



Australian Indigenous youth's participation in sport and associated health outcomes: Empirical analysis and implications



Bronwen Dalton^{a,*}, Rachel Wilson^b, John Robert Evans^b, Steve Cochrane^a

^a University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

^b University of Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of the 2012 Mission Australia Youth Survey (MAYS) finds that among Indigenous youth aged 15–19 years there is a positive relationship between self-reported participation in sport and two health outcomes: rating of overall health and risk of mental health disorder. We find that Indigenous youth who participate in sport are 3.5 times more likely to report good general health and 1.6 times more likely to have no probable serious mental illness. The significance of these findings is discussed in relation to potential future research and policy. In terms of research, the analysis illustrates the utility of brief and cost-effective measures of health outcomes that could be used in future evaluations of specific programs targeting Indigenous youth participation in sport. We also discuss the potential ramifications, for practitioners and management professionals, of the particular policy paths needed to address the current gaps in service delivery to Indigenous communities, and for the development of grassroots, evidence-based, well resourced, culturally sensitive, inclusive and community-led programs. This can, in part, be achieved by ensuring youth sport development programs are shaped by Indigenous youth themselves.

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1. Introduction

In September 2012 the Commonwealth Government's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs released a press release requesting submissions to: "inquire into and report on the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring" ([House of Representatives Standing Committee on ATSI Affairs, 2012](#), p. 1). More specifically the committee was interested in understanding: how sporting bodies can increase opportunities for Indigenous participation, including for Indigenous women; how non-government organizations can use sport as a vehicle to improve outcomes for Indigenous people, and; how Indigenous sporting programs, as supplied by the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 295145756.

E-mail address: bronwen.dalton@uts.edu.au (B. Dalton).

sporting codes, the private and NGO sectors, and federal government assistance programs contribute to Closing the Gap targets.¹

After 10 months of consultation and 58 submissions, the resultant report *Sport: More than just a Game* was released in June 2013. This report lays out 11 recommendations, among them: to promote sport as a vehicle to Close the Gap by:

Recommendation 1 – Framework for sport programs and Close the Gap outcomes

The Committee recommends the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, in consultation with the Minister for Sport, develop an overarching framework of service delivery and evaluation for Commonwealth agencies which fund sport programs to clearly identify outcomes that align with Close the Gap targets ([House of Representatives Standing Committee on ATSI Affairs, 2013](#), p. xiii).

The Closing the Gap targets reflect a range of outcomes which are dependent upon improving the health of Indigenous Australians. In this context, sport is seen as a potential lever in lifting the overall health status of Indigenous communities. Two interlocking approaches to the promotion of sport hold potential here: firstly programs which identify, support and promote Indigenous elite talent in sport and secondly, programs promoting grassroots participation in sport. In this study we focus on the latter, grassroots sports participation, and address a second recommendation “to promote participation in sport among Indigenous Australians through a range of strategies” including conducting “a comprehensive project to measure and compare the range of outcomes across gender and age from Indigenous participation in sport and cultural activities” ([House of Representatives Standing Committee on ATSI Affairs, 2013](#), p. xiv).

In response to the report and the above recommendations this paper seeks to provide some evidence on the relationship between participation in sport and indicators of health in an already available data set. The Mission Australia Youth Survey is an important, national, annual survey of youth values, concerns and social participation ([Hampshire & Di Nicola, 2011](#); [Mission Australia, 2012b](#)). The survey questionnaire also collects data on demographic and personal background information and on self-reported general health and mental health. Sport participation is operationalized in the survey by the question: “In the past year, have you been involved in ...sports (as a participant)?”; thus in this study we refer to grassroots sport as any sport within a community in which a youth may have been involved.

Among the 2012 participants in the survey ($N = 15,351$) 4.2% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ($n = 645$). This sample enables examination of the relationship between reported participation in sport and self-reported general health (formatted from the ABS General Social Survey) and risk of mental health disorder (the ‘Kessler 6’ screener). Analysis of this data enables an empirical exploration of the relationship between sport and the general health and wellbeing outcomes in this youth population. The significance of these findings is discussed in relation to potential future research and current policy, particularly in relations to the challenges of overcoming the current gaps in service delivery to Indigenous communities and barriers to sport participation and how these might be addressed through culturally appropriate and evidence informed approaches.

In this paper we examine literature on the role of sport and its relationship to health outcomes in Indigenous communities, before presenting logistic regression analyses of the MAYS data to address the following research questions:

1. What is the association between self-reported participation in sport and self-reported general health status in young (15–19-year-old) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander² people?
2. What is the association between self-reported participation in sport and risk factors for non-specific psychological distress for young (15–19-year-old) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Implications of our findings are then discussed in relation to sports management programs and policy, in particular how programs and policies might address the current gaps in service delivery to Indigenous communities through culturally appropriate, collaborative and evidence informed approaches.

2. The role of sport

Sport and recreational activities were established as pedagogical and life learning endeavors for Indigenous communities prior to colonization and the introduction of Anglo/Celtic games ([Edwards, 1999, 2009](#); [Maynard, 2011](#); [Whimpress, 1999](#)).

¹ In 2008 COAG set specific and ambitious targets for Closing the Gap:

- To close the life-expectancy gap within a generation.
- To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.
- To ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities within five years.
- To halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade.
- To halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 achievement by 2020.
- To halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

² In the Mission Australia Youth Survey participants identified as *Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander* by answering ‘yes’ (as opposed to ‘no’ or ‘prefer not to answer’) when asked whether they identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander. For this reason we use the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous when referring to the findings of this survey.

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