

Estimating the reliance of Aboriginal Australians on welfare: Some policy implications

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ABSTRACT

The Aboriginal Employment Development Policy has three broad aims: employment, income and welfare dependency equality between Aboriginal and other Australians by the year 2000. The paper focuses primarily on the third and least scrutinised of these goals: the reduction of Aboriginal welfare dependency to levels commensurate with that of the total population. 1986 Census data are initially used to estimate the relative significance of Aboriginal employment and non-employment income in aggregate terms. These estimates are then disaggregated using census data and available administrative data sets. A critical overview of available official information on sources of Aboriginal income is presented highlighting the lack of detailed comparative data for the Aboriginal population. Commentary is also provided on important sources of income for Aboriginal people that are generally overlooked in official statistics, and data gleaned from a number of available case studies are used to consider some of the social and economic circumstances affecting Aboriginal reliance on non-employment income. In conclusion we raise the possibility that there might be inverse and unintended tradeoffs between the three AEDP goals: in particular, reduced welfare dependency in the current economic climate may hamper the goal of income equality; and the pursuit of statistical equality between Aboriginal and other Australians may inadvertently result in greater inequities within the Aboriginal population.

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The Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) has three main goals: the achievement of employment, income and welfare dependency equality between Aboriginal¹ and other Australians by the year 2000 (Australian Government 1987). Because the AEDP is primarily a mainstream labour market-oriented policy, it is not surprising that its performance has been primarily evaluated in terms of its employment and training goals (see Altman 1991a; Johnston 1991). In an earlier paper, Altman (1991b) attempted to shift this emphasis to examine the issue of income equality. This paper focuses primarily on the third, and least scrutinised AEDP goal: the reduction of Aboriginal welfare dependency to levels commensurate with that of the total population by the year 2000.

In the AEDP 'welfare dependency' is equated with dependency on unemployment benefit (UB)², specifying a reduction in Aboriginal receipt of UB '... from the current level of around 30% of the working age population to only 5%' (Australian Government 1987: 4-5). This definition of welfare is somewhat narrow reflecting, in our opinion, the labour market focus of the AEDP. Here, a wider definition of welfare that includes all transfer payments from the Federal Government to Aboriginal citizens is used. This more accurate definition of 'welfare' is used because Aboriginal welfare dependence is an important policy issue: it is frequently raised in public and political debate and the depiction of Aboriginal people as excessively dependent on welfare or handouts often results in negative stereotyping of the Aboriginal population.

This paper begins with an overview of available official information on sources of Aboriginal income. 1986 Census data are initially used to estimate the relative significance of Aboriginal employment and non-employment income in aggregate terms. An attempt is then made to disaggregate these estimates using census data and available administrative data sets. A critical commentary is provided on important sources of income for Aboriginal people that are generally overlooked in official statistics, and data gleaned from a number of available case studies are used to highlight some of the social and economic circumstances affecting Aboriginal reliance on non-employment income. Next, some policy implications of the extent of Aboriginal reliance on welfare and the AEDP's goal of reducing this dependence are raised. In particular, an attempt is made to demonstrate the links between the goal of reduced welfare dependence, the primary focus of this paper, and the other two AEDP goals of employment and income equality. In conclusion we raise the possibility that there might be inverse and unintended tradeoffs between the three AEDP goals: in particular, reduced welfare dependency in the current economic climate may hamper the goal of income equality; and the pursuit of statistical equality between Aboriginal and other Australians may inadvertently result in greater inequities within the Aboriginal population.

OFFICIAL DATA ON SOURCES OF ABORIGINAL INCOME

Individuals obtain cash income from various sources: from their labour earning power (wages), from business (profit), from their citizenship entitlement in the Australian welfare state to basic income support (government benefits and pensions), from ownership of land (rent and royalties) and from earnings on assets (interest and investment income). Income from welfare payments is only one source of cash for Aboriginal people and cash is, in turn, only one kind of income to which they have access. Given the recent public and government focus on the issue of level of Aboriginal incomes and their assumed

reliance on welfare transfers (see Commonwealth of Australia 1991), it is salutary to note that there are no statistics currently available that quantify accurately the above range of sources of Aboriginal income. At the same time, there is case study material from an Aboriginal perspective which suggests that the issue of dependence on welfare is not given a high priority by many Aboriginal people.

The 1976 Census included a question on sources of individual income that allowed the recording (and subsequent analysis) of specific sources of income including government benefits and pensions. This question has not been included in subsequent censuses. The 1986 Census collected data on each individual's usual gross weekly income from all sources (including pensions, benefits, wages and salaries, dividends, rents and interest), but does not break it down into those constituent sources. As a result, information on specific sources of Aboriginal individual and household incomes has not been available since 1976.

There are other limitations in the range of information on Aboriginal incomes collected in the census. For example, there are particular types of income (received in cash and in kind) which Aboriginal people may receive that could not be categorised as individual income. Royalties and rents accruing from Aboriginal land ownership are often paid to incorporated Aboriginal royalty associations and while some monies are directly distributed to individuals and families, other royalty payments come to people in the form of goods and services and wages from employment. Royalty incomes received directly by individuals should be included in census estimations of levels of personal income, but income-in-kind in the form of access to goods and services arising from royalty payments might not.

Other important types of income-in-kind, such as the value of subsistence production, are not enumerated because there is no reference to such sources of income in censuses. Similarly, a range of Aboriginal goods and services exchanged via Aboriginal trade, ceremonial and social networks contribute to the economic well-being of Aboriginal people and in some regions help mitigate the impact of low and fluctuating levels of cash income (Altman 1987a; Anderson 1982; Finlayson 1991; Young 1981; Smith 1991a, 1991b). To leave these forms of income out of a consideration of Aboriginal sources of income could seriously underestimate people's access to goods and services.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) periodically conducts national surveys of household income and expenditure. The Income Survey is unique in its comprehensive coverage of sources of both annual and current income from wages, self-employment and transfers. From data gathered in the Household Expenditure Survey, the ABS (1987) is able to produce a detailed assessment of the distribution of government benefits and taxes amongst Australian households. The reliance of Australian households on such payments is analysed according to a wide range of variables including access to other sources of income, both direct and indirect (such as education, health and housing benefits) and in terms of the family composition of households, age of the household head, number of employed persons per household, level of household occupancy and so on. The detailed data on sources and levels of Australian income from these surveys have made a significant contribution to the research and analysis of national

social security issues and the development of economic policy (ABS 1990a: 52). All of the ABS surveys include a random sample of the Aboriginal population. However, the absence of an Aboriginal or Islander identifier in all but the five yearly census means that the data on sources of Aboriginal income cannot be isolated (see Smith 1991a, 1991b); data available for the total Australian population are not available for the Aboriginal population alone.

Despite the absence of a census question on sources of income and the absence of Aboriginal identifiers in other ABS surveys, a good deal can still be said about sources of Aboriginal income, and more specifically, about the extent of Aboriginal welfare dependence. For example, 1986 Census data can be manipulated to isolate employment and non-employment income, and data on sources of income for certain Aboriginal populations are available from research case studies. Source of income at an aggregate level have been estimated by Fisk (1985) in his analysis of the Aboriginal component of the Australian economy; and some administrative data sets on welfare transfers have been published. Whilst these data sets are incomplete, they nevertheless allow some preliminary analysis that is undertaken here. Clearly, there is a need for detailed data to be obtained on all sources of Aboriginal income, especially transfer payments.

ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT AND NON-EMPLOYMENT INCOME

At an aggregate level, the extent of Aboriginal reliance on welfare income can be estimated using 1986 Census data for persons aged 15 years and over (see Table 1). However, such an estimate is limited by a number of factors outlined by Treadgold (1980, 1988). In particular, Aboriginal annual income is divided into only five very broad categories: \$0-9,000, \$9,001-15,000, \$15,001-22,000, \$22,001-32,000, and \$32,001 and over, in census output that is cross-tabulated with labour force status. In estimating mean incomes it is necessary to take a mid-point for each income category and assume that individuals are evenly distributed about this mid-point. The open-ended highest category is especially problematic, but following Treadgold (1988: 595) it is arbitrarily assumed that the average income received by individuals in this category was one and a half times the lower limit (mean income in this class is assumed to be \$48,000 per annum).

More detailed microfiche data on income by sex show that 15,772 Aboriginal people aged over 15 years received no income. For the purposes of this analysis it is assumed that all these people were not in the labour force rather than employed or unemployed. An additional problem is that of 137,133 Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over, 17,514, or 13 per cent, did not state their income. The analysis here is limited to the 119,619 individuals who did state their income. However, even among these there are some possible errors which are apparent when income classes are cross-tabulated with labour force status. For example, 83 individuals who were unemployed and 237 individuals not in the labour force at the time of the census declared incomes over \$22,001.³

Table 1. Employment and non-employment income of Aboriginal individuals aged 15 years and over, 1986.

Labour force status	Number	Mean Income	Total Income (\$m)	Per cent of Total
Employed	40,462	\$13,726	\$557.9	58.2
(CDEP component)	(4,000)	(\$5,650)	(\$22.6)	(2.4)
Unemployed	21,467	\$6,883	\$147.8	15.4
Not in labour force	54,321	\$4,388	\$238.3	24.9
Not stated	3,189	\$4,580	\$14.6	1.5
Total (%)	119,619	\$8,015	\$958.7	100.0

Source: 1986 Census data.

Table 1 provides a summary of sources of Aboriginal income in 1986, in a form not previously tabulated. It is immediately apparent from Table 1 that employment income is of paramount significance and that UB income, the AEDP's measure of welfare dependence, is relatively insignificant in aggregate terms. In the following two sections Aboriginal income is disaggregated into two components: Aboriginal income from wages and Aboriginal income from transfers.

ABORIGINAL WAGES INCOME

In the 1986 Census 42,878 Aboriginal people were enumerated as employed in a working age population of 137,133. That is, some 65 per cent of the Aboriginal labour force, representing close to one-third of the Aboriginal working age population, would have earned some wages from employment as a major source of income, although a number did not state their income (hence the discrepancy with Table 1 above). Of Aborigines employed, 69 per cent worked full-time (35 hours and over) and were presumably receiving full-time wages as their primary source of income in the month prior to the census interview.

The mean employment income of individual Aboriginal people of working age in 1986 was \$13,726 (see Table 1).⁴ The total employment income of the Aboriginal labour force represented just over 58 per cent of all Aboriginal income quantified in the 1986 Census. This estimate is higher than Fisk's (1985) figure, based on 1981 Census data, and Gregory's (1991) more recent re-estimate.

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme

At the time of the 1986 Census there were some 4,000 persons at 38 communities participating in the CDEP scheme (Altman and Sanders 1991a: 2). These CDEP scheme participants represented just over 9 per cent of the employed Aboriginal labour force in 1986. CDEP scheme 'wages' are classified as earned in the private sector in the 1986 Census, even though the wages earned were notional UB 'equivalents' based on an individual's foregone welfare entitlement. Total expenditure on the scheme in 1985/6 was \$27.2 million; approximately \$22.6 million of which was allocated to pay CDEP scheme wages. This

figure converts to a mean income per participant of \$5,650 per annum, which is below the income earned by unemployed Aborigines, but above the income of those not in the labour force (see Table 1). This mean income figure is probably an underestimate because the \$27.2 million allocation was for the full financial year 1985/6, while the 4,000 participants would have been at 30 June 1986 with some having gradually joined the scheme over the financial year.

The removal of these 4,000 persons from the lists of the unemployed accordingly changed their source of income from UB to employment wages and correspondingly reduced the 1986 Aboriginal unemployment rate from an estimated 41 per cent to a recorded 35 per cent (Altman 1991b: 3). It has been argued that the rapid growth in the CDEP scheme since 1986, with over 18,000 participants in 1991, could have significantly reduced the number of Aboriginal people officially classified as unemployed and receiving UB as their primary source of income (Altman 1991c: 163).⁵

Training for Aborigines Program

During 1986/7 some 11,426 Aboriginal people were in training schemes (Junankar and Kapuscinski 1991) at an estimated total cost of \$63.3 million.⁶ While Aboriginal trainees are classified as being employed in the labour force in the 1986 Census, it is a moot point whether they actually occupy jobs. They might as easily be classified as individuals in transit from being unemployed. Indeed, training may well constitute a third labour force status for some Aboriginal people who undertake recurrent training in a series of government training and employment programs; neither fully exiting from their unemployed status, nor entering into the regular labour market.⁷

Income from transfer payments

Aboriginal people receiving UB and registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) are officially classified as being unemployed within the labour force. All other recipients of transfers such as aged, invalid and widow's pensions and sole parents benefit, are classified as being outside the labour force. Extraordinarily, the Department of Social Security (DSS) currently has no aggregate data on the number of Aboriginal people receiving various types of welfare transfers, let alone specific breakdowns by sex, age or location. In the past, information on Aboriginality has been recorded haphazardly by assessing officers. The introduction of an Aboriginal identifier, albeit as a voluntary question on application forms, will result in data that continue to be unreliable and inconsistent.

The lack of comprehensive official data on Aboriginal recipients of other government transfers means that it is not possible to assess their relative dependence on one form of payment or another. Further, overall comparisons cannot be made with the total Australian population's dependence on government transfers as a source of income.

Unemployment benefits

An exception is the availability of aggregate data on recipients of UB. However, even these data only reflect the maximum number of Aboriginal people who might be receiving such benefits because Aboriginal identity is assigned by CES officers at the time of their registration with the CES as unemployed and looking for employment.⁸ At June 1986 there were 27,804 Aboriginal people registered with the CES,

comprising 20,138 males and 7,666 females (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1987). The total number of Aboriginal recipients of UB represents 20.2 per cent of the 1986 working age Aboriginal population, and 29.4 per cent of the working age population when the numbers employed are excluded.⁹

Alternatively, the significance of income for the unemployed (presumably from UB) can be assessed using 1986 Census data. The mean individual income of unemployed Aborigines in 1986 was \$6,883, just less than half the mean income of those employed. The total national income of unemployed Aborigines accounted for 14.4 per cent of all Aboriginal income recorded in the 1986 Census (Table 1).

One of the primary objectives of the AEDP is a reduction of Aboriginal reliance on UB to a level commensurate with the total Australian population; that is, to 5 per cent of the working age population. To achieve this would require a reduction in the numbers of Aboriginal people on UB to 4,728; that is, removing 23,000 persons from the lists of the unemployed at 1986. Interestingly, since 1985/6 over 14,000 Aboriginal people, over half of the required figure, have been shifted from the ranks of the unemployed as a result of their participation in the CDEP scheme (Altman and Sanders 1991a: 2). It may well be that the AEDP will achieve its target of employment equality by expanding the numbers of communities involved in the scheme.

Sole parent benefits

In the absence of official DSS data on the number of Aboriginal people receiving sole parent benefits an estimate must be made. The 1986 Census recorded 13,399 single parent Aboriginal families (ABS 1991: 11). Assuming that each family has an adult who is eligible for the sole parent benefit and is not in any form of employment, then there would be an absolute maximum of 13,399 Aboriginal people eligible for sole parent benefits; that is, 9.7 per cent of the Aboriginal working age population. It is likely that a high proportion of these beneficiaries are female. Daly (1991: 6), uses the 1 per cent sample from the 1986 Census to estimate that on the basis of DSS qualifying criteria, approximately 22 per cent of Aboriginal women would have qualified for either sole parent or widow's pensions. Extrapolating this to the total female working age population provides an estimate of 15,557 women receiving these kinds of transfers.¹⁰

In 1986, almost one-third of Aboriginal families were one parent families, double the proportion in the total Australian population. One parent Aboriginal families had the lowest family incomes: over 75 per cent had annual incomes of \$15,000 or less (ABS 1991). The rate of joblessness in Aboriginal sole parent families consistently exceeded 80 per cent at the time of the 1986 Census (20 per cent higher than for non-Aboriginal sole parent families). Ross et al. (1990: 62-7) report that poverty among these families is between 10 to 25 per cent higher than for non-Aboriginal sole parents and suggest a higher level of reliance upon transfers by Aboriginal sole parents.

Abstudy

Secondary and tertiary students are classified as being outside the labour force, but nevertheless receive income in the form of Abstudy Grants. At December 1985 there were some 15,817 persons receiving such grants (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1987: 50). Excluding all school-age recipients, there were

13,984 persons receiving government study allowances within the Aboriginal working age population classified as being outside the labour force.¹¹

Summary

Recorded CES Aboriginal recipients of social security incomes in the form of UB (27,804 persons), together with estimates (see Daly 1991) from the 1986 Census of recipients of sole parent benefit and widow's pensions (15,557 persons), totalled 43,361 persons. This figure represents 32 per cent of the Aboriginal population aged 15 years and over.

Official information is not available on Aboriginal recipients of age or invalid pensions. Because of the absence of DSS data this estimate of Aboriginal reliance on welfare does not include men and women receiving such pensions, and no comparison can be made with the total Australian population. The number of Aboriginal people receiving welfare payments as estimated above is slightly more than those counted as employed by the Census in 1986. However, as noted in Table 1, the level of total income received by unemployed Aboriginal people is relatively low. UB accounted for only 15.4 per cent of total income for working age Aborigines, and Aboriginal reliance on unemployment income is some three times lower than reliance on employment income (see Table 1).

OTHER SOURCES OF INCOME

There are a number of other sources of income for Aboriginal people that need to be mentioned because they can be of significance, but are rarely mentioned in official statistics. Many of these sources have been identified in case studies that have used long-term fieldwork methods. In a later section we summarise some of this ethnographic evidence. Here we focus on four additional sources of income that can ameliorate overall welfare dependence; three are in the cash arena, one in the non-cash or informal sector.

Royalties and rents

In some cases, royalty and rental payments accruing from commercial developments on Aboriginal-owned land are paid to individuals and, as such, might be declared as individual income in the census. In the majority of cases royalty payments are paid to a designated Aboriginal association for distribution in the form of goods and services to its Aboriginal members, or for investment on their behalf. Whilst this source of income is small when reckoning national Aboriginal incomes (Fisk 1985: 79, estimates royalties and rentals as representing 1.5 per cent of total Aboriginal income), it may have a significant effect in raising the low incomes of individuals and particular groups.

In Kakadu National Park, individual royalties distributed by the Gagudju Association to its members were \$2,000 per annum in 1986; while the Djabalukgu Association disbursed payments of \$1,000 per person per annum. In addition to this income, some Aboriginal residents in the National Park received occasional buffalo royalties, Park rental payments and royalties from gravel used to upgrade roads. Whilst these payments do not have a marked overall impact on household cash incomes, Altman reported that they could be of great significance for those households totally dependent on social security (Altman 1988:

194-5). Similarly, royalty and rental payments to Aboriginal residents of Gurig National Park, north of Kakadu, were reported as ameliorating people's reliance on welfare and raising per capita cash income by 75 per cent (ibid.: 234-5).¹²

There is enormous variability in the type and level of financial payments made to Aboriginal people as a result of their legal ownership of land. Monies paid to the same group of people are often erratic in the timing and duration of payments and there is considerable variation in amounts received. Royalty and rental payments are not necessarily an ongoing source of income for Aboriginal groups and are only available to a small proportion of the total Aboriginal population.

Art and craft production

While the overall significance of arts income to Aboriginal communities appears to be low, the arts sector often provides the only means available to people to earn discretionary cash above the ceilings set by welfare and program funds (Altman 1989: 39). Fisk (1985: 79) estimated the national income accruing to the sale of artworks and artefacts at \$1 million in 1981. This had risen to \$7 million in 1987/88 according to estimates made by Altman (1989: 35). In that year, individual Aboriginal artists earned an average of \$1,500 per year from arts production, though the majority of artists earned less than \$1,000 per annum.

In the recent review of the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry Altman (1989) found that the majority of Aboriginal artists are dependent upon other forms of cash income. Of a sample of individual artists, only 4.2 per cent were wholly dependent on their arts income, while the majority (35 per cent) were reliant on UB as the primary source of cash income, 25 per cent upon pensions, 15 per cent on other wage incomes and 20 per cent upon CDEP wages (ibid.: 171). At the community level a similar picture was apparent: at Nguuu, Bathurst Island, income from the arts industry accounted for just over 4 per cent of community income in 1985/6; at the Mutitjulu community, Uluru National Park, it accounted for between 3 and 9 per cent of community income over three surveys in 1985 and 1986; and at Yirrkala and Yuendumu it accounted for approximately 5 and 10 per cent respectively (ibid.: 39). Income from Aboriginal arts showed considerable variation between communities and also within communities. Because income from the sale of arts and crafts is both low and erratic, welfare benefits provide basic income support for most art producers (Altman 1989).

Private transfers

In the 1986 Census some 15,772 Aboriginal people (5,949 males and 9,823 females) had no annual income. They represented 8.9 per cent and 13.8 per cent respectively of the total male and female working age population. Whilst there was no significant difference between Aboriginal females and the total female population in the percentage receiving no income (16 per cent and 17 per cent respectively), there was a greater difference between Aboriginal males and total Australian males with no annual income (10 per cent and 6 per cent).¹³ Perhaps more telling was the difference between the

percentage of Aboriginal families with no annual income (1.5 per cent) and total Australian families in the same situation (0.8 per cent).

The fact that some people do not receive any income from 'standard' sources such as wages, and especially from welfare transfers, raises questions about Aboriginal access to cash. Having no stated income is not the same as having no access to cash. Field researchers have noted the crucial role played by Aboriginal kin networks in redistributing cash between individuals and families; such redistribution can amount to an Aboriginal welfare system, although much of it is underwritten by the State. In some instances cited by researchers (Altman 1987a; Anderson 1982; Rowse 1988; Young 1981), this redistributive mechanism has meant that the considerable variations between Aboriginal household incomes at a single community have been ameliorated. On the other hand, Aboriginal redistribution of cash depends on external flows of cash into communities. Given the often erratic nature of cash inflow (as a result of changes in availability of employment, irregular receipt of benefit payments exacerbated for some by mobility and remoteness from DSS offices, changes in eligibility criteria and so on), Aboriginal redistributive control over flows of available cash is an extremely important mechanism for ensuring the continuing survival of families and individuals with low or no source of cash income (Smith 1991b).

Subsistence income

Some Aboriginal people have access to two types of income: cash and income-in-kind obtained through their participation in the informal economy. Information on the contribution of subsistence production to the Aboriginal economy has primarily focused on outstations. Altman (1982, 1987a) argues that considering cash income alone gives an inadequate guide to living conditions at Momega outstation in Arnhem Land where subsistence production accounted for 64 per cent of total cash and imputed income in 1979/80.

While there are marked regional differences in the contribution of subsistence production (see Altman 1987a; Altman and Taylor 1989; Blanchard 1987; Cane and Stanley 1985; Coombs et al. 1983; Ellanna et al. 1988; Fisk 1985; Palmer and Brady 1991; Young 1981) the importance of subsistence production as a source of income-in-kind can be seen when levels of Aboriginal cash income are taken into account. Fisk estimated that in 1981 such income-in-kind was significant for about 5 per cent of the Aboriginal population. *The National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Commonwealth of Australia 1991: 392) suggested that given the increased numbers of people establishing outstations since then, Fisk's estimate may well have increased. More current data to test this proposition are not available.

The contribution of subsistence production is pertinent to the debate surrounding Aboriginal dependence on welfare. For example, the issue of income equality and financial dependence on the welfare state are confused in the context of Aboriginal outstations (Altman and Taylor 1989: 11). It is not at all clear whether outstation residents regard themselves as being dependent on government. As the Miller Report noted, they '... are already engaged in productive activities, enjoy a good diet, have adequate time and resources to participate in important cultural pursuits and have cash incomes that are adequate to meet their present limited material aspirations...' (Miller 1985: 34).

Aboriginal people receiving welfare as their only source of cash need not necessarily be characterised as economically dependent on those transfers when they have daily access to important sources of income-in-kind in the form of subsistence goods. In some cases, differences between Aboriginal groups in the extent of their subsistence activity may effectively mean the difference in their being economically dependent or not, on receiving welfare. From such a perspective, reliance on welfare as the major source of cash income can be redefined not as dependence, but as income support for the continuation of economically and socially valuable hunting and gathering (Altman 1991a; Altman and Taylor 1989; Blanchard 1987). This approach has received recent support in the *National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* which argued that the AEDP's employment objectives should include '... a recognition of and support for traditional Aboriginal economic activities as a legitimate form of employment' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991: 367).

SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES

The most comprehensive attempt to estimate Aboriginal national levels and sources of income was carried out by Fisk (1985) using the 1976 and 1981 Censuses and data from a number of fieldwork case studies conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Fisk (*ibid.*: 79) estimated that out of a total national Aboriginal income of \$409 million in 1981, 2 per cent came from subsistence and production of artefacts; 1.5 per cent from royalties and rents; 42.5 per cent from wages and salaries; and 52.8 per cent from social security payments. In fact, Fisk included family allowance, payments made under the National Employment and Training (NEAT) scheme and other tertiary Aboriginal study allowances in his estimate of Aboriginal reliance on social security payments. Excluding these payments reduces Fisk's national Aboriginal social security payments in 1981 to \$179.5 million; that is, from the more commonly cited 53 per cent reliance to a more accurate 44 per cent of national Aboriginal income.

Fisk also estimated that in Aboriginal towns, outstations and in urban areas, the main source of Aboriginal transfer payments were pensions, with UB being of secondary importance. The reverse was the case in small non-Aboriginal towns where UB was most important (see Table 2).

Table 2. Aggregate Aboriginal social security income by location, 1981.

Location	Unemployment Benefit, per cent	Pensions, per cent	Family Allowance, per cent	Total \$m
Aboriginal towns and outstations	36.3	50.4	13.2	32.6
Small non-Aboriginal Towns	47.0	37.8	15.1	58.3
Urban	35.0	51.0	13.0	113.0
Total	39.0	47.0	14.0	204.0

Source: Fisk (1985).

There are indications that the sources of Aboriginal incomes have changed significantly since Fisk's assessment of 1981 Census data. In particular, the increased rate of CDEP scheme participation has offset the extent of Aboriginal dependence on UB, and for some groups there has been increased access to royalty and rental payments. Fisk's aggregate estimates relied heavily on a number of research studies (many of which were commissioned by the 'Aboriginal Component of the Australian Economy' project he directed) of various Aboriginal settlements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These case studies have since been augmented and updated.

In a survey of Aboriginal communities in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory, Ellanna et al. (1988) found considerable reliance on income from government funds, either from publicly-funded employment or social security payments. Before the introduction of the CDEP scheme, Aboriginal income at Beswick came from wages (45 per cent) or social security (55 per cent). Barunga and Eva Valley, two other communities in the same region, had similar high reliance on government, except in their cases the CDEP scheme was operating. Consequently, at Barunga, wages (mainly from the CDEP scheme) accounted for 81 per cent of total household income and lowered reliance on social security to 19 per cent; at Eva Valley 'wages' accounted for 70 per cent and social security for 30 per cent of income.

Case studies have reported the continuing reliance of Aboriginal communities not only on welfare and special Aboriginal programs, but also on a particularly narrow range of labour market options. In many situations the number of people employed often represents a very small proportion of the working age population. With low rates of labour force participation, the few people working in the private sector appear to represent a significant percentage of those employed. For example at Warmun, Altman (1987b) found that 43 per cent of the working age population were employed in some full- or part-time capacity. Of the 33 full-time employed persons, 11 (or 33 per cent) were receiving incomes from work on local cattle stations and at the Argyle diamond mine. The remaining 67 per cent of employed Aborigines at Warmun were receiving incomes from Aboriginal pastoral enterprises, community education and the Community Employment Program, (a make-work program operating at that time). Altman (1987c: 7) estimated that imputed subsistence income added at least 10 per cent to cash incomes at Warmun.

Some 63 per cent of Aboriginal household income at Warmun came from welfare. However, Altman (1987b: 17) noted that the equivalent rate of reliance of the three lowest Australian income decile groups averaged 75 per cent and emphasised that the extent of social security dependence at Warmun was not particularly high compared with other poor Australians at the time of his visit.

Altman's studies (1987b, 1987c, 1987d) of the economies of Warmun community in Western Australia and the Mutitjulu community in Uluru National Park in the Northern Territory, highlight considerable fluctuations in Aboriginal community employment levels. Both communities are characterised by highly unstable employment which directly affects both the source and level of individual incomes. At Mutitjulu, social security ranged from 58-70 per cent of total income between August and November 1986; income from employment ranged between 21-35 per cent; from private enterprise between 0-4 per cent; from the sale of artefacts between 3-9 per cent; and from royalties 0-1 per cent. Reliance on social security income fell by 12 per cent over 15 months as employment opportunities increased. In particular, the relative significance of UB fell from 39 per cent to 26 per cent of welfare payments during

that period. Further surveys within the community in 1986 indicated that total social security payments accounted for about 50 per cent of cash income (Altman 1988).

A similar distribution between wage and welfare income was found by Stanley (1985) at Peppimenarti outstation where 32 persons were employed and 35 adults received social security. The most significant proportion of these (22 persons) received UB. By comparison, the availability of local employment in Kakadu National Park with the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ranger Uranium Mines and local Aboriginal royalty associations altered the source of incomes for Aboriginal residents of the Park (Altman 1988). Sixty-eight per cent of the Park's Aboriginal working age population were employed, with a high proportion of wages coming from part-time and casual work. Thirty-two per cent were reliant on social security and family allowances for their income. Of the latter, just over half came from pensions and the remainder from UB (*ibid.*: 188-93). A small number of employment opportunities within a community appear to be able to have a significant statistical impact on the relative reliance of Aboriginal people on other sources of income. However, these opportunities are invariably characterised by considerable unreliability. In the face of such employment uncertainty, it might be difficult to persuade Aboriginal people to forsake the greater security of welfare income.

Recent research in the Torres Strait by Arthur (1990, 1991) reveals a distinction between sources of income for full-time and part-time fishermen. The former relied on commercial fishing for all their income, whereas part-time fishermen obtained basic income support from UB and other welfare payments, or from participation in the CDEP scheme (1991: 9). On the outer Islands the main source of income is CDEP wages, which accounted for 42 per cent of total outer Islands' income. Non-CDEP wages account for 13 per cent and welfare transfers for 23 per cent. Arthur also estimates that subsistence production represents 10 per cent of total outer Islands' income.

A regional study of Aboriginal sources and levels of income by Crough et al. (1989) suggests that in Central Australia a dual economy exists, with an 'Aboriginal economy' based essentially on employment in a series of Aboriginal service and community organisations and government departments in Alice Springs. For example, Khalidi (see Crough et al. 1989: 19) estimated that over half of employed Aborigines in Alice Springs obtained wages from working for Aboriginal organisations, with an additional 11 per cent receiving wage incomes from public service employment. Crough et al. (1989) reported considerable income variations in the central Australian region between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population. Over half the Aboriginal population in Alice Springs and about three-quarters of the population in the central Australian region, received incomes of less than \$9,000 according to the 1986 Census. The authors note that social security was the major source of direct income for most Aboriginal people in Alice Springs (*ibid.*: 21). A study by Khalidi (1987) similarly estimated that amongst the poorer town camp Aboriginal households, 70 per cent of residents relied upon welfare as their major source of income. Both Crough et al. (1989: 62) and Khalidi (1987: 30) reported that UB accounted for approximately one-third of transfers, with other pensions being more significant sources of income.

The significance of sole parent and aged pensions is referred to by a number of researchers. The latter were an important aspect of welfare income at Warmun as a result of the high proportion of aged people in the community (Altman 1987b: 12, 15), with 36 per cent of aggregate fortnightly social security income

coming from pensions and only 25 per cent from UB (Altman 1987c: 7). At the Mt Margaret community, age pensions continued to contribute approximately 45 per cent of total adult income between 1975 and 1980 (Stanton 1982). Pensioners were central to the economy of Darwin town campers (Sansom 1980: 251–3) and to Aboriginal households in Alice Springs (Collmann 1979). Their significance in Alice Springs town camps is highlighted by Rowse (1988: 57) who reports that at any one time, up to 45 per cent of residents had no cash income at all. In particular, he noted that a wide range of kin, including many young adults, were entirely dependent upon the financial support of pensioners and women receiving sole parent benefit. The major source of income in Alice Springs households were a range of pensions which were used to financially support a wider network of kin and friends; UB, which was regarded as being 'private' money, was again of secondary importance.

A number of case studies highlight the operation of an Aboriginal 'welfare network', a system of social and economic relations within and between Aboriginal households whereby persons and families with negligible personal income are financially supported by recipients of social security payments.¹⁴ Recent research also emphasises the variations that exist at Aboriginal communities in the level and source of incomes. In particular, they indicate that reliance on welfare within a single community, and across communities, can vary dramatically according to the changing nature of the labour market and people's participation in subsistence activities and according to family type, age, marital status, sex and so on. Ball (1985) reports from her survey of Aboriginal residents in Newcastle that there is considerable difference between male and female sources of income. While 55 per cent of males received some form of government transfer, 88 per cent of women received such a payment. More specifically, they received different types of welfare: while 37 per cent of all male income came from UB, only 15 per cent of female incomes came from this source. Women were much more reliant for their incomes on 'supporting parents' (now sole parent) benefit: 37 per cent of their incomes came from this source and 21 per cent from age and invalid pensions, men received only 11.7 per cent in total from the same three types of benefits. General statements about the nature of Aboriginal reliance on sources of welfare income obscure extremely important variations according to sex, age and residential location.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The issue of welfare dependency is complex, being influenced by both economic and cultural factors. Because of the absence of official data on the numbers of Aboriginal people receiving different types of social security payments, little can be said about the precise degree to which Aboriginal reliance is different to that of the total population. The current absence of statistical data on Aboriginal utilisation of different types of welfare needs to be rectified; accurate information is required if appropriate policies and programs are to be formulated.

It is clear that for policy purposes it is not entirely appropriate to compare Aboriginal households with the 'average' Australian household. In 1988–89 the average Australian household had a weekly income of \$636, or approximately \$33,000 per annum: of that, 72.3 per cent came from wages and salaries, 9.2 per cent from business and only 10.1 per cent from government benefits and pensions (ABS 1990b: 3). When compared with that level of welfare reliance, Fisk's estimated 44 per cent (based on 1981 Census

data) and our estimate of 42 per cent (based on 1986 census data) appear to suggest a significant Aboriginal dependence on welfare. However, such a comparison is not entirely satisfactory.

Perhaps a more appropriate comparison is with poor Australians. In 1988-89, the three lowest income decile Australian household groups were overwhelmingly dependent on government pensions and benefits: 98, 75 and 58 per cent respectively of their average weekly incomes being obtained from welfare (ABS 1990b: 3 and corrigendum). Poor Australian households display a greater reliance on government benefits and pensions in comparison with the average Australian household. When compared with low income Australian households it would seem that Aboriginal people in Australia are no more or less 'dependent' on welfare than other poor Australians.

Such conclusions are somewhat speculative and require detailed data for further analysis.¹⁵ Unfortunately, comparisons of this kind between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal households (whether poorest or average) will only be possible when ABS special surveys include a representative sample of Aboriginal households and allow the use of an Aboriginal identifier. Alternatively, if a special national survey of the Aboriginal population is undertaken in 1993/4 detailed information on sources of income should be collected.

Not only are more detailed comparative data needed, but some argue that measures of income, expenditure, poverty and so on, should '... adequately reflect cultural priorities, which may differ between different groups and between people in different locations' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991: 390). Similarly, measures of so-called welfare dependence should reflect Aboriginal social circumstances and their involvement in a wide range of informal economic activities.

Different perspectives can be taken of Aboriginal receipt of welfare. Such payments can provide a means of income support for those who pursue a lifestyle where subsistence production is important and who reside in remote localities where mainstream employment opportunities are scarce or non-existent. The Aboriginal social relations of welfare also mean that a wide range of individuals may be reliant upon the receipt of one person's pension or benefit. Social security payments have, in effect, a wider 'income catchment' as a result of the redistributive mechanisms operating within Aboriginal society. Furthermore, as Daly points out, social security payments are adjusted for dependents, whereas wages are not, and so may be higher than income received from poorly paid employment. The result is that many Aboriginal people with limited earnings power are caught in a poverty trap with little inducement to give up welfare (Daly 1991: 1-2). Gregory (1991: 144) estimates that for a low-skilled married male worker with a dependent wife and three children social security benefits would represent between 70 and 80 per cent of his potential post-tax wage income, creating little incentive to actively seek employment. In the face of fluctuating and recently decreasing employment opportunities in many parts of Australia, welfare may represent a source of more reliable income for many Aboriginal people and provide a degree of economic autonomy and security lacking in employment.

Case studies suggest that Aboriginal households are reliant on a wide range of government transfers and that age and widow's pensions and sole parent benefits are often more significant than UB, both in terms of the actual numbers of people receiving them and in terms of the wider network of kin supported by

such payments. Because the AEDP is a labour market policy it focuses unduly on UB, and thereby male unemployment, as the key means to reduce Aboriginal welfare dependency. In 1986, 72 per cent of Aboriginal UB recipients were male. For a number of reasons Aboriginal women are under-represented in CES registrations (see Daly 1991; Smith 1991c) and tend to obtain income support as non-participants in the labour force. In order to achieve a more balanced approach to the generation of higher levels of income and to expand the range of sources of Aboriginal income, it is important that government policy widens its definition of 'welfare' beyond the immediate consideration of UB to include the full range of welfare available to people both inside and outside the labour force.

The combination of low levels of Aboriginal employment and high unemployment and dependency ratios means that there is a considerable economic burden on Aboriginal families (Tesfaghiorghis and Altman 1991: 4-5). Those relying on welfare are in a dependent situation vulnerable to changes in government policy. Single parent Aboriginal families are especially prone to the poverty trap created by welfare dependency. An important factor that mitigates against Aboriginal income equality and results in higher levels of poverty is the high rate of sole parent Aboriginal families. This finding is not new and was outlined in some detail by Ross et al. (1990). Its policy implication is that Aboriginal poverty is as much a social, as an employment, policy issue. Any policy that aims to achieve economic equality must examine the situation of sole parent families whose income earners are generally not participating in the labour force.

The dimensions of Aboriginal poverty need to be explained in terms of sources of income as well as income levels. Aboriginal sources of income are particularly concentrated. Cash incomes predominantly consist of low wages from employment in the public and Aboriginal community sectors, and payments from social security. Whilst social security income relieves poverty, and for individuals such as sole parents with large numbers of dependents provides a source of stable income, it does not alleviate poverty in the longer term. Additionally, the economic situation of many Aboriginal people is closely linked not only to the source of their income, but also to the changing nature of those sources of income. This is especially apparent in the recycling of individuals between employment, unemployment, participation in training programs, and the 'not in the labour force' category. This process of recycling work-status creates associated variations in sources of income and constitutes in itself a structural obstacle to overcoming Aboriginal poverty (Smith 1991c).

As illustrated in Table 1, the percentage of total Aboriginal income from employment sources is higher than that from UB. If the Federal Government's AEDP goal of income equality is to be achieved, it will be essential to get Aboriginal people into the labour force and not just to get the unemployed into jobs. For example, if all the enumerated unemployed in 1986 were employed and earned the mean income of those then actually employed, mean individual income would only increase to about \$9,800 per annum, or 80 per cent of the mean annual income for all Australians as estimated by Treadgold (1988: 595). If income equality is to be achieved, and assuming that Aboriginal people not in the labour force will need to find employment at the 1986 mean income level, then 36,000 of those currently not in the labour force (for whom income data exist) will need to both enter the labour force and find employment. This means that over 57,000 Aboriginal people, more than the total employed in the 1986 Census, will need

to be employed if the AEDP goal of income equality were to be attained in 1986. While it could be argued that the AEDP target is only to be met by the year 2000, projections made by Tesfaghiorghis and Gray (1991) suggest that this goal will become increasingly hard to achieve owing to rapid growth of the Aboriginal working age population.

Among some sections of the Aboriginal population the statistical goal of employment equality may already be met. For example, it has been argued that many outstations Aboriginal people are already fully employed. But as a result of the statistical exclusion of people participating in subsistence from the ranks of the employed and the failure to count their production as income-in-kind this contribution is not officially acknowledged. If welfare income at outstations was classified as CDEP wages, with economic work being subsistence production, then residents would immediately be re-classified as employed within the labour force with payment of UB equivalents being interpreted as wages for that work. Such a reclassification could mean that the goal of income equality may not be appropriate in the outstations context if people make a conscious choice to reside in locations that are remote from mainstream economic opportunities.

An alternative means to achieve income equality is for the occupational status of those currently employed and their mean income, to increase dramatically. Hypothetically, if the mean income of the employed increased to \$24,440 in 1986 (that is by 78 per cent), then mean individual income of \$12,251 per annum (the then national average) could have been attained. However, in such a scenario, the average annual income of the employed would be 3.6 times that of the unemployed, whereas currently this differential is only a factor of 2. Given that 70 per cent of employed Aboriginal people live in major urban and other urban locations this would introduce marked variations in economic status between urban and rural Aboriginal residents (Altman 1987c).

Recent changes in the primary source of income has occurred for many Aboriginal people through their participation in the CDEP scheme. If CDEP payments were still regarded as a form of welfare (participants are invariably employed part-time for wages limited generally to the weekly equivalent of UB entitlements) then the degree of Aboriginal reliance on welfare would be correspondingly higher and would increase as the numbers participating in the CDEP scheme rose. If CDEP wages are regarded as welfare income then Aboriginal employment income declines from 58 per cent to 56 per cent (see Table 1). Simultaneously, mean employment income would increase to \$14,600 per annum. In short, the CDEP scheme has the effect of moving employment equality goals in the right direction, but has the adverse, and unintended consequence, of moving the income equality goal in the wrong direction. This inverse relationship could result in one AEDP goal being achieved at the expense of another. Interestingly, whether participation in the CDEP scheme is classified as employment or as 'unemployment' will affect both employment and income equality goals. Aboriginal income support/employment creation programs might improve the apparent employment status of Aboriginal people, but they will not result in income equality. Similarly, while paying participants in such schemes a wage that is notionally tied to welfare entitlements may have the appearance of moving people off welfare and into wage employment, the distinction is merely cosmetic unless participation in such programs is used to generate additional income or employment.

These examples of tradeoffs and dilemmas in meeting broad policy objectives demonstrate the complexities of attaining statistical goals for a population that is extremely diverse. It has already been noted elsewhere that given the locational and cultural heterogeneity of the Aboriginal population, there may be problems in rigorously assessing the success or failure of programs using statistical indicators (Altman 1991c). But such potential problems in measuring outcomes will be exacerbated if the broad aims of government policy are internally inconsistent, or even worse, inversely related.

NOTES

1. The term 'Aboriginal' and 'Aborigines' refer to both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations throughout.
2. In July 1991, Unemployment Benefits were replaced by Job Search and Newstart Allowances. New requirements such as contractual obligations regarding training and more frequent interviews take effect after the first 12 months on Job Search when the unemployed person enters another phase called Newstart. As this paper analyses 1986 Census data and case study material that precedes this administrative change, the historically relevant terminology has been retained.
3. The effect of individuals not stating their income is to categorise the entire family and household of which they are members, as having 'not stated' any income. Accordingly, some 18 per cent of families (numbering 9,583) and 18 per cent of household units (numbering 9,085) were classified as not stating their income in the 1986 Census (ABS 1991: 50-51), although some individuals within these families and households may have received cash incomes.
4. The census question asks respondents to provide an aggregate of all income. Here the income of the employed is assumed to come from employment only. This assumption is not unreasonable as the ABS Income and Housing Survey (ABS 1990a) indicates that 85 per cent of the income for those in full-time employment comes from wages and salaries. The need to make this assumption reinforces the absence of any recent information on sources of income for Aboriginal people.
5. As we argue in our conclusion, the rapid growth of the number of CDEP scheme participants would also have decreased the mean income of the employed, as CDEP workers generally work part-time for the equivalent of the welfare entitlements. While this expansion of the scheme would have reduced officially defined Aboriginal unemployment it would not have alleviated income differentials between Aboriginal and other Australians.
6. While these data suggest that the expenditure per trainee was \$5,534 per annum, this figure cannot be used to estimate trainees' incomes because schemes vary in duration from three to twelve months. The data on TAP participation are of a flow nature and cover a financial year, whereas the census data are of a stock nature referring to a specific point in time (30 June 1986).
7. A recent review (Johnston 1991: 73) of the Training for Aboriginals Program (TAP) noted that there is a high level of 'recycling' through TAP programs, with approximately 30 per cent of trainees proceeding to further training programs after completion of courses in 1991.
8. Even though registration for employment with the CES is a necessary precondition to receiving UB from the DSS, not all CES registrants will receive the benefit. They must in turn be assessed by DSS criteria which includes means testing applicants.
9. It may be this estimation which the AEDP (Australian Government 1987) used in its reference to 30 per cent Aboriginal reliance on UB.
10. As with UB, there can be a divergence between eligibility and take-up rates which cannot be calculated without accurate data on Aboriginal recipients of sole parent benefits.

11. Removing all secondary school recipients of Abstudy grants excludes some people aged 15 years and over who are within the working age population category. Detailed published information is not available to make finer distinctions.
12. Whilst royalty and rental payments to residents of Gurig National Park contributed 75 per cent to per capita cash income, in real terms this still only meant that per capita Aboriginal incomes had risen from \$3,200 per annum to \$5,600 per annum.
13. This percentage is arrived at when the census category of Aboriginal persons having 'not stated' their annual income has been excluded from the total working age population for each sex; being some 7,839 males and 9,675 females.
14. A number of researchers have noted that a wider 'cash network' operates whereby a range of people are supported by income recipients irrespective of the source of that income. The 'welfare network' referred to here forms one part of such an informal redistributive process.
15. Data problems in such comparisons include contamination bias, as those in the special ABS survey include some Aboriginal people. Furthermore, strict comparative analysis would require a comparison between the poorest Aboriginal households and the poorest Australian households. Data for such analysis are not currently available.

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