AN EVIDENCE BASED ANALYSIS OF INDIGENOUS POPULATION AND DIVERSITY

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From time immemorial until the 18th of January 1788, the entire Australian continent and offshore islands were the sole domain of peoples whose descendants are now commonly referred to as Indigenous Australians. Over these millennia it is estimated that some 2.5 billion such people were born and died. The actual size and distribution of those present when Philip's fleet moored at Werrong (Sydney Cove) remains a matter for conjecture, though best estimates range between 500,000 and 750,000 with highest densities in well watered areas. At the beginning of the twenty first century, and in light of deliberations surrounding reconciliation, it is worth reflecting that the Indigenous population is estimated once again to be around 500,000 thus providing a sense of being back where we started over 200 years ago, at least in terms of population size. Of course, as Australians, we are far from where we started back then, as major demographic transformations have ensued along the way — the continental population has increased 40-fold and at varying times and to varying degrees the initial inhabitants and their descendants, have been decimated, relocated, assimilated, emancipated, rejuvenated and enumerated. It is the last of these actions that allow us to report here on the relative circumstances of Indigenous people in modern Australia.

One profound transformation over the past 200 years has been a geographic shift in population distribution with most Indigenous people now resident in urban and metropolitan centres. Over the long term, this reflects the impacts of colonization. More recently, since 1971, it also reflects a growing tendency for Indigenous people who were already urban-based to self-identify in census counts. Either way, the proportion of the Indigenous population resident in urban areas rose from 44 per cent in 1971 to 74 per cent in 2001. Almost one-third of Indigenous Australians are now resident in our major cities (Table 1).

While this remains substantially less than the total population (67 per cent), it represents a marked increase from 15 per cent in 1971. As this process of ever-greater population counts in urban areas has unfolded, the rural share of the population has continued to decline—down from 56 per cent in 1971 to almost one-quarter in 2001[1].

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[1] Taylor 2003.

Table 1. Indigenous and Non-Indigenous population distribution by remoteness category, 2001

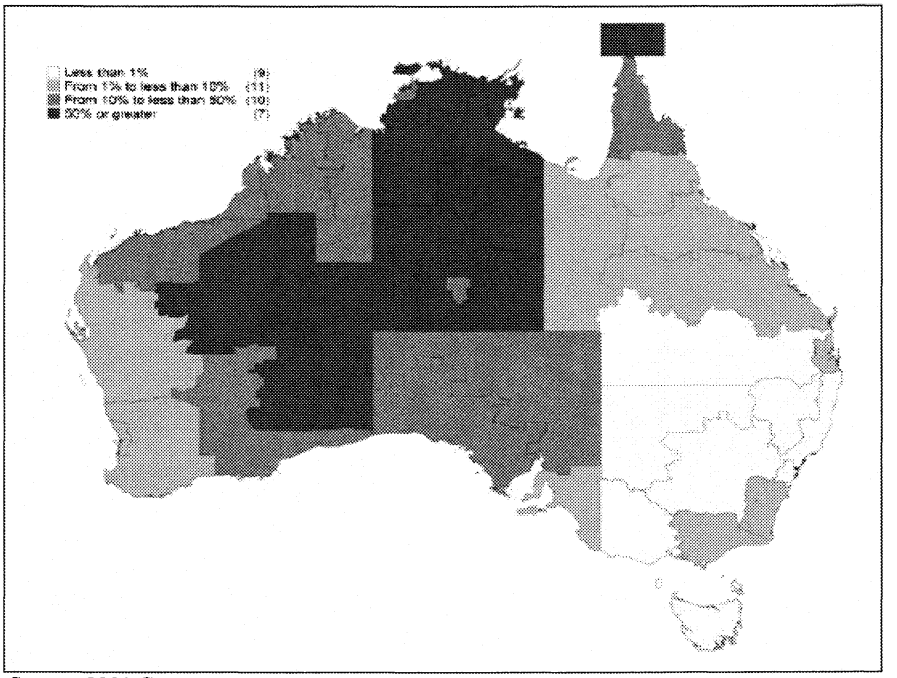
	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Indigenous % of total
Major city	67.2	30.2	1.1
Inner regional	20.7	20.3	2.3
Outer regional	10.1	23.1	5.3
Remote	1.5	8.8	12.4
Very remote	0.5	17.7	45.4
Total percent	**100.0**	**100.0**	**2.4**
Total (n)	18.95 m	0.45m	

Source: ABS 2003: 22

Despite this, however, Indigenous people remain much more likely than other Australians to reside away from cities, and especially in remote areas. Reference to remote Australia draws attention to the vast two-thirds of the continent where economic development and access to goods and services are severely impeded by small numbers and long distances. Fully one quarter of the Indigenous population lives scattered across this landscape in places that are either close to, or on, lands over which they have held custodianship via descent for millennia. Overall, Indigenous people account for almost half of the resident population of remote Australia, though away from the main service and mining towns, they are by far the majority. This dispersal of the contemporary Indigenous population from the suburbs of global cities to the remotest parts of the continent produces an unusually diverse range of residential circumstances and opportunities for social and economic participation. If we take just one indicator (the proportion of Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language at home) as a marker of diversity, we can see that across the country very different cultural settings apply (Figure 1).

In many parts of northern and central Australia, the majority of Indigenous people speak an Indigenous language at home, often as their first tongue. Here, English is just one of a number of secondary languages. Elsewhere, and especially in south-eastern Australia, use of Indigenous languages is almost non-existent.

Figure 1. Proportion of Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language at home by ATSIC Region, 2001



Source: 2001 Census

Population growth and change

While the size of the Indigenous population may be similar or approaching its 1788 level, the prognosis for its future growth and composition is now quite different from that time. As with the general population, an Indigenous baby boom emerged in the post-war years but was sustained for longer and persisted at much higher levels leading to substantial population growth. However, in the past two decades, the fertility of Indigenous women has followed the steady decline observed more generally, and though it remains higher than that of all Australian women, it is now also below replacement level. While this has gradually reduced the rate of Indigenous population growth, there are a number of reasons why such growth is likely to remain relatively high for many years to come:

- First, the youthful age distribution of the Indigenous population means that the cohort of child-bearing women will continue to expand for some time to come;
- Second, more than two-thirds (68%) of Indigenous couple families are based on unions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners. So long as the offspring of such couples are identified as Indigenous (and the majority currently are—85%), then there will be a rising and

progressively substantial boost to Indigenous population from births to non-Indigenous women with Indigenous male partners. Presently, one quarter of the growth in the Indigenous population is due to this factor, although this is overwhelmingly in the more urbanized south and east of the country. This share is likely to rise;

- Finally, Indigenous population growth is currently held back by persistently high mortality, especially at adult ages. The scale of this premature loss to the population is such that any shift towards more general levels will lead to enhanced numbers, especially at older ages. This last factor is likely to occur over the long-term.

Clearly, much of the difference in mortality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—both male and female—results from a sustained high intensity of Indigenous mortality in adult ages. The policy impact of this can be demonstrated by establishing the year in which expectation of life at birth were the same for the total population as they are now for the Indigenous population. Thus, current life expectancies for Indigenous males and females are at a level last seen for all Australian males and females back in 1919 and 1925 respectively[2]. These national population dynamics vary considerably by region. In remote areas, for example, and especially across northern Australia, Indigenous women's fertility remains very high and populations continue to expand rapidly due to natural increase with little contribution from non-Indigenous women. Equally, while remote Indigenous peoples are highly mobile, they are far less migratory[3]. As a consequence, across much of the outback, the Indigenous population is rising as a share of the total because Indigenous people tend to stay put, on country, while non-Indigenous people have tended to move out. While the latter has led to an image of the bush being in decline, across vast areas of remote Australia Indigenous communities have been growing with some localities emerging as sizeable towns. For example, Wadeye (formerly Port Keats Mission), in the Northern Territory, is likely to be the Territory's fourth largest town by 2023. This growth in areas of overall population decline presents substantial policy challenges in Australia's backyard.

Age composition and population projections

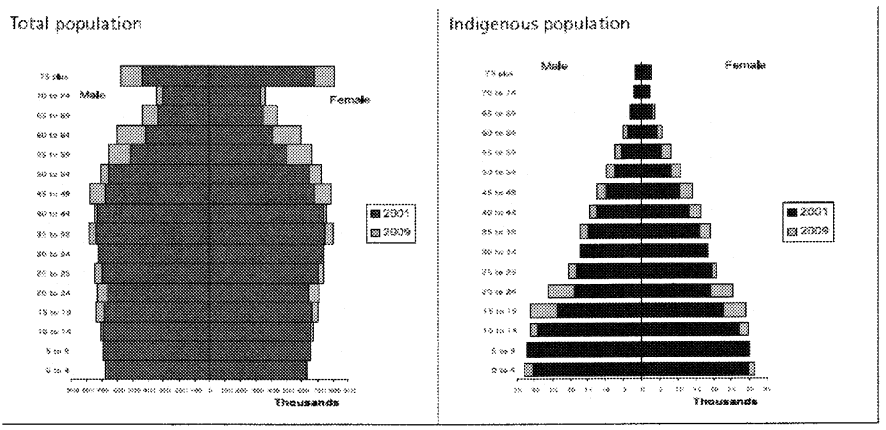
According to the most conservative of ABS projections, the Indigenous population is expected to increase to 530,000 by 2009. Apart from the steady growth that this implies, one characteristic that almost defines the Indigenous population is its composition by age. In Figure 2, this is compared to that of the total Australian population, while both profiles are projected to 2009 to give a sense of how these are changing over time. What is striking is the very young age composition of the Indigenous population compared to the very old age

[2] Taylor 2003

[3] Taylor and Bell 2004

composition of the Australian population. Moreover, as the latter is projected to age even further with increasing shares in the oldest age groups, the Indigenous population looks set to retain its youthful profile because of large numbers of women moving into child-bearing age, combined with high adult mortality. This reinforces a widening gap in the focus and purpose of social and economic policy—as the Australian population is increasingly concerned with the effects and implications of ageing and funding retirement, Indigenous Australians remain firmly fixed on issues of raising families, education, housing, and jobs.

Figure 2. Total and Indigenous Australian Age Pyramids 2001 and 2009



Total population Indigenous population - Source: ABS 2004

Comparative social indicators

Social indicators are aggregated summary statistics that reflect aspects of the social condition or quality of life of a society or social subgroup. In Table 2 we provide a range of indicators that are commonly used for this purpose. These are presented at the national level for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, while the former are also shown for remote and non-remote areas to capture the impact of some of the diversity in locational circumstances alluded to above.

For all indicators, substantial difference is evident between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in a way that highlights the relatively poor socioeconomic status of the former with some measures (such as unemployment rates being much higher for Indigenous people), and others (such as income) being much lower. Viewing the data as a whole, there is a clear sense (though not statistically proven here) of a connecting thread. Thus, Indigenous people are sicker and have poorer educational outcomes, and so they are more likely to be unemployed or dependent on low-income work. This means that household incomes are much lower, and so therefore is the rate at which Indigenous people engage in that key source of Australian asset building—home ownership. Access to flexible transportation is also

diminished, as is the degree to which Indigenous people are online in the fast developing new age of web-based social and economic interaction. Of course, life is more complex than this and some of this complexity is alluded to in the remote/non-remote split in the data with Indigenous people in non-remote (mostly urban) areas much closer to the rest of the population on key indicators, although even here it remains striking how big a gap often remains.

Table 2. Select Indigenous and non-Indigenous social indicators in remote and non-remote Australia, 2001/02

	Indigenous Remote	Non-Remote	Total	Non-Indigenous
Mean equivalised gross household income - $ (a)	354	407	394	665
Unemployment rate (b)	10.9	22.2	20.0	7.2
Employed in CDEP (% of employed) (a)	62.9	10.2	26.2	n.a.
Has non-school qualification (a)	19.1	32.8	29.0	50.1
Life-expectancy (c) Male Female			 56 63	 77 82
Home owner (with or without a mortgage) (a)	8.6	33.4	26.5	73.1
Has access to motor vehicle(s) to drive (a)	47.5	64.4	59.7	85.2
Accessed the internet in last12 months (a)	21.6	48.3	41.0	58.4 (d)

(a) NATSISS and GSS
(b) Census pub (page 71)
(c) AIHW
(d) Data not directly comparable due to difference in questions

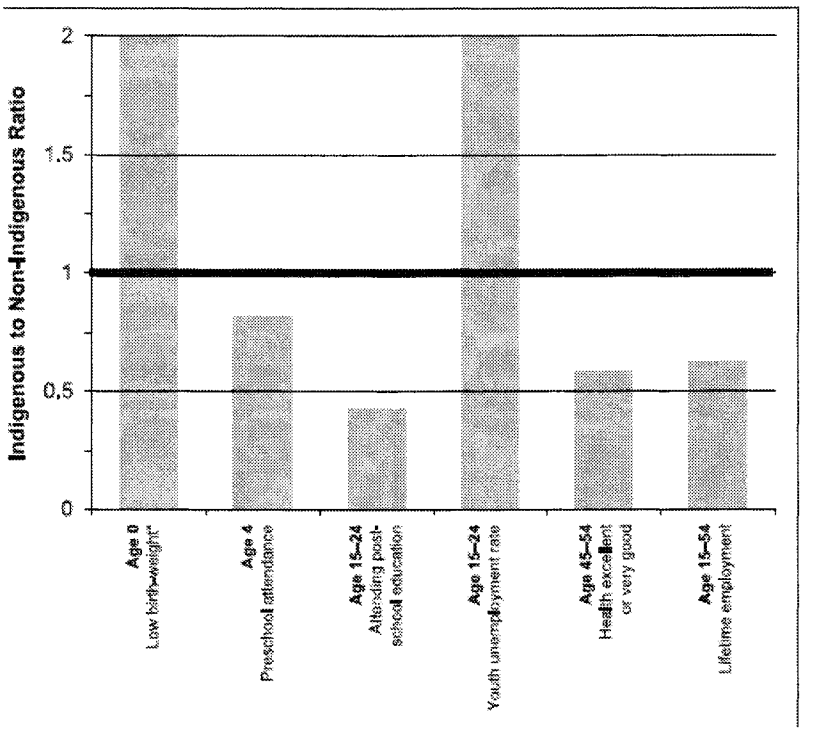
One stand out feature is the fact that Indigenous unemployment appears relatively low in remote areas, and much more so than amongst Indigenous people who are closest to active labour markets. This is a measure of the next indicator that reveals the high level (and long-standing) engagement by remote communities in mutual obligation arrangements under the CDEP scheme. In major cities, and other urbanized areas, Indigenous people are often resident in high unemployment neighbourhoods, where they are the group with the highest unemployment. Also striking is the difference in levels of Indigenous home ownership between remote and non-remote areas. This reflects the fact that in many remote areas households generally access quasi-public community housing.

As for trends in these measures of social and economic status, the most rigorous analysis to date indicates slow improvement over the past 30 years at the national level across most standard indicators, with odd exceptions, such as

the Indigenous unemployment rate, which is now much higher[4].

Comparative life opportunities

Figure 3. Select social indicators across the life span: Ratios of Indigenous to non-Indigenous levels



Presently, male and female children born in Australia can expect average life spans of 78 and 83 years respectively. This is not the case for the average Indigenous child. For example, if we take a newborn Indigenous male, the chance that he will reach age 15 is about 97 per cent. For those who reach age 15, about 19 per cent will die before age 45, while one-quarter will not reach age 50. Statistically, more than half of Indigenous males who reach age 15 have no chance of surviving to age 65. Compared to non- Indigenous males, these results imply an intensity of mortality among Indigenous Australian males which is 2.7 per cent higher than the rest of the population between ages 0 and 15 years, 18 per cent higher between ages 15 and 45 years, and as much as 75 per cent higher between ages 15 and 65 years[5]. Similar gaps are evident between Indigenous and non-Indigenous females. Thus, based on this one indicator alone, Indigenous life opportunities are substantially curtailed.

[4] Altman, Biddle and Hunter 2004.

[5] Kinfu and Taylor 2002

While premature mortality shortens the span of social and economic participation for many Indigenous people, social and economic disadvantage at early ages reduces the level of such participation as suggested by the data in Figure 3. In this figure, ratios above the middle gridline (1.0) indicate higher Indigenous values; ratios below the middle gridline indicate lower Indigenous values.

Thus,

- Indigenous children are twice as likely than non-Indigenous children to have a low birth weight (below 2,500 gms);
- The level of Indigenous pre-school attendance at age 4 years is barely 80 per cent of the non-Indigenous level;
- Post-school education attendance in the all important school to work transition years is less than 50 per cent of the non-Indigenous level;
- Not surprisingly Indigenous youth unemployment is twice the non-Indigenous rate, and;
- By middle age Indigenous people report their health status as very good or excellent at only 60 per cent of the non-Indigenous rate.

Putting all this together in a life opportunities framework, the telling outcome is the proportion of Indigenous adults of prime working age (15-54 years) who are employed, which is less than two-thirds that of non-Indigenous adults.

The purpose of this background brief has been to provide a quantum to discussions of needs, aspirations, and development capacities. To the extent that reconciliation is concerned with closing the gaps between Indigenous and other Australians and enhancing life opportunities for Indigenous people, the data presented outline the scale of some of the tasks ahead. Importantly, though, they also emphasise diversity in Indigenous circumstances and that consequently the routes to reconciliation are many and varied.

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