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# 7.3  Community safety among Indigenous Australians

Many factors can influence community safety and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Among the positive influences are being connected to country, land, family and spirit; having strong and positive social networks; and having strong leadership in both the family and the community (see Chapter 7.1 'Community factors and Indigenous wellbeing' for more information about these and other positive influences on community functioning).

This article focuses on contact with child protection services, contact with the criminal justice system, and community experiences of safety and violence. Indigenous Australians are over-represented in Australia's child protection, youth and adult justice systems. They also experience violence (particularly family and domestic violence) at rates well above those of non-Indigenous Australians. Factors contributing to this include past experience of violence and abuse (including in childhood), long-term social disadvantage, use of alcohol and drugs, and the ongoing impact of past dispossession and forced removal policies that have caused psychological trauma and contributed to the breakdown of traditional parenting, culture and kinship practices (SCRGSP 2016).

## Contact with child protection services

The child protection system across Australia assists vulnerable children who have been, or are at risk of being, abused, neglected or otherwise harmed, or whose parents are unable to provide them with adequate care or protection. Children may receive a mix of child protection services. These include 'investigations', 'care and protection orders', and 'out-of-home care'. Investigations can lead to 'substantiations' if there is sufficient reason to believe that a child has been, or is at risk of being, abused, neglected or harmed. Definitions of key terms are available in the Glossary (see also Chapter 2.4 'Child protection' and Chapter 2.5 'A stable and secure home for children in out-of-home care').

Factors that may be associated with child abuse and neglect include poverty, substance abuse by parents, marginalisation, social isolation, parental exposure to violence and crime, low levels of parental educational achievement, and inadequate housing (AIHW 2014; Scott 2014). All these factors are more common among Indigenous Australians than non-Indigenous Australians. Protecting Indigenous children requires a multifaceted approach that takes account of these factors, and strengthens and empowers Indigenous families and communities (SNAICC 2015).

- In 2015–16, more than 46,600 Indigenous children aged 0–17 received child protection services and about 12,900 (43.6 per 1,000 population) were the subject of a child protection substantiation—a rate around 7 times that for non-Indigenous children (Figure 7.3.1).

- The most common reasons for substantiations for Indigenous children were emotional abuse and neglect (accounting for 39% and 36% of cases, respectively). By comparison, 47% of substantiations for non-Indigenous children were due to emotional abuse, and 20% due to neglect.

- More than one-third of children (35%) on care and protection orders as at 30 June 2016 were Indigenous despite making up only 5.5% of the Australian population aged 0–17.

- As at 30 June 2016, there were more than 16,800 Indigenous children in out-of-home care, a rate almost 10 times that for non-Indigenous children (Figure 7.3.1).



Figure 7.3.1: Children in the child protection system, by Indigenous status, 2015–16
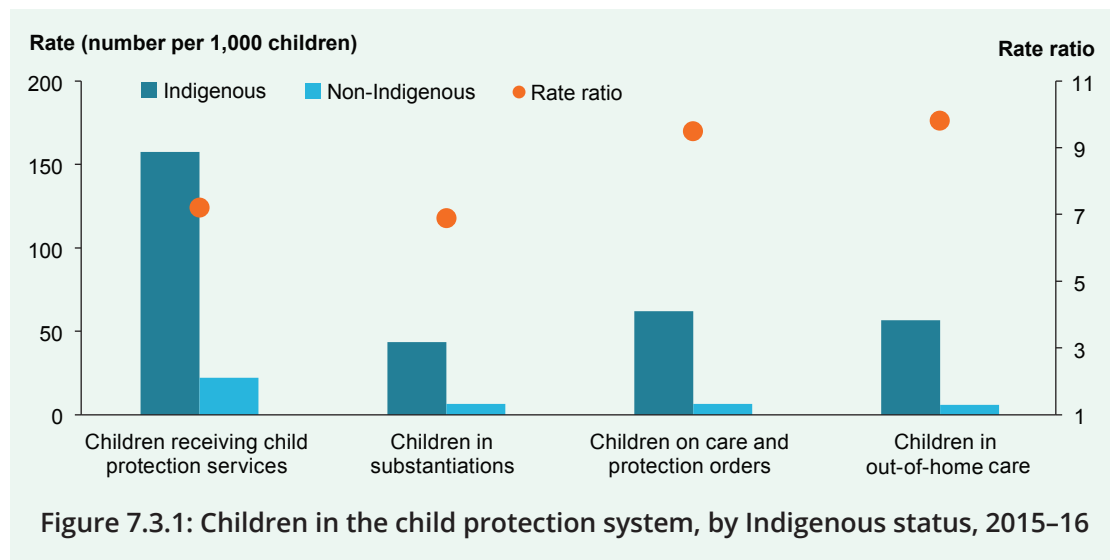
# Contact with police and the criminal justice system

In 2014–15, around 1 in 7 (15%) Indigenous people aged 15 and over reported that they had been arrested in the previous 5 years (20% of males and 9.2% of females) and over 1 in 3 (35%) had been formally charged by police at least once in their lifetime (48% of males and 23% of females) (ABS 2016a). Comparable data for the non-Indigenous population are not available.

## Youth justice

Supervision of young people on legal orders is a major aspect of Australia's youth justice system (see Chapter 2.6 'Youth justice supervision'). On an average day in 2015–16, the majority (84%) of young people under supervision were supervised in the community, with the remainder in secure detention facilities.
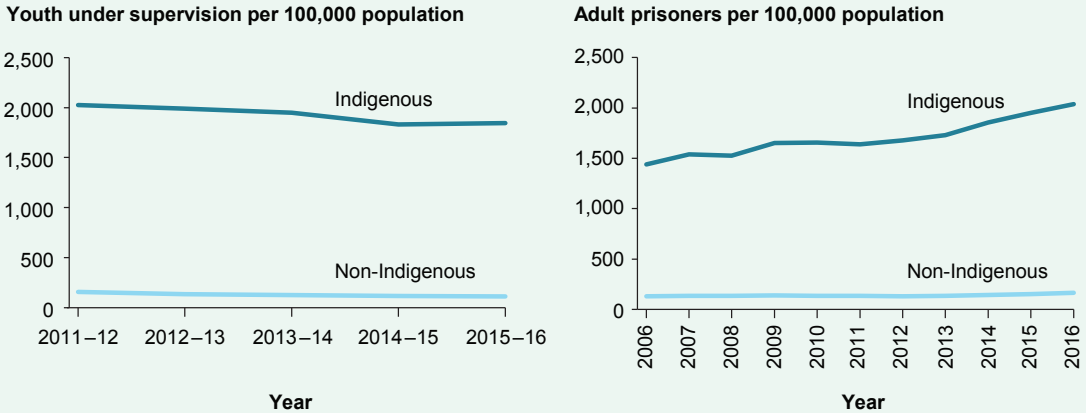
- Although only 5.5% of young Australians aged 10–17 are Indigenous, on an average day in 2015–16, nearly half (48%) of people of this age under supervision were Indigenous. Among people aged 10–17 supervised in detention, more than half (59%) were Indigenous.

- For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, about 4 in 5 people aged 10–17 under supervision on an average day in 2015–16 were male (80% for Indigenous, 83% for non-Indigenous). These proportions were higher among people in detention (89% for Indigenous, 91% for non-Indigenous).

- Between 2011–12 and 2015–16, the rate of Indigenous people aged 10–17 under supervision on an average day fell from 2,026 to 1,845 per 100,000 population (Figure 7.3.2).

## Adult imprisonment

Indigenous Australians are greatly over-represented in adult prisons. They are generally younger than non-Indigenous prisoners and more likely to have been imprisoned before.

- As at 30 June 2016, around 10,600 prisoners identified as Indigenous. This accounted for more than one-quarter (27%) of the total Australian prison population. The Indigenous age-standardised imprisonment rate was 13 times that for non-Indigenous Australians (2,039, compared with 163 per 100,000 population) (ABS 2016b).

- Around 1 in 4 (24%) Indigenous prisoners were aged 24 or under, compared with 1 in 7 (14%) non-Indigenous prisoners.

- The majority of Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners were men (90% and 93%, respectively).

- Three-quarters (76%) of Indigenous prisoners had been imprisoned before, compared with half of non-Indigenous prisoners (49%).

- Between 30 June 2006 and 30 June 2016, the age-standardised Indigenous imprisonment rate increased by 42% compared with a 24% increase for non-Indigenous Australians (Figure 7.3.2).

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**Youth under supervision per 100,000 population**

**Adult prisoners per 100,000 population**

*Notes*

1. Data for youth relate to young people aged 10–17 in detention or community supervision on an average day in the relevant year.

2. Data for adults are age-standardised rates for prisoners aged 18 and over (17 and over in Queensland) as at midnight on 30 June in the relevant year.

*Sources:* ABS 2016b; AIHW 2016.

**Figure 7.3.2: Youth under supervision per 100,000 population, 2011–12 to 2015–16 and adult prisoners per 100,000 population, 2006 to 2016, by Indigenous status**

# Community experiences of safety and violence

Family violence in Indigenous communities is both a cause and an effect of social disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, poor parenting and substance misuse (see also Chapter 7.2 'Factors affecting the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous Australians' for information on the use of alcohol and other drugs by Indigenous Australians). It is likely to be linked to the effects of colonisation and dispossession, and past policies of removal, disempowerment and assimilation (Memmott et al. 2001).
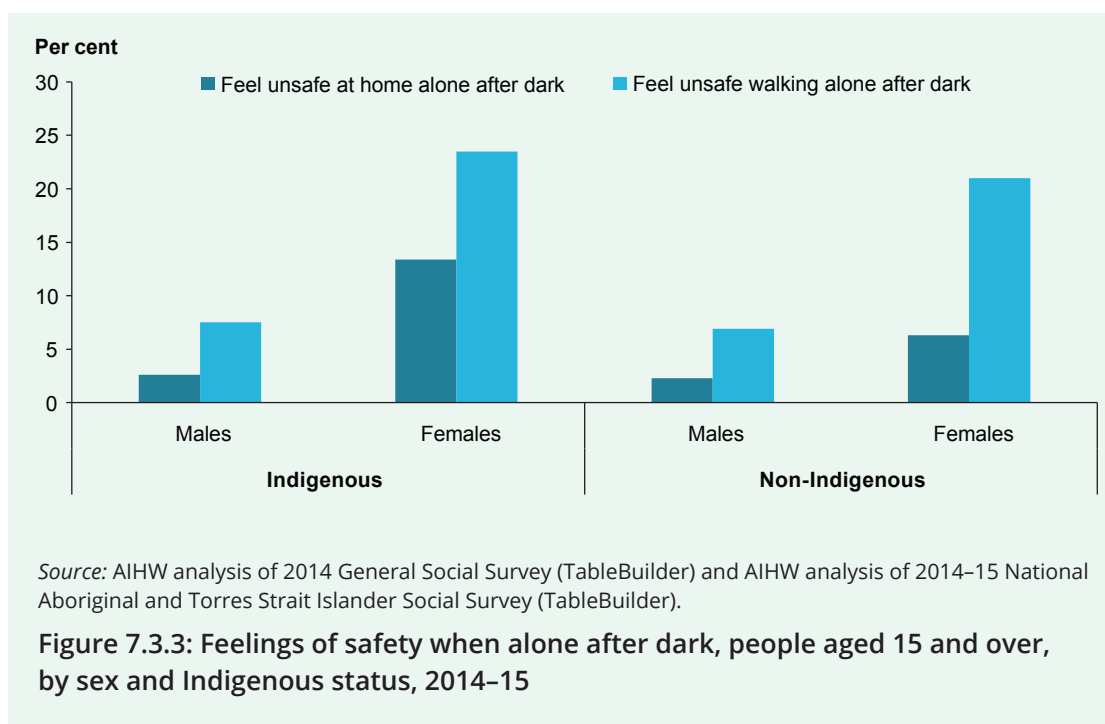
In 2014–15 among Indigenous Australians aged 15 and over:

- 16% felt unsafe walking alone in their local area after dark and 8.1% felt unsafe at home alone after dark. Among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, females were more likely than males to feel unsafe when alone after dark (Figure 7.3.3)

- in the previous 12 months, 13% had experienced physical violence and 16% had been threatened with physical violence (ABS 2016a)

- more than two-thirds (68%) of people who had experienced physical violence reported that alcohol or other substances contributed to the most recent incident

- almost two-thirds (63%) of women and more than one-third (35%) of men who had experienced physical violence reported that the perpetrator of the most recent incident was a family member (AIHW analysis of ABS 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey)

- the majority (69%) were aware of there being problems in their neighbourhood or community. The most commonly reported problems were theft (44%), dangerous or noisy driving (41%), alcohol (38%) and illegal drugs (37%) (ABS 2016a)
  - by comparison, 67% of non-Indigenous people aged 15 and over were aware of there being problems in their local area. The problems they most commonly reported were noisy driving (38%), dangerous driving (36%), offensive language/behaviour, rowdy behaviour and noisy neighbours (all 17%) (AIHW analysis of ABS 2014 General Social Survey)
- Indigenous Australians in remote areas were more likely to report neighbourhood or community problems than Indigenous Australians in non-remote areas (82% compared with 65%), and were more than twice as likely to report problems with alcohol, family violence, assault, rape, neighbourhood conflict and gambling (ABS 2016a).



*Source:* AIHW analysis of 2014 General Social Survey (TableBuilder) and AIHW analysis of 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (TableBuilder).

**Figure 7.3.3: Feelings of safety when alone after dark, people aged 15 and over, by sex and Indigenous status, 2014–15**
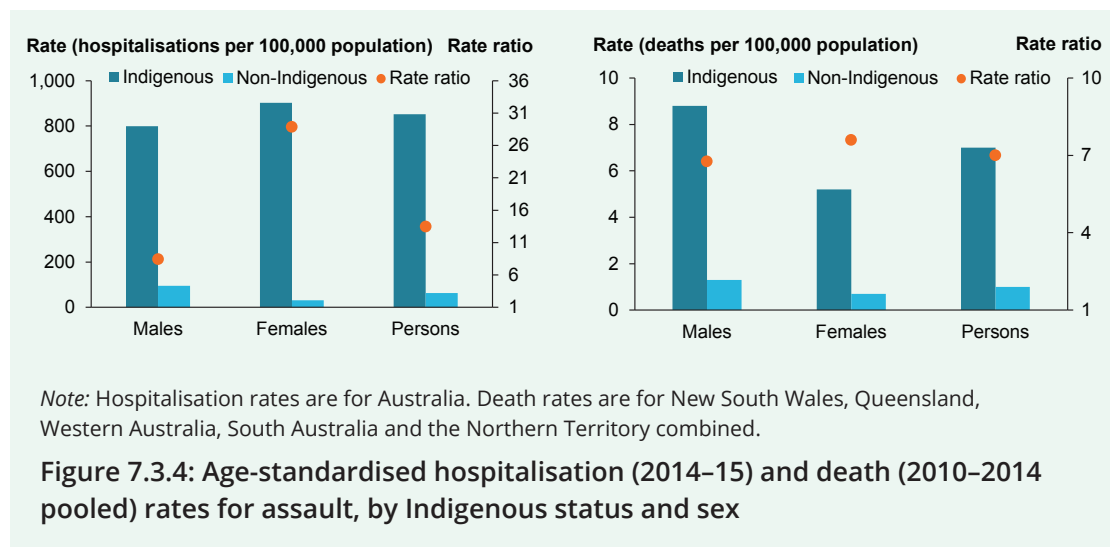
## Hospitalisations and deaths due to assault

In 2014–15, the Indigenous age-standardised hospitalisation rate for non-fatal assault (that is, hospitalisations for injuries inflicted by another person where the patient was discharged alive) was more than 13 times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians (852 compared with 63 per 100,000 population) (Figure 7.3.4). The ratio was even higher for females (29 times as high) and for people living in *Remote* and *Very remote* areas (19 times as high).

Indigenous Australians are also more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to die from assault. Over the 5-year period 2010–2014 in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory combined:

- there were 192 deaths due to assault among Indigenous Australians. The Indigenous age-standardised rate of deaths from assault was 7 times as high as the rate for non-Indigenous Australians (7.0 compared with 1.0 per 100,000 population) (Figure 7.3.4)
- Indigenous and non-Indigenous males were around twice as likely as their female counterparts to die from assault (age-standardised rate ratios of 1.7 for Indigenous and 1.9 for non-Indigenous) (SCRGSP 2016).



*Note:* Hospitalisation rates are for Australia. Death rates are for New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory combined.

**Figure 7.3.4: Age-standardised hospitalisation (2014–15) and death (2010–2014 pooled) rates for assault, by Indigenous status and sex**

## What is missing from the picture?

The prevalence of violence in Australia is difficult to determine as not all incidents are reported to police or other authorities. Incomplete identification of Indigenous Australians in relevant data collections also reduces the accuracy of estimates of violence among Indigenous Australians. Determining the prevalence of domestic or family violence is further complicated by the fact that even when incidents are reported, the victim may not disclose that the incident was perpetrated by a family member (ABS 2013). For the hospital separations data on non-fatal assault cited in this article, the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim was recorded in only 51% of cases.

The AIHW is developing reporting capability in the form of a national Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence data clearinghouse. The clearinghouse will coordinate national reporting, and provide a platform for improving data quality and for identifying data gaps and priority data developments. The AIHW may also conduct data linkage and facilitate the access of researchers to data. More information is provided in Chapter 2.7 'Family, domestic and sexual violence'. The collection of more detailed data regarding experiences of violence among Indigenous Australians would provide valuable information to support policy and service responses to this issue.

## Where do I go for more information?

More information about community safety for Indigenous Australians is available from the reports *The health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework*.

More data on child protection and youth justice can be found on the AIHW website.

Detailed information on prisoners, offenders and victims of reported crime are available from ABS Crime and Justice statistics.

## References

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