National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan

August 2002

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National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan

A report prepared for the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit, a joint program of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

August 2002

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Canberra

AIHW cat. no. HWI 38

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ISBN 1 74024 212 2

Suggested citation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit 2002. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan. Canberra: AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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Published by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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Acknowledgments

This report has been prepared by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit, a joint unit of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

The authors of the report would like to acknowledge the assistance they have received from the clients and staff of many community services agencies from many service sectors across Australia. Great assistance has also been provided by staff of Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, members of the National Community Services Information Management Group, the National Disability Administrators and the project steering committee, which has given expert advice and overall direction to the report.

Thanks also go to Simpson Norris International and Manguri Corporation for collecting the focus group data.

Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ATSIHWIU	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit
CSDA-MDS	Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set
CEODS	Chief Executive Officers of Disability Services
CSMAC	Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council
FaCS	Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services
NCSDD	National Community Services Data Dictionary
NCSIMG	National Community Services Information Management Group
NDA	National Disability Administrators (now CEODS)
NDCA	National Data Collection Agency
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
SCCSISA	Standing Committee of Community Service and Income Security Administrators (now CSMAC)

Summary

In 1999 the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) published the National Community Services Information Development Plan. The Plan, which was endorsed by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC), identified information development priorities in the community services sectors. The need for high quality data on Indigenous people in community services data collections was identified as one of the highest priorities.

In April 1999 CSMAC (previously known as SCCSISA) accepted the NCSIMG business plan to develop principles and standards for community services Indigenous population data, and granted funding for this project. NCSIMG invited the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit (ATSIHWIU) to develop principles and standards that address key issues of self-identification by Indigenous people who use community services and the ownership of the data collected about them.

NCSIMG also requested an evaluation of the quality of the Indigenous identifier in three collections—Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), child protection and welfare, and the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set (CSDA-MDS)—as exemplars within the community services sector.

This report fulfils the undertaking given by ATSIHWIU to NCSIMG that a review of the current collection protocols of Indigenous status in community services, and the development of principles and standards for the collection of this information, would be completed by February 2001.

The report presents three interrelated projects:

- a draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan;
- proposed principles and standards for community services Indigenous client data, developed from focus group discussions held with the clients, officers and administrators of community services agencies across Australia; and
- reviews of the current collection protocols of Indigenous status in the Supported Accommodation Access Program (SAAP), Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement (CSDA) funded outlets and in child protection and welfare.

The report contains seven guiding principles, established to govern the collection and use of Indigenous client data in community services. The principles provide a broad framework of collection protocols which are given more specific development in the Information Plan.

Focus groups, consisting largely of community services providers and users, were used to investigate the difficulties in collecting information on Indigenous status. The focus group discussions were designed to draw on a wide range of people, particularly Aboriginal people, to examine their concerns about the collection of Indigenous status from clients.

The results of the focus group discussions, and the questionnaire-based work with SAAP and child protection, revealed a number of concerns that were common to all sectors of community services and felt across all States and Territories. For example, some staff in a variety of service delivery agencies reported experiencing embarrassment when asking clients if they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin while others felt it was inappropriate and intrusive to ask for this information or that by doing so they would upset their clients.

To address the difficulties experienced by some staff in requesting Indigenous status, the report recommends the development of training modules aimed at providing government and non-government sector staff with a thorough understanding of:

- why the information is needed,
- the importance of the collection, and
- the benefits that can flow to communities when accurate data are available.

A sound knowledge of these elements would address many of the concerns agency staff have about collecting Indigenous status.

The primary aim of the investigations into the SAAP and child protection collection protocols was to determine whether the service delivery agencies in these sectors were collecting the Indigenous status of their clients, and if so, how they were doing it. The reviews were based on the results of questionnaires that were circulated to a large number of agencies. Each review examined the consistency of information collected by agencies, staff issues related to asking clients about their Indigenous status, how information was stored and updated, as well as issues of data security, privacy, access and use.

The report acknowledges that community services is a large and complex field of service provision with at least nine sectors spanning diverse fields such as aged care and disability services, juvenile justice and emergency relief and crisis care. Services are delivered by many thousands of outlets of greatly varying size in a range of settings and circumstances that reflect the geographic, cultural and socioeconomic variation between populations across Australia. These complexities result in the need for local arrangements to be developed in order to best serve client needs and the report recognises the importance of developing these arrangements.

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan

The purpose of this draft Plan is to improve information in both the government and non-government sectors about the Indigenous clients of community services through:

(a) the use of the standard Australian Bureau of Statistics question on Indigenous status and the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* protocol;

(b) developing a supportive base and infrastructure for data collection and use;

(c) improving the technical aspects required to facilitate quality Indigenous community services information concerning Indigenous clients;

(d) gaining national commitment to implement recommendations to improve Indigenous information.

The Plan has two parts in the first part, strategic intentions are outlined under Goals 1 and 2. In the second part, Goal 3 describes the implementation steps of the Plan.

Responsibilities for action and processes for monitoring performance are outlined separately after the third goal.

GOAL 1: Develop a supportive base and infrastructure for data collection and use

Objective 1.1

Address issues concerning the ethics, ownership and use of data about Indigenous people

1.1.1 Develop national and locally specific protocols for the ethical and culturally sensitive handling of data concerning Indigenous peoples through:

(a) consultation with and participation of Indigenous communities and peak bodies

(b) reference to existing protocols and to privacy and confidentiality principles and practices

(c) exploring the benefits of memoranda of understanding between communities, agencies and departments

(d) including feedback mechanisms between communities and the data collectors

(e) recognising and acknowledging family as central to Indigenous world views and daily life.

Objective 1.2

Develop and support information management skills and processes in community services and line agencies

1.2.1 Build and continue to support the capacity of service agencies to collect information for client management, planning and national reporting through:

(a) establishing sustainable information management systems at service provider level

(b) providing appropriate training for the use and maintenance of data collection and data reporting systems in service agencies.

Objective 1.3

Improve the capacity of Indigenous communities to use community services information

1.3.1 Support and sustain the use of community services information in Indigenous communities through:

(a) delivery, including improved coordination of collection and the feedback to communities increasing the usefulness of the data for local planning and service

(b) supporting the development of locally relevant information that also meets national data collection requirements

(c) improving the presentation and accessibility of feedback to communities

(d) developing improved accountability processes with local communities for the collection, use and return of the data.

Objective 1.4

Promote information dissemination and communication

1.4.1 Promote an information culture in agencies and service providers through:

(a) developing a marketing strategy for use in all relevant jurisdictions about the importance of collecting and using accurate data about Indigenous peoples

(b) demonstrating, through publication, the potential of information to generate improvements in service provision

(c) reporting relevant, timely and useful aggregate data to meet communities' expressed needs

(d) sharing relevant data between levels in the system and agencies, within a framework of the community services Indigenous information protocols.

Objective 1.5

Develop a strong and supported Indigenous workforce able to participate in the decision-making and implementation processes involved in the collection of Indigenous community services information

1.5.1 Establish permanent and long-term positions for Indigenous personnel in community services decision-making agencies and other information management sections through:

(a) developing and implementing workforce plans that encompass recruitment, selection and workforce development for Indigenous employees

(b) maximising the benefits of traineeships and work experience for Indigenous people

(c) examining the feasibility of a scholarship scheme for Indigenous people interested in a career in demography or information management

(d) developing a career structure for Indigenous participation in culturally sensitive data collection, including competency-based training and accreditation.

Objective 1.6

Improve the coverage and quality of Indigenous community services information through the development and implementation of appropriate and targeted training modules

1.6.1 Provide ongoing support and training for community services staff in the collection, analysis, application and reporting of information through:

(a) developing programs that will improve the capacity of staff to collect information in a manner consistent with established standards and procedures; such training should emphasise the importance of collecting Indigenous status accurately because of its value in planning and supporting services which can lead to improvements in the wellbeing of Indigenous people.

(b) involving community expertise in the development and delivery of cultural awareness programs for community services agency staff.

GOAL 2: Improve the technical aspects required to facilitate quality Indigenous community services information

Objective 2.1

Improve the capacity of major data collections to separately identify Indigenous persons

2.1.1 Ensure that major community services data collections in all jurisdictions are able to separately identify Indigenous persons through:

(a) using the standard ABS question on Indigenous status and the National Community Services Data Dictionary protocol

(b) gaining the commitment of jurisdictions that fund services to ensure that this requirement is included in all relevant contracts between agencies and funding organisations

(c) developing and distributing best practice models, standards and exemplars

(d) improving service providers’ capacity to ask the question on Indigenous status

(e) enabling Indigenous clients to identify their Indigenous status

(f) promoting common counting rules in all major administrative data collections.

2.1.2 Improve the quality of community services information about Indigenous persons through:

(a) developing effective data validation and quality control mechanisms at all the relevant levels of data collection

(b) undertaking regular audits of the quality of the Indigenous identifier in collected data.

GOAL 3: Ensure national commitment to implement recommendations to improve Indigenous information

Objective 3.1

Ensure that national and State/Territory processes are in place to oversee the implementation of strategies to improve Indigenous community services related information

3.1.1 Initiate processes to facilitate, coordinate and oversee implementation of the Plan through:

(a) developing an accountable process for national leadership for implementation that includes attention to partnerships between jurisdictions and peak bodies

(b) providing resources to support the Plan's implementation, including a forward commitment for a specified period of time

(c) monitoring the use of the standard ABS question on Indigenous status

(d) reporting on improvements in community service planning and provision with the use of increasingly accurate and consistent data.

Responsibilities for action

It is expected that the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) will oversee the implementation of the Plan, under the auspices of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Committee (CSMAC). It is also expected that the NCSIMG will draw on the expertise of its associated working groups in the implementation process. The National Disability Administrators (NDA) will oversee monitoring and improvement of disability services data.

It is anticipated that the NCSIMG will work with Indigenous peak bodies and local communities as appropriate, in both the development of the strategies and of the implementation process.

Many of the responsibilities for action fall within the jurisdiction of Commonwealth, State and Territory line agencies. Their responsibilities in this area extend to the collection and reporting responsibilities of the services that they fund and the transfer of information to the national collection, as agreed by NCSIMG. The acceptance of the scope and nature of responsibilities will be the subject of negotiation through the usual processes of community services decision making.

It is anticipated that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the ABS will have key roles in the improvement of community services information about Indigenous people. The roles and responsibilities of these organisations will be agreed to through the development of the implementation processes for the Plan.

Monitoring and reporting performance

It is anticipated that monitoring the performance of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan will include the following elements:

- monitoring the implementation of the Plan
- strategic quality audits of identified key areas
- evaluating the effectiveness of strategic components of the Plan
- annual reporting against agreed performance indicators.

The development of processes to monitor performance will be the subject of negotiation as part of the next stage of the Plan's development.

Proposed principles governing the collection and use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community services information

There are seven guiding principles underlying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan.

The principles were derived from the focus group discussions conducted nationally and the specific projects reviewing SAAP and Child Protection and from the comments and feedback received in response to the circulation of drafts of the report. The principles are designed to provide a broad framework governing the essential elements in the collection and use of information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of community services.

Principle 1

Accurate information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients who access community services is to be collected as a matter of high priority because of its value in planning and supporting services which can lead to improvements in the wellbeing of Indigenous people.

Principle 2

Whenever information is collected about the Indigenous status of clients, this will be done in a manner which is ethical, relevant, culturally sensitive and non-threatening.

Principle 3

A standardised approach to both the collection of Indigenous status and the output of information is to be implemented in order to provide data that are comparable and consistent across all jurisdictions and agencies within the community services sector and across the health service sector.

Principle 4

Information collections will be regularly reviewed and refined to ensure their continuing relevance to service delivery and compliance with agreed information standards.

Principle 5

Training in the collection of Indigenous status is to be made available to staff in both government and non-government agencies. Such training is to be delivered in a culturally sensitive manner that takes regional differences into account.

Principle 6

The privacy and confidentiality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and communities will be protected in accordance with applicable State legislation and the *Privacy Act 1988*. Specific sector- or department-level agreements may also be in place to protect the privacy of clients and should be respected.

Principle 7

Departments and agencies in receipt of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community services information have a responsibility to provide appropriate feedback to the individuals or communities which provide the information.

Introduction

In 1999 the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) published the National Community Services Information Development Plan. The Plan, which was endorsed by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC), identified information development priorities in the community services sectors. The need for high quality data on Indigenous people in community services data collections was identified as one of the highest priorities.

In April 1999 CSMAC (then known as SCCSISA) accepted the NCSIMG business plan to develop principles and standards for community services Indigenous population data, and granted funding for this project. NCSIMG invited the AIHW/ABS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit (ATSIHWIU) to develop principles and standards that address key issues of self-identification by Indigenous people who use community services and the ownership of the data collected about them.

NCSIMG also requested an evaluation of the quality of the Indigenous identifier in three collections: Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), child protection and welfare, and the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set (CSDA-MDS), as exemplars within the community services sector. Reviews of the SAAP and child protection collections and the CDSA-MDS are included as chapters in this report.

The NCSIMG recognised the importance of maintaining consistent methods for the collection of Indigenous information across both the health and community services sectors. The NCSIMG has therefore recommended that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information Plan, which received widespread support in the health sector, be used as a model for developing principles and standards in community services. A parallel approach to data collection and management, in community services and health, will mean enhanced comparability between the data, and an increased capacity to produce information about Indigenous clients of these services.

The accurate identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who use community services is essential to measure the effectiveness of these services in meeting the needs of this sector of the community. For this reason the development and implementation of a nationally consistent Indigenous identifier is supported by all major stakeholders. Issues surrounding the implementation of this question and concerns about the question itself were key elements in the focus group discussions which form the basis of this report.

The aim of this report is to identify the important themes and issues which came out of the focus group discussions and the reviews of the SAAP, child protection and disability collections to recommend a set of principles and standards for the collection and use of community services Indigenous population data. The report also aims to emphasise the importance of collecting consistent, good quality information about the Indigenous clients of community services and to reinforce this concept through all levels of community services agencies and among clients themselves.

Focus group discussions

Simpson Norris International and Manguri Corporation were contracted by ATSIHWIU to conduct a series of focus group discussions with people from each sector of community services from across Australia. The purpose of these discussions was to:

(a) allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of community services to express their views and concerns about identifying as Indigenous and about issues of data ownership, security and use;

(b) allow those who work in community services to raise difficulties experienced in establishing the Indigenous status of their clients;

(c) gain the views of managers of community services agencies and discuss issues arising from the need to establish the Indigenous status of clients.

Key people in each State and Territory were provided with a summary of the consultancy, in the following service sectors:

- aged care
- disability services
- childcare and preschool
- supported accommodation
- child protection and welfare
- juvenile justice and welfare
- family support
- emergency relief and crisis care
- community development and advocacy.

They were asked to provide the contact details of anyone they believed should be involved in the proposed focus group discussions. These people in turn were asked to provide appropriate contacts and it was from the resultant pool that the focus group participants were drawn. Twenty-three focus group discussions were held, involving managers of community service agencies, service providers and their Indigenous clients. They were conducted in 10 different locations, including each State capital, and involved the participation of 122 people.

The discussions were centred on a number of key questions designed to encourage critical comment on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are identified in the data collections of community services agencies, and to address issues of confidentiality, ownership, use of and access to the data. The significant themes and issues arising from the focus groups were extracted to form the basis of this report.

Main themes arising

The significant themes and issues arising from the focus groups are outlined below. They formed the bulk of issues emerging from the group discussions. There was also considerable discussion about the appropriate protocols collectors should observe when gathering information from Indigenous communities. There were four major themes that emerged from the focus group data which can be grouped as:

(a) difficulties experienced by service providers trying to establish the Indigenous origins of clients, and ways to meet these difficulties;

(b) concerns about why information is collected, who has access to it, how it is used, who owns it and its quality;

(c) concerns about the wording and use of the ABS standard question and the Commonwealth Working definition;

(d) suggestions about how information can most effectively be collected in Indigenous communities;

These themes are dealt with in detail in the sections that follow.

Difficulties encountered in establishing the Indigenous status of clients[1]

Often embarrassment can play a major role in inhibiting an agency employee from asking a person about their Indigenous status. Embarrassment can arise when:

(a) the employee knows the status of the person already

(b) the employee has preconceived notions that the person asked would be reluctant to identify as Indigenous.

Some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander service providers find it particularly confronting to ask a person who is not known to them, and who they believe to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, about their Indigenous origins.

Community services employees may not consider Indigenous status important and neglect to ask clients about it.

Service providers, such as those working in emergency relief and crisis care, find it more difficult to collect the Indigenous status of clients than those providing services in some other areas. The stress inherent in emergency and crisis situations can make questions about Indigenous origins seem inappropriate, whereas in other areas the necessity and relevance of the question are more readily accepted.

A person's Indigenous status can be a sensitive issue. A history of racial prejudice in Australia has meant many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt, and still feel, uncomfortable about identifying themselves as Indigenous.

> *Shame word comes from long way back. Comes out in information collections as us being hesitant in giving information, because government has made us feel ashamed of being Aboriginal, half-caste.*

Both clients and employees can find questions about Indigenous origins offensive because they believe that services should be provided on the basis of need alone and cannot see the relevance of such questions to service provision.

Some Indigenous clients do not wish to be singled out for special attention, particularly in a public situation.

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[1] Direct quotations from discussions in focus group appear in italics.

Concerns about why information is collected, who has access to it, how it is used, who owns it and its quality.

Distrust of government departments, and staff who collect data in government agencies, is widespread, derived in many cases from historical causes, such as the removal of children from their parents.

> *Issues around trust – people not believing you will keep the data confidential. People...may trust one data collector and identify as Aboriginal, but not trust another and not identify.*

There is a sense that information collected is being used to monitor Indigenous people in a paternalistic or 'big brother' like manner.

> *Bureaucratic data cannot be trusted – it is most often used against people...it is like signing in and signing out or making a theatre booking...they know where you're sitting and when you'll be there* (Provider, Melbourne).

Among Indigenous people who are asked to give information, there is often little understanding of the reasons for its collection. The frequency with which questions are asked, and their repetitious nature, can cause frustration among those providing information.

> *What's it for? Our people are always being evaluated, put under the microscope... Aboriginal people are the most researched people on earth. You get to a point where you start feeling quite angry* (Indigenous provider, Cairns).

There is resentment that so much information is being collected and a consequent reluctance to cooperate, or an increased likelihood of giving incorrect information in order to be left alone.

Because they are in receipt of community services, clients can feel under an obligation to provide more personal information than they feel comfortable about giving. If this occurs, clients can feel their relationship with the collector of information is intrinsically coercive and that they have limited control over what they must reveal about themselves.

A view expressed in several focus groups was that data should be considered the property of those who provided it. Too often there was no feedback mechanism to inform people how the information they had provided was being used and what benefits were derived from it. There was a lack of understanding among many Indigenous people about how to access data relevant to themselves or their communities or how to exert control over the published result. As a minimum requirement, Indigenous people would like an opportunity to comment on material concerning them, before it is published.

A concern that non-Indigenous people were identifying as Indigenous for the purpose of getting benefits intended for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders was particularly strong in urban areas where some ethnic groups could successfully pass themselves off as Indigenous Australians.

Further concerns were that data may be misused to portray Indigenous people in a bad light, and that distorted results could be used to the detriment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, misuse of information was seen as prevalent among callers to talkback radio stations.

> *People on talkback radio are always ringing in about people identifying as Aboriginal to get free services, more money. In this way the question of identification serves as a tool to support racism* (Indigenous provider, Sydney).

Concerns about the wording and use of the ABS standard question

The ABS standard question (see Appendix 1), which provides the mechanism for people to identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both origins, is considered too narrow by some Indigenous people who identify primarily by their language grouping, tribal affiliation or geographic location. Others consider the classification to be wrong. For example, Murray Islanders do not consider themselves to be Torres Strait Islanders, yet they have no alternative way of identifying.

> *State by state we all got our own names or language groups...Aboriginal boundary is not state boundary. That state thing is a white man line.*

Some agencies, such as Aboriginal housing corporations, are perceived as seeking to stringently confirm the Indigenous status of their clients. To do this, the third element of the Commonwealth working definition (see Appendix 2) is used, which requires that a person must be accepted as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander by the community in which they live. This approach, however, is thought to be fraught with problems because:

- Aboriginal people often move around the country and local communities dont know whether recent arrivals are Indigenous or not;
- some communities are divided into factions, and recognition of a person as Indigenous, or otherwise, may be politically motivated.

> *Aboriginal families denied their Aboriginality so they could get the rights other people had. A lot of the decisions have flowed on to the following generation...there are those who want to identify again and the community don't want them back: they say 'when we were having hard times you didn't want to be part of us'.*

Establishing a person's Indigenous identity can be time-consuming and there is little recognition of this fact by governments, but rather an assumption of goodwill on the part of clients and providers.

Opposing views arose from the discussions about the value of self-identification. Some people felt that it led to bad data, with non-Indigenous people identifying in order to obtain benefits intended for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, while others thought the incidence of this was so low that it would have little impact on statistical outcomes.

Suggestions about how information can most effectively be collected in Indigenous communities

Focus groups identified a broad range of ways in which data can be collected better than current practice. While the issues under this section have general instructive usefulness, they are directed more at population data in Indigenous communities rather than service data. Some recommendations from focus group participants include:

- Collectors should be able to explain why the information is being collected and the benefits it will bring, etc. and give assurances about privacy and ownership.
- The use of local Indigenous people, who have been appropriately trained, may result in more reliable data being obtained.
- Non-Indigenous collectors need to take time to build relationships with local people, use plain English when speaking and be willing to paraphrase questions without resorting to patronising speech or attitudes.
- Collectors should give at least two weeks notice before their arrival in a community and, prior to arrival, establish with whom they should be talking, since different people have responsibilities for different sorts of information.
- Appropriate dress is essential. Suits and ties are considered to be representative of authority and are not appropriate attire in an Indigenous community. Casual but modest clothing is most suitable. Inappropriate dress will lead to embarrassment among community elders and have a direct bearing on data quality.

  > *They come in shorts and trousers and expect the grandmothers to talk to them...sometimes you are speaking to people with no ears.*

- Body language and physical position (relative to the other person) are important issues and can be dealt with (to some degree) through training.

  > *Body language says a lot, the way you dress. If people on the receiving end are not comfortable with some aspect of them, we will say anything to get rid of them. It is an offence to have them in our presence.*

- Indigenous communities may contain separate factions that do not cooperate with each other. Communicating with one faction can result in alienation from another. It is therefore essential that collectors identify the correct people with whom they should be talking before entering an Indigenous community.

Discussion

Given that focus group participants were drawn from a wide variety of geographic locations and agencies, the commonality of the views expressed indicates areas of concern which are felt nationally. Specific difficulties associated with asking a person for their Indigenous status were raised at all focus groups across the country, although the degree and nature of these difficulties varied widely. It must be noted that clients of community services agencies come from a wide cross-section of society and from vastly different social and economic circumstances. Indigenous clients range from Aboriginal people living in remote communities in northern Australia to urban dwellers in Hobart or Adelaide, and issues associated with Indigenous origins vary as widely as their social and geographic circumstances.

Other factors that directly affect the propensity of people to provide information about their Indigenous status are the type of service, the method of service delivery and the perceived 'risk' to the person in identifying. Any set of guidelines for collecting this information needs to be sufficiently broad to recognise the various settings against which the information will be collected, and allow within its scope the development of principles and protocols specific to types of service and local circumstances.

In order to obtain reliable and consistent data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples accessing community services, it is necessary to allow every person using those services to identify their Indigenous origins. This means asking every client the ABS standard question about Indigenous origins. Clearly, in an Aboriginal community, it is unlikely an Indigenous employee of a community services agency could be persuaded to ask a relative about their Indigenous status. The question would be absurd, and in these circumstances Indigenous status could be collected by the employee, based on their own knowledge, without loss of data quality. However, when there is doubt about a persons origins it is essential that the standard question be asked. This may mean in an urban setting all clients are asked, but scope for the application of local arrangements would appear the best option.

Collection of Indigenous status can be enhanced if questions relating to it are seen to be part of a larger collection of administrative data, rather than isolated elements.

Some agencies, such as housing authorities, use the Commonwealth working definition to collect Indigenous status. In other service sectors where knowledge of Indigenous origins has less impact on the work of the agency, the ABS standard question, or a different question, is used. The use of different questions by different agencies makes it difficult to compare data between them and one of the recommendations of this report is the adoption of the ABS standard question by all agencies.

The 11 information privacy principles, in part III of the *Privacy Act 1988*, provide Commonwealth legislation governing the collection, use and storage of access to, alteration of, limits to, disclosure of and responsibilities of collectors, with regard to private information. Many State departments have developed their own guidelines from these principles to ensure that client information is handled appropriately in their jurisdictions. Good examples have been produced by the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services and the New South Wales Department of Health.

Because many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples distrust government departments, there is an additional onus on those collecting information from Indigenous people to explain why it needs to be collected, who will have access to it, how it will be used to benefit those who provide it, who owns the information and how it will be stored. There is also a need for similar explanations to be made to the wider community, so the reasons for collecting specific information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are transparent and clearly understood.

Some Indigenous people prefer to identify by their language group, tribal group or the region of the country they come from, rather than as simply Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. While not needed for national statistical collections, this information could be useful in areas where service provision is dependent on knowledge of language and culture.

The means by which information is obtained confers upon it a degree of ownership. For example, information obtained as a by-product of administrative data generally remains the property of the agency that collected it. This assumes that those providing the information gave their free and informed consent for its collection and use. However, information gathered directly from the subject population, often in the context of surveys or research, may remain the property of those who provided it and rights with regard to ownership, and future input into how it is used, should be clarified before the collection takes place.

Training should be made available to employees of community services agencies to assist them in the collection of the Indigenous status of their clients. It should be undertaken to:

- address the issues of staff who have a philosophical objection to collecting Indigenous status
- motivate collectors in order that they return to collect Indigenous status at a later time in the collection process, if they are prevented from doing so at initial contact
- address the difficulties staff may face when collecting Indigenous status, for example, embarrassment, or a perception that the question is discriminatory, unnecessary or intrusive
- help staff deal with clients who are reluctant to provide information.

The training provided to agency staff who collect Indigenous status should ensure they are able to explain why the information is needed, to answer questions about privacy, consent, ownership of and access to data, and to explain the benefits of good quality data to the clients who are providing it.

Where circumstances require it, services should appoint a ‘culturally appropriate’ person to collect personal information from Indigenous clients. Such a person is more likely to obtain accurate and detailed information than an officer without the same level of acceptance. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people state that they feel more comfortable dealing with Indigenous people who are known to them, and there are advantages to some agencies in facilitating this situation by appointing appropriate staff, particularly for points of first contact.

Promotional materials, such as monographs, newsletters, pamphlets and posters should be developed to explain why Indigenous status is collected and what the information is used for. Promotion of best practice should include ongoing monitoring and auditing of data collections; this process should be used to detect the extent of 'no' and/or 'not stated' outputs reported.

All forms used to collect client information should be written in plain English, free from complex words and confusing phrases. Similarly, speech should be plain, clear and precise when information is sought.

Review of Indigenous identification in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)

Background to the Indigenous identification data review

As part of the development of information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of community services, the NCSIMG directed that a study to evaluate the quality of Indigenous identification in the SAAP National Data Collection be carried out. The collection was selected, along with the child protection and welfare collection, and Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set, as an exemplar of sectors within community services.

The accurate identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of SAAP is essential in determining the effectiveness of the program in reaching this client group and provides information necessary for planning and improved service delivery.

SAAP is a joint Commonwealth/State Government recurrently funded and managed program providing supported accommodation and related services to people who are homeless, or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. The program is governed by Federal legislation, the *Supported Accommodation Act 1994*. The program is administered through agreements between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories. According to the agreements, the day-to-day administration of the program is the responsibility of the States/Territories which distribute funds to agencies for the provision of services to clients.

The National Data Collection Agency (NDCA), a unit within the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, collects data on SAAP clients from each agency throughout Australia on an ongoing basis. It is a requirement under their funding arrangements that each agency provide data on the number of people using SAAP services, the number of occasions of support, the reasons people require assistance, how their circumstances change when they leave the SAAP agency, and the number of requests for assistance that could not be met. This information provides a statistical basis upon which agencies can develop funding applications, allocate resources and identify areas of need. The information obtained also informs government, and the community at large, about homelessness in Australia.

The NDCA collects four major areas of SAAP data: client information, unmet demand information, casual client information and administrative information. These are described below:

- Client information is the main component of the collection. Information on all clients receiving ongoing or substantial support under SAAP is included in this collection. For each occasion of support, client forms are completed by service providers during contact with the client and forms are usually sent to the NDCA after the support period has ended, that is, after a client has left a SAAP agency. The data include basic socio-demographic information about each client and the services required by them. Information is collected about the client's circumstances before and after receiving SAAP support. This allows an assessment of client outcomes to be made. The personal details of SAAP clients require, with the exception of gender, the informed consent of the client before they can be reported in the SAAP national data collection.
- The collection of data on unmet demand takes place annually over a two-week period. The collection is designed to measure the level of unmet demand for SAAP services, and collects information about people who request support or accommodation at SAAP agencies, but are not provided with that service. The data informs debate about the resources required by SAAP agencies to meet client needs. The collection is being revised to provide better estimates of unmet demand for accommodation at SAAP agencies, including estimates of the number of people whose requests for accommodation are not met.
- The casual client information collection records one-off assistance provided to casual clients and is undertaken over a two-week period annually. Casual clients are defined as those who 'receive only one-off assistance requiring less than one hour of SAAP workers time. They do not establish an ongoing relationship with the agency. Because casual clients only spend a small amount of time under the program, there is only a small amount of data collected about them.
- Administrative information collection contains general descriptive information such as size, structure and service mode of the 1,200 agencies receiving SAAP funding to provide accommodation and support services to people who are homeless or in crisis. The information is provided by the State and Territory community service departments which administer the SAAP program.

  In addition, the NDCA conducts data collections on specific topics of interest to the SAAP stakeholder community. The two most recent collections covered children accompanying adult clients of SAAP and clients of SAAP on very low incomes.

Table 1 shows the different ways the collection of information about the Indigenous status of clients is undertaken in these data collections.

Table 1: Standards for Indigenous identification on NDCA client information forms

ABS standard question	Mandatory	Position on form	Period of collection
Client form 1	Approximates ABS question	Q5	July–June
Client form 2 *	Approximates ABS question	Q8	July– June
Unmet demand	Approximates ABS question	Q7	November
Casual client information	Not applicable **		

* Client form 2 is the form used by high volume agencies.

** Not applicable because no demographic information is collected.

The Indigenous identifier used on the NDCA forms is worded according to the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* definition, and differs slightly from the ABS standard question. However, the code can be mapped to the ABS standard question, that is, the results obtained using NDCA forms have a high degree of comparability with those obtained using the ABS standard question.

Methodology for the data review

The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) supplied contact details for over 1,000 SAAP agencies nation-wide, and from this a random sample of 120 agencies was selected. The agencies ranged in size from 1.5 full-time staff to 70 full-time staff. A short paper-based questionnaire identifying key issues in the collection of data on Indigenous clients was mailed to 120 SAAP agencies. A response was requested within four weeks. In addition to answering the questionnaire, agencies were asked to provide copies of any forms (other than the NDCA forms) that they used to collect data from clients.

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with a number of stakeholders, including the NDCA. The questions were designed to be non-threatening and easy to complete. It was recognised that the agencies would only recently have completed, or be in the process of completing, the three collections for the National Data Collection for the AIHW, which ran between May and June 2000, and that respondent burden needed to be managed.

The data from completed questionnaires were entered on a spreadsheet, where counts and cross-tabulations were carried out.

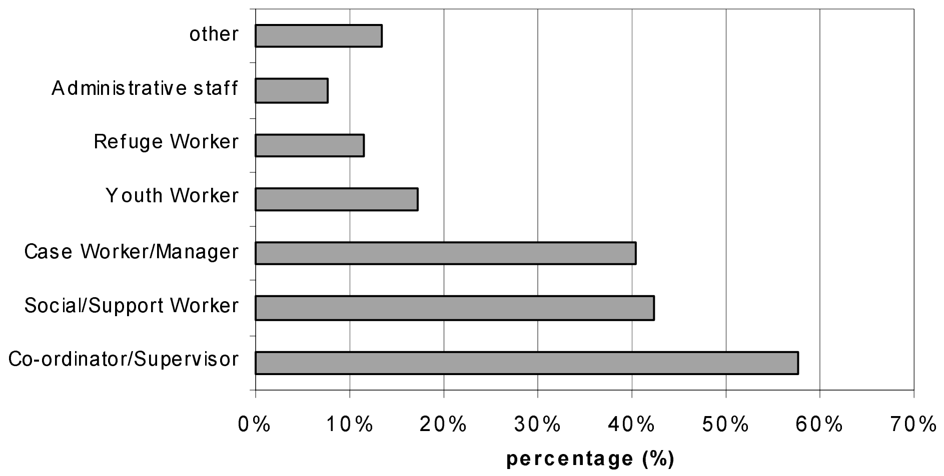
Results of the review

Of the 120 questionnaires sent out, 43% were completed and returned. Eighty per cent of the SAAP agencies that responded reported that they collected information on the Indigenous status of their clients, although 50% said their systems did not make it mandatory to do so. Only 8% reported they did not collect Indigenous status, while 4% reported collecting it 'sometimes'. Of the agencies that did obtain information on Indigenous status, 96% obtained it by asking clients verbally, and assisted in filling out the form, while 4% handed out the form for the client to fill in.

Forty-eight per cent of agencies reported using the ABS standard question about Indigenous origins, or a question that produced a response mappable to the ABS standard. The second most common question used was, 'What is your cultural identity?', which was used by 27% of agencies. Other questions were 'Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?' or a simple choice of identifying as either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.

Around 80% of respondent agencies had less than 10 staff, while there were two, both located in New South Wales that had more than 70 staff. The positions held by staff members most likely to collect Indigenous status varied widely across agencies. Many agencies gave multiple responses to this question indicating a range of people in their organisation carried out the collection of the data.

Figure 1 shows that information is most likely to be collected by an agency's coordinators or supervisors, followed by social/support workers and caseworkers/managers.



Note: Totals add to more than 100% because respondents could give more than one answer.

Figure 1: Position of person in the organisation most likely to collect Indigenous status

Many agencies have locally designed forms that collect qualitative, rather than statistical, information, which is used to assess client needs. Locally designed forms that did contain an Indigenous identifier varied both in the question asked and in the mandatory nature of the question. Across agencies the question referred to ethnicity, ethnic origin, cultural identity or cultural background. It was usually asked verbally. The majority of agencies said the question was mandatory, but some conceded, even then, it was not always asked. Other agencies used locally designed forms that did not contain a question pertaining to Indigenous status.

Some agencies reported that they obtained information on Indigenous identification from personal knowledge of the client, or that the staff member responsible for data collection made a guess based on skin colour and other physical features.

Agencies that use locally designed forms to collect data at initial contact with clients are required to transcribe that information onto the NDCA client forms for reporting at the end of each month. If an agency has not used an Indigenous identifier question that can be mapped to that used in the NDCA forms, there is potential for the information to be lost or transcribed inaccurately.

Difficulties faced by agency staff in obtaining Indigenous identification

Seventy per cent of agencies reported that their staff had no problems in obtaining the Indigenous status of clients. The difficulties experienced in the other 30% of SAAP agencies were:

- a perception among some staff that questions about Indigenous status were annoying to those asked;
- a perception that questions about a person's Indigenous status were discriminatory;
- the information was regarded as irrelevant by some staff and they did not see any reason to ask it;
- the information was regarded as private by some staff and they felt it was not their place to intrude;
- some staff felt too embarrassed to ask;
- some staff stated they were too busy to obtain the information;
- the results are expressed graphically below in Figure 2.

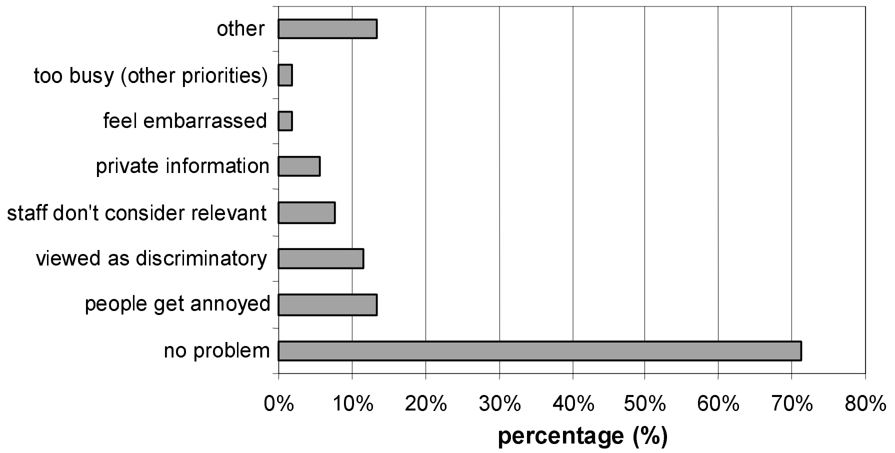


Figure 2: Reasons reported by respondents that influenced their recording of the Indigenous status of client

In these cases all responses were collated. However, as there was often more than one response per agency, the totals add to more than 100%.

Staff training in data collection

The survey questionnaire asked agencies whether their staff received training in data collection. Of the total number of respondents, 91% answered this question. Of these, 77% indicated that their staff received some training in data collection. Fourteen per cent reported they did not. The latter figure included the two largest agencies, with over 70 staff each.

It should be noted that training is available and organised through the State and Territory departments responsible for SAAP. Agencies wanting training are able to request it from the relevant department.

Use of computer-based systems

Just over 71% of the respondent agencies reported that they use a computer-based system for recording their data. Some agencies use both paper-based and computer-based systems, with smaller agencies (1–3 staff) less likely to have a computerised system than larger agencies (4–10 staff). The computer-based systems varied from agency to agency.

Seventy-four per cent of the agencies that reported using a computer-based system could select the responses ‘unknown’ or ‘not stated’ in the Indigenous status field. And 59% said the Indigenous status field was not compulsory.

About half of the agencies reported that they updated their client information continuously, while 12% updated it every 3–6 months and 25% every 6–12 months. Forty-two per cent stated they held client information for more than 7 years and 23% for 2–5 years. The length of time an agency held client information showed no direct correlation to whether they had a computer-based, or paper-based, system. A review of client data was not mandatory in half of the agencies and 12% never reviewed the files. Thirty-seven per cent reported having mandatory procedures for reviewing a client’s details.

Table 2: Number of agencies using computer-based or paper-based system by use of the ABS standard question on Indigenous status or other question

	Computer-based system				
	Yes	No*	Not stated	Total	%
ABS standard question	20	1	4	25	48.08
Other	16	5	3	24	46.15
Not applicable**	1	1	1	3	5.77
Total	**37**	**7**	**8**	**52**	**100.00**
%	71	14	15		

* These agencies used a paper-based system.

** 'Not applicable' applies to agencies that reported no Indigenous clients.

Discussion

The results obtained from the completed questionnaires of the SAAP agencies were consistent with those obtained from questionnaires completed by the child protection agencies and the focus group discussions conducted across the country. As in the child protection and disability services sectors, SAAP services are provided by many small agencies, contracted to the administering government departments. These agencies deliver services to Indigenous people in a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic settings that require delivery services appropriate to those conditions.

The key issues of how the Indigenous identifier is collected, barriers to staff collecting client information, provision of appropriate and well-targeted training, the assurance that the information is held securely and with due regard to privacy and that data recording systems meet national output standards, will need to be addressed as part of the process to improve the quality of information about Indigenous SAAP clients.

The NDCA has developed training material for agency staff who collect client data which is available to any agency upon request. The training, however, does not include a module specific to the collection of the Indigenous identifier and the opportunity exists to develop training modules to address this issue and to include them in current competency-based training programs. Particular attention should be given to informing non-government agencies that the training is available and how it can be accessed.

As noted in the body of the report, with the exception of gender, all personal details of SAAP clients require informed consent from the client before they can be collected.

According to the 1996–97 SAAP NDCA report, 67% of the 148,873 forms returned to the NDCA contained informed client consent for the collection of demographic and Indigenous status information. In the 1998–99 report, 75% of the 155,005 forms returned contained informed consent. Those clients from whom informed consent was not obtained were not asked to provide any information about their Indigenous status. A major focus of the training modules should be to increase the awareness of clients and staff about the importance of data in planning and delivery of services and to provide assurances about the confidentiality and security of data, in an effort to reduce the number of clients who do not give their consent.

There are some NDCA forms used by SAAP agencies that do not collect the Indigenous identifier. This adds to the difficulties in establishing the completeness of the data and should be addressed.

When services are provided to clients who have recently undergone a traumatic experience, such as being the victim of violence, it may be inappropriate for the SAAP officer involved to seek certain types of administrative information, such as Indigenous status, at the point of first contact. If this occurs, it is important that system procedures are in place to ensure that client information is obtained at another, more appropriate, time.

Some SAAP agencies fail to report on their activities via the NDCA data collections. The reasons for this are not known but should be investigated. It is possible they indicate unwillingness by agencies to comply with requests for client data for cultural or ethical reasons. If this is the case, it highlights the need to develop appropriate training to address such concerns among clients and agency staff.

Review of Indigenous identification in child protection and welfare

Background to the child protection and welfare collection protocols review

This review also forms part of the development of information about aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of community services, an area of information need given high priority in the National Community Services Information Development Plan. Similar to the evaluation of the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) and that being conducted for the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set (CSDA-MDS), this review is included as an exemplar of how Indigenous status is collected in a sector of community services.

Child protection services are the responsibility of community services departments, or their equivalent, in each State or Territory. External agencies such as community or church-based family service organisations may be contracted to community services departments to provide services that range from family support to placement of children in out-of-home care services.

Although each jurisdiction is governed by its own legislation, policy and practices, the approaches taken are similar. The data, however, are not strictly comparable, and there are gaps in the national data on child protection. For example, national data on the usage of family support services are not generally available (although data on family support preservation services were collected for the first time for 1999–2000).

At the national level, there are three child protection data collections:

(a) child protection notifications, investigations and substantiations;

(b) children on care and protection orders; and

(c) children in supported overnight out-of-home care.

These data collections overlap, as some children may become the subject of a child protection substantiation, be placed on a care and protection order and/or placed in out-of-home care.

Child protection is a difficult and emotive area of community services, particularly where Aboriginal children are involved. Policies that led to the creation of the Stolen Generation have created deep distrust of government agencies by many Indigenous people. Child protection officers must be aware of the historical context within which they are working and be able to clearly articulate the advantages of good quality data in measuring program effectiveness and in helping set planning strategies that will provide better client services.

Children who come into contact with State and Territory community services departments for protective reasons include those who have been, or are being, abused or neglected or otherwise harmed, or whose parents or guardians cannot provide adequate care or protection (AIHW 2000). As noted above, each jurisdiction has its own legislation, policies and practices in relation to child protection and these differences affect the data that are provided. The processes used to protect children, however, are broadly similar across jurisdictions.

Initially, children who are seen to be in need of protection come to the department's attention through a report made by an individual or organisation, or the child. These reports are assessed by the department and some are classified as 'child protection notifications'. These notifications are then assessed to determine whether the notification should be 'investigated', dealt with by other means or whether no further action is required. When an investigation is completed the notification will be classified as either 'substantiated' or 'not substantiated', depending on the degree of risk, or harm, to the child. Departmental involvement may take the form of service provision to the child and their family, a referral to another agency, or direct intervention on the child's behalf. (For more detailed information about this process, see AIHW 2000, pp.3–5.)

At any point in the process the department may apply to the relevant court to place a child under a care and protection order, but this is usually an intervention of last resort. Care and protection orders vary between States and Territories, but generally they provide for either a supervisory role or the transfer of legal guardianship to an authorised department. The issuing of a care and protection order is often a legal requirement if a child is to be placed in out-of-home care. This option can be used to protect a child from abuse or potential abuse, in cases where parents are ill and incapable of looking after the child, or if there is a need to give the child 'time-out' from family conflict.

The collection of Indigenous status in national child protection data collections is not undertaken consistently across jurisdictions, and data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be treated with caution. No State or Territory has other data sources with which to validate the data on Indigenous children. In South Australia and Western Australia, children whose Indigenous status is unknown are counted as non-Indigenous, leading to a likely underestimation of the numbers of Indigenous children in the child protection system.

All States and Territories have adopted the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle which states a preference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be placed with other Indigenous people if they are placed outside their family. This requirement places an additional responsibility on departmental officers to establish a child's Indigenous origins. However, where the child's status is unknown or in dispute, a recording of 'unknown' is the most likely outcome.

Methodology for the collection protocols review

A short paper-based questionnaire identifying key issues in the collection of data on Indigenous children subject to child protection was mailed to the Department of Community Services, or its equivalent, in each State and Territory. In addition to answering the questionnaire, agencies were asked to provide copies of any forms that they used to collect data from clients.

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with a number of stakeholders, including the AIHW and the National Child Protection and Support Services Data Working Group.

In addition, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia State departments requested that questionnaires be forwarded to specified external agencies contracted by these departments to provide out-of-home care services. The State departments provided the contact details for these agencies, and a total of 171 questionnaires were mailed out. Of these, 66 replied, a response rate of 39%. The responses were collated and analysed using standard qualitative research methods.

Results of the review

Results from State/Territory departments

Responses to the questionnaire were received from all State and Territory departments. The completed forms showed some commonality between the departments in the way they collected Indigenous status, but also highlighted significant differences between collection methods and the types of training given to staff. The key point, however, was that each government department did attempt to establish the Indigenous origins of children in their child protection systems.

Table 3 shows some of the key questions that were asked in the questionnaire. The responses give an indication of the variations and similarities that exist between the State and Territory departments in the manner in which they approach the collection of the Indigenous status of their clients.

Table 3: Responses of State departments to selected questions

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
Is the child's Indigenous status recorded?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children be separately identified?	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is recording Indigenous status mandatory?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can a child's Indigenous status be recorded as 'not stated'?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can the Indigenous status field be bypassed?	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Does the organisation use the standard ABS question to identify Indigenous children	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Is a review of the child's records mandatory at substantiation?	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes

Table 3 shows it is mandatory to try to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in all States and Territories. The table also illustrates the lack of a standard question across jurisdictions and the option for data collectors to either bypass the question in their recording systems or have the option of 'not stated' (the use of this option is discussed in Appendix 1).

New South Wales differs from other States in that it does not allow officers to record the response 'not stated'. New South Wales also allows the field to be bypassed (as does the Northern Territory), so if staff are unable to enter Indigenous status details initially the system does not prevent them from entering other client information. On the other hand, other States, where this field cannot be bypassed, did not report difficulties with returning to the field at a later time in the process.

Difficulties in obtaining Indigenous identification

Departmental staff were asked to report on factors which they felt hindered them in the collection of a child's Indigenous status. Their responses may be summarised as:

- a reluctance to ask, when it was perceived that the child or accompanying adult would be distressed or angered by the question;
- a reluctance to ask if acquiring the information seemed unnecessary, for example, some staff reported making an independent decision that a client was, or was not, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, based on their own knowledge of the person, or on their appearance;
- a perception that Indigenous status is a personal matter and community services staff have no right to ask clients this question;

- a perception that the question is discriminatory;
- staff not sure why the information was necessary and unable to explain the reasons for its collection if asked to do so by clients;
- the highly sensitive issues around the Stolen Generation and past government policies involving the removal of Indigenous children;
- in situations where the parents cannot agree on a child's Indigenous status the collector of the information was more likely to record the child's status as unknown than side with one parent or guardian over the other.

Staff training in data collection at the departmental level

All departments stated that their staff received training in data collection. The emphasis was largely on the use of the electronic systems in which data were recorded, although some departments provided training in interviewing techniques and interpersonal skills. The amount of training varied between ad hoc arrangements to comprehensive and mandatory three-day courses.

Other issues

There were often no prescribed methods which child protection workers were required to employ when obtaining information about Indigenous status. It was stated that experienced officers could often obtain the information from their knowledge of the child's relationship to others, family name or physical appearance. Where doubt remained, there was often little to compel an officer to pursue the matter since most systems had the category 'not stated'.

The requirement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 'prove' their Indigenous status, as they need to do with some departments, can affect their readiness to identify. The concept of 'proof', under the Commonwealth definition, depends upon a person being accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander by the community in which they live. For Indigenous people who are not confident that this acceptance will be forthcoming, the concept of obtaining proof of their Indigenous status can be both confronting and insulting. A benefit of using the ABS standard question on all child protection forms is that the question does not require community acceptance in its definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but relies on the elements of origin and self-identification only.

Results from agencies contracted to provide child protection services

The following survey results were collected from external agencies to which community services clients were referred in Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland. These agencies provided out-of-home care, counselling services and family support. Of the 171 agencies that were surveyed 66, or 39%, responded. The majority, 92% of these, stated they provided services for all people while the remainder serviced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples only. A variety of people in different positions within the various agencies were used to collect the information. Receptionists, caseworkers, social workers, administrative staff and program coordinators were all employed in this capacity.

Of the 66 respondent agencies, 86% stated that they systematically collected information about Indigenous status, although the question was not mandatory in 22% of these agencies. The most common method of collection (44%) was to ask the child or parent directly. Twenty-seven per cent of agencies stated that the child's Indigenous status had already been established by the referring department, and was known to them at the time of placement. In 16% of cases, Indigenous status was established on forms completed by the child or parents, and in 12% collecting staff based their assessment on the child's physical features. Aboriginal children could be identified separately from Torres Strait Islander children by 34% of the respondent agencies.

Twenty-nine per cent of respondent agencies use the ABS standard question (see Appendix 1), or a similar question; that is, one which would provide output mappable to ABS codes.

The remaining 71% of respondent agencies asked questions based on ethnicity, kinship, nationality, cultural identity or Indigenous status which do not provide data comparable to that obtained using the standard question.

Difficulties faced by agency staff in obtaining the Indigenous status of clients

The responses of agency staff indicate they experienced similar, and in many cases, identical problems to those experienced by departmental staff when obtaining the Indigenous status of clients.

Around 73% of agency staff reported having at least occasional problems determining a child's Indigenous status. The reasons given for these problems were:

- Some staff believed a person's Indigenous status was a personal matter and should not be the subject of enquiry.
- Others believed the question was discriminatory and avoided asking it.
- Some staff didn't understand the importance of the question, or couldn't be convinced of it, and were reluctant to spend time on it.
- Some staff felt embarrassed about asking the question. Some were hesitant to ask as they felt they would be unable to adequately explain to a child, or parent, why such a question should be asked.
- Others avoided asking the question because they felt it was likely to make the child or parents upset, uncomfortable or annoyed.
- A small number of agencies believed they never had any Indigenous clients and so never asked questions about origins.

Use of computer-based systems

Nearly 80% of respondent agencies reported using a computer-based system to record their data. The remainder used paper-based systems. The Indigenous status field was mandatory in 85% of computer-based systems, although 88% allowed the options of 'not stated' and 'unknown' to be used.

Within the previous six months, around 70% of agencies had made technological upgrades to their computer systems, but only 35% reported reviewing and updating client information in this period. Of those that did update this information, 48% said the process was mandatory and 7% said they did not know whether it was or not.

Three-quarters of the respondent agencies stated that client information was kept indefinitely, sometimes simply because there was no policy on the matter. Other agencies kept information for periods ranging from one to seven years.

Staff training in data collection, at agency level

Seventy-five per cent of the respondent agencies reported that their staff received training in data collection.

Other issues

Agency staff working in communities that are predominantly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander approach issues of child protection in ways that differ from mainstream approaches. More time is spent establishing rapport and engaging the family before a report is made to the department. Community consultation is important and discussions may be undertaken with community elders before any action is taken.

Agency staff consider that information they collect about Indigenous status in communities is usually accurate because of the consistent level of local involvement.

Discussion

All the relevant State and Territory departments, and 86% of the respondent agencies, stated that they collected the Indigenous status of children. However, the processes by which the information was obtained varied widely, often making comparisons between and within jurisdictions difficult or impossible. The case for using the ABS standard question is therefore compelling as it would allow these comparisons to be made. However, standardising the question alone will not produce data of optimal quality. The reliability of Indigenous status information held in administrative data sets varies because of the difficulties reported above by staff working in the field and the different approaches employed by various agencies. The problems faced by the staff are similar, and in many cases identical, to those in other areas of community services. Child protection, however, presents particular problems because of the sensitive and potentially traumatic nature of situations that lead to the intervention of an external agency in a child's life.

When the ABS standard question cannot be completed for children for whom it is not possible to determine Indigenous status, the response in output is 'not stated' (see Appendix 1).

The difficulties faced by staff in collecting Indigenous status can be addressed through training and the provision of resources. The limiting factors are the quality and availability of both. Currently, training is inadequate in many jurisdictions, with often only a minimal amount provided, and often this is directed more at the technical aspects of data rather than the interpersonal skills needed in a field as sensitive as child protection. This situation could be addressed through the development of a training module which would give collectors of Indigenous status the confidence and knowledge they need to operate effectively.

Situational factors are likely to play an important role in how the Indigenous status of children is obtained. There is a strong view that such factors need to be recognised. For example, a person collecting Indigenous status will invariably use their knowledge of a child's family or community to establish the child's origins, or make a judgement based on the child's physical characteristics. Training is likely to have minimal impact on these situations, particularly when the staff member knows the child. It is in cases where there is doubt about a child's origins, or when the collector needs to overcome personal barriers in order to obtain accurate information, that the training will be most effective.

If the ABS standard question is implemented as a collection instrument nationwide, it will be necessary to ensure that it is understood to mean the same thing by all those using it. For example, the meaning of the word 'origin' is open to various interpretations and may be meaningless to people who are not familiar with the English language.

Some Indigenous people expressed their unhappiness with the concepts of abuse and neglect being coupled together to form a single statistical entity. They felt that the elevated levels of abuse and neglect, reported for Indigenous children, presented a distorted view of their communities. The term 'neglect' in particular, they felt, was open to interpretation, and acts that may be regarded as neglect in one culture, may not be viewed the same way in another.

National level publications now refer to 'child protection' rather than specifying abuse and neglect although these terms are still used by some agencies.

Staff recording the Indigenous status of a child are sometimes presented with the situation where the parents or guardians cannot agree on whether the child is Indigenous or not. This creates difficulties because all jurisdictions have adopted the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle which states that, when out-of-home care is the appropriate response, it is preferred that Indigenous children be placed with other Indigenous people. In these situations, the best approach seems to be one based on the best interests of the child—something the investigating officer must decide in consultation with other staff and the family. The officer may wish to record the child's Indigenous status as 'not stated or not known' as a means of reducing conflict or, depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate for the officer to make their own decision about whether or not the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

It is important to acknowledge that the area of child protection is a particularly difficult one in which to monitor or mandate the collection of good quality Indigenous data, particularly given the recent history of the Stolen Generation. Additionally, in most instances, clients do not choose to receive child protection services, and these services are often provided in highly stressful and sensitive circumstances. The complexities of these issues can make the collection of good quality data, at times, problematic. However, since data are collected and published, efforts must be made to ensure that they are as consistent as possible.

When the ABS standard question about Indigenous status is asked verbally, it needs to take a different form to that which appears on written forms. Therefore, there is a need to consider two verbal forms, one for use with adults and the other for children. Possible forms are suggested here, and both are designed to capture the essential information in the standard question. The suggested form of the question, used when asking children for their Indigenous status, avoids the requirement that the child understand the abstract concept of 'origin'.

The two suggested verbal forms are:

When asking an adult:

- Is this child of Aboriginal origin, Torres Strait Islander origin, or of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin?

When asking a child:

- Is your mother or father Aboriginal?
- Is your mother or father a Torres Strait Islander?

The responses could be recorded by the interviewer on a form or screen containing the standard question.

The circumstances under which it is appropriate to ask a child for their personal details and at what age questions of this nature may be asked should also be considered. Some consider there are no definitive answers to these questions and final judgement must rest with the departmental or agency officer dealing with the case. Clearly, what is in the best interests of the child should be the determining factor. However, all attempts to provide accurate data on Indigenous status should be made.

A child's Indigenous status should be determined at the earliest practicable time. In circumstances where enquiries about status would be inappropriate at the early stages of contact with services, procedures need to be introduced to ensure this information is collected no later than at the end of the investigation stage. Asking the question about a child's Indigenous status should be compulsory.

All systems should contain a mandatory review procedure at the substantiation stage, designed to ensure that Indigenous status and other important information has been captured. Electronic systems can be designed to prompt staff about the necessity of completing these fields. It may be easier to forget, or ignore, incomplete information in paper-based systems, but ultimately both depend on the skills and diligence of staff using them.

Review of Indigenous identification in disability support services provided under the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement

Background

The review presented here examines the current collection protocols for Indigenous status undertaken by disability support service outlets funded under the CSDA, and comprises the third and final of the reviews requested by the NCSIMG. Funding for this review was provided by the Chief Executive Officers of Disability Services (CEODS) formerly known as the National Disability Administrators (NDAs).

In 1993–1994 the Commonwealth, the AIHW and all States and Territories jointly developed a minimum set of data items for national reporting by service providers funded under the CSDA.

The CSDA-MDS collections, which are conducted under the auspices of the CEODS, began in 1995. Under the most recent CSDA, signed in 1998, the Commonwealth is responsible for the management and provision of employment services, and the States and Territories for the administration of specialist disability services. Advocacy, print disability and information services are joint responsibilities.

In 2000, governments funded 7,378 service outlets under the CSDA. Data are collected from these outlets on a single nominated day known as 'snapshot day', when service providers are required to complete two types of form: service forms and consumer forms.

A separate service form must be completed for each service type delivered. It is not uncommon for a service provider to provide more than one type of service from the same location, that is, have two or more outlets co-located. Service types are grouped under the broad categories of accommodation support, employment services, community support, community access and respite (see Appendix 3 for a more complete description of service types).

A consumer form is completed for each person receiving a service on snapshot day. Since some consumers may receive more than one service on that day, the number of consumer forms completed exceeds the number of persons assisted. In 2000, an estimated 62,341 people received 74,929 services provided or funded under the CSDA.

The Indigenous status of clients is collected on the CSDA consumer forms. The collection method used differs slightly from both the ABS standard question and the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* collection method (which are identical) but the data domains of all three are the same.

Methodology

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit (ATSIHWIU) was provided with a stratified sample consisting of the identification numbers of 500 disability service outlets, selected by the AIHW from the national CSDA-funded outlets database. The sample included outlets from all States and Territories and from each service type. It was weighted in favour of those outlets that had reported high numbers of Indigenous clients, or high proportions of clients with unknown Indigenous status, from data gathered on snapshot day. These outlets were considered to be of particular interest with regard to how, or if, they collected Indigenous status throughout the rest of the year, and what reasons existed for the high proportions of clients for whom this information was not obtained in 1999 (see Appendix 3 for a detailed account of the sample methodology).

In accordance with the agreement reached with the NDAs in October 2000, jurisdiction data administrators provided the addresses of outlets in the sample. These addresses formed the mail-out database used to send out a questionnaire and covering letter to individual outlets or to those agencies under which multiple outlets operated. The latter situation arose most often with 'group homes' which provide community-based accommodation for people with disabilities.

The questionnaire was developed by ATSIHWIU and was circulated to the CEODS and AIHW for comment and approval. It was similar to the questionnaire used in the reviews of SAAP and child protection and sought information about the collection of Indigenous status by disability services outlets and about any problems that may have been associated with that collection.

A total of 338 letters and questionnaires were sent to disability support service outlets in each State and Territory in Australia. If appropriate, agencies responsible for the administration of more than one outlet were asked to forward copies of the questionnaire for completion by staff in the outlets under their control.

Follow-up phone calls and faxes to those outlets that had not responded by the deadline helped increase the response rate. Two hundred and eleven questionnaires were completed and returned, a response rate of 62%. Information obtained from the questionnaires was then collated and analysed using standard research methods.

Results of the review

Fifty-one per cent of respondent outlets reported that they collected Indigenous status as part of their ongoing client data recording processes. This may be partly a result of the sample design, where the selection of outlets used in the disability services review was not random and focused on outlets with high proportions of 'unknowns' and/or Indigenous clients, in order to better understand the nature, rather than the level, of data collection problems. Of those outlets that did collect Indigenous status, 42% reported using the ABS standard question to do so.

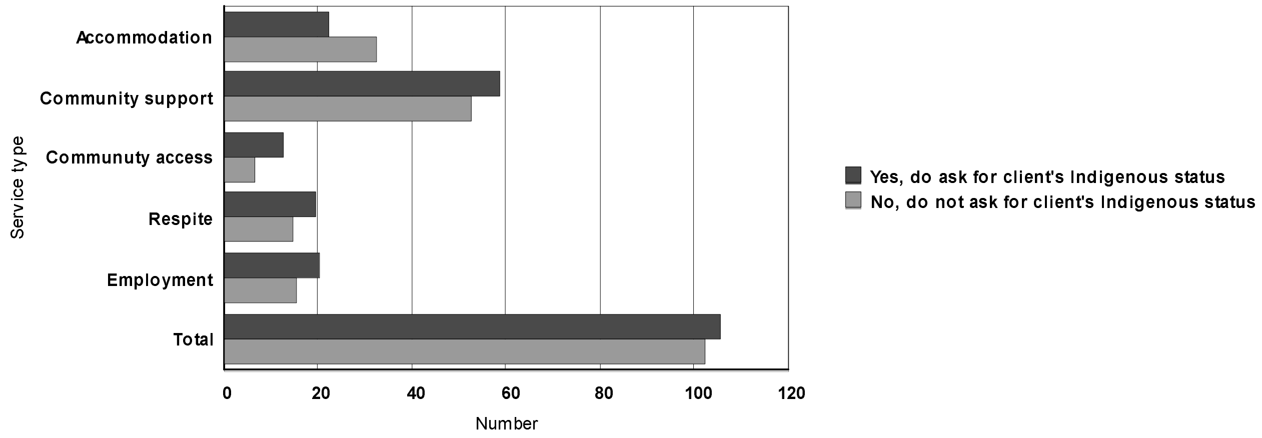
A wide range of alternative questions was used by those outlets that did not use the standard question on their forms. These alternatives can be categorised as follows:

- Twenty-six per cent of outlets not using the ABS standard question asked clients how they identified themselves, and of these, half employed response categories from the data domain of the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* Indigenous status data element (see Appendix 2), which contains a 'not stated' option.
- Twenty-one per cent asked whether the client belonged to one of these groups: Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander (which has never been an MDS category)
- Seventeen per cent used the question, 'Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?' with a Yes/No option but not specifying the two population categories
- Ten per cent asked questions based on 'ethnicity'.

The remaining outlets linked a person's Indigenous status to questions about 'cultural background' or 'needs' or 'language spoken at home'.

Some outlets reported that if the Indigenous status field in their computer-based recording systems was not completed, the system defaulted to a 'no' response, producing a negative skew in the data and falsely increasing the number of clients who identified as non-Indigenous.

Figure 3 illustrates how the proportion of outlets that ask clients for their Indigenous status varies according to the type of service they are providing. Some of the outlets sampled were run by service providers that were providing more than one type of service, from co-located outlets. In these cases the response from the sampled outlets also applied to the other outlets located at the same location and, as a result, the number of outlets (260) is greater than the number of responses, reflecting the fact that 21% of responses were from service providers with such multiple outlets.



Note: Twenty-one per cent of service outlets stated that they provided more than one type of service.

Figure 3: Service type by number of outlets that ask clients for their Indigenous status

The questionnaire asked service outlets to identify the types of service they provided. Twenty-one per cent (44 outlets) reported providing more than one service, and of these 75% reported that one of the services they provided was community support. Twenty-six per cent reported providing accommodation as part of their multiple services and 14% employment services. The prevalence of community support as the service type most commonly provided in conjunction with other services may be explained by the nature of the services provided under this category (see Appendix 4). Community support is available for people of all age groups and incorporates a range of programs which readily complement those provided by other service types. For example, early childhood and holiday programs provide assistance to children of all ages, while family management and self-help groups are more likely to involve adults.

A question about Indigenous status was asked by a majority (61%) of service outlets that provided either a single service type, which was not accommodation support, or a combination of services types which excluded accommodation services. The results were markedly different for outlets where accommodation was provided, either as a single service or in combination with other services. Forty-five per cent of these outlets reported asking a question about Indigenous status. This figure fell to 40% for those outlets providing accommodation services only.

A possible explanation for the smaller number of accommodation services asking clients about their Indigenous status than other service types may occur because clients often remain in group houses for long periods of time and become well known to the service providers. In these circumstances, if Indigenous status is not collected initially it may be deemed inappropriate to collect it at a later time, or it may be that accommodation services is an area of service provision where knowledge of someone's Indigenous status is considered less important, or a more sensitive issue, than in other service types.

On snapshot day in 2000, an estimated 62,341 people received 74,929 services provided or funded under the CSDA. Of these, 2.6% (1629 people) were of Indigenous origin. Nearly 8% of those for whom consumer forms were completed on snapshot day did not state their Indigenous origin or reported they did not know what their Indigenous origin was.

Table 4: Number of service types provided

Service type	No.
Accommodation services	56
Community support	112
Community access	20
Respite	35
Employment services	37
Total	**260**

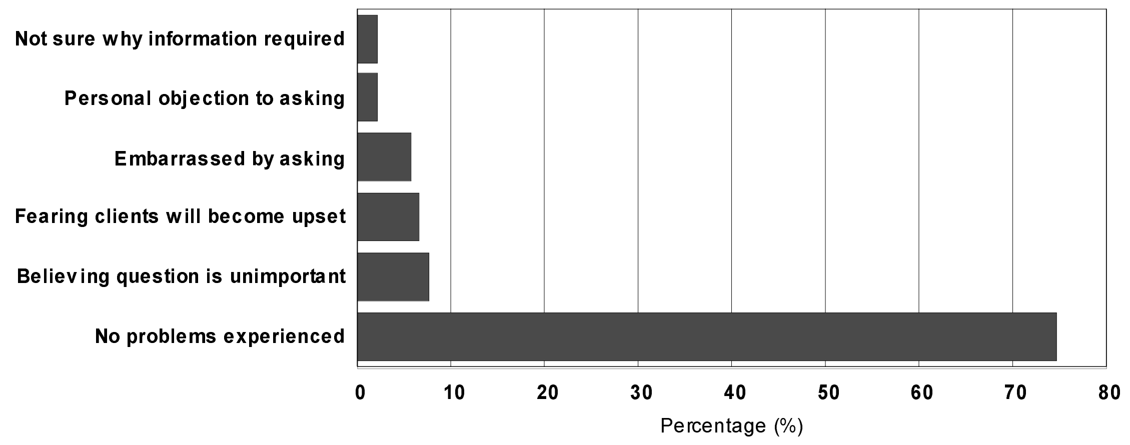
Note: 211 service outlets provided the total of 260 services.

Difficulties faced by staff in obtaining Indigenous status

All respondent outlets that reported collecting the Indigenous status of their clients as part of their ongoing data recording processes answered the question about the difficulties their staff may face when asking for this information. Of these, only 20% reported having any difficulties in asking. The difficulties faced were:

- Staff felt that obtaining a client's Indigenous status was not important and consequently attached little value to collecting the information.
- Staff felt that clients would become upset if asked about their Indigenous status.
- Staff felt too embarrassed to ask.
- Staff were not clear why the question needed to be asked and consequently felt little compulsion to ask it.
- Staff had a personal objection to asking the Indigenous status question, often seeing it as discriminatory.

In addition, staff from some service outlets held the view that some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people were unaware of or unsure of their Indigenous status, did not understand the concept, as defined and used by organisations with which they had contact, or were afraid of a negative response if they answered this question in the affirmative. Other organisations reported that they were sure their clients were exclusively Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and on the basis that the question was redundant, had never asked their clients about their Indigenous origins.



(a) Proportion of outlets that reported they did collect Indigenous status.

Figure 4: Issues that influenced the recording of the Indigenous status of clients[(a)]

These results are similar to those obtained from the review of SAAP where 72% of agencies said their staff had no difficulties in obtaining Indigenous status, but are markedly different from those obtained in the review of child protection and welfare where 73% of agencies contracted to provide child protection services reported having at least occasional problems determining a child's status.

Again, these results must be treated with caution because the disability services review was based on a non-random stratified sample whereas the other two reviews were based on random samples.

Client data recording systems

Twelve per cent of outlets relied solely on computer-based systems for recording client data while 47% used a combination of both paper-based and computer-based systems. Thirty-eight per cent reported using paper-based systems only.

Thirty-eight per cent of agencies reported that client data was updated 'as required', often at every client contact (although this was likely to be information other than Indigenous status), or within a 6–12 month period (37%). Only 3% of systems were updated less often than 12 monthly. Computerised systems were more likely to be updated 'when required' (58%) than either paper-based systems (25%) or a combination of both (44%). Given the non-random nature of the sample used, caution must be used when interpreting these results, although a correlation between computer usage and the frequency with which client data systems were updated appears to exist.

Table 5: Frequency that service outlets update client details by type of recording system

	Computerised system	Paper-based system	Both paper-based and computerised	Not stated	Total
< 6 months	2	13	19		34
6–12 months	8	39	31		78
> 12 months		4	2		6
When required	15	20	44	2	81
Not stated	1	4	3	4	12
Total	**26**	**80**	**99**	**6**	**211**

Outlets with computerised client data recording systems reported asking clients a question about their Indigenous status in 62% of cases. This was also the case in just over 55% of those with both computerised and paper-based systems and in 44% of those with paper-based systems only.

Role of person in the organisation most likely to collect Indigenous status

Indigenous status was collected by people working in a variety of positions within the service outlets and often the task was not confined to one particular person or position. Overall, 30% of those collecting Indigenous status were managers, 26% case workers, 10% administrative officers and 8% were social workers.

Other issues

Indigenous status was established in 40% of outlets by a staff member asking the client and then completing the form. Clients were given the form and asked to complete it themselves in 20% of cases while nearly 15% relied on what they already knew about the client, including recognition of the family name or knowledge of where the person lived.

About 3% of outlets reported that their staff would attempt to guess a client's Indigenous status, based on the client's appearance, rather than ask for the information.

Discussion

The consumer form used to collect client information on the CSDA MDS snapshot day contains a question about Indigenous status that is similar to the ABS standard question (see Appendix 1) but differs from it in two significant ways:

(a) The initial question, directed to the client, is worded differently on the 1999 consumer form from the wording that appears in the ABS standard. On the consumer form the question to the client is:

'Are you [the consumer] of Indigenous origin?

The ABS standard has the question:

'Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?'

Although the consumer form asks a question based on a person's Indigenous origin, as the ABS standard does, it differs most significantly by using the word 'Indigenous' rather than 'Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander'. A problem identified with this is that the general word 'Indigenous' may attract positive responses from people born outside Australia, and who consider themselves indigenous to their country of birth.

(b) The ABS standard does not allow for the responses 'not stated' or 'not known' except by non-completion of any tick boxes, whereas the consumer form contains a response category, 'not known' which can be used by either data collection staff or the client.

The inclusion of a 'not known' category on the consumer form is contrary to what is in the ABS standard and the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* (NCSDD) Indigenous status data element, where such a category is not offered. A 'not stated' or 'not known' category was considered by those who developed the ABS standard and NCSDD data element to be an 'easy option' for data collectors or clients who did not wish to ask or answer the question. However, if the question is left blank, the response in output is still 'not stated' or 'not known', although this may not be apparent to outlet staff collecting the information or clients answering the question. (See Appendix 2 for the data domain in the NCSDD and an explanation of how data are recorded in output.)

On a national basis, snapshot day is designed to be a valid sample of clients, producing information on a day that is considered to be 'average' or 'typical'. However, service providers collect data for a number of reasons additional to the need to meet the reporting requirements of national collections such as the CSDA-MDS and the Home and Community Care Program National MDS. The information required for the maintenance of internal management systems, resource allocation, development of long-term strategies, and to ensure compliance with the reporting regimes of funding jurisdictions, determines much of what is collected.

The CSDA-MDS, which is currently being redeveloped, has been designed to mesh as much as possible with these other requirements and thus to harvest a proportion of the data that is collected for other purposes.

The revised minimum data set and collection methods of the CSDA are planned to commence in July 2002. A key feature of the redeveloped collection will be a requirement for outlets to collect and transmit information about all clients who received a service during a financial year. The level of detail required will vary according to service type and, as in the current collection, client information will not be collected in relation to a number of service types, for example information/advocacy.

Nearly 50% of outlets responding to the questionnaire reported that they did not collect the Indigenous status of clients. On snapshot day only 8% of clients did not have a response recorded for this question. This large discrepancy may, in part, be a result of the compulsory nature of the snapshot day collection as well as the difficulties reported by 20% of outlet staff in obtaining a client's Indigenous origins. Again it should be noted that outlets with low data quality or high numbers of Indigenous clients were targeted in the sample.

Often, Indigenous status questions were grouped together with questions about language spoken at home, ethnicity and whether or not the client came from a non-English-speaking background. The placement of the Indigenous status question in this part of the form may mean it appears 'less threatening' than it would be if it appeared separately.

The CEODS have indicated that respondents in services deal better with mutually exclusive categories and have recommended that an additional category is included when asking the Indigenous origin question: Yes, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. NCSIMG has acknowledged this concern and has requested the National Community Services Data Committee include an examination of this issue in its work program in time for the next revision of the *National Community Services Data Dictionary*.

Service outlets funded under the CSDA are to be encouraged to collect the Indigenous status of their clients as part of their ongoing data collections. Training for outlet staff, which emphasises the importance of collecting Indigenous status from clients, and which addresses concerns felt by staff when collecting this information, should be made available to those who need it. An awareness raising campaign, similar to that employed to promote the correct recording of Indigenous status in health services, should be developed.

Appendix 1

The ABS standard question for Indigenous status

All ABS Indigenous population figures are based on results from the ABS standard question which is:

Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

> For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander

Issues in data collection and reporting

The categories expected to be used in collecting data for Indigenous Status are derived from the answers to the relevant question in the question module but include the supplementary category 'Not Stated/Inadequately described', where applicable:

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ Not stated/inadequately described

However, these 'input' categories do not include the category 'Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin' because that category is defined when both the 'Yes' boxes are ticked. When this occurs the results are amalgamated and appear in the standard output (see below).

It can be seen that the 'output' categories are the same as the categories agreed for use in the collection protocol for Indigenous status in the *National Community Services Data Dictionary*, and create the following output data:

Aboriginal but not Torres Strait Islander origin

Torres Strait Islander but not Aboriginal origin

Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin

Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander origin

Not stated/inadequately described

The ABS standard question is based upon the Commonwealth working definition

> *An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives. Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981, p. 1*

but does not include the third element of the definition, namely that the person 'is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives'. Collecting information on the basis of community acceptance is often impractical and can lead to serious inaccuracies, and for these reasons it is not included in the ABS standard question.

Appendix 2

National Community Services Data Dictionary—Indigenous status data element

The *National Community Services Data Dictionary*, Version 2, 2000 contains an Indigenous data element that includes a discussion of the data domain and data collection methods. An abbreviated version of the data element is given below, illustrating how the data dictionary description is based on the ABS standard and is consistent with, and mappable to, ABS codes.

Indigenous status

Definition

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.

Data domain

1 Aboriginal but not Torres Strait Islander origin
2 Torres Strait Islander but not Aboriginal origin
3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin
4 Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander origin
5 Not stated/inadequately described

Guide for use

There are three components to the definition:

- descent
- self-identification, and
- community acceptance.

The classification for 'Indigenous status' has a hierarchical structure comprising two levels. There are four categories at the detailed level of the classification, which are grouped into two categories at the broad level. There is one supplementary category for 'not stated' responses. The classification is as follows:

Indigenous

Aboriginal but not Torres Strait Islander origin

Torres Strait Islander but not Aboriginal origin

Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin

Non-Indigenous

Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander origin

Not stated/inadequately described

This category is not to be available as a valid answer to the questions but is intended for use:

- primarily when importing data from other data collections that do not contain mappable data;
- where an answer was refused;
- where the question was not able to be asked prior to completion of assistance because the client was unable to communicate or a person who knows the client was not available.

Only in the last two situations may the tick boxes on the questionnaire be left blank. Refer to ABS for advice in relation to the recording of indigenous status for children in receipt of children's services.

Collection methods

The standard question for Indigenous status is as follows:

> [Are you] [Is the person] [Is (name)] of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?
>
> (For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.)
>
> ☐ No
>
> ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
>
> ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander

This question is recommended for self-enumerated or interview-based collections. It can also be used in circumstances where a close relative, friend, or another member of the household is answering on behalf of the subject.

When someone is not present, the person answering for them should be in a position to do so, that is, this person must know well the person about whom the question is being asked and feel confident to provide accurate information about them. However, it is strongly recommended that this question be asked directly wherever possible.

This question should always be asked even if the person does not ‘look’ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The Indigenous status question allows for more than one response. The procedure for coding multiple responses is as follows:

If the respondent marks ‘No’ and either ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Torres Strait Islander’, then the response should be coded to either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as indicated (that is, disregard the ‘No’ response).

If the respondent marks both the ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander’ boxes, then their response should be coded to ‘Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin’.

If the respondent marks all three boxes (‘No’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander’), then the response should be coded to ‘Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin’ (that is, disregard the ‘No’ response).

Appendix 3

Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set

Service type

Accommodation support institutions

- large residential; hostels group homes; attendant care; outreach
- other 'in-home'/drop-in support; alternative family placement
- accommodation support; other not stated

Community support

- Early childhood intervention
- Recreation/holiday programs
- Therapy (PT OT ST); family
- individual case practice/management; behaviour/specialist intervention

Counselling

- individual/family/group; brokerage
- direct funding; mutual support
- self-help groups ;resource teams
- regional teams; community support
- other or not stated

Community access continuing education

- independent living training
- adult training centre; post-school options
- social and community support/community access; community access and day programs
- other not stated

Respite: own home respite/respite centre:

- home; respite
- host family/peer support; respite:
- other/flexible/combination

Employment

- open employment
- supported employment
- open and supported employment
- other employment
- home; respite
- host family/peer support; respite:
- other/flexible/combination

Employment

- open employment
- supported employment
- open and supported employment
- other employment

Sampling methodology for the data review

Analytical tables were created using CSDA services data from 1999 which contained the categories: number of agencies, service type, State or Territory, size of agency (determined by client volume), percentage of clients known to be Indigenous and percentage of clients for whom Indigenous status was not known.

However, upon examination, it was found it was not possible to stratify the sample using all these variables, as this would have required a larger sample than was practicable. The approach decided upon focused on agencies with high proportions of Indigenous clients, or high proportions of clients with unknown Indigenous status, while ensuring there were sufficient numbers from each State.

The sample was selected in the following way:

(a) A sample of 200 agencies was selected from the 458 which reported that between 26% and 100% of their clients, on snapshot day, did not record a valid answer to the Indigenous status question; and

(b) All 188 agencies were selected which reported that between 26% and 100% of their clients were of Indigenous origin. These were supplemented by including additional agencies from South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory in the 11% to 25% range, to ensure a representative selection was taken from each jurisdiction.

The sample was chosen selectively, rather than randomly from each category, because the aim of the review is to identify problems in areas where they seem more likely to arise, rather than seek a perfect representation of all services in all jurisdictions. The sample, however, was still broad enough to include agencies from each sector of disability services, that is, accommodation support, community support, community access, respite and employment and from each State and Territory. The bulk of the agencies included had either identified high numbers of Indigenous clients, high numbers of 'unknowns' or a small number of (or not any) Indigenous clients.

The sample size was around 450, which was considered manageable in terms of size and (depending on the response rate) was thought to be sufficiently large to produce meaningful data.

Appendix 4

Community services Indigenous client data workshop, 6 October 2000 AIHW

Richard Madden	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)
Ching Choi	AIHW
Helen Moyle	AIHW
Ros Madden	AIHW
Justin Griffin	AIHW
Margaret Fisher	AIHW
Janis Shaw	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Information Unit, ABS/AIHW
Barbara Gray	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Information Unit, Australian Bureau Statistics/AIHW
Graham Brice	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Australian Bureau of Statistics/AIHW
Anna Williams	Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania
Shane Mohor	Aboriginal Services Division, Department of Human Services, South Australia
Ian Lennie	New South Wales Health Department
James Baban	Ageing and Disability Department, New South Wales
Patsy Gallagher	Department of Community Services, New South Wales
Tony Carr	Department of Human Services, Victoria
Mary Sullivan	Koori Health Unit, Department of Human Services, Victoria
Andrew Benson	Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Department of Health and Aged Care
Rose Lau	Department of Family and Community Services, Commonwealth (FaCS)
Myee Michael	FaCS
Carolyn Taylor	FaCS
John Fulop	FaCS
Doug Limbrick	FaCS
Jo James	Indigenous Community Segment Team, Centrelink
Steve McIntosh	Indigenous Community Segment Team, Centrelink
Ken Black	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Phil Browning	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Margaret Wallace	Facilitator

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Client Information Guidelines

NSW State Health Publication No. (AHB) 980128

NSW Aboriginal Health Information Guidelines 1998