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To cite this article: Jacob Prehn & Maggie Walter (2023) Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Social Work in Australia, Australian Social Work, 76:3, 371-378, DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2023.2186256

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2023.2186256>



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Published online: 17 May 2023.



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Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Social Work in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue that in Australian social work context and practice, Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV) needs to be operationalised by enacting the principles of Indigenous Data Governance (ID-GOV). Failure to embed ID-SOV and ID-GOV leaves the profession open to claims that it is complicit in disempowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in relation to data. ID-SOV is a global movement focused on Indigenous Peoples having access to, and ownership, control, and possession of, their data. Social work is a profession committed to championing equal rights and challenging injustices. Therefore, it has an obligation to decolonise existing data structures in its workplaces. This article outlines the Australian ID-SOV movement, including current scholarship on operationalising ID-SOV in the form of ID-GOV, and the challenge for social work to position itself in alliance with the ID-SOV movement and in active participation in changing the way Indigenous data have traditionally been collected and used in Australia

IMPLICATIONS

- The Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV) movement demands the data rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is re-shaping the Australian data landscape.
- If social work is true to its stated commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, the profession needs to engage with ID-SOV and work to operationalise Indigenous Data Governance (ID-GOV) across social work environments.
- A particular focus of this article is the importance of ID-SOV and ID-GOV being operationalised within social work research and policy in areas such as “child protection”, the criminal justice system, health and wellbeing, and housing.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 August 2022
Accepted 26 February 2023

KEYWORDS

First Nations; Aboriginal;
Torres Strait Islander;
Indigenous Data
Sovereignty; Indigenous
Data Governance; Rights;
Support; Research; Child
Safety

The global Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV) movement is focused on the rights of Indigenous Peoples to govern the creation, collection, ownership, and application of data pertaining to their lives (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). The ID-SOV movement began in 1998 in Canada, when First Nations Peoples’ data were intentionally kept from them. In response, Canadian First Nations people developed the Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) (Schnarch, 2004). ID-SOV

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networks are now active in many nations, and are particularly strong in the Anglo-colonised countries of Australia, Canada, the United States and Aotearoa (New Zealand).¹

The global ID-SOV movement uses a rights-based framework and builds upon the rights established by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2008). The benefits of this framework will only be realised when Indigenous people have rights to the ownership, control, and application of any data pertaining to their lives (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016a). In 2019, Indigenous Peoples from a range of countries including Australia came together to develop the CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) Principles to sit alongside the non-Indigenous FAIR (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse) Principles of the open data movement (Carroll et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2021).

Australian Indigenous Data Sovereignty

In Australia, ID-SOV began with a global workshop called Indigenous Data Sovereignty held at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2016. More than 20 participants, mostly Indigenous academics from across the CANZUS countries, worked to build upon the OCAP Principles and to develop the foundations of the ID-SOV movement. In Australia, these became tangible at the inaugural Australian Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit held in Canberra in 2018, cohosted by Maiam nayri Wingara people (2021), the Australian Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (2021). More than 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates from across Australia, along with invited colleagues from Te Mana Raraunga (2019), the Māori Data Sovereignty Network, attended. At the summit, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders exercised their sovereign rights and agreed upon the definitions of key terms (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018, p. 1):

1. In Australia, “Indigenous Data” refers to information or knowledge, in any format or medium, which is about and may affect Indigenous Peoples both collectively and individually.
2. “Indigenous Data Sovereignty” refers to the right of Indigenous people to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse of Indigenous Data.
3. “Indigenous Data Governance” refers to the right of Indigenous Peoples to autonomously decide what, how, and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed, and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous Peoples reflect our priorities, values, cultures, worldviews, and diversity.

The Summit developed five key principles of Indigenous Data Governance (ID-GOV), with delegates asserting that Australian Indigenous people have the right to (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018, p. 2):

1. Exercise control of the data ecosystem including creation, development, stewardship, analysis, dissemination, and infrastructure.

2. Data that are contextual and disaggregated (available and accessible at individual, community and First Nations levels).
3. Data that are relevant and empower sustainable self-determination and effective self-governance.
4. Data structures that are accountable to Indigenous Peoples and First Nations.
5. Data that are protective and respect our individual and collective interests.

Good ID-GOV empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make effective decisions to support their communities and First Nations in the ways that meet their needs and aspirations (Lovett et al., 2019; Maiaim nayri Wingara, 2018).

Current and Historical Issues Regarding Indigenous Data

The ID-SOV movement is a response to the historical and ongoing structures of colonisation, which include troubling Indigenous data practices (Lovett et al., 2019). In Australia, Palawa sociologist and distinguished academic Maggie Walter describes Indigenous data collection as often leading to data that reproduce deficit narratives, or to a phenomenon that Walter (2018, p. 1) terms “5D data”: disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction, and difference. Not only do these data focus on the Indigene as the problem, this construction of the problematic Indigenous person/family/community/nation forms the evidence base for Indigenous-linked policies and programs. The failure of the first Closing the Gap (CTG) policy initiative (2008–2018), as well as the 200 years of ineffective and failed policies prior to CTG, suggests that policies, not the people subject to them, are the problem (Walter & Carroll, 2021).

Walter (2018, p. 1) identified the existence of an Indigenous “data paradox”, by which she means that there are “vast amounts of data about” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but “very little for” them. What she describes as the “too much data” space is occupied by significant amounts of official government statistics and administrative data about Aboriginal people produced from the standpoint of non-Indigenous Australians. In the “too little data” space, which contains data for Indigenous Peoples, there exists what she terms a “data desert”: the absence of the types of data Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to make informed decisions about their lives, communities, tribes, and nations (Walter, 2018, p. 1).

Currently, much of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data landscape is overpopulated with what Walter (2018) described as BADDR data: blaming, aggregate, decontextualised, deficit, and restricted. For social workers to avoid the BADDR data trap, the data *needs* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be considered first and foremost, that is, above any non-Indigenous data *wants*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need data relevant to the Indigenous lifeworld (Walter & Suina, 2019), data that are appropriately disaggregated (Davis, 2016), data that are suitably contextualised (Prehn et al., 2021; Walter & Carroll, 2021), data that address Indigenous priorities and agendas (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Walter, 2016; Yap & Yu, 2016), and data that are available and amendable (Walter, Lovett et al., 2021b).

BADDR data are of little relevance to the *needs* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Jelfs, 2016; Walter, 2016). In a time when data saturate our daily lives, discussion has increasingly turned to issues relating to data consent, use, rights, and storage. The Australian

Indigenous data ecosystem² is immense, and includes data created or held by individuals, Indigenous communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations, governments, research institutions, and commercial entities (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016b). Many of these settings involve the social work profession and social workers in areas such as child safety, criminal justice, health and wellbeing, and housing.

As the term ID-SOV suggests, the movement is led by Indigenous Peoples exercising their sovereignty over their own and their peoples' data. The major role for non-Indigenous allies (such as the social work profession and social workers) is to provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve Data Sovereignty by decolonising existing structures that disempower and marginalise Indigenous people from their data (Jelfs, 2016; Pool, 2016; Rowe et al., 2015; Wilks et al., 2018). The point is that most Indigenous-related data are still collected and held by non-Indigenous organisations and entities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, even Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers, cannot change these troubling data practices by themselves. The challenge for social work is whether their commitment to Indigenous rights includes working within their own organisations to change the way Indigenous data are conceptualised, collected, and analysed, questioning which Indigenous data are used, what they are used for, and why (Walter, 2018). For ID-SOV, the answer to those questions must always be to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in terms that the latter have defined.

Operationalising Indigenous Data Sovereignty in Australian Social Work

Social work must consider how the principles of ID-SOV and ID-GOV apply to the profession, and to the institutions and organisations in which social workers conduct research and work as practitioners. As detailed in the Australian Association of Social Work's (2020) *Code of Ethics*, the social work profession and its workers have a key role to play in reducing social disadvantage, in supporting Indigenous Peoples to achieve life outcomes that are equitable with their non-Indigenous counterparts, and in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. It is our argument that ID-SOV and ID-GOV are central components of manifesting these ambitions.

The operationalisation of ID-SOV through ID-GOV is key to prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data *needs* within social work (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016b). In its ordinary English sense, to "operationalise" is "to put into effect, to realise" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022, p. 1). In social research, operationalisation is the process of defining how concepts work, and whether concepts are present or absent; how you operationalise depends on the type of work you are doing (Natalier, 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have already defined the concepts of ID-SOV and ID-GOV, and now social work must operationalise ID-SOV by putting the five principles of ID-GOV into action (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018).

The breadth of where and when is as wide as the areas of social work practice, but current priorities include social work research (Paine et al., 2021; Walter & Suina, 2019), policy (Walter, Kukutai et al., 2021a), so-called "child safety" (Hunter et al., 2020; Krakouer, 2019; Krakouer et al., 2021), the health and wellbeing sector (Lovett, 2016; Lovett et al., 2021), and the criminal justice system (Cunneen, 2016). All of

these systems collect, maintain, and use vast amounts of data, the majority of which contributes to the dominant narrative of Indigenous deficit. Often the data users in these systems are consumed with simplistic, binary, comparative analysis between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. While these data do identify that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience considerably worse outcomes across many measures, the types of data First Nations people *need*—to overcome disadvantage and grow strong through being empowered to make data-driven decisions—is largely absent (Walter & Carroll, 2021).

Operationalising ID-SOV in Australian social work requires that the five ID-GOV principles be put into practice: that Indigenous people have control of the data ecosystem, that data structures are accountable to Indigenous Australians, and that data are contextualised, disaggregated, relevant, protective, and respectful. In so-called “child protection”, this could mean having an Indigenous Data Governance Committee for Indigenous data at the state or territory level, or at a level that is more appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. An Indigenous Data Governance Committee could be similar to that used in the Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing (MK Study, 2022). *The Family Matters Report 2020* by Hunter et al. (2020) identifies ID-SOV as key to interpreting Indigenous data in a meaningful way. However, we suggest that social work and the child protection system need to go a step further by including ID-GOV at the data conceptualisation phase. This is because once the data are already collected, the ability to ask the types of questions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people *need* answers to is limited. Having ID-SOV and ID-GOV embedded in the child protection system begins to change the data landscape to meet the needs of Indigenous people, their families, and their communities.

The criminal justice system is another site of extreme over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths aged 10–17 years are 16 times more likely to be under youth justice supervision than non-Indigenous Australians, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are 12 times more likely to be imprisoned. Although this binary comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous data highlights the ongoing impact of colonisation and its damaging effects on Indigenous people (Cunneen, 2016; Cunneen & Rowe, 2014), there are few to no data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on strengths-based factors that contribute to people and communities being safe and healthy. Social workers practising in the criminal justice system can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and contribute to ID-SOV and ID-GOV by decolonising existing data structures that disempower and marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their data and the types of data they need for meaningful change to be achieved (Jelfs, 2016; Pool, 2016; Rowe et al., 2015). Through the process of decolonisation, the empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding their data can occur. This will contribute to enabling Australia’s First Nations Peoples to begin to Indigenise the data ecosystem to reflect their worldviews and achieve their data needs and aspirations.

The social work profession must challenge and not be complicit in contributing to BADDR data trends (Walter, Lovett et al., 2021b) and the 5D Indigenous data phenomenon (Walter, 2016). Therefore, we call on the social work profession and social workers to:

1. Advocate for the principles of ID-SOV and ID-GOV to be enacted across their organisations and in their research.
2. Decolonise existing data structures that marginalise Indigenous people from their data.
3. Empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Indigenise the data ecosystem.
4. Include Indigenous Data, ID-SOV, and ID-GOV in:
 - (i) the *Australian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics*
 - (ii) the Australian Association of Social Work's (2021) *Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS)*
 - (iii) professional development delivered by the AASW and other entities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Australian social work must operationalise ID-SOV through enacting the principles of ID-GOV. To do otherwise makes the profession complicit in disempowering Indigenous Peoples regarding their data. To date, the centrality of data to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been largely overlooked in social work. This relates especially to the areas of “child protection”, the criminal justice system, housing, and health and wellbeing, and to the research, policy, and practice guidelines that are produced in these areas. The ID-SOV movement, steered by strong Indigenous leadership, must have allies in the social work profession to support them in their work.

Notes

1. This group of nations is sometimes collectively referred to as the CANZUS countries because of their shared history and the ongoing structure of colonisation.
2. A data ecosystem is a data environment and all of its components.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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