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STATISTICS ON THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF AUSTRALIA

This article has been contributed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a comparatively small, but highly important, proportion of the total Australian population.

In the 1991 Census, some 265,000 people identified themselves as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. This represents just over 1.5 per cent of the total Australian population. It is a growing component; over the five years from the previous Census in 1986, the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increased by 17 per cent, compared with a growth of 8 per cent for the total Australian population.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, however, have significance much beyond their numbers. As Australia's indigenous peoples, the possessors of the oldest continuous cultures in the world, and as the most disadvantaged group of Australians they have a unique place in Australian society. The Commonwealth Government accepts a special responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, manifested in a range of programs and activities specifically directed at overcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. At the same time, other spheres of government retain their responsibilities for the provision of services to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents.

Increasingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are gaining a greater role in decisions affecting them, notably through the establishment in 1990 by the Commonwealth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the structure of 60 Regional Councils throughout Australia.

Internationally there is a sharpening focus on the rights of indigenous peoples. Australia's relations with its indigenous peoples have become one of the key elements in the assessments made by the United Nations and other international organisations of our human rights performance. In 1993, this international focus has been considerably sharpened by its designation as the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

There is accordingly a substantial demand by governments for statistical data about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. This demand is augmented by the requirements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and of researchers in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

The characteristics which distinguish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reflected across the range of demographic, social and economic indicators -- age distribution and family composition, fertility and mortality, health, geographic distribution, housing, employment, education, incomes, and the like.

This special article presents some brief historical data, a statistical profile on various characteristics of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, and outlines some important statistical issues and directions for the future.

Earlier estimates of the indigenous population

Various estimates ranging from around 300,000 to over one million, have been made of the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia at the time of European settlement.

In the years following colonisation the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population declined dramatically under the impact of new diseases repressive and often brutal treatment, dispossession, and social and cultural disruption and disintegration. Such data as is available suggests that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population had declined to around 60,000 by the 1920s.

Counts and estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations have been attempted at every national census since Federation. The figures were not included, however, in the official count of the Australian population until the 1971 Census, following the repeal in 1967 of section 127 of the Commonwealth Constitution which required Aboriginal natives to be excluded from population counts. Until 1966, Aboriginal people who lived beyond settled areas were not counted but estimates of their numbers were provided by authorities responsible for Aboriginal welfare.

ESTIMATES OF THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION PRIOR TO THE 1971 CENSUS

Census year	Number
1901	93,000
1921	72,000
1933	81,000
1947	76,000

1954	75,000
1961	84,000
1966	102,000

Source: 'The Aboriginal Population of Australia', L.R. Smith, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

Differences and deficiencies in coverage and data collection methods limit the usefulness of this data as a guide to trends.

Indigenous population since 1971

In the 1971 Census, a total of 115,953 persons identified themselves as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. At subsequent censuses the figures have been:

Year	Number
1976	160,915
1981	159,897
1986	227,645
1991	265,492

Considerable caution is required in making any inter-censal comparisons. In particular, it is believed that a substantial proportion of the increases reflect a growing willingness or people to identify themselves as Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders. There have also been some changes over the period in the form or the question asked in the Census, and improvements in collection procedures.

It is not possible to estimate the significance of these special factors and thereby to identify underlying trends more accurately. Nor is it possible to utilise data on registrations of births and deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide some check on inter-censal trends, as not all States and Territories identify Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders separately in their records. There is, in any event, some concern about the accuracy of the data that is available.

These limitations notwithstanding it is clear that, over the last two decades, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has been moving much more rapidly than the overall Australian population.

The basis for census data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations is self-identification. This reflects established practice in the administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, where the definition used has three elements: that the person is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, that he or she identifies as an aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and that he or she is recognised as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander within the community in which they live.

Data from the 1991 Census shows that of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of 265,492:

- 238,590 were Aboriginals and 26,902 were Torres Strait Islanders;
- females (134,030) slightly outnumbered males (131,462); and
- the numbers and proportions of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in each State and Territory were:

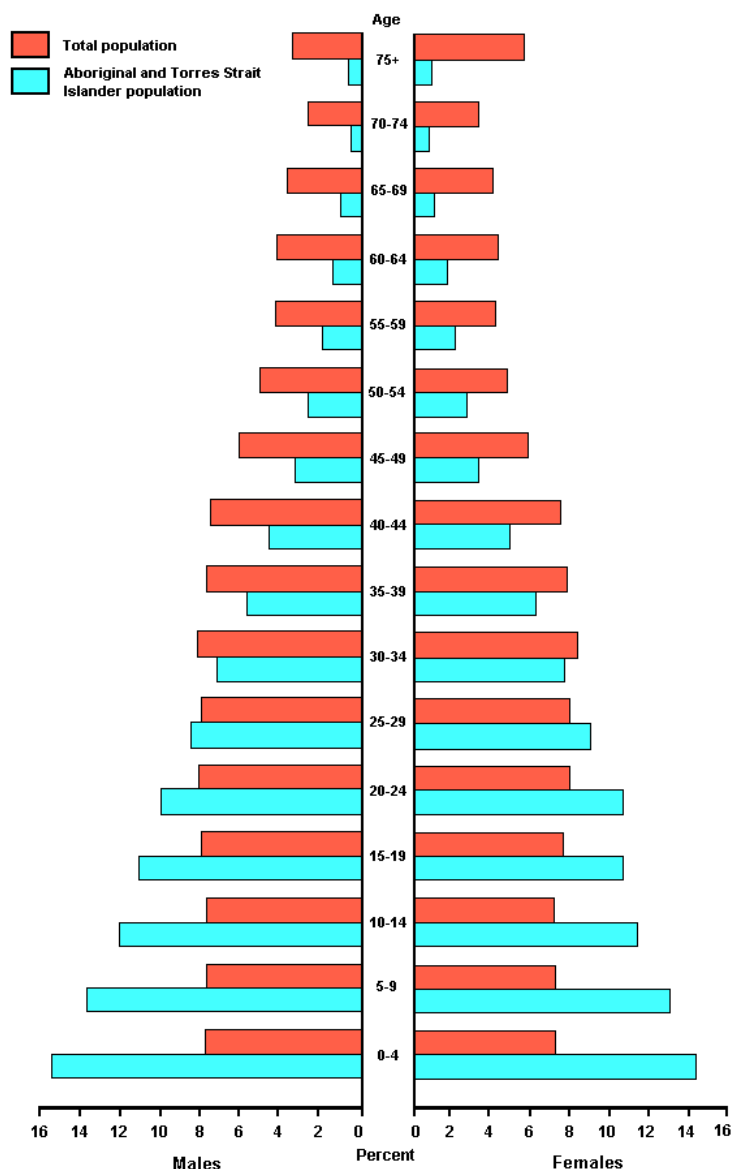
NUMBERS AND PROPORTIONS OF THE TOTAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION BY STATE, 1991

State	Number	%
New South Wales	70,020	26.4
Victoria	16,736	6.3
Queensland	70,130	26.4
South Australia	16,238	6.1
Western Australia	41,792	15.7
Tasmania	8,886	3.4
Northern Territory	39,918	15.0
Australian Capital Territory	1,772	0.7

Statistical profile from the Census

In addition to providing figures on the indigenous population, the five-yearly Population Census provides data on a range of characteristics for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The following statistical profile is based mainly on the results of the 1986 Census as comparable details were not yet available from the 1991 Census at the time of preparation of this article.

Age. As the accompanying chart illustrates, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in 1991 was much younger than the general Australian population. Over half were under 20 years of age, compared with less than a third of all Australians. The proportion under five (14%) was almost double that of the total population, while only six per cent were aged over 54 compared with 20 per cent of the total population.



Fertility and child survival. Fertility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is considerably higher than the national average, but so too is child mortality. At the time of the 1986 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women had had, on average, 2.6 children. The national average was 1.9. Those reaching the end of their child-bearing years (45 and over) had had, on average, 4.9 children, compared with a national average of 2.6 children.

Child loss rates were considerably higher than the national average. By 1986, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers aged between 15 and 29 had lost 26 per thousand children born, compared with 15 for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers.

Location and mobility. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations show a markedly different pattern of geographic distribution than for the population as a whole. Overall, in 1986 33 per cent lived in rural areas, compared with 15 per cent of the total population; 24 per cent were in major urban areas with populations of 100,000 or more (63% and 42 per cent were in other urban censuses (22%).

Mobility rates were somewhat higher than for the total population. On Census night 1986, 24 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had had a different address one year earlier, and 46 per cent had had a different address five years earlier. National figures were 18 and 43 per cent respectively. Of those who had moved, however, only about one in ten had changed their State or Territory of residence.

Households and housing. Compared with national averages, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in larger households. The average number of persons per household was 4.5 (compared with a national average of 2.7); in rural areas, the figure was 6.0. A greater number of households had dependent children or were multi-family.

Seven out of every 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households were renting their dwellings. Just over a quarter lived in homes either owned or being purchased by a household member, compared with two-thirds for all Australian households.

Employment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force was significantly lower in 1986 than for the total population. The figures were 66 per cent for men and 36 per cent for women, compared with national figures of 75 per cent and 48 per cent respectively. Participation was significantly lower in rural areas.

Unemployment among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the labour force was much higher (35%) than for the labour force as a whole (9%).

Of those employed, larger than average proportions were in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations; 43 per cent were employed in the public sector (compared with the national proportion of just over a quarter); and 96 per cent worked for wages or salaries (83%).

Income. In 1986, median incomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and families were only two-thirds of the national figures.

Education. Overall, 95 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged between 6 and 14 were stated as attending school. The figure fell to 92 and 91 per cent for rural localities and other rural areas respectively.

In the age group 15-24, the proportion of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders still attending an educational institution was much lower than the national average -- 23 per cent as against 39 per cent. Only 7 per cent of these were attending universities or colleges of advanced education, as against 18 per cent nationally. Nine per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons age 15 and over stated that they had post-school qualifications compared with 26 per cent for the overall population in these age groups.

Language. In rural areas, 42 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged five years or over spoke an Aboriginal language at home in 1986. In urban areas, the figure was only six per cent. About 2,000 were reported as not able to speak English at all.

Statistics from other than the Census

A certain amount of statistical data on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is available from sources other than the five-yearly population censuses. However, the capacity to utilise other sources of data such as regular ABS sample surveys has been limited by survey design problems such as the relatively small size of, and difficulties in identifying the indigenous population. Administrative records are another source of statistics although, as mentioned previously, these have their limitations.

The following further measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage are taken from a variety of present non-census data sources.

Health. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- mortality rates are at least two and a half times those of the total population;
- life expectancy is some 15 to 17 years less than for the whole population;
- infant and prenatal mortality rates are approximately three times the national rates;
- death rates associated with diseases of the circulatory system are two and a half times higher than for the total Australian population;
- admissions to hospitals are up to three times more frequent than for other Australians, and the incidence of chronic disability is much greater;
- at least 10 per cent suffer from diabetes; and
- the incidence of eye disease, especially in hot, dry areas, is much higher than for other Australians.

Law and Justice. In 1991, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment was 18 times that of non-Aboriginals. Research undertaken by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that, in August 1988, 20 per cent of those detained in police custody were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Need for further statistics

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations exhibit markedly different demographic, economic, social and cultural characteristics from the overall Australian population. Their special status as the indigenous peoples of this country, combined with the fact (as indicated by the statistics summarised in this article) that they are, as a group, the most disadvantaged of Australians, create special demands for accurate, timely and comprehensive data on which national, regional and community plans can be developed, public policies based, and progress in addressing problem areas evaluated.

The demographic characteristics of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are of particular importance and have major implications for policy development and program priorities, notably in such areas as employment and education, and in housing and infrastructure needs.

At the time of the 1991 Census, 40 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was aged under 15, and a further 30 percent were aged between 15 and 29. The rapid growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working age population is of considerable economic and social significance. On the basis of projections made from 1986 Census data by Gray and Tesfaghiorgis (Social Indicators of the Aboriginal Population of Australia, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Research, Australian National University 1991), this would grow by 47 percent between 1986 and 2001.

Another trend is the growth -- projected to average over three per cent a year -- in the numbers of households with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander head. Location factors are also highly relevant. Proportionately higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in areas where employment opportunities are at best limited, experiencing long-term decline or virtually non-existent.

Data needs and deficiencies were highlighted by the National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which represented the most comprehensive analysis ever undertaken of the nature, extent and causes of Aboriginal disadvantage.

The Royal Commission's recommendation 49 read:

'That proposals for a special national survey covering a range of social, demographic, health and economic characteristics of the Aboriginal population with full Aboriginal participation at all levels be supported. The proposed census should take as its boundaries the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission boundaries. The Aboriginal respondents to the census should be encouraged to nominate their traditional/contemporary language affiliation. I further recommend that the ATSIC Regional Councils be encouraged to use the special census to obtain an inventory of community infrastructure, assets and outstanding needs which can be used as data for the development of their regional plans'.

In March 1992 the Commonwealth responded by announcing a special national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. An amount of \$4.4 million has been allocated to this sample survey, which will be undertaken in mid-1994 following a comprehensive program of consultation with the indigenous community, and survey testing and development. It is intended that the survey will give priority to the provision of complementary information to that which is becoming available from the 1991 Census and from other sources.

Of these other sources, the most substantial is the Survey of Housing and Community Infrastructure Needs being undertaken by ATSIC. The purpose of this survey is to ascertain the condition of existing housing and infrastructure, the level of unmet requirements, and the estimated costs of providing adequate housing and infrastructure to match comparative standards in the wider community). Data collection for the survey commenced in the first half of 1992 in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

It might be noted that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made a number of other recommendations relating to data collections and research on a number of more specific matters such as persons in custody, alcohol use, recidivism, and effectiveness of non-custodial sentencing orders and parole.

The availability of statistical data will be a critical factor for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and for governments in the years ahead. The full results of the 1991 Census, and the outcome of the Special Survey, will do much to update and expand the existing databases.

Data from such sources needs to be augmented, however, by a better flow of data from regular collections, notably in such areas as health, education, and law and justice. Addressing these needs is one of the important challenges for those charged with responsibility for data collections.

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