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Discussion Paper



**The relative economic status  
of indigenous people in the  
Northern Territory, 1986-91**

**J. Taylor**

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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 the Northern Territory, attention is focused 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 while the gap in labour force status between indigenous and non-indigenous people has narrowed, the relative income status and level of welfare dependency of indigenous people has worsened. This suggests that increased emphasis on the quality of AEDP outcomes, and not just quantity, will be necessary if the overall aims of the AEDP are to be accomplished.

## **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, adopted an intentionally standard approach to the analysis of these data. The present series of papers on the situation in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory vary somewhat from this standard approach: Queensland data are presented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people separately; and the analysis of Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory data takes 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 this series of discussion papers will be especially useful for policy development purposes at the State and Territory level.

Jon Altman  
Series Editor  
June 1994

A mid-term review of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) has recently been completed (Barnblett 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 initially 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; McKinsey and Company 1994), 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 the Northern Territory. Unlike Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) State and Territory publications on indigenous people (ABS 1990, 1993a), the focus of attention 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 the Northern Territory compared to that of the rest of the 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 varies in its capacity to create employment in different parts of the Territory.

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 consistency with other State and Territory analyses the standard three-way taxonomy for the Northern Territory has been reduced to two components by amalgamating data for bounded localities and the rural balance to create a single 'rural' category (0-999 persons).<sup>1</sup> Although this represents an oversimplification of the settlement hierarchy for the indigenous population, it is validated by the fact that residence in an urban, as opposed to a rural centre, remains the crucial determinant of physical access to mainstream labour market opportunities. Furthermore, analyses of change in economic status using a refinement of the ABS section-of-State data to more closely reflect the realities of indigenous settlement in the Northern Territory are available elsewhere (Taylor 1992a, 1993c).

### *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 the Northern Territory's indigenous population was slightly above expectations based on projections from the 1986 Census (3 per cent per annum as opposed to an expected rate of 2.2 per cent per annum). This represents a growth rate marginally higher than that observed for the rest of the Territory's population which was 2.8 per cent per annum. This higher than expected increase in the indigenous population seems not to have occurred by natural increment, as Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1993) identify a slight decline in fertility during the intercensal period, while overall mortality levels remained unaltered. The most likely explanation is an increase in census coverage since 1986. In this context, it is interesting to note that 71 per cent of the indigenous population in the Northern Territory was enumerated in the 1991 Census by remote area interview techniques and not by self-enumeration (ABS 1993b: 26). Given that the section of the remote area interview form referring to indigenous status was pre-ticked in the affirmative, there is a very real sense in which the census count of the Territory's indigenous population was controlled by physical coverage as much as anything else (Taylor 1993d). Thus, the proposition here to help explain the higher than expected census count is simply that remote area coverage in 1991 was more comprehensive than in 1986.

One of the features of indigenous population distribution over the past two decades has been a gradual increase in the proportion resident in urban areas such as Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs (ABS 1990: 9-12; Hugo 1991: 159-68). For example, between 1971 and 1986, the proportion of the Territory's indigenous population living in urban areas increased from 17 per cent to 31 per cent while the proportion living in rural areas declined from 83 per cent to 69 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 urbanisation has continued (Table 1). The rate of population increase was highest in urban areas and such places accounted for a growing share of the indigenous population, although by far the majority remain concentrated in rural places with a growing emphasis on residence at small remote outstations (Taylor 1993c).

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

	1986		1991		1986-1991	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	Net change	Per cent change
Urban	10,701	30.8	13,826	34.6	3,125	29.2
Rural	24,039	69.2	26,088	65.4	2,049	8.5
Total	34,740	100.0	39,914	100.0	5,174	14.9

Surprisingly, no published research is available which quantifies the contemporary migration of indigenous people into the main urban centre, Darwin, although numerous government documents from the days of Commonwealth administration to the present provide evidence of movement into the city, predominantly from communities in the Top End. Research is available on migration to most other towns in the Northern Territory (Young 1981; Loveday and Lea 1985; Lea 1989; Taylor 1988, 1990a, 1990b). The general consensus is that increased urban residence is a response to the availability of housing, employment and social services in urban areas and has been augmented over time by a process of chain migration from rural communities in the Northern Territory and from other urban centres interstate. At the same time the distinction between urban and rural populations is somewhat blurred as much of the movement into urban areas is circular in character and urban populations retain strong links with rural hinterlands (Taylor 1992b).

There are more important caveats, however, applicable to the analysis of change in urban populations over time. It should be noted, for example, that the continued statistical shift towards a more urban population partly

reflects the reclassification of Nguiu, Port Keats (Wadeye), Galiwinku and Yulara from rural localities in 1986 to urban centres in 1991. Of further note is the fact that 1986 and 1991 Census counts by section-of-State in the Northern Territory are based on inconsistent definitions and are not strictly comparable. In 1986, the Linge criteria for defining urban centres were not applied, whereas in 1991 they were (ABS 1993c: 29).<sup>2</sup> The effect of this was to include in the 1986 urban count an estimated 1,721 indigenous individuals who should have been classified as rural according to the ABS's own rules. In 1991, the application of the Linge criteria meant that 2,041 individuals, who would have been classified as urban residents if the 1986 practice had been repeated, were correctly classified as rural. This confusion is added to by a failure in 1986 to follow another ABS rule for defining section-of-State categories. Strictly speaking, population clusters of 1,000 or more persons should be classified as urban. While this was the case in 1991, in 1986 Nguiu and Galiwinku both had populations of over 1,000 but were classified as rural localities.

Fortuitously, the impact of these inconsistencies on change in population distribution and on the economic characteristics of urban and rural populations appears to be minimal. This is because, numerically, the loss of urban residents to rural areas in 1991 due to the application of the Linge criteria is compensated for by the transfer of the rural Port Keats population to the urban section-of-State. In terms of the socioeconomic characteristics of those involved in this exchange, the majority of the population excluded from urban areas in 1991 under the Linge criteria were from town camps in Darwin, Katherine and, particularly, Alice Springs. It is assumed that these had an economic profile not dissimilar to the residents of Port Keats. On this basis, it is considered safe to proceed with the analysis of change in economic status by section-of-State using the data as published.

#### *The non-indigenous population*

A shift in proportional distribution by section-of-State was more apparent among the majority of the Northern Territory's population (Table 2). At the same time, the redistribution tendency exhibited was significant for being opposite to that displayed by indigenous people. Thus, in contrast to the continued expansion of the indigenous population in favour of urban areas, the rest of the Territory's population displayed a turnaround from a previous urbanisation trend toward much stronger growth in rural areas. Once again, however, this pattern of redistribution is more illusory than real as non-adherence to the Linge criteria in 1986 followed by their strict application in 1991 resulted in the re-classification of many peri-urban residents of Darwin and Alice Springs from urban to rural status. In effect, it is unlikely that the non-indigenous population is now proportionally less urbanised as the data indicate. Much of the recent expansion of urban areas in the Northern Territory has involved spatially intermittent growth and the associated incorporation into the urban area of formerly rural fringes (see,

for example, Taylor and Lea 1988: 233-34). This makes the count of urban populations especially sensitive to any misinterpretation or wrongful application of census geography such as occurred in 1986.

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

	1986		1991		1986-1991	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	Net change	Per cent change
Urban	100,359	84.2	105,220	77.4	4,861	4.8
Rural	18,874	15.8	30,770	22.6	11,896	63.0
Total	119,233	100.0	135,990	100.0	16,757	14.0

Aside from these differences in spatial redistribution, the overwhelming contrast with the indigenous population remains the far greater concentration of the majority of the Territory's residents in Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine and other urban centres (Taylor 1989; Hugo 1991). The fact that the data show more non-indigenous people resident in rural areas in 1991 than indigenous people is misleading since a large share of the non-indigenous rural population is located in peri-urban areas where the application of strict Linge criteria is questionable (Hugo 1986). In contrast, the majority of indigenous rural dwellers are far removed from urban centres and remote from many urban-type services and labour markets.

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

As foreshadowed by Gray and Tesfaghiorgis (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 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. Table 3 indicates that the rate of increase of the indigenous working-age population in the Northern Territory was distinctly above that of the rest of the population. In addition to the higher natural rate of increase of this age group, this variation may also be partly explained by much lower net loss to the indigenous working-age population due to interstate migration. Between 1986 and 1991, the balance of migration flows in and out of the Territory among indigenous people of working age led to a net loss of 116 persons representing a rate of loss of around 5 per thousand of the average intercensal population. By comparison, the non-indigenous population of working age was reduced by 1,828 representing a rate of depletion of 23 persons per thousand.

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

	1986	1991	Net change	Per cent change
Indigenous	19,987	23,254	3,267	16.3
Non-indigenous	86,314	98,136	11,822	13.7

### Labour force status, 1986-91

Three standard social indicators are used here to highlight 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.

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

	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	1986 (1)	1991 (1)	1986 (2)	1991 (2)
Employment rate	28.6	31.5	72.5	71.4
Unemployment rate	35.0	25.9	7.7	9.6
Participation rate	44.0	42.5	78.6	79.0
Ratios (1/2)				
Employment rate	0.39	0.44		
Unemployment rate	4.5	2.7		
Participation rate	0.56	0.54		

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

Between 1986 and 1991, the overall employment rate of indigenous people in the Northern Territory showed sign of improvement, rising from 28 per cent to 31 per cent (Table 4). It is instructive to consider this positive trend

in a wider labour market context as corresponding figures for the rest of the Territory's working-age population showed a slight decline, from 72 per cent to 71 per cent. Thus, a marginal degree of convergence in employment levels between the two groups has been achieved in recent years, as indicated by the change to a higher employment ratio in 1991, although it should be noted that the employment rate for indigenous people remains substantially below the Territory average. At the same time, the relative improvement in indigenous labour force status has been achieved against a background of sustained higher growth in the population of working age.

A similar closure of the gap in labour force status between indigenous people and the rest of the population is apparent from intercensal shifts in unemployment rates (Table 4). The results point to a significant decline in the indigenous unemployment rate at a time when the non-indigenous rate has risen noticeably. Using the data in Table 4, it can be calculated that the indigenous unemployment rate as a ratio of the non-indigenous unemployment rate fell from being 4.5 times higher in 1986 to 2.7 times higher in 1991.

It is important to qualify discussions of relative employment and unemployment rates with data on relative rates of labour force participation since the proportion of the indigenous population formally attached to the labour market has historically been well below the Territory average. Evidence from the 1991 Census indicates that this is still the case (Table 4). While the indigenous labour force participation rate decreased from 44 per cent in 1986 to 42 per cent in 1991, the non-indigenous participation rate rose slightly from 78.6 per cent to 79 per cent, thus further widening an already large gap.

A number of points are relevant in interpreting these data. First, the much higher intercensal growth rate of the indigenous working-age population means an increase in the indigenous participation rate at a level equivalent to the rest of the population would have required a proportionally much greater increase in the numbers of indigenous people joining the labour force. Likewise, with regard to the employment rate, greater success in gaining employment has been required among indigenous people simply to maintain this at a constant level, to say nothing of actually improving it. Another factor, which may have dampened growth in labour force participation among indigenous people as it has in other States, is the move to encourage higher levels of attendance and retention in educational institutions under the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.

In this context, it is worth noting that the growth of 2.9 per cent in the proportion of indigenous people aged 15 years and over who were reported by the census as attending an educational institution in the Northern Territory, was much lower than the national average rate of 14.6 per cent.

The actual numbers recorded were 4,246 in 1986 increasing to 4,371 in 1991. 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 moderate growth in the labour force participation rate. At the same time, given the relatively small rise in attendance at educational institutions, 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 have greater validity (Daly 1992).

#### *Section-of-State and gender variations*

A modified 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: Northern Territory, 1986-91.**

	Other urban Net change	Rural Net change	Total Net change
<b>Males</b>			
Employment rate	-9.0	5.7	1.0
Unemployment rate	8.1	-19.2	-9.0
Participation rate	-6.5	-5.4	-5.5
<b>Females</b>			
Employment rate	-2.6	7.5	4.4
Unemployment rate	7.0	-20.8	-9.0
Participation rate	0.6	1.7	1.7

While improvements in the labour force status of indigenous people have occurred overall, a distinction emerges between the population in urban and rural areas. For both males and females, the increase in the employment rate and decline in unemployment was clearly restricted to rural areas with those in towns experiencing deteriorating status. The situation for males in urban areas was somewhat worse than for females as the decline in the male employment rate was more severe while the participation rate also fell, whereas for females it increased slightly. In contrast with indigenous people in urban areas, those in rural areas experienced a substantial improvement in labour force status characterised most notably by a dramatic fall in the rate of unemployment.

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

	Other urban Net change	Rural Net change	Total Net change
<b>Males</b>			
Employment rate	-4.0	-1.6	-3.7
Unemployment rate	2.7	2.7	2.7
Participation rate	-1.8	0.7	-1.5
<b>Females</b>			
Employment rate	2.6	3.3	2.6
Unemployment rate	0.6	1.1	0.7
Participation rate	3.2	4.3	3.2

Further perspective is shed on these relative shifts in labour force status when comparison is drawn with the rest of the population (Table 6). In urban areas, for example, the labour force status of non-indigenous males also worsened, although to a lesser degree than for indigenous males. In contrast, however, non-indigenous females in urban areas improved their position within the labour market against the general trend pointing to a growing gap between them and indigenous females in urban areas. Away from the towns, improvement in the labour force status of indigenous males in particular is made more prominent by the decline in status for other males. Overall, where opportunities are restricted to mainstream labour markets, it would seem that indigenous people in the Northern Territory have been more susceptible to the economic forces shaping work patterns in the population generally.

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

	Other urban		Rural		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
<b>Males</b>						
Employment rate	43.3	34.2	31.5	37.2	35.2	36.2
Unemployment rate	30.7	38.9	39.6	20.4	36.4	27.4
Participation rate	62.5	56.0	52.2	46.8	55.4	49.9
<b>Females</b>						
Employment rate	32.9	30.4	17.7	25.2	22.7	27.1
Unemployment rate	22.8	29.8	40.0	19.2	32.9	23.9
Participation rate	42.7	43.3	29.5	31.2	33.8	35.6

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

	Other urban		Rural		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
<b>Males</b>						
Employment rate	81.9	77.9	78.4	76.8	81.3	77.6
Unemployment rate	7.8	10.5	7.0	9.7	7.6	10.3
Participation rate	88.8	87.0	84.3	85.0	88.0	86.5
<b>Females</b>						
Employment rate	62.8	65.4	57.2	60.4	62.0	64.4
Unemployment rate	8.1	8.7	6.7	7.9	7.9	8.6
Participation rate	68.4	71.6	61.3	65.6	67.3	70.4

Relatively favourable shifts in the labour force status of indigenous people in rural areas are unlikely to have occurred from the effect of market forces. More realistically they reflect the impact of widespread program intervention primarily in the form of participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the 1986 Census there were four communities in the CDEP scheme in the Northern Territory with 720 participants. By 1991, 24 communities were participating in the scheme with a total of 4,146 participants. Of these, the vast majority (3,946) were resident in rural communities and 200 were located in Alice Springs, although some of the latter were probably classified as rural in the 1991 Census due to the application of the Linge criteria in determining urban status.

#### *Employment growth and the AEDP*

The likelihood that AEDP initiatives have served to enhance the relative labour force status of indigenous people is suggested by their much higher rate of intercensal employment growth compared to other residents of the Northern Territory, albeit starting from a much lower base (Table 9). Between 1986 and 1991, the number of indigenous people in employment grew by 1,696 representing an increase of 33 per cent, more than twice the rate recorded for the rest of the population.

In estimating the proportion of this employment growth due to participation in the CDEP scheme, much depends on assumptions made regarding the ratio of CDEP scheme workers to participants as the participant schedules include non-working spouses. A 60 per cent ratio is employed here as a best estimate using the scant evidence available from the 1993 review of the scheme (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu 1993: 51). Clearly, a higher ratio would increase the contribution of CDEP scheme employment to total employment with associated policy implications.

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

	Number employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous	5,181	6,877	1,696	32.7
Non-indigenous	59,038	67,115	8,077	13.7
Total	64,219	73,992	9,773	15.2

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

	Per cent employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Urban	42.4	36.1	284	12.9
Rural	57.6	63.9	1,412	47.3
Total	100.0	100.0	1,696	32.7
Non-indigenous				
Urban	83.9	77.7	2,593	5.2
Rural	16.1	22.3	5,484	57.8
Total	100.0	100.0	8,077	13.7

Using the minimum ratio, it is estimated that expansion of the CDEP scheme accounted for more than the total increase in employment for indigenous people between 1986 and 1991. According to Table 10 the net increase in rural jobs for indigenous people was only 1,412 whereas the estimated increase in CDEP scheme jobs recorded by the census was 2,056. The policy message from this is clear. Without increased participation in the CDEP scheme, overall employment in the Northern Territory would have decreased and rural labour force status in particular would have been far worse than indicated by 1991 Census data. In urban areas, the rate of job growth for indigenous people was far less than in rural areas but achieved mostly without access to the CDEP scheme. Furthermore, indigenous residents of urban areas recorded higher growth in jobs than the rest of the urban population suggesting that the public and private sector initiatives of the AEDP left some mark in a depressed labour market, although precisely in what manner, to what extent and over what time frame, is difficult to determine.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to be precise about the impact of CDEP scheme participation on employment change given that calculations are

based on assumptions regarding the ratio of actual workers in the scheme to those registered as participants. Furthermore, the data are drawn from an administrative database which is not strictly comparable with census data. If anything, the estimate of the CDEP scheme's contribution to intercensal employment growth is likely to be a minimum figure judging by early returns from ATSIC's newly instituted CDEP scheme Census (Taylor 1993b: 35-6). If this is so, then the loss of rural and urban jobs in the non-CDEP scheme sector would have been greater still.

Likewise, information on the number of placements in the Training for Aboriginals Program (TAP) and other DEET labour market programs in the Northern Territory over the course of the intercensal period is difficult to obtain. However, figures published by DEET for the year 1989-90 indicate that a total of 2,817 indigenous people commenced placements in all labour market programs in the Northern Territory (DEET 1991: 38). Even though this level of placement was not sustained throughout the five-year intercensal period, and assuming that some placements were made in rural areas, the gap between recorded urban job growth and placement data 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; Smith 1994: 12). Another may be found in the short duration of job subsidies and program support combined with the withdrawal of some participants from the programs. Finally, any positive employment outcomes from program placements may simply have disappeared by census time (Daly 1993). Thus, 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.

**Table 11. Employment growth among indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by gender: Northern Territory, 1986-91.**

	Per cent employed		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Males	58.2	55.1	778	25.8
Females	41.8	44.9	918	42.4
Total	100.0	100.0	1,696	32.7
Non-indigenous				
Males	60.9	57.9	2,870	8.0
Females	39.1	42.1	5,207	22.6
Total	100.0	100.0	8,077	13.7

Whatever the case, it is apparent that in urban areas particularly, the AEDP has fallen behind in its task of achieving employment equality or substantially improving employment status, particularly for indigenous males. The worsening labour market position of indigenous males is further underlined by the fact that just over half of all new jobs for indigenous people (54 per cent) went to females. Because of their far fewer numbers in the labour force, however, indigenous females experienced a much higher rate of employment growth (Table 11) consistent with the gender pattern of job growth generally in the Territory. Thus, in the deteriorating labour market conditions of the early 1990s one important impact of the AEDP, and the CDEP scheme in particular, has been to ameliorate potentially worse employment and unemployment statistics for indigenous males.

### 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 on ensuring that the types of jobs created generate incomes that are commensurate with those of the general population. Given a relative improvement in the labour force status of indigenous people in the Northern Territory there would appear to be statistical grounds for expecting that the income gap between them and the rest of the population may have narrowed.

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

	Income (\$000s)			
	Indigenous 1986	Indigenous 1991	Non-indigenous 1986	Non-indigenous 1991
Mean	7.7	9.7	16.8	23.1
Median	5.9	7.5	15.8	21.0
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous				
Mean	0.46	0.42		
Median	0.38	0.36		

Overall, however, the census indicates little change in income relativities. Mean income for the indigenous adult population as a ratio of that for the rest of the population, showed a distinct fall from 0.46 in 1986 to 0.42 in 1991 (Table 12) while median income, though somewhat lower as a ratio of the non-indigenous median, displayed a slight rise.<sup>4</sup> This divergent trend

is only minor and no doubt reflects the different bases for calculation. The essential conclusion to be drawn from combining these measures is simply that income relativities have not changed. This lack of improvement in relative incomes may partly be explained by the fact that all net employment growth for indigenous people has been generated by participation in the CDEP scheme which provides for income at levels more or less equivalent to welfare entitlements. At the same time, it suggests that employment outside of the scheme continues to be concentrated in relatively low-wage occupations. If further expansion of employment opportunities for indigenous people is also characterised by low-wage work, such as currently provided by the CDEP scheme, there seems little prospect that the overall income gap between them and the rest of the population in the Northern Territory will narrow. If anything, it is likely to widen further. This is of crucial policy significance as it signals that improvements in labour force status alone are not sufficient to enhance income status. Of equal importance to job creation 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 nature of work 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). Despite the fact that intercensal improvement in the labour force status of indigenous people has been most noticeable in rural areas, income levels remain inversely related to settlement size.

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

	Urban		Income (\$000s)		Total	
	1986	1991	Rural 1986	Rural 1991	1986	1991
Indigenous						
Mean	9.7	12.3	6.7	8.4	7.7	9.7
Median	8.2	9.7	5.6	7.1	5.9	7.5
Non-indigenous						
Mean	16.9	23.2	16.1	23.0	16.8	23.1
Median	15.9	21.1	14.6	20.4	15.8	21.0
Ratio indigenous/non-indigenous						
Mean	0.58	0.53	0.42	0.37	0.46	0.42
Median	0.51	0.46	0.38	0.35	0.38	0.36

For example, the ratio of mean income for rural-based indigenous people compared to those in urban areas remained essentially unaltered at 0.69 in 1986 and 0.68 in 1991. This contrasts with the pattern of income among

the rest of the Territory's population which displays very little variation according to section-of-State. The persistence of the urban/rural income gap among indigenous people is not surprising given the composition of much rural employment as part-time work with remuneration based on approximate welfare equivalents via the CDEP scheme. Notwithstanding signs of improvement in labour force status, rural areas remain structurally disadvantaged compared to urban areas where a much greater proportion of jobs are full-time and award-based.

#### *Income change by gender*

The primary cause of the widening gap between indigenous and non-indigenous income was a relative decline in the income level of indigenous males (Table 14). Using the figures for nominal mean income in 1986, indigenous male income was 52 per cent of the total mean for the non-indigenous population. By 1991, this proportion had fallen to only 42 per cent. In contrast, mean income for indigenous females rose slightly as a proportion of total non-indigenous mean income from 40 per cent in 1986 to match the male income ratio at 42 per cent in 1991.

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

	Males		Income (\$000s) Females		Total	
	1986	1991	1986	1991	1986	1991
Indigenous						
Mean	8.7	9.8	6.7	9.6	7.7	9.7
Median	6.9	7.2	5.5	7.9	5.9	7.5
Non-indigenous						
Mean	21.0	28.0	11.7	17.4	16.8	23.1
Median	19.4	25.5	10.6	16.1	15.8	21.0
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous						
Mean	0.41	0.35	0.58	0.55	0.46	0.42
Median	0.36	0.29	0.52	0.49	0.38	0.36

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 income falling substantially from a real mean of \$11,836 in 1986 to \$9,307 in 1991 and the female equivalent holding steady at \$9,115 in 1986 and \$9,117 in 1991. In effect, there is now no income differential between indigenous males and females in the Northern Territory. This convergence in male and female incomes is consistent with the trend revealed by Treadgold (1988) and Daly and Hawke (1994) for the intercensal periods between 1976-86 and is most likely linked to the 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 sustained growth of indigenous female employment in full-time and skilled work at a time when the growth of equivalent male employment has been sluggish (Taylor 1993a).

Despite the income gains experienced by indigenous females, they failed to keep up with the rate of growth in income experienced by non-indigenous females. Nominal mean income for indigenous females, for example, increased by 43 per cent during the intercensal period. Non-indigenous females, on the other hand, increased their mean income by 49 per cent starting from a substantially higher base (Table 14). Thus, indigenous males and females both fell further behind their non-indigenous counterparts as indicated by respective declines in income ratio.

### 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: Northern Territory, 1986-91.**

	1986		1991	
	Income (\$ million)	Per cent (\$ million)	Income	Per cent
Indigenous				
Employed	62.9	50.7	95.0	49.2
Unemployed	15.9	12.8	17.4	9.0
Not in the labour force	45.3	36.5	80.7	41.8
Total	124.2	100.0	193.1	100.0
Non-indigenous				
Employed	1,198.8	92.0	1,836.1	90.0
Unemployed	27.8	2.1	59.9	2.9
Not in the labour force	76.8	5.9	143.4	7.0
Total	1,303.5	100.0	2,039.5	100.0

Overall, there is little change in the contribution of employment income to total income. If anything, a slightly lower proportion of income among the indigenous population derives from employment in line with the trend among the rest of the population. This suggests that the longer-term trend of a decline in employment income relative to total income, noted in respect of indigenous Australians by Daly and Hawke (1993) for the period 1976-91, has continued in the Northern Territory despite improvements in employment during the most recent intercensal period. The most likely reason for this is an increase in the proportion of total employment income derived from CDEP scheme participation. Indeed, given this, it could be argued that the fall in the proportion of total income derived from employment should have been considerably greater as income based on notional citizen entitlements should arguably be classified as welfare-related rather than employment-based.

At the same time, even if income from the CDEP scheme is accepted as employment income, the proportion of total income derived from non-welfare sources remains fixed at a much lower level among indigenous people than among the rest of the population. This is despite their relatively greater improvement in labour force status. Thus, 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 the Northern Territory than before the introduction of the AEDP.

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

Labour force status	Mean income (\$000s)		Change	
	1986	1991	Net	Per cent
Indigenous				
Employed	13.17	14.27	1.11	8.4
Unemployed	6.09	7.91	1.82	29.8
Not in the labour force	5.31	7.39	2.08	39.1
Total	7.80	9.77	1.97	25.2
Non-indigenous				
Employed	21.03	28.19	7.16	34.1
Unemployed	6.02	9.27	3.25	54.0
Not in the labour force	4.95	8.80	3.85	77.6
Total	16.89	23.20	6.31	37.3
Ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous				
Employed	0.63	0.51	-0.12	-19.1
Unemployed	1.01	0.85	-0.16	-15.7
Not in the labour force	1.07	0.84	-0.23	-21.7
Total	0.46	0.42	-0.04	-8.8

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 the ratio of indigenous/non-indigenous employment incomes from 0.63 in 1986 to 0.51 in 1991. As already noted, this is to be expected given that a substantial share of new employment income for indigenous workers is essentially fixed at a rate roughly equivalent to Jobsearch and Newstart allowances. As for non-employment income, the mean individual income of unemployed indigenous people in 1986 was \$6,090, which was substantially less than half (46 per cent) of the mean income recorded for those in employment. By 1991, this gap had closed somewhat but unemployed indigenous people still had incomes that were roughly half of those recorded for indigenous people in employment (55 per cent).

### **Policy implications**

This analysis of change in the relative economic status of indigenous people in the Northern Territory during the intercensal period 1986 to 1991 provides the first comprehensive basis for considering the impacts of the AEDP since it was implemented in 1987. The results, in terms of stated policy objectives, appear to be mixed. On the one hand, employment and unemployment rates among the indigenous population show distinct signs of improvement leading to a closing of the gap in these indicators (albeit slowly) with the rest of the population. On the other hand, when the data are disaggregated by section-of-State and the nature of employment growth is investigated, the achievement is revealed to be an entirely rural phenomenon and related to the rapid expansion of the CDEP scheme since the last census.

In contrast with the growth of rural employment, urban-based public and private sector jobs show a much slower rate of increase. While this runs counter to expectations, given the strength of program efforts to encourage urban employment, it appears that the impact of AEDP public and private sector programs, in the context of a depressed mainstream labour market, has been to ameliorate what might otherwise have been a far worse outcome. This proposition cannot be validated from census data alone and requires close scrutiny of DEET's program placement and post-program monitoring data in order to examine the precise nature and spatial application of labour market programs, as well as their links with employment outcomes. Despite some sign that focused labour market programs left a mark, indigenous people clearly remain marginalised in urban labour markets.

The relative lack of improvement in the overall income status of indigenous people in the context of much improved labour force status

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 (Saunders 1992). Indigenous people appear to lag consistently behind in an economy which is increasingly divided between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. 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 large part, for the persistence of relatively high levels of welfare dependence. Given that much new employment growth has involved a shift into CDEP scheme employment of individuals formerly on unemployment benefit or outside the labour force, it is realistic to suggest that the level of welfare dependence is actually higher than revealed by the census. This is because income derived from such employment merely represents the transfer of social security entitlements under a different guise.

Aggregate Territory-level data showing economic change clearly have the capacity to conceal important intra-Territory and gender variations. In brief, the improvements in labour force status evident at the Territory level are reversed in urban areas and considerably enhanced in rural areas. Despite this, rural incomes remain firmly behind those in urban areas. Likewise, the labour force and income status of indigenous women show distinct improvement compared to those of men, which in income terms at least, has regressed. This clearly underlines the importance of assessing policy impacts on the economic status of indigenous people at varying levels of aggregation and for different sub-groups in the population.

Given a continuation of intercensal trends in economic status among indigenous people in the Northern Territory a number of outcomes seem likely in the medium term. With continued growth in CDEP scheme participation, as outlined in the Government's white paper on employment (Commonwealth of Australia 1994), the gap in labour force status between indigenous and non-indigenous residents will further recede, but overall, indigenous people will remain around half as likely to be in employment and two to three times more likely to be unemployed. Depending on the rate of growth in CDEP scheme participation, reliance on welfare (non-employment) income may show a tendency to decline but levels of such support will remain notably higher among indigenous people not least because of sustained lower labour force participation.

One unknown factor is whether dependency levels will be reduced by increased funding to improve the operation of CDEP schemes and to expand the Community Enterprise Incentive Scheme, both announced in the white paper on employment. Also difficult to predict is the degree to which enrolments in educational institutions will start to translate into increased employment in private and public sector jobs. Much will depend here on the pace and nature of economic recovery while special labour

market programs and other funding regimes for indigenous organisations have a demonstrated capacity to provide some buoyancy even in depressed economic circumstances. A further unknown is the employment effects that may ensue from any native title-led mining and other joint venture arrangements such as those at Mt. Todd and McArthur River. These two very different agreements between mining companies and indigenous interests have culminated in positive outcomes for all parties. In the case of the Mt Todd Agreement, there is an option for up to one-third of the mine workforce to be drawn from the Jawoyn people while the McArthur River Agreement provides for a significant employment and training package to facilitate local employment at the mine (Altman 1994). Even with such developments, however, 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 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 the Northern Territory are as follows: 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. Criteria for delimiting urban centres and rural localities are applied after a census has been conducted. The criteria, based on those developed in 1965 by Dr G.J.R. Linge of the Australian National University, combine measures of population density, land use and spatial contiguity in classifying collection districts as urban or rural. For further details of these criteria see ABS (1993d).
3. The CDEP scheme is a Commonwealth 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).
4. 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.

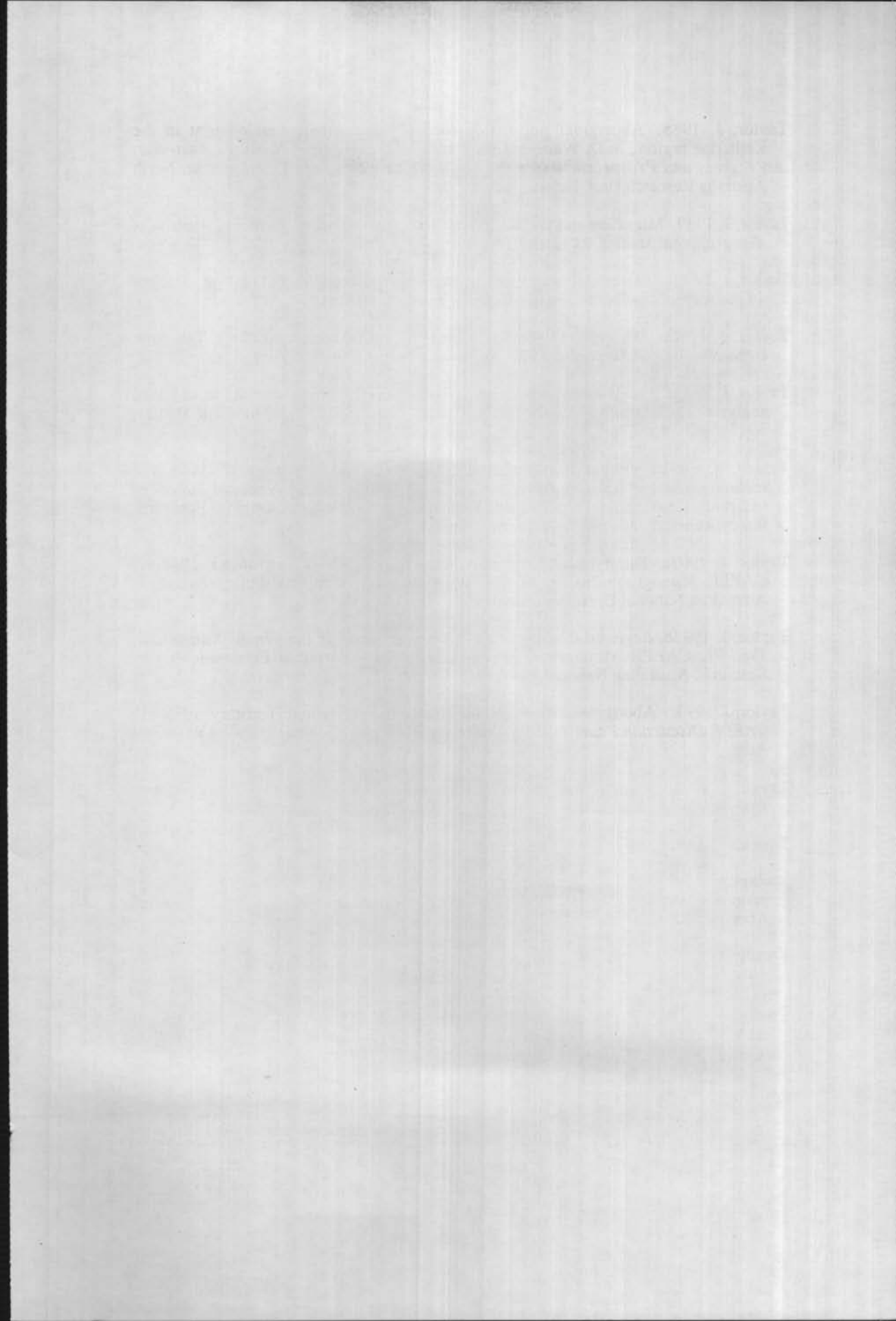
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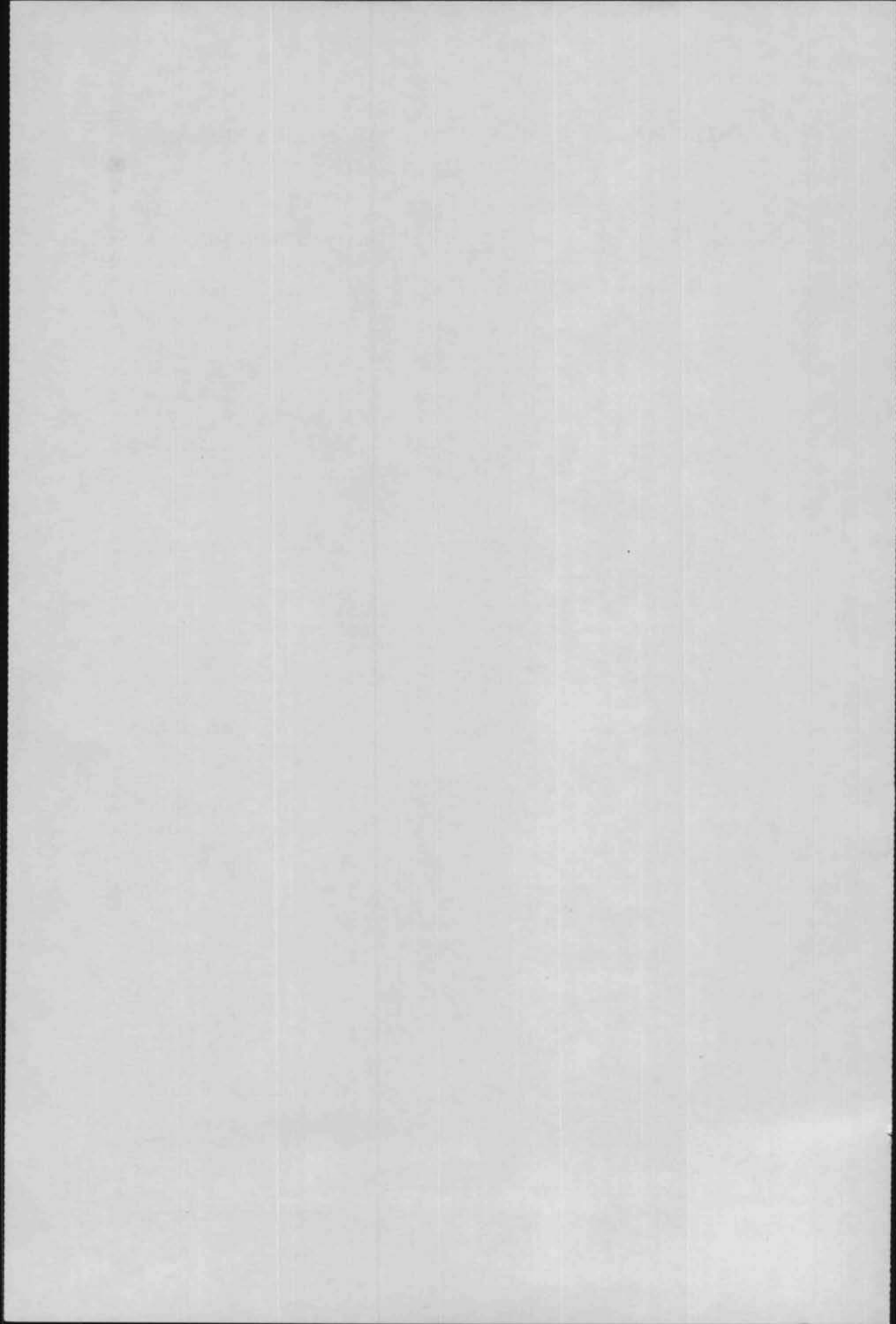
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