

Identifying Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people accessing AOD treatment: How good are the current indicators?

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Background

In Australia, 28% of people were overseas-born and 23% spoke a language other than English; in New South Wales (NSW), they were 36% and 27%, respectively (2021 Census)¹. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare recommends four indicators to identify culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations: country of birth, main language spoken at home (not English), English proficiency, and Indigenous status. Definitions vary as the National Drug Strategy Household Survey defines people from CALD background uses the country of birth or language, whereas the Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services (AODTS) National Minimum Dataset (NMDS) uses country of birth. Inconsistent data collection limits CALD visibility and impairs culturally responsive care. This study aimed to quantify CALD representation in alcohol and other drugs (AOD) treatment within non- government organisations (NGO) services using different indicators.

Methods

A retrospective analysis was carried out using routinely collected, statewide data (NADAbase) for people accessing AOD treatment across 225 NGO services in NSW (July 2019- June 2024). CALD status was identified using two indicators: country of birth (overseas-born) and preferred language (non-English), applied in four ways: (a) preferred language only, (b) country of birth only, (c) both, and (d) either.

Results

Between FY2019/20 to FY2023/24, 127,900 treatment episodes were reported, with annual treatment episodes ranging from 24,007 to 28,136. The annual prevalence of CALD-identified episodes varied by definition: 1.3%–1.9% using the strictest (both non-English language and overseas-born), and 11.5%–12.9% using the broadest (either). Each definition identified demographically and clinically distinct cohorts by age, substance type, main treatment accessed and treatment outcome (completed vs others) ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion and conclusions

CALD populations are underrepresented in AOD treatment data due to limited use of culturally nuanced indicators. Variation in defining and using CALD indicators yield different population profiles. These findings highlight the need for consistent, expanded data collection beyond the core set of indicators to better identify and support CALD people accessing substance use treatment.

Disclosure of Interest Statement

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References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australia's Population by Country of Birth. Canberra: ABS; 2023 [cited 2025 15 April]. Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>.