
Trends in stillbirths and neonatal deaths among babies born to Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Queensland, 1989-1993 to 2009-2013

Miles Utz, Trisha Johnston and Dannie Zarate

For further information contact:

Health Statistics Branch
Queensland Health
GPO Box 48
Brisbane Queensland 4001 Australia
tel (+61) (07) 3234 1875
hlthstat@health.qld.gov.au
www.health.qld.gov.au

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Trends in stillbirths and neonatal deaths among babies born to Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Queensland, 1989-1993 to 2009-2013

Miles Utz, Trisha Johnston and Dannie Zarate
 Health Statistics Branch, Queensland Health

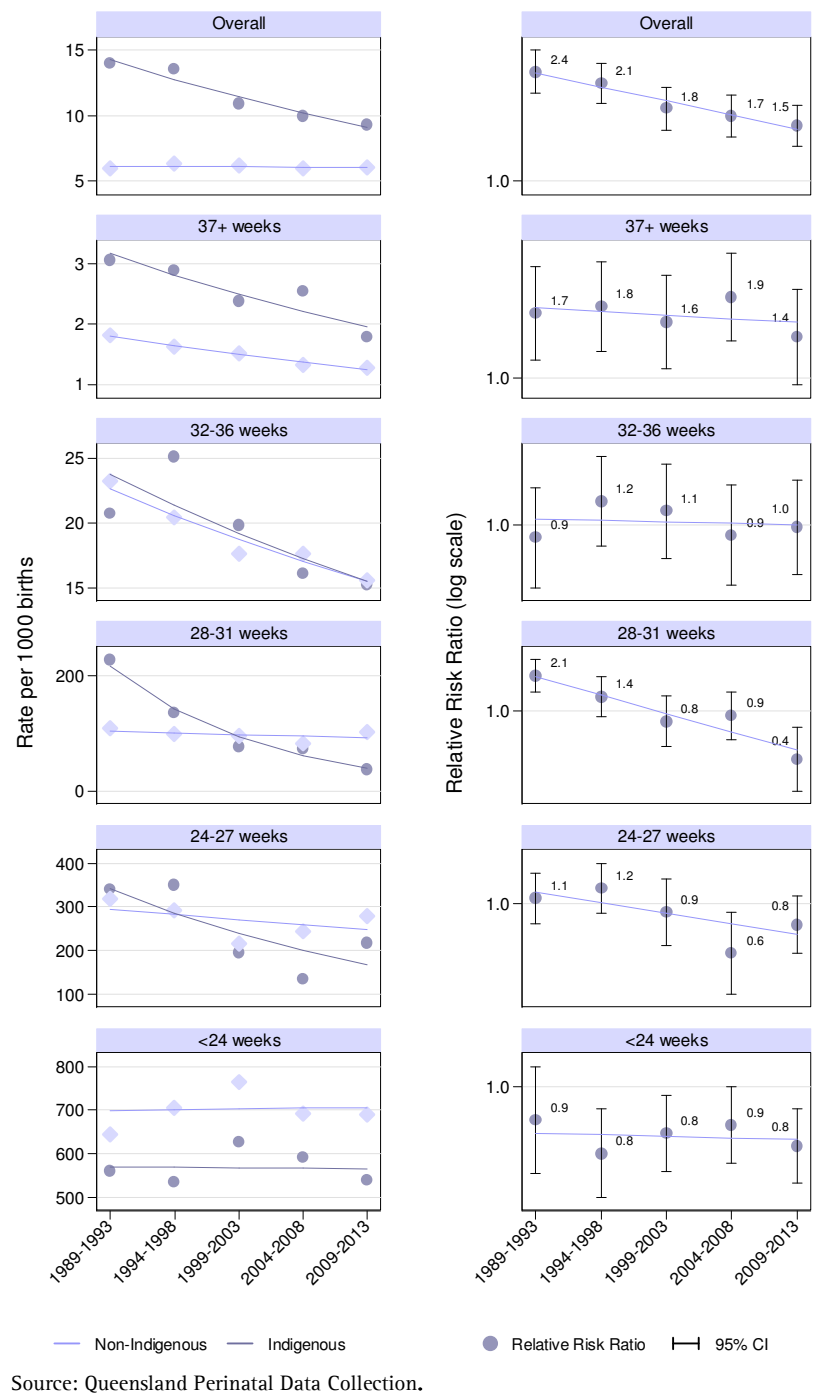
Across Australia, rates of adverse perinatal outcomes among babies born to Indigenous* women are higher than among babies born to non-Indigenous women. In Australia in 2012 babies born to Indigenous women were 1.5 times more likely to be stillborn compared to babies born to non-Indigenous women, 1.8 times more likely to die in the neonatal period and 1.7 times more likely to be born preterm¹. While perinatal mortality and preterm birth rates among babies born to Indigenous women have declined over the last decade¹⁻³, these figures illustrate that a substantial gap remains.

This Statbite examines the trends in stillbirths, neonatal deaths, preterm births and low birthweight babies in Queensland and the gap between these outcomes in births to Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. This report updates and expands upon previous research from the Health Statistics Branch⁴ to examine whether perinatal disparities have diminished in recent years. All singleton births were extracted from the Queensland Perinatal Data Collection (PDC) from 1989 to 2013. Data were aggregated into five year intervals for analyses to minimise the impact of random variation in rates due to the small numbers of outcomes that occur in a single year.

Stillbirth

Overall stillbirth rates declined over the study period in births to Indigenous women (APC[†]: -2.2; 95% CI: -3.2,-1.2) but did not change among births to non-Indigenous women (APC: -0.0; 95% CI: -0.4, 0.3) (Figure 1 and Table 1). In the most recent 5 year period (2009-2013), babies born to Indigenous women were 1.5 (95% CI: 1.3, 1.8) times more likely to be stillborn than babies born to non-Indigenous women. This gap would be

Figure 1 Trends in stillbirth rate and relative risk ratio by gestational age and Indigenous status of mother, Queensland, 1989-93 to 2009-13



* The term Indigenous is used throughout this report when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people collectively.

† APC: Annual Percent Change

closed if the number of stillbirths among Indigenous women for the five year period was reduced from 167 to 108. This equates to about 12 fewer stillbirths per year. While a gap still remains, the disparity in stillbirth rates has reduced over time. The relative risk ratio significantly decreased (APC: -2.2; 95% CI: -3.1,-1.2), driven by the significant decline in the stillbirth rate for births to Indigenous women.

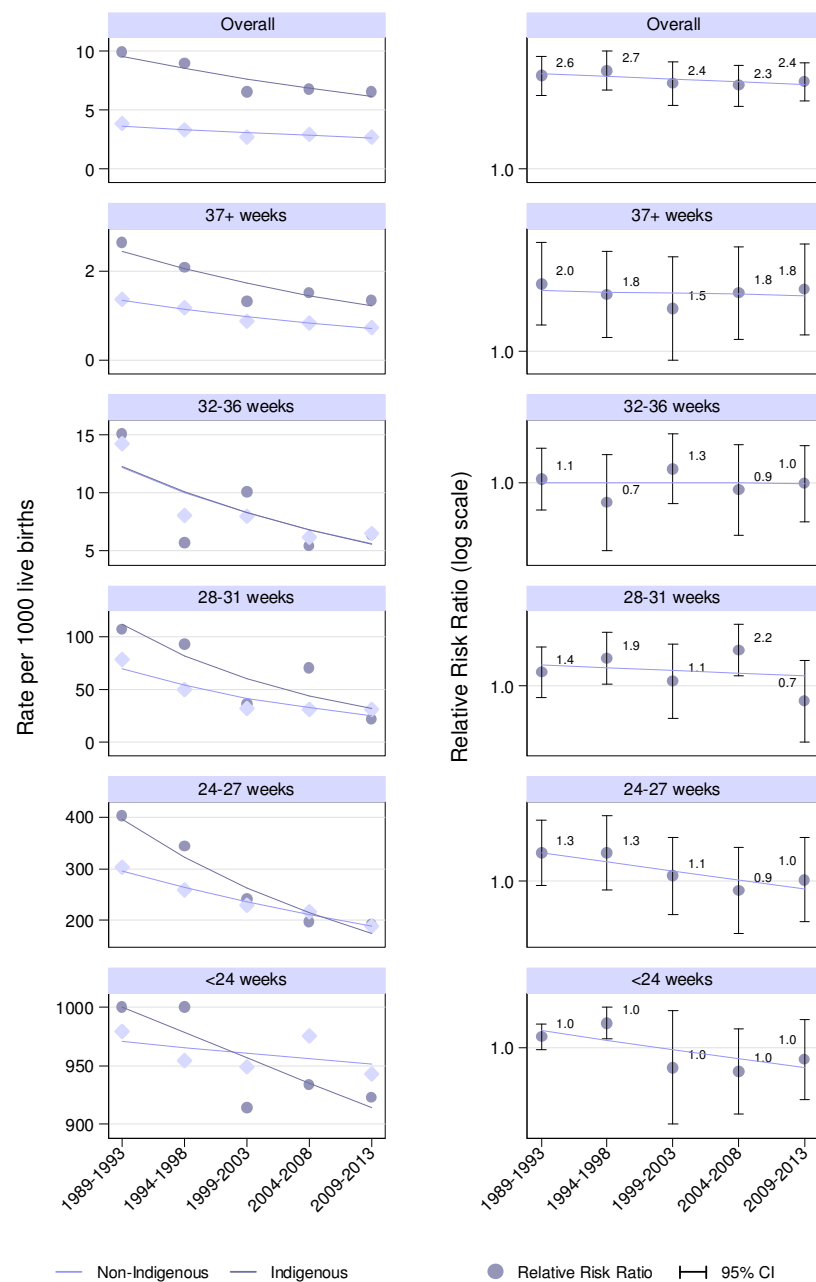
The pattern of disparities differed after stratifying by gestational age[‡]. Between 24 and 31 weeks, stillbirth rates declined at a significantly faster rate for babies born to Indigenous women than for babies born to non-Indigenous women, while stillbirth rates for pre-viable (<24 weeks) babies did not change over the time period.

Between 32-36 weeks, stillbirth rates decreased significantly for babies born to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women with no disparity over the study period. The largest disparity was observed for babies born at term (37+ weeks), where there was a decline in both groups with a slightly faster rate of decline among births to Indigenous women. The differential remains larger among this gestational age group than for others, but has declined over time and was not significant in the latest period (RRR[§]: 1.4; 95% CI: 0.9, 2.0).

Neonatal Death

Overall neonatal death rates significantly declined over the study period in births to Indigenous women (APC: -2.1; 95% CI: -3.3,-0.9) and births to non-Indigenous women (APC: -1.6; 95% CI: -2.1, -1.2) (Figure 2 and Table 1). In the most recent 5 year period (2009-2013), babies born to Indigenous women were 2.4 (95% CI: 2.0, 3.0) times more likely to die in the neonatal period than babies born to non-Indigenous women. This gap would be closed if the number of neonatal deaths among babies of Indigenous women for the five year period reduced from 117 to 48. This equates to about 14 fewer neonatal deaths per year. The disparity in neonatal death rates did not significantly reduce over time (APC: -0.5; 95% CI: -1.7, 0.7).

Figure 2 Trends in neonatal death rate and relative risk ratio by gestational age and Indigenous status of mother, Queensland, 1989-93 to 2009-13



Source: Queensland Perinatal Data Collection.

[‡] Analyses include terminations of pregnancy that are in-scope of the PDC. Interpretation of results, particularly for shorter gestational ages, should take this into consideration. See Limitations for further details.

[§] RRR: Relative Risk Ratio

Analyses by gestational age showed that neonatal death rates significantly decreased for babies born to Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in all viable gestational age groups (24 weeks or more), with babies born between 28-31 weeks showing the most rapid relative decrease in neonatal mortality rates over the study period. There were no statistically significant changes among pre-viable babies (<24 weeks). Disparities in neonatal deaths largely disappeared after stratifying by gestational age. The only outstanding disparity was observed for babies born at term (37+ weeks). The gap among term babies did not significantly reduce over the study period.

Discussion

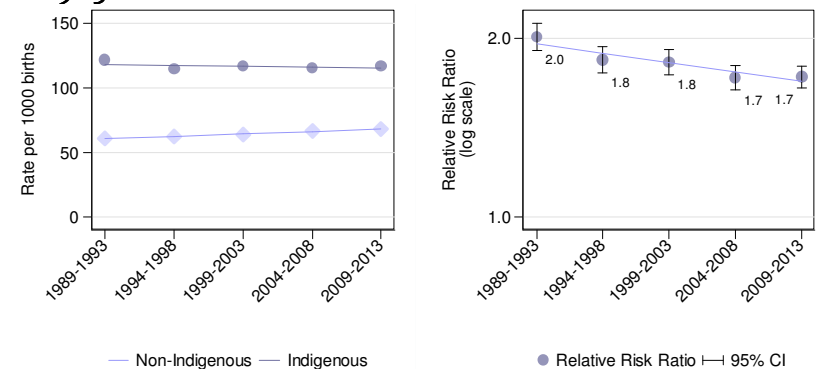
The disparity in stillbirths between babies born to Indigenous women and babies born to non-Indigenous women significantly declined from 1989 to 2013, while the disparity in neonatal deaths also declined but not significantly. After stratifying analyses by gestational age, a significant disparity remains for neonatal deaths among babies born at term, but the gap has closed in other gestational ages, both for neonatal deaths and stillbirths. In the case of stillbirths, a similar study of stillbirths in Queensland attributed this disparity at term to maternal diabetes, perinatal infection, fetal growth restriction and unexplained antepartum fetal death⁵.

While gaps in adverse perinatal outcomes largely narrowed within each gestational age stratum, a larger proportion of births to Indigenous women are preterm** or of low birthweight** compared with births to non-Indigenous women (Figure 3, Figure 4 and Table 1).

The rate of preterm (<37 weeks) birth to Indigenous women only slightly decreased over the study period (APC: -0.1; 95% CI: -0.4, 0.2). The apparent closing of the gap is due to the increasing preterm birth rate among babies born to non-Indigenous women (APC: 0.6; 95% CI: 0.5, 0.7), driven mostly by an increase in slightly preterm births (32-36 weeks). This finding of increasing preterm birth rates is consistent with national results published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare³ and the World

Health Organisation who reported a global increase in preterm birth rates over the last two decades⁶. Higher risk of preterm birth, particularly among Indigenous women, has been found to be associated with smoking during pregnancy, poor social support, pre-existing diabetes and lower attendance of antenatal care⁷.

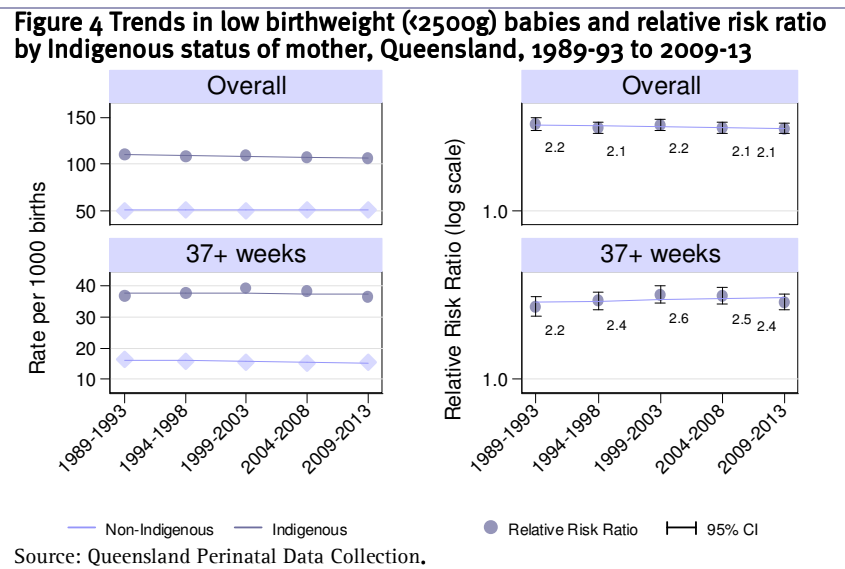
Figure 3 Trends in preterm (<37 weeks gestation) birth rate and relative risk ratio by Indigenous status of mother, Queensland, 1989-93 to 2009-13



Source: Queensland Perinatal Data Collection.

** Analyses include all singleton births, regardless of whether the baby was stillborn or live born. Reporting of preterm birth and low birthweight typically restrict analyses to live births only. Such an approach underestimates the true burden of preterm birth⁶ and low birthweight. In addition, analyses include terminations of pregnancy and interpretation of results should take this into consideration. See Limitations for further details.

Overall, the proportion of low birthweight babies born to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and the relative disparity has not significantly changed over the study period (APC: -0.2; 95% CI: -0.5, 0.2). This is also consistent with national results³. However, at term (37+ weeks) there has been a significant decline in the proportion of low birthweight births to non-Indigenous women. No change was observed in the proportion of low birthweight babies born at term to Indigenous women.



Conclusion

The gap in adverse perinatal outcomes between babies born to Indigenous and non-Indigenous women has diminished from 1989 to 2013 but an apparent disparity remains for babies born at term. In addition, there has been no change in the proportion of preterm or low birthweight births to Indigenous women, and the overall disparity in outcomes is likely to remain until the gestational age/birthweight distribution of babies born to Indigenous women reconciles with that of babies born to non-Indigenous women.

Limitations

These analyses include terminations of pregnancy that are in-scope of the Queensland Perinatal Data Collection i.e. that occurred after 20 weeks gestation *or* where the baby weighed 400g or more. Over the past few decades there has been a suspected increase in the number of pregnancies that end in termination due to an increase in detection of severe fetal abnormalities⁸. It is possible that detection of fetal abnormality and resultant termination rates differ by Indigenous status of mother, and hence interpretation of stillbirth (and to a lesser extent neonatal death) rates from these analyses must take this into consideration, most notably in shorter gestational age strata.

Similarly, rates of preterm birth and low birthweight reported in this Statbite also include terminations of pregnancy. However, rates and trends were calculated with stillbirths (and therefore the majority of terminations) excluded and results showed the same patterns as those reported in this Statbite. Hence, the inclusion of terminations does not seem to have impacted on the trends or differentials for preterm birth and low birthweight.

Appendix

Table 1 Annual percent change (APC) by gestational age and Indigenous status of mother, Queensland, 1989-93 to 2009-13

		<24 weeks	24-27 weeks	28-31 weeks	32-36 weeks	37+ weeks	Overall
Stillbirth	Indigenous	-0.08 (-1.71, 1.58)	-3.47* (-5.78, -1.11)	-8.11* (-10.84, -5.30)	-2.12 (-4.58, 0.39)	-2.38* (-4.54, -0.16)	-2.21* (-3.17, -1.24)
	Non-Indigenous	0.05 (-0.52, 0.62)	-0.84* (-1.66, -0.01)	-0.59 (-1.59, 0.42)	-1.87* (-2.66, -1.08)	-1.81* (-2.47, -1.15)	-0.04 (-0.36, 0.28)
	Relative Risk Ratio	-0.17 (-1.83, 1.52)	-2.50* (-4.73, -0.21)	-7.28* (-9.98, -4.50)	-0.25 (-2.73, 2.29)	-0.58 (-2.78, 1.67)	-2.18* (-3.14, -1.20)
Neonatal Death	Indigenous	-0.44 (-2.30, 1.46)	-4.02* (-6.58, -1.39)	-6.02* (-9.70, -2.19)	-3.88* (-7.55, -0.06)	-3.40* (-5.98, -0.75)	-2.13* (-3.30, -0.94)
	Non-Indigenous	-0.10 (-0.95, 0.76)	-2.23* (-3.26, -1.18)	-4.97* (-6.52, -3.40)	-3.79* (-4.96, -2.60)	-3.18* (-3.98, -2.36)	-1.64* (-2.09, -1.20)
	Relative Risk Ratio	-0.34 (-2.20, 1.56)	-1.82 (-4.43, 0.85)	-1.24 (-4.88, 2.55)	-0.10 (-3.74, 3.68)	-0.24 (-2.88, 2.46)	-0.51 (-1.68, 0.67)
Preterm Birth (<37 weeks gestation)	Indigenous						-0.13 (-0.44, 0.18)
	Non-Indigenous						0.60 [^] (0.50, 0.70)
	Relative Risk Ratio						-0.72* (-1.03, -0.42)
Low birth Weight (<2500g)	Indigenous					-0.06 (-0.64, 0.52)	-0.16 (-0.48, 0.16)
	Non-Indigenous					-0.32* (-0.52, -0.11)	0.00 (-0.11, 0.11)
	Relative Risk Ratio					0.23 (-0.34, 0.81)	-0.16 (-0.48, 0.16)

Source: Queensland Perinatal Data Collection.

*Significant annual decrease

[^]Significant annual increase

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