

A geographic perspective to understanding
birthweight variation – Temporal trends and
spatial patterns in New South Wales, Australia,
1994 to 2004

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Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures	xiv
Abstract	xvii
Declaration.....	xix
Acknowledgements	xx
Abbreviations	xxii
Chapter 1 Birthweight in context	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Research Aim and Objectives.....	7
1.3 Defining adverse birthweight outcomes	10
1.4 The demographic context of birthweight outcome: Recent fertility trends in Australia and NSW	12
1.5 Adverse birthweight outcomes - Limitations of current reporting in Australia and NSW	18
1.6 Study Area.....	21
1.7 Structure of the study	27
1.8 Conclusion.....	29
Chapter 2 Health, place and birthweight in the literature.....	30
2.1 Introduction.....	30
2.2 Place and Health	31
2.3 Geography of Health and Spatial Epidemiology	35
2.4 GIS and health geography	37
2.5 Previous birthweight research.....	41
2.5.1 Individual level factors	45
2.5.2 Area level factors.....	62
2.6 Conclusion.....	71

Chapter 3	Data and Methods	73
3.1	Data Sources and Preparation	73
3.1.1	The New South Wales Midwives Data Collection (MDC).....	74
3.1.1.1	Geocoding the MDC data.....	75
3.1.1.2	Geocoding results and preparation of the MDC analysis database	81
3.1.2	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).....	85
3.1.3	NSW Digital Cadastre Database (DCDB)	88
3.1.4	NSW Land Valuation Data.....	88
3.1.4.1	Matching land values to birth records.....	90
3.1.5	ARIA Remoteness Values	94
3.2	Conceptual and methodological considerations in contextual health research – Spatial data issues	94
3.2.1	Type of spatial data	95
3.2.1.1	Point data	95
3.2.1.2	Area level data	96
3.2.2	The ecological fallacy	97
3.2.3	The Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP).....	97
3.2.4	Choice of scale	98
3.2.5	Spatial Autocorrelation	100
3.2.6	Data Confidentiality.....	101
3.2.7	Data integration	101
3.2.8	Population movement.....	103
3.2.9	Confounders	104
3.3	Data Analysis methods.....	105
3.3.1	Temporal trends.....	106
3.3.2	Spatial patterns.....	106
3.3.2.1	Kernel Density Mapping	107
3.3.2.2	Getis-Ord G_i^*	107
3.3.2.3	Index of dissimilarity.....	109
3.3.3	Univariate and Multivariate analysis.....	110
3.4	Conclusion.....	111

Chapter 4	Temporal trends and spatial patterns of birthweight and associated risk factors.....	113
4.1	Introduction.....	113
4.2	Temporal trends and spatial patterns - Birthweight outcomes.....	119
4.2.1	Spatial Distribution.....	119
4.2.2	Temporal Trends	126
4.2.3	Changes in the distribution of SGA and LGA births 1994 to 2004.....	131
4.2.4	Spatial patterning of birthweight outcomes	135
4.3	Temporal trend analysis and spatial patterns – Individual level risk factors influencing birthweight.....	141
4.3.1	Smoking.....	141
4.3.2	Maternal Age	148
4.3.3	Gestational Diabetes	151
4.3.4	Maternal Diabetes - Pre-existing	153
4.3.5	Chronic Maternal Hypertension.....	154
4.3.6	Pre-eclampsia.....	154
4.3.7	Number of previous pregnancies.....	155
4.3.8	Antenatal Care.....	156
4.3.9	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mothers.....	160
4.3.10	Maternal country of birth.....	161
4.4	The spatial distribution of selected contextual risk factors and the association with births over time	162
4.4.1	Births by Socio-Economic Status – SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage	164
4.4.2	Births by Remoteness Area.....	172
4.5	The spatial distribution of land value in the Sydney metropolitan area and the association with births over time	174
4.6	Discussion	179
Chapter 5	Identifying significant risk factors – Univariate analysis	183
5.1	Introduction.....	183
5.2	Association of study factors with birthweight outcome	187

5.2.1 Individual level factors	187
5.2.1.1 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers.....	187
5.2.1.2 Maternal age	189
5.2.1.3 Gender	191
5.2.1.4 Smoking during pregnancy.....	192
5.2.1.5 Gestational diabetes.....	195
5.2.1.6 Pre-existing maternal diabetes (diabetes mellitus).....	196
5.2.1.7 Chronic maternal hypertension	197
5.2.1.8 Pre-eclampsia	198
5.2.1.9 Previous pregnancies.....	199
5.2.1.10 Antenatal care	201
5.2.1.11 Marital status	202
5.2.1.12 Premature birth.....	204
5.2.1.13 Maternal country of birth.....	205
5.2.1.14 Year of birth.....	206
5.2.2 “Pseudo” individual level factor.....	207
5.2.2.1 Land Valuation	208
5.2.3 Contextual factors.....	210
5.2.3.1 Socio-economic status	212
5.2.3.2 Population density	214
5.2.3.3 Remoteness	216
5.2.3.4 Indigenous.....	219
5.2.3.5 Overseas born.....	222
5.2.3.6 Separated or divorced	224
5.2.3.7 Education	225
5.2.3.8 Renting.....	227
5.2.3.9 Single parent families	228
5.2.3.10 Unemployment	230
5.2.3.11 Post school education	231
5.2.3.12 Motor vehicle	232
5.2.3.13 High income	234
5.2.3.14 Low income	235
5.3 Discussion	237
Chapter 6 Identifying significant risk factors – Multivariate analysis.....	240

6.1 Introduction.....	240
6.2 Small for Gestational Age and associated risk factors	242
6.2.1 The core SGA model	242
6.2.2 Adding socio-economic and remoteness covariates to the core SGA model for NSW.....	245
6.2.3 Adding socio-economic covariates to the core SGA model for Sydney.	254
6.3 Large for Gestational Age and associated risk factors	260
6.3.1 The core LGA model.....	260
6.3.2 Adding socio-economic and remoteness covariates to the core LGA model for NSW.....	263
6.3.3 Adding socio-economic covariates to the core LGA model for Sydney .	267
6.4 Summary and Discussion.....	270
 Chapter 7 Discussion and Policy Implications	 277
7.1 Introduction.....	277
7.2 Findings in relation to research objectives.....	278
7.3 Limitations	285
7.4 Policy Implications.....	286
7.5 Future directions and concluding comments	290
 Appendices	 296
Appendix 1 NSW Health Areas and Local Health Districts.....	296
Appendix 2 Ethics Approval	298
Appendix 3 Counts and percentages for study factors by gestational age category.....	300
Appendix 4 Changes in birth outcomes between 1994 and 2004 for Urban Centres in NSW with more than 10,000 people, ranked by 2001 total population and shaded by remoteness category	306
Appendix 5 Reference Maps NSW and Sydney Urban Centre	307
Appendix 6 Comparison of the numbers and percentages of births in 1994 and 2004 by maternal age group and remoteness.....	309
Appendix 7 Comparison of Core SGA Models	310
Appendix 8 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD – SGA NSW 2000 - 2002	311

Appendix 9 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD + ARIA – SGA NSW 2000 - 2002	312
Appendix 10 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD - SGA Sydney 2000 - 2002	313
Appendix 11 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD + Land Value – SGA Sydney 2000 - 2002	314
Appendix 12 Model Summary Core + Land Value – SGA Sydney 2000 – 2002	315
Appendix 13 Comparison of Core LGA	316
Appendix 14 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD – LGA NSW 2000 - 2002	317
Appendix 15 Model Summary Core + SEIFA IRSD – LGA Sydney 2000 – 2002	318
Appendix 16 Model Summary Core + Land Value – LGA Sydney 2000 - 2002	319
References	320

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Total fertility rates for states and territories	17
Table 1.2 NSW population distribution by Remoteness Area 2006	22
Table 3.1 MDC Data Items	75
Table 3.2 FEBRL Geocoding match types	78
Table 3.3 MapMarker Geocoding Codes.....	79
Table 3.4 MapMarker geocoding match codes achieved when geocoding the Midwives Data Collection (MDC) and corresponding match type classification.....	79
Table 3.5 Protocol to assign geocodes using FEBRL and MapMarker results	80
Table 3.6 Summary of geocoding results	81
Table 3.7 Geocoding results by Remoteness Area	83
Table 3.8 Number and percentage of birth records with missing data	84
Table 3.9 Selected 2001 Census Variables	87
Table 3.10 Land Valuation Classification.....	89
Table 3.11 Classification of land value class into five classes	93
Table 4.1 Percentage of live births by birthweight for Australia 1991 to 2004	116
Table 4.2 Comparison of total population and singleton births in NSW for 2001, and Australian Total Fertility Rate by Remoteness Area.....	123
Table 4.3 Smoking during pregnancy by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous mothers by Remoteness Area	144
Table 4.4 Antenatal Care by Remoteness of mother's residence, 1994 to 2004...	157
Table 4.5 ATSI births in NSW for selected years compared to the total ATSI and Non-Indigenous population in 2001 by Remoteness Area	161
Table 5.1 Counts and percentages of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers by size for gestational age category	188
Table 5.2 Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers with SGA	189
Table 5.3 Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers with LGA.	189
Table 5.4 Counts and percentages of maternal age group by size for gestational age category	190
Table 5.5 Association of maternal age with SGA	190
Table 5.6 Association of maternal age with LGA.....	191

Table 5.7 Counts and percentages of infants gender by size for gestational age category	191
Table 5.8 Association of female gender with SGA	191
Table 5.9 Association of female gender with LGA.....	192
Table 5.10 Counts and percentages of maternal smoking by size for gestational age category	192
Table 5.11 Counts and percentages of maternal smoking amount by size for gestational age category.....	194
Table 5.12 Association of smoking with SGA.....	194
Table 5.13 Association of amount smoked with SGA.....	194
Table 5.14 Association of smoking with LGA	195
Table 5.15 Association of amount smoked with LGA.....	195
Table 5.16 Counts and percentages of mothers with gestational diabetes by size for gestational age category.....	195
Table 5.17 Association of gestational diabetes with LGA	196
Table 5.18 Association of gestational diabetes with SGA	196
Table 5.19 Counts and percentages of mothers with maternal diabetes (diabetes mellitus) by size for gestational age category.....	196
Table 5.20 Association of maternal diabetes with LGA	197
Table 5.21 Association of maternal diabetes with SGA	197
Table 5.22 Counts and percentages of mothers with maternal hypertension by size for gestational age category.....	198
Table 5.23 Association of maternal hypertension with SGA	198
Table 5.24 Association of maternal hypertension with LGA.....	198
Table 5.25 Counts and percentages of maternal pre-eclampsia by size for gestational age category.....	199
Table 5.26 Association of maternal pre-eclampsia with SGA	199
Table 5.27 Association of maternal pre-eclampsia with LGA.....	199
Table 5.28 Counts and percentages of birth number by size for gestational age category	200
Table 5.29 Association of previous pregnancies with LGA	200
Table 5.30 Association of previous pregnancies with SGA.....	201

Table 5.31 Counts and percentages of attendance antenatal care by size for gestational age category	201
Table 5.32 Association of inadequate antenatal care with SGA	202
Table 5.33 Association of inadequate antenatal care with LGA.....	202
Table 5.34 Counts and percentages of marital status by size for gestational age category	203
Table 5.35 Association of marital status with SGA.....	203
Table 5.36 Association of marital status with LGA	204
Table 5.37 Counts and percentages of premature birth by birthweight by gestational age category	204
Table 5.38 Association of premature birth with SGA.....	204
Table 5.39 Association of premature birth with LGA	204
Table 5.40 Counts and percentages of maternal country of birth by birthweight by gestational age category.....	205
Table 5.41 Association of maternal country of birth with SGA	205
Table 5.42 Association of maternal country of birth with LGA.....	206
Table 5.43 Counts and percentages of births for each year by size for gestational age category	206
Table 5.44 Association of birth year with SGA	207
Table 5.45 Association of birth year with LGA.....	207
Table 5.46 Counts and Percentages of births by land valuation class by size for gestational age.....	209
Table 5.47 Association of land valuation with SGA	209
Table 5.48 Association of land valuation with LGA	209
Table 5.49 Counts and percentages of births by SEIFA IRSD quintile by size for gestational age category.....	214
Table 5.50 Association of socio-economic status with SGA	214
Table 5.51 Association of socio-economic status with LGA.....	214
Table 5.52 Counts and percentages of births by population density, by size for gestational age category.....	215
Table 5.53 Association of population density with SGA	216
Table 5.54 Association of population density with LGA.....	216

Table 5.55 Counts and percentages of births by remoteness category, by size for gestational age category	218
Table 5.56 Association of remoteness with SGA	218
Table 5.57 Association of remoteness with LGA.....	218
Table 5.58 Percentage of Indigenous mothers for each remoteness and gestational age category	218
Table 5.59 Association of remoteness with SGA (a) and LGA (b) using binary logistic regression for non Indigenous mothers	219
Table 5.60 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of Indigenous population in the surrounding area by size for gestational age category	220
Table 5.61 Association of percentage Indigenous population with SGA.....	220
Table 5.62 Association of percentage Indigenous population with LGA	221
Table 5.63 Association of percentage of Indigenous population with SGA using binary logistic regression – Non Indigenous populations only.....	222
Table 5.64 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of overseas born population in the surrounding area by size for gestational age category	223
Table 5.65 Association of percentage overseas born with SGA	223
Table 5.66 Association of percentage overseas born with LGA.....	223
Table 5.67 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of separated or divorced population in the surrounding area by size for gestational age category	224
Table 5.68 Association of percentage separated or divorced with SGA	225
Table 5.69 Association of percentage separated or divorced with LGA	225
Table 5.70 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of population with a highest level of schooling of year 8 or below in the surrounding area by size for gestational age category.....	226
Table 5.71 Association of percentage of population with a highest level of schooling of year 8 or below with SGA	226
Table 5.72 Association of percentage of population with a highest level of schooling of year 8 or below with LGA.....	227
Table 5.73 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of population renting in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category.....	228
Table 5.74 Association of percentage of population renting with SGA	228
Table 5.75 Association of percentage of population renting with LGA.....	228

Table 5.76 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of single parent families in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category	229
Table 5.77 Association of percentage of single parent families with SGA	229
Table 5.78 Association of percentage of single parent families with LGA	230
Table 5.79 Counts and percentages of births by unemployment rate in the surrounding area, by birthweight by gestational age category	230
Table 5.80 Association of unemployment rate with SGA	231
Table 5.81 Association of unemployment rate with LGA.....	231
Table 5.82 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of population with a degree or higher in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category	232
Table 5.83 Association of percentage of the population with a degree or higher with SGA.....	232
Table 5.84 Association of percentage of the population with a degree or higher with LGA	232
Table 5.85 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of the population without a motor vehicle in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category	233
Table 5.86 Association of percentage of the population without a motor vehicle with SGA.....	233
Table 5.87 Association of percentage of the population without a motor vehicle with LGA	233
Table 5.88 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of high income earners in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category	235
Table 5.89 Association of percentage of high income earners with SGA	235
Table 5.90 Association of percentage of high income earners with LGA.....	235
Table 5.91 Counts and percentages of births by the percentage of low income earners in the surrounding area, by size for gestational age category	236
Table 5.92 Association of percentage of low income earners with SGA.....	237
Table 5.93 Association of percentage of low income earners with LGA	237
Table 6.1 Associations between study factors and SGA births NSW 2000 – 2002:	249
Table 6.2 Associations between study factors and SGA births Sydney 2000 – 2002:	258

Table 6.3 Associations between study factors and LGA births NSW 2000 – 2002:	
.....	265
Table 6.4 Associations between study factors and LGA births Sydney 2000 – 2002:	
.....	269

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Australian Total Fertility Rate 1901 to 2011	14
Figure 1.2 Age-specific fertility rates (a), Australia 1931 to 2011	15
Figure 1.3 Age-specific fertility rates (a), Capital City and Balance of State	16
Figure 1.4 New South Wales (NSW) study area	22
Figure 1.5 Sydney Urban Centre selected suburbs.....	23
Figure 1.6 Age and Sex Distribution, Sydney Statistical Division and Balance of NSW, 30 June 2006	24
Figure 1.7 Percentage of the total population by SEIFA IRSD quintiles within each Remoteness Area for Mainland NSW 2001	26
Figure 4.1 Birth density for NSW 1994 to 2004	120
Figure 4.2 Birth density for the Sydney Urban Centre and surrounding towns 1994 to 2004	121
Figure 4.3 SGA birth density for the Sydney Urban Centre and surrounding towns 1994 to 2004	124
Figure 4.4 LGA birth density for the Sydney Urban Centre and surrounding towns 1994 to 2004	125
Figure 4.5 Percentage of high and low birthweight, and SGA and LGA births in NSW from 1994 to 2004	127
Figure 4.6 Percentage of low birthweight and SGA for term births 1994 to 2004 ..	128
Figure 4.7 Percentage of Small for Gestational Age (SGA) and Large for Gestational Age (LGA) births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers 1994 to 2004 ..	130
Figure 4.8 Absolute percentage difference in LGA births in NSW, 1994 to 2004 ..	133
Figure 4.9 Absolute percentage difference in SGA births in NSW, 1994 to 2004 ..	134
Figure 4.10 Spatial autocorrelation of birthweight z-scores by distance for births in Sydney in 2001	137
Figure 4.11 Getis-Ord G_i^* Hot Spot analysis of birthweight z-scores for high population density areas in NSW 1994 to 2004	138
Figure 4.12 Getis-Ord G_i^* Hot Spot analysis for birthweight z-scores for Sydney Urban Centre 2001.....	139

Figure 4.13 Percentage of maternal smoking anytime during pregnancy 1994 to 2004	143
Figure 4.14 Percentage of mothers that smoked during pregnancy by age group 1994 to 2004	144
Figure 4.15 Percentage of mothers in each Remoteness Area who smoked during pregnancy 1994 to 2004	146
Figure 4.16 Comparison of smoking behaviour during pregnancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and Non-Indigenous mothers 1994 to 2004 ...	146
Figure 4.17 Percentages of maternal smoking in the second half of pregnancy 1994 to 2004	148
Figure 4.18 Kernel density of mothers that smoked anytime during pregnancy, NSW 1994 to 2004	149
Figure 4.19 Average Maternal Age 1994 to 2004.....	150
Figure 4.20 Percentage of mothers age group by year 1994 to 2004.....	151
Figure 4.21 Percentage of mothers with gestational diabetes 1994 to 2004	152
Figure 4.22 Percentage of mothers with gestational diabetes by age group 1994 to 2004	153
Figure 4.23 Percentage of mothers with chronic hypertension 1994 to 2004	154
Figure 4.24 Percentage of mothers with pre-eclampsia 1994 to 2004.....	155
Figure 4.25 Percentage of number of previous pregnancies 1994 to 2004	155
Figure 4.26 Density of births where the mother received inadequate antenatal care, NSW 1994 to 2004.....	158
Figure 4.27 Density of births where the mother received inadequate antenatal care, Sydney Urban Centre and surrounding areas, 1994 to 2004.....	159
Figure 4.28 Percentage of mothers identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander 1994 to 2004	160
Figure 4.29 Percentage of births by mother's country of birth, 1994 to 2004	162
Figure 4.30 SEIFA IRSD 2001 by Census Collectors District for NSW.....	167
Figure 4.31 SEIFA IRSD 2001 by CCD for Sydney Urban Centre and surrounding towns.....	168
Figure 4.32 Percentage of births by SEIFA IRSD quintiles of the CCD of the mother's address 1994 to 2004	169
Figure 4.33 Percentage of SGA births by SEIFA IRSD quintile 1994 to 2004	170

Figure 4.34 Percentage of LGA births by SEIFA IRSD quintile 1994 to 2004	171
Figure 4.35 ABS 2001 Remoteness Areas for NSW	173
Figure 4.36 Remoteness category of mother's address for births 1994 to 2001 ...	174
Figure 4.37 Land Values for Sydney Urban Centre 2001	177
Figure 4.38 Percentage of mothers residing within land value category by SEIFA IRSD quintile (SES), for Sydney Urban Centre 2001	178
Figure 6.1 SGA and Multivariate Models for NSW 2000 - 2002.....	246
Figure 6.2 SGA Multivariate Models for Sydney Urban Centre 2000 – 2002.....	255
Figure 6.3 LGA Multivariate Models for NSW 2000 – 2002	263
Figure 6.4 LGA Multivariate Models for Sydney Urban Centre 2000 – 2002.....	268

Abstract

Increasingly it is recognised that birthweight is not only a major determinant of infant health, but it also has far reaching implications for adult and generational health. The influences of socio-economic status and remoteness as risk factors have been identified. Despite considerable research into risk factors associated with low birthweight and Small for Gestational Age (SGA) births, there has been little research into Large for Gestational Age (LGA) births, particularly in Australia, and most investigations examining the influence of socio-economic factors and remoteness on birthweight have used large spatial units. This dissertation seeks to address these identified deficiencies using a health geography approach.

The thesis examines the spatial distribution and temporal trends in SGA and LGA births in NSW from 1994 to 2004, and associated individual and contextual risk factors. The data used was geocoded singleton births from the NSW Midwife's Data Collection (n= 891,771 births) which was spatially matched to ecologic socio-economic and remoteness variables extracted from the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing at the census collection district level. In addition, an examination of the utility of unit record land valuation data, obtained from the NSW Department of Lands, as a quasi individual level measure of socio-economic status was made for a smaller study area covering the Sydney Urban Centre. Univariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to evaluate the associations between individual and contextual risk factors and SGA and LGA births. The study aims not only to assess the association between SGA and LGA births and socio-economic status, but to also identify the particular aspects of disadvantage that most influenced these birth outcomes.

The analysis has established that while the percentage of SGA births has shown a small reduction, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of LGA births over the study period. This increase is likely to be attributable in part to the increase in the percentage of mothers with gestational diabetes, the reduction in smoking behaviour and the increased number of births to older women. Spatial variations were identified in the concentrations of standardised high and low birthweights, smoking rates and attendance at antenatal care providing evidence of the value of incorporating a spatial approach to both identify areas with higher than expected incidence of adverse birthweight outcomes and for targeting intervention strategies. Individual census variables produced a better model fit than the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage and had the advantage of producing more easily interpretable results. Educational attainment, the percentage overseas born and income were identified as the main ecologic variables associated with birthweight outcome.

It is recommended that the focus of birthweight research in Australia is extended to include LGA births and that data collections capture information regarding maternal pre-pregnancy weight, maternal height and pregnancy weight gain to assist this endeavour. In addition, the implementation of routine geocoding of births would also be beneficial to enhance birthweight research and health service delivery.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Danielle Taylor

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AGA	Average for Gestational Age, Birthweight between the 10 th and 90 th percentile
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ARC	Australian Research Council
ARIA	Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia
ASGC	Australian Standard Geographical Classification
ASGS	Australian Statistical Geography Standard
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
BMI	Body Mass Index
CCD	Census Collectors District
CI	Confidence Interval
DCDB	Digital Cadastral Data Base
GIS	Geographic Information System
GISCA	The National Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems, The University of Adelaide.
ID	Index of Dissimilarity
HBW	High Birthweight, birthweight more than 4000g
LBW	Low Birthweight, birthweight less than 2500g
LGA	Large for Gestational Age, birthweight greater than the 90 th percentile
MAUP	Modifiable Areal Unit Problem
MDC	Midwives Data Collection

SEIFA IRSD	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SD	Statistical Division
SGA	Small for Gestational Age, birthweight less than the 10 th percentile
SLA	Statistical Local Area
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
UC	Urban Centre