

# **CLOSING THE GAP THROUGH LANGUAGE**

*The Importance of Aboriginal Languages and its Relationship  
to the Socioeconomic Status of Aboriginal People*

**11/4/2013**

**Major Project**

***“Our language is like a pearl inside a shell. The shell is like the people that carry the language. If our language is taken away, then that would be like a pearl that is gone. We would be like an empty oyster shell.”<sup>1</sup>***

***Yurranydjil Dhurrkay,  
Galiwin’ku,  
North East Arnhem Land***

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## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to acknowledge that I am a non-Aboriginal student who has an interest in Aboriginal Studies. This means my perspectives on Aboriginal culture, heritage, identity and language are limited because I have not been exposed to primary experiences of these aspects of Aboriginal life. Due to these limitations, when discussing the importance of these aspects, I will include multiple Aboriginal perspectives along with my own; however I acknowledge that I only speak from an 'outside' perspective looking 'in'. I acknowledge that the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views that I put forward in my project may not be accepted by everyone in the many diverse Aboriginal communities; however this project and its findings are completed with respect for all Aboriginal communities and their cultures.

It is important to acknowledge that because my project looks at the relationship between Aboriginal languages and the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, generalisations have been used to help me theorise about the links between the two concepts. These links are simply my theory as to *how* language *can* influence socioeconomic status. I fully acknowledge that these links are generalisations and may not be the case for many individuals. Even when statistics are shown to support my theory, I acknowledge that the trends shown are not necessarily a representation of everyone's experiences in the particular population.

I must also acknowledge that Aboriginal language is only one of many factors that influence the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people. For the purpose and aim of my project, which is to examine the relationship between Aboriginal language and socioeconomic status, I am solely focusing on this relationship. I am not stating that this is the only factor which influences socioeconomic status, nor the most influential. My project will target this one factor in detail, rather than a broad description of a range of factors.

## **Introduction**

Aboriginal language is the heartbeat for all Aboriginal cultures. It is the essential medium that is used to orally express, promote and pass on vital aspects of Aboriginal culture such as heritage, identity, kinship, Country, and Dreaming stories. Unfortunately, across Australia, Aboriginal languages have suffered severely from previous Government policies and less than one fifth of the approximate 250 Aboriginal languages that were spoken before 1788 are being passed on to the next generation. The significant deterioration of Aboriginal languages has detrimentally impacted on the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people. This is because the absence of an Aboriginal language in an Aboriginal community means that those in the community are bereft of the medium used to express their culture. As a consequence, community members may lack the ability to experience and utilise the psychological, economic, health and lifestyle benefits that Aboriginal culture can promote. The ramifications of a lack of cultural connection are extremely significant, because a deficiency of these cultural benefits can adversely impact on every indicator of socioeconomic status. If a whole Aboriginal community has succumbed to disconnection from their Aboriginal language and culture, then it also consequently impacts on the community's ability to achieve social justice within the wider Australian society. It is for this reason that Aboriginal language revival is so important.

To holistically understand how and to what extent the revival of Aboriginal languages can improve the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, the role that Aboriginal languages play in expressing and promoting Aboriginal cultures must firstly be highlighted. The importance of aspects such as heritage, identity, Country and The Dreaming to Aboriginal culture must then be emphasized in order to demonstrate how the psychological and educational benefits of a cultural connection can improve indicators of socioeconomic status. Once the importance of culture and its influence on the indicators of socioeconomic status are clearly visible, then the relationship between Aboriginal language and socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people will become evident.

After establishing the relationship between Aboriginal language and the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, the final stage in the process will be to emphasise the magnitude of the importance that this relationship can have on Aboriginal people and their communities. As this report will highlight, recognition of the potential impact that the revival of Aboriginal language can have on Aboriginal people will be crucial when aiming to strengthen Aboriginal communities and improve their socioeconomic status. Failure to acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal language will allow a continuation of poor socioeconomic outcomes that are reflected in many Aboriginal communities today. If, however, the importance of language is recognised, and the appropriate language and cultural regeneration programs are implemented, then there will be a greater likelihood of 'Closing the Gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal socioeconomic outcomes.

# Part 1: The Process of Closing the Gap

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## **Closing the Gap**

‘Closing the Gap’ is the process of reducing the difference between the socioeconomic outcomes of Aboriginal and Non-Indigenous Australians. This process involves the implementation of strategies to target and improve, key indicators of socioeconomic status including life expectancy, child mortality, educational achievement, income, crime and employment levels. The Australian Government has committed to achieving this goal by endorsing the ‘United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ in 2009, and has attempted to fulfil the Declaration’s obligations through the ‘Closing the Gap’ campaign.<sup>2</sup> Consciously or subconsciously however, it is the duty of all Australians to ensure that Aboriginal people achieve social equality: from Federal, State and Local Governments who can provide significant resources and empower communities, through to universities, schools, and charities that can advocate, influence and educate the average Australian individual, to adopt a supportive attitude towards reconciliation and equity. As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma said in 2006 “There is no greater challenge to the Australian values of decency, fairness and egalitarianisms than the inequality in health status between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the non-Indigenous population.”<sup>3</sup>

Health promotional initiatives, including those that attempt to close the gap, should not be solely based upon trends shown in epidemiological studies, such as those conducted by the Australian Government through the 2006 and 2011 Australian Censuses. While studies such as the Census allow for the identification of significant health and economic issues in a population, they do not address the socio-cultural factors that contribute to negative health behaviours and poor socioeconomic outcomes. As such, successful health promotion campaigns must both identify significant issues through epidemiological studies, as well as explain the root socio-cultural factors that are contributing to the issue. This then allows the health promotion campaign to appropriately direct its resources towards the fundamental causes of the issue, which will consequently enhance the likelihood of a successful campaign.

This report will attempt to use this mechanism in order to demonstrate how a reduction in Indigenous disadvantage can be made possible through the revival of Aboriginal languages. Table 1.0 outlines the fundamental steps for a successful health promotion initiative. This report has used the guidelines of the process outlined in Table 1.0 in order to identify one method of closing the socioeconomic gap between Aboriginal and Non-Indigenous Australians.

**Table 1.0 – The process of a successful health promotion campaign**

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify the issue</li></ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obtain data from population</li><li>• Identify trends</li></ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Determine extent of the issue from data</li></ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify socio-cultural causes of the issue</li></ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Devise methods to target the causes, in collaboration with the affected population</li></ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conclude effectiveness of the initiative</li></ul>

In Table 1.0 above, the first few steps in the process of implementing a successful health promotional initiative involve identifying and determining the extent of an issue through data obtained from the affected population. Part Two of this report incorporates epidemiological information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which has been used to determine that the current state of Aboriginal socioeconomic status is significantly lower than that of Non-Indigenous Australians. This is a significant issue because not only does this impact on the everyday experiences of Aboriginal people; it also limits their ability to achieve social justice and equality. Part Two will also provide an overview of the current state of Aboriginal languages, as well as the historical reasons behind the loss of Aboriginal languages.

These two initial steps are extremely important because Part Three of this report, through the examination of the relationship between Aboriginal languages and socioeconomic status will investigate the socio-cultural reasons as to why Aboriginal people are achieving substandard levels of socioeconomic outcomes. Once this link has been outlined, the socio-cultural factors that are contributing to poor socioeconomic outcomes will become clear, and consequently ways in which they can be tackled and reversed should become evident. The final part of this report, Part Four, will assess the importance of language revival in reducing Indigenous disadvantage, and examine how equality can be furthered and social justice achieved in Australia through the revival of Aboriginal languages.

## Part 2: The Current State of Aboriginal Languages and Socioeconomic Status

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### Historical Overview of Aboriginal Language



Awaiting Copyright

*This map<sup>4</sup> represents the language or tribal groups of Aboriginal people across Australia*

Before the colonisation of Australia by the Europeans in 1788, there were approximately 250 thriving and diverse Aboriginal languages, many of which contained different dialects across the Australian continent. Unfortunately due to government policies and actions such as dispersal and dispossession, protectionism and assimilation, the number of Aboriginal languages present in Australia has dramatically declined. While these policies had differing goals and methods of implementation, they all involved the suppression of Aboriginal languages, meaning that whole language groups lost the ability to express their cultural heritage, stories and practices, because they had been deprived of the knowledge and medium which was used in the expression of their cultures. Due to over 200 years of the destruction and suppression of Aboriginal languages, there have been approximately 105 Aboriginal languages and cultures which have become extinct. Today, only 145 languages are still present, 110 of which are critically endangered. According to the National Indigenous Language Survey Report of 2005, there are only 18 languages which are being fully spoken and passed on by all age groups; however four of these are at risk of becoming endangered.<sup>5</sup>

From their arrival in 1788, the Europeans implemented a policy of dispersal and dispossession on the Aboriginal people, which had a significantly detrimental impact on their unique languages and cultures. During this period, smallpox, extermination and the forcible removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands all combined to decimate Aboriginal language groups across New South Wales. In the first three years of European colonisation approximately 80% of Aboriginal people living in the Port Jackson area of Sydney had died due to the effects of smallpox<sup>6</sup>. Slowly, this disease spread up the Darling and Murray Rivers, into language groups of Far Western New South Wales. Aboriginal language groups were decimated in a similar way during the Hawkesbury and Nepean Wars from 1790 to 1816, including incidents such as the Battle of Richmond Hill in which the New South Wales Corps and armed settlers fought with intent to exterminate the local Darug population. In April 1816 Governor Macquarie issued orders that the Aboriginal “natives” should be dispersed “by clearing the country of them entirely, and driving them across the mountains”<sup>7</sup>.

As a consequence of small-pox, extermination and the removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, many Aboriginal language groups and their cultures ceased, or struggled to properly function due to their declining populations. The loss of any Aboriginal group members, be it Elders, adult males, adult women, or children, would have had a devastating impact on that group because each individual would have had specific tribal and social obligations and responsibilities under the classificatory kinship system and moiety groups. The loss of Elders would have resulted in the significant loss of cultural knowledge in the form of Dreaming stories, punishment and ceremonial duties. The loss of adult males and females would have meant that the gender specific roles, obligations and responsibilities could not have been carried out. The combination of these scenarios is how Aboriginal language and cultural groups lost their language, culture and knowledge during the early period of European arrival.

The ethnocentric government policy of protectionism also contributed to the loss of Aboriginal languages and culture, as it involved taking Aboriginal people off their traditional lands and forcing them to live on government missions and reserves. Also included in this policy was the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families in an attempt to give them a ‘civilised white’ education. Auntie \_\_\_\_\_ from Moree stated that “Our language was suppressed, as anyone who lived on missions and reserves were not allowed to speak the language.”<sup>8</sup> Separation from their traditional lands severed the spiritual and cultural links between Aboriginal people and their Country because while in the missions Aboriginal people were forbidden from speaking their traditional languages or performing cultural practices. When speaking about the ‘Menindee Mission’ which operated from 1933 to 1949, \_\_\_\_\_ stated that “the language was lost as they were forbidden to speak it.”<sup>9</sup>

The restrictive nature of the protectionism policy inflicted further damage on Aboriginal language groups and their cultures because by depriving Aboriginal people of the right to use their language and express their culture for a significant time period, most Aboriginal people permanently lost touch with their language and culture. For some, even after leaving the reserves and being reunited with their family, they were unable to culturally communicate with them, as their language had long been forgotten.

This ultimately impacted their group's ability to thrive as an Aboriginal community because cultural practices were not able to be performed, and social and familial obligations and responsibilities were unable to be defined, through the disuse of the language.

The government policy of assimilation furthered this detrimental impact on Aboriginal languages across Australia as it aimed for Aboriginal people to disband their traditional languages and cultures and instead adopt the wider mainstream Australian culture. Under assimilation, Aboriginal people were moved off the reserves as the government tried to integrate them into society by making them 'look, act and think white'<sup>10</sup>. This policy was characterised by the frequent removal of Aboriginal children, who were brought up in church missions or fostered into non-Aboriginal families. These children are now known as the 'Stolen Generations'.

The 'Stolen Generations', under the policy of assimilation, had dire ramifications for Aboriginal languages because whole generations of Aboriginal people were deprived of their traditional languages. This not only affected the generations that were stolen, but it also impacted on their children, who were unable to be taught the language due to it being generational disrupted. If their parents had either never known their traditional language or alternatively had lost touch with it, they would be unable to pass it on to the next generation. Likewise under the protectionism policy, Aboriginal people were discouraged to use their language and perform their cultural practices in preference of absorbing their culture into the wider non-Aboriginal Australian society. This has ultimately contributed to the overall loss of Aboriginal language.

The combination of the policies of dispersal and dispossession, protectionism and assimilation has culminated in the devastation of Aboriginal languages across Australia. As referenced, only 18 of the approximate 250 Aboriginal languages are today being spoken by all age groups and transmitted to the next generation. Many Aboriginal communities are suffering from a lack of cultural connection due to a historical deprivation of their traditional languages. As this report will show, this historical legacy can hinder the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, as well as the community's ability to achieve social justice within the broader Australian society. It is for this reason that language revival and regeneration is so important if we as a nation are to 'close the gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

## Overview of the Current State of Aboriginal Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is the general standard of living of a group of people in comparison to the whole society, usually through reference to indicators such as health, income, employment, education, housing, and contact with the law. In general, Aboriginal people across Australia achieve significantly poorer outcomes in the various indicators of socioeconomic status compared to the wider Australian society. Unfortunately, due to the dynamic nature of the interrelationships between the indicators of socioeconomic status, if one indicator is achieving substandard outcomes, then this can adversely affect other indicators of socioeconomic status. This is known as the 'Cycle of Socioeconomic Disadvantage' and is what Aboriginal communities are currently experiencing across Australia<sup>11</sup>. The section below will attempt to provide an overview of the current outcomes for the indicators of socioeconomic status that Australian Aboriginal people are achieving.

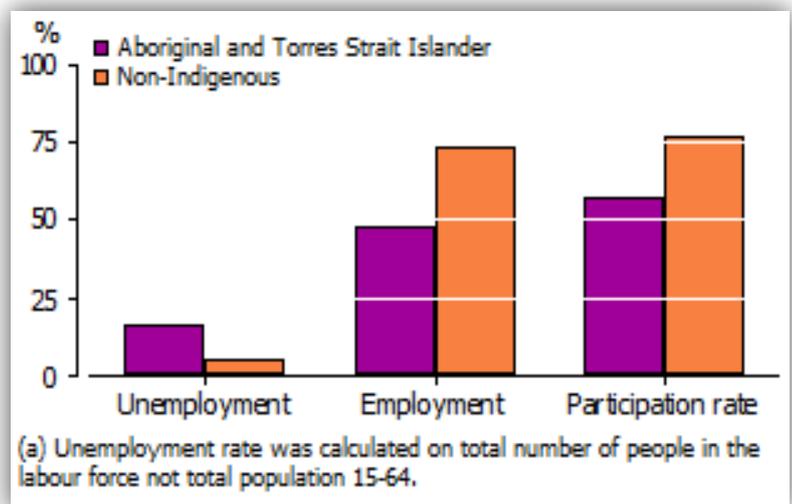
## Employment

**Table 2.0 - Employment Characteristics, Indigenous Persons aged 15-64, Australian 2011 Census**

	Unemployment rate	Employment to population ratio	Participation rate
	%	%	%
<b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</b>	16.4	48.3	57.7
<b>Non-Indigenous</b>	5.0	73.4	77.3
<b>Total</b>	5.2	72.8	76.8

**Graph 2.1 - Employment Characteristics, Indigenous Persons aged 15-64, Australian 2011 Census**

Statistics from the 2011 Census show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience an unemployment level of 16.4% which is significantly higher than the Non-Indigenous and total Australian population by 11.4% and 11.2% respectively. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also recorded a 19.6% lower participation rate in the workforce than the Non-Indigenous.



## Epidemiology

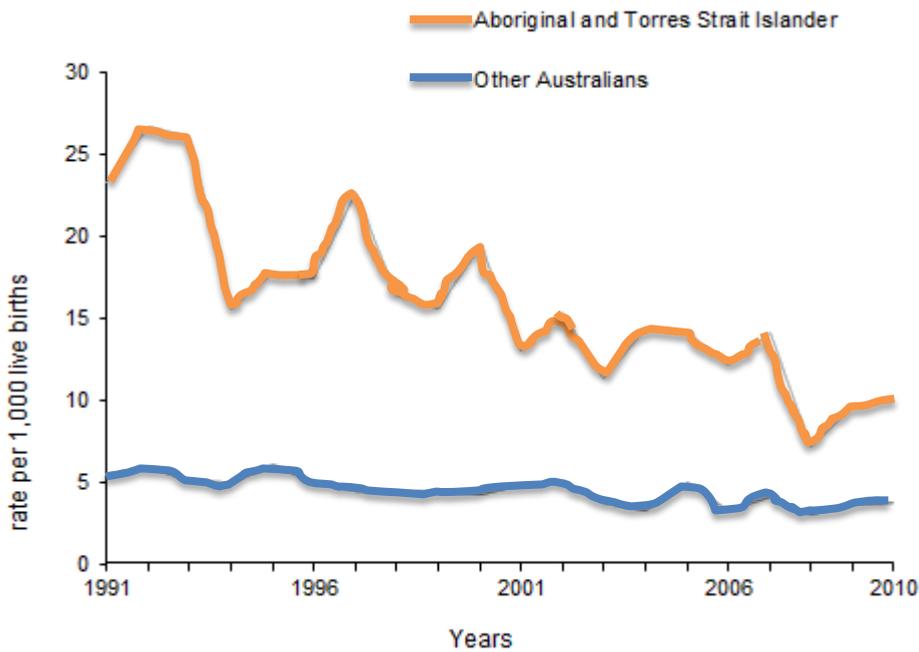
In 2007 the life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous people was approximately one decade for males and females

Table 2.2 - Life Expectancy

Gender	Indigenous	Non Indigenous	Difference
Male	67.2	78.7	11.5 years
Female	72.9	82.6	9.7 years

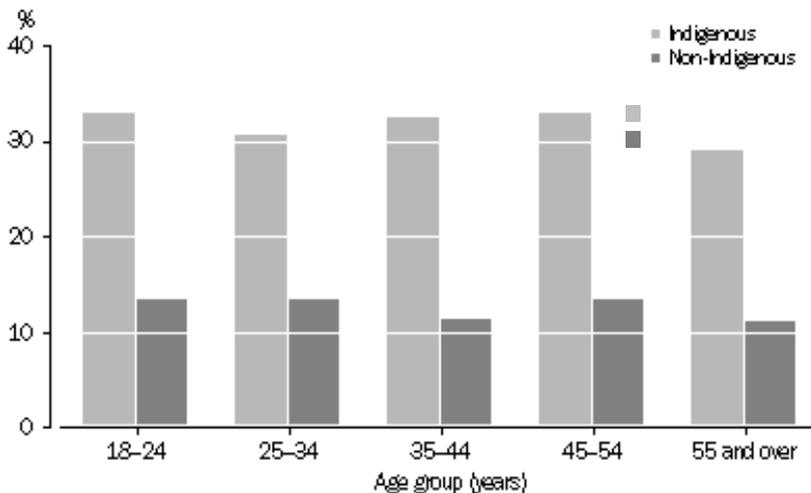
## Infant Mortality

Graph 2.3 - Comparison of Infant Mortality rates from 1991–2010



While this graph from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that from 1991 Aboriginal infant mortality rates have declined, they are still significantly higher than Non-Indigenous infant mortality rates. In 2010 there were approximately 5 Non-Indigenous infant deaths per 1,000 live births compared to over 10 Aboriginal infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

Graph 2.4 - PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS 2008



The 2008 National Health Survey indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years and over were two and a half times more likely than Non-Indigenous people to have experienced high/very high levels of psychological distress.<sup>12</sup>

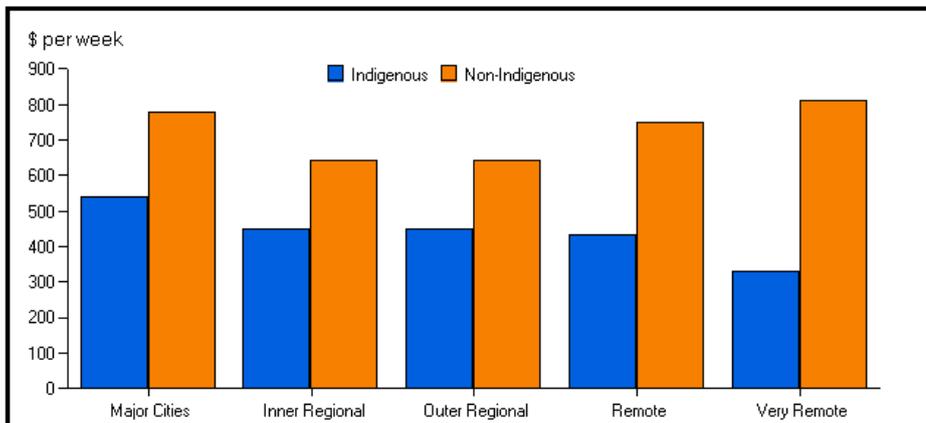
## Income

**Table 2.5 - Mean Equivalised Gross Household Income 2006 Census<sup>13</sup>**

Remoteness	Indigenous (\$)	Non-Indigenous (\$)	Difference (\$)
Major Cities	539	779	240
Inner regional	450	645	195
Outer Regional	448	644	196
Remote	433	752	319
Very Remote	329	812	483

*This statistical information from the 2011 Census shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households experience a significantly lower weekly income, especially in remote and very remote areas where there is a \$319 and \$483 difference between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous incomes respectively. In Menindee, a remote NSW community, Aboriginal people had on average a 27% lower income than non-Aboriginal people in Menindee.*

**Graph 2.6 - Mean Equivalised Gross Household Income 2006 Census**

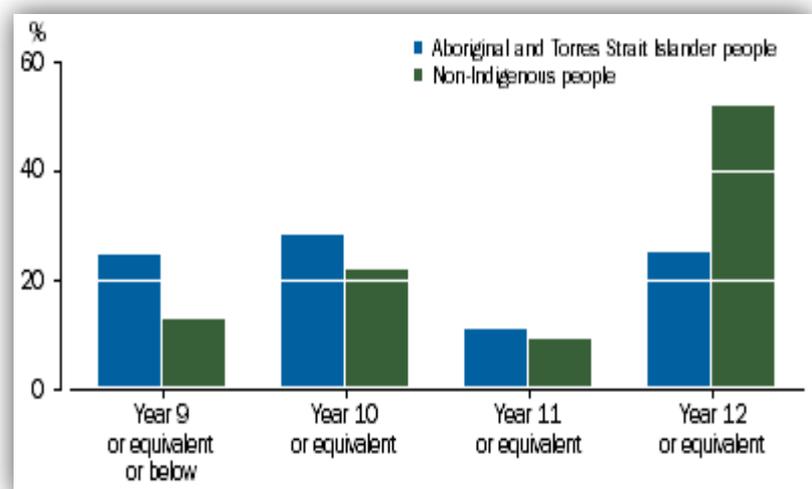


## Education

*According to the 2011 Census, only 25% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over reported Year 12 or equivalent as the highest year of school completed, compared with about half (52%) of non-Indigenous people.*

*In Menindee, a predominant Aboriginal community, only 3% of the population aged 15 and over had a bachelor or higher degree, while 60% of the adults had no form of post school qualification.*

**Graph 2.7 - Highest Year of School Completed 2011**



## Representation in the Criminal Justice System

*This table demonstrates that across Australia, Aboriginal people are over represented in prisons as they are at least 10 times more likely to be incarcerated than Non-Indigenous people, despite making up only 2.5% of the total Australian population. In NSW the Aboriginal population is 2.2% however an Aboriginal person is still 13 times more likely to be incarcerated than a Non-Indigenous person*

**Table 2.8 - Ratio of Indigenous to Non-Indigenous Standardized rates of imprisonment**

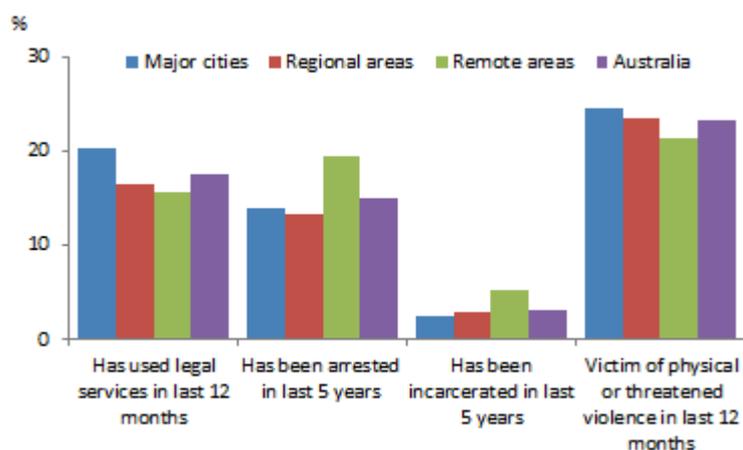
	NSW.	VIC.	QLD.	NT.	WA.	AUS.
<b>2010</b>	13	11.2	11.9	10.5	19.2	14.2

**Table 2.9 - Law and Justice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over, 2008**

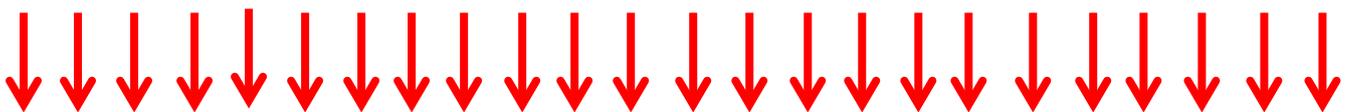
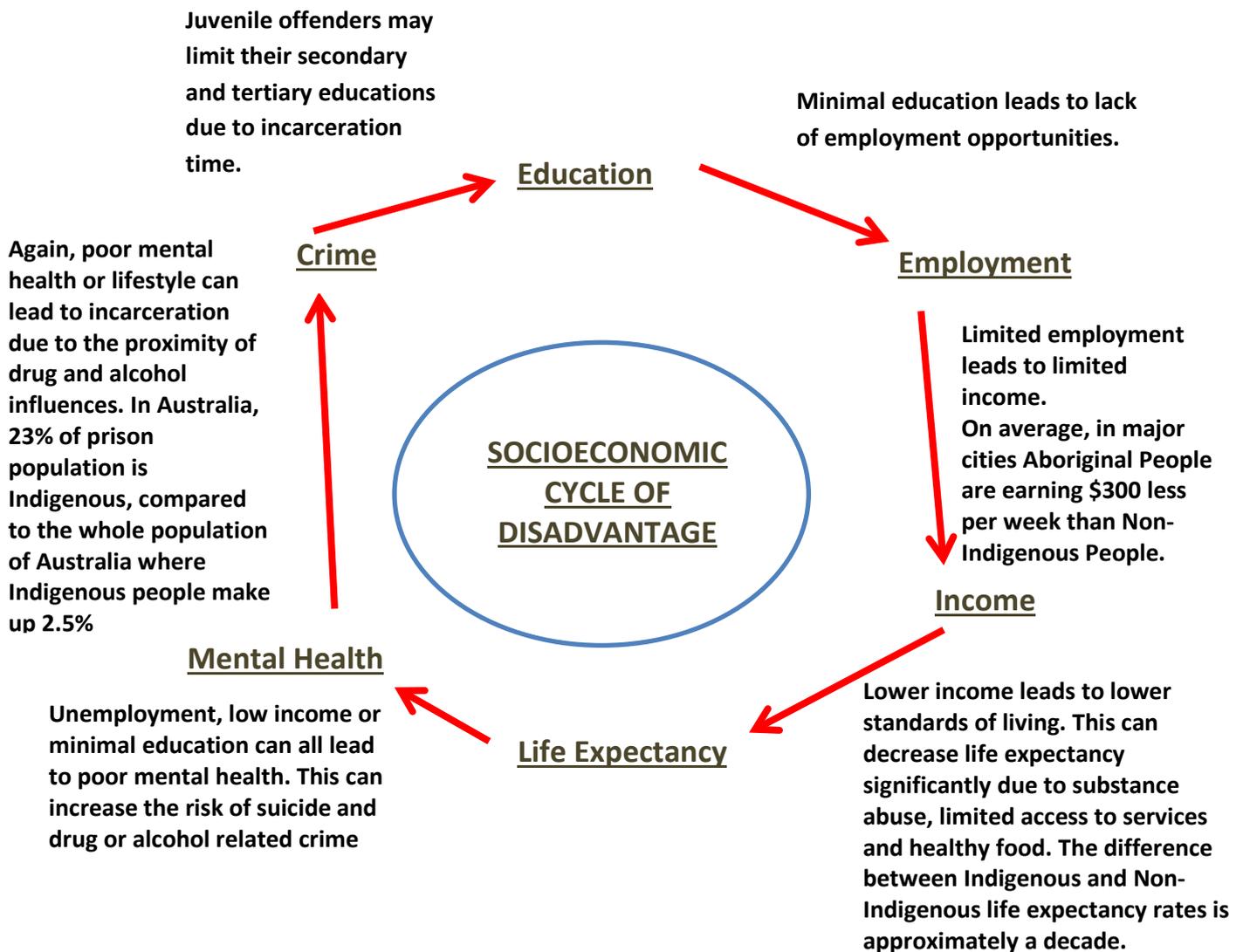
	Major cities	Regional areas	Remote areas	Australia
	%	%	%	%
<b>Has used legal services in last 12 months</b>	20.2	16.5	15.6	17.5
<b>Has been arrested in last 5 years</b>	14.0	13.2	19.4	15.0
<b>Has been incarcerated in last 5 years</b>	2.4	2.8	5.2	3.2
<b>Victim of physical or threatened violence in last 12 months</b>	24.5	23.4	21.3	23.2

*Table 2.9 demonstrates that in the last 5 years approximately 15% of Aboriginal people aged 15 and over have been arrested. In remote areas, this statistics is 19.4%, meaning that almost a fifth of the population has been arrested in the last 5 years. Disturbingly, these results show that in the last 12 months 23.2% of Aboriginal people aged 15 and over have been victims of or threatened by violence*

**Graph 2.10 - Law and Justice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over, 2008**



## Socioeconomic Cycle of Disadvantage



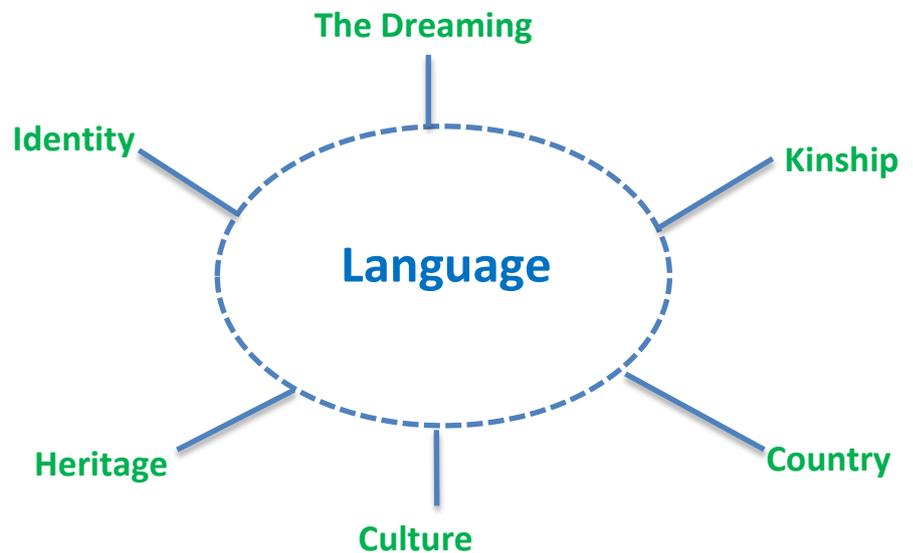
The interrelating nature of the indicators of socioeconomic status, as displayed in the diagram above, makes it extremely difficult for the cycle of socioeconomic status to be broken or reversed. If one indicator becomes damaged, it can consequently impact on the other indicators of socioeconomic status in a domino effect, leading to an overall decrease in socioeconomic status. Just like it is easier to walk down a hill than up, improvements in socioeconomic status may take generations, whilst a decline may only be the result of one wrong decision made at a juvenile age. It must be stressed that a substandard level of socioeconomic status severely impacts on the lived, everyday experiences of Aboriginal people, and as such it is imperative that swift, planned and co-operative action be taken in an attempt to 'close the gap'.

# Part 3: The Importance of Aboriginal Language and its Relationship to the Socioeconomic Status of Aboriginal People

## Hypothesis

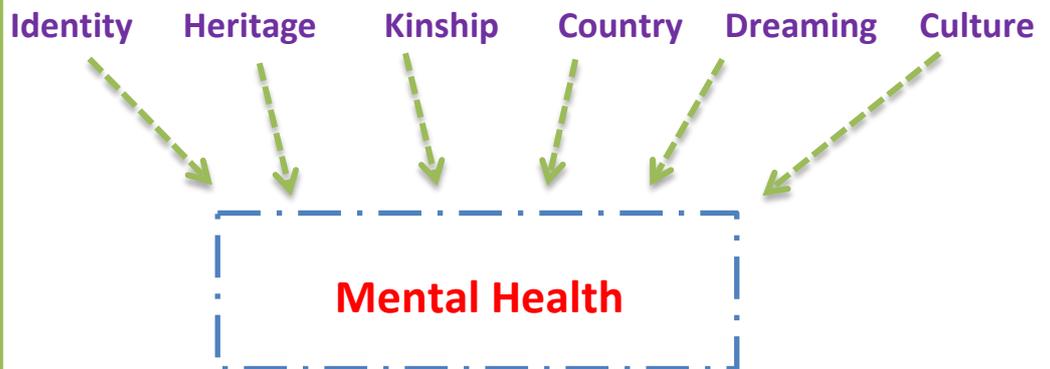
### Part 1

Concepts that Aboriginal language can influence



### Part 2

These concepts can be linked to mental health



### Part 3

Mental health can influence other indicators of socioeconomic status



### Part 4

The combination of these create socioeconomic status

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS 16

## **The Importance of Aboriginal Language**

**“I think language is very important, because you feel more connected to the land and Country and in your everyday living as Aboriginal people. So you open up the language and you’ve got a sense of who you are, and where you’re from.”<sup>14</sup> - \_\_\_\_\_, Paakantyi Language teacher**

Aboriginal languages are an integral component of contemporary and traditional Aboriginal communities due to their vital role in articulating Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal language and culture are immutably inseparable because Aboriginal culture is enmeshed within, and expressed through the language. Aboriginal cultural heritage, identity, Dreaming stories and connection to Country are passed on from one generation to the next orally, and it is for this reason that languages are so important to Aboriginal communities. The relationship between Aboriginal languages and culture is symbiotic, meaning that if an Aboriginal language is absent in a community then the all the cultural aspects outlined above will struggle to function. As Keith Gosman acknowledges, “There may be no surer yardstick of the death of a culture than the death of language.”<sup>15</sup>

A deficiency of connection to culture can have a devastating impact on the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal communities and is a contributing factor to current Indigenous inequality. The next part of this report will attempt to establish socio-cultural reasons as to why Aboriginal people are achieving substandard levels of socioeconomic outcomes. This will be done by firstly highlighting the importance of the aspects of culture, and then by demonstrating how depleted access to the benefits that culture provides can and has been detrimentally impacting upon every indicator of socioeconomic status. Once the relationship between language and socioeconomic status has been established, the final part of this report will discuss how the revival of Aboriginal languages could improve the indicators of socioeconomic status, thus reducing Indigenous disadvantage and aiding equity and reconciliation for Aboriginal people.

## **Identity and Cultural Heritage**

Identity is the complex notion that explains who an individual is, in terms of where they come from, who they associate themselves with, and where they belong<sup>16</sup>. In general, people may choose to identify themselves with a nationality, an ethnicity, a set of religious beliefs or a community. For Aboriginal people, identity is extremely important because they intrinsically associate their identity with their Country, their people, their family and their culture. These are fundamental relationships, central not only to Aboriginality, but are universal to all of humanity.

As such, the possession of Aboriginal identity can promote feelings of well-being, self-esteem, belonging and pride, because these embody the essential relationships of the human experience.

**“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”<sup>17</sup> - Jane Howard, Psychologist**

For an Aboriginal person, cultural heritage is the basis of their identity as it explains their inherited history, their nation’s past experiences, stories and sacred sites. Aboriginal identity has become a source of strength, pride and resilience for Aboriginal people because they associate it with their unique cultural heritage and its survival in the face of suppression. Knowledge of one’s cultural heritage for an Aboriginal person is crucial in shaping their identity because the heritage of an Aboriginal nation forms the basis of their cultural and social practices. This allows Aboriginal people to understand their place and role in society and in their everyday living as Aboriginal people.

Language is a central component to having a strong sense of identity for several reasons. Firstly, language is a social device that establishes membership of a group, by enabling those in the group to engage with others within the group while simultaneously excluding anyone who does not know the language. For Aboriginal people, this means that knowledge of their traditional language enables them to associate themselves with and become an accepted member of their Aboriginal community, as they have the medium to culturally and socially interact with them. Consequently, language’s capacity to empower Aboriginal people to connect with their community allows for specific cultural heritage and knowledge, for example, the names of ancestors, moieties, dreaming tracks and ceremonies, to be conveyed. Trevor Stockley has noted that "Language learners have feelings of wellbeing, self-respect, empowerment, identity, self-satisfaction and belonging when hearing and speaking their ancestral language."<sup>18</sup> This is because knowledge of their cultural heritage enables Aboriginal people to develop a greater sense of identity through deeper connections with their society, culture and family.

**“When kids feel lost and their spirit is weak then they can’t learn well or be healthy. They need to feel pride in their language and culture and know that they are respected. That’s the only way to start closing the gap”<sup>19</sup> - Walpiri Education Body**

The core importance of Aboriginal languages can act as a double edged sword: if language is removed, a community’s ability to culturally thrive will be hindered. As a consequence, a sense of identity, as well as the feelings that Trevor Stockley listed above, will not be experienced by Aboriginal people. The deprivation of the essential connections to culture and family can consequently impact on the psychological health of Aboriginal people.

As shown in Part 2 of this report, the majority of Aboriginal languages have been destroyed, and as a consequence there is a deep sense of loss for Aboriginal people who are unable to identify with their culture or language. This sense of loss is reflected by Karen Smith who stated that “It is said that if you take the stories and the language and the songs from someone, you take their identity away from them. With the loss of language and stories, you lose your identity because they tell you who you are. You would feel extremely isolated. For people who have lost their culture, they won’t even identify as an Aboriginal person.”<sup>20</sup>

As established above, the consequences of the suppression of Aboriginal languages have culminated in a loss of identity, resulting in feelings of loss and isolation. This is a significant issue because the psychological impact of these experiences can also influence physical health, education and employment. Consider the corollary of an athlete who suffers from psychological issues such as anxiety or lack of motivation. As a result the athlete will not achieve their optimal performance, as these psychological issues will detract from their effort. The same scenario is mirrored for people with poor mental health such as those who feel isolated, alienated or have a sense of loss. These factors may cause people to lack the motivation to engage in school, access health services or eat nutritional food. People with poor mental health are also more likely to succumb to comorbid difficulties including drug, alcohol, criminality and self-harm.

**“Tragically it is becoming more likely that an Indigenous person’s rite of passage into adulthood will take place while in a correctional facility rather than a place of education”<sup>21</sup> - Gino Vumbaca, Executive Director of the Australian National Council on Drugs**

The cycle of socioeconomic disadvantage demonstrates that if a person receives minimal education or becomes incarcerated, it can limit their employment opportunities, reduce their income and subject them to a poorer lifestyle. It is extremely significant to recognise that all these scenarios can be made possible for Aboriginal people, through the loss of identity, stemming from a disconnection from their native language. The absence of Aboriginal languages can cause a multitude of psychological issues, which can then detrimentally impact upon the indicators of socioeconomic status. As discussed in the previous paragraph, poor mental health can lead to disengagement in education, which will then limit employment, income, health and subsequent socioeconomic status. To improve the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal languages must be implemented in schools or places of learning as tools to engage young Aboriginal people in education in order to counter the impact of a loss of identity.

## **“He who opens a school door, closes a prison.”<sup>22</sup> - Victor Hugo, French writer**

The relationship between Aboriginal language and socioeconomic status is symbiotic in nature. It is evident that Aboriginal socioeconomic disadvantage can occur due to the absence of an Aboriginal language. Conversely if language is present in an Aboriginal community, then consequent improvements in socioeconomic status may be seen. The presence of a thriving Aboriginal language initiates a strong sense of identity and connection to culture through knowledge of heritage, and as a result can actually engage young Aboriginal people in education. Aboriginal language has the potential to commit young Aboriginal people to their schooling because it gives them a “powerful reason to go to school”, according to Victor Dominello<sup>23</sup>. Young Aboriginal people will feel compelled to learn their own language in school as it is an expression of their identity, an expression of who they are. This is explained by Alitya Rigney, who writes “Have you ever seen a kid's face when they learn the language of their people and country and see the joy, the pride and the identity that comes from that and the wonder that will take them into the future? It is absolutely magic.”<sup>24</sup> When people sing their own national anthem they feel a sense of belonging as it connects them to the whole nation. Similarly, when speaking their own language, Aboriginal people will feel pride as they will be intrinsically associating themselves with an acceptance into the broader community.

The acquisition of language and its ability to influence socioeconomic status does not just apply to Aboriginal people. Parkville College, a school inside a youth correctional facility in Melbourne was opened in February 2012 after research conducted by Monash University indicated that 50% of juveniles in Parkville Prison had a language or communication disorder<sup>25</sup>. Speech Pathologist Laura Caire found that “Kids with the most language impairment have the least amount of insight”, implying that children who lack struggle with language will have a greater chance of incarceration.<sup>26</sup> The juvenile offenders are taught language and communication skills which help them “navigate their way through the myriad of little social interactions that we all have to manage every day.”<sup>27</sup>

Since the school commenced, violence has decreased across the precinct, with a reduction in critical incidents by 56%.<sup>28</sup> Students who have previously never read before have become engrossed in literature and are loving it according to Brendan Murray, whose idea it was to open the school.<sup>29</sup> The developments at Parkville College highlight that educating young people in traditional languages can help create safer communities, while engaging the young people in education.

**“Participation and retention of children within the education system is critical, as is stopping the long-term employment problems that imprisonment creates”<sup>30</sup> - Gino Vumbaca, Executive Director of the Australian National Council on Drugs**

Engagement in learning is fundamental when attempting to break the socioeconomic cycle of disadvantage. Education is crucial when raising awareness of the consequences of negative health behaviours, improving lifestyle choices as well as helping gain employment and an income. Victor Dominello acknowledges that “If they have a greater sense of language, a greater sense of identity, there’s a greater chance they will stay at school.”<sup>31</sup> A more extensive education will reduce the likelihood of drug or alcohol issues as this will engender a greater awareness of the dangers involved. This is supported by the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), which found that young people living in remote areas who spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language were less likely than those who did not to:

- ✚ Have consumed alcohol at risky or high risk levels in the last 12 months (8% and 18% respectively)
- ✚ Report that they had used illicit substances in the past 12 months (16% and 26% respectively)
- ✚ Have been a victim of physical or threatened violence in the last 12 months (25% and 37% respectively).

The survey also discovered that:

- ✚ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 13-17 year olds in urban and regional areas are substantially more likely to attend school if they speak an Indigenous language
- ✚ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak, understand or learn an Indigenous language are more likely to gain a post-school qualification<sup>32</sup>

These are extremely significant statistics that suggest Aboriginal people who have knowledge of their language are more likely to receive a greater education, and less likely to consume drugs and alcohol, than an Aboriginal person who does not speak their traditional language. This implies that Aboriginal people who learn their languages would have a greater chance of gaining employment while reducing their chances of becoming involved in drug or alcohol related crime. The findings of NATSISS highlight the argument that the revival of Aboriginal languages can help improve the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, because an overall, large scale reduction in crime and the subsequent increase in educational achievement is linked to improved employment and income opportunities. A consequent improvement in all the indicators of socioeconomic status on a national level would see the reduction in the socioeconomic gap between Aboriginal and Non-Indigenous people.

## **The Dreaming, Kinship and Country**

The Dreaming is the foundation of Aboriginal cultures in both traditional and contemporary communities, as it provides a complex spiritual link to their sacred, human and physical worlds. Kinship and moiety systems, laid out by The Dreaming, establish the obligatory roles and responsibilities for individual, familial and community relationships. These systems are vitally important for creating a sense of identity for Aboriginal people because teaches them how they fit into their society. The Dreaming also establishes the rules of governing interrelationships between Aboriginal people and the land. This intrinsically and spiritually connects Aboriginal people to their Country and is a core part of Aboriginality and identity. Through ritual, song and dance, The Dreaming allows for each generation of Aboriginal people to enter into a direct relationship with their totemic ancestors, who guide them spiritually and socially, even in the present day. As shown in the 'Heritage and Identity' section of this report, these intrinsic connections to their land, their heritage and their community are crucial in the development of a strong sense of identity for Aboriginal people.

As stated, kinship and moiety systems establish the basis of social and familial relationships between Aboriginal people. The classificatory system of Kinship outlines the familial roles and responsibilities between Aboriginal family members, while moiety systems outline the obligations of social behaviour towards other members of their own and other Aboriginal communities. These two social functions are central in forming a strong sense of identity as they build a strong sense of belonging by linking Aboriginal people to their families, while also creating a social network for Aboriginal people. Karen Smith says that "Kinship is what identifies you. It allows Aboriginal people to know how to behave towards every other Aboriginal person in terms of reciprocal obligation."<sup>33</sup> Kinship can trace back multiple generations, and as such, an Aboriginal person who has knowledge of their kinship system enables themselves to establish a relationship with another Aboriginal person who they have previously not met before. This knowledge allows Aboriginal people develop a connection with each other and dictate basis of their relationship, a relationship that would not have been able to exist without knowledge of kinship. Thus kinship and moiety groups are vital components of social and familial life for Aboriginal people.

### **"The land is my backbone"<sup>34</sup> - Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Land Rights Activist**

For traditional Aboriginal communities, their complex relationship to Country was the foundation for all sources of life; spiritually, culturally, socially and politically. Their intimate knowledge of the land and its resources allowed their culture to survive and flourish for over 40,000 years. Such an intimate, strong and metaphysical connection to Country helps form a sense of identity for Aboriginal people in contemporary communities, as they intrinsically associate themselves with all the aspects of their ecosystem.

This is highlighted by Mary Tarran who stated that “I can’t describe who I am, or what I am if I do not have those feelings toward Country.”<sup>35</sup> Sacred sites may record Dreamtime stories, or places of cultural importance which are the basis for Aboriginal cultural heritage. This link between Country and heritage is discussed by Galarrwuy Yunupingu, who said “I think of my land as the history of my nation.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, a strong connection to Country can help develop a strong sense of identity because of the intrinsic associations with cultural heritage.

Aboriginal languages play a crucial role in maintaining a strong connection to Country, The Dreaming and kinship. Dreamtime stories, the basis for Aboriginal cultural and spiritual life, are passed down orally through the language. The absence of language can thereby prevent the communication of these fundamental stories, and as such foster a lack of cultural connection. If Dreamtime stories are unable to be transmitted due to the absence of language, this further destroys a connection to Country because knowledge of totems and sacred sites, which tie Aboriginal people to the land, will be non-existent. The absence of an Aboriginal language will mean that because there will be a disconnection to The Dreaming, as a result, kinship and moiety systems will also struggle to be established. Therefore, the absence of an Aboriginal language will mean that Aboriginal people may lack a connection to their physical world, through a disconnection from Country, their sacred world, through a disconnection to The Dreaming, and their human world through limited knowledge of their kinship system.

As previously established, a firm connection to The Dreaming, Country and kinship is central in creating a strong sense of identity and cultural heritage. The importance of identity in influencing mental health, and subsequent socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, has already been demonstrated in the ‘Identity and Cultural Heritage’ section of this report. The following section will demonstrate how an intimate knowledge of one’s Country, culture and language does not influence solely the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people through mental health. There are direct employment opportunities associated with knowledge of traditional language and Country for Aboriginal people in science, tourism and education. Due to the dynamic interrelationships between the indicators of socioeconomic status, improvements in employment, and subsequent income opportunities, will see an overall improvement in the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people.

**“Collaborations between Aboriginal people on country and scientists are significantly enhanced by the use of these languages.”<sup>37</sup>**

**- Professor Michael Christie, Aboriginal Language teacher**

There are an increasing number of employment opportunities for Aboriginal people who have knowledge of their traditional language and a strong connection to Country. Aboriginal languages have the potential to aid environmental scientific progress as their languages have developed vast vocabularies for the names of species, as well as descriptions of their ecology. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2009*, “These are little known to Western science and the loss of it would disadvantage all Australians.”<sup>38</sup> The ‘Our Land Our Languages’ report also acknowledged that “Ecological knowledge is invaluable in areas of environmental management, biodiversity, and pharmaceutical development.”<sup>39</sup> This means that Aboriginal people, who have strong knowledge of their language and land, will have the possibility of gaining employment in the field of environmental science due to an extensive knowledge of their ecosystems.

**“We hear evidence of students who have gone through the primary school program and into the high school program who in their employment are able to use their Aboriginal language skills whether they are in a bank, a CES office or working in an old people's home.”<sup>40</sup>**

**- Lola Jones, teacher trainer**

Aboriginal people are able to use their knowledge of culture, language and Country in other employment fields such as tourism, music, TV, radio and education. The Aboriginal tourism industry offers Aboriginal language speakers significant opportunities for employment as they have the capacity to use their cultural and linguistic knowledge in occupations such as tour guides. Likewise, the introduction of the National Indigenous Television channel (NITV), which contains many culture and language related programs such as ‘Bush Plum’, has increased employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and has allowed them to use their knowledge of Aboriginal language and culture within the television industry. Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, who sings the stories of his nation in both his traditional Aboriginal language and English, has shown that Aboriginal people with knowledge of cultural and language can make a career out of music. Robert Lindsay, a Paakantyi language teach in Menindee, also notes that “These days the Aboriginal community does need teachers of language and a kid can actually have it on his career path to actually be a language teacher these days.”<sup>41</sup> This highlights that Aboriginal people who have an understanding of their traditional language and culture are able to increase their employment opportunities over a diverse range of occupations.

The availability of employment opportunities is fundamental when attempting to reduce Aboriginal disadvantage because of the positive influence it can have on the other indicators of socioeconomic status. Greater access to employment will help increase, consolidate or maintain an income level, which is essential in establishing a satisfactory standard of living. This is because an increased income will enhance the ability of the person to have access to quality healthcare, nutrition and educational opportunities such as university. Improvements in all these indicators of socioeconomic status for Aboriginal people will create an overall reduction in Aboriginal disadvantage because they will have an overall, elevated level of socioeconomic status, closer to that of the Non-Indigenous population. As witnessed in the 'Employment' section of Part 2 of this report, an increase in employment opportunities is crucial for improving the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, because they are currently achieving a significantly high level of unemployment, which is detrimentally impacting on other indicators of socioeconomic status.

Knowledge of language and culture for Aboriginal people, as shown above, can increase employment opportunities in a wide range of occupational fields. This means that they will be able to increase the chance that they will be able to improve their income, health, quality of life and overall socioeconomic status. It is essential to acknowledge that this improvement in socioeconomic status can be made possible through the revival of Aboriginal languages because as established, an increase in employment opportunities can help improve the individual indicators of socioeconomic status, and thus reduce Indigenous disadvantage.

## Part 4: Closing the Gap through the Revival of Aboriginal Languages

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**“Awareness of an Indigenous language offers both Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians a good opportunity to better understand our combined history and to gain an understanding of Australia’s Indigenous heritage of languages and culture. It is a positive way to help close the gap.”<sup>42</sup> - Trevor Stockley, Aboriginal Language teacher**

The revival of Aboriginal languages has the potential to achieve social justice and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This report has concluded that the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages in Aboriginal communities has the potential to significantly improve the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people. If Aboriginal people achieve similar outcomes to the Non-Indigenous population in the indicators of socioeconomic status, then they will have free, full and equal access to the same level of health care, education, employment and income opportunities that the wider Australian population experiences. An elevated level of socioeconomic status, closer to that of the Non-Indigenous Australian population, means that Aboriginal people across Australia will have a greater chance of achieving social justice and equality.

While this underlines the potential that the revival of Aboriginal languages has to aid Aboriginal people achieving equity in Australia, it is crucial to recognise that this cannot be accomplished without the support of the Non-Indigenous population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will never achieve social justice, reconciliation and equality in Australia without the empathy of the Non-Indigenous Australian population. The prevalence of racism and discrimination against Aboriginal people in Australia today, is hindering the ability of Aboriginal people to achieve equality in society. People who experience racism face a higher risk of developing a range of mental health problems which may cause them to disengage with their education, employment and feel as if they are not accepted in their community. This limits Australia’s goal of closing the gap and achieving reconciliation, because an egalitarian society can never occur in the presence of racism. Discrimination against Aboriginal people stems from a cultural and historical ignorance of Aboriginal Australia’s past, which accounts for the current position of Aboriginal people in Australia’s society. If the Non-Aboriginal population had a greater awareness of the Australian-Aboriginal culture and history, then a decline in racism would be witnessed. Again, the revival of Aboriginal languages can play an important role in countering discrimination in Australia, and thus help achieve equality and reconciliation.

The revival and promotion of Aboriginal languages also has the potential to create a more empathetic and culturally aware Australian society. Initiatives that aim to document, archive and promote Aboriginal languages, cultures and historical perspectives, such as the Dhiyaan Indigenous Centre in Moree, can influence the Non-Indigenous population to accept the concept of shared, Aboriginal-Australian history. If shared histories are taught in schools, students from diverse backgrounds will develop a greater acceptance of Aboriginal cultures and their peoples, and as a result will carry this acceptance throughout their life, and pass it on to the next generation. Acknowledging that Australia has had a violent and oppressive past is vital in changing Australian attitudes, because a greater understanding of the past allows us to “face the future with a view from each other’s eyes”, according to Aunty Noeline, who established the Dhiyaan Indigenous Centre<sup>43</sup>. If Australia as a nation is able to view our history from both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal perspectives, then we will be able to recognise what happened in the past, and understand how to move forward together.

**“They need to know the history of the Aboriginal people. And once they can get the history of the Aboriginal people, they can understand what has happened in the past and that allows us to go forward.”<sup>44</sup> - Aunty Noeline, Aboriginal researcher**

An appreciation of Australia’s Aboriginal-European history is absolutely essential if Australia is to close the socioeconomic gap between Aboriginal and Non-Indigenous Australians socioeconomic outcomes. If we as a nation are able to recognise how our conflictive past has contributed to a low level of socioeconomic status for Aboriginal people, then we can begin to develop ways to alleviate current Aboriginal disadvantage. Recognition of the historical, root causes of this issue is vital to improving Aboriginal socioeconomic outcomes. As Aunty Noeline states “If we don’t recognise what happened in the past and go forward, we don’t know what we are going forward into.”<sup>45</sup> If Australia does not understand how Aboriginal socioeconomic disadvantage was initiated, we cannot hope to work out how to fix it. As this report has demonstrated, an appreciation of the historical and socio-cultural causes of Aboriginal socioeconomic disadvantage (destruction of language and culture) allows for appropriate measures, such as language revival to be initiated in order to rectify and improve the current socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people. It must be stressed that this can only possible through studying and understanding Aboriginal-Australian history.

**“The past is the past. The only thing I can affect is the future”<sup>46</sup>**

**- Brendan Murray, Principal of Parkville College**

As this report has revealed, the relationship between the presence of an Aboriginal language in an Aboriginal community and the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people is symbiotic in nature. While the absence of Aboriginal languages can detrimentally impact on the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people, conversely, the revival of Aboriginal languages in Aboriginal communities can improve socioeconomic outcomes, strengthen communities and as a consequence, help them acquire social justice and equality. It is essential to recognise the contribution that language revival can make in achieving these goals for Aboriginal people because as the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages (AuSIL) notes, “Not doing so will continue to contribute to low levels of performance, and seriously impede the goals of Closing the Gap.”<sup>47</sup> Failure to recognise the importance of language to Aboriginal people will allow a continuation of the low socioeconomic status that Aboriginal people are currently achieving. Therefore the importance of Aboriginal language must be stressed, recognised and understood, so that the appropriate language revitalisation initiatives are undertaken. The implementation of initiatives such as these will see a reduction in Aboriginal disadvantage. It is now the duty of all Australians to ensure that the appropriate measures are taken in order to holistically close the gap between Aboriginal and Non-Indigenous people.

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