POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF INDIGENOUS POPULATION CHANGE, 1991–1996

John Taylor

Since 1971 the indigenous population of Australia has trebled. From 1991 to 1996 numbers grew by 33 per cent, 16 per cent more than had been projected. This unexpected increase was highest in the south-east, especially in Tasmania and the ACT. Much of it can be explained by out-marriage. In 1996, 64 per cent of couples (in married or de facto relationships) included a non-indigenous partner. Most of the children from these intermixed relationships have been counted as indigenous persons in the Census.

The release of the 1996 Census count of indigenous Australians has generated a good deal of interest among analysts and policy makers. In part, this no doubt reflects a heavy reliance on the five-yearly census for information regarding the relative social and economic status of indigenous people. In this context of census dependency, population projections based on the 1991 Census count assumed considerable policy significance over the intercensal period.

For example, it was pointed out that there was an increasing disparity between indigenous employment growth and the projected growth in the working-age indigenous population with escalating social and economic costs for indigenous people and for the Australian community as a whole. However, confidence in these population projections is now undermined by the higher than expected population count from the 1996 Census. This necessitates entirely new projections to 2006 from a higher base and much thought will also need to be devoted to the underlying dynamics of population change.

Inconsistency between census counts has long been a feature of the demography of indigenous Australians. However, the intercensal change observed between 1986 and 1991 suggested that, for the first time, census counts were moving into line with expectation. Greater predictability in the estimation of population levels and composition seemed within grasp. The 1996 Census result returns demographic analysis to the more familiar condition of uncertainty about intercensal projections.

At the 1996 Census, a total of 352,970 individuals self-identified as indigenous Australians. This represented an increase of 87,599 or 33 per cent since 1991. The increase in the estimated resident population (ERP), which adjusts the census count for census error, was roughly of the same order rising from 283,560 to 372,052, an increase of 31 per cent. These results were substantially above the levels expected from 1991 Census-based projections. However, viewed in the historical context of attempts by the Australian state to enumerate its indigenous peoples, they are not remarkable.

### Table 1: Indigenous population change, 1971–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year range</th>
<th>Population at end of period</th>
<th>Net change</th>
<th>Per cent change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>intercensal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1976</td>
<td>160,915</td>
<td>44,962</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1981</td>
<td>159,897</td>
<td>-1,018</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1986</td>
<td>227,645</td>
<td>67,748</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-1991</td>
<td>265,459</td>
<td>37,814</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1996</td>
<td>352,970</td>
<td>87,511</td>
<td>33.0</td>
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</table>

Table 1 shows the change in indigenous population enumerated at each census over the past 25 years, this being the period within which indigenous people have had the opportunity (post-1967 referendum) to self-identify on census forms. The erratic nature of the count over...
time and the generally high intercensal growth rates are striking. The population growth reported for the 1986–91 intercensal period is more or less in line with expectation on the basis of estimated rates of natural increase, while the 1996 count resumes the more familiar experience of a higher than anticipated rate of increase.

This raises questions of fundamental policy interest:

- What is the explanation for this increase and has it been evenly distributed demographically and spatially?
- What does the increase imply for the socio-economic status of indigenous people?
- What are the implications of a return to unpredictability for benchmarking policy and program performance using social indicators?

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY**

In demographic terms, population change is the net consequence of additions due to births, losses due to deaths and either gain or loss due to international migration (at the national level) or internal migration (at the regional level). Other variables, such as census error, also impinge and adjustment for these is made by estimation. Unlike the standard demographic equation, however, indigenous population change is complicated by the added dynamic of net change in ethnic identification. Because of this, there is no sense in which the indigenous population can be described as clearly defined. Rather, political and sociological processes, including the highly variable way in which States, Territories and the Commonwealth have attempted to enumerate and categorise indigenous people and the choices made by respondents to official enumerations, construct the entity we call ‘the indigenous population’.

The most complete exploration of these issues from a demographic perspective remains the work of Smith who distinguished between a theoretical total population of any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry and the official figures, which he referred to as the ‘revealed’ population. Part of the unpredictability of this ‘revealed’ population is the latent potential it implies for growth due to increased identification of individuals as indigenous Australian in official statistics. Similar observations about the growth potential of populations derived from census questions on racial origin/ethnic affiliation have been made in the United States. Three factors appear to contribute to this dynamic: propensity to self-identify, inter-marriage and changes in enumeration procedures.

**Propensity to self-identify**

The extent to which the size of the revealed indigenous population is affected by changes in the propensity of individuals to self-identify on census forms as indigenous Australians is unknown. It is undeniable, however, that a number of events occurred during the 1990s which may have contributed substantially to increased awareness and acknowledgment of indigenous origins. Among these one might include the declaration of land rights in New South Wales and Queensland, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the creation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the conduct of ATSIC elections, increased government spending on indigenous programs, the rise of indigenous political and service-delivery organisations, the Mabo decision, and subsequent passing in the High Court of the Native Title Act, the High Court Wik decision and the Stolen Generation Inquiry.

The last example is instructive. While the numbers of children and families separated by welfare authorities are difficult to establish with precision, it is estimated that from around 1910 until 1970 between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. As for those still living, in the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey some six per cent of survey respondents (an estimated 17,000 persons) reported being taken away by authorities from their natural family. The impact of these sizeable removals on the unfolding structure and distribution of the self-identified indigenous population remains unknown but they clearly establish a large potential pool of census respondents.
Intermarriage

Intermarriage is defined as formal or de facto marriage between indigenous and non-indigenous persons. Because rates of indigenous identification among the product of such marriages are high (82 per cent of children in 1991), intermarriage adds to the population of indigenous origin by producing a higher number of births of indigenous children than would be the case if the only factor was the fertility of indigenous women. As a measure of the impact of this, between 1991 and 1996 a total of 16,350 births of indigenous children (28 per cent of the intercensal total) were to non-indigenous mothers with indigenous fathers. These births accounted for 16 per cent of indigenous population growth over the intercensal period. 

The first indications of high inter-marriage rates were reported from the 1986 Census which revealed that 46 per cent of indigenous couple families were unions between indigenous and non-indigenous partners. Further analysis based on the 1991 Census indicated that this proportion had increased to 51 per cent while the 1996 Census shows a further rise to 64 per cent.

1996 Census data on the composition of these families is not yet available but, according to the 1991 census, indigenous-couple families involving a union between indigenous and non-indigenous partners were almost evenly divided between those where the mother was indigenous (56 per cent) and those where the father was indigenous (44 per cent). In terms of demographic accounting, it is from the latter group that additional indigenous births are derived.

Indigenous births to non-indigenous mothers appear to have steadily risen in recent years as a proportion of all indigenous births. As an indication of this, Gray points out that among couple families where one partner was indigenous in 1991, the proportion of children with a non-indigenous mother was 27 per cent for children aged less than one year. This proportion decreased in close to linear fashion to 20 per cent for children aged 14 years. Gray’s estimate for the 1996 Census of the proportion of infants with non-indigenous mothers suggests a further rise to 30 per cent.

The fact that inter-marriage rates are highest in major urban areas and in the south-east of the country, may provide one explanation for regional population growth rates that appear counter-intuitive. For example, the indigenous population in places such as the Northern Territory, with the highest fertility (but low rates of intermarriage), has grown as a proportion of the total population less rapidly than expected, while populations in the south-east, with lower fertility (but high intermarriage rates), have grown faster than expected.

Changes in enumeration procedures

Since 1971, the methods used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to count the indigenous population have been gradually extended and improved. According to Barnes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were the focus for an improved enumeration effort in the 1996 Census and an enhanced Indigenous Enumeration Strategy (IES) was developed to facilitate this. This strategy specifically targeted urban areas. It employed special ‘Indigenous Assistants’ in urban neighbourhoods to deliver and collect forms, to explain the census and even to fill forms out if requested. The strategy also involved the employment of a senior manager in each State and Territory with responsibility for the enumeration of indigenous people. In Gray’s view, the increased count in many urban areas provides some measure of the effectiveness of this strategy. For example, non-response to the census question on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) origins decreased noticeably in all regions where ATSI population growth was above average.

It is then ironic that enumeration problems seem to persist in many remote areas where special enumeration procedures have been employed since 1976. Research has demonstrated that methodological and conceptual problems in the count of remote-area populations can lead to under-enumeration, particularly of the young, the more mobile and the more socially marginal. The relative exclusion of such cohorts emerged again in the 1996 Census and
the phenomenon is well recognised by the ABS.\textsuperscript{24}

The 1996 Census count also showed substantially divergent regional trends in remote-area population change which appear to derive from census error. In particular, there was a notable increase in non-response to the census question on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins in almost all of the remote regions which experienced lower than expected intercensal growth.\textsuperscript{25} While reasons for this remain unclear, it may be significant that the census question on indigenous origins was pre-ticked on remote-area census forms in 1991 but left blank for interviewers to complete in 1996. It is estimated that the net increase in non-response to this question amounted to 6,300 in areas where remote-area forms were used.\textsuperscript{26}

**POPULATION DISTRIBUTION**

The 1996 Census count underlines a long-standing trend of a shifting balance in the distribution of the indigenous population. The proportion in the north and west of the continent has steadily declined in favour of the east and south, and the proportion living in rural areas has declined while that in urban areas has increased.

One indication of the recent force of this trend is provided by a comparison of 1991-based projections of the 1996 indigenous population of each State and Territory against the 1996 Census results (see Table 2). This shows that all States and Territories recorded ERPs above those projected, but that this was particularly so in New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) where growth was much higher than expected. By contrast, in South Australia, Western Australia, and especially in the Northern Territory, 1996 ERPs were very close to expectation.

Cumulative evidence from each census since 1971 suggests that interstate migration is unlikely to have affected this shift, given that net interstate movements of indigenous people to date have been relatively small with inflows almost cancelled out by outflows.\textsuperscript{27}

**Population change by section-of-State**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Variation between the indigenous population as projected for 1996 and the 1996 estimated resident population (ERP) by State and Territory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a} High series

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics \textsuperscript{27}

The growing focus on States in eastern Australia coincides with an increased residence in urban areas. Table 3 shows the change in indigenous population numbers by section-of-State over the past two intercensal periods and Table 4 outlines the proportional shift in
distribution between sections-of-State. Several features stand out:

- The bulk of indigenous population growth in recent years has occurred in urban areas;
- Numerically, this increase has been shared equally between major urban and other urban areas, although the rate of increase in major urban areas has been greater because of a lower base population.
- In rural localities growth from natural increase has been less than might be expected and the rate of growth actually fell in the 1991–96 period.
- The ‘other rural’ section-of-State, which includes populations at outstations, showed a modest increase.

Another way to express these changes is shown in Table 4. Briefly, the proportion of the indigenous population resident in urban areas rose from just over two-thirds in 1991 (67 per cent) to almost three-quarters in 1996 (73 per cent). As a consequence, almost one-third of indigenous Australians are now resident in major urban areas compared to just over one-quarter in 1991. While this is still much less than the total Australian population (63 per cent), it nonetheless represents a substantial increase from the 15 per cent of the indigenous population counted in 1971. In line with this, the rural share of the indigenous population has steadily receded — down from 33 per cent in 1991 to almost one-quarter (27 per cent) in 1996. Nonetheless, unlike the non-indigenous rural population which declined numerically by 21,000, the indigenous rural population continued to rise.

### Table 3: Changes in the indigenous population by section-of-State, 1986–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Population increase</td>
<td>Per cent increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major urban</td>
<td>15,344</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other urban</td>
<td>12,734</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural localities</td>
<td>2,231</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other rural</td>
<td>7,470</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37,779</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a The ABS section-of-State classification is as follows: ‘major urban’ (settlements over 100,000 persons), ‘other urban’ (1,000–99,999 persons), ‘rural localities’ (200–999 persons) and ‘other rural’ (fewer than 200 persons).

### Table 4: Distribution of indigenous population by section-of-State, 1991–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section of State</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Per cent distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major urban</td>
<td>70,881</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other urban</td>
<td>108,613</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural localities</td>
<td>36,285</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other rural</td>
<td>49,645</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>265,424</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regional population change

The shifting geography of the indigenous population count is best revealed at the regional level. For this purpose, the regional councils of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) provide a useful analytical framework. Figure 1 shows the percentage growth in population between 1991 and 1996 for each of the ATSIC regions. The cut-off point of a growth rate of 2.6 per cent per annum is used to isolate those regions that experienced less than the anticipated average national growth rate based on 1991 projections.
Regions with more than 6.6 per cent annual growth exceeded the national average growth rate for the 1991–96 period.

Figure 1 shows that higher than anticipated growth was recorded throughout most of eastern Australia and in capital cities. It also shows that isolated regions in southern parts of Western Australia, coastal New South Wales, southern and central Queensland and the Cairns district. Elsewhere, growth was lower than had been projected. Three areas in particular stand out as having growth rates that were particularly lower than expected. These included ATSIC regions in the Kimberley and Pilbara districts of Western Australia, the Jabiru Region across the Top End of the Northern Territory, the Peninsula Region in Cape York Peninsula as well as the region covered by the Torres Strait Regional Authority.

CHANGE IN SOCIAL INDICATORS

The growth of population at a rate considerably above that expected by natural increase, together with the concentration of this growth in urban areas, raises a number of important questions regarding the impact of new entrants to the indigenous population. Among the key issues for policy is the net impact of augmenting the population in terms of change in socioeconomic status and assessment of need.

Research on this issue has only just commenced. However, early indications are that, despite a substantial number of new entrants to the census-identified indigenous population, the overall social and economic profile of the group remains largely the same as in 1991. For example, although the percentage of working-age persons in employment has risen from 35.8 to 40.7, real change in employment may not be as favourable because the higher census numbers are inflated by the effect of increased participation in the ‘work for the dole’ Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, the lingering impact of placement in the former Labor government’s Working Nation job programs, and an unknown effect due to new additions to the population. Likewise, despite apparent
employment growth, the average income of indigenous Australians remains substantially below that of all other Australians. In 1996 it was 0.63 of the general level compared to 0.61 in 1991. Other research shows that indigenous city-dwellers in 1996 remain substantially over-represented in the poorest neighbourhoods and that their relative distribution across major urban collection districts is essentially unchanged since 1991.30

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The key source of data for policy formulation in indigenous affairs is the five-yearly census and yet this continues to yield counts of the indigenous population that are unpredictable. As long as the census question on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins remains the sole means of comprehensively defining the indigenous population, it is likely that the numbers identified in this way will continue to rise steadily due to increased enumeration, changes in identification and the flow-on effects of intermarriage. Between 1991 and 1996, it appears that around 60 per cent of the increase in the indigenous population can be attributed to such factors.31

At a time of growing pressure for targeted service delivery that is cost-effective and based on demonstrated need, the prospect of an ever-expanding indigenous population requires careful consideration. In this context, it is worth recalling the Commonwealth’s three-part definition of an indigenous Australian. An individual is an indigenous Australian if he or she:

- has Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- is accepted as an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander by the community in which he or she lives.

It can be argued that the indigenous population revealed by the census conforms with only the first and second of these criteria, but only to the extent that a collection of individuals have ticked the appropriate box on a census form which asks if they are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. Absence of the third criteria from the census methodology does open the prospect that the census-derived indigenous population may be of a different size to any population based on the full Commonwealth definition.

While recognising these complexities, the key policy question stemming from the 1996 Census is this. Has the growth of the population identified by the census question on indigenous origins altered the characteristics and extent of demonstrated need in terms of education, training, employment and housing? So far, initial research findings suggest that this is unlikely.

In estimating future need there is a pressing requirement for revised official projections of the indigenous population. In recent years, the ABS has produced experimental projections, but the methodology used in constructing these has not included any adjustment for change in census identification. Assumptions about the role of intermarriage have also been restricted by available administrative data on indigenous paternity rates. Demographically, there are sound reasons for avoiding assumptions about change in identification. But in view of the substantial gap between 1991 Census-based projections and the 1996 ERP, an argument might be advanced in favour of further developing projections based on a range of assessments about the contribution of intermarriage to population growth.33

The issue at stake here is highlighted in the context of benchmarking outcomes in social and economic policy. What, for example, is the appropriate denominator to use for measuring change in social indicators when the base population can vary so much between census counts? For example, what can be said about the effects of policy when it is not clear if employment growth reflects real improvement to the original client base or merely the effect of adding new people to the population who have different labour-force characteristics? Likewise, intercensal indicators that use administrative data for the numerator and census-based population estimates as the denominator, may be revised downwards because of an expanded denominator, as has already happened with estimates of indigenous fertility for South Australia and the Northern Territory.34
What is the significance of a clear consolidation of population distribution in urban areas and in eastern Australia? Current policy emphasises the relative needs of remote rural populations, but one question raised by the substantial geographic bias in population growth rates in favour of the south, east and urban areas is whether this also implies a concomitant diversion of resources.

Finally, research on self-identified indigenous populations in the United States has posed a paradox for public policy which appears to have a growing parallel in Australia. In Snipp’s words, this is that indigenous populations are considered discrete and homogenous when in reality they are becoming less discrete, less homogenous and more difficult to define unambiguously.

References


6 ibid.

7 The ERP is the official Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) best estimate of the population. In calculating the ERP for the indigenous population, the census count by place of usual residence is adjusted for underenumeration by pro-rating the distribution of non-responses to the census question on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, correcting for errors in age reporting to smooth the age distribution and reconstituting the population according to expected sex ratios (See D. Benham and A. Howe, Experimental Estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 1986-1991: States/Territories and Australia, Demography Working Paper 94/2, ABS, Canberra, 1994, and also Experimental Projections: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population, June 1991-June 2001, cat. no. 3231.0, ABS, Canberra, 1996a. Projections are based on ERPs.


9 L.R. Smith, op. cit.


13 A. Gray, op. cit.


15 A. Gray, op. cit., p. 8
16 ibid., p. 10


20 *Census Field Officer Manual*, Item M21, ABS, Canberra, 1996b

21 A. Gray, op. cit.


23 A. Gray, op. cit.


26 ibid.


31 A. Barnes, op. cit., p. 9; A. Gray, 1997, op. cit., p. 13

32 ABS, 1996a, op. cit.

33 A. Gray, 1997, op.cit.

34 ABS, 1996b, op. cit., p. 57

35 J. Herron, 9th Annual Joe and Enid Lyons Lecture, 15 November 1996, University House, ANU, Canberra, 1996


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