

# Rate of sudden deaths in Indigenous infants much higher than estimated

October 31 2019

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Indigenous infants in Queensland may be dying suddenly and

unexpectedly at a rate more than 3.5 times that of non-Indigenous infants, according to USC Nursing and Midwifery research.

The study, published today in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, found the rate of Sudden and Unexpected Death in Infants (SUDI) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants across Queensland from 2010 to 2014 was much higher than had been previously estimated.

Ph.D. researcher Rebecca Shipstone, who led the study supervised by USC Professor of Nursing Jeanine Young, said the official state and "Closing the Gap" child [death](#) statistics for Queensland reported an Indigenous SUDI rate only twice that of non-Indigenous infants.

She said the project had applied, for the first time, a new method for combining data from a variety of sources to produce more reliable information about Indigenous status.

"Indigenous status may not be recorded accurately on all [death certificates](#) due to lack of information, so we used an algorithm to combine the status recorded from five government collections (birth and death registrations, health data, [child protection](#) and coronial records)," she said.

"We also applied the algorithm to population data to more accurately calculate infant mortality."

SUDI is a broad category of deaths in babies aged less than one year. It includes Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and fatal sleeping accidents where the cause of death is not immediately obvious.

Most SUDI deaths are considered preventable, with known [risk factors](#) including sleeping a baby on its tummy, cigarette smoke exposure and

unsafe sleep environments.

Ms Shipstone said the research aimed to produce accurate data about the Indigenous status of 228 infants who died of SUDI in the four-year period—and the results were concerning.

"The results identified 27 percent of the [infants](#) as Indigenous, compared to 16 percent in the original data," she said.

"When that increase is compared to non-Indigenous infant SUDI, the rate is more than 3.5 times higher."

Professor Young, who leads long-term research into infant deaths and is a member of the Queensland Paediatric Quality Council, Queensland Child Death Review Panel, and Red Nose Scientific Advisory Group, said the study "called into question some of the previously reported gains towards Closing the Gap in Indigenous infant mortality."

"This study is part of ongoing research that aims to more fully understand the social and environmental contexts in which these deaths occur, and the groups most affected," she said.

"SUDI have been shown to be responsive to public health initiatives, and as such serve as a litmus test for the effectiveness of initiatives to reduce disparities in Indigenous infant mortality."

**More information:** Rebecca A. Shipstone et al. The real divide: the use of algorithm-derived Indigenous status to measure disparities in sudden unexpected deaths in infancy in Queensland, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1753-6405.12951](https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12951)

Provided by University of the Sunshine Coast

Citation: Rate of sudden deaths in Indigenous infants much higher than estimated (2019, October 31) retrieved 10 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-10-sudden-deaths-indigenous-infants-higher.html>

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