Analyses of anthropometric data in the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children and methodological implications

by
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A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy
The Australian National University
December 2012
Declaration

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is the result of my own work carried out while I was an MPhil student at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) at the Australian National University in Canberra.

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December 2012
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of the people who have helped me during my candidature.

First, I would like to acknowledge and celebrate the traditional custodians of the land, and pay my respects to the elders of the Ngunnawal people past and present.

I thank the 1,759 children who have generously donated their time to participate in the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), as well as their parents, carers, and teachers. Without their participation in LSIC, my research would not have been possible. I thank the LSIC Research Administration Officers for the countless hours they have spent collecting data, and for their willingness to share with me their experiences of conducting these surveys. I would like to thank the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) for funding the LSIC study, and the LSIC Steering Committee, particularly Laura Bennetts-Kneebone, Fiona Skelton, Wendy Patterson, Carole Heyworth, and Jason Brandrup, for encouraging me to use the LSIC data and for providing me with guidance along the way.

I thank the Anne Wexler Scholarship and the Australian Government Australia Awards program for funding my research, and the Australian-American Fulbright Commission for administering my scholarship and welcoming me into the Fulbright network. I would particularly like to thank Lyndell Wilson, Tangerine Holt, and Kate Lyall from the Fulbright Commission for their kindness and support, and 2012 Australian Fulbright Dr. Hamish Graham and his wife Dr. Mariam Tokhi, for generously hosting me in Alice Springs and providing me with an inimitable opportunity to contextualise my research.

I thank the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) at the Australian National University for granting me the opportunity to pursue my MPhil, and for providing me with a supportive, encouraging, and approachable supervisory panel. Dr Cathy Banwell has been an outstanding chair of the panel, cheerfully guiding me through my MPhil and supporting my endeavour to extend my studies at ANU. I thank Dr Phyll Dance, whose careful eye and green pen have corrected countless errors, for her positive encouragement throughout my candidature. I thank Dr Gill Hall for sharing her
epidemiological expertise and for helping me to critically examine findings. I thank Dr Martyn Kirk for his practiced advice and his selfless dedication to providing guidance. I would also like to thank Dr John Boulton, from the Universities of Sydney and Newcastle, for sharing his wisdom and experience and providing a valuable perspective. I have learned so much from each of you, and am grateful for having the opportunity to work with you. Thank you for all of the time and resources you have devoted to this project.

I thank Dr Terry Neeman and Mr Bob Forrester at the Statistical Consulting Unit at the Australian National University for their statistical advice.

I thank my family: my mother Judith, my father Clifford, and my sister Mary, who have supported me from across the globe. I also thank my Australian family, the Hoskings, for their continuous support and generosity throughout my time in Canberra.

I thank my friends and colleagues at NCEPH, in particular Ellen Hart, Ellie Paige, Ray Lovett, Phil Baker, Anna Olsen, Benjawan Tawatsupa, Yanni Sun, Sarunya Sujaritpong, Wakako Takeda, Jill Guthrie, Sarah Geddes, Stephanie Davis, and Bridget O’Connor, for making my time at NCEPH so enjoyable.
Abstract

Although publications in the field of Indigenous health have increased in number in recent decades, their impact remains inadequate (1, 2). This is partially attributable to the continued reliance on descriptive studies (1, 3, 4) and the underrepresentation of urban environments in research. The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), administered by the Department of Family and Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), addresses both concerns. LSIC is a cohort study of 1,759 Indigenous Australian children from environments ranging from very remote to urban. LSIC’s retention rate has remained high; however, the dataset withstands a large amount of missing and implausible data.

In the first section of this thesis, I evaluated the validity of LSIC anthropometric data. I developed a data cleaning method based on World Health Organization protocols, incorporating knowledge gained from interviews I conducted with LSIC data collectors. These conversations served to depict the process of conducting surveys and to exemplify barriers impeding data collection. They shed light upon the importance of the development of a trusting relationship between participants and the LSIC team, a difficult task within the rigid structure requisite of the conduct of a longitudinal study. Based on these interviews and quantitative analysis of the accuracy of LSIC data, I provided recommendations to facilitate the collection of anthropometric data within a variety of settings. After reviewing my data cleaning methods and the final cleaned data, FaHCSIA approved the release of the cleaned anthropometric data for public use on the 4th of December, 2012.

The second part of this thesis contains analyses of the distribution of height, weight, and birth weight in the cleaned sample. In LSIC, 10% of infants were low birth weight and 11% were high birth weight; 6% of children aged three to 106 months were underweight, 74% were in the healthy weight range, 12% were overweight, and 8% were obese according to international Body Mass Index (BMI) cut-offs (5, 6).

The third segment of this thesis explores the impact of birth weight on the growth trajectories of children through eight years of age. Low and high birth weight have both been identified as risk factors for overweight and chronic disease in adulthood, and this association may be mediated by early childhood growth. Multilevel mixed-effects modelling, adjusting for the repeated measurement of children and the study’s clustered
sampling, was used to examine the association between birth weight and childhood growth. Birth weight-for-gestational age z-score was a significant predictor of BMI-for-age z-score in childhood, and remained significant (coefficient = 0.166, p < 0.001) after accounting for age, gender, Indigenous identity (Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both), remoteness, breastfeeding duration, and maternal cigarette use during pregnancy. These findings demonstrate a long-lasting impact of birth weight on childhood growth, and suggest that interventions to improve prenatal care may have an effect beyond solely impacting birth weight. Subsequent follow-up of the LSIC cohort will enable examination of the association between of birth weight and childhood growth and later chronic disease incidence.
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