only reporting outcomes at a National and State and Territory level. Remote versus non-remote comparisons are sometimes provided for survey data where the appropriate geography is provided. It may be theoretically possible to generate administrative data by remoteness, and arguably desirable to do so where accessibility and cultural difference are likely to be important, but we think that the OID Reports have the balance right by attempting to disaggregate administrative data below the State and Territory level as there is considerable uncertainty about the reliability of such data collected in very different circumstances (see next section).

The OID Reports have become even more comprehensive, or at least longer, over time, but the extent of information contained in them is necessarily limited and descriptive without an explicit theoretical model. The initial reports included a Venn diagram that described how the three 'priority areas' (probably) overlapped (SCRGSP 2003, 2005). To be fair, this was never meant to be a theoretical model, but was more of an organising principle which was a contribution in its own right. The Venn diagram merely enumerates the fact that some people will experience issues with two or more priority outcomes at the same time. Later reports have acknowledged the existence of multiple causal processes. In our opinion, the attempts to consider multiple causes are laudable, but are probably overly ambitious in the context. It is difficult to interpret the multiple disadvantages without an explicit theory to explain how those disadvantages are related to one another. Describing the coincidence of several different disadvantages does emphasise the potential importance of compounding of adverse circumstances, but policy and research must be also informed by how the various disadvantages relate to and interact with one another. There are clear limits to the extent that a substantial analysis of multiple disadvantage can be achieved in the OID Reports. Certainly, the attempts to do this in the most recent reports are rather mechanical, necessarily qualified and descriptive (SCRGSP 2011: Chapter 13). They cannot be construed as evidence for a particular theoretical proposition, and certainly do not reflect the efficacy of a program, without complete specification of underlying assumptions or methodological approach. The level of detail required is not really possible in what is already a rather long document. In any case there are more appropriate places for testing particular propositions, including peer-reviewed publications.

Weaknesses of OID Reports

There are several weaknesses of the OID Reports: the absence of an explicit theoretical framework and the lack of independent peer-review alluded to in the previous paragraph, but more importantly the under-appreciated data quality issues, which we focus on in this section. Please note that we are not criticising the considerable efforts to ensure data quality across the data from the range of jurisdictions—the task is obviously mammoth and appears to have been conducted conscientiously. However, there are certain aspects of data quality that are difficult if not impossible to resolve and the failure to adequately discuss such issues will tend to promote an unwarranted confidence in the data reported in the OID Reports.

OID Reports have adopted best practice and reported confidence intervals for survey data that are prone to 'sampling error' (which arise because samples may not precisely represent a statistic for a population). Reliability of the resulting estimates is more of an issue in small selective samples, and reporting confidence intervals allow users to judge whether estimated differences and trends are statistically significant. Non-sampling error is potentially an issue for all data collections, not just surveys, as such error arises from the process of collecting and analysing data rather than the sample achieved (Biddle & Hunter 2006). Non-sampling error includes problems in coverage, response, non-response, data processing, estimation and analysis.

Administrative data can have substantial non-sampling error associated with it even if it seems to cover a large number of Indigenous people. Hunter and Ayyar (2011) demonstrate that Indigenous disadvantage can be grossly understated depending on the treatment of Indigenous status information. The inadequate treatment of the 'not stated' category or the failure to capture the extent of under-enumeration is likely to lead considerable non-sampling error.¹ For example, in the context of the most recent OID Report, non-Indigenous suicides includes deaths where Indigenous status is not stated (SCRGSP 2011: p. 7.66).

The population data used to estimate rates in OID Reports attempt to correct for under-enumeration in census data, but there is no analogous attempt to correct the administrative data used in the numerator in these publications. At the very least it is important to recognise that this non-sampling error exists and warn analysts that they should exercise extreme caution when attempting to interpret such data.

One important aspect of non-sampling error not captured, or rather not adequately discussed, is the jurisdictional variation in the way in which people were asked about how the Indigenous status information was collected. Incentives to report as Indigenous may differ depending on how the data is collected and even financial or non-pecuniary incentives/disincentives. Hunter and Ayyar (2011) discuss how certain types of crimes are more likely to identify Indigenous respondents as police have the potential to use their discretion as to whether a person looks 'Indigenous' (e.g. where a notice is served but there is no necessary formal engagement with the court system—such as traffic infringements as opposed to formally charged offences). Incentives may be important in jurisdictions where eligibility for access to services is contingent on individuals identifying as an Indigenous Australian.

It is not clear whether such ‘errors’ tend to systematically overstate or understate Indigenous outcomes. If Indigenous people believe that the system does not treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders fairly, they are more likely to avoid indicating their Indigenous status (if given the opportunity). On the other hand, pecuniary and non-pecuniary incentives could theoretically lead to an over-reporting of Indigenous status. The point here is that, even if you believe that the underlying administrative data captures all the relevant treatment group in the population, the estimates for any sub-population cannot be said to be reported without some assessment of reliability of those estimates.

Of course assessments of non-sampling issues are extremely complex and possibly too difficult to discuss adequately in the context of the OID Report. Such issues are arguably unavoidable and intractable in the Indigenous context, but they have to be acknowledged even if they are impossible to (fully) capture in confidence intervals. The main point is that it is inappropriate to represent administrative data as if they are very precise. There are many factors that are likely to lead to non-sampling errors and these factors are likely to change substantially over time (with changes to both the way in which questions are asked and the institutional context). Furthermore, the denominators used in measuring rates are based on the experimental estimates of the Indigenous population in the respective States and Territories. The ABS are clearly aware that the population estimates are measured with error, as they are projected forecasts of census data (which itself has longstanding and ongoing issues with under-enumeration of the indigenous population, see Ross 1999). All forecasts become less reliable the longer the period of projection (Kennedy 1998). Accordingly population data, and the rates on which they are based, are most reliable at the time of the census on which they are based. The bottom line is that OID time series analysis should only focus on long-run trends between census years and avoid short-run trend or annual estimates.

Another weakness of the OID Reports is that there may be a potential conflict of interest for certain data or evaluations. If data is drawn solely from people providing or administering the services being assessed or evaluated, it is difficult to discount the possible incentive to overstate the efficacy of programs (independence of peer review). A special case of the role of independence in the OID Reports is the (seemingly) selective case studies of successful programs which are analysed in detail in the next section.

‘What Works’ analysis

After the first OID Report, case studies have become an increasingly important aspect of the published output. This

TABLE 1. Case studies and associated evaluations in the OID Reports, 2003–11

Year	Case studies (no.)	Evaluations (no.)	Evaluated (%)
2003	0	0	0
2005	32	4	13
2007	94	17	18
2009	114	28	25
2011	83	22	27
Total	323	71	22

Note: Evaluations include peer-reviewed publications, internal or external evaluations, audits, research publications by institutes or schools, and conference papers where those publications are available either publicly or by subscription. Where conference papers can be verified (in proceedings or as journal articles), they have been included in this category.

section reflects on the value added by these case studies. An attempt has been made to independently verify citations and evaluations, but this was not always possible. Note that for the purposes of the following analysis, we have adopted a generous definition of the term ‘evaluation’ that passes no judgement as to the independence of the analysis from the program in question. The question of independence is essential to the credibility of the claims made about efficacy of programs, but we will return to this in the concluding section.

Over the five OID Reports, a total of 324 ‘Things that work’ or ‘What Works’ case studies are provided in order to elaborate on policy or program successes that may not be captured by statistical data (Table 1).

[T]here is clearly more going on in Indigenous communities than can be captured by statistics. Our consultations across the country in preparing this Report have revealed many positive initiatives at the local level, often at the instigation of Indigenous people themselves, and involving constructive new relationships with government and private enterprises. Some of these initiatives have been revealed in this year’s Report through case studies and in an array of boxes devoted to ‘things that work’. (SCRGSP 2005: iii)

While there were no What Works case studies provided in the first report, an increasing number appeared in subsequent reports, except for the final report in 2011.

Many programs or services were identified in more than one report; once duplicates were removed we identified a total of only 240 unique What Works case studies.² However, as the evidence used in support of a case study can change over time, when new evaluations or peer reviewed research are released, a summary of both unique and all case studies is provided where relevant.

TABLE 2. Focus of case studies, OID Reports, 2003–11

Focus of case study	Description	Number
Policy	Endorsed government policy	1
Infrastructure	Public services (housing, swimming pools)	4
Strategy	Method or approach to delivering policy outcome	5
Other	Awards, partnerships, tours, health outcomes	16
Project	Defined period of operation	37
Service	Service provider or organisation	55
Program	Ongoing service delivery	122
Total		240

Case studies are aligned with the 49 COAG Targets and indicators. In all years, there are no What Works case studies provided for the following seven indicators:

- 4.6 Employment
- 5.4 Early childhood hospitalisations
- 6.2 Teacher quality
- 6.4 Year 9 attainment
- 6.5 Year 10 attainment
- 8.4 Income support
- 9.1 Overcrowding in housing

At face value, this could be taken to indicate that there is an absence of effective programs in these areas. However, recent CtG Clearinghouse Issues Papers show that there were substantial improvement in some of these areas over time and, more importantly, make claims that some programs are associated with better outcomes than other programs. The question thus arises: what criteria used to include the case studies and are those criteria justifiable? We are not aware of any justification of what constitutes a program that 'works' in the OID Reports, but unless an attempt is made to adequately justify the criteria explicitly one should question the value added by the inclusion of these case studies.

Does the substantial number of What Works case studies constitute a justification in itself? Of the 240 case studies analysed, 12 per cent did not include any references and a further 45 per cent cited unpublished sources only.³ Only 22 per cent of case studies cite an evaluation. Note that 7 per cent of citations could not be verified. The quality of the case material in the OID Reports is clearly not adequate and must be improved.

The focus of case studies is not always a program with ongoing service delivery. Indeed just over half of the 240 unique case studies were programs (Table 2). The important point in this context is that any evaluation of 'what works' requires a clear definition of the 'treatment' that could be construed as working. However, Table 2 illustrates that the focus of the case studies are conceptually very different. Programs might be credibly identified as a treatment, but policies, strategies and even organisations are heterogeneous higher-order concepts that are hard to construe as a treatment. Even if one suspends disbelief about the arguably conceptually confused nature of some of the case studies in the OID Reports, it is important to reflect on the extent to which the associated analysis is based on independent peer-reviewed research.

Once duplicates are removed, 61 case studies rely on information which is not an evaluation or peer-reviewed publication (e.g., a press release, organisation annual report, or organisation or government website). In a very small number of cases, the veracity of some statistics may have been misinterpreted and the quality of data relied upon to substantiate the case study may be questioned. For example:

- The most recent report of the Non-Truancy Project by the Catherine Freeman Foundation cites a 20 per cent increase in school attendance over two years (SCRGSP 2011: p. 6.5). The report references an AIHW Issues Paper, which sources that statistic from the Catherine Freeman Foundation website (Purdie & Buckley 2010). The AIHW paper states that there is no evaluation available to support the claim, but this caveat is not acknowledged in the OID Report.

- The case study on the Tasmanian Government Aboriginal Early Years Program (SCRGSP 2009: p. 4.27) references a Tasmanian Government (2010) Report, which briefly discusses the improvement of Indigenous students participating in the Launching into Learning program. The Tasmanian Government report does not however evaluate the Early Years Program, nor identify the Early Years Program by name.
- The What Works case study on night patrols in the 2005 OID Report (SCRGSP 2005: p. 8.12), states that the crime rate in a local shopping mall dropped by 39 per cent after a night patrol service commenced in a rural Indigenous community of Victoria, and cites Rowland and Toumbourou (2004). Rowland and Toumbourou provide a literature review and an evaluation of strategies to prevent drug-related harm amongst Indigenous people, but does not explicitly evaluate night patrols. The 39 per cent crime reduction is an unattributed quotation from a practitioner who worked in the regional community. Other research available at the time of the 2005 OID Report does demonstrate the effectiveness of night patrols (e.g., Sputore, Gray & Sampi 2000; Blagg & Valuri 2003).

Given the ambitious scope of material covered in the OID reports it is perhaps unsurprising that independent, academic, peer-reviewed material or evaluations are not cited even when this material is available; or evaluations are stated to have occurred but no citation is provided. Some examples include:

- The discussion of the Accelerated Literacy Program, which cites an evaluation that was conducted by Charles Darwin University but does not provide a reference for this information (SCRGSP 2007: 6.10). An interim evaluation was released in 2007 (Accelerated Literacy Evaluation Team 2007), and a final evaluation was released for this project in 2009 (Robinson et al. 2009).
- Alternatively, the discussion of the Koori Maternity Services Program (SCRGSP 2007: 5.18) cites a conference paper which can no longer be accessed (Dwyer 2005), instead of a peer-reviewed evaluation published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health that was available at the time of the publication of the 2007 Report (Campbell & Brown 2004).

Occasionally, more rigorous data were available to substantiate a case study at the time of publication, or peer-reviewed publications or evaluations have become available over time, but the case study was not discussed in subsequent reports, for example:

- The ANAO Audit of the Sporting Chance program (which has its own What Works case study, but funds the Clontarf Football Academy, itself mentioned in the 2005,

2007, 2009, and 2011 OID Reports and covered by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) audit).

- Remote secondary schooling in the Northern Territory was discussed in the 2007 and 2009 reports, but a major report published by Charles Darwin University in 2003 is not mentioned (Ramsey 2003).
- The Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program was evaluated in 2005 (Elderfield & Loudon 2005), but that information is not provided in 2005 or the repeated case study in 2007.

The What Works case studies were arguably included in the OID reports for the purpose of capturing 'good news stories' or initiatives whose positive results may not be reflected in national level data. This analysis suggests that the data used to support these case studies is often anecdotal and partial, and omit more rigorous information which was either publicly available at the time or became available after the initial case study, and could therefore be used to provide a more robust discussion of 'what works' over time. Given that the CtG Clearinghouse is set up to provide summaries of program evaluations in a flexible manner that encourages peer-review, it would be a better use of resources to refer to Clearinghouse publications rather than attempt to provide an inadequate commentary on 'what works'.

More knowledge less data

The basic message of this submission is that OID Reports are too long and occur too frequently. The main strength of the process is that it provides data that would not otherwise be available and is a tangible measure of government transparency on performance with respect to Indigenous issues. The length issue is largely a result of the claims made about 'what works'. These claims are not really credible in that the reported assessments are not always peer-reviewed. Obviously evaluations provide important context to understand what policy can do to address Indigenous disadvantage, however this context can be provided more parsimoniously by reference to other publications that summarise the peer-reviewed literature. CtG Clearinghouse publications are one potential source of such information, but other references may be appropriate for some issues (especially where the Clearinghouse has not produced a relevant publication yet).

Another aspect of OID Reports that could be substantially rationalised is the time series analysis. In our judgement, the presentation of annual trends is not warranted as both the numerator and denominator are measured with, potentially considerable, error. We would recommend more time should elapse between OID Reports so that the focus is squarely on long-run trends. An argument can be made that the reports be timed as soon as possible after

the census data is released publicly so as to minimise the possible error in the denominator used for estimating the Indigenous population. An alternative timing of OID reports would be to report shortly after the analysis of major surveys like the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Surveys, but coordinating reports with the census would effectively achieve this outcome.

While it is desirable to reduce the size of future OID Reports to a more manageable size, the reports need to spend some space reflecting the issues of potential bias and the reliability of administrative data for Indigenous Australians. These are complex issues that are poorly understood. One reason why such issues are under-researched is that they require an open collaboration between government departments, researchers and Indigenous community. The first step is to recognise the potential scope of the issue and then willing collaborators need to be found. This submission is a small step towards the recognition of the issue.

The above discussion does not mention the breadth of indicators in the OID Reports because there will always be arguments about some aspects of Indigenous disadvantage that are difficult to measure and analytically encapsulate. For example social capital and social inclusion are poorly measured and conceptualised in the Indigenous context, especially in quantitative analysis that abstracts from Indigenous social networks (Hunter 2004; Hunter & Jordan 2010). Philosophically it is important to acknowledge there are some areas that are not amenable to measurement and analytical humility is essential. Most empirical analysis requires that the concept being measured is meaningful or applicable for all groups. In domains where there are fundamental cultural differences between Indigenous and other Australians, no comparative data will exist. However, radical differences will have important implications for understanding Indigenous disadvantage and the policies that are likely to be effective. While a sense of humility about what can be measured is appropriate, there is no doubt that the OID Reports can and do provide invaluable data that are essential for Indigenous policy-makers.

Notes

1. Another separate issue are those respondents within scope but not covered by the data collection in question.
2. Case study names have been standardised, however there are separate case studies which describe different programs provided by one organisation (e.g. training programs provided by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC)), or programs which have the same name but are provided in or by different communities (e.g. alcohol management plans in Groote Eylandt, Cape York or Fitzroy Crossing). These programs remain separate and identifiable.
3. The term 'references' is very loosely used here as it includes a diverse range of 'evidence' that would not usually be acceptable in peer-review publications. For example, unpublished and unverifiable sources are classified as evidence here. Note unpublished sources include publicly available but unpublished or unattributed government and organisation sources, or personal communications. Unverifiable sources are those which have not been publicly released and of which no public record (apart from the OID Reports) can be found after extensive internet, library and database searches have been conducted.

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Appendix A: OID Indicators

TABLE A1. Indicators in the most recent OID Report	
COAG Target	4.1 Life expectancy
	4.2 Young child mortality
	4.3 Early childhood education
	4.4 Reading, writing and numeracy
	4.5 Year 12 attainment
	4.6 Employment
Headline Indicator	4.7 Post-secondary education - participation and attainment
	4.8 Disability and chronic disease
	4.9 Household and individual income
	4.10 Substantiated child abuse and neglect
	4.11 Family and community violence
Early Childhood Development	4.12 Imprisonment and juvenile detention
	5.1 Maternal health
	5.2 Teenage birth rate
	5.3 Birthweight
	5.4 Early childhood hospitalisations
	5.5 Injury and preventable disease
	5.6 Basic skills for life and learning
Education and Training	5.7 Hearing impairment
	6.1 School enrolment and attendance
	6.2 Teacher quality
	6.3 Indigenous cultural studies
	6.4 Year 9 attainment
	6.5 Year 10 attainment
	6.6 Transition from school to work
Healthy Lives	7.1 Access to primary health care
	7.2 Potentially preventable hospitalisations
	7.3 Avoidable mortality
	7.4 Tobacco consumption and harm
	7.5 Obesity and nutrition
	7.6 Tooth decay
	7.7 Mental health
	7.8 Suicide and self-harm
Economic Participation	8.1 Employment by full time/part time status, sector and occupation
	8.2 Indigenous owned or controlled land and business
	8.3 Home ownership
	8.4 Income support
Home Environment	9.1 Overcrowding in housing
	9.2 Rates of disease associated with poor environmental health
	9.3 Access to clean water and functional sewerage and electricity services
Safe and Supportive Communities	10.1 Participation in organized sport, arts or community group activities
	10.2 Access to traditional lands
	10.3 Alcohol consumption and harm
	10.4 Drug and other substance use and harm
	10.5 Juvenile diversions
	10.6 Repeat offending
Governance and Leadership	11.1 Case studies in governance
	11.2 Governance capacity and skills
	11.3 Engagement with service delivery
Source: SCRGSP (2011).	