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**A comparison of the socioeconomic
characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander people**

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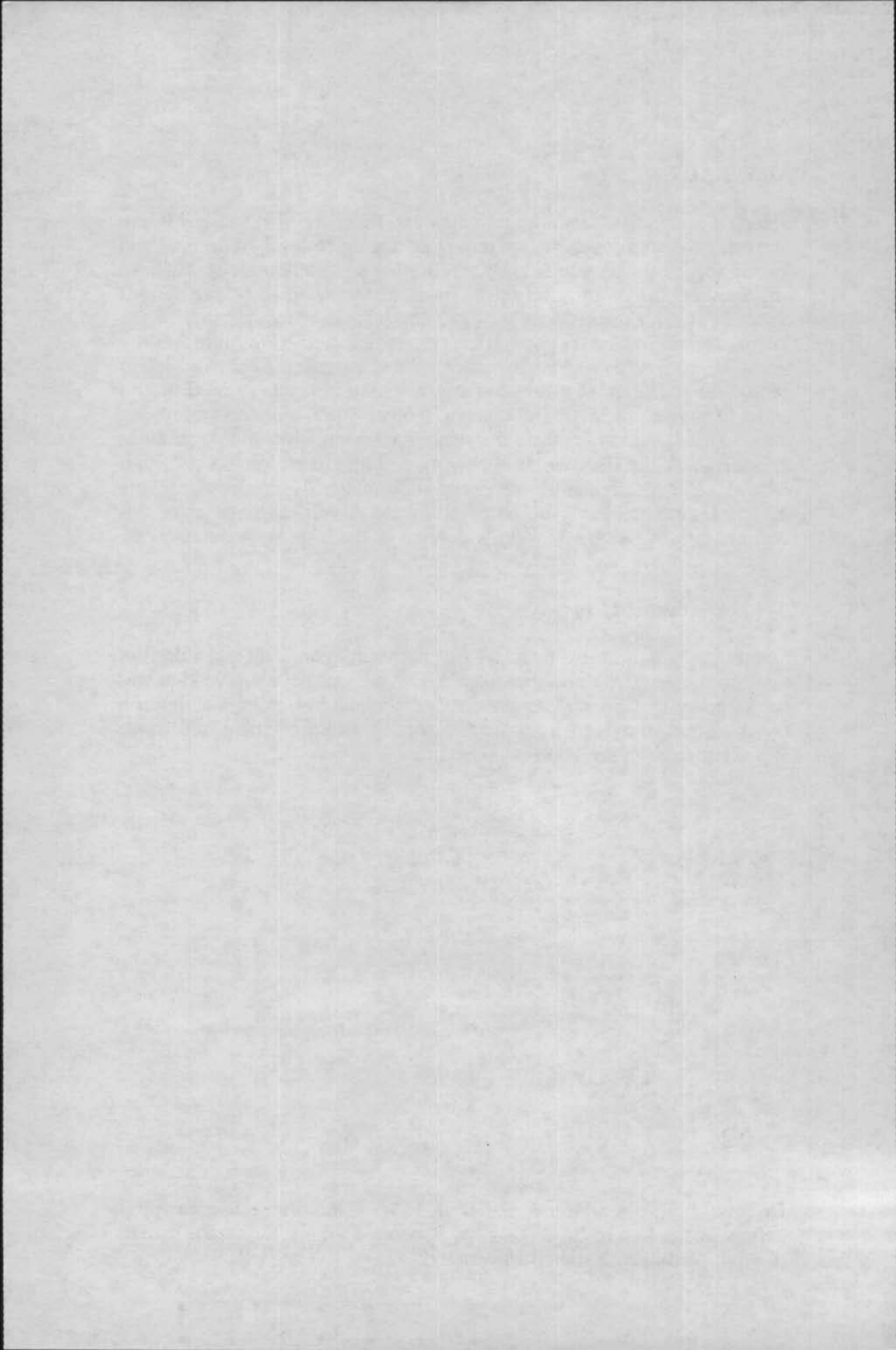
ABSTRACT

Selected social and economic indicators from the 1986 Census are presented to test the proposition that at an aggregate level Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people display differing socioeconomic status from one another. Although provision is made in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* for separate consideration of the Torres Strait Islander population in social and economic policy formulation, few data exist to indicate their variation from Aboriginal people. Examination of a range of census-based indicators reveal that in terms of overall socioeconomic status, Torres Strait Islanders occupy an intermediate position between the Aboriginal population and Australians in general. While the overall effect of combining data on Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people in any statistical analysis is to ameliorate the low socioeconomic status observed for the Aboriginal population, this impact varies with the regional distribution of the Islander population.

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Despite official recognition of two indigenous peoples in Australia - Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders - little is known about the extent to which they differ in socioeconomic status.¹ From a public policy perspective this is somewhat surprising, given the special provisions in sections 79-88 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* which established the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board and the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs. The somewhat different roles of these bodies reflect, in part, subtle distinctions within the Torres Strait Islander population itself. The Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs, for example, is charged with monitoring the development of State and Federal policies and programs affecting Islanders, and evaluating the extent to which these programs meet Islander needs, particularly the needs of those who live on the mainland. The Advisory Board, on the other hand, advises the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs on matters affecting the social, economic and cultural development of Islanders resident in the Torres Strait.

Notwithstanding these statutory obligations, social and economic indicators are rarely available separately for the Torres Strait Islander population. Instead, the tendency in social and economic policy analysis has been to consider Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as a single client group. This situation has recently been reviewed by Arthur (1992) who concludes that the lack of separate statistics on Islanders makes it difficult to determine their relative socioeconomic status and confounds attempts to analyse any differential impact of government policies. While there is no doubt that Aborigines and Islanders share relatively low socioeconomic status when compared to most Australians, there are, at the same time, significant differences between them in terms of culture, geographic distribution and the manner of their incorporation into wider institutional structures. These are sufficient to suggest that Torres Strait Islanders may exhibit social and economic characteristics that differ from those of the Aboriginal population in ways that have policy relevance. Whether this is, in fact, the case forms the objective of exploratory investigation here, using a selection of key social and economic indicators.

To date, few academic analyses have sought to draw comparisons between the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal populations. Those attempting to do so have focused selectively on fertility differentials (Gaminiratne 1992a), industry and occupation of employment (Taylor 1992a, 1992b) and geographic distribution (Taylor and Arthur 1992). In order to provide a more comprehensive assessment of relative socioeconomic status, a wider range of census-based social and economic indicators are drawn upon, following the lead of Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1991) and Tesfaghiorghis and Altman (1991). The key focus in this exercise is on highlighting differences (and similarities) in the social and economic

characteristics of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Data are also provided for the remainder of the Australian population to serve as a comparative benchmark where appropriate. No attempt has been made to establish trends based on time series data given the doubtful reliability of pre-1986 Census data for both indigenous population groups due to problems associated with coverage and intercensal shifts in Aboriginal and Islander self-identification (Choi and Gray 1985; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1989). While preliminary 1991 Census results are available, use of these for trend analysis is similarly impeded by census enumeration errors, specifically with respect to the Islander population which recorded inordinately high growth for the 1986-91 intercensal period (Gaminiratne 1992b; Gray and Tesfaghiorghis 1992).

Population distribution

Of the 227,645 indigenous Australians recorded by the 1986 Census, only 9.5 per cent (21,541) self-identified as Torres Strait Islander. Given their far fewer numbers, plus the fact that the majority of Islanders were restricted in location to the Torres Strait until the end of World War 2 (Taylor and Arthur 1992), it is not surprising to find substantial regional differences in the spatial distribution of the Torres Strait Islander population compared to that of the Aboriginal population (Table 1). In 1986, almost two-thirds of Torres Strait Islanders were resident in Queensland, with an almost even split between those living in the Torres Strait and those resident in the rest of the State, predominantly in the

Table 1. Distribution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations by State and Territory, 1986.

	Aborigines		Torres Strait Islanders	
	no.	(%)	no.	(%)
Queensland	48,098	23.3	13,170	61.1
New South Wales	55,672	27.0	3,339	15.5
Victoria	10,740	5.2	1,871	8.7
South Australia	13,298	6.4	993	4.6
Tasmania	5,829	2.8	887	4.1
Western Australia	37,110	18.0	679	3.2
Northern Territory	34,197	16.6	542	2.5
Australian Capital Territory	1,160	0.7	60	0.3
Total	206,104	100.0	21,541	100.0

Source: ABS (1991: 7).

larger urban centres of the North Queensland coast. Most of the remainder of the Islander population were found in New South Wales and Victoria, resulting in a distinct spatial bias towards the eastern States. By comparison, the Aboriginal population is more widely distributed around the country and has a far greater representation in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

In terms of distribution by section-of-State, an almost equal percentage of Aborigines and Islanders (about 25 per cent each) were living in Australia's major urban areas, although the majority of Islanders in this category were found in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, while Aborigines were more widely distributed in all metropolitan centres (Table 2). Within these centres, and in other large cities, both populations are spatially dispersed with Torres Strait Islanders, in particular, showing few signs of residential concentration (Taylor 1992c). The similarity in the proportions living in 'other urban' centres is misleading, as Islanders are generally restricted in their location to the larger regional centres such as Cairns, Townsville and Mackay, while Aborigines are far more in evidence in medium- and small-sized country towns across the entire outback (Taylor 1991: 8; Taylor and Arthur 1992: 12). A similar disparity lies behind the figures for 'other rural' residence. Aborigines in this category tend to be located at outstations and other small, widely dispersed communities, while the Islander population in this category is found mostly on the islands of the Torres Strait. In comparison with Torres Strait Islanders, the clear dominance of Aboriginal people in rural localities reflects the legacy of their wider geographic attachment to mission and government settlements.

Table 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations by section-of-State, 1986.

Section-of-State	Aborigines	Islanders
Major urban	24.4	24.7
Other urban	41.4	49.0
Rural	15.8	6.4
Other rural	18.4	19.9
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS (1991: 7).

Age distribution

Little difference is apparent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander age structures at the national level (Table 3). Overall, both populations are youthful, although the Aboriginal population is slightly more so with a greater proportion of children aged under 15 years (40 per cent compared to 37 per cent). However, this lack of difference at the national level masks considerable variation at the State level. While Aboriginal age structures are fairly consistent across the States, Islander age structures are less so. Compared to Torres Strait Islanders, the more youthful character of the Aboriginal population is more apparent in all States except Queensland. In some States, the proportion of Aborigines less than 15 years of age is up to 10 per cent higher than among Islanders. Accordingly, in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, the proportion of Islanders in the older working-age and retirement-age groups is noticeably higher than for Aborigines, while Islanders generally show a disproportionate share of persons aged 15-44 years.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders by five year age groups and State of residence, 1986.

State of residence	0-14	15-44	Broad age group		Total
			45-64	65+	
Aborigines					
New South Wales	41	49	9	2	55,672
Victoria	39	51	8	2	10,740
Queensland	40	48	9	3	48,098
South Australia	39	49	9	3	13,298
Western Australia	40	47	10	4	37,110
Tasmania	43	48	8	1	5,829
Northern Territory	40	48	10	3	34,197
ACT	40	52	7	1	1,160
Australia	40	48	9	3	206,104
Torres Strait Islanders					
New South Wales	31	52	12	4	3,339
Victoria	30	55	11	4	1,871
Queensland	40	44	12	3	13,170
South Australia	30	52	12	6	993
Western Australia	35	54	10	1	679
Tasmania	36	53	8	3	887
Northern Territory	37	53	9	1	542
ACT	28	63	8	0	60
Australia	37	48	11	4	21,541

Source: Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1992).

Table 4. Dependency ratios: Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians, 1986.

	Dependency ratio ^a	Child ratio	Aged ratio	Economic burden ^b
Aborigines	74.2	69.7	4.5	237.1
Torres Strait Islanders	68.9	62.8	6.1	156.3
Other Australians	52.8	38.3	14.5	84.5

a. Children and aged dependents per 100 persons of working age.

b. Children and aged dependents per 100 persons employed.

The higher proportion of children in the Aboriginal population results in a higher dependency ratio compared to the Torres Strait Islander population (Table 4). For example, for every 100 working-age Aboriginal persons there were 74.2 dependants, 70 of whom were children and 4.2 aged persons. By contrast, every 100 working-age Torres Strait Islanders had substantially fewer child dependents (62.8) than their Aboriginal counterparts and, although they also had slightly more aged dependents (6.1), their overall dependency ratio of 68.9 was distinctly lower. However, these differences appear marginal when set against the much lower overall dependency ratio, lower child dependency and higher aged dependency revealed for the majority of the Australian population. Of greater significance are the differences in economic burden as measured by the number of children and aged dependents for each 100 persons in formal employment. Using these criteria, the dependency burden for each Aboriginal person in employment is far greater than that for each Torres Strait Islander. In the context of the total Australian working-age population, the economic burden for Torres Strait Islanders can be described as intermediate, while that for Aborigines is extreme.

School attendance

Responses to the census question on school attendance reveal that in all single year age groups between 15 and 19, Torres Strait Islanders are more likely to be attending school than Aborigines. Overall, the rate of school attendance among Torres Strait Islanders in the 15-19 age cohort is notably higher than that of Aborigines (38 per cent compared to 28.9 per cent) but still falls behind the rate for the general population (44.7 per cent).

Table 5. Probabilities of leaving school at successive age intervals: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations aged 15-19 years.^a

Age left school (years)	Aborigines	Torres Strait Islanders
<12	0.011	0.009
12-13	0.017	0.008
13-14	0.084	0.043
14-15	0.350	0.302
15-16	0.544	0.112
16-17	0.544	0.112
17-18	0.709	0.483

a. Excluding 'never attended' category and 'school attendance not stated'.

Table 6. Labour force participation, employment and unemployment rates among Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and other Australian males and females aged 15-64 years, 1986.

	Males	Females	Total
Labour force participation rate ^a			
Aboriginal	64.5	35.3	49.5
Torres Strait Islander	73.8	42.5	57.7
Other Australians	82.3	55.1	68.8
Employment rate ^b			
Aboriginal	40.2	22.9	31.3
Torres Strait Islander	56.9	31.9	44.1
Other Australians	75.1	49.9	62.6
Unemployment rate ^c			
Aboriginal	24.3	12.4	18.2
Torres Strait Islander	16.9	10.7	13.7
Other Australians	7.3	5.2	6.2

a. Percentage of the working-age population aged 15-64 in the labour force.

b. Employed persons as a percentage of the working-age population.

c. Unemployed persons as a percentage of the working-age population.

The single year age distribution of school attendance may be used to estimate the probability of an individual of a given age leaving school from one age to another. The number of persons leaving school at given age intervals may be viewed as similar to attrition due to deaths in a conventional life table. Extending the analogy, the population at risk is represented by those remaining in school at each successive age interval, similar to survivors in a life table. The probability of a child currently aged 15-19 leaving school at a given age interval may thus be calculated using a survival analysis, and this has been done for the Aboriginal and Islander populations with the results shown in Table 5. This clearly indicates that at each age interval, Aboriginal youth are more likely to leave school than their Islander counterparts. For example, the probability that an Aboriginal person of between 15 and 19 years would have left school by age 12 is 0.011. This compares to a probability of 0.009 for an equivalent Torres Strait Islander. Up to the age interval 14-15 years, which is the legal school leaving age in all States except Tasmania, probability differences between the two groups are relatively minor, but beyond the age of compulsory schooling substantial gaps emerge, with the probability of remaining in school weighted substantially in favour of Torres Strait Islanders. This may, in part, reflect greater access to secondary schooling for Torres Strait Islanders due to their more urbanised residential pattern (Table 2).

Labour force status

A selection of labour force indicators are shown in Table 6 and indicate once again that Islanders occupy an intermediary position between the general population and the Aboriginal population. It is tempting to speculate that higher school retention rates for Torres Strait Islanders are reflected in their relatively better labour force status. Not only are Torres Strait Islanders more likely to be in the labour force than Aborigines, but also their employment rate is higher and unemployment rate lower. While this is the case for both males and females, differences in labour force status between Aborigines and Islanders are more marked among males. The most striking difference between Aborigines and Islanders, however, is in their respective rates of employment. These are substantially higher for both male and female Islanders, although this may in part reflect the more youthful age structure of the Aboriginal population.

Occupation and industry of employment

The particular employment activities in which Aborigines and Islanders engage are determined by their relative endowments of human capital, as

well as by cultural, historical and geographic factors which have created specific employment niches. Compared to the workforce in general, Aborigines and Islanders tend to be in lower skilled occupations and are overly concentrated in publicly-funded jobs, most notably in community service industries. These were the findings of detailed analyses of the relative standing of Aborigines and Islanders within the Australian workforce (Taylor 1992a, 1992b).

In comparing Aboriginal patterns of employment with those of Islanders, the outcomes are broadly similar, although some variation occurs depending on the level of analysis. At the general level of major occupational groups or industry divisions, the variance between the two indigenous populations is, on the whole, no more than would be expected to occur by chance. At more detailed levels of analysis, however, using occupational units and industry classes, a few subtle variations emerge mostly reflecting geographic influences on the labour market experience of each group.

The broad occupational distribution of each group is shown for employed males in Figure 1 (see Appendix) and employed females in Figure 2 (see Appendix). Although Aboriginal males show a slightly greater tendency to be concentrated in labouring occupations, and Torres Strait Islander males in trade occupations, the occupational distribution of the two groups is almost identical as indicated by a very low index of dissimilarity of only 6.9.² While the pattern of female employment is quite different from that of males, with a much greater focus on clerical, sales and personal service jobs, a similar lack of difference between Aborigines and Islanders is in evidence with an index of dissimilarity between the two groups of 5.1.

The patterns of employment distribution across industry divisions are also broadly similar as shown in Figures 3 and 4 (see Appendix), although notable variations do occur, particularly between Aboriginal and Islander males. For example, Aboriginal males are more likely to be found in public administration and community service jobs, whereas Islander males are more concentrated in manufacturing, wholesale, retail and transport industries. Overall, these differences compound to produce an index of dissimilarity of 18.3, which indicates that up to one-fifth of male Aboriginal workers would have to change their broad industry category of employment to have an employment profile equivalent to that of male Islanders. Among female workers, a somewhat similar pattern emerges with Aborigines more heavily concentrated in community services and Islanders in the wholesale and retail trade. The general absence of all female workers from many industry divisions, however, results in a slightly lower index of dissimilarity of 15.9.

Using detailed data on industry of employment, more subtle variations between Aborigines and Islanders are apparent, although once again the striking feature is the similarity in individual jobs in which Aborigines and Islanders engage. Such differences as do occur appear to result from geographic factors which predispose the two populations to employment opportunities in particular industries according to the spatial distribution. For example, although Aboriginal and Islander males display an equal tendency to be employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, Aborigines are heavily concentrated in the pastoral industry and Islanders in the fishing and plantation fruit industries (Taylor 1992a: 7). In the mining industry, Islanders show a greater tendency to be employed in bauxite mining, while in manufacturing they are more likely to be in the sugar and seafood processing industries. An investigation of detailed occupational distribution reveals a similar pattern, with Islanders more prominent only in occupations for which they have a distinct comparative advantage due to location and/or custom, such as fishermen and deckhands, ships pilots and officers, and ministers of religion.

Individual income

In the 1986 Census, each person aged 15 years and over was asked to report their total gross weekly income from all sources by ticking appropriate income classes which ranged from no income to over \$958 per week. The precision of income measures based on reported income classes in response to a single question format is open to dispute (Treadgold 1988; Daly 1992). This is particularly a problem in remote areas like the Torres Strait, where non-market informal income may be significant (Altman and Allen 1992). Notwithstanding interpretive difficulties, the census provides the only comprehensive source of income data for the Aboriginal and Islander populations and median annual individual incomes for the two populations are compared with the general Australian population (see Table 7).

Table 7. Median annual individual incomes of Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians, 1986.

	Males	Income in dollars Females	Total
Aborigines	7,253	5,448	6,110
Torres Strait Islanders	10,420	5,348	7,473
Other Australians	15,112	5,807	9,654

In the context of federal government policy targets for statistical equality in income distributions, the figures in Table 7 are significant as they reveal that the gap in incomes between indigenous Australians and the general population is far more pronounced for Aborigines than for Torres Strait Islanders.³ This is particularly so among males, with the median income for Islanders half again that of Aborigines. It is likely that this reflects the much higher rates of employment and labour force participation observed among Torres Strait Islander males (Table 6), rather than any occupational advantage leading to higher wages. Once again, when juxtaposed with the characteristics of the general population, Islanders occupy an 'intermediate' economic status.

Conclusion and policy implications

While both share substantially lower socioeconomic status in relation to the general Australian population, an exploratory analysis of selected census-based indicators reveals clear differences between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Compared to Islanders, the Aboriginal population is somewhat younger, more rural and widely dispersed, more likely to leave school earlier, less likely to be in the labour force or employed, has a much higher economic burden on those who are employed, tends to be more employed in community service jobs and as labourers, and has lower individual median incomes. Thus, the overall effect of combining data on Islanders and Aboriginal people in any statistical analysis is to ameliorate the low socioeconomic status observed for the Aboriginal population. On a national scale, the difference in size between the two populations serves to minimise the impact of this positive influence. However, on a regional scale, and particularly in States such as Queensland where Islanders form a substantial proportion of the indigenous population, the effect may be significant and suggests a possible need for data separation (Arthur 1992). Obviously, the relationship works more forcefully in reverse, with Aboriginal socioeconomic status potentially downgrading that of Islanders.

In terms of overall socioeconomic status, Islanders appear to occupy an intermediate position between the Aboriginal population and Australians in general. Given normal variation in the data, this suggests that considerable overlap may exist between the socioeconomic characteristics of Islanders and large sections of the general population. While this much is suggested by the data presented, further analysis would be required to validate this finding, not least because of problems with census data with respect to the Torres Strait Islander population. For example, difficulties exist in determining precisely what constitutes the census-derived Torres Strait Islander population, given the suspicion that this may contain a number of other population groups, such as South Sea Islanders and Bass

Strait Islanders, who identify incorrectly (Arthur 1992). Elsewhere, Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1992) found the intercensal discrepancies in age structure of the Islander population between 1986 and 1991 to be of such an order as to contemplate leaving them out of their calculations of indigenous population change.

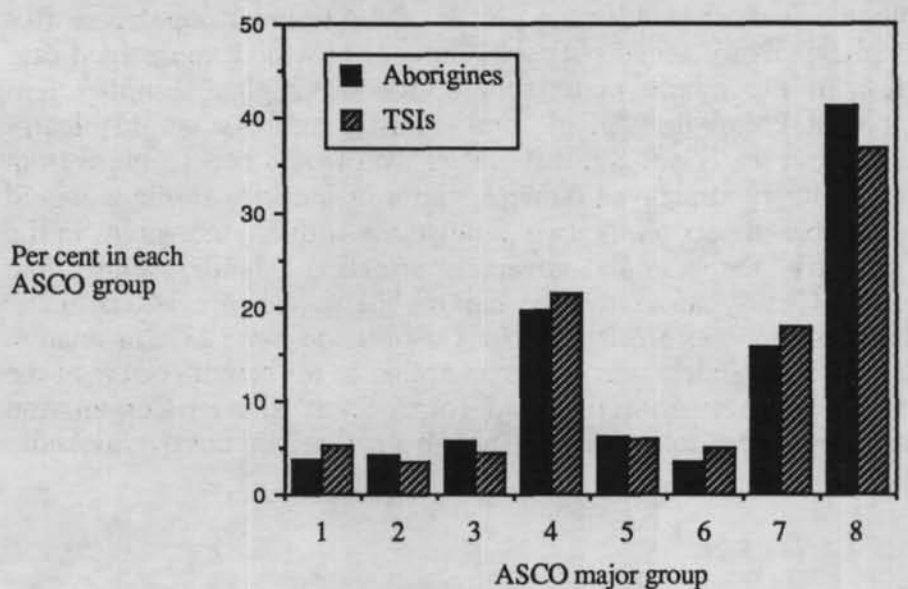
From a policy perspective, the call for separate Islander statistics would only serve to highlight their relatively advantaged position within the context of any policy targeting. At the same time, particular nuances of the population that are revealed by the data suggest that some separate analysis leading to customised policy prescriptions may be in order. For example, the somewhat older age profile of the Islander population may have implications for social policy in terms of providing more aged-care facilities. In the employment sphere, the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy-derived pastoral industry strategy would clearly have no impact on Torres Strait Islanders who would benefit more from a fishing industry strategy. Likewise, shifts in industry fortunes would have a variable impact on the two populations with any downturn in the sugar industry, for example, adversely affecting Islanders more than Aborigines. Clearly, any moves to remove the special provisions of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* in relation to Torres Strait Islanders, mooted as an option in the recent review of the operation of the Act (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 1992: 5), would need to ensure that such distinctions are not overlooked.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, the term 'Islanders' is sometimes used to denote Torres Strait Islanders.
2. For a discussion of the index methodology plus a measure of the relative segregation of Aboriginal and Islander workers within the overall labour force, see Taylor (1992a, 1992b).
3. This observation should be qualified by the fact that the median income of indigenous people in the Torres Strait (the vast majority of whom are Torres Strait Islanders) is little different from that of the indigenous population in general (Gaminiratne 1992c).

Appendix

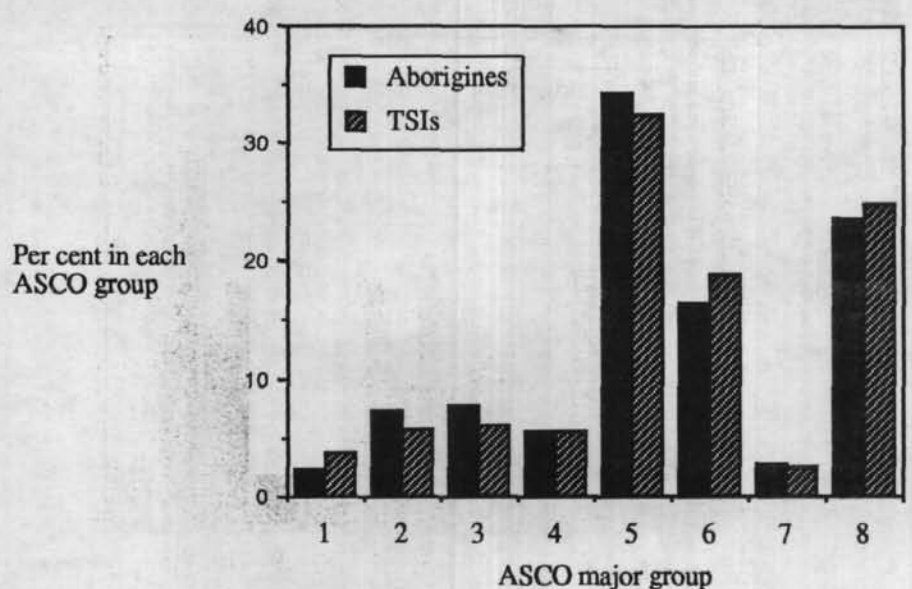
Figure 1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males by ASCO major group.



- 1 Managers and administrators
- 2 Professionals
- 3 Para-professionals
- 4 Tradespersons

- 5 Clerks
- 6 Sales and personal service workers
- 7 Plant and machine operators and drivers
- 8 Labourers and related workers

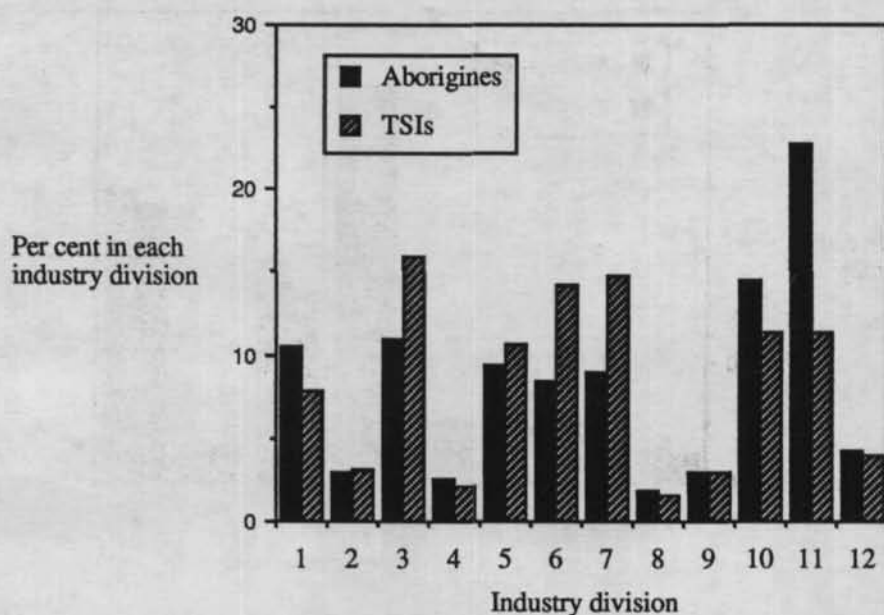
Figure 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females by ASCO major group.



- 1 Managers and administrators
- 2 Professionals
- 3 Para-professionals
- 4 Tradespersons

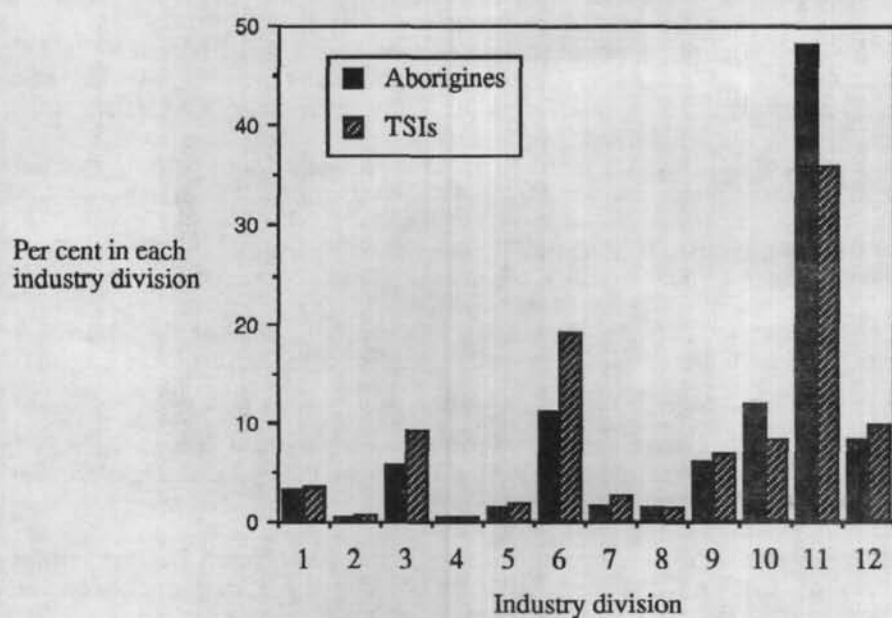
- 5 Clerks
- 6 Sales and personal service workers
- 7 Plant and machine operators and drivers
- 8 Labourers and related workers

Figure 3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males by industry division.



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1 Agriculture, forestry and fishing | 7 Transport and storage |
| 2 Mining | 8 Communication |
| 3 Manufacturing | 9 Finance, property and business services |
| 4 Electricity, water and gas | 10 Public administration |
| 5 Construction | 11 Community services |
| 6 Wholesale and retail | 12 Recreational and personal services |

Figure 4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females by industry division.



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1 Agriculture, forestry and fishing | 7 Transport and storage |
| 2 Mining | 8 Communication |
| 3 Manufacturing | 9 Finance, property and business services |
| 4 Electricity, water and gas | 10 Public administration |
| 5 Construction | 11 Community services |
| 6 Wholesale and retail | 12 Recreational and personal services |

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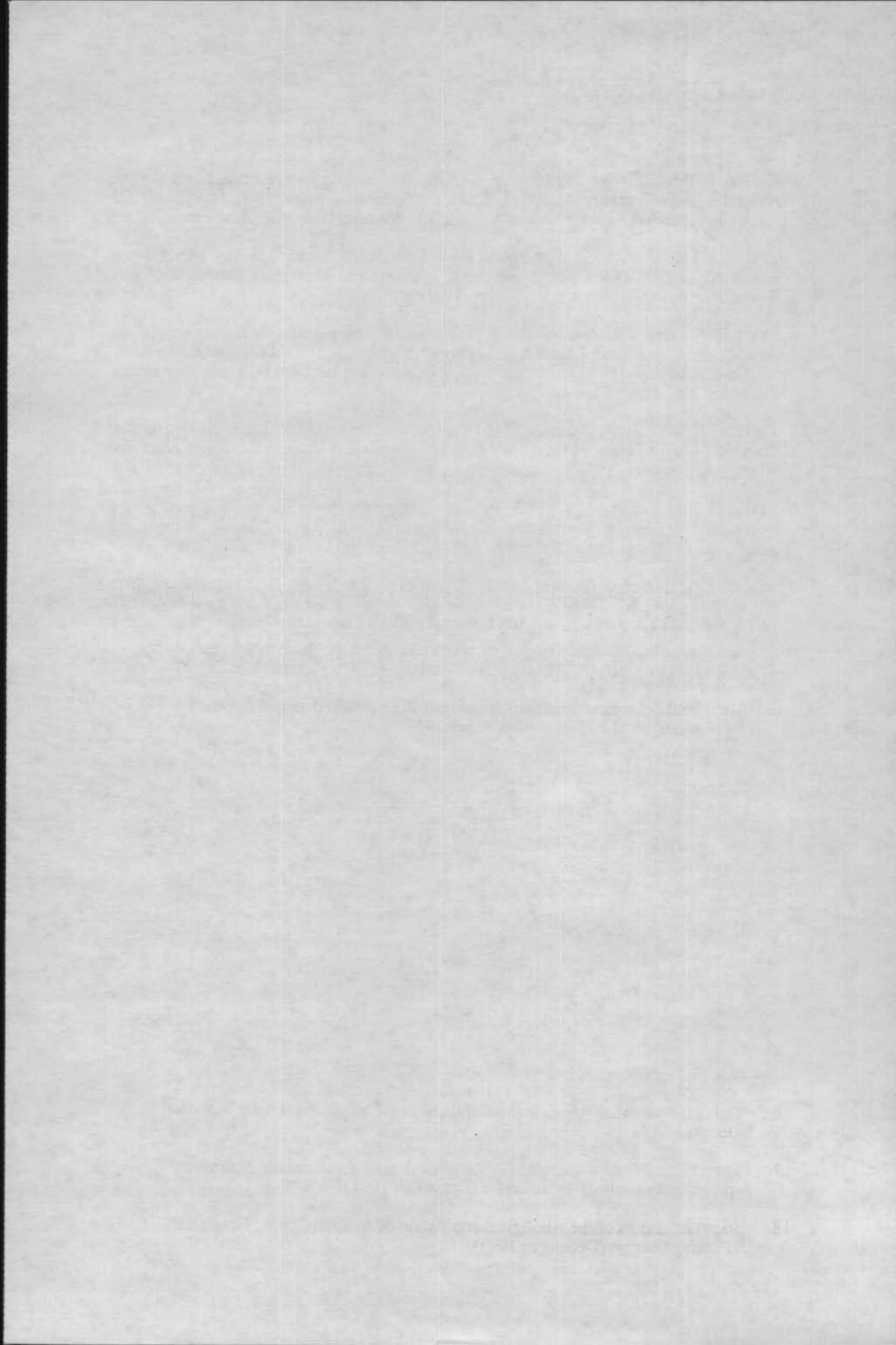
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