

SEARCH: Community-led research that's improving the health of Aboriginal children

What is SEARCH?

The Study of Environment on Aboriginal Resilience and Child Health (SEARCH) is Australia's largest ongoing study of the health of urban Aboriginal children and their families.

Since 2008, SEARCH has been following over 1,600 Aboriginal children in urban and regional NSW to provide critical information about their ongoing health, from obesity and chronic disease, to hearing and speech development.

SEARCH is the only platform of its kind, and is providing a holistic, ever-growing picture of the health and wellbeing of urban Aboriginal communities – evidence that is being used by communities to drive real improvements in health services.

Most importantly, SEARCH is owned and led by Aboriginal people. It functions as a long term, co-creative partnership between the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AH&MRC), Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) in NSW, the Sax Institute, and leading researchers from across Australia.

How does it work?

SEARCH aims to fill an information gap about the health of Aboriginal people living in urban and large regional centres, who now make up the majority of Aboriginal people in Australia, but are still under-represented in health research.

Using a community-led approach, SEARCH supports ACCHSs to set the research priorities and decide how data is collected, interpreted and used. This ultimately leads to smarter research that can make a bigger impact on the health of Aboriginal children and their families.

With a dynamic, co-creative research partnership, SEARCH is a vehicle for effectively translating the knowledge collected into solutions developed by the communities to tackle priority health areas.

“The data from SEARCH is so important – this has given us important information about the things we were concerned about and now we are doing something about it.”

Darryl Wright, CEO
Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation

SEARCH focus areas and findings



Ear health and child development

According to SEARCH data, one in three participating children have been diagnosed with middle ear disease, and 10% of Aboriginal children have significant hearing problems. As a result of these findings, the NSW Ministry of Health provided funding for children at participating ACCHs, along with some additional ACCHs, to receive specialist services. To date, more than 8,000 extra speech and hearing services and 300 ENT surgeries have been provided to NSW Aboriginal children.



Mental health

While the majority of children participating in SEARCH have good mental health, research shows that one in three SEARCH children are at high risk of experiencing mental health issues. SEARCH is working with select local health districts to test community-led mental health interventions to help support Aboriginal child and adolescent mental health.



Obesity and chronic disease

SEARCH data indicates that food and nutrition insecurity is the third most significant factor affecting Aboriginal child health and wellbeing, and is related to higher rates of obesity and chronic disease. SEARCH is now embarking on an Aboriginal-led food security program to promote healthy and sustainable diets and reduce food stress in urban Aboriginal households.



Housing

Nearly one in two families in social housing are struggling with poor dwelling conditions, and SEARCH has shown a connection between poor housing conditions

and gastrointestinal disease in urban Aboriginal children. SEARCH is bringing these findings to the attention of decision makers in both the housing and health sectors.

Making a difference

SEARCH is collecting a wealth of information on the health and wellbeing of urban Aboriginal children. To date, 70 researchers from over 25 institutions have used the cohort data to publish 24 papers, making SEARCH the most widely published individual source of data about Aboriginal health in Australia.

But it doesn't stop there. We also have a strong track record of supporting Aboriginal researchers and community members to undertake training in research and health promotion. SEARCH leaders provide mentorship and expertise along the research journey for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers.

As we embark on the next ten years of the study, SEARCH will continue to work collaboratively with communities. And together, we can use this rich data source to help inform innovative programs and advocate for policy changes to support the future health of urban Aboriginal children and their families.

About the Sax Institute

The Sax Institute is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that improves health and wellbeing by driving better use of evidence in policies, programs and services.

Find out more

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