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**A profile of indigenous
workers in the private sector**

J. Taylor and B. Hunter

No. 137/1997



DISCUSSION PAPER

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Summary

The current re-orientation in policy emphasis towards engagement with the private sector as the primary source of future employment growth for indigenous people raises questions about how this might be achieved. As a prior step, this paper considers what is known about the present involvement of indigenous people in the private sector and how this might be relevant to policy development.

A profile of the indigenous private sector workforce

- In 1991, private sector jobs accounted for 42 per cent of all indigenous jobs as opposed to 70 per cent for non-indigenous Australians.
- According to the 1994 NATSIS there was no growth in private sector employment in the early 1990s.

Most private sector jobs are found in urban areas. Capital cities stand out as having a greater share (39 per cent) than suggested by their share of population (27 per cent). The proportion of private sector jobs found in rural areas (18 per cent) is considerably less than expected given that 31 per cent of the population was located in rural areas.

While indigenous private sector workers have many of the same characteristics as their counterparts in public sector jobs there are a number of key differences. First, they have the option of self-employment; are in relatively insecure jobs; are more likely to be in part-time work but are also more likely to work over-time; are more likely to be males; tend to be younger; have a much greater spread across income categories than public sector workers and are more likely to be earning both the lowest and the highest incomes.

Compared to private sector workers as a whole, indigenous employees in private sector jobs are over-represented in primary industries and under-represented in retail and wholesale industries as well as in finance and business services. For both groups most workers are found in manufacturing and in wholesale and retail industries.

Within industry groupings substantial concentration of indigenous employment exists. Private sector activities from which indigenous workers are noticeably under-represented tend to be in service industries and those requiring high skill levels and professional accreditation. As a consequence indigenous people are relatively absent from some of the country's major employer groups and key areas of private sector growth such as in the hospitality and retail industries.

Policy implications

A degree of caution and policy realism is required in pursuing the goal of increased private sector employment as this could result in changes to the

employment profile which may be construed as a backward step for indigenous people and for related goals of policy:

- Less job security and more casual/part-time work; greater scope for males and younger people but less for females and older people; more workers on low salaries and fewer training opportunities.
- On the positive side, there is likely to be a greater proportion of high income earners, but this will be dependent on raising the numbers who are self-employed.

To add to this, a major structural factor affecting indigenous participation in the private sector is provided by location. This is because the majority of indigenous people remain widely scattered across non-metropolitan regions, while new business activity and growth in private sector employment is increasingly focused on a few mega-metropolitan areas.

Acknowledgments

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The policy context

An important and long-standing issue that derives from the position of indigenous people in the labour market concerns their over-reliance for work on the public and community sectors (Altman and Daly 1992). For one thing, this means that they are concentrated in a sector of the labour market where overall employment has declined over the past decade, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1994). More crucially, however, this leaves them overly vulnerable to the employment effects of shifts in government policy and spending. This insecurity has been underlined by the current round of fiscal tightening and associated job losses in the public sector as the consequences of downsizing and restructuring take effect. Also of significance is the contribution by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to the government's deficit reduction program.

The experience of employment trends in the Australian Public Service (APS) is instructive here. Between June 1989 and March 1996 effective employment in the APS declined by around 20,000 positions. Between the election of the Coalition government in March 1996 and June 1997 a further 12,000 positions were lost while the Budget projection to June 1998 is for a further reduction of 16,500 positions (Commonwealth of Australia 1997), although the real figure here is likely to be around 10,000 as some of this merely reflects restructuring of positions. In terms of this downsizing, and in particular with regard to voluntary redundancies, early indications from the Office of the Public Service Commissioner are that indigenous workers are accepting redundancy packages at a rate significantly higher than their present proportion in the APS. Thus, from an indigenous labour market perspective it is not just that the public sector job market is shrinking but that their share of public sector employment is likely to be also falling.

The creation of jobs by government spending in indigenous affairs is also under threat. This is probably most apparent in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme which, according to the latest available estimate from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS), accounted for just over one-quarter of all indigenous people in work (ABS/CAEPR 1996). While it is difficult to establish precisely how many indigenous jobs might derive from program spending, some indication of the scale can be provided by discounting CDEP scheme jobs from employment statistics as well as those in the community sector that are linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. In this event, the employment/population ratio would fall from an estimated 36 per cent in 1996 to as low as 24 per cent. At such a level, almost 100,000 additional jobs would need to be created over the next 10 years to approach employment equality with the rest of the workforce (Taylor and Altman 1997: 18-20).¹

In the context of a rapidly expanding indigenous population of working-age, the application of a fiscal brake on the CDEP scheme has significant implications for future employment prospects. So too do budget cuts in ATSIC program areas such as the Community Training Program and the Community and Youth Support Program (ATSIC Budget 1996-97 Media Release 16 August 1996). Early (albeit sketchy) indications from the Social and Cultural Division of ATSIC of the consequences of cuts to these two programs point to job losses of up to one-third of program employees. If the diminishing public sector contribution to indigenous employment is added to this, then it is clear that the search for future jobs growth will fall most prominently on potential outcomes in the private sector.

This much is recognised by ATSIC who consider one of the key pathways to economic development to be greater involvement by the mainstream private sector in job creation and further development of an indigenous private sector (ATSIC 1996: 7). It is also in line with current government thinking on the means to achieving an expansion of jobs and lower unemployment for indigenous people via increased private sector activity (Herron 1996: 13-15). Accordingly, the current reorganisation of indigenous programs within the new Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) structure will reflect this focus.

Following years of fiscal expansion in the indigenous affairs portfolio with an associated rise in employment, this re-orientation towards the private sector as the primary source of future employment growth raises a number of pertinent and pressing issues in regard to how this might be achieved and what the implications for indigenous people might be. As a prior step, however, it is pertinent to consider what is known about the present involvement of indigenous people in the private sector and how this might be relevant to policy development. The purpose of this paper is to provide answers to these questions.

Several studies have addressed issues to do with indigenous self-employment and business development (Arthur 1991, 1996; Altman 1993, 1995; Altman, Arthur and Bek 1994; Daly 1993, 1994, 1995: 85-98; Finlayson 1995; Martin 1995; Smith 1994, 1996; Taylor and Altman 1997: 20-1), but very few have considered the overall nature of indigenous employment in the private sector. Those in this category have been fairly limited in scope dealing with problems of estimating the numbers involved at an aggregate level (Altman and Taylor 1995) and on the geographic distribution and change in numbers employed over time using census data and the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) (Taylor 1993: 31-3; ABS/CAEPR 1996: 20-3). Much more potential exists for analysis of NATSIS data on the private sector and this paper compares the characteristics of private sector workers who are not tied to publicly-funded organisations with those of public sector workers. In addition, the paper makes further use of census data to identify specific private sector industries that have favoured indigenous employment and those which have not.

Size of the indigenous private sector workforce

At the time of writing, the most up-to-date information on indigenous private sector jobs was available from two sources only: the 1991 Census and the 1994 NATSIS. Previous analysis of intercensal employment growth between 1986 and 1991 indicated an expansion of indigenous private sector employment far in excess of that for non-indigenous Australians (Taylor 1993a: 31). However, a number of qualifications should be applied to the interpretation of census data on industry sector, the most prominent being that many publicly-funded indigenous economic activities are classified as private. As a consequence, some of the apparent growth in private sector employment between 1986 and 1991 was not in the 'real' (non-government) private sector but was associated with indigenous community organisations which might more accurately be labelled as public sector as they depend for their existence directly on public monies. A good example was the misclassification of many CDEP jobs as private sector. Because of this, concern has been expressed that indigenous people have been growing more reliant on employment that is dependent for its continuation on special government support but that this was being hidden to some degree in official statistics (ATSIC 1994: 25).

In an attempt to redefine indigenous involvement in the private sector to more accurately reflect those activities that rely solely on market forces, Altman and Taylor (1995) have used two methods of calculation. The first comprised a residual of persons in the labour force after accounting for those employed in the CDEP scheme, those recorded by the census as unemployed and those recorded as employed in the government sector. This yielded a figure of 25,000 private sector employees.

The second involved a cross-classification of private sector employment by detailed industry class to exclude jobs that ultimately depend on government funding for their existence. Among those reclassified in this way were 'private sector' workers in community organisations and local government administration. This revision produced a slightly lower estimate of private sector employment of 23,000.

If we accept the average of these two estimates at 24,000 then this is substantially below the 1991 Census figure of 31,000. On this basis private sector jobs accounted for 42 per cent of all indigenous jobs in 1991 as opposed to 54 per cent as suggested by the census. This compared to a figure for non-indigenous Australians at that time of more than 70 per cent. Since then, the number of Australians employed by the private sector has increased by around 5 per cent (ABS 1995a: 15) while the latest estimate of indigenous employment in this area from the NATSIS (23,400), suggests no growth up to 1994 with the private sector share of total indigenous employment falling to 38 per cent (ABS 1995b: 52).

Private sector employment: findings from the 1994 NATSIS

The 1994 NATSIS adopted a definition of private sector (referred to as 'other private') employment similar in concept to that of Altman and Taylor (1995). Statistically, then, it is reassuring to find that the 23,400 indigenous people estimated by the survey to be employed in the private sector was very close to the revised estimate of 24,000 based on the 1991 Census. Table 1 shows the distribution of these workers by sex and part-of-State. Two features stand out. First, that private sector employment is dominated by male workers (two-thirds of the total). Second, for both males and females, the vast majority of jobs in the private sector are found in urban areas. While this last point is not surprising given that most of the indigenous population is urban-based, capital cities stand out as having a greater share of private sector jobs (39 per cent) than suggested by their share of population (27 per cent). In contrast, the proportion of private sector jobs found in rural areas (18 per cent) is considerably less than expected given that 31 per cent of the population is located in rural areas.

Table 1. Distribution of indigenous private sector employment by sex and part of State, 1994

	Males		Females		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Capital city	5,864	38.0	3,374	41.9	9,238	39.4
Other urban	6,794	44.1	3,069	38.1	9,863	42.0
Rural	2,758	17.9	1,607	20.0	4,365	18.6
Total	15,415	65.7	8,050	34.3	23,466	100.0

Source: ABS (1995)

Furthermore, the importance of private sector employment relative to all other forms of employment increases with settlement size (Table 2). Up to half of the indigenous working-age population is geographically scattered in one of 250 small country towns and more than 1,000 smaller rural centres and outstations across the country, many in remote areas (Taylor 1993a). Leaving aside supply-side issues to do with labour and available skills, this raises the question of whether sufficient market thresholds for private sector activities exist in many cases. Thus, in capital cities, private sector jobs account for 62 per cent of all jobs for indigenous males and half of those for indigenous females. In other urban areas, these proportions are less at 47 and 32 per cent, while in rural areas almost 80 per cent of all jobs are generated by the various components of the public sector, in particular by community organisations. Not surprisingly, the spatial distribution of private sector employment shows a strong bias towards the more settled parts of Australia in and around the major cities (Figure 1).

Table 2. Distribution of indigenous employment by industry sector, sex and part-of-State, 1994

Industry Sector	Capital city		Other urban		Rural	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Public sector						
Commonwealth	15.8	14.8	5.8	10.8	2.3	2.3
State/Territory	13.2	26.9	16.1	29.3	13.2	27.3
Local	4.3	0.5	14.8	10.2	30.3	16.7
Community	4.7	7.8	16.1	17.5	33.2	31.6
Private sector	62.1	50.0	47.1	32.2	21.0	21.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Excluding industry sector not stated.

Source: ABS (1995)

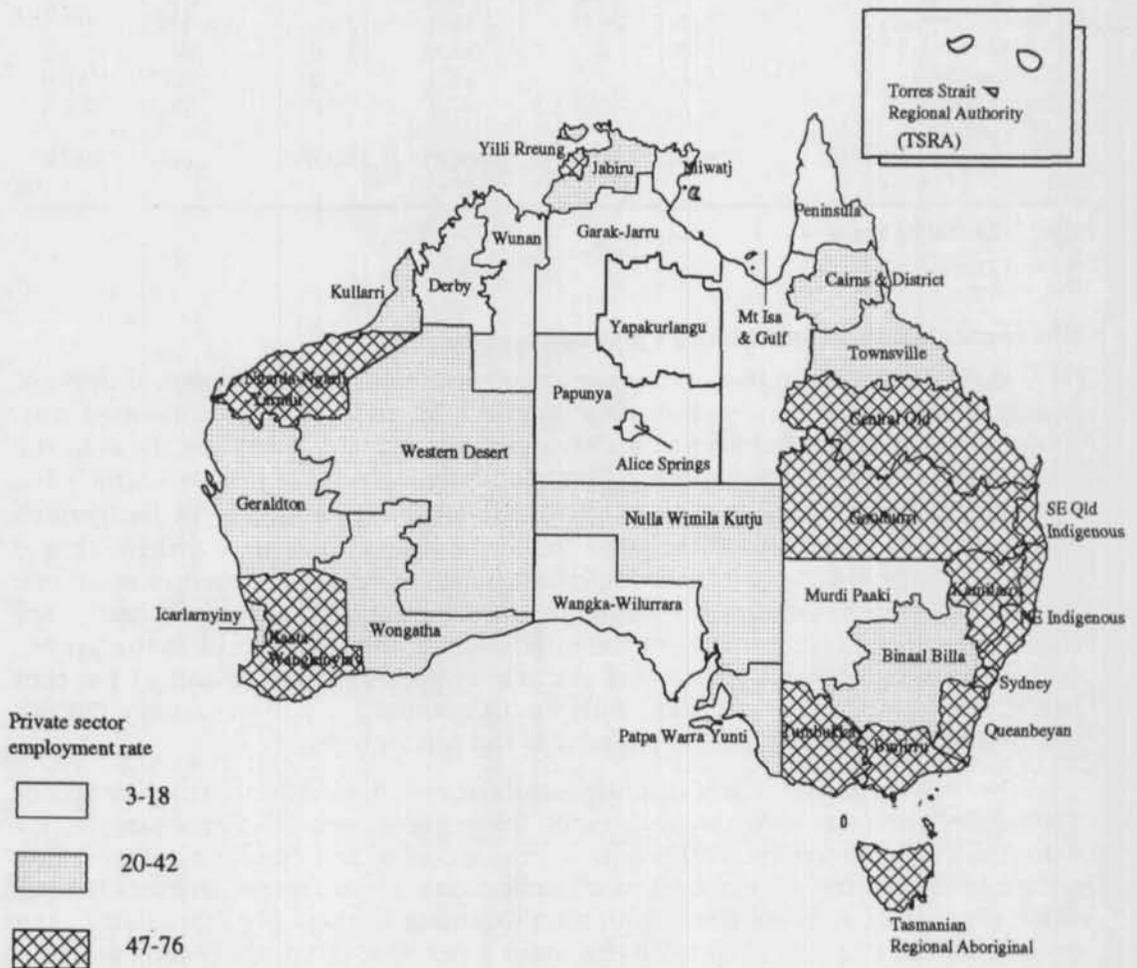
Characteristics of indigenous private sector jobs

A range of information on the social and economic characteristics of workers in the private sector were gathered by the NATSIS and these are compared with those of public sector workers in mainstream employment (including those in the community sector) to highlight the distinguishing features of private sector jobs. Analysis of these NATSIS data confirms that the major divide in indigenous employment is between CDEP scheme employment and other employment. This is because relatively little difference is evident between the characteristics of private and public sector workers. For example, similar proportions in each sector are employed full-time (75 per cent in the public sector and 72 per cent in the private sector), want to work more hours (18 per cent in the public sector and 21 per cent in the private sector), and worked fully for 12 months prior to the survey (70 per cent in the public sector and 64 per cent in the private sector).

Notwithstanding such overall similarities, several important features distinguish private sector employment from public sector. For example, by definition, private sector workers have the option of self-employment and this accounts for around 15 per cent of all indigenous private sector workers. At the same time, since only 42 per cent of all indigenous workers are employed in the private sector, it is not surprising that only 4 per cent of all indigenous workers were self-employed in 1991 compared to 15 per cent of all other Australian workers (Daly 1995: 87). Given the much higher rate of non-indigenous employment in the private sector, the relative deficiency in indigenous self-employment may have been overstated in the existing literature. However, indigenous workers are still about half as likely to be self-employed as other workers after adjusting for their distribution by sector of employment. The remaining deficit is probably due to poor market infrastructure in rural and remote Australia and the stringent educational, skill and capital requirements for

starting a business. That is to say, if indigenous people were better able to meet the market conditions for becoming self-employed then, *ipso facto*, their rate of private sector employment might also increase.

Figure 1. Distribution of indigenous private sector employment by ATSI region, 1994

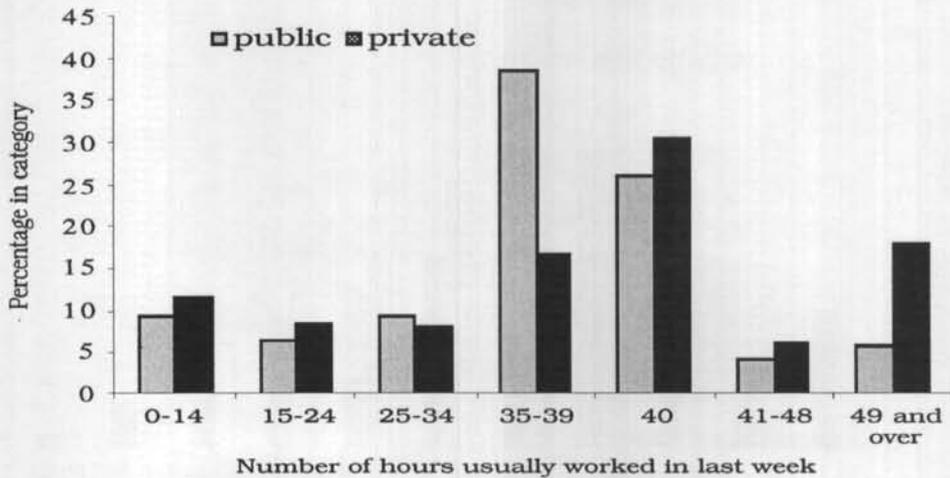


Source: ABS (1995)

Another difference between public and private sector jobs appears to be the relative insecurity of private sector employment. Private sector workers were around 10 per cent more likely to have been engaged by two or more employers in the 12 months prior to the survey than their public sector counterparts (23 per cent compared to 13 per cent). While this relative insecurity may arise from the nature of work provided by small private employers compared to large public ones, it may also reflect a greater reliance on casual and seasonal employment in the private sector. Unfortunately, since NATSIS does not provide any direct information about movements in and out of work or the reasons for such movement, it is not possible to analyse this issue (Hunter 1996).

Finally, while private sector employment is slightly more likely to involve part-time work than public sector employment, it is also much more likely to involve over-time. Figure 2 illustrates this point graphically and shows that around 20 per cent more private sector employees work 40 or more hours compared to their public sector counterparts. Indeed, 55 per cent of all indigenous workers in the private sector work relatively long hours and they are three times more likely than those in the public sector to be working extremely long hours each week (49 or more hours).

Figure 2. Indigenous employment by industry sector and number of hours worked, 1994



Source: NATSIS, Confidentialised Unit Record File (CURF)

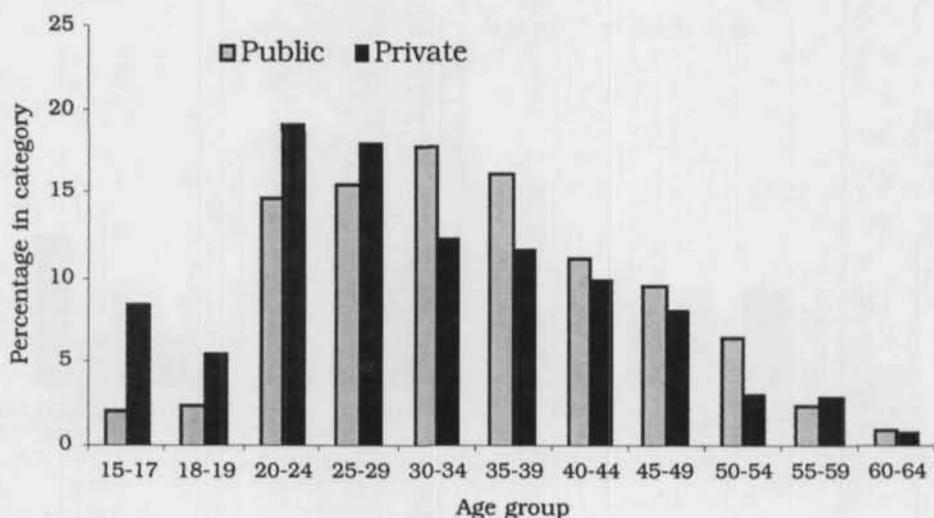
The proportion of private sector employees working these long hours is a similar order of magnitude to that observed in the general Australian population (20 per cent of employed). If indigenous overtime also follows similar patterns to those observed in the overall Australian workforce, then the majority of these hours will be unpaid (Norris and Wooden 1996: 4). Given the relatively long hours

that many private sector employees are working it seems somewhat ironic that a slightly larger proportion of them want to work longer hours than public sector employees (22 per cent as opposed to 18 per cent).

Characteristics of indigenous private sector workers

In general, the personal characteristics of private sector employees are even harder to distinguish from those of public sector workers than differences in the job characteristics. However, several distinct features of private sector employees stand out from other indigenous workers. In line with census findings, private sector employees in the NATSIS were more likely to be males than public sector employees (66 per cent compared to 51 per cent). The consistency of this finding may reflect the application of affirmative action principles by government agencies as this bias towards males in private sector employment is of a similar order of magnitude to that observed in the general Australian workforce (Norris and Wooden 1996: 2). As far as age is concerned, private sector workers tend to be younger with as much as one-third under 25 years of age compared to less than one-fifth of public sector workers (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Age distribution of indigenous public and private sector workers, 1994



Source: 1994 NATSIS, CURF

Among the underlying determinants of indigenous mainstream employment, levels of education and training have been identified as crucial (ABS/ CAEPR 1996). Table 3 shows these characteristics for public and private sector workers and, once again, few substantive differences are evident between the two groups.

If anything, private sector employees are less likely to have a degree or education to year 12 than their public sector counterparts and a higher proportion, though small number, are likely to have some employment while still at school. Slightly more variation is evident between experiences with training. Public sector workers are more likely to have attended a training course in the 12 months prior to the survey (21 per cent compared to 15 per cent) and are also more likely to have completed this (12 per cent and 7 per cent).

Table 3. Education and training characteristics of indigenous public and private sector workers, 1994

	Public sector %	Private sector %
Highest level of school completed:		
Still at school	0.4	3.6
Below year 6	5.8	3.3
Years 6 to 9	31.7	34.8
Years 10 or 11	45.9	44.6
Year 12	16.2	13.7
Total	100.0	100.0
Type of qualification:		
Degree or diploma	10.4	3.5
Vocational	15.0	17.3
Other	8.8	5.9
No qualification	65.8	73.3
Total	100.0	100.0
Training experience:		
Attended at least one training course in last 12 months	20.8	15.5
Completed a training course in last 12 months	11.7	7.2
Total employed	23,514	23,466

Source: NATSIS, CURF (1994)

Other important determinants of mainstream employment include a range of social and family characteristics (ABS/CAEPR 1996; Hunter and Borland 1997) and a selection of those reported by the NATSIS are shown for each group of private sector workers in Table 4. The lack of any differentiation is again repeated. Among private sector workers there were very similar proportions compared to public sector workers who were: married (57 per cent and 58 per cent), sole parents (5 per cent and 6 per cent), taken away as children from their natural parents (6 per cent and 7 per cent) and arrested at least once in the five year period prior to the survey (15 per cent and 13 per cent). The main difference in social terms appears to be the greater tendency for workers in the private sector

to have no children which may reflect the commitment to longer working hours required by such workers as well as their younger age.

Table 4. Select social characteristics of indigenous public and private sector workers, 1994

	Public Sector %	Private Sector %
Married	0.4	3.6
Sole parent	6.9	4.8
Taken away from natural family	8.5	6.0
No children	45.7	54.7
Arrested in last five years	12.6	14.7
Total employed	23,514	23,466

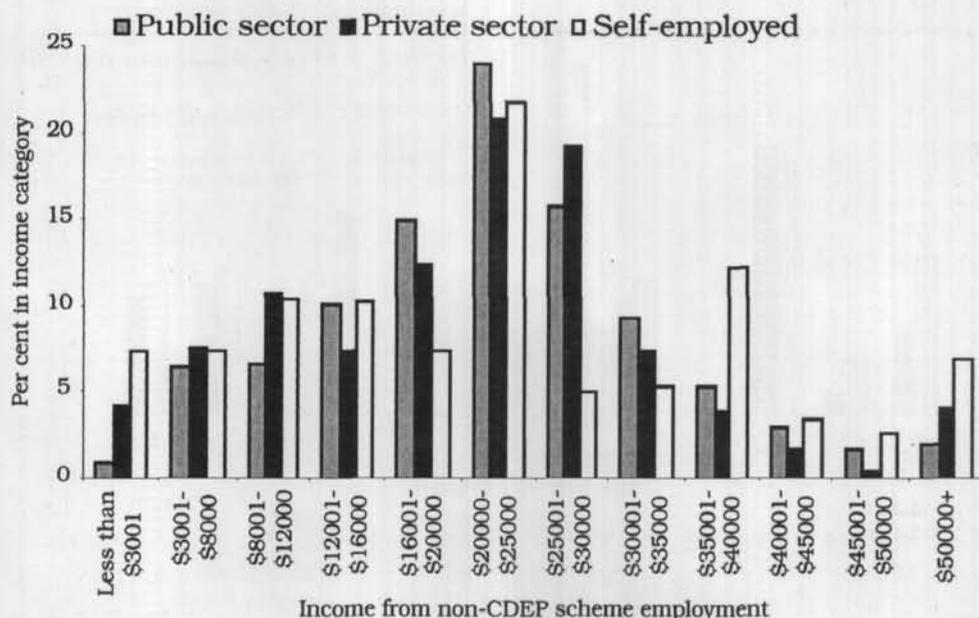
Source: NATSIS, CURF (1994)

The overall similarity of private and public sector employment is further emphasised by the lack of difference in annual wages and income received. The average annual gross public sector wage of \$23,367 was only slightly higher than the \$22,939 paid to private sector workers while both sets of workers paid on average about \$5,200 in tax each year. Non-wage incomes were almost identical at around \$1,500 per annum, although this is somewhat ironic since private sector employees have an 8 per cent lower chance of receiving government payments than their public sector counterparts. This lower reliance on welfare payments in the face of equivalent non-wage incomes may indicate that private sector employees have a slightly higher asset base than other indigenous workers.

The lack of difference in average annual wages is interesting as experience in the United States shows that employment in the public sector creates upper limits on rewards and that the real gains to income are acquired through participation in private sector activity (Smith and Welch 1989: 561). Data from the NATSIS tend to support this observation and show that equal average incomes derive from somewhat different patterns of income distribution. Figure 4 shows the distribution of income for workers in the public sector compared to private sector wage and salary earners and private sector self-employed. It is clear that private sector workers, and in particular those who are self-employed, have a much greater spread across income categories than public sector workers. Consequently, they are more likely to be earning both the lowest and the highest incomes. Thus, in the context of government efforts to raise the income level of indigenous people there may be sound economic reasons for pursuing private sector employment, but the prospect of this resulting in lower incomes for some should also be noted. Of further relevance is the fact that high incomes appear to be the preserve of the self-employed and this component of private sector

employment would have to be boosted considerably to have any impact on overall indigenous income relativities.

Figure 4. Income distribution of indigenous public and private sector workers, 1994



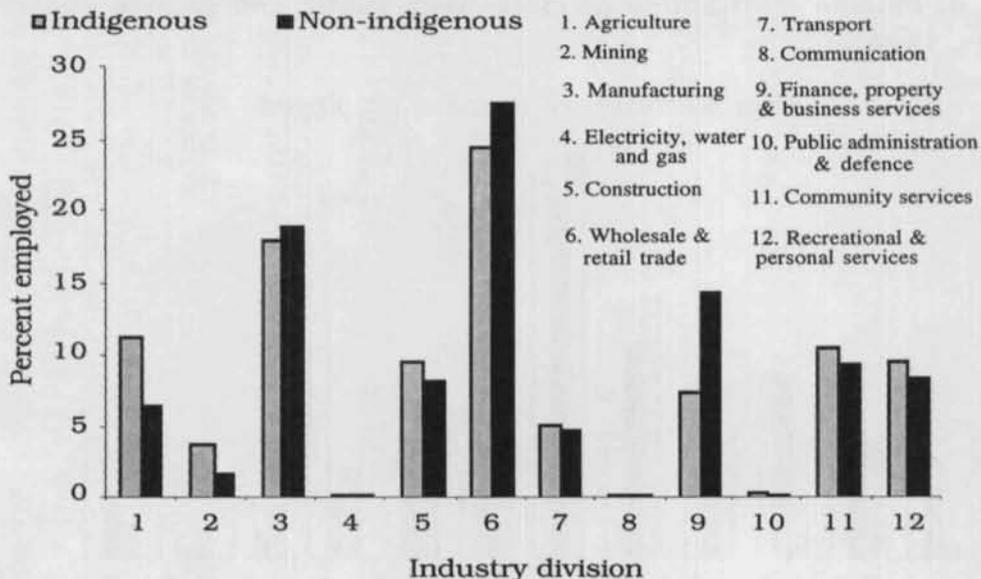
Source: 1994 NATSIS, CURF

Private sector employment by industry

Several analyses have examined the distribution of overall indigenous employment by type of industry (Taylor 1993b; Taylor and Liu Jin 1995) but none have identified the particular industries that private sector workers are engaged in. This is despite the fact that industry strategies form a key component of ATSIIC and DEETYA policies aimed at raising indigenous employment levels.

The Australian Standard Industrial Classification (ASIC) contains 12 broad industry divisions and 612 detailed industry classes (ABS 1985). To establish the degree of concentration in particular industries among indigenous private sector workers relative to that of all other private sector workers, indexes of dissimilarity are calculated for employment distributions at each of these levels.² At the level of broad industry divisions the proportional distribution of indigenous private sector workers is very similar to that of private sector employees as a whole. This is indicated by an index of dissimilarity of 11.2. The main areas of difference are shown clearly in Figure 5 with indigenous workers over-represented in private sector primary industries and under-represented in retail and wholesale industries as well as in finance and business services. For both groups most workers are found in manufacturing and in wholesale and retail industries.

Figure 5. Distribution of indigenous and non-indigenous private sector employment by industry division, 1991



Source : 1991 Census of Population and Housing.

This similarity in employment distribution at the broad industry level hides much greater variation evident at more detailed levels of classification. This is revealed in Table 5 which shows intra-industry indexes of dissimilarity based on employment distributions across the numerous individual industry classes within each of the broad industry divisions. Thus, for example, considerable difference is evident between the distribution of indigenous and non-indigenous employment across the 42 individual agriculture, forestry and fishing industries as indicated by an index of dissimilarity of 32.8. What this indicates is that one-third (32.8) of indigenous workers would have to change their agricultural industry of employment in order to have a similar distribution across agricultural industries as non-indigenous workers. The intra-industry indexes shown in Table 5 are not directly comparable because of the different number of industry classes within each division. However, substantial concentration of indigenous employment is apparent (in rank order) within agriculture, public administration, community services, mining, manufacturing, finance and business service industries, followed closely by retail and wholesale industries.

Employment distributions at this detailed level can also be used to isolate particular private sector industries which employ a surfeit of indigenous workers, and those from which they are conspicuously absent, compared to other workers (Figure 6).³ In some industries, such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing and retailing, it appears that employment concentrations are in part geographically

and historically driven while in others, such as business, community and personal services, they may be more culturally derived.

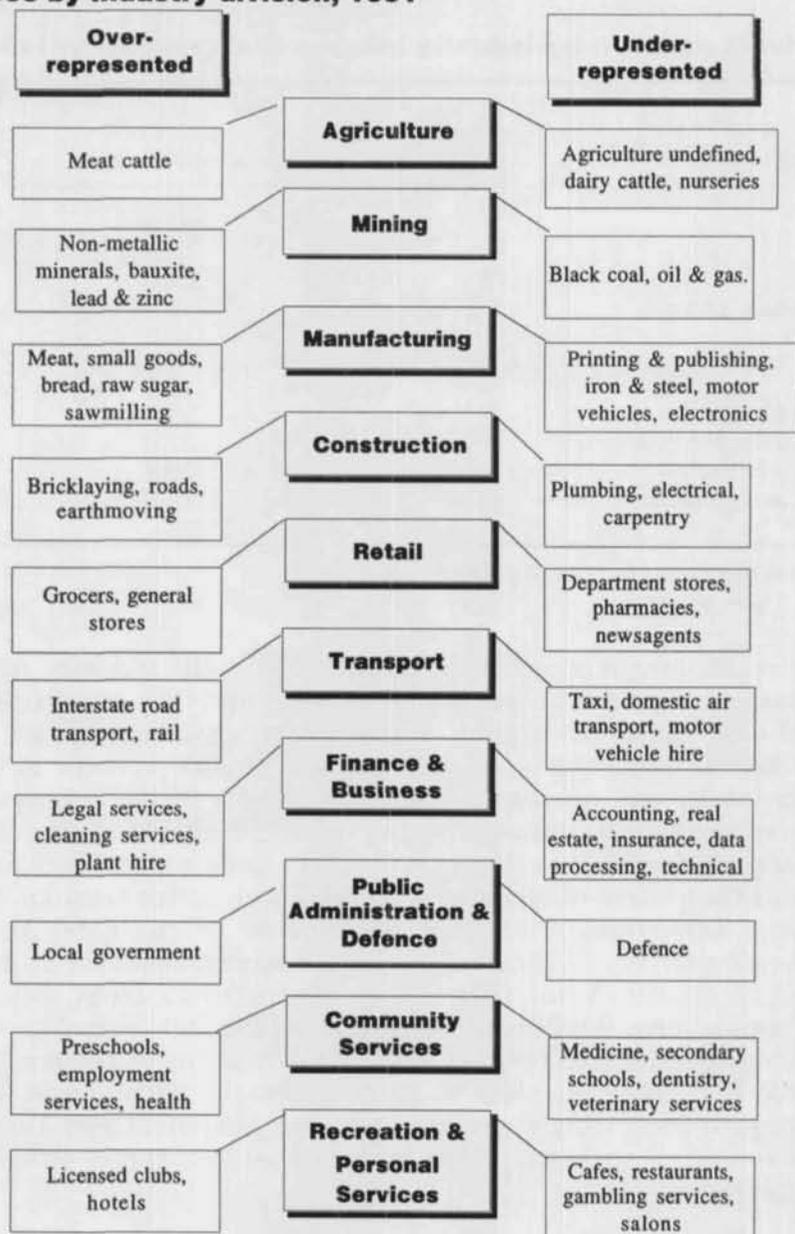
Table 5. Private sector intra-industry indexes of dissimilarity, 1991

Industry division	Index of dissimilarity	No. of industry classes
Agriculture	32.8	42
Mining	25.5	32
Manufacturing	24.6	221
Electricity, water and gas	8.9	7
Construction	11.1	25
Wholesale & retail trade	18.0	95
Transport	15.7	41
Finance & business services	22.3	51
Public administration & defence	31.0	9
Community services	28.4	51
Recreational and personal services	15.8	37

Source: Census of Population and Housing (1991)

For example, over-representation in the meat cattle industry reflects the location of many indigenous people in remote areas and their involvement in the pastoral industry either as station managers or as labourers for pastoral companies. By contrast, there are very few indigenous workers in the more urban-focused dairy and nursery industries. Similarly in the mining industry, indigenous mineworkers are concentrated in bauxite, lead and zinc mining and it is probably no coincidence that these are found in areas where Aboriginal people form a sizeable component of the local population with mines often on Aboriginal land involving companies that have agreements in place for indigenous employment and training. In contrast, by far the largest employer in the mining industry is coal mining. While this is also conducted in areas with adjacent indigenous populations, notably in the Hunter Valley and central Queensland, indigenous employees form a very low relative share of the workforce. The other mining sector that under-employs indigenous people, oil and gas, is largely offshore, although increasingly pipelines traverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands and, as such, may have the potential to generate some scope for localised employment.

Figure 6. Over and under-representation^a of indigenous private sector employees by industry division, 1991



Source: 1991 Census of Population and Housing

^a above or below average percentage differentials

As for manufacturing, the concentration of indigenous employment in abattoirs and small goods companies, in the sugar industry and sawmilling operations probably reflects the dispersed non-metropolitan and rural distribution of much of the potential workforce. On the other hand, the relative lack of indigenous workers in the iron and steel industry, vehicle assembly plants and domestic air transport signals their general absence from some of metropolitan Australia's major employer groups. This is repeated throughout the list in Figure 6, for example among taxi firms, department stores, newsagents, cafes and restaurants all of which employ considerable numbers of urban Australians. Service sector industries such as these are precisely the ones projected to show the strongest growth in the years ahead (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 12-17). Reasons for the lack of indigenous employment in these key areas of the private sector are unclear but a combination of factors including social and cultural processes that may determine initial job acquisition and subsequent job mobility (Campbell, Fincher and Webber 1991), discrimination by potential employers and personal choice, especially where service industries are involved, may all contribute to segmentation in the labour market. In other areas of the private sector that under-employ indigenous people high human capital requirements may provide a skills and accreditation barrier, for example in medicine, veterinary services, technical services, accounting, and various enterprises requiring trades-based skills, notably those in the construction industry.

Conclusion and policy implications

It has long been a policy goal of Australian governments to encourage greater participation of indigenous people in the private sector as a means of generating employment and reducing dependence on government support. In the past this has been seen as one component of a multi-faceted approach which also involved substantial public subvention to underwrite employment, especially in areas with limited or no labour markets. In the current climate of deficit reduction and greater reliance on market forces for job creation, it is not surprising to find a growing policy emphasis on creating opportunities for indigenous people in the private sector.

In terms of the broader aims of indigenous policy to raise income levels and approach greater equality with the general population in labour market outcomes, the analysis suggests that a degree of caution and policy realism may be necessary. Although the characteristics of indigenous private sector workers vary little from their public sector counterparts, important differences should be noted. For one thing, a shift in favour of private sector employment is likely to involve changes in the employment profile which may be construed as a backward step. For example, less job security and more casual/part-time work; greater scope for males and younger people but less for females and older people; more workers on low salaries and fewer training opportunities. On the positive side, there is likely

to be a greater proportion of high income earners, but this will be dependent on raising the numbers who are self-employed.

As for the goal of generating jobs growth, a major structural factor affecting indigenous participation in the private sector, and the primary policy hurdle faced by government as it seeks to enhance this, is provided by location. This is because the majority of indigenous people remain widely scattered across non-metropolitan regions, while new business activity and growth in private sector employment is increasingly focused on a few mega-metropolitan areas (O'Connor and Stimson 1997).

While it is true that some non-metropolitan communities benefit from export-oriented activities such as mining, pastoral and tourism ventures, these are typically very localised and highly resource-dependant. For most places, then, an import substitution model embracing activities such as construction and maintenance, retailing, transport, media, land restoration and management, recreation and horticulture, seems more appropriate. While there is an increased program budget to support such activities under the Indigenous Business Incentive Program, there are real limits to the number of private sector jobs that could be generated in this way given the limited market size and lack of economies of scale in many of the places where indigenous people reside.

The fundamental point seems to be that to achieve a significant overall shift in indigenous employment towards the private sector would require a population distribution much closer to that of the total Australian population which is heavily skewed in favour of major cities. Given that this would require substantial migration of labour, one would have to question whether such an outcome is either feasible or desirable. The available evidence regarding indigenous migration is that it is far more localised and regionalised and less responsive to labour market considerations than for the population as a whole (Taylor and Bell 1996).

What this suggests is a need for flexibility and realism in the drive for increased private sector involvement. In particular, it is important to ask how broad employment strategies might be targeted to suit particular regional circumstances. In this context, an initial requirement is for detailed regionally-based quantitative assessments of the supply of, and demand for, indigenous labour for different industries at the scale of inquiry outlined in this paper. Only then, can the appropriate mix of enterprises, labour market and training program resourcing be appropriately channelled.

A number of strategies are in place to exploit the comparative advantage of indigenous people in a range of industry areas. Notable here are the tourism, rural industry and cultural industry strategies. The above analysis confirms the importance of these industries as private sector employers of indigenous labour and suggests that potential exists for further outcomes given the relative success in these areas to date. What is significant about these strategies, however, is their largely rural focus and emphasis on activities in which indigenous people already have a leading edge. By contrast, metropolitan-based populations in close proximity to the hub of private sector activity have been without focused

strategies to assist them in accessing major private sector employers from which they are relatively absent, for example retailing outlets, accommodation and restaurant industries, large manufacturing firms and the construction industry. Aside from the growing focus of business activity in the major cities, the need to consider the special needs of metropolitan populations and to match indigenous job seekers with growing private sector opportunities has received added urgency with the release of data from the 1996 Census. These reveal a much larger indigenous population in major urban areas than previously indicated with the share of the total indigenous population counted in the larger cities rising from one quarter to around one-third.

Notes

1. This estimate is based on projections from the 1991 Census. At the time of writing, 1996 Census results became available and revealed a census count 10 per cent higher than the projected figure for 1996 and further upward adjustment will result from the calculation of the census-based estimated resident population (ERP) to be released in August 1997 in ABS catalogue 4705.0. Although employment data from the 1996 Census will not be available until late in 1997, on the basis of increased population numbers alone there seems every reason to believe that estimates of job requirements will be substantially higher than those produced by Taylor and Altman (1997).
2. In a statistical sense, segregation refers to the degree of difference in the pattern of proportional distribution between two otherwise similar sets of data. A relative measure of such difference is provided by a wide range of segregation indices and one commonly used in studies of labour force segregation, the index of dissimilarity, is applied here. This is calculated by summing the absolute differences between the per cent of all indigenous people employed in different industries and dividing the answer by two. For example, using hypothetical data showing the percentage of indigenous and non-indigenous workers employed in three industries.

	Indigenous employed (per cent)	Non-indigenous employed (per cent)	Absolute difference
Industry A	65	20	45
Industry B	10	50	40
Industry C	20	30	10
Total	100	100	95

In this case, the index of dissimilarity would equal $95/2 = 47.5$ per cent. In other words, almost half of indigenous workers (or non-indigenous workers) would have to change their industry of employment in order to eliminate the difference in the statistical distributions. The index thus ranges from zero (no segregation) to 100 (complete segregation). As a rule of thumb an index greater than 20 would suggest a substantial difference between distributions as this would indicate that at least one-fifth of workers would have to change their industry of employment in order to have a distribution similar to the control group. For further discussion of the index methodology see Karmel and McClachlan (1988) and Jones (1992).

3. For the most part there is little difference in the proportion of indigenous and non-indigenous workers in each industry class. Those that do stand out at either end of the distribution as having relatively more or fewer indigenous workers than might be expected are identified as being above or below the average differential between the two populations. These are shown for each industry division in Figure 6.

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