

Demographics of Indigenous Australia

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There exists in Australia a new environment for effective debate on Indigenous¹ affairs. Where once a culture of fear, intimidation and hostility existed, new opportunities have arisen. There is greater space for Indigenous people to share their opinions, remark on the state of their communities and begin to contribute to positive work that may create a better future for Indigenous Australia.

This new environment must be harnessed in a way that captures the momentum rather than misses a valuable opportunity. In doing so, we must be aware that new solutions in Indigenous affairs require fresh thinking, innovative solutions and atypical partnerships. A society's capacity to transition from era to era, movement to movement, is best judged by the place of young people in political and social development. This is no different for Indigenous affairs. Young people are the interpreters of change. Accordingly, if meaningful and lasting change is to be achieved in society, or in one particular element of it, young people must be involved, mentored and supported. Therefore, Indigenous young people must be at the forefront of the necessary 'reformation' of Indigenous affairs in Australian society.

Demographics of Indigenous Australia

Indigenous communities and policy-makers are better placed to succeed if they utilise their young people. Approximately 63% of Indigenous Australians are under the age of 30.² In non-Indigenous Australia, the corresponding statistic is approximately 40%.³ A majority of Indigenous Australians are young people. Consequently, Indigenous young people are central to the development of policy and programs and community

capacity-building. Unfortunately, Indigenous communities are burdened by an abundance of socio-economic problems that constrain their ability to depend on their own human resources to create and oversee successful solutions. These issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse and misuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, overrepresentation in the justice system, under representation in education and employment outcomes, are well documented. Our knowledge about what is wrong is not the barrier to success. However, if we do not move from a problem-based approach to a strength-based approach in Indigenous affairs, we will remain unable to ensure equity and justice in Indigenous communities.

In promoting a strength-based approach to Indigenous policy, young Indigenous people must be recognised as assets to their community. Hard fought victories in the fields of education, employment, economic development and legal change by our forebearers have given young Indigenous people more opportunities than our communities have had in the history of Australian colonisation. In order to build on these victories and increase opportunities for the generations to come, the efficient transition of leadership from one generation to the next is critical. Indigenous young people can then utilise the skills they have on the basis of past victories to further development of their communities and more generally, Australian society.

National Indigenous Engagement Workshops

The vast talent amongst Indigenous young people was witnessed by the National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia

(NIYMA) through workshops held around the country in 2007. In conjunction with Reconciliation Australia, NIYMA held seven one-day workshops with Indigenous people aged 18 to 30, in Canberra, Cairns, Adelaide, Darwin, Perth, Sydney and Melbourne. The workshops were designed to give young Indigenous people space to support and network with each other, share in their own voices what they believed the issues to be in their communities and begin to build the solutions needed.

The young people who attended the workshops proved they had the innovation and fresh thinking required in Indigenous policy. In Perth, a group of participants have begun to use new technology—particularly websites like Facebook and Bebo—to create a virtual space where they can share experiences, keep in touch, work together to effect solutions and branch out to other members of their community. This method of communication is particularly important considering the mobility of young Indigenous people in modern society. One participant suggested the eradication of 'shame job' from the Indigenous vocabulary as a way to halt a lack of higher expectations among our people. In northern Queensland a group created their own foundation to provide a mechanism for young Indigenous people to express their own voice in the environmental and climate change debate. In Sydney, participants from inner city suburbs realised that the divisions between them were unhelpful and destructive. Both communities had buses that they planned to use in the future to bring groups of young people from each community to the other in order to break down barriers. Young people in Adelaide have made the commitment to network locally and stay connected to support those young Indigenous people who are working on ground towards local strategies for effective change.

The workshops also gave NIYMA the opportunity to partner with local and state Indigenous youth organisations that are contributing positively to their communities. Many of these organisations go unnoticed and uncelebrated and yet are making a major impact in the lives of young Indigenous people. Lapa Bummers Youth Haven in Sydney is the creation of a group of young Indigenous people from the La Perouse community who mentor and host activities for school children in order to limit the negative effects of boredom in their community. Danila Dilba Youth Service in Darwin provides a space for young Indigenous

people to connect and build self-esteem, leadership and interdependency. Yirra Yarkin Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia enables Indigenous communities to celebrate their culture through theatre performance and focuses on the involvement and training of young Indigenous people. The Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service in Perth is exploring innovative methods of educating young Indigenous people, particularly children, about the harmful effects of drug and alcohol abuse from the perspective of Indigenous people themselves. The Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council is a successful peer network that is able to advise government about the issues of young Indigenous people while also themselves running programs that aim to engage other Indigenous young people in their culture and introduce them to young mentors who can encourage them to succeed. Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts in Adelaide provide services and support to young Indigenous artists as well as an array of other youth-specific programs. These organisations only represent a small portion of successful youth-run or youth-led organisations or programs that encourage the development of young Indigenous talent, creativity and intellect.

Reformation

There must be a major investment made in young Indigenous people if policy-makers, government, the private sector and the community sector desire real and positive change in Indigenous communities. Firstly, all these groups should be aware of the unique demography of Indigenous Australia and engage with young Indigenous people in developing and implementing any Indigenous policy, program or investment. Secondly, any contribution made by young Indigenous people that requires their time, energy and expertise should be appropriately recognised. There is often the view in Indigenous affairs that Indigenous knowledge should be free, in time and finances, because the goal is good for public policy. However, in other fields, expertise is valued, financially or otherwise. Indigenous young people, who often give up time from their careers or study to provide their expertise, should be treated no differently.

Thirdly, there must be a shift in attitude for policy-makers so that they think about investing in people rather than only in policy and programs. Success in Indigenous communities is dependent on the capacity of Indigenous people themselves to self-determine their own

futures. For this to occur, community capacity-building must involve a degree of individual capacity-building. For the greatest and longest return on an investment, such capacity-building must be focused largely on young Indigenous people.

The Future

There has never been a more critical time for young Indigenous Australians to play a role in shaping and influencing the way the nation views and embraces its Indigenous people. Out of the 400,000 Indigenous Australians there are in the country, 250,000 of them are under the age of 30. When society understands Indigenous demographics then it must realise, as NIYMA has, that the most critical investment that can be made into Indigenous Australia has to be an investment made in Indigenous people.

History has taught us—and our future demands from us—that for Indigenous Australia to improve the quality of life that we live, to bridge the socio-economic divide between us and the rest of Australia, there must be new ideas, new perspectives—new leadership. Indigenous Australia should recognise and value the contribution, sacrifice and struggle of those that have come before us. However, we must also believe in those ahead of us.

Through the Indigenous Youth Engagement Workshops, NIYMA has begun to unearth a new group of leaders—intelligent, educated and earnest in their resolve to improve the quality of life of their peers and the nation in general. It is in this cohort that NIYMA sees an opportunity to effect long term positive change for not only Indigenous Australians, but all Australians.

Endnotes

1. The authors use the term Indigenous for brevity and comprehensibility. We understand that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders prefer alternative terms to describe their identity.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia*, (2008).
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories* (2007).
4. Productivity Commission, (2007), *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators*.