Give us a break!

A look at the myths and legends surrounding Aboriginal people and our lifestyle.
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Published by: General Practice Education and Training Limited Level 3, 10 Rudd Street, CANBERRA ACT 2600

Telephone: (02) 6263 6777

Website: www.gpet.com.au

Design layout: Leona Butler

Front cover artwork: The cover design for ‘Give us a break!’ is based on original artwork by Melinda Brown.

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this publication may contain the names and stories of deceased persons.

The term “Indigenous” within the context of this document is in reference to and respect of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
I am a Kamilaroi woman and I belong to the Connors, Livermore, Munro and Jerrard families from Tingha.

I grew up in Tingha, which is a small town on the New England Tablelands. I went to the Aboriginal school out at Long Gully until I was about 14 years of age. About this time the government decided that they were not going to repair and maintain Aboriginal schools anymore so we were integrated into the school in town. I remember being so impressed with the milk – it was pink and came in a bottle! We had to make ours with powdered milk and water from the spring down in the gully.

Growing up, we did all the things that other Aboriginal people in Tingha did to make the rations go further. I went ‘tin mining’ (fossicking) for sapphires and other gemstones, and set rabbit traps, both of which I was really good at. I also did housework around the place and loved eating witchetty grubs!

Mum insisted that I go to school and, despite not really fitting in, I completed my Intermediate Certificate. After school I went into nursing, but preferred working in the area of administration. I was eventually employed in the newly formed NSW Aboriginal Health Unit and continued in their employment through numerous changes and restructures for about 32 years, when I took voluntary redundancy and ended up with a part time job with GP Synergy.

I’ve had long term involvement with the union movement, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Pius X Aboriginal Corporation and the Local Aboriginal Lands Council (LALC).

I love gardening and reading murder mysteries and, if I put my mind to it, I can write a decent short story.

I am a widow now, with three grown children, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren (one little girl and then twins, a boy and a girl). My kids reckon that I spoil them, but I always think that’s what grandmothers are for.
However, literacy and numeracy levels have shown little improvement, the life-expectancy gap (currently, just over a decade) remains too great, and national efforts to close the gap in employment outcomes appear to be failing.

In addition, the Prime Minister announced a new goal to dramatically improve school attendance rates, which in some remote communities, are lower than 70 per cent.

This data proves that, despite the progress that has been made, we still have some way to go before we achieve the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) targets to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

“*In too many areas, people’s lives are not improving or not improving fast enough.*”

(Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s 2014 report)

So why do these numerous – and detrimental – stereotypes and myths about Aboriginal people remain, and why are they accepted by so many non-Aboriginal Australians?

In some ways, this is an indication of the widening gaps between the different socio-economic groups in Australia. Non-Aboriginal Australians of higher socio-economic background as well as overseas visitors may believe these stereotypes because they have very little, if any, regular or direct contact with Aboriginal people.
Furthermore, many lower socio-economic, non-Aboriginal groups may accept these stereotypes because they see themselves as competing for the same government entitlements, which they feel are geared in favour of Aboriginal people.

Some people may perceive the inherent racism in this stereotyping is the result of an educational system which has, in the past, perpetuated discrimination through its policies and its textbooks.

There are many reasons why people act as they do, but it is up to us all to look at the way we treat each other; and to treat others as we would like ourselves and our loved ones to be treated.

I hope this publication will help us to do that.

Val Dahlstrom
Indigenous Liaison Officer
GP Synergy
April 2014

Disclaimer: This publication has been written from Val Dahlstrom’s point of view as an Aboriginal woman. Val refers specifically to Aboriginal people throughout the myths in this publication. However it should be noted that the statistical information cited within the publication refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In addition, when looking at data about Aboriginal people, note that – for various different reasons - confirmation of Aboriginality is not always requested, even though it is mandatory. This means there will always be slight discrepancies, though on the whole, the broad direction reflected in the data is usually accurate.
RACISM CAN, AND DOES, IMPACT UPON ABORIGINAL HEALTH.

“On an individual level, exposure to racism is associated with psychological distress, depression, poor quality of life, and substance misuse, all of which contribute significantly to the overall ill-health experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Prolonged experience of stress can also have physical health effects, such as on the immune, endocrine and cardiovascular systems.”

Pat Anderson, chair of the Lowitja Institute, Australia’s National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, The Australian, 27 July 2013
THE IMPACT OF RACISM ON THE HEALTH OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE CAN BE SEEN IN:

- inequitable and reduced access to the resources required for health (employment, education, housing, medical care, etc.)
- inequitable exposure to risk factors associated with ill-health (junk food, toxic substances, dangerous goods)
- stress and negative emotional/cognitive reactions which have negative impacts on mental health as well as affecting the immune, endocrine, cardiovascular and other physiological systems
- engagement in unhealthy activities (smoking, alcohol and drug use)
- disengagement from healthy activities (sleep, exercise, taking medications)
- physical injury via racially motivated assault.

(Anderson 2014)
Under the Commonwealth Education Act, 1990 it is compulsory for all young people - regardless of whether they are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal - to attend school from the age of six years until they complete year 10. Then, they must participate full-time (i.e., at least 25 hours per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until at least the age of 17 years.

The only exception is, if a child or a parent is ill or the child is being satisfactorily educated at home, they may apply to gain exemption from attending school.

School enrolment and attendance

- According to data sourced from the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC), nationally 103.7 per cent* of Indigenous children aged 6-15 years were enrolled (either full or part time) in schools in 2010, compared with 98.7 per cent of non-Indigenous children.

- These rates vary across jurisdictions, and were relatively stable between 2006 and 2010.

- However, in 2009, attendance rates for Indigenous students at government schools were lower than for non-Indigenous students for years 1-10 in all states and territories.

- Attendance rates declined at government schools in all jurisdictions from year 5 to year 10 for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, but declined by more for Indigenous students.

- From 2007 to 2009, there was little change in the attendance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in government schools in years 5 and 10; though in 2009, attendance rates in government schools for years 5 and 10 were lower for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students, in all states and territories.
No, Aboriginal children are not exempt from attending school.

Data shows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled in school at around the same rate as non-Aboriginal children; however, they are affected by a range of socio-economic factors that impact upon their ability to regularly attend and remain in school, meaning actual attendance rates are usually lower.

- Across the other school sectors (including Catholic and independent schools), attendance rates for Indigenous students in years 1-10 were generally lower than for non-Indigenous students.
- In 2009, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ attendance rates was greater in year 10 (between 9 and 24 percentage points) than in year 5 (between 3 and 17 percentage points).

(SCRGSP 2011, Section 6.1, pp. 6.3—6.9)

Where school attendance is low, it may be attributed to a combination of home, school and individual factors: including, for example, issues in the home environment, underlying poor literacy and numeracy, lack of culturally relevant curriculum content, lack of parental insistence, poor teaching, low self-esteem, bullying or peer pressure. (Reid, 2008 in Purdie & Buckley 2010, pp. 2-3)

* The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2011 Report advises “Data on student enrolment rates should be interpreted with caution because of quality issues associated with the identification of Indigenous students in both the NSSC and population statistics. For example, rates calculated for most jurisdictions are greater than 100 per cent.” (p6.8)
Aboriginal people just don’t want to work.

As outlined in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2011 Report,

“Employment outcomes are directly related to people’s living standard and many aspects of their wellbeing. Being employed leads to improved income for families and communities, which in turn has a positive influence on health and the education of children. Employment also enhances self-esteem, increases opportunities for self development, influences interaction at the family and community levels and reduces social alienation.” (SCRGSP, 2011, Section 4.5, p.4.59)

The report goes on to state, “Many aspects of work affect people’s wellbeing, including hours worked, job satisfaction and security, levels of remuneration, opportunities for self-development and interaction with people outside the home.” (SCRGSP, 2011, Chapter 8, p.8.1)

However, in some remote areas particularly, Aboriginal people face limited employment opportunities, and this affects the overall participation of Aboriginal people in the labour force.

This participation is also affected by the employment opportunities available to Aboriginal people through the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program*. Since 2008, CDEP participants were classified as employed, not unemployed, by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This means the employment rate for Indigenous people appears higher than it otherwise would; CDEP employment makes up a significant percentage of Aboriginal employment. According to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, in 2008 the CDEP program accounted for 5.6 per cent of the Indigenous labour force, ranging from 1.2 per cent in non-remote areas to 19.4 per cent in remote areas. (AIHW 2010, Ch. 2.07, p. 988)
*The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program* was established in 1977 to create local employment opportunities in remote Indigenous communities where the labour market might not otherwise offer employment. The program was later extended to all areas, however a recent restructure has seen its focus shift back to supporting employment opportunities in remote Indigenous communities. It’s important to consider CDEP when analysing historical labour force and unemployment data: for example, at the time data was collected, CDEP participant payments may have comprised a mix of both wages and income support payments (such as the NewStart Allowance); and, the program includes elements of both unemployment and employment, with some activities similar to those undertaken by participants in *Work for the Dole*, and others (such as essential roles in municipal services, health care and community services) that would be considered employment in mainstream communities and organisations. (SCRGSP 2011, Section 4.6, p. 4.6.2)

**Employment and labour force participation**

Increasing economic participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is key to achieving the COAG target to halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade, and also contributes to the headline indicator relating to household and individual income.

The primary measures for this indicator are:

- working hours (full time or part time),
- sector of employment (public or private), and
- occupation.
Aboriginal people just don't want to work.

In 2008, for those aged 15–64 years:

- Employment to population ratios for Indigenous people were lower than for non-Indigenous people in all states and territories.
- Employment to population ratios varied across states and territories for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.
- The gap was highest in the NT (50.8 per cent of Indigenous people employed compared to 90.8 per cent of non-Indigenous people) (SCRGSP 2011, Section 4.6, p.4.64).

An apparent increase in the employment to population ratio for Indigenous people between 2004-05 and 2008 (from 51 per cent to 54 per cent) is not statistically significant, as there was a similar increase in the rate for non-Indigenous people from 74 per cent to 76 per cent, so there was no significant change in the gap over this period.

Importantly, while the number of CDEP participants fell by almost half between 2002 and 2006, there was not an accompanying drop in Indigenous labour force participation or rise in Indigenous unemployment – even in regional and remote areas where CDEP participation was concentrated.

This suggests a greater number of Indigenous people have gained employment following the CDEP restructure, than have moved to income support.

Between 1994 and 2008, for Indigenous people aged 15–64 years:

- the labour force participation rate increased from 54.5 per cent to 64.5 per cent,
- the unemployment rate decreased from 31.0 per cent to 16.6 per cent. (SCRGSP 2011, Chapter 4, p. 4.59)

However, after adjusting for differences in age structure, Indigenous Australians aged 15–64 years were less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be employed (54% compared with 76%) and almost four times as likely to be unemployed (11% compared with 3%), according to 2008 data. (AIHW 2010, p.981).
In 2006:

- 25.8 per cent of employed Indigenous people worked in the public sector, compared to 14.7 per cent of employed non-Indigenous people,

- Indigenous people were employed as managers and administrators and professionals at a lower rate, and as labourers at a higher rate, than non-Indigenous people.

(SCRGSP 2011, Section 8.1, p. 8.3)

In 2002, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University published the *Institutional factors underpinning Indigenous labour force participation: The role of the CDEP scheme and education* working paper. The paper found,

“Underemployment is particularly common among Indigenous employees, with 19.5 per cent of female workers and 25.3 per cent of male workers indicating they would prefer to work more hours. The extent of Indigenous underemployment is indicated by the fact that the Indigenous underemployed work about 11 hours less per week than Indigenous employees who are unconstrained in the number of hours they work...Not only do the underemployed have difficulty finding enough work, but they were also less likely to be working for continuous periods. These observations are consistent with the underemployed being more likely to be working in any available job—including casual or seasonal jobs—rather than being matched with their optimal job.”

(Hunter 2002, p. vi)

It is wrong to say that Aboriginal people do not want to work. Barriers such as low educational attainments and limited access to training and employment opportunities work against them gaining meaningful employment.

Where the opportunities do exist – as under the CDEP program – Aboriginal people embrace them.
Aboriginal people receive greater support payments to attend school or tertiary institutions than non-Aboriginal Australians.

One of the abiding beliefs among many non-Aboriginal Australians is that Aboriginal people receive greater support payments for attending school or tertiary institutions.

Commonwealth Government payments to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians use the same criteria to determine how payments are calculated.

There are six types of education support payments available from the Australian Government:

- **Youth Allowance** – financial help for people aged 16 to 24 years who are studying full-time, undertaking a full-time Australian Apprenticeship, training, looking for work.
- **Austudy** – financial help to full-time students and Australian Apprentices aged 25 years or more.
- **ABSTUDY** – helps with costs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are studying or undertaking an Australian apprenticeship.
- **The Schoolkids Bonus (currently available until July 2014)** – provides additional assistance for families and students to pay for education expenses such as uniforms, books, school fees and sports registration fees.
- **Pensioner Education Supplement** – helps students with the ongoing costs of full-time or part-time study in a secondary or tertiary course.
- **Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme** – help for students who cannot go to an appropriate state school because of geographical isolation, disability or special health needs.
No, Aboriginal people do not generally receive much greater payments for attending school or tertiary institutions than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are subject to the same regulations, and are entitled to no more (and no less) government support, than any other Australians.

Payment rates for the various allowances are subject to change. Therefore, to find details of current payment rates, please visit www.humanservices.gov.au and click on ‘Centrelink’.

Income and asset tests apply to ABSTUDY as well as Austudy and Youth Allowance, and these may affect payment rates.

“Recipients of Parenting Payments, Disability Support Payments, Youth Allowance or Newstart payments, who participate in ‘Work for the Dole’ activities – including full-time Work for the Dole and Drought Force – or Green Corps activities, the Skills for Education and Employment program

or Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) activities – may be eligible for an additional supplement of $20.80 per fortnight.”

(A guide to Australian Government payments, p.12)
Aboriginal people get special health service privileges from the Government.

The provision of specialist health services is one area that is often seen as discrimination by some non-Aboriginal Australians. Others see it as a waste, or possibly more a misdirection of funds, to provide additional services to those already available to the general public.

In fact, specialised services are desperately needed by Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, to achieve health outcomes that are on par with the wider population.

One key area against which to measure the need for health services is life expectancy. In 2007/2008, COAG committed to an ambitious target to close the life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians within a generation (by 2031), and to halve the gap in the mortality rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under five within a decade. (SCRGSP 2011, ‘Terms of Reference’, p.XXVI)

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2010-12, the life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was 69.1 years for men and 73.7 years for women. (ABS media release, 15 November 2013) This means the current gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is estimated to be 10.6 years for males and 9.5 years for females.

The Close the Gap Prime Minister’s Report that was released in February 2013 found that while progress to reduce under-five mortality is on track to achieve the target, overall mortality rates continue to decline but will need to drop at a much faster rate for the 2031 target to be met.

One of the reasons for the differences in life expectancy is, as it’s widely recognised, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians struggle to access mainstream health care. Financial and geographic obstacles, as well as personal and cultural barriers, communication and language difficulties and even institutionalised racism, mean Indigenous Australians are less likely to access the health care they need, when they most need it. (Reconciliation Australia 2010, p.4)
It’s wrong to say Indigenous people receive special treatment under the health system. As Reconciliation Australia states, targeted solutions are necessary to overcome the unique problems that confront Indigenous Australians. Specialist services are not a privilege but are a basic necessity until the health and life expectancy levels of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are equal.

In its *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Audit Report 2012: Progress to Date and Challenges that Remain*, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) stated:

“The health inequalities that have been experienced by Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders over many decades are a national shame, and redressing them should be a matter of the highest national priority … The health needs of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are significantly greater than those of other Australians … changing this requires primary health care that is funded at a level, and focused in a way, that is commensurate with this differential burden of poor health.”

(AMA 2012, Introduction, p.3)
You must be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent to use the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services.

The Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) do not discriminate against people in need of health or dental services.

As non-profit organisations which rely on government funding, ACCHSs are required to comply with the grant conditions set down by the funding bodies.

In all cases, these conditions specify that the funds are to provide services to Aboriginal people and ACCHSs are required to provide Aboriginal-specific data to justify ongoing funding.

ACCHSs can operate as ‘one stop shops’ for clients displaying complex presentations that touch on many areas of their lives – not just their physical health. They connect their clients to services that may operate outside the health sector, and in so doing, break down artificial walls between a health condition per se, and the health impacts of poverty, poor housing, or a lack of cultural support.

(Holland 2014, p. 11)
The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 makes racial discrimination unlawful in Australia. In addition to providing widespread legal protection from discrimination, the Act also includes special measures to assist or protect disadvantaged racial groups.

The Act recognises that some groups do not enjoy human rights equal with others, and allows for special measures to assist these groups. Such measures are an exception to the general rule that ‘all racial groups must be treated the same’. (NSW Rural Doctors Network and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council 2010, p. 29)

That’s why ACCHSs specifically target and promote their services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who, for various reasons as outlined in the previous chapter, aren’t able to access mainstream health services.

ACCHSs exist to address the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and work to provide much-needed specialist health services. However, you do not have to be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent to access services provided through the ACCHSs.
Aboriginal legal services are a special privilege not available to non-Aboriginal Australians.

Among the myths around ‘special government privileges’ that are available to Indigenous Australians, is the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are able to access cheap or free legal advice and representation, that is not available to other Australians.

As outlined in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2011 Report*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in the criminal justice system, as both young people and adults. The early involvement of young people in the criminal justice system puts them at much higher risk of further involvement as adults. (SCRGSP 2011, Overview, p.31)

The report also highlights that poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, having a parent previously or currently in custody, and lack of access to social services are linked with high crime rates and high rates of imprisonment. (SCRGSP 2011, Overview, p.30)

**Imprison rates:**

- Indigenous imprisonment rates increased by 52 per cent between 2000 and 2010 (SCRGSP 2011, Section 4.12, p.4.132)

- Between 2000 and 2010, the imprisonment rate increased by 59 per cent for Indigenous women and by 35 per cent for Indigenous men (SCRGSP 2011, Section 4.12, p.4.130)

- In 2006, after adjusting for age differences, Indigenous people were 14 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be imprisoned (compared with 10 times more likely in 2000) (SCRGSP 2011, Section 4.12, p. 4.130)
• At 30 June 2005, Indigenous juveniles were 23 times more likely to be detained than non-Indigenous juveniles. From 2001 to 2008, the difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous juvenile detention rates increased from 318 to 420 juveniles per 10,000, before falling sharply to 365 juveniles per 10,000 in 2009. (SCRGSP 2011, Overview, p. 31)

One in four people in the prison system today is an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander – even though they comprise only one in 33 of the total population. The incidence of mental health conditions and substance abuse problems among the prison population is apparent. A 2009 survey of New South Wales prisoners found that 55% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and 64% of women reported an association between drug use and their offence. In the same sample group, 55% of men and 48% of women self-reported mental health conditions. In an even more recent Queensland study, at least one mental health condition was detected in 73% of male and 86% of female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners; with 12% of males and 32% of females diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. (Holland 2014, p. 35)

To help address this critical need in the community, Aboriginal legal services (or their equivalents) have been established in all states and territories of Australia.

These organisations exist to deliver culturally sensitive, equitable and accessible legal aid for Aboriginal Australians.
Aboriginal legal services are a special privilege not available to non-Aboriginal Australians.

In the current environment, such programs are essential to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to exercise their legal rights as Australian citizens. *(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS), n.d., para. 1)*

In a similar way, Legal Aid services (or their equivalents) exist in all states and territories of Australia to ensure financial and other barriers do not preclude Australians from fair and equitable protection of their rights and interests under the law.

**Aboriginal legal services are not a privilege. Services provided to Aboriginal people by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service address a critical need, and allow them to exercise their legal rights as Australian citizens.**

**Indigenous Legal Aid and Policy Reform Program**


It ensures Indigenous Australians can fully exercise their legal rights as Australian citizens.

The program also funds law reform, policy development and community legal education activities that advance the legal rights of Indigenous Australians.

The range of legal assistances services provided include:

- information, initial legal advice, minor assistance and referral
- duty lawyer assistance
- legal casework services for criminal, civil and family law matters.

*(Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department 2013)*
Aboriginal people get a free car or shiny new bike from the Government.

As discussed in *Rebutting the Myths*, one of the more absurd, and yet, one of the most persistent myths about Aboriginal people is that they can purchase a motor vehicle, fail to make further repayments, and the “Government” will then meet all ongoing costs.

There are many variations of this myth, including the following:

- Aboriginal families receive a new car without the need for any contribution at all towards the costs
- Aboriginal people pay the first one or two payments under hire purchase agreements and “the Government” meets all remaining costs
- Aboriginal children are alleged to receive a “shiny, new bicycle” at “the Government’s” expense.

No, Aboriginal people do not get a new car, new bike or any other gifts from “the Government”. There is not, and has never been, a government program that distributes free houses or cars to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

There are no government departments, policies or strategies that involve the distribution of any consumer goods, free of charge, to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (see *Rebutting the Myths*, 1992, p. 16).

While the origins of such myths are unclear, it’s interesting to note the Refugee Council of Australia highlights a number of similar - and equally untrue – myths about privileges for refugees in Australia. These fictitious reports suggest asylum seekers are given special obligation-free social security payments or higher allowances, a job, a credit card and/or free housing and accommodation (Refugee Council of Australia 2012).
Aboriginal people have a problem with alcohol abuse.

Myths abound that Aboriginal people drink alcohol too much, drink to excess more than non-Aboriginal people, or are somehow less able to cope with the effects of alcohol consumption than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

The dangers of alcohol abuse are well known. As the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2011 Report outlines,

“Excessive alcohol consumption has both health and social consequences. It increases the risk of heart, stroke and vascular diseases, liver cirrhosis and several types of cancers. It also contributes to disability and death through accidents, violence, suicide and homicide. In the case of pregnant women, excessive alcohol consumption can affect the health of newborn infants.”

(Overview, p. 67)

The Report indicates that Aboriginal people do not have a greater issue with long-term alcohol abuse than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Between 2002 and 2008, for Indigenous people aged 15 years and over:

• the proportion who reported that they did not drink or had never drunk alcohol decreased from 31 to 27 per cent
• there was no change in the proportions who reported drinking at chronic risky/high risk levels (17 per cent) or binge drinking in the two weeks prior to interview (37 per cent).
A 2004-05 survey found that a lower proportion of Indigenous than non-Indigenous adults had consumed alcohol in the week prior to interview (53 per cent compared with 36 per cent). Among those who drank alcohol, rates of risky to high risk drinking were similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. (SCRGSP 2011, Overview p. 67)

However, when alcohol consumption by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is combined with endemic problems, such as difficulty accessing mainstream healthcare services or greater risk of exposure to violence and imprisonment, it shows Indigenous Australians are at a distinct disadvantage.

According to the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE):

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to abstain from alcohol than other Australians. In 2008, 29% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not drink in the previous 12 months compared to 15% of non-Indigenous Australians. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more likely than non-indigenous Australians to binge drink (17% and 8% respectively) and are also more likely to experience disproportionately higher rates of alcohol-attributable health and social problems compared to other Australians. (FARE 2011)
Aboriginal people have a problem with alcohol abuse.

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2011 Report also states:

- Indigenous people were hospitalised for alcohol related conditions at rates between 1.5 and 8 times those of other people in 2008-09.
- 71 per cent of Indigenous homicides over the period 1999-2000 to 2008-09 involved both the victim and offender having consumed alcohol at the time of the offence, compared with 25 per cent of non-Indigenous homicides.

(SCRGSP 2011, Overview, p. 67)

As far back as 1991, Associate Professor Wayne Hall and Dr Randolph Spargo published research that found no evidence that Aboriginal people are biologically less able to handle alcohol.

(Rebutting the Myths 1992)

Aboriginal Australians do not consume alcohol at much greater rates than non-Aboriginal Australians; though Indigenous people who do drink, tend to do so in more dangerous quantities than non-Indigenous Australians.

Problems linked to alcohol consumption tend to arise from other socio-economic factors that impact upon Aboriginal people.

“The popular belief that Indigenous people are genetically unable to tolerate alcohol because they did not drink until European settlement is another myth. Indigenous people have long fermented drinks into alcohol from a range of sources such as the sap of some gum trees, bauhinia flowers and wild honey, banksia cones, pandanus plants and in the Torres Strait, the juice of coconut tree buds.”

(Reconciliation Australia 2013)
Aboriginal people are just out for a “big land grab”.

Aboriginal people have a strong connection with the land. ‘Country’ is important to the cultures, spirituality and history of Aboriginal people.

Since the inception of Aboriginal Land Rights Acts in most states and territories, and the Commonwealth Native Title Act, 1993, many non-Aboriginal Australians have been concerned about the implications for their properties, ranging from farms to household blocks. Many mistakenly believe that any Aboriginal person can lay claim to their suburban housing plots.

First, it’s important to be clear on the distinction between native title and land rights – while the terms are often used interchangeably, they are not one and the same. As the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department explains:

“There are fundamental differences between land rights and native title. Land rights are rights created by the Australian, state or territory governments. Land rights usually comprise of a grant of freehold or perpetual lease title to Indigenous Australians.

By contrast, native title arises as a result of the recognition, under Australian common law, of pre-existing Indigenous rights and interests according to traditional laws and customs. Native title is not a grant or right created by governments.”

(Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department 2014)

In 1992, a landmark decision by the High Court of Australia effected the first recognition of native title. The Mabo case recognised the native title rights of the Meriam people to the lands of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait. Key to this decision was the rejection by the Court of the notion that Australia was ‘terra nullius’ at the time of British settlement; that is, land defined under International Law as belonging to no one.
As explained further in Managing Crown Land fact sheets, Native Title and Native Title Extinction (2013):

Native Title describes the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in land and waters, according to their traditional laws and customs. Native Title may exist in areas where it has not been extinguished (removed) by an act of government. It will apply to Crown land but not to freehold land ...

Native title may exist in areas such as:
- vacant (or unallocated) Crown land
- forests and beaches
- national parks and public reserves
- some types of pastoral leases
- land held by government agencies
- land held for Aboriginal communities
- any other public or Crown lands
- oceans, seas, reefs, lakes, rivers, creeks, swamps and other waters that are not privately owned.

However Native Title can be extinguished or impaired when holders of native title are not able to fully exercise their traditional rights in an area. Most loss or impairment of native title is a result of government action in granting interests in Crown land in ways that exclude Indigenous people from having co-existent rights to the land or waters ... The grant of a freehold estate before 23 December 1996 will extinguish native title.

It should be noted that at this time, lodging a Native Title claim is a lengthy and complicated process. It can take years of research by claimants in order to be able to provide the required evidence to prove a native title claim; and as outlined in the Australian Human Rights Commission’s Social Justice and Native Title Report 2013, as at 30 June 2013, the average length of time for resolution of applications was 12 years and 11 months.

(State Government of Victoria Department of Environment and Primary Industries, 2008)
Because of poor record-keeping, or the loss or destruction of government records from the time, it remains unknown exactly how many children were taken from their homes. However Reconciliation Australia states,

“The 1997 Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, found that between 1 in 10 and 3 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the years 1910 to 1970.”

Members of these so-called “Stolen Generations” have experienced serious and lasting pain and suffering as a result of being forcibly removed from their families. Reports of deep feelings of insecurity, loss of identity, depression and substance abuse are common.

“For many of the children, removal meant that they lost all connection to family, traditional land, culture and language and were taken to homes and institutions where they were often abused, neglected and unloved.”

(Reconciliation Australia 2008)

In many cases, these children were put to work, often working long hours and in terrible conditions. Their wages were withheld to — allegedly — pay for local infrastructure projects and welfare programs that, in most cases, never materialised.
Therefore, the concept of compensation for the forced removal of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children from their homes is an issue that needs to be looked at from two angles:

• compensation for the sadness, pain and abuse that the children and the families went through; and

• compensation for the so-called ‘Stolen Wages’ that went into a government trust fund when the children were placed in work situations.

At the moment, there are differing attitudes between the Australian Government and various state/territory governments with regards to the payment of compensation for members of the Stolen Generations and their families:

• The Commonwealth Government has stated that there will be no compensation paid to the Stolen Generations (see Federal Govt ignores UN Stolen Generations request, 2009)

• In October 2006, the Tasmanian Government released a $5 million funding package as part of its reconciliation efforts, making Tasmania the first state to compensate members of the Stolen Generations.

• In a landmark case, Bruce Trevorrow* became the first member of Australia’s Stolen Generations to receive compensation when he sued the South Australian Government for pain and suffering and was awarded $525,000 by the court in August 2007.

• In 2007 the Western Australian government set up the Redress Scheme, offering compensation for the “Forgotten Australians” which included members of the Stolen Generations.

• In June 2011 Neville Austin became the first victim of the Stolen Generations in Victoria to gain compensation.

* Bruce Trevorrow

The excerpt below, from The Age newspaper article Stolen generation payouts (2 August 2007), outlines the first successful compensation case for a member of the Stolen Generations.

“A decade after the “Bringing Them Home Report” raised the plight of the “Stolen” Aboriginal children to national importance the South Australian Supreme Court has become the first to accept it as a basis for legal compensation.
In a landmark case before Justice Grey the court found that Bruce Trevorrow, 50, was treated unlawfully and falsely imprisoned when he was removed from his mother’s care and handed over to a white family in 1957, aged 13 months...

... Bruce Trevorrow was separated from his mother in December 1957 when he was admitted to the Adelaide Children’s Hospital suffering from gastroenteritis. More than six months later, his mother wrote to the state’s Aboriginal Protection Board, which had fostered him out, asking when she could have her son back. “I am writing to ask if you would let me know how my baby Bruce is and how long before I can have him home?” she wrote in 1958. “I have not forgot I got a baby in there.”

The court was told that the board lied to her, writing that her son was “making good progress” and that the doctors needed to keep him for treatment ...

... [Mr. Trevorrow] was awarded $450,000 for injuries and losses suffered, and a further $75,000 in damages for unlawful removal and imprisonment.

The SA Government appealed against this decision but lost the appeal in 2010. Mr. Trevorrow passed away in 2008.”

(Chandler, Debelle 2007)

Contrary to popular myths, the long-awaited National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 has not resulted in a large number of claims for compensation by members of the Stolen Generations and their families.

However, and like any other Australian, Aboriginal Australians and their families who have been the victims of “the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss” (Rudd 2008), deserve adequate recognition and — if so determined — compensation.
A note from the author, Val Dahlstrom

In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered an apology to the members of the Stolen Generation. The text of that Apology is included later in this publication.

The Apology was a long time coming and a huge achievement and I guess, basically, we all thought that everything would be alright.

But things haven’t really changed. Aboriginal people are still disadvantaged by these myths people believe, which is why we still need a publication like Give us a break! to bust some of these myths, and why I’m also still including Chris Graham’s ‘ten sorry excuses’ piece from 2008, to follow.

We still need to understand what some people believe, and why they believe - and maybe, we can just go from there ...

To some Australians, the concept of an apology for past wrongs is (still) unacceptable. They feel, rightly or wrongly, that what happened in the past is not their responsibility and they shouldn’t be apologising for it.

Yet, to have any kind of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia, we need to accept our past. Through acceptance, we can go (and I’ll misquote Star Trek here) “where no Australian has gone before”. That is, the beginning of an Australia where equality and forgiveness are a way of life, an Australia where we treat each other as equals, a place in which we want our children and loved ones to grow up.

Mythbusters: ten sorry excuses exploded

The excerpt below comes from Mythbusters: ten sorry excuses exploded an article written by Chris Graham, Editor of The National Indigenous Times.

The original story was written on Friday 1 February 2008 prior to the official apology to the Stolen Generations by the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.

However the article provides a unique viewpoint on some of the common beliefs people have had, or may continue to have, about apologising to members of the Stolen Generations.

Through this discussion we acknowledge and learn from this unacceptable piece of our history.
Here’s a little ... guide to exploding 10 of the more virulent myths surrounding a national apology to members of the Stolen Generation.

It was done by a previous generation
Not correct. Of all the Stolen Generation myths, this is the biggest. If it were “previous generations”, then surely there’d be no-one left to apologise to? The facts are that the removal of Aboriginal children continued well into the 1960s and the early 1970s.

Saying “Sorry” won’t deliver better results in health, housing or education
Here’s a surprising revelation...saying sorry is not supposed to deliver health, housing or education. Equally, saying sorry won’t prevent governments from delivering health, education or housing. [The] fundamental flaw [of this particular objection] is that it relies on the premise that Australia’s so backward as a nation we can’t deliver practical outcomes while simultaneously delivering symbolic gestures.

I will not be made to feel guilt and shame for something I didn’t do
In the case of younger Australians who were not alive during the removal practices, the word “Sorry” does not have to be an expression of shame or guilt. It can be an expression of empathy. Personally I was born in 1972 when government started to abandon the removal policies. I don’t feel shame at my personal actions, but I do feel shame at the actions of my country. As for older Australians, many claim “I had nothing to do with it”. Well, that’s part of the problem - bad things happen when good
people stay silent. The point is not that older Australians participated in the removal process, but that they did nothing to stop it.

**Some Aboriginal leaders have said that an apology is not important**

Sure, but almost every one of them are not members of the Stolen Generations. Their views on whether or not an apology is warranted are no more or less relevant than your or my view... because none of us are victims.

**Aboriginal people can’t even agree on an apology**

Wow, Aboriginal people have this amazing thing called “independent thought”. The facts are that some members of the Stolen Generation don’t want an apology. That’s their right. But the overwhelming majority do. That’s also their right.

**It costs us …**

Contrary to popular opinion, a national apology will have no legal effect on the capacity of members of the Stolen Generation to seek compensation. As a nation, an apology costs us nothing. Period.

**It won’t affect white Australia, so why worry?**

The removal practice AND the use of this issue... as a race wedge is a stain on white Australia’s recent past. Just as Aboriginal people need an apology to move on, white Australia needs to apologise to move on.

**Saying sorry won’t change the past**

Sadly, it won’t. But it will have a massive impact on the future and that’s the whole point. A real apology will mean an enormous amount to Aboriginal people.
On 13 February 2008, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, offered an apology to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, especially the Stolen Generations, saying in part...

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry ...

... We today take the first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

(Rudd, MP, 2008)


Give us a break!
Give us a break!