



Social determinants and psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander adults in the Australian state of Victoria: A cross-sectional population based study

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in the Australian state of Victoria have a higher prevalence of psychological distress than their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts. We sought to explain this inequality, focussing on the social determinants of health. We used population-based survey data from the 2008 Victorian Population Health Survey; a cross-sectional landline computer-assisted telephone survey of 34,168 randomly selected adults. We defined psychological distress as a score of 22 or more on the Kessler 10 Psychological Distress scale. We used logistic regression to identify socio-demographic characteristics and social capital indicators that were associated with psychological distress. We then created multivariable models to explore the association between psychological distress and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status that incorporated all significant socioeconomic status (SES) and social capital variables, adjusting for all non-SES socio-demographic characteristics. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians (24.5%) were more than twice as likely than their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts (11.3%) to have psychological distress (odds ratio (OR) = 2.56, 95% confidence interval; 1.67–3.93). Controlling for SES, negative perceptions of the residential neighbourhood, lack of social support from family, social and civic distrust, and all non-SES socio-demographic variables (age, sex, marital status, household composition, and rurality), rendered the previously statistically significant inequality in the prevalence of psychological distress, between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians and their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts, insignificant at the $p = 0.05$ level (OR = 1.50; 0.97–2.32). Psychological distress is an important health risk factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults that has yet to be widely acknowledged and addressed. Addressing the underlying inequalities in SES and social capital may be the key to addressing the inequality in psychological distress.

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1. Background

Psychological distress is an important incident and/or secondary risk factor for a number of diseases and conditions including: fatigue, migraine, cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive

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pulmonary disease, cerebrovascular disease, injury, obesity, and depression and anxiety (Andrews and Slade, 2001; Hamer et al., 2012; Holden et al., 2010; Stansfeld et al., 2002). Moreover, psychological distress is associated with a higher risk of mortality, even after adjusting for potential confounders such as socioeconomic status (SES) (Pratt, 2009). Psychological distress is also a significant risk factor for the lifestyle risk factors of smoking, excessive consumption of alcohol, and drug use (Holden et al., 2010). Therefore, the evidence shows that psychological distress impacts negatively on health both directly and indirectly.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have consistently been shown to have a higher prevalence of psychological

distress than their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts; ranging from 50% to three times higher (Jorm et al., 2012). In the state of Victoria, the age-adjusted prevalence of psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults was 22.0%, compared with 11.3% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (Markwick et al., 2011). The 2004–05 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) collected additional data on the impact and cause of psychological distress. Over half of those with psychological distress reported not always being able to carry out their normal daily activities, one-third had consulted a health professional about their distress, and 41% reported that their distress had nothing to do with their physical health (Cunningham and Paradies, 2012).

It is important to remember that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia is not a homogeneous group, as there are significant linguistic, cultural and experiential differences, based on geographic location (Australian museum, 2014). For

example, the Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (27%), many of whom live in remote communities. By contrast, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the state of Victoria constitutes less than 1% of the total state population, is more widely dispersed across the state, and there are no remote communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Yet the majority of studies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing were conducted in either remote or rural communities, or using the national datasets which masks regional differences (Biddle, 2014). It cannot be assumed that the health and the determinants of the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the same across the country.

Life stressors have been shown to be causally related to psychological distress with the individual's psychological resources and resources in the social environment (social capital) mediating or moderating the impact of life stressors on psychological distress

Table 1
Psychological distress by socio-demographic characteristics in Victoria: Univariable analysis.

Socio-demographic characteristic	Psychological distress (K10 \geq 22) ^a		Univariable analysis	
	N ^b	Weighted % (95% CI)	Crude odds ratio (95% CI)	p value
Non-Aboriginal	3778	11.3 (10.7–11.8)	1.00	
Aboriginal	80	24.5 (17.5–33.2)	2.56 (1.67–3.93)	<0.001
18–24 years	244	14.3 (12.2–16.6)	1.00	
25–34 years	436	12.5 (11.0–14.1)	0.85 (0.68–1.08)	0.181
35–44 years	718	10.4 (9.4–11.5)	0.70 (0.56–0.87)	0.001
45–54 years	880	12.3 (11.2–13.5)	0.84 (0.68–1.04)	0.109
55–64 years	834	10.7 (9.7–11.8)	0.72 (0.58–0.89)	0.002
65 + years	766	9.0 (8.1–9.9)	0.59 (0.48–0.73)	<0.001
Male	1283	9.7 (8.9–10.6)	1.00	
Female	2595	13.0 (12.3–13.8)	1.39 (1.24–1.56)	<0.001
Married or living with a partner	2001	9.0 (8.5–9.6)	1.00	
Not married or living with a partner	1849	16.2 (15.0–17.4)	1.94 (1.74–2.17)	<0.001
Household without a child	2589	11.6 (10.9–12.3)	1.00	
Household with a child	1271	11.0 (10.1–11.9)	0.94 (0.84–1.05)	0.279
Not a lone parent of a child	3464	10.9 (10.4–11.5)	1.00	
Lone parent of a child	392	22.9 (20.0–26.2)	2.43 (2.02–2.93)	<0.001
Household size ^c	3878	–	1.00 (1.00–1.00)	0.001
One person household	973	14.3 (13.2–15.5)	1.00	
Two person household	1278	10.2 (9.5–11.1)	0.68 (0.60–0.78)	<0.001
Three person household	626	12.6 (11.4–13.9)	0.86 (0.74–1.01)	0.059
Four person household	553	10.1 (9.0–11.4)	0.68 (0.58–0.79)	<0.001
Five people or more in household	418	12.2 (10.6–13.9)	0.83 (0.69–1.00)	0.045
Resides in metropolitan Victoria	1619	11.5 (10.9–12.2)	1.00	
Resides in rural Victoria	2259	11.1 (10.3–12.0)	0.96 (0.87–1.07)	0.476
Socioeconomic status				
Household income^c	3333	–	1.39 (1.34–1.45)	<0.001
Greater than \$80,000	424	6.2 (5.4–7.1)	1.00	
\$60,001–\$80,000	319	9.6 (8.2–11.1)	1.60 (1.28–2.00)	<0.001
\$40,001–\$60,000	525	12.4 (11.0–14.0)	2.13 (1.74–2.61)	<0.001
\$20,001–\$40,000	967	15.0 (13.7–16.4)	2.66 (2.22–3.19)	<0.001
\$20,000 or less	1098	21.4 (19.5–23.4)	4.11 (3.41–4.95)	<0.001
Employed	1650	9.2 (8.5–9.9)	1.00	
Unemployed	235	23.6 (19.6–28.2)	3.06 (2.38–3.93)	<0.001
Not in labour force	1968	13.9 (13.0–14.8)	1.60 (1.43–1.78)	<0.001
Completed tertiary education	725	7.5 (6.8–8.4)	1.00	
Completed secondary education	539	11.0 (9.7–12.4)	1.52 (1.27–1.81)	<0.001
Completed TAFE ^d	901	12.8 (11.6–14.1)	1.79 (1.53–2.10)	<0.001
Completed primary education or less	1665	15.1 (14.0–16.2)	2.18 (1.89–2.50)	<0.001
Owned a home or mortgage	2820	10.3 (9.8–10.9)	1.00	
Rented a home	1022	15.5 (14.2–17.0)	1.59 (1.41–1.81)	<0.001
No financial stress	2603	9.2 (8.7–9.7)	1.00	
Financial stress	1144	27.0 (24.9–29.3)	3.66 (3.22–4.17)	<0.001
Food secure	3077	9.8 (9.3–10.4)	1.00	
Food insecure	792	38.6 (35.0–42.3)	5.76 (4.88–6.80)	<0.001

95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

^a K10 = Kessler 10 Psychological Distress Scale.

^b N = raw unweighted sample size; however, prevalence and prevalence odds ratio estimates are based on weighted data.

^c Continuous variable.

^d TAFE = Technical And Further Education; with or without completion of secondary education.

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