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Discussion Paper



**The relative economic status  
of indigenous people in Victoria,  
1986-91**

**J. Taylor and L. Roach**

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## SERIES NOTE

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- investigate the stimulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development and issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and unemployment;
- identify and analyse the factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force; and
- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

The Director of the Centre is responsible to the Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University and receives assistance in formulating the Centre's research agenda from an Advisory Committee consisting of five senior academics nominated by the Vice-Chancellor and four representatives nominated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Department of Employment, Education and Training and the Department of Social Security.

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## ABSTRACT

A mid-term review of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) has recently been completed. While much of the associated policy-rhetoric and assessment of policy outcomes has been aimed at the national level, the fiscal environment in which AEDP goals are to be achieved is invariably one of regional labour markets and administrative systems operating in the economic context of States and Territories. In view of this reality, this paper responds to a need for regional-level analyses of change in the economic status of indigenous people compared to that of non-indigenous people in each State and Territory. Using 1986 and 1991 Census-based social indicators for Victoria, attention is focussed on relative shifts in population growth and intra-State distribution, labour force and income status, and levels of welfare dependency (measured as non-employment income). A major finding is that the gap in labour force status between indigenous and non-indigenous people remained the same, with the status of both groups deteriorating, while the relatively lower income status and higher level of welfare dependency of indigenous people also remained unaltered. This suggests that despite the introduction of the AEDP, indigenous people in Victoria have shared in the negative effects of economic downturn. If the overall aims of the policy are to be accomplished, an increased focus on quantity and quality of outcomes will be necessary.

## Acknowledgments

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## Foreword

During the second half of 1993, CAEPR undertook Phase 2 of the evaluation of the AEDP on a consultancy basis for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). The major outputs from this consultancy have been published as CAEPR Research Monograph No. 5 *The Relative Economic Status of Indigenous Australians 1986-91* and No. 6 *Regional Change in the Economic Status of Indigenous Australians 1986-91*, both authored by Dr John Taylor. These monographs were based on special tables summarising and cross-tabulating 1986 and 1991 Census data ordered from ABS.

The large amount of data generated from the censuses could not be fully summarised in the two research monographs and as part of its consultancy, CAEPR also provided ATSIC with 32-page statistical summaries for each State and Territory for the use of the AEDP Review Secretariat and Review Committee. These summaries form the basis of a series of CAEPR Discussion Papers that focus on intercensal changes between 1986 and 1991 in the comparative economic status of indigenous Australians at the State and Territory level. The first five discussion papers in this series, CAEPR Discussion Papers No. 55 to No. 59, co-authored by Dr John Taylor and Ms Linda Roach, take an intentionally standard approach to the analysis of these data. Subsequent discussion papers on the situation in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory will vary somewhat from this standard approach: Queensland data will be presented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people separately; and the analysis of Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory data will take into account the somewhat unusual population distribution in each jurisdiction.

This set of State-oriented discussion papers are a little different from most of CAEPR's research output, but are regarded as analytically valuable for two main reasons. First, CAEPR's research charter requires it to examine the economic situation of indigenous Australians at the State and Territory, as well as national and regional, levels of aggregation. Second, while ABS output on indigenous Australians is available in standard publications based on the 1986 and 1991 Census, there is little published that rigorously and systematically compares the economic status of indigenous Australians with non-indigenous Australians over time. It is hoped that each of these five discussion papers will be especially useful for policy development purposes at the State level.

Jon Altman  
Series Editor  
April 1994

A mid-term review of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) has recently been completed (Bamblett 1994). The AEDP was originally developed as an immediate Commonwealth response to the *Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs* (Miller 1985) and launched in association with the 1986-87 Commonwealth Budget. Subsequently, the AEDP was expanded and officially launched in November 1987. In late 1992, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University negotiated with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) to provide an analysis of official census statistics to assist the review process. This resulted in the publication of two monographs on national and inter-regional changes in the economic status of indigenous Australians between 1986 and 1991 (Taylor 1993a, 1993b).

The *Aboriginal Employment Development Policy Statement* (Australian Government 1987) highlighted that the overall objective of the AEDP is to assist indigenous Australians to achieve broad equity with other Australians in terms of employment and economic status. This objective was incorporated in three specific goals that emphasise both equity and statistical equality. These are:

- the achievement of employment equality with other Australians, that is to increase the proportion of indigenous Australians of working age, in employment to equal that of the total population;
- the achievement of income equality with other Australians, that is to increase median individual incomes to the median of the total population; and
- to reduce the welfare dependency of indigenous Australians to a level commensurate with that of other Australians, with a particular emphasis on unemployment-related welfare.

It has been understood for some time that an assessment of AEDP outcomes, in broad policy and statistical terms, would be almost entirely dependent on labour force statistics collected in the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing (Altman 1991: 168-70, 1992). In this context, it was fortunate that a degree of correlation emerged between the 1986 Census, the official launch of the AEDP, the availability of 1991 Census data in 1993 and the timing of its mid-term review. With this in mind, the terms of reference for Phase 2 of the evaluation of the AEDP agreed upon between the inter-agency AEDP Review Co-ordinating Committee and CAEPR stated specifically:

In order to assist in assessing the impact of the AEDP, conduct a detailed analysis of 1986 and 1991 Census data to ascertain the degree

to which the AEDP objectives have been achieved and in particular examine:

- the extent to which the income status of indigenous people has improved since 1986;
- the extent to which the employment status of indigenous people has improved since 1986;
- the extent to which the dependency of indigenous people on welfare (non-employment income) has declined since 1986.

Where possible, the analysis should also seek to identify:

- comparative changes in income status, employment and welfare dependence over the period since 1986 for the general Australian population;
- changes in overall macroeconomic conditions and employment opportunities in the mainstream labour market;
- other relevant factors like demographic, gender and locational issues impacting on the achievement of AEDP targets.

In recognition of renewed policy interest in regional issues, both within ATSIC and the Federal Government (Kelty 1993), and to allow information on the contemporary economic status of indigenous Australians to be disseminated as widely as possible, these issues have now been analysed for each State and Territory and the findings are presented in a series of CAEPR Discussion Papers. This paper is concerned with Victoria. Unlike Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) State publications on indigenous people (ABS 1993a), the focus here is on intercensal change in labour force and income status with direct comparison drawn between indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

### **Population size and distribution, 1986-91**

To analyse change in the economic status of indigenous people in Victoria compared to that of the rest of the State's population, an appreciation of respective population growth rates and spatial distributions is crucial. This is because different pressures are brought to bear on the need for new job creation by variable rates of growth in working-age population while the economy itself displays a varied capacity to create employment in different places.

Previous analyses at the national level have identified an urban/rural gradient in regard to broad levels of economic status among indigenous

Australians (Gray and Tesfaghiorghis 1991; Tesfaghiorghis 1991; Taylor 1993a, 1993b). It has also been noted that the delivery of economic policy initiatives under the AEDP has a rationale based on the size of localities where clients live. Community-based programs are predominant in small, mostly rural places where labour markets are poorly developed, while mainstream initiatives are more evident in urban places (Taylor 1993a: 5-6). Given the policy significance of these structural distinctions, the subsequent analysis is organised according to the ABS section-of-State classification, although for analytical convenience the standard four-way taxonomy has been reduced to three components by amalgamating data for bounded localities and the rural balance to create a single 'rural' category (0-999 persons).<sup>1</sup>

### *The indigenous population*

In contrast with earlier intercensal periods, the change in the census count of indigenous people in Australia between 1986 and 1991 accords more closely with demographic expectations giving some cause for confidence, for the first time, in its interpretation (Gray and Tesfaghiorghis 1993). At the same time, according to Gaminiratne (1993: 5) the growth in Victoria's indigenous population was notably higher than expected based on projections from the 1986 Census (5.5 per cent per annum as opposed to an expected rate of 3.4 per cent per annum). This represents a growth rate more than six times higher than that recorded for the rest of the population. A number of observations are relevant to an understanding of this demographic discrepancy. First, the suggestion that higher growth partly reflects real increases in fertility at a time when life expectancy among indigenous people in Victoria has risen at a faster rate than in most other States (Gray and Tesfaghiorghis 1993). Second, the prospect of mis-identification on the part of census respondents who classified themselves as Torres Strait Islanders. Concerns regarding the veracity of counts of the Torres Strait Islander population have been expressed at successive census rounds (Choi and Gray 1985; ABS 1993b) and the large proportional increase in Torres Strait Islanders in Victoria between 1986 and 1991 (60 per cent) only serves to heighten such doubts. Finally, Gaminiratne (1993: 8) raises the possibility of improved coverage in the 1991 Census and/or an increase in the tendency for individuals in Victoria to identify as indigenous Australians.

Apart from an increase in population across the State, one of the features of indigenous population distribution over the past two decades has been a slight decrease in the proportion enumerated in Melbourne and Geelong and an increase in country urban centres such as Bendigo, Ballarat, Wodonga and Mildura. For example, between 1971 and 1986, the proportion of the State's indigenous population living in the largest cities declined from 51 per cent to 48 per cent, while the share in country towns increased from 33 per cent to 41 per cent. Over the same period, those

reported as living in rural areas declined from 16 per cent of the total to 11 per cent. Analysis of indigenous population change by section-of-State for the most recent intercensal period, between 1986 and 1991, indicates that this trend towards a more dispersed distribution has continued but this time because of a higher than average growth rate in rural areas (Table 1).

Although its share of the population has declined further, the greater Melbourne area still accounts for the largest single concentration of indigenous people in Victoria (Table 1). Elsewhere, a reversal of previous trends is apparent with very high growth rates in rural areas and the expansion in country town population slowing down to an average rate. As a consequence, in 1991, the indigenous population of the State was slightly less concentrated in major urban areas and slightly more likely to be found in rural settlements. Whether this shift towards rural locations reflects a real movement of population or whether it results from increased self-identification of indigenous people in rural areas is a moot point and requires further investigation. Certainly, the notion of net migration loss to Melbourne accords with the trend observed for the 1981-86 intercensal period (Gray 1989) and is consistent with the pattern documented around large cities generally in Australia (Bell 1992: 46-87), although whether for the same reasons is not clear. The likelihood of out-migration from urban areas contributing to rural population growth is also given added strength by the fact that any tendency towards increased self-identification in the census has been regarded more as an urban, rather than a rural, phenomenon (Altman 1992: 8).

**Table 1. Change in indigenous population by section-of-State: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	1986		1991		1986-1991	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	Net change	Per cent change
Major urban	5,986	47.5	7,471	44.6	1,485	24.8
Other urban	5,224	41.4	6,852	40.9	1,628	31.2
Rural	1,401	11.1	2,414	14.5	1,013	72.3
Total	12,611	100.0	16,737	100.0	4,126	32.7

#### *The non-indigenous population*

The majority of the Victorian population displayed less tendency to vary its overall distribution between 1986 and 1991 (Table 2). To the extent that any change is evident according to section-of-State, the trends in distribution are similar to those apparent among indigenous people. As with the indigenous population, the majority of the State's residents are

now slightly less prevalent in major urban areas and slightly more likely to be in other urban and rural areas. A major factor underlying this trend is a continuing process of counterurbanisation involving net migration flows in favour of non-metropolitan places within commuting zones and places of high amenity value particularly in coastal areas away from large urban centres (Hugo and Smailes 1985; Bell 1992: 46-87). Notwithstanding this similarity in spatial redistribution, an overwhelming contrast with the indigenous population remains with the far greater concentration of non-indigenous Victorians in Melbourne and Geelong.

**Table 2. Change in non-indigenous population by section-of-State: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	1986		1991		1986-1991	
	No. (million)	Per cent	No. (million)	Per cent	Net change	Per cent change
Major urban	2.76	69.0	2.88	68.1	109,463	3.9
Other urban	0.74	18.4	0.79	18.7	48,147	6.5
Rural	0.49	12.6	0.55	13.2	54,141	10.8
Total	4.00	100.0	4.22	100.0	211,751	5.3

*Change in the working-age population, 1986-91*

As foreshadowed by Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1991), the rate of growth in the indigenous population of working age continued to outstrip that of the rest of the working-age population during the 1986-91 intercensal period. This was, in part, the inevitable outcome of demographic processes set in train during the early 1970s culminating in distinct shifts in the age structure of the indigenous population across Australia. In Victoria, which has an ageing population overall, this difference in growth rates is readily apparent with the working-age indigenous population growing at a rate 5 times higher than that of other Victorians (Table 3).

In addition to higher rates of natural increase, this variation may be partly explained by net gains to the indigenous working-age population due to interstate migration compared to substantial net losses among the rest of the population. Between 1986 and 1991, the balance of migration flows in and out of the State among indigenous people of working age led to a net gain of 71 persons representing a rate of increase of around 8 per thousand of the average intercensal population. While this gain is not excessive it compares favourably with the substantial net loss of 31,000 other Victorians in the working-age group which represented a rate of depletion of 12 persons per thousand. Other factors accounting for the difference in

growth rates may have more to do with census error. Gray and Gaminiratne (1993), for example, draw attention to the tendency for age-graduated self-identification to account for at least some of the observed increase in working-age population, while it is also worth bearing in mind that Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1993) found it hard to substantiate the recent increase in the Torres Strait Islander population of Victoria on demographic grounds alone.

**Table 3. Change in population aged 15-64 years among indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	1986	1991	1986-1991 Net change	Per cent change
Indigenous	7,515	9,779	2,264	30.1
Non-indigenous	2,670,031	2,829,819	159,788	6.0

### **Labour force status, 1986-91**

Three standard social indicators are used here to show the extent and direction of relative change in indigenous labour force status: the employment rate, representing the percentage of those aged 15-64 years who indicated in the census that they were in employment during the week prior to enumeration; the unemployment rate, expressing those who indicated that they were not in employment but had actively looked for work during the four weeks prior to enumeration as a percentage of those in the labour force (those employed plus those unemployed); and the labour force participation rate, representing those in the labour force as a percentage of those of working age.

Between 1986 and 1991, the employment rate of indigenous people in Victoria remained static at a round 46 per cent of the working-age population (Table 4). Similar stability was evident in the rate for the rest of the State's working-age population. As a consequence, the gap in employment levels remained unaltered with indigenous people 30 per cent less likely to find employment. A slightly more equitable picture emerges from the change in unemployment rates. Although these increased for both indigenous and non-indigenous job seekers the rate of increase for indigenous people was lower. With the gap in labour force participation rates remaining the same, the overall picture is one of a marginal degree of convergence in labour force status between the two groups. It is important to note, however, that the status of indigenous people in the labour market

remains substantially below the State average, although any significant change to this position would need to have been achieved against a background of sustained higher growth in the population of working age.

**Table 4. Change in labour force status of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	1986	1991	1986	1991
	(1)	(1)	(2)	(2)
Employment rate	46.3	46.2	65.6	64.6
Unemployment rate	24.0	27.4	7.0	12.0
Participation rate	61.0	63.6	70.5	73.4
Ratios (1/2)				
Employment rate	0.70	0.71		
Unemployment rate	3.40	2.30		
Participation rate	0.86	0.86		

All figures exclude those who did not state their labour force status.

This last point is worth pursuing. The much higher intercensal growth rate of the indigenous working-age population means that increases in indigenous participation rates equivalent to the rest of the population have required a proportionally greater increase in numbers joining the labour force. Likewise, with regard to employment rates, greater success in gaining employment has been required among indigenous people simply to maintain rates at constant levels, to say nothing of actually improving them. Another factor, which may have served to dampen the rate of growth in labour force participation, is the move to encourage higher levels of Aboriginal attendance and retention in educational institutions under the Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. In this context, it is worth noting that the proportion of indigenous people aged 15 years and over who were reported by the census as attending an educational institution in Victoria either full-time or part-time, rose by as much as 28 per cent representing an increase from 1,607 in 1986 to 2,056 in 1991 which is considerably higher than the national rate of 14.6 per cent (Taylor 1993b: 20). While this growth in attendance at educational institutions may result in employment dividends at some later stage, its most likely immediate impact would have been to dampen growth in the labour force participation rate. At the same time, standard explanations advanced by labour economists of apparently intractable low participation, due to a variety of factors operating to discourage indigenous people from seeking employment, may also have some validity (Daly 1992).

*Section-of-State and gender variations*

A quite different picture of intercensal change in labour force status emerges from a disaggregation of the data by section-of-State and gender. The magnitude and net direction of such shifts are shown in Tables 5 and 6, while the actual rates from which these are calculated are shown in Tables 7 and 8.

**Table 5. Net change in labour force status of indigenous Australians by section-of-State and gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Major urban Net change	Other urban Net change	Rural Net change	Total Net change
Males				
Employment rate	-3.7	-7.5	6.6	-3.6
Unemployment rate	4.5	10.6	-2.6	5.6
Participation rate	-0.2	0.7	6.2	1.1
Females				
Employment rate	3.1	1.5	9.6	2.9
Unemployment rate	1.7	0.6	-9.6	0.2
Participation rate	5.0	2.5	6.7	3.9

**Table 6. Net change in labour force status of non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State and gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Major urban Net change	Other urban Net change	Rural Net change	Total Net change
Males				
Employment rate	-5.4	-4.8	-4.1	-5.1
Unemployment rate	6.8	5.9	4.6	6.4
Participation rate	0.3	0.1	-0.3	0.2
Females				
Employment rate	3.1	4.7	2.9	3.3
Unemployment rate	3.8	2.0	1.5	3.2
Participation rate	6.0	6.5	4.2	5.8

In urban areas, and particularly in country towns, employment and unemployment rates among indigenous males mirrored the overall deterioration in these indicators. This is contrary to the situation in rural areas where the indigenous male employment rate increased by almost 7 percentage points and unemployment fell by almost 3 percentage points. It is also at variance with the changing economic position of indigenous

females whose labour force status improved regardless of settlement size, although it is worth noting that this discrepancy between males and females follows the pattern found in the workforce generally (Table 6). As a consequence of these differential shifts based on settlement size, the labour force status of indigenous males in rural areas is now higher than among those in the metropolitan area, while the position of indigenous males in country towns has fallen further behind (Table 7). A similar closure of the gap in labour force status between metropolitan and rural areas is also apparent among indigenous females.

**Table 7. Change in labour force status of indigenous Australians by section-of-State and gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Major urban		Other urban		Rural		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
<b>Males</b>								
Employment rate	62.4	58.7	52.8	45.3	53.2	59.7	57.6	54.0
Unemployment rate	20.0	24.5	28.7	39.3	26.9	24.3	24.1	29.7
Participation rate	78.0	77.8	74.0	74.7	72.7	79.0	75.8	76.9
<b>Females</b>								
Employment rate	41.5	44.7	29.7	31.2	31.0	40.6	35.9	38.8
Unemployment rate	18.7	20.4	30.9	31.5	28.1	18.5	23.9	24.1
Participation rate	51.1	56.1	43.0	45.5	43.1	49.8	47.2	51.1

**Table 8. Change in labour force status of non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State and gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Major urban		Other urban		Rural		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
<b>Males</b>								
Employment rate	78.1	72.7	77.5	72.7	79.2	75.1	78.1	73.0
Unemployment rate	6.2	13.0	7.2	13.1	6.5	11.0	6.4	12.8
Participation rate	83.3	83.6	83.6	83.7	84.7	84.4	83.5	83.7
<b>Females</b>								
Employment rate	53.9	56.9	47.7	52.3	54.0	56.9	52.8	56.1
Unemployment rate	7.5	11.3	9.4	11.4	7.4	8.9	7.8	11.0
Participation rate	58.2	64.2	52.6	59.1	58.3	62.5	57.3	63.1

Despite indications that indigenous people have responded to the same economic forces shaping work patterns in the population generally, the relatively favourable shifts in labour force status evident in rural areas are

unlikely to have derived from market forces alone and point to the possible effect of program intervention. One such impact has been the creation of an estimated 65 jobs in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme at the Lake Tyers community while other AEDP initiatives appear to have effected rural job creation.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, improvements in labour force status, particularly among males, that may have been expected to occur in urban areas due to the application of private and public sector employment programs administered by DEET do not emerge from the data.

Precise information on the number of placements in the Training for Aboriginals Program (TAP) and other DEET labour market programs in Victoria during the intercensal period are difficult to obtain. However, figures made available by DEET for the year 1989-90 indicate that a total of 900 individuals commenced placements in all labour market programs in the State. Even though this level of placement was not sustained throughout the five-yearly intercensal period, and assuming that 20 per cent of job growth in rural areas was due to the CDEP scheme, the lack of positive impact on urban labour force status, particularly for males, is striking. One explanation may be that many TAP placements do not represent 'new' entrants to 'new' jobs, but simply reflect the recycling of individuals several times through a constant, or even declining, pool of positions (Johnston 1991: 73). Another may be found in the short duration of subsidies and program support combined with the failure of some participants to remain in programs. Finally, any positive employment outcomes from program placements may simply have been relinquished by census time (Daly 1993).

Whatever the case, it is apparent that in urban areas the AEDP has fallen behind in its task of achieving employment equality or even improving employment status, particularly for indigenous males. To be fair, it should be pointed out that non-indigenous males also performed poorly during the intercensal period irrespective of their location. Thus, in the deteriorating labour market conditions of the early 1990s one important impact of the AEDP may simply have been to ameliorate a potentially more regressive employment situation for many indigenous males seeking opportunities in mainstream urban labour markets.

#### *Employment growth and the AEDP*

The likelihood that AEDP initiatives have served to enhance the relative standing of indigenous people in the labour market is suggested by their much higher rates of intercensal employment growth compared to other residents of Victoria, albeit starting from a much lower base (Table 9). Between 1986 and 1991, the number of indigenous people in employment grew by 1,009 representing an increase of 30 per cent, more than 7 times the rate recorded for the rest of the population. It is worth noting that in contrast to most other States and Territories a relatively high rate of job

growth has been achieved without substantial participation in the CDEP scheme (Taylor 1993b: 35).

**Table 9. Employment growth among indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Number employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous	3,360	4,369	1,009	30.0
Non-indigenous	1,706,755	1,777,646	70,891	4.2
Total	1,710,115	1,782,015	71,900	4.2

*Employment growth by section-of-State*

Substantial variation in the distribution of intercensal job growth is apparent according to section-of-State (Table 10). Among indigenous people, the striking feature is the relatively low rate of job growth in urban areas, and in country towns particularly. Although rural areas accounted for only 14 per cent of the State's indigenous population in 1991, 31 per cent of all new jobs for indigenous people were created in such places.

**Table 10. Employment growth among indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Per cent employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Major urban	55.7	53.5	465	24.9
Other urban	33.9	31.3	228	20.0
Rural	10.4	15.2	316	90.0
Total	100.0	100.0	1,009	30.0
Non-indigenous				
Major urban	70.8	69.8	31,842	2.6
Other urban	16.6	17.0	18,188	6.4
Rural	12.6	13.2	20,861	9.7
Total	100.0	100.0	70,891	4.2

It is interesting to note, however, that rural areas also displayed the highest rate of job growth among non-indigenous Victorians, although the reasons for this are likely to be quite different having more to do with industry

restructuring, lifestyle choices and the decentralisation of jobs and people away from large cities (Hugo and Smailes 1985). Of greater interest is the fact that the rate of employment growth among indigenous people was considerably higher than among the rest of the population in all settlement size categories. Most noteworthy here, is their relatively better performance in Melbourne given that the rate of job growth among other residents in the metropolitan area was low.

#### *Employment growth by gender*

Just over half of all new jobs for indigenous people (52.9 per cent) went to females. However, because of their far fewer numbers in the labour force, the rate of female employment growth was conspicuously higher than that of males (Table 11).

**Table 11. Change in employment growth among indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Per cent employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Males	59.8	56.8	475	23.6
Females	40.2	43.2	534	39.6
Total	100.0	100.0	1,009	30.0
Non-indigenous				
Males	60.0	56.7	-14,979	-1.5
Females	40.0	43.3	85,870	12.6
Total	100.0	100.0	70,891	4.2

This is in line with the gender pattern of job growth generally in the State and results in an almost identical ratio of male to female workers among both indigenous and non-indigenous populations. Apart from the much higher rate of employment growth among indigenous females compared to other females, a clear indication of the impact of AEDP programs is provided by the fact that indigenous males recorded an increase in employment at a time when other males lost jobs.

#### **Income status, 1986-91**

A key goal of the AEDP is to achieve an improvement in income levels for indigenous Australians to a point where they are equal to those of the general population. In this endeavour, much depends not just on accelerating the rate of employment growth among indigenous people above that of the rest of the workforce, but also ensuring that the types of

jobs created generate incomes that are commensurate with those of the general population. Given the lack of relative improvement in the labour force status of indigenous people in Victoria there would appear to be no statistical grounds for expecting that the income gap between indigenous people and the rest of the State's population may have narrowed. This is precisely what the census data indicate.

**Table 12. Change in income status of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Income (\$000s)			
	Indigenous 1986	Indigenous 1991	Non-indigenous 1986	Non-indigenous 1991
Mean	9.8	13.9	13.4	19.2
Median	7.8	11.1	11.8	16.5
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous				
Mean	0.73	0.72		
Median	0.66	0.68		

Mean income for the indigenous adult population expressed as a ratio of that for the rest of the population actually fell slightly from 0.73 in 1986 to 0.72 in 1991 (Table 12).<sup>3</sup> Median incomes were somewhat lower as a ratio of non-indigenous medians but display a slight improvement. This divergent trend is only minor and no doubt reflects the different bases for calculation. The essential conclusion to be drawn from both measures is that income relativities have not changed during the intercensal period. This lack of improvement in relative incomes is not surprising given the overall fall in employment rates and the rise in unemployment, but some relative improvement might have been expected from the much higher rate of new job growth among the indigenous population. The indication here is that the additional employment acquired by indigenous workers has been in low income jobs. If such low-wage work continues to provide the bulk of new employment for indigenous people, there seems little prospect that the overall income gap between them and the rest of the population in Victoria will narrow. If anything, it is likely to widen further. This is of crucial policy significance as it signals that the creation of job opportunities alone is not sufficient to enhance income status. Of equal importance is the nature of the work involved and the income it generates.

#### *Income change by section-of-State*

The proposition that overall income levels are influenced as much by the occupational status of work created as by the rate of employment growth is supported by data showing change in the income status of indigenous people by section-of-State (Table 13).

**Table 13. Change in income status of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Income (\$000s)							
	Major urban		Other urban		Rural		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
Indigenous								
Mean	10.5	15.5	8.9	12.3	9.4	12.7	9.8	13.9
Median	8.5	12.7	7.4	10.0	6.2	10.0	7.8	11.1
Non-indigenous								
Mean	13.9	20.0	12.3	17.2	12.0	17.4	13.4	19.2
Median	12.5	17.3	10.8	15.1	9.6	14.1	11.8	16.5
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous								
Mean	0.76	0.78	0.73	0.71	0.78	0.73	0.73	0.72
Median	0.68	0.74	0.69	0.66	0.65	0.71	0.66	0.68

Despite the fact that intercensal improvements in the labour force status of indigenous people have been most noticeable in rural areas, income levels remain substantially higher in the metropolitan area compared to elsewhere in the State. Furthermore, this gap in income levels appears to be widening. For example, the ratio of mean incomes for rural-based indigenous people compared to those in the greater Melbourne area, fell from 0.90 in 1986 to 0.82 in 1991. The equivalent comparison for residents of other urban areas reveals a lower ratio which also fell, from 0.85 to 0.79, thus reflecting the far worse labour force status of indigenous people in country towns. The opposite trend emerges for other State residents with the ratio of rural to major urban mean incomes rising from 0.86 in 1986 to 0.87 in 1991. This widening of the metropolitan/non-metropolitan income gap among indigenous people is suggestive of structural disadvantage for country residents compared to city dwellers who have greater access to full-time and award-based jobs.

#### *Income change by gender*

Although incomes for indigenous females remain substantially below those of indigenous males some convergence in income levels between the two groups is apparent (Table 14). One way of assessing relative gender-based movement in income levels is to calibrate changes against a common denominator, in this case the total income for the rest of the population. Using the figures for nominal mean income in 1986, indigenous male incomes were substantially lower (88 per cent) than the total mean for the non-indigenous population. By 1991, this ratio had fallen further (83 per cent). Although lower still, mean incomes for indigenous females rose as a proportion of total non-indigenous mean incomes from 58 per cent in 1986 to 62 per cent in 1991. If these figures are expressed in terms of 1989-90

prices (using a Consumer Price Index of 73.5 in 1985-86 and 105.3 in 1990-91), the real gender-based shift in incomes is apparent with indigenous male incomes falling slightly from a real mean of \$16,054 in 1986 to \$15,194 in 1991 and the female equivalent showing a clear counter-tendency by rising from \$10,612 to \$11,206.

**Table 14. Change in income status of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by gender: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	Males		Income (\$000s) Females		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
Indigenous						
Mean	11.8	16.0	7.8	11.8	9.8	13.9
Median	10.6	13.8	6.5	9.6	7.8	11.1
Non-indigenous						
Mean	17.6	23.9	9.0	14.2	13.4	19.2
Median	16.3	21.2	6.9	11.4	11.8	16.5
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous						
Mean	0.67	0.67	0.87	0.83	0.73	0.72
Median	0.65	0.65	0.95	0.85	0.66	0.68

This convergence in male and female incomes, though slight, is consistent with the trend revealed by Treadgold (1988) for the intercensal periods 1976-1986 and is linked to the relatively better performance of females in sectors of the labour market less affected by the vagaries of the economy. Also, it probably reflects growing gender differentials in the nature of work with indigenous females employed for relatively longer hours and in more skilled employment (Taylor 1993a).

Despite the income gains experienced by indigenous females, they failed as a group to keep up with the rate of growth in income experienced by their non-indigenous counterparts. For example, nominal mean income for indigenous females increased by 51 per cent during the intercensal period whereas non-indigenous females increased their mean income by 58 per cent starting from a higher base (Table 14). Thus, ratios of indigenous to non-indigenous incomes, particularly for the median, reveal that the gap between female incomes has widened while that between males has remained unchanged. At the same time, in monetary terms, indigenous females remain substantially behind indigenous males with the average income for indigenous females rising by a lesser amount from a lower base.

## Welfare dependency

In the AEDP, welfare dependency is equated with dependency on unemployment benefit. Altman and Smith (1993: 21) take the view that this definition is somewhat narrow, reflecting the labour market focus of the AEDP. They take a broader definition of welfare to include all transfer payments from the Federal Government to indigenous citizens. Such a wider definition is also necessitated by the limited availability of official sources of income data for indigenous Australians. At an aggregate level, the most comprehensive indication of the reliance of indigenous people on welfare income is available from census data. This is derived from a cross-tabulation of individual incomes by labour force status. Using this source, Table 15 shows the proportion of total income accruing to each category of the labour force, and to those not in the labour force, in 1986 and 1991.

**Table 15. Change in total income of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by labour force status: Victoria, 1986-91.**

	1986		1991	
	Income (\$ million)	Per cent Change	Income (\$ million)	Per cent Change
Indigenous				
Employed	47.7	73.4	84.3	71.4
Unemployed	5.2	8.0	12.0	10.2
Not in the labour force	12.0	18.6	21.6	18.4
Total	65.0	100.0	118.0	100.0
Non-indigenous				
Employed	29,523.3	89.7	42,758.9	88.0
Unemployed	608.9	1.9	1,782.4	3.7
Not in the labour force	2,771.1	8.4	4,066.1	8.4
Total	32,903.4	100.0	48,607.5	100.0

Overall, there has been a decline in the contribution of employment income to total income. As a consequence, dependence on welfare income has risen. However, the proportion of total income for indigenous people derived from welfare sources remains fixed at a much higher level than among the rest of the population. In 1986, 27 per cent of total indigenous income was from non-employment sources and this increased to 29 per cent in 1991. While a similar rise was apparent among the rest of the population, the level of non-employment income at 12 per cent of total income in 1991 remains low compared to the indigenous population. This seems to suggest that the longer-term trend of a decline in employment income among indigenous Australians relative to total income, noted by

Daly and Hawke (1993) for the period 1976-91, has been sustained in Victoria. Thus, despite a relatively better outcome in terms of labour force status, the policy objective of a reduction in welfare dependency among indigenous people to a level commensurate with that of other Australians is no closer to being achieved in Victoria than before the introduction of the AEDP.

**Table 16. Change in mean employment/non-employment income of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: Victoria, 1986-91.**

Labour force status	Mean income (\$000s)		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Employed	14.94	20.37	5.44	36.4
Unemployed	5.40	8.15	2.75	50.9
Not in the labour force	4.98	7.69	2.71	54.4
Total	9.87	13.98	4.12	41.7
Non-indigenous				
Employed	17.92	24.91	6.98	39.0
Unemployed	5.12	8.22	3.10	60.5
Not in the labour force	4.10	6.87	2.77	67.5
Total	13.47	19.24	5.77	42.8
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous				
Employed	0.83	0.82	-0.02	-1.8
Unemployed	1.06	0.99	-0.06	-6.0
Not in the labour force	1.21	1.12	-0.10	-7.8
Total	0.73	0.73	-0.01	-0.8

Actual shifts in mean employment and non-employment incomes are shown in Table 16. The most striking feature is that mean employment incomes for indigenous people have increased at a considerably slower rate than for others in employment. This is further indicated by the decline in ratios of indigenous/non-indigenous employment income from 0.83 in 1986 to 0.82 in 1991. Given the much higher rate of intercensal job growth among indigenous people, this suggests that the procurement of quality employment, in terms of occupational status, remains an obstacle to the achievement of AEDP goals. As for welfare income, the mean individual income of unemployed indigenous people in 1986 was \$5,400, which was substantially less than half (36.1 per cent) of the mean income for those in employment. By 1991, this gap had closed somewhat but unemployed indigenous people still had incomes that were less than half of that recorded for people in employment (40 per cent). Due to the higher level of employment income among the non-indigenous population the equivalent gap in income status between non-indigenous people in employment and those dependent on welfare was much greater. This is to

be expected given that non-employment incomes for indigenous people and others were more or less the same.

### **Policy implications**

This analysis of change in the relative economic status of indigenous people in Victoria during the intercensal period 1986 to 1991 provides the first comprehensive indication of the impacts of the AEDP in the State since it was implemented in 1987. The results, in terms of stated policy objectives, are ambiguous. On the one hand, there has been little change in the relative labour force status of indigenous people compared to others in the State. The gaps in employment and unemployment rates that existed in 1986 are still as wide in 1991, while the rate of labour force participation persists at a somewhat lower level among indigenous people of working age. At the same time, the rate of new job growth among indigenous people has been much higher than for the rest of the population. The lack of impact on labour force status in the face of this proportionally greater increase in employment is explained by very high growth rates among the indigenous working-age population. Although this intercensal expansion of the base population for social indicators detracts from an accurate assessment of change in economic status, certain conclusions can be drawn.

In the context of a depressed labour market, indigenous people performed at least as well, if not better in some cases, than other job-seekers during the intercensal period suggesting that focused labour market programs left some mark. This is particularly noticeable among indigenous males who at least gained some new employment at a time when other males experienced a substantial net loss of jobs. Likewise, indigenous people secured new jobs in urban areas at much higher rates than the rest of the population. More vigorous growth in employment occurred in rural areas, although the extent to which labour market programs contributed to this job growth is not certain and cannot be validated from census data alone. Apart from the employment impact of the Lake Tyers CDEP scheme, evidence of other AEDP effects would require close scrutiny of DEET's program placement and post program monitoring data to examine the precise nature and spatial application of labour market programs, as well as their links with employment outcomes. However, it would seem that in urban areas particularly, the impact of AEDP public and private sector programs has been to simply ameliorate what might otherwise have been a far worse outcome for indigenous people.

The relative lack of improvement in the income status of indigenous people in Victoria in the context of proportionally higher employment growth emphasises the need for quality, as well as quantity, in job creation

schemes if the overall aims of the AEDP are to be achieved. This is given added weight when account is taken of growing income inequalities for the population as a whole. Indigenous people in Victoria continue to lag behind in an economy which is increasingly divided between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Saunders 1992). From a labour market perspective, one difficulty continues to be the substantial proportion of indigenous adults of working age who are not in the labour force. This accounts, in part, for the persistence of relatively high levels of welfare dependence but, compared to most other States and Territories, the continuance of relatively high welfare dependency in Victoria has less to do with low levels of labour force participation and is more directly a consequence of employment in low-wage occupations.

Aggregate State-level data relating to economic change clearly have the capacity to conceal important intra-State and gender variations. In brief, marginal shifts in labour force status evident at the State level are more exaggerated when disaggregated by section-of-State. Among indigenous people, decline in the employment rate and increase in unemployment was greatest in urban areas while a higher rate of job growth in rural areas was reflected in improved rural labour force status. Indeed, among indigenous males, rural areas now display the highest employment rate. Overall, the labour force status of indigenous women showed clear sign of improvement while that of men deteriorated. Despite this, indigenous females fell further behind in economic status compared to their male counterparts as well as compared to other females in the workforce. These variations clearly underline the importance of assessing policy impacts on the economic status of indigenous people at varying scales of analysis and for different sub-groups in the population.

Given a continuation of intercensal trends in economic status among indigenous people in Victoria a number of outcomes seem likely in the medium term. First, with signs of recovery in the economy, the economic position of indigenous Victorians should not fall any further behind that of the rest of the population. This is based on their slightly better than average performance in more difficult economic times, although much depends on the ability of labour market programs to ensure full participation in a more buoyant job market. Second, depending on the rate of growth in employment, overall reliance on welfare (non-employment) income may show a tendency to decline but levels of welfare support will remain notably higher as a proportion of total income for indigenous people, not least because of their greater involvement in lower paid employment and their sustained lower labour force participation. One unknown factor is whether increased enrolments in educational institutions will start to translate into increased employment in private and public sector jobs. Whatever ensues, it is important that the enhancement of occupational status, and not just labour force status, be the key target of policy. To date,

improvements in labour force status have not impacted on the gap in average incomes. For this to change, indigenous people will need to acquire employment at a much faster rate and in positions that provide an income at least commensurate with those obtained by the rest of the workforce.

## Notes

1. The ABS sections-of-State within each State and Territory are as follows: major urban - all urban centres with a population of 100,000 and over; other urban - all urban centres with a population of 1,000 to 99,999; bounded locality - all population clusters of 200 to 999 persons; rural balance - the rural remainder of the State or Territory.
2. The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme is a Commonwealth Government program in which unemployed indigenous people of working age forgo their entitlements to payments from the Department of Social Security but receive the equivalent from a local community organisation in return for work. For a full description of the scheme and the policy issues surrounding it, see Altman and Sanders (1991) and Sanders (1993).
3. In estimating mean incomes, the mid-point for each income category has been taken on the assumption that individuals are evenly distributed around this mid-point. The open-ended highest category is problematic, but following Treadgold (1988) it is arbitrarily assumed that the average income received by individuals in this category was one and a half times the lower limit of the highest category. Clearly, estimates of mean incomes will vary according to the upper level adopted. In this analysis the full range of income categories has been utilised with \$50,000+ as the highest category in 1986 and \$70,000+ in 1991.

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