

**ANTH 2017 FINAL PAPER: Statistics as a Magnifying Glass**

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*Prompt:*

*Drawing on a 2024 example of your choice as a case study, discuss and analyse the role of statistics in contemporary Indigenous lives.*

*According to Deborah Stone, policy is a form of narrative literature. We use stories to make sense of the world around us, and political policy is a way of giving those stories a satisfying conclusion where villains are conquered and innocent victims are avenged (Stone, 2012). If policy is a form of storytelling, then statistics are the magnifying glass that guide our attention through the pages and direct us to the themes that we ultimately take away from the story. In this paper, I discuss statistics on the deaths of two young Indigenous boys in Queensland's annual child death report for the 2022-2023 financial year, tabled in parliament on March 14th, 2024. I argue that the collection of data with respect to the two boys' lives and deaths, as well as the way this data was disseminated in news media thereafter, effectively shifted the focus of public discourse around the report. Attention was guided from the children's circumstances and preventative measures against youth crime, to solely focusing on creating better conditions within the punitive system already in place. This exemplifies how statistics carry out the settler colony's function of simply perpetuating itself.*

## **Numbers in the Report**

When attempting to quantify a political problem, those in charge of 'counting' must make decisions about what features to measure and how to do so in order to best represent it (Stone, 2012). In the case of this report, numbers were primarily used to quantify the boys' conditions of detainment. Other aspects of their lives that contributed to encounters with the justice system were instead given brief descriptions with words. This imbalance in what was quantified gives a similarly unbalanced perception of importance in what ultimately caused the deaths of the two boys, placing the focus on their detainment and erasing the role that their previous environments and the lack of support that they received played.

### *What was not numerically quantified*

Information on the boys' lives prior to detainment is given without any quantification. This has certain consequences in the current landscape of politics, where "if something is not measured, it does not exist" (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011). This problem can be likened to inattentional blindness in the way that issues not given numbers are not given attention. The precursing issues of violence, substance use, housing instability, etc. then recede into the background in comparison to the other factors of the boys' lives that contributed immediately to their passing, such as their conditions within detention facilities.

### *What was numerically quantified*

The report does quantify the boys' experiences in youth detention centers. It gives figures like "[Boy 1] was the subject of 25 court appearances, resulting in four separate periods of detention." It additionally states that "he spent a total of nine nights in Police watchhouses and 128 nights in detention during the year of his death," with a similar format of facts being shared about boy 2 (The State of Queensland, 2023). The act itself of quantifying information requires the attention of the people doing it, and therefore pulls their focus toward what is being measured (Stone, 2012). Consequently, more importance is given to the conditions of detention

than of home life when drafting recommendations through the mere implication behind what got measured numerically by the review board. In her book, Stone (2012) supports this with the idea that things are only measured when there is a need to change those things or the actions around them specifically.

Andreas and Greenhill contend with a “fetishism for statistics” in people which causes them to fixate on numbers whenever they are received. People gravitate towards solving problems that are presented to them in the form of statistics because as soon as an issue is framed as a number, solving it feels as easy as performing some arithmetic (Stone, 2012). These traits of the settler mindset mean that the idea of what must be changed is placed entirely on what was numerically quantified: the detention system.

### *Resulting recommendations in the report*

Even after acknowledging important opportunities to have intervened early on pages 30 and 31, the report itself does not make any official request for preventative measures after completing its presentation on the lives of the two boys. The final recommendations given by the report due to these case studies are all with respect to the detention system itself. The recommendations are as follows: To publish a Detention Operating Model, to create a workforce strategy, to fund more accurate reporting on detained children’s time out of their cells, and to conduct reviews of individuals on the Serious Repeat Offender Index.

### **Numbers in the Media**

The selection of statistics to include in reporting was a strategic move to the advantage of media outlets in the current attention economy. These choices ultimately directed the focus that public forums and political officials would take when discussing potential responses, leading to proposals outside of even the recommendations given in the report itself.

### *Selection of Statistics from the Report*

With the modern rise of the internet and big data, barriers to entry for accessing and disseminating information have become extremely low, leading to a massive amount of competition in the media sphere. Consequently, news media has had to shift to an economic model where the profit incentive is no longer providing a paid service like a newspaper, but instead capturing the attention of members of the public in order to redirect it to a profitable avenue like advertisements (Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard, 2019).

One pivotal way of securing attention in the market is by appealing to and wielding emotional reactions from readers (Nelson-Field, 2020), and statistics are a common way to do so. Numbers can convey meaning and thus captivate the attention of an audience with fewer characters and in less time than words can, making them a valuable asset. When those numbers elicit an emotional response due to their size or subject matter, they are also likely to be shared. News outlets are inclined to select statistics that meet these criteria in order to reap the benefit of higher viewership that comes with the phenomenon of sharing emotional content throughout a network of individuals (Nelson-Field, 2020).

An article featured in The Guardian about the child death report is an example of these motivations put into practice. Out of the statistics offered in the report, the facts chosen for the article are as follows:

- “[Boy 1] spent 376 days in a youth detention centre; [boy 2] was detained for 319.”
- “[Boy 1] was confined to his cell 78% of the time.”
- “[Boy 2] was confined to his cell for more than 22 hours a day on 55 separate days. On 22 days he was in his cell for more than 23 hours. Three times he spent 24 hours in his cell without a break.”

(Smee and correspondent, 2024)

These statistics are short, emotionally engaging, and easy to share.

### *Resulting Public and Political Discourse*

Choosing those statistics in line with what will best benefit the company, however, has consequences on the resulting discussion and passing of policy. As was seen once before with the inadequacies of response to representation in the NTER (Dunne Breen, 2017), the media's use of statistics has shifted the focus of the conversation away from what was recommended by the original report and completely to the use of solitary confinement.

The numbers offered by the Guardian relate only to the boys' time spent in detention and isolation. This focus is placed so heavily that it results in the title of the article beginning with “Concerns raised over solitary confinement” (Smee and correspondent, 2024). This becomes a widespread issue throughout public discourse when factoring in the phenomenon of inter-institutional news coherence explored by Dunne Breen (2017). A simple Google search shows multiple articles that use the same first statistic as the Guardian article exactly.

Naturally, politicians are pressured to respond publicly to the concerns brought up by the media in order to remain favorable in the eyes of their constituents. This is exemplified by the article's inclusion of a statement by Greens MP Michael Berkman, that “the information about the deaths should spark ‘an immediate end to, or at least an investigation into’ the use of separation in youth prisons.” Now, the response being discussed by a person with the authority to propose legal change has to do with the use of separation in general, not any of the official recommendations made by the report, and certainly not any preventative measures mentioned within the report either.

### **Ultimate Abstraction: From Preventative to Punitive and Sustaining Colonial Tools**

Chapter 3 of the child death report briefly discussed some measures that could have been taken by the government to prevent youth encounters with the justice system entirely. These included things like early identification of language disorders and trauma-informed evaluation of family care arrangements (The State of Queensland, 2023). Through the process of collecting and presenting quantifiable data on the lives of two boys, however, statistics were able to shift the focus of what improvements should be recommended from preventative systems to simply making the current system of detention slightly less punitive than it already is. This shift in focus was exacerbated by the media's use of statistics to relay information about the report, where vying for attention sensationalized a single aspect of the poor conditions in

youth detention facilities: isolation. Currently, responses to this media from political authorities have led to proposals that are entirely focused on the use of isolation in youth detention and nothing else.

This rallies for better conditions in detention, but proposes no preventative efforts or community support to reduce the need for youth imprisonment in the first place. The only conversation happening in the public discourse now is how to further ‘improve’ and reinforce the existing prison system rather than any alternative measure. In this way, statistics have perfectly exemplified the colony’s self-perpetuation and inability to act against its own systems for good.

#### REFERENCES:

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