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Conference on Urban Issues

Bronwyn Fredericks

Over 70% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in urban or regional urban areas. The statistics demonstrate that living in urban areas is as much part of reality of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in a rural, remote or discrete community. Despite this, there has been limited attention paid to the issues that impact on Indigenous achievements in education, or how to improve health status, housing and rates of incarceration and the struggle for cultural recognition in urban localities. A conference focusing on the issues and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in urban areas was long over-due.

The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) National Indigenous Studies Conference, Perspectives on Urban life: Connections and Reconnections was held in Canberra from 28 September – 1 October 2009.

The conference was broken up into a series of themes, including:

Urban Identity and the Urban Experience

Health

Education

Culture and Heritage

Representation and Cultural Expression

Urban Histories

Demography

Language

Mobility and Migration

Housing

Community Partnerships

I attended papers across a broad selection of themes. For this conference overview I will focus particularly on the health and demography themes. A few health papers really stood out. For example, Michael Wright's paper titled *Giving and receiving care: reframing the work of Indigenous care-giving* was one of these. Michael spoke how care giving and relationships provide stability in many Indigenous families and communities even though what is called the 'ethic of care' remains absent from the debate. He specifically narrowed in on mental health issues and the level of complexity and concepts of Indigenous care-giving within the area of mental health. The work comes from Michael's PhD research based within the greater Perth region.

Anthony Brown delivered a dynamic presentation on the Koori Kids Adolescent Unit within the Family Counselling Service at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Anthony demonstrated how an integrated approach ensures culture is embedded throughout the service delivery and care of the program. While Teddy Hart and Sandra Kelly's presentation focused on Aboriginal men's mental health needs through an outreach program at Blacktown in NSW. The results of the program were increased numbers of Aboriginal people linking into the health service and improved communication between Aboriginal community organisations and mainstream mental health services.

The demographic sessions really highlighted the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in some regions. For example, John Taylor in his presentation titled *Indigenous urbanisation: real or imagined?* showed the increasing concentrations of Indigenous people in towns and cities and the decline in rural areas. He attributed this to the combined effects of migration, natural increase and increased census identification. The other thing John spoke of was out-marriage which is now contributing to higher numbers of Indigenous people. That is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who partner with non-Indigenous people and have children as a result of that relationship. John Taylor's presentation gave us a glimpse of further growth: he predicted based on current patterns of growth that the Indigenous population in the greater Brisbane area would hit around 80,000 by the year 2016.

There were prizes given to Mary Anne Gale, Eileen McHughes, Phyllis Williams and Verna Koolmatrie for the best presentation at the conference for *Lakun Ngarrindjeri Thunggari: weaving the Ngarridjeri language back to health* and to Kelly Greenop for the best student presentation for *Place attachment and culture in contemporary Indigenous Inala*. A number of other people were given notable mentions for their presentations.

A number of publishers had books for sale and universities had displays with including what courses and programs they had on offer. One of the popular stands was the Aurora Project and The Charlie Perkins Trust stand who were giving out copies of *The Indigenous students' guide to postgraduate scholarships in Australia and overseas*. Richard Potok was available to discuss the guide.

The AIATSIS Perspectives on Urban Life: Connections and Reconnections Conference explored Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and needs in urban areas. There were some presentations which didn't quite hit the mark or started out focusing on urban issues and then drifted off. I think all presenters tried hard to develop papers which would be relevant to the themes and the conference. I think most importantly, it did leave people with a greater understanding of the issues and concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas.