



# Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Program

## Program Goal:

**To develop a detailed understanding of the social determinants of Aboriginal health and of the interventions that are effective in improving health status through action on social determinants.**

## Program Overview

Social determinants of health are the economic, physical and social conditions that influence the health of individuals, communities and jurisdictions as a whole. They include housing, education, social networks and connections, physical infrastructure, connection with land, racism, employment, and law enforcement and the legal and custodial system. Improvements in the social and economic determinants of health produce significant gains in life expectancy and in the quality of life. Clean water, sanitation, education, meaningful employment, good nutrition, appropriate housing, control over life circumstances, supportive communities and networks, peace and freedom from discrimination and racism all make significant contributions to keeping people and their communities healthy.

While the CRAH is founded on the belief that these social determinants are fundamental to Aboriginal health, developing a research agenda for this program of work has been a challenge. Unlike most of the CRAH programs, where the key stakeholder groups are within the health sector, this program requires a major focus on stakeholders outside the traditional health sector to work in collaboration with the traditional health sector.

## Research Priorities

A workshop on the social determinants of Aboriginal health held in 2004 and an industry roundtable in June 2006 have contributed to the development of the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Program. The priorities, and areas for further activity identified through these, were:

- building awareness of the social determinants of Aboriginal health;
- racism and its impact on health outcomes;
- housing and the physical environment;
- education, employment and childhood;
- law and justice; and
- culture and land.



Photograph by Wayne Quilliam Photography

**Research Projects Relevant to Area of Priority / Research Focus**

<b>Research focus areas</b>	<b>Project number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Project Leader</b>	<b>Potential outcomes/lessons</b>
Better understanding of the social determinants of Aboriginal health	128	Course and textbook on the social determinants of Indigenous health: B. Carson <i>et al.</i> (eds) 2007, <i>Social Determinants of Indigenous Health</i> , Allen & Unwin, Sydney	Ross Bailie, Menzies School of Health Research	This ground-breaking book provides a systematic overview of the relationship between the social and political environment and health from a number of highly respected authors around Australia. It explores a number of issues that impact upon Indigenous health, including dispossession, racism, poverty, class, education and housing. It is being taken up as an academic resource in health courses within many Australian health education and research institutions.
	8.1	Workshop and publication on the social determinants of Indigenous health: I. Anderson <i>et al.</i> (eds) 2007, <i>Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health</i> , CRCAH, Darwin	Fran Baum, Flinders University	This advanced text explores in depth a range of social determinants that affect Aboriginal health outcomes (e.g. race, poverty, education).
	162	Housing improvement and child health	Ross Bailie, Menzies School of Health Research	This project is the largest and most comprehensive study to date on the impact of housing programs on the health of young children in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. It will have important implications for community housing programs.
	13	Socioeconomic and environmental determinants of health in Indigenous communities in the NT (SEEDH)	Ross Bailie and Matt Stevens, Menzies School of Health Research	This project is drawing together a wide range of available indicators—including social, economic, physical and environmental, and health system access and utilisation—into a single body of work for use in prioritising policy development and program initiation, and to focus effort on the most important underlying determinants of health. A discussion paper, <i>A Longitudinal Data Resource on Key Influences on Health in the Northern Territory: Opportunities and Obstacles</i> , has been published and is available from the CRCAH website. The main finding to date is the significant limitation of current routine data sources for providing information on the social determinants of health. There also needs to be high-level commitment to improving information systems.
	225	Utility stress (water, power, etc.) as a social determinant of health	Eileen Willis, Flinders University	This was a scoping project undertaken in 2007 to develop research partnerships to examine the impact of the rising cost of public utilities on socioeconomic status and subsequent health status of Aboriginal people, and includes a literature review. This project builds upon a body of work undertaken by Flinders University around issues of access and equity relating to water supply and charges for Indigenous communities in SA.
	245	Stock-take and gap analysis of Indigenous drug prevention research	Russell Renhard, La Trobe University and The University of Melbourne	The Victorian Premier's Drug Prevention Council commissioned a stock-take of drug prevention research as it applies to the Victorian Aboriginal (Koori) community. The stock-take will assist the Council in promoting culturally appropriate research that contributes to preventing alcohol and drug-related problems.
	228	<i>International Symposium on the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health</i> , Adelaide, hosted by the CRCAH for the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health in collaboration with Flinders University	Fran Baum, Flinders University	Indigenous views on the social determinants of health fed into the processes of the international Commission for the Social Determinants of Health established by the World Health Organization
	142	Compositional and contextual determinants of urban health inequities: An Indigenous perspective	Fran Baum and Gilbert Gallaher, Flinders University	A comprehensive 3-year project focusing on neighbourhood life, social capital, experiences of racism and health for urban Indigenous people living in Adelaide. The project explored peoples' perceptions of the social, physical and service/amenities within their neighbourhoods; their degree of participation in groups and informal networks; levels of trust and access to help and assistance. It also explored experiences of racism and how Indigenous people respond to these experiences including the health impacts of racism. The aim of the project is to ensure that research findings will be used to inform the work of government and non-government agencies that are in a position to make changes leading to improved health for Aboriginal people.

## Research Projects Relevant to Area of Priority / Research Focus

Research focus areas	Project number	Title	Project Leader	Potential outcomes / lessons
Better understanding of the social determinants of Aboriginal health (continued)	266	Racism and Indigenous health: Setting the research agenda	Yin Paradies, The University of Melbourne	A symposium attended by national and international participants was held in Melbourne in November 2007 to set an agenda for research on racism and health in Australia and New Zealand. Racism is a significant contributor to the poor state of Indigenous health, yet very little research has been done in this area. Professor David Williams from Harvard University also attended the symposium, and highlighted the importance of fostering research on racism and health across a range of national settings. A discussion paper entitled <i>The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda</i> has been published by the CRAH.
	224	Analysis of representation of Indigenous Australians in mainstream print media—An exploration centred on the social determinants of health	Jessica Roberts (Student Project), La Trobe University	This project found a lack of focus on health in articles in the print media relating to Indigenous Australians (articles in <i>The Age</i> , <i>The Australian</i> and the <i>Herald Sun</i> in Victoria, from April to June 2007). However, about one-third of all articles examined did refer to at least one social determinant of health, such as education, life expectancy and housing. Additionally, of the articles containing information relating to the social determinants of health, almost half did not demonstrate from where they had derived their information.
Interventions that meet the values and needs of Aboriginal Australians and lead to downstream improvements in Aboriginal health	184	Aboriginal people travelling well—Exploring barriers to safe and sufficient transport for Aboriginal people in South Australia, and working toward solutions	Yvonne Helps, Flinders University	This project, funded by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, highlights the benefits of engaging stakeholders in research processes. A series of forums, along with focus groups, case studies and interviews, brought together representatives from Aboriginal organisations and government agencies to explore the barriers to safe transport in the Far West Coast region of SA. The broad range of stakeholders involved in this project has already produced several benefits through the development of new linkages, and lobbying to address one of the key issues identified—barriers to obtaining a driver's licence and the consequences of not having one—which it is hoped will result in improvements being made.
	268	Industry roundtable on Aboriginal prisoner health	CRAH	Identification of priority needs for evidence from policy makers, justice, prison administrators, prisoner support and prisoner advocacy groups.
	182	Handwashing campaign	Nicola Slavin, NT Dept of Health & Community Services	This project involved the development of a social marketing campaign to promote hand washing and was piloted in two remote NT communities. It was based on formative research, and is a good example of the benefits of collaborative work between Federal and Territory governments and researchers. The advertising material produced from this project has been praised internationally, and the project is linked with the International Handwashing Project.
Evidence that can be used by policy makers and service providers for interventions that address the social determinants of Aboriginal health	19	Fluoridation demonstration project—Feasibility and costs of water fluoridation in remote Aboriginal communities	Ross Bailie, Menzies School of Health Research	Water fluoridation is recognised at the national policy level as essential in achieving improvements in oral health outcomes, especially for Indigenous Australians. This project demonstrated that small-scale fluoridation plants can be viable, and recommended that consideration be given to installing water fluoridation units in large remote Indigenous communities with low levels of natural fluoride and high levels of dental caries as a priority. With a relatively small investment, the fluoridation of public water supplies of remote communities and towns should result in significant improvements in the dental health of community residents in the medium to long term, with important flow-on effects to general health ( <a href="http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/7/100">http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/7/100</a> ).

# Understanding the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health

There is widespread recognition that better housing, education and employment are vital to improving Aboriginal health, but there remains a limited understanding of how these social determinants of health intersect, and even less understanding of how to address them effectively.

There has also been little research done on Aboriginal understandings of the social determinants of health.

A large part of the work of the CRAH and its predecessor, the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, has been to help build a knowledge base and awareness of the social determinants of Aboriginal health.

This has included the publication of two major books (see below), and a project designed to give a better understanding of how policy makers, service providers and academics think, talk and make decisions about issues relating to the social determinants of Aboriginal health.

## ***Social Determinants of Indigenous Health***

Edited by Bronwyn Carson, Terry Dunbar, Richard Chenhall and Ross Bailie

Published by Allen & Unwin

This book provides a thorough introduction to the social determinants of Aboriginal health. Designed as a teaching resource, it investigates the factors that impact upon the current state of Aboriginal health, such as poverty, class, community and social capital, education, employment, and housing.

The book scrutinises the social dynamics of making policy for Indigenous Australians and the interrelation between human rights and health. It also outlines a framework for effective health interventions that take social factors into consideration.

Launching the book, CRAH Chairperson Pat Anderson said:

*This book, if read and understood by those who design and implement Aboriginal health policies, will make a difference. A thorough understanding of the complexities of the social determinants of our health would put an end to the situation we've seen all too often in recent years: the development of health policy in the back of a light airplane after ministerial visits to one or other of our remote communities.*

*The challenge to turn around the health of Aboriginal people will take clear thought and real collaboration between governments, and between governments and Aboriginal people ourselves, in dealing with the issues presented in this important book.*

The book arose from a series of lectures and a short course developed jointly by the CRAH, Menzies School of Health Research and Charles Darwin University. It has been adopted as a textbook by a number of leading Australian health education and research institutions.

## ***Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health***

Edited by Ian Anderson, Fran Baum and Michael Bentley

Published by CRAH

This monograph contains a series of papers by more than 50 Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. It presents fresh perspectives on how a range of social and economic factors—including culture, law, education, employment, modes of governance, and social and community interactions—affect the health of Aboriginal Australians. It also suggests fruitful directions for further inquiry into how these factors can be more health promoting.

## For More Information

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