

Mental health burden for Indigenous Australians exceeds estimates

July 3 2018



Credit: University of Queensland

Mental health disorders are four to seven times more common among Indigenous adults than other Australians, University of Queensland researchers have found.

A study by the UQ Rural Clinical School examined the prevalence of common mental [disorders](#) in Southern Queensland and two Aboriginal communities in New South Wales.

The school's Director of Indigenous Health Dr. Maree Toombs said the

results exceeded estimates.

"The disorders can be broken down into three general groups – mood, anxiety and substance abuse disorders," Dr. Toombs said.

"Face-to-face interviews revealed Indigenous Australians were 6.7 times more likely to suffer mood disorders, 3.8 times more likely to suffer from anxiety and 6.9 times to have substance abuse disorders.

"These findings have given us a picture of how big the problem is so we can start advocating for change."

The study also revealed that rates of [mental illness](#) were much lower among Aboriginal Reserve and remote area residents.

"This really highlights the importance of Indigenous peoples' connection to their traditional lands and culture," Dr. Toombs said.

Professorial Research Fellow Professor Geoff Nicholson said it was well established that people with mental illness were more likely to have chronic physical illnesses and die prematurely.

"We think that the contribution of mental [illness](#) to the Indigenous Health Gap and increased mortality has been grossly underestimated," Dr. Nicholson said.

"Dislocation from traditional homelands, kinship networks and family, together with poverty, violence, marginalisation and racism are all significant risk factors which need to be addressed for the gap to be closed."

The study team has received a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant to develop a treatment program based on its

findings.

"By designing a care program specifically for the affected communities, we hope the uptake of these services will be higher," Dr. Toombs said.

"Often as researchers we 'take' and don't 'give' anything back.

"We've worked closely with these communities during the study and the funding now allows us to do something for them, which is really fantastic."

The study is published in *BMJ Open*.

More information: Bushra F Nasir et al. Common mental disorders among Indigenous people living in regional, remote and metropolitan Australia: a cross-sectional study, *BMJ Open* (2018). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020196](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020196)

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Mental health burden for Indigenous Australians exceeds estimates (2018, July 3) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-07-mental-health-burden-indigenous-australians.html>

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