



HC Coombs Policy Forum and Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

Indigenous Data: A scoping workshop on enhanced access to and creative use of data on Indigenous Australians

Correspondence

Dr Boyd Hunter, Senior Fellow, CAEPR, ANU
E boyd.hunter@anu.edu.au T +61 2 6125 8207

Paul Harris, Deputy Director, HC Coombs Policy Forum, ANU
E paul.harris@anu.edu.au T +61 2 6125 6983

The HC Coombs Policy Forum in conjunction with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at The Australian National University (ANU) organised a targeted workshop aimed at supporting the creative use of new and extant data on Indigenous Australians to improve both research and policy-making. There were about 30 invited participants at the Workshop including senior members of the public service, academia and civil society along with two visiting international specialists on indigenous data – Professor Matthew Snipp of the Center for Comparative Studies of Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University and Dr Harry A Patrinos, Lead Education Economist at The World Bank Washington, DC.

The Workshop followed on from the 2011 CAEPR conference on 'Social Science Perspectives on the 2008 National and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS)' which was held at ANU on 11-12 April 2011. The Conference recognised that there are data gaps that need to be addressed, and that effective policies informed by peer-reviewed findings arising from creative analysis need to be developed. The specific objectives of the Workshop were to:

- > identify the key challenges for augmenting the evidence base, to help inform policy-makers and legislators
- > construct a positive agenda for closing the data and analysis gap.

The Workshop was structured into three sessions:

- > insights from overseas
- > creative collaboration between universities, the public and private sectors
- > new methodologies in Indigenous research.

Each session had a chair and one or two discussion starters. All discussions were subject to the Chatham House rule.

To set the scene, a number of data types were identified, including cross sectional, longitudinal, from random control trials, administrative data, experimental, audit studies and qualitative data. Data ranges from the national to the community level. Their collection can be informed by ideology and requirements for evidence. A key issue for researchers is how to work constructively with imperfect datasets to answer questions for policy makers.

Insights from overseas

Data on race and ethnicity is complex and potentially volatile. It may be collected at varying geographical levels with attendant varying definitions. Identification as indigenous may be based on residence, descent, language, official registration or self-perception. Levels of self-identification may be influenced by eligibility for special benefits, for example privileged access to university courses or fee exemption. Additionally, people may identify as more than one race and may also change their racial or ethnic identification over time.

These complications have impacts for putting together cohorts for cross comparisons, for performing international comparisons, for benchmarking outcomes of different policies, for providing evidence and advice on appropriate policy programs and for managing action plans and targets.

Despite the difficulties and by the taking into account due caveats, comparisons can nonetheless enrich understanding and provide models for improvement. Educated estimations about the strength of data and the likely source of errors to create a hierarchy of trusted datasets will help inform any comparisons. A caution was issued for comparisons between Australia and other countries where the quality of civic registration systems is of concern and time intervals between census data collection may vary.

An interesting point was made that random control trials need not be difficult or unethical. For example, randomization can be based on varying the benefits of programs (ie by augmenting program cutoff levels) rather than treatments that potentially involve detrimental effects on program participants.

Creative collaboration

A number of models for collaboration between academia and the public and private sectors were discussed (see for example Weiss 1979):

- > Knowledge driven model – rarer in the social sciences than in other fields
- > Problem solving model – commissioned research
- > Interactive model – commissioned research feeding into a dynamic policy process
- > Political model – a government has made a decision and needs support to justify it
- > Enlightenment model – academics do research which leads to increased general awareness of the issue.

Some concern was expressed that the public service has shifted its focus to program delivery to the detriment of longer-term strategic policy. This opens the scope for partnerships with academic/research organisations – long-term relationships with investment in intellectual capacity (see Moran Report 2010). Close collaboration with national statistical agencies should be an integral element of these partnerships.

With these partnerships, it is profitable to determine the opportunity costs – is it worth doing and to answer which key policy questions? It is also important to understand evolving policy questions in critical areas and what data would be needed to elucidate or influence the issues. This would help eliminate any tensions with trying to use data for purposes it was not designed for.

Current successful partnerships include staff placements both within academia and within the public service; organisation to organisation links with annual agreed sets of topics; and having community representation on steering committees. A potential obstacle is intellectual property given that publication is a focus for university staff under current higher education and research policies.

The types, sources and scale of relevant data were also discussed.

Communications data, such as that collected passively from mobile phones, and administrative data, such as tax and health records, are other useful sources of information. There are ongoing questions of privacy and confidentiality with this data. The potential benefits of cost, accuracy, coverage and the possibility of matching records across populations provide strong incentives to use administrative data.

Participants also discussed the most useful scale for different data and issues. For example, enormous tests with statistical power, may have no capacity for local level focus. Size varies with type of study, for example a study of 60 families in one US city on childhood intervention triggered lots of other studies and action programs.

The US and Canada have been trying since the 1990 census, with little success so far, to link to administrative data. Barriers come from errors in the data, an inability to match, questions of proprietary cleaning of data and from varying confidentiality laws.

New methodologies for Indigenous research

A few useful organisations and mechanisms for future creative collaborations in data usage and research were suggested.

The Indigenous Research Forum is held annually. The forum is intended for Indigenous re-searchers, academics and post-graduate students and may provide for creative collaboration between all the stakeholders in any research agenda.

The Australian Research Council's (ARC's) Linkage grants aim to encourage and develop long-term strategic research alliances between higher education organisations and other organisations, including with industry and other end-users such as government. Projects are funded for two to five years; had a 47 per cent success rate in 2008; have a formal agenda in a definite area and generally take about nine months from inception to announcement. There are two rounds annually usually closing in May and November.

www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/lp/lp_default.htm

Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) are organisations, formed through collaborative partnerships between publicly funded researchers and end users and funded by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR). Two current CRCs working on indigenous issues are:

- > CRC on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health **www.lowitja.org.au/crcatsih**
- > CRC on Remote Economic Participation also looks at mobility **www.crc-rep.com.au**
- > FaHCSIA and ANU are also involved in a proposal for a CRC on Social Inclusion.

One quality of esteem metric used by the ARC Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative is the presence of publications in international A and A* journals. This will have an impact on indigenous research in that local or regional research does not usually appear in such journals. Given the importance of peer review for the Indigenous evidence process, it is important that the unintended consequences of the ERA are acknowledged and publicly debated.

The HC Coombs Policy Forum has a mandate and funding for commissioned work in areas of academic excellence and relevance to government within its agreed thematic priorities.

Two relevant international groups are:

- > Pacific Indigenous Scholars
- > Native American and Indigenous Studies Association **www.naisa.org**

It would be valuable to have a record and description of existing relevant dataset holdings that includes details of availability. The list could start with those held by workshop attendees. It is sometimes possible to have access to non-public data if a strong and specific case is made for its use in research. This data mapping exercise would be a constructive first step in creating a truly creative collaboration between various stakeholders. It was also suggested that workshop attendees identifies the big policy questions that need to be addressed by new or reconstructed data.

Background readings

Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration (2010) *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint For Reform Of Australian Government Administration* (Moran Report), Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra.

Nicholas Biddle & Mandy Yap (2010) Closing the (Data) Gap, *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, Vol. 7 Issue 19: 17-9, July/August.

Jonathan Pincus (2010) Rapporteur's comments, *Roundtable Proceedings on Evidence-based policy*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

Carol Weiss (1979) The Many Meanings of Research Utilization, *Public Administration Review*, 39(5), 426-431.

World Bank (2011) Indigenous Peoples: Still among the poorest of the poor, *Indigenous Peoples Policy Brief*, World Bank Policy Brief. Available at http://publicpolicy.anu.edu.au/coombs/workshops/indigenous_data/Indigenous_Peoples.pdf

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