

LIVING CULTURE: FIRST NATIONS ARTS PARTICIPATION AND WELLBEING

September 25, 2017

Overview

Living Culture presents arts and culture data from the ABS's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) about Indigenous Australians' engagement with First Nations arts, festivals, languages and broadcasting, and attendance at arts and cultural venues and events. The data can be explored through interactive [dashboards](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/living-culture-dashboards/) (<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/living-culture-dashboards/>), or downloaded in detailed [tables](http://australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/natsiss-data-file-for-publicat-59c492899a733.xlsx) (<http://australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/natsiss-data-file-for-publicat-59c492899a733.xlsx>) with breakdowns by a range of characteristics including by state/territory and remoteness areas.

Living Culture contributes to the growing body of evidence about the critical role of culture as the foundation of First Nations wellbeing.

Resources

- [Summary infographic](#)
- [Data tables \(Excel\)](#)
- [Living Culture – Interactive dashboards](#)
- [About this research](#)
- [Related research about First Nations arts, culture and wellbeing](#)

Key stories

Click on key stories below or scroll down to read more.

- First Nations arts engagement supports empowerment, community connectedness and wellbeing among First Nations Australians.
- First Nations arts practice has a strong relationship with both cultural maintenance (such as speaking a First Nations language or recognising homelands) and mainstream outcomes (such as education and employment). Those who are disenfranchised from both are the least likely to create art. Action is needed to ensure access to the empowering benefits of the arts for all First Nations people.
- Older First Nations Australians are more likely to participate in, and earn income from, First Nations arts. This highlights the contribution of arts and culture to the wellbeing and livelihoods of older First Nations Australians. It also highlights the importance of supporting intergenerational cultural transmission, and investment to engage young First Nations people in the arts – one of the fastest growing and at risk segments of our population.
- One in three First Nations people in remote Australia creatively participate in First Nations arts and almost one in ten earn income from arts. However, remote creative arts participation rates declined between 2008 and 2014-15 driven by declines in remote NT and Queensland – a concerning trend given the importance of First Nations arts to cultural and economic sustainability, and community wellbeing.
- There is a strong relationship between First Nations language maintenance and arts engagement, and many First Nations people across Australia are connecting with their culture by learning First Nations languages.
- Relatives of those impacted by policies of child removal are rekindling interrupted connections to culture through the arts.
- First Nations people are a growing audience segment at arts and cultural venues such as art galleries, museums and libraries.

First Nations arts engagement supports empowerment, community connectedness and wellbeing among First Nations Australians.

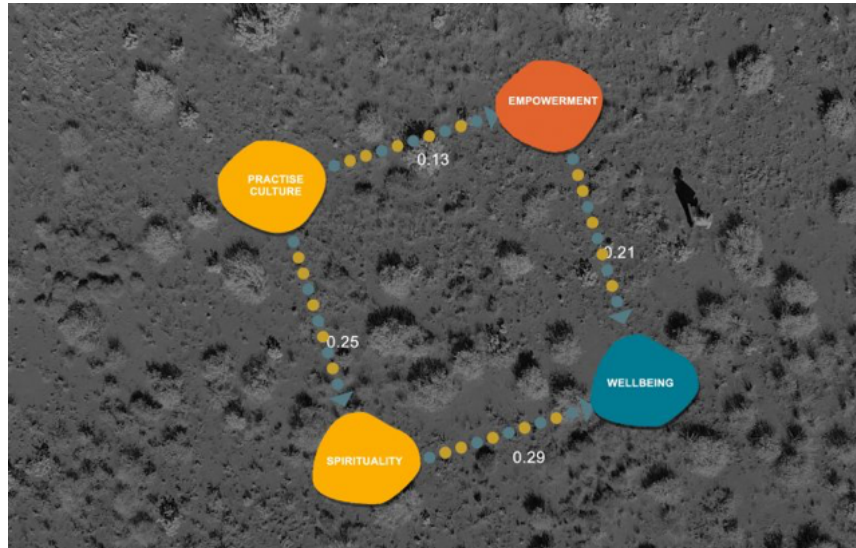
The Australia Council worked with researchers from the ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) on new analysis of the NATSISS. Using a statistical model to control for a range of observed cultural and socioeconomic factors, CAEPR found that First Nations people who creatively participate in First Nations arts or attend First Nations festivals are more likely to be studying or intend to in the future, and are more likely to feel able to have a say within their community. First Nations people who attend First Nations festivals are also more likely to feel able to get support outside their household, and to report happiness.^[1]

These findings indicate that engagement with First Nations arts and cultural expression has an inter-relationship with measures of subjective wellbeing related to empowerment and community connectedness – but with the caveats that wellbeing is complex and multidimensional, and the research cannot show us which caused which outcome.

These results are reinforced – and the pathways further explained – by the [Interplay Project](https://crc-rep.com/interplay) (<https://crc-rep.com/interplay>), a multi-year project by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP). The Interplay Project worked with remote communities to map the interrelationships between

- First Nations community priorities of culture, empowerment and community; and
- government priorities of education, employment and health.

Bringing together stories and numbers, the results suggest that practising culture, including through arts participation, is the key to improving wellbeing for Aboriginal people in remote Australia – and that empowerment and spirituality are pathways between practising culture and wellbeing (measured through 'life satisfaction').[2]



CRC-REP 2017, *Interrelationships: Bringing together Stories and Numbers, It all comes back to culture*

The NATSISS analysis found a relationship between arts engagement and measures of empowerment and community connectedness, but did not find a direct relationship between arts engagement and life satisfaction – the Interplay framework suggests that the relationship between practising culture and life satisfaction ('wellbeing') is an indirect relationship, mediated by empowerment and spirituality (at least in remote Australia).

[1] Full details of the analysis are published in Biddle, N. and Crawford, H. 2017, *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing: Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, *CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017* (<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2017WP117.php>). The Australia Council for the Arts provided funding support for this project, and collaborative work to conceptualise the paper and select the variables for analysis.

[2] CRC-REP 2017, *Interplay Wellbeing Framework Poster 2: It all comes back to culture* (https://old.crc-rep.com/sites/default/files/upload/interplay_poster_2_culture.pdf); Data visualisation: *Interrelationships: Bringing together Stories and Numbers, It all comes back to culture* (<https://old.crc-rep.com/wellbeingframework/INTERRELATIONSHIPS.html>), viewed 7 September 2017. Full details of the analysis are published in Cairney S, Abbott T, Quinn S, Yamaguchi J, Wilson B, Wakerman J 2017, 'Interplay wellbeing framework: a collaborative methodology 'bringing together stories and numbers' to quantify Aboriginal cultural values in remote Australia (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28468656>),' *International Journal for Equity in Health*, May 3, 16(1):68.'

First Nations arts practice has a strong relationship with both cultural maintenance (such as speaking a First Nations language or recognising homelands) and mainstream outcomes (such as education and employment). Those who are disenfranchised from both are the least likely to create art. Action is needed to ensure access to the empowering benefits of the arts for all First Nations people.

Using a statistical model to control for a range of socioeconomic and cultural factors, researchers at CAEPR found that First Nations people who attend First Nations festivals or creatively participate in First Nations arts are more likely to be employed, and are more than twice as likely to have a degree.[3]

While it could be that education and employment support First Nations arts engagement or vice versa, these findings show that cultural participation and mainstream success can go hand in hand. They also indicate that those experiencing disadvantage are the least likely to access First Nations arts and their benefits.

The Interplay findings suggest that empowerment is a causal link between practising culture and employment outcomes, and that culture is the foundation upon which – through empowerment – pathways lead to better outcomes in education, employment and wellbeing.[4]

Language maintenance and recognition of homelands appear to be key support factors for arts engagement. First Nations people who speak or understand a First Nations language or who recognise homelands are much more likely to attend First Nations festivals, and creatively or economically participate in First Nations arts.

[3] Biddle, N. and Crawford, H. 2017, *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing: Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, *CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017* (<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2017WP117.php>). The Australia Council for the Arts provided funding support for this project, and collaborative work to conceptualise the paper and select the variables for analysis.

[4] CRC-REP 2017, *Interrelationships: Bringing together Stories and Numbers* (<https://old.crc-rep.com/wellbeingframework/INTERRELATIONSHIPS.html>), viewed 7 September 2017. Full details of the analysis are published in Cairney S, Abbott T, Quinn S, Yamaguchi J, Wilson B, Wakerman J 2017, 'Interplay wellbeing framework: a collaborative methodology 'bringing together stories and numbers' to quantify Aboriginal cultural values in remote Australia (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28468656>),' *International Journal for Equity in Health*, May 3, 16(1):68.

I knew straight away that I wanted to be in the arts because my family were great storytellers: we always celebrated our culture at home through music, dance and song. These experiences gave me strength, power, values and the principles that ground work I create today

Stephen Page, Artistic Director Bangarra, Australia Council Dance Award recipient 2017



Older First Nations Australians are more likely to participate, and earn income from, First Nations arts. This highlights the contribution of arts and culture to the wellbeing and livelihoods of older First Nations Australians. It also highlights the importance of supporting intergenerational cultural transmission, and of investment to engage young First Nations people in the arts – one of the fastest growing and at risk segments of our population.

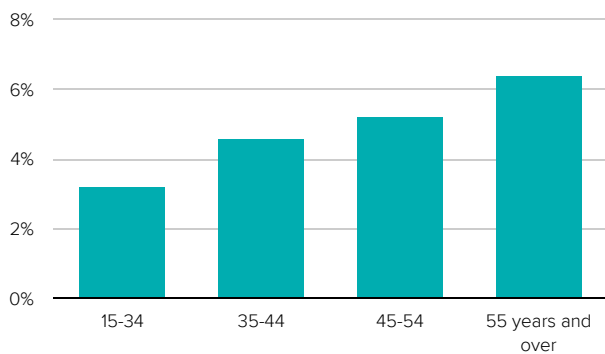
At an age when many Australians are retiring, First Nations artists are contributing to the arts economy, with those aged 65 plus the most likely to be earning income from First Nations arts ('economic arts participation').[5]

The ABS data shows that rates of economic arts participation increase across the age groups.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies* (<https://old.crc-rep.com/research/enterprise-development/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-art-economies>) project by the CRC-REP found that artists over 55 years account for 31% of all artists in remote Indigenous art centres, but generate 55% of sales, despite large falls in sales for older artists.[6]

As well as being more likely to earn income from arts, the ABS data shows that First Nations people aged 55–64 are more likely to creatively participate in First Nations arts than those aged 15–24 (31% vs 24%), particularly writing and telling stories (7.3% vs 18%). Those aged 45–54 are more likely to attend First Nations festivals (28% vs 19% of those aged 15–24).

First Nations economic arts participation by age



These findings highlight the important contribution of arts and culture to the livelihood and wellbeing of older First Nations Australians, and the importance of supporting Elders to pass on cultural knowledge to younger generations before it is lost. They also highlight the importance of investment in engaging young First Nations people in the arts – one of the fastest growing segments of our population, who are at risk from a range of factors reflected in high rates of incarceration, suicide, unemployment, substance abuse and disability.

[5] After controlling for a range of socioeconomic and cultural factors. Biddle, N. and Crawford, H. 2017, *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing: Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, *CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017* (<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2017WP117.php>).

[6] CRC-REP *Policy Briefing* (http://www.nintione.com.au/resource/PB009_AboriginalTorresStraitIslanderArtEconomies.pdf): Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project

Data collected for the first time in 2014-15 shows that almost one in ten First Nations people in remote Australia receive income from First Nations arts (8.8%, compared to 2.9% in regional Australia and 2.8% in major cities). In many remote communities arts and cultural production provide the only feasible pathway towards long-term economic and cultural sustainability.[7]

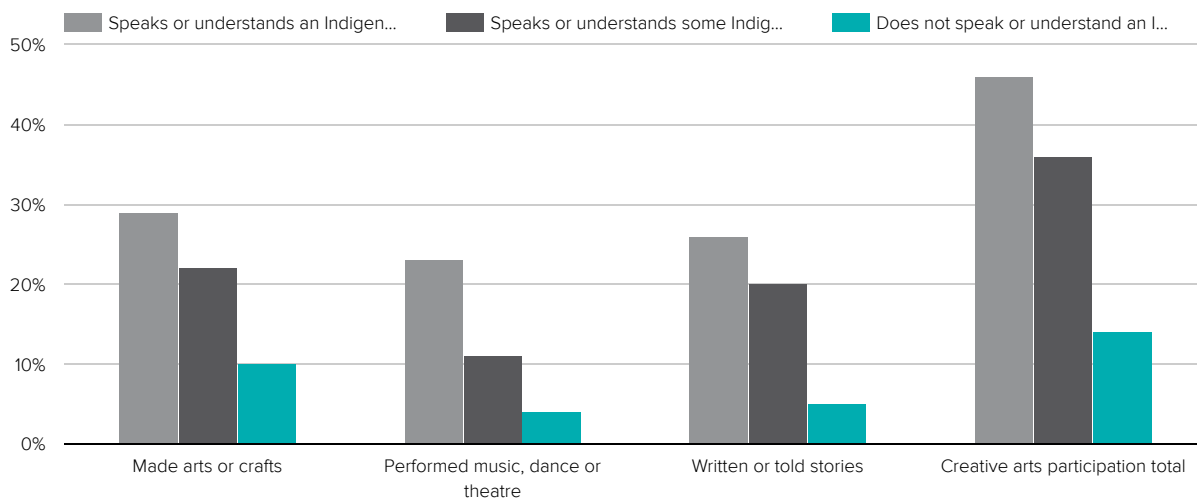
A bar chart comparing the percentage of respondents by location (Remote, Regional, Major city) across four economic arts participation activities. The Y-axis represents the percentage, ranging from 0% to 10% in 2% increments. The X-axis lists the activities: Sale of painting and art works, Sale of other arts and crafts, Arranging or participating in cultural dancing or performances, and Economic arts participation total. The legend indicates that Remote is represented by grey bars, Regional by dark grey bars, and Major city by teal bars.

Activity	Remote (%)	Regional (%)	Major city (%)
Sale of painting and art works	6.7	1.5	1.2
Sale of other arts and crafts	2.6	0.6	0.0
Arranging or participating in cultural dancing or performances	1.6	1.6	1.7
Economic arts participation total	8.8	2.9	2.8

However, there were declines in First Nations creative arts participation rates in remote Australia between 2008 and 2014-15 (38% to 33%), driven by declines in remote NT (44% to 35%) and remote Queensland (39% to 30%). There were also significant declines in creative participation among females in remote Australia (40% to 33%).

There is a strong relationship between First Nations language maintenance and arts engagement, and many First Nations people across Australia are connecting to their culture by learning First Nations languages.

Creative arts participation by First Nations language speaking



[8] Biddle, N. and Crawford, H. 2017, *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing: Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017 (<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2017WP117.php>).

Relatives of those impacted by policies of child removal are rekindling interrupted connections to culture through the arts.

First Nations people who have had a relative removed are significantly more likely to attend First Nations festivals or create First Nations art than those who were removed themselves, or those who have not had a relative removed.[9] The loss of culture had devastating impacts for many First Nations people affected by policies of child removal. [10] It is recognised that connections to culture through the arts can have healing and rehabilitative effects.

[9] After using a statistical model to control for a range of cultural and socioeconomic factors. Biddle, N. and Crawford, H. 2017, *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing: Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017 (<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2017WP117.php>).

[10] Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>), Commonwealth of Australia.

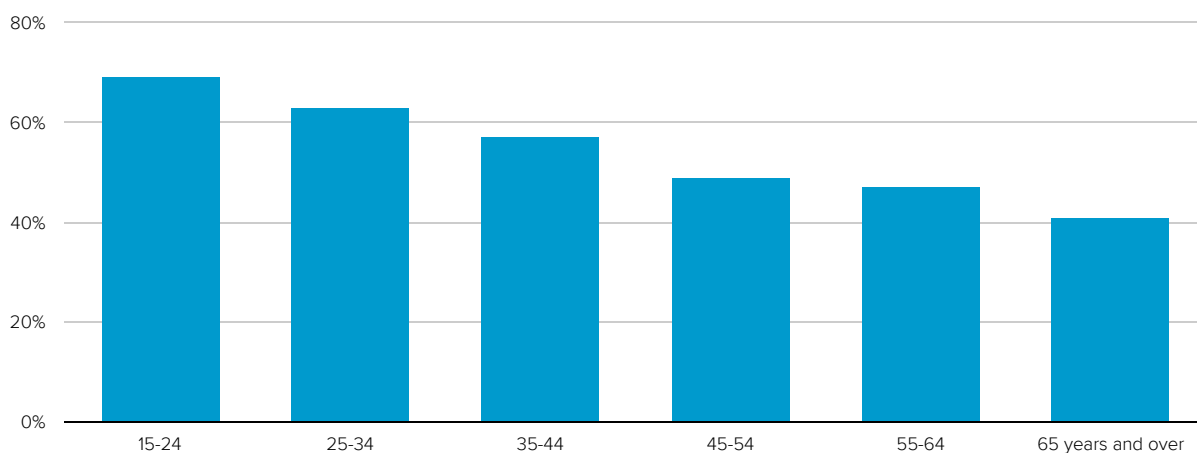
First Nations people are a growing audience segment at arts and cultural venues such as art galleries, museums, libraries, theatres and movies.

The proportion of First Nations people attending Indigenous or non-Indigenous arts and cultural venues and events increased between 2008 and 2014–15 (48% to 59%), including an increase in those attending libraries, museums and art galleries (32% to 37%). Data on First Nations attendance at theatre and concerts (21%) and attendance at movies (44%) were collected separately for the first time.

First Nations people with disability attend venues and events at similar levels to First Nations people without disability, but are less likely to attend movies (39% vs 48%) and more likely to visit libraries, museums or art galleries (39% vs 35%).

Younger First Nations people are more likely to attend arts and cultural venues and events than older First Nations people. People who speak First Nations languages are less likely to attend. This contrasts with the age and language stories for First Nations arts participation and First Nations festival attendance.

First Nations attendance at arts and cultural venues and events by age group



About this research

The ABS's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) is an important national data collection. It came from a recommendation in the *Indigenous Deaths in Custody* report[11] about the need for data to achieve equality, and to ensure that barriers to accessing services can be brought to light and addressed.

This Australia Council project aims to help make the arts data collected through the NATSISS accessible to First Nations people, communities and organisations, the arts sector and decision makers; and to ensure that the arts story is being told.

The *Living Culture* project supplements the Australia Council's National Arts Participation Survey, and the Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia undertaken by Macquarie University, by ensuring that data are published on First Nations people's engagement with arts and cultural expression based on a large nationally representative sample.

For *Living Culture*, the NATSISS sample included 7,823 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over in 2008, and 7,022 in 2014-15 (children were included in the broader ABS NATSISS sample). For more information about the NATSISS, see the [NATSISS home page](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4714.0) (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4714.0>) or see [here](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4714.0Appendix12014-15?opendocument&tabname=Notes&prodno=4714.0&issue=2014-15&num=&view) (<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4714.0Appendix12014-15?opendocument&tabname=Notes&prodno=4714.0&issue=2014-15&num=&view>) for technical information and comparisons between 2008 and 2014-15.

The words 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably in this project to refer with respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, and their arts and cultures.

[11] *Indigenous Deaths in Custody 1989 – 1996* (<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/indigenous-deaths-in-custody>), a report prepared by the Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, October 1996.

[12] ABS media release: *Key Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander data released* ([http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Media%20Release~Key%20Aboriginal%20&%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20data%20released%20\(Media%20Release\)~1](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Media%20Release~Key%20Aboriginal%20&%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20data%20released%20(Media%20Release)~1)), 28 April 2016.

This survey is not just about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it's for us. We need this information to make sure that we are getting things right – we need to feel confident that our issues are accurately reflected in government policies, programs and services.

Professor Tom Calma AO, NATSISS champion and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner[12]

Related research about First Nations arts, culture and wellbeing

Living Culture builds on the Australia Council's First Nations arts research program, and contributes to the growing body of evidence about the critical role of culture as the foundation of First Nations wellbeing.

Australia Council research

- *Building Audiences* (2015) – research exploring strategies for increasing audiences in the First Nations arts sector.
- *Showcasing Creativity* (2016) – research examining First Nations performing arts programming in Australia's mainstream venues and festivals.
- *Connecting Australians* (2017) – results from the National Arts Participation Survey about Australian's engagement with the arts, including increased engagement with First Nations arts.
- The Australia Council has also published *Protocols for working with Indigenous artists* (2007).

Other research based on the NATSISS

- *Culture key for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children* (2017) – an ABS media release featuring NATSISS data about the strength of children's participation in First Nations arts and culture.
- *Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and the relationship with wellbeing* (2017) – a Working Paper by researchers from CAEPR with full details of analysis drawn on in *Living Culture*.
- *Speaking an Indigenous language linked to youth wellbeing* (2011) – ABS analysis of the 2008 NATSISS found that First Nations youth who speak an Indigenous language are less likely to experience risk factors associated with poor wellbeing, including high risk alcohol consumption, illicit substance use and violence.

Impacts of arts and culture programs

- *Supporting healthy communities through arts programs* (2014) – a 2014 review for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. It found benefits of participation in First Nations arts programs include improved physical and mental health and wellbeing; increased social inclusion and cohesion; some improvements in school retention and attitudes towards learning; increased validation of, and connection to, culture; improved social and cognitive skills; and some evidence of crime reduction.
- *Health and wellbeing outcomes of programs for First Nations Australians that include strategies to enable the expression of cultural identities* (2017) – a recent systematic review published in the *Australian Journal of Primary Health*. It provides evidence that interventions that include opportunities for expression of cultural identities can have beneficial effects for First Nations Australians.
- *Indigenous Cultural Festivals: Evaluating impact on community health and wellbeing* (2010) – a 2010 evaluation of three First Nations festivals by researchers from RMIT. It found benefits for participants included empowerment, capacity building, social capital, exposure to positive role models, cultural security, cultural confidence, local leadership, economic opportunities and pride in Indigenous identity

Wellbeing projects

- *The Elders' report into preventing Indigenous self-harm and youth suicide* (2014) – voices of Elders' calling for action to improve Indigenous wellbeing in Australia, with foreword by Mick Gooda and introduction by Professor Pat Dudgeon. Themes include community empowerment, the strengthening of cultural identity, maintenance of Indigenous languages, culturally appropriate employment, bi-cultural education and returning to country.
- *The National longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing (Mayi Kuwayu)* (underway) – a new national longitudinal study on how First Nations culture relates to health and wellbeing, led by Dr Raymond Lovett and First Nations research partners including the Lowitja Institute and AIATSIS.
- The *Interplay Project* (2011-2017) – a comprehensive 'whole of system' project about First Nations wellbeing by the CRC-REP, led by Sheree Cairney.
- *Interplay wellbeing framework: a collaborative methodology 'bringing together stories and numbers' to quantify Aboriginal cultural values in remote Australia* (2017) – full details of the Interplay Project analysis, published in the *International Journal for Equity in Health*.

Research about First Nations arts and artists

- National Survey of Remote Indigenous Artists (underway) – a new nationwide survey of individual Indigenous artists working in remote areas in all forms of artistic and cultural production. Led by David Throsby and Katya Petetskaya from the Department of Economics at Macquarie University.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies (2010-2016) – a comprehensive study about remote Indigenous art centres by the CRC-REP, led by Tim Acker.

International studies

- Cultural Continuity as a Hedge against Suicide in Canada's First Nations (1998) – a famous 1998 study among Canada's First Nations communities which found that a sense of identity and cultural continuity can help Indigenous people, especially youth, to see they have a future.
- Cultural Continuity as a Determinant of Indigenous Peoples' Health (2016) – a synthesis of qualitative research in Canada and the United States published in *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*.