

**Indigenous household demography
and socioeconomic status: the policy
implications of 1996 Census data**

A.E. Daly and D.E. Smith

No. 181/1999

ISSN 1036-1774
ISBN 0 7315 2616 3

Dr Anne Daly is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Management at the University of Canberra and Ms Diane Smith is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University.

Series Note

The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) was established in March 1990 under an agreement between The Australian National University (ANU) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Since 1 January 1999, CAEPR operates as university centre and is funded by ATSIC, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and ANU. CAEPR's principal objective is to undertake high quality independent research that will assist in furthering the social and economic development and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

CAEPR's mission is to be a world-class centre undertaking research on indigenous economic development issues that combine academic excellence with policy relevance and realism. In Australia, CAEPR is currently the only dedicated research centre focusing on indigenous economic policy issues from a national perspective: its publications, which include the CAEPR Discussion Paper series, aim to broadly evaluate government policy, influence policy formulation and inform rational debate.

The Director of the Centre is responsible to the Vice-Chancellor of ANU and receives assistance in formulating the Centre's research priorities from an Advisory Committee consisting of senior academics nominated by the Vice-Chancellor and representatives nominated by ATSIC, the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business and the Department of Family and Community Services.

CAEPR Discussion Papers are intended as one forum for the rapid dissemination of refereed papers on research that falls within the CAEPR ambit. These papers are produced for discussion and comment within the research community and indigenous affairs public policy arena. Many are subsequently published in academic journals. Publications can be purchased from:

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
2nd Floor, J.G. Crawford Building
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Telephone 02-6279 8211
Facsimile 02-6249 2789

Abstracts or Summaries of all CAEPR Discussion Papers can be found at the following World Wide Web address: <http://online.edu.au/caepr/>

As with all CAEPR publications, the views expressed in this Discussion Paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect an official CAEPR position.

Professor Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR
The Australian National University
June 1999

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Summary..... | v |
| Acknowledgments..... | vi |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| The characteristics of indigenous households: ethnographic data | 1 |
| Diversity | 1 |
| Household characteristics..... | 2 |
| Visitors and the impact of mobility | 2 |
| Household economies | 2 |
| The characteristics of indigenous households: 1996 Census data..... | 3 |
| Population profile and diversity | 3 |
| Household structure and composition | 4 |
| Family types within households..... | 4 |
| Labour force status | 6 |
| Household economic status | 12 |
| Conclusions and policy implications | 10 |
| Appendix | 16 |
| References..... | 13 |

Tables

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Distribution of persons resident by household size, 1991–96 | 4 |
| Table 2. Percentage of second and third families among all families in indigenous and non-indigenous households, 1991–96.... | 5 |
| Table 3. Distribution of family types among indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families, 1991–96 | 5 |
| Table 4. Distribution of family types by section-of-State, 1996 | 6 |
| Table 5. Median weekly income of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families, 1991–96 (1996 dollars) | 9 |
| Table 6. Median weekly income of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian households, 1991–96 (1996 dollars) | 9 |
| Table 7. Household tenure type for indigenous and non-indigenous Australian households, 1991–96 | 10 |
| Table A1. The labour force status of females and males in sole parent and partnered families, 1996..... | 12 |

Figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Labour force status of indigenous male sole parents, 1996..... | 6 |
| Figure 2. The labour force status of non-indigenous male sole parents, 1996 | 9 |
| Figure 3. The Labour force status of indigenous female sole parents, 1996 | 7 |
| Figure 4. The labour force status of non-indigenous female sole parents, 1996 | 8 |
| Figure 5. The labour force status of partnered males in indigenous families, 1996..... | 8 |
| Figure 6. The labour force status of partnered males in non-indigenous families, 1996 | 11 |
| Figure 7. The labour force status of partnered females in indigenous families, 1996 | 9 |
| Figure 8. The labour force status of partnered females in non-indigenous families, 1996 | 9 |

Summary

The paper presents an analysis of indigenous household demography and economic status relative to non-indigenous Australian households. An innovative combination of economic analysis of 1996 Census data and ethnographic research is used, and reveals that indigenous households are experiencing substantial and multiple forms of economic burden in comparison to non-indigenous Australian households and that they display significantly different characteristics. The findings highlight a number of policy implications.

Research findings

Ethnographic research suggests that indigenous households in the 1990s were characterised by considerable compositional complexity, porous social boundaries and large size. They commonly consist of extended families whose members may live together in a single physical dwelling, but more often than not will be residing across several nearby dwellings. Indigenous households are more likely to contain sole parent families and have, on average, a larger number of children than non-indigenous Australian households. The adults are younger, have lower levels of income and education and are less likely to be in employment than non-indigenous Australians.

The important demographic trend at the household level indicated by the 1991 and 1996 Censuses is the substantial relative increase in the total number of indigenous households; an increase of 25 per cent compared to 9 per cent in non-indigenous households. The increased population count has had a marked impact on the apparent urban-rural distribution of the indigenous population. At the household level, while the major trend is that indigenous households are urbanising, they nevertheless remain relatively remote in geographic terms compared to non-indigenous Australian households.

The 1996 Census data indicate the median income of indigenous families is about 69 per cent of that of non-indigenous Australian families. Because of the larger average household size, the median household income per the median number in an indigenous household is 54 per cent of that of non-indigenous Australian households. Given the prevalence, noted in the ethnographic literature, of extended family formations, kin-based demand sharing, erratic sources of wage income, recycling unemployment, and high mobility and visitor rates, the authors surmise that the economic burden experienced by low-income multi-family indigenous households is more substantial than the census depicts.

Conclusion and policy implications

- The emphasis on individual-centred data analysis obscures key areas of economic vulnerability at the family and household level; arguably the more relevant social groupings in indigenous society. Similarly, a policy and program emphasis on individuals is likely to address only certain areas of disadvantage, ignoring others which have a profound economic influence.
- A demographic analysis of indigenous households, particularly when embedded in an ethnographically informed framework, suggests that there is need for an even finer-grained policy approach than the 'remote-urban' divide.
- An area of particular concern for policy makers and program delivery should be the economic wellbeing of large multi-family indigenous households in which there are sole parents, high rates of adult unemployment, high visitor rates and high childhood dependency burdens.
- Policy and program delivery could usefully be re-evaluated to take into account the economic needs of these vulnerable households. A greater focus on family types within households at the regional level may also lead to more effectively targeted outcomes from government policy and programs.

Acknowledgments

This paper was originally presented at the Australian Population Association Conference, Brisbane, in September 1998. We would like to thank session participants for their comments. We would also like to thank Tony Auld for his valuable assistance with the preparation of Australian Bureau of Statistics tables, Linda Roach and Hilary Bek for editorial comment and proofreading, and Jennifer Braid for formatting.

Introduction

The household is notoriously difficult to define, especially in a cross-cultural context. Not surprisingly, the various statistical surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) such as its Census of Population and Housing, and income and expenditure surveys, have been criticised as blunt tools at the level of describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households; lacking culturally appropriate concepts and definitions (Smith 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Finlayson 1995; Daly and Smith 1996; Smith and Daly 1996). At the same time, census data continue to be instrumental in documenting the ongoing relative economic disadvantage experienced by indigenous Australians, and these data are increasingly referred to by government and indigenous organisations to support specific program initiatives and funding requirements.

In order to enhance the analytical validity and policy usefulness of census data, the authors have developed a cross-disciplinary approach, employing the methods and tools of both anthropology and economics. This interesting hybrid union, combining ethnographic and statistical analyses, highlights the relevance of culturally based characteristics for enhancing the validity of data analysis and interpretation. In particular, the approach suggests that greater policy realism is needed at the level of indigenous households. The policy process contains its own inherent limitations and its response to cultural factors must be feasible, realistic and strategic. In some circumstances, the attempt to incorporate indigenous organisational patterns and behaviours by using them as the basis for mainstream policy and program delivery may, in fact, exacerbate difficulties for families and communities on the ground through ill-advised social engineering.

This paper provides an analysis of 1996 Census data on indigenous household demography building on earlier papers (Daly and Smith 1995, 1996, 1997; Smith and Daly 1996). It identifies the key characteristic features of indigenous households as documented in the ethnographic record, examining the changes and continuities as reported between the 1991 and 1996 Censuses, and then identify some issues and trends which policy-makers may realistically be able to address.

The characteristics of indigenous households: ethnographic data

There is a substantial ethnographic research literature available on indigenous Australian households. Though carried out using different objectives and methodologies, the ethnographic research is often based on long-term fieldwork resulting in fine-grained descriptions of culturally based behaviours and patterns of social organisation. A major limitation of such research is that it invariably focuses at the community level, making comparison at the regional, State or national level difficult, if not impossible. A major advantage is that the research record identifies a range of culturally based characteristics of indigenous households, which may have significant implications for policy and program delivery.

Diversity

The first critical feature revealed by the ethnographic record is the significant cultural diversity within the indigenous population. Groups across the country differ in fundamental aspects of their social and economic organisation and maintain quite distinctive local identities and cultural priorities. The population is also extremely dispersed geographically: indigenous households reside at a wide variety of localities, from remote settlements, outstations and pastoral excisions, to rural towns, old mission stations and city suburbs. Not surprisingly, household economic circumstances and types vary significantly across these locations.

Household characteristics

The second key feature reported in ethnographic case studies is that the nuclear family is not the most common residential form. Rather, each individual's investment in family relationships is widely distributed according to systems of descent, marriage, kin affiliation and historical association.

As a result of these family characteristics, indigenous households on the ground are characterised by considerable compositional complexity, porous social boundaries and large size. They commonly consist of extended families whose members may live together in a single dwelling (whether these be houses or improvised camps), but more often than not, will reside across several nearby dwellings.

Typically, a household consists of a small, multi-family, multi-generational core of kin with a highly mobile fringe of transient members. The literature reports the aged as remaining within the extended family, with older members often assuming key social and economic responsibilities. The responsibility for child-care and rearing is distributed widely amongst a range of kin outside the conjugal unit, contrary to the Anglo-Australian norm.

Visitors and the impact of mobility

Mobility and its residential outcome of high visitor numbers, is a commonly reported factor affecting indigenous household composition and economic wellbeing in remote, rural and urban communities. Indeed, some people appear to be permanently transient, repeatedly moving in an established pattern between households in the same or surrounding communities.

Surveys conducted by Taylor (1989) of Aboriginal households in Katherine during the late 1980s found that approximately one-quarter had visitors on a more or less constant basis, and that visitor rates increased the average number of people per dwelling from 5.4 to 7.8 persons. More recent field-based research by Martin at Aurukun (see Martin and Taylor 1995) indicates that 35 per cent of the total Aboriginal population had shifted their place of residence within the community over a four month period. Finlayson's (1991) detailed field observations of household domestic cycles demonstrate the dynamic nature of residential changes at the household level and the resulting substantial fluctuations in membership. The rates of mobility reported across the country (Taylor 1996) generate a dynamic developmental cycle of segmentation and reformation within indigenous households.

Household economies

Contrary to the popular notion of indigenous households being communistic and egalitarian, adult members do not necessarily share resources, nor do they all contribute to common domestic costs within a particular household (Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995). Not surprisingly, mobility and its residential outcome of high visitor numbers, have a significant impact on household economies—severely taxing resources and contributing little to costs, especially when transients are unemployed young adults. But the impact of mobility is not limited to adults. The high short-term mobility of children has been noted as having a significant influence on the economic viability of households, especially those that are welfare-dependent.

Indigenous households are not necessarily demarcated by the physical boundary of a dwelling. Rather, patterns of consumption and distribution reinforce a reliance upon kin networks across several dwellings, and are referred to in the ethnographic literature as 'linked' or 'clustered' households, or variously in Aboriginal English as 'mobs', 'company', or 'all one family'. These linked households are characterised by cooperative efforts for subsistence production, food purchases and capital accumulation, by shared ownership and use of consumer durables, and shared child-care arrangements.

Linkages across dwellings (whether they be houses or camps) constitute key economic formations and underwrite the viability of many families, ameliorating the impact of low and

erratic incomes and making it possible for some individuals to survive without any income at all for long periods. At the same time, such redistribution networks can also limit an individuals' own saving and expenditure capacity, and place severe economic burdens on particular family members.

The characteristics of indigenous households: 1996 Census data

Not surprisingly, the definitions and concepts employed in ABS surveys and censuses tend to obscure the multi-residential associations and dynamic developmental cycles reported in the literature, focusing as they do on a snapshot view of residentially stable families in single dwellings.

In 1996 ABS defined 'household' as 'a group of two or more related or unrelated people who usually reside in the same dwelling, who regard themselves as a household, and who make common provision for food or other essentials for living; or a person living in a dwelling who makes provision for his/her food and other essentials for living, without combining with any other person' (ABS 1996).

ABS operational definitions of family and household tend to truncate extended kin relations. In particular:

- indigenous marital and parental relationships cannot easily be established by census collectors;
- difficulty is experienced in dealing with several families in one dwelling;
- determining the relationships of visitors and offspring to various core adults proves difficult; and
- the census approach effectively 'immobilises' transients and excludes various kinds of 'visitors' from the construction of family household, thereby omitting individuals whose comings and goings have substantial economic impacts.

The census is simply not the most appropriate tool for researching many of the dynamic aspects of indigenous household developmental cycles and their domestic economies. These cannot properly be understood without long-term field research; but this is so for many family types covered by the census.

Arguably the most analytically productive approach, and one which facilitates greater policy realism, is to use the finer-grained ethnographic case study information to ground-truth census-based analyses of household demography. This approach has been adopted below.

Population profile and diversity

In 1996, indigenous Australians numbered approximately 386,000, representing 2 per cent of the total Australian population and an increase of 33 per cent from 1991. The average annual growth rate of the indigenous population was 2.3 per cent compared to the total population rate of 1.2 per cent. Overall, the indigenous population is also younger, with 40 per cent under 15 years of age compared to 21 per cent of the total population, and the median age being 20 years compared to 33 years for the total population.

In the context of significant population growth, this youthful demographic profile means the number of indigenous people moving into the ages in which families are being formed is increasing rapidly. At the household level, the important demographic trend between 1991 and 1996 was the substantial relative increase in the total number of indigenous households, which increased by 25 per cent compared to 9 per cent amongst non-indigenous households (see total numbers in Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of persons resident by household size, 1991–96

| Persons resident | 1991 | | 1996 | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Indigenous Per cent | Non-indigenous Per cent | Indigenous Per cent | Non-indigenous Per cent |
| 1 | 10.4 | 21.1 | 13.4 | 24.0 |
| 2 | 20.9 | 31.6 | 20.9 | 30.6 |
| 3 | 19.4 | 17.3 | 18.7 | 16.4 |
| 4 | 18.6 | 17.7 | 18.6 | 17.2 |
| 5 | 12.9 | 8.5 | 12.7 | 8.2 |
| 6 | 9.0 | 3.0 | 8.0 | 2.7 |
| 7 | 3.1 | 0.6 | 2.8 | 0.6 |
| 8 + | 5.9 | 0.3 | 4.6 | 0.2 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Total number of households | 76,142 | 5,454,500 | 94,931 | 5,920,884 |

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

The increased count of indigenous peoples between 1991 and 1996 has had a marked impact on their urban-rural distribution, with the proportion in rural areas declining from more than 33 per cent in 1991 to 27 per cent in 1996 (though in absolute terms, the numbers in rural areas continued to increase as well). This compares with a much smaller change for the total Australian population from 14.8 per cent to 14 per cent.

At the household level, while the major trend is that indigenous households are urbanising, they nevertheless remain relatively remote in geographic terms compared to non-indigenous Australian households; close to one-quarter of the indigenous population lived in rural localities of less than 1,000 persons in 1996.

Household structure and composition

Overall, the continuing disadvantaged economic status of indigenous households has again been confirmed by an analysis of the 1996 Census data.

Table 1 shows the distribution of persons across households of different sizes. In 1996, the proportion of indigenous households which were lone person households was almost half (13 per cent) that of the proportion among non-indigenous Australian households (24 per cent). At the other end of the household distribution, 15 per cent of indigenous households had six or more residents compared with 4 per cent of non-indigenous Australian households.

On average, indigenous households had 3.7 persons per household compared to 2.7 for non-indigenous households, though this is likely to be an underestimate given the high levels of mobility and visitor rates noted in the ethnographic literature. According to the 1996 Census, 10 per cent of indigenous households had a visitor present compared with 6 per cent of non-indigenous Australian households. This is a smaller difference than might be expected given the ethnographic evidence. The result may, in part, reflect the difficulties of identifying 'visitors' in a transient population. People may be staying in a household for several weeks or months and moving in a cyclical pattern between a number of other households in the remaining time. It is therefore arbitrary as to whether they are classified as 'visitors' or 'usual residents' in a household. The census does not identify a large difference between indigenous and non-indigenous Australian households in the proportion of usual residents in the household who are temporarily absent, probably for this reason.

Family types within households

The next group of tables focus on the family within households. The larger size of indigenous households reflects, in part, the larger number of families living in them. Table 2 shows that a much larger percentage of indigenous families are recorded as the second or third family living in a household (7.2 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent), providing further evidence of

the importance of the extended family in the indigenous community. These figures on household size may represent a conservative estimate of the structural differences given the census methodology (which continued in the 1996 Census) of counting a maximum of three families and disbanding others as individuals to the primary family.

Table 2. Percentage of second and third families among all families in indigenous and non-indigenous households, 1991–96

| | Indigenous households Per cent | Non-indigenous households Per cent |
|------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1991 | 6.0 | 0.9 |
| 1996 | 7.2 | 1.4 |

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

Table 3 compares a breakdown of the types of families represented among Australian families in 1991 and 1996. The largest category for both indigenous and non-indigenous families is two parent families. Among indigenous Australian families, sole parent families are the second largest category, accounting for an increasing share of all indigenous families in 1996 compared with 1991. In 1996, over one-third of indigenous families were sole parent families, more than twice the share of this category among non-indigenous Australian families. Among non-indigenous Australian families, it was the couple category that was the second major group. The proportion of indigenous families which were couple families was approximately half that of non-indigenous Australian families (18.4 per cent compared to 34.5 per cent).

Indigenous sole parent families had more children than non-indigenous Australian sole parent families. There was however, little difference on average between indigenous and non-indigenous Australian two parent families in the number of children in the family. The Census recorded less than two per cent of dependent offspring as ‘temporarily absent’ for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families thus this does not appear to be an important difference between the groups.

Table 3. Distribution of family types among indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families, 1991–96

| Family type | 1991 | | 1996 | |
|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Indigenous Per cent | Non- indigenous Per cent | Indigenous Per cent | Non- indigenous Per cent |
| Sole parent family | 28.4 | 12.3 | 29.6 | 14.2 |
| Partnered family | 54.3 | 53.9 | 49.5 | 49.6 |
| Couple | 15.1 | 31.9 | 18.4 | 34.5 |
| Other family | 2.2 | 1.8 | 2.6 | 1.8 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100 |
| Number | 65,780 | 4,171,000 | 88,366 | 4,567,553 |

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

Given their ongoing high representation amongst indigenous family types, indigenous sole parent families and the households in which they reside highlight policy issues pertinent to indigenous households generally. The 1996 Census data confirm the picture previously developed from the 1991 Census (see Daly and Smith 1997), namely:

- indigenous female sole parents are younger (24 per cent were under 25 years of age compared with 12 per cent of non-indigenous female sole parents;
- they have had more children than non-indigenous Australian female sole parents;

- they have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in employment than non-indigenous Australian sole parents; and
- these characteristics are associated with low family incomes.

Department of Social Security (now Centrelink) administrative data also show that indigenous female sole parents are more likely to be wholly reliant on the Parenting Payment than non-indigenous Australian female sole parents and are far less likely to receive child support from the non-custodial parent. Welfare dependency continues to be a critical problem for many adults in indigenous households and has a continuing impact on levels of household poverty.

The distribution of indigenous families by location of residence has shifted somewhat toward urban areas between the 1991 and 1996 Censuses. This reflects the rapid growth in the number of urban dwelling indigenous Australians recorded in the 1996 Census. However, the contrast in the distribution of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families remained (see Table 4). About two-thirds of non-indigenous Australian families lived in the major urban areas, almost double the share of indigenous families.

Table 4. Distribution of family types by section-of-State, 1996

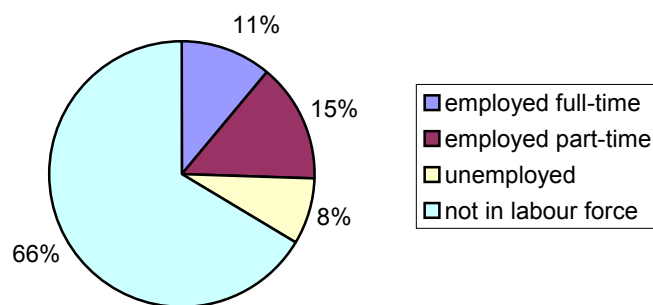
| | Section-of-State | | | Total Per cent |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Major urban Per cent | Other urban Per cent | Rural Per cent | |
| Indigenous | | | | |
| Sole parent | 13.1 | 15.4 | 6.3 | 34.8 |
| Couple | 5.8 | 6.0 | 4.1 | 15.9 |
| Partnered | 15.0 | 19.5 | 12.4 | 46.8 |
| Other | 0.9 | 1.0 | 0.6 | 2.5 |
| Total | 34.7 | 41.9 | 23.4 | 100.0 |
| Number | 35,752 | 43,083 | 24,113 | 102,948 |
| Non-indigenous | | | | |
| Sole parent | 9.4 | 3.4 | 1.3 | 14.0 |
| Couple | 21.1 | 8.4 | 5.1 | 34.6 |
| Partnered | 31.7 | 10.5 | 7.4 | 49.7 |
| Other | 1.4 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 1.8 |
| Total | 63.5 | 22.6 | 13.9 | 100.0 |
| Number | 2,892,574 | 1,027,950 | 632,447 | 4,552,971 |

Source: 1996 Population Census.

Labour force status

There were important differences in the labour force status of adult indigenous family members compared with non-indigenous Australian adult family members. These are summarised in the pie charts presented here (see Figures 1–8. The data for these figures are presented in Appendix Table 1). The charts summarise the situation firstly for sole parents and then for partnered people.

Figure 1. Labour force status of indigenous male sole parents, 1996

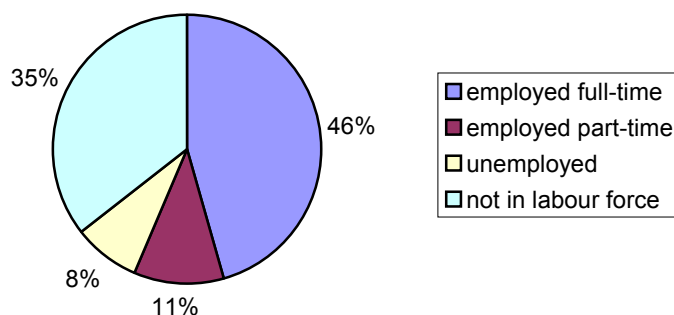


1996 Population Census.

Source:

Indigenous sole parents are less likely to be in employment than non-indigenous sole parents. Indigenous male sole parents look more like their female counterparts than non-indigenous male sole parents; that is, they were more likely to be outside the labour force.

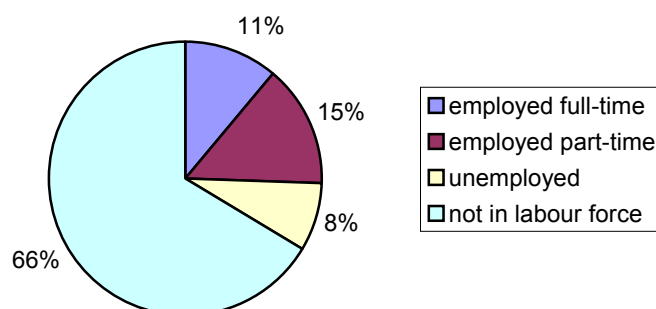
Figure 2. Labour force status of non-indigenous male sole parents, 1996



Source: 1996 Population Census.

Indigenous males with partners were more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force than non-indigenous Australian males with partners. However, it is important to note that almost half of the males in indigenous families were in full-time employment. This may reflect the criteria for selection as an indigenous family; namely, that one adult be indigenous. Some of the males included in indigenous families may in fact not be indigenous.

Figure 3. Labour force status of indigenous female sole parents, 1996

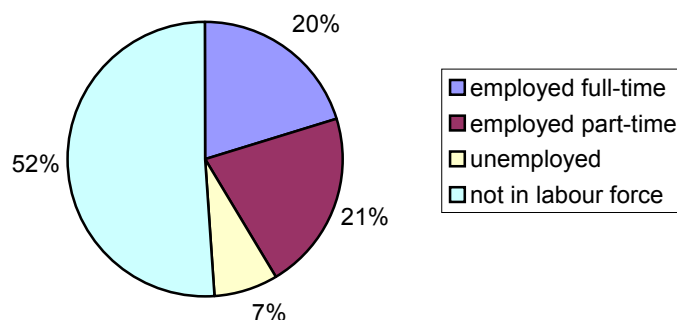


Source: 1996 Population Census.

A smaller proportion of female partners in indigenous families were in employment than among non-indigenous partnered females. Employment for both groups was fairly evenly divided between part- and full-time. Females who were partners in indigenous families were more likely to be in employment than their sole parent counterparts (compare Figure 3 and Figure 7). The 1996

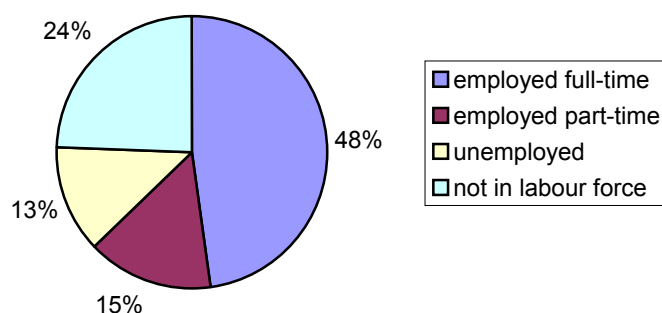
Census data confirm the earlier results of a close correlation between the labour force status of partners. Where the male was employed there was a higher probability that his female partner would be in employment. Similarly, the unemployed tended to be partnered with other unemployed people or those not in the labour force. These differences in employment status have implications for family and household income.

Figure 4. Labour force status of non-indigenous female sole parents, 1996



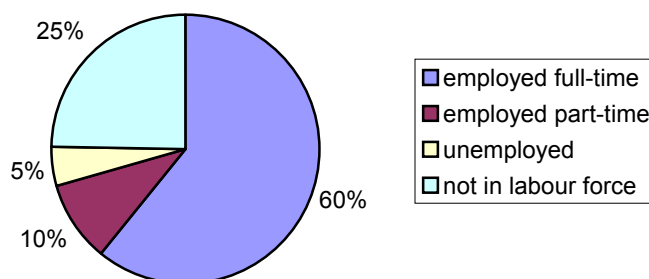
Source: 1996 Population Census.

Figure 5. Labour force status of partnered males in indigenous families, 1996

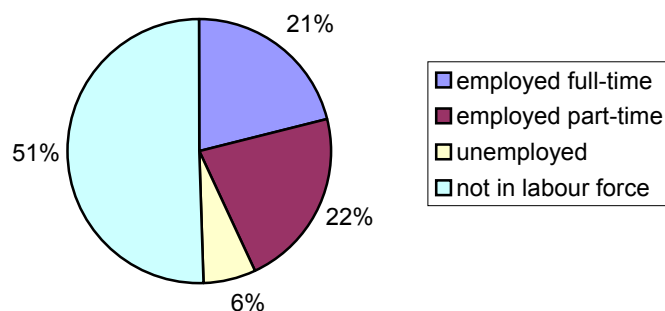


Source: 1996 Population Census.

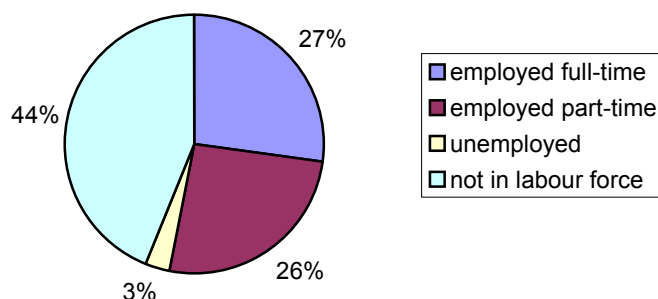
Figure 6. Labour force status of partnered males in non-indigenous families, 1996



Source: 1996 Population Census.

Figure 7. Labour force status of partnered females in indigenous families, 1996

Source: 1996 Population Census.

Figure 8. Labour force status of partnered females in non-indigenous families, 1996

Source: 1996 Population Census.

Household economic status

Table 5 presents data on family incomes and shows that the median income of indigenous families was 69 per cent of that of non-indigenous Australian families. Table 6 shows evidence on household income. The data show little change in the relative income of indigenous households compared with non-indigenous households between 1991 and 1996. However, given the larger average household size, the median household income per the median number in an indigenous household was 54 per cent of that of non-indigenous Australian households.

Table 5. Median weekly income (1996 dollars) of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families, 1991–96

| | Indigenous (\$) | Non-indigenous (\$) | Ratio |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|-------|
| 1991 | 503 | 756 | 0.67 |
| 1996 | 512 | 742 | 0.69 |

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

Table 6. Median weekly income (1996 dollars) of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian households, 1991–96

| | Indigenous (\$) | Non-indigenous (\$) | Ratio |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|-------|
| 1991 | 529 | 636 | 0.83 |
| 1996 | 540 | 632 | 0.85 |

| | | | |
|---|-----|-----|------|
| Median household income/median no. in household | 191 | 351 | 0.54 |
|---|-----|-----|------|

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

It is likely that more indigenous households are reliant upon government transfers as their primary source of income than are non-indigenous households, although it is extremely difficult to obtain systematic information on welfare dependency at the level of families and their households. The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey conducted by ABS (ABS/CAEPR 1996) reported that 55 per cent of working-age indigenous Australians had a government transfer payment as their main source of income, and that 14 per cent had no income at all.

One of the major forms of saving in Australia is through home purchase. Table 7 shows that indigenous Australians are much less likely to own or be in the process of purchasing their own home than non-indigenous Australians (33 per cent compared to 73 per cent). This means they are not accumulating an important asset. The inter-censal changes suggest that the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians may actually be widening on this margin. Furthermore, in 1996 12 per cent of indigenous households in the rural balance area continue to live in improvised dwellings compared to 3.3 per cent of non-indigenous households.

Table 7. Household tenure type for indigenous and non-indigenous Australian households, 1991–96

| | 1991 | | 1996 | |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Indigenous Per cent | Non- indigenous Per cent | Indigenous Per cent | Non- indigenous Per cent |
| Renting | 61.1 | 26.0 | 67.4 | 27.2 |
| Owned or purchasing | 38.9 | 74.0 | 32.6 | 72.8 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Smith and Daly 1996; ABS 1997.

Conclusions and policy implications

It has become commonplace to report the economic disadvantage of indigenous Australians. The analysis here, based on the most recent census analysis, confirms this at the household level. An ethnographically informed analysis of census data emphasises that indigenous households are experiencing multiple and different forms of economic burden in comparison to non-indigenous households.

Indigenous households are more likely to be multi-family, increasing in size progressively from capital cities to urban, rural and remote areas in terms of the average number of families, persons, adults and dependants per household. Overall, the adults are younger, have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in employment than non-indigenous Australians. They are twice as likely to contain sole parent families and less likely to contain couple families. According to Jones's (1994, 1999) updated estimates, the proportion of indigenous households in 'after housing' poverty increased slightly between 1991 and 1996, from 28 per cent to 30 per cent. The 1996 figure constitutes a significant increase in the actual number of households in poverty, reflecting as it does the overall increase in the total number of identified indigenous households.

Given the prevalence, noted in the ethnographic literature, of extended family formations, kin-based demand sharing, erratic sources of wage income, patterns of recycling unemployment, high mobility and visitor rates, we can only surmise that the real economic burden experienced by low-income indigenous households is more substantial than the census depicts. For all

indigenous households there are policy and program funding implications arising from the census understatement of economic burden and the dynamic aspects of household domestic cycles. Mobility and related high visitation rates are likely to lead to the:

- greater and faster deterioration in the condition of housing stock;
- exacerbation of environmental health problems associated with overcrowding; and
- creation of 'visitor-induced' economic stress on the expenditure capacity of core household members and their potential to save.

These impacts reinforce poverty entrapment for low income households.

An area of particular concern for policy makers and service deliverers should be the economic wellbeing of large multi-family indigenous households in which there are sole parents, high rates of adult unemployment, high visitor rates and childhood dependency burdens. Social policy and related program delivery could usefully be reframed to more effectively target the particular disadvantage of such economically vulnerable households. For example, access to education, training and employment opportunities for the adults within these households should be addressed as a priority. Furthermore, the numbers of indigenous people moving into the ages in which young families are being formed will increase rapidly over the next decade. Issues affecting young adults within households will be of increasing policy importance. The economic burdens noted in this paper are likely to have increasing or widening impact as more of these new families enter into unemployment and poverty.

The significance of extensive kin networks providing child-care and rearing are highlighted in the literature. The implication is that families in indigenous households are experiencing substantial caring burdens because of the higher rate of childhood dependency, and that multiple generations of older women are assuming extended mothering roles—all of which have economic impacts within households and for individuals. We have suggested elsewhere (Daly and Smith 1996; Smith and Daly 1996) that older indigenous carers require enhanced service support for their roles.

More generally, there are indications of significant demographic shifts in the distribution of the indigenous population—in particular, to the south-east of Australia and to urban areas. This is at a time when current government policy has increasingly emphasised the greater relative needs of remote and rural populations. This population trend, if it is sustained, suggests the need for an identified diversion of resources and service delivery to those areas. Certainly, it cannot be assumed that urban indigenous populations are somehow better off as a result of their supposedly better access to mainstream services and labour markets. Smith (1995) has reported labour force, income and mobility variables for the Redfern population of Sydney which are akin to (and occasionally worse than) comparable indicators of disadvantage in remote Northern Territory communities. Jones (1999) has also estimated that 'after housing' poverty in 1996 is greater in major urban and other urban areas (17.3 per cent and 17.8 per cent nationally), but lower in rural areas (11.9 per cent).

On the other hand, while policy clearly needs to respond to the fact that indigenous households are urbanising to a greater extent than before, they continue to be more likely to be outside the major metropolitan centres than non-indigenous Australian households. A demographic analysis of indigenous households, particularly when embedded in an ethnographically informed framework, suggests then a need for an even finer-grained, more sophisticated policy approach than the 'remote-urban' divide.

There are significant differences in the economic circumstances of indigenous households not only according to their residence in remote, rural and urban locations, but according to family types within households and across different settlement types. This raises important issues for their future access to services, their future participation in the labour market and access to wage incomes. Policy formulation and program expenditure could be better targeted on the basis of developing standardised benchmark indicators at the regional level which identify the varying economic and structural circumstances of indigenous households (perhaps most appropriately, at the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Regional Councils).

A critical issue for policy makers is the continuing extent of welfare dependency. An international trend has been toward the tightening of criteria attached to the receipt of welfare payments and the recent introduction by governments of 'mutual obligation' conditions to govern individual access to such payments. While there may be perceived long-term benefits in encouraging individual economic self-sufficiency, proposed policy changes in that direction may create considerable hardship for indigenous households in the short run; especially if sustainable employment and training opportunities cannot be significantly improved, let alone keep pace with population growth.

In summary, greater finesse is needed to orient policy formulation and service delivery to the ongoing diversity evident within types of indigenous households across regions. The emphasis on individual- and organisation-centred service delivery obscures key areas of economic vulnerability at the family and household level that are, arguably, the more relevant social groupings in indigenous society. Such a policy and program emphasis is likely to address only certain areas of economic disadvantage. Government at all levels, in coordination with ATSIC, need to urgently address the continuing socioeconomic disadvantage of specific indigenous household types, not simply of individuals or organisations, and to do this by devising programs oriented to their regional and demographic circumstances and based upon more accurate regional data benchmarks.

At the same time, it is also important to recognise the complexities of the problems facing indigenous households, that the amelioration of many areas of disadvantage will be a matter of generational change, and that there is a limit to the degree of government intervention in family and household matters which is either desirable or feasible.

Appendix

Table A1. The labour force status of females and males in sole parent and partnered families, 1996

| | Family type | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| | Sole parent | Partnered | Total |
| | Per cent | Per cent | Per cent |
| Males | | | |
| Indigenous | | | |
| Full-time employed | 0.24 | 0.47 | 0.45 |
| Part-time employed | 0.12 | 0.15 | 0.14 |
| Total employed | 0.39 | 0.64 | 0.62 |
| Unemployed | 0.14 | 0.13 | 0.13 |
| Not in labour force | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.25 |
| Total | 4,844 | 61,206 | 66,050 |
| Non-indigenous | | | |
| Full-time employed | 0.45 | 0.60 | 0.60 |
| Part-time employed | 0.11 | 0.10 | 0.10 |
| Total employed | 0.57 | 0.71 | 0.71 |
| Unemployed | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Not in labour force | 0.35 | 0.24 | 0.25 |
| Total | 97,844 | 3,694,765 | 3,792,609 |
| Females | | | |
| Indigenous | | | |
| Full-time employed | 0.11 | 0.20 | 0.17 |
| Part-time employed | 0.14 | 0.21 | 0.19 |
| Total employed | 0.26 | 0.42 | 0.37 |
| Unemployed | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.07 |
| Not in labour force | 0.66 | 0.48 | 0.54 |
| Total | 29,926 | 64,573 | 94,499 |
| Non-indigenous | | | |
| Full-time employed | 0.20 | 0.27 | 0.26 |
| Part-time employed | 0.21 | 0.25 | 0.25 |
| Total employed | 0.42 | 0.53 | 0.52 |
| Unemployed | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.03 |

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Not in labour force | 0.51 | 0.43 | 0.44 |
| Total | 531,112 | 3,773,453 | 4,304,565 |

Source: 1996 Population Census.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1996. *Census Dictionary*, cat. no. 2901.0, ABS, Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1997. *Indigenous Thematic Profile*, cat. no. 2020.0, ABS, Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics/Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ABS/CAEPR) 1996. *1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey. Employment Outcomes for Indigenous Australians*, ABS, cat. no. 4199.0, ABS, Canberra.
- Daly, A.E. and Smith, D.E. 1995. 'The economic status of indigenous Australian families', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 93*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Daly, A.E. and Smith, D.E. 1996. 'The contemporary economic status of indigenous Australian families', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 31 (4): 354–75.
- Daly, A.E. and Smith, D.E. 1997. 'The economic status of indigenous sole parent families: a challenge for social policy', in P. Saunders and T. Eardley (eds), *States, Markets, Communities: Remapping the Boundaries*, Social Policy Research Centre Reports and Proceedings, Sydney, 1 (136): 73–86.
- Finlayson, J.D. 1991. Don't Depend on Me: Autonomy and Dependence in an Aboriginal Community in North Queensland, unpublished PhD thesis, Department Anthropology, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Finlayson, J.D. 1995. 'Equity for Aboriginal families in the 1990s: the challenges for social policy', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 94*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Jones, R. 1994. *The Housing Need of Indigenous Australians*, Research Monograph No. 8, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Jones, R. 1999 (forthcoming). Overcrowding and Poverty in Indigenous Households: Results from the 1996 Census, consultancy report prepared for the Housing, Infrastructure, Health and Heritage Division, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra.
- Martin, D.F. and Taylor, J. 1995. 'Enumerating the Aboriginal population of remote Australia: methodological and conceptual issues', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 91*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Peterson, N. 1993. 'Demand sharing: reciprocity and the pressure for generosity among foragers', *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): 860–74.
- Schwab, J. 1995. 'The calculus of reciprocity: principles and implications of Aboriginal sharing', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 100*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Smith, D.E. 1991a. 'Towards an Aboriginal household expenditure survey: an analysis of empirical data and its policy implications', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 9*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Smith, D.E. 1991b. 'Toward an Aboriginal household expenditure survey: conceptual, methodological and cultural considerations', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 10*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Smith, 1992. 'The cultural appropriateness of existing survey questions and concepts', in J.C. Altman (ed.) *A National Survey of Indigenous Australians; Options and Implications*, Research Monograph No. 3, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Smith, D.E. 1995. 'Redfern works: the policy and community challenges of an urban CDEP scheme', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 99*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.

- Smith, D.E. and Daly, A.E. 1996. 'The economic status of indigenous Australian households', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 109*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Taylor, J. 1989. 'Public policy and Aboriginal population mobility; insights from the Katherine region', *Australian Geographer* 20 (1): 47–53.
- Taylor, J. 1996. 'Short-term indigenous population mobility and service delivery', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 118*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

For information on earlier CAEPR Discussion Papers and Research Monographs please
contact:

Publication Sales
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Telephone: 02-6279 8211
Facsimile: 02-6249 2789

Abstracts or summaries of all CAEPR Publications
can be found at the following WWW address:
<http://online.anu.edu.au/caepr/>

MONOGRAPH SERIES

1. *Aborigines in the Economy: A Select Annotated Bibliography of Policy-Relevant Research 1985-90*, L.M. Allen, J.C. Altman and E. Owen (with assistance from W.S. Arthur), 1991.
2. *Aboriginal Employment Equity by the Year 2000*, J.C. Altman (ed.), published for the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 1991.
3. *A National Survey of Indigenous Australians: Options and Implications*, J.C. Altman (ed.), 1992.
4. *Indigenous Australians in the Economy: Abstracts of Research, 1991-92*, L.M. Roach and K.A. Probst, 1993.
5. *The Relative Economic Status of Indigenous Australians, 1986-91*, J. Taylor, 1993.
6. *Regional Change in the Economic Status of Indigenous Australians, 1986-91*, J. Taylor, 1993.
7. *Mabo and Native Title: Origins and Institutional Implications*, W. Sanders (ed.), 1994.
8. *The Housing Need of Indigenous Australians, 1991*, R. Jones, 1994.
9. *Indigenous Australians in the Economy: Abstracts of Research, 1993-94*, L.M. Roach and H.J. Bek, 1995.
10. *The Native Title Era: Emerging Issues for Research, Policy and Practice*, J. Finlayson and D.E. Smith (eds), 1995.
11. *The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey: Findings and Future Prospects*, J.C. Altman and J. Taylor (eds), 1996.
12. *Fighting Over Country: Anthropological Perspectives*, D.E. Smith and J. Finlayson (eds), 1997.
13. *Connections in Native Title: Genealogies, Kinship and Groups*, J.D. Finlayson, B. Rigsby and H.J. Bek (eds), 1999.
14. *Land Rights at Risk? Evaluations of the Reeves Report*, J.C. Altman, F. Morphy and T. Rowse (eds), 1999.

RECENT DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

- 143/1997** *Changing numbers, changing needs? A preliminary assessment of indigenous population growth, 1991–96*, J. Taylor.
- 144/1997** *The Native Title Amendment Bill 1997: a different order of uncertainty?* J. Clarke.
- 145/1997** *Indigenous heritage protection, native title and regional agreements: the changing environment*, J.D. Finlayson.
- 146/1997** *Regional agreements and localism: a case study from Cape York Peninsula*, D.F. Martin.
- 147/1997** *Towards a comprehensive regional agreement: Torres Strait*, W.S. Arthur.
- 148/1997** *The CDEP scheme in a new policy environment: options for change?* J.C. Altman.
- 149/1997** *How does (and should) DSS treat CDEP participants? (What are these allegations of racial discrimination?)*, W. Sanders.
- 150/1997** *Growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, 1991–2001 and beyond*, A. Gray.
- 151/1998** *Access to government programs and services for mainland Torres Strait Islanders*, W.S. Arthur.
- 152/1998** *Native title compensation: historic and policy perspectives for an effective and fair regime*, J.C. Altman and D.P. Pollack.
- 153/1998** *The continuing disadvantage of indigenous sole parents: a preliminary analysis of 1996 Census data*, A.E. Daly and D.E. Smith.
- 154/1998** *Assessing the utility of 1996 Census data on indigenous Australians*, B. Hunter.
- 155/1998** *Estimating intercensal indigenous employment change, 1991–96*, J. Taylor and M. Bell.
- 156/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in the Northern Territory, 1991–96*, J. Taylor and L. Roach.
- 157/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in Western Australia, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 158/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in Tasmania, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 159/1998** *Labour market incentives among indigenous Australians: the cost of job loss versus the gains from employment*, B. Hunter and A.E. Daly.
- 160/1998** *The determinants of indigenous educational outcomes*, B. Hunter and R.G. Schwab.
- 161/1998** *Educational ‘failure’ and educational ‘success’ in an Aboriginal community*, R.G. Schwab.
- 162/1998** *The supply of alcohol in remote Aboriginal communities: potential policy directions from Cape York*, D.F. Martin.
- 163/1998** *Indigenous land use agreements: the opportunities, challenges and policy implications of the amended Native Title Act*, D.E. Smith.
- 164/1998** *The relative labour force status of indigenous people 1986–96: a cohort analysis*, B. Hunter and M.C. Gray.
- 165/1998** *Homelands and resource agencies since the Blanchard Report: a review of the literature and an annotated bibliography*, R. Davis and W.S. Arthur.

- 166/1998** *Parentage and indigenous population change*, A. Gray.
- 167/1998** *New and emerging challenges for Native Title Representative Bodies*, J.D. Finlayson.
- 168/1998** *Financial aspects of Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory*, J.C. Altman and D.P. Pollack.
- 169/1998** *The indigenous Land Corporation: a new approach to land acquisition?* J.C. Altman and D.P. Pollack.
- 170/1998** *A critical survey of indigenous education outcomes, 1986–96*, M. Gray, B. Hunter and R.G. Schwab.
- 171/1998** *Indigenous participation in health sciences education: recent trends in the higher education sector*, R.G. Schwab and I. Anderson.
- 172/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in Queensland, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 173/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in New South Wales, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 174/1998** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in Victoria, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 175/1999** *The relative economic status of indigenous people in the Australian Capital Territory, 1991 and 1996*, J. Taylor.
- 176/1999** *Indigenous self-employment: miracle cure or risky business?* B.H. Hunter.
- 177/1999** *What's new? The parliamentary Inquiry into Indigenous Business*, W.S. Arthur.
- 178/1999** *The Grameen Bank micro-credit model: lessons for Australian indigenous economic policy*, S. McDonnell.
- 179/1999** *Trends in indigenous participation in health sciences education: the vocational education and training sector, 1994–97*, R.G. Schwab and I. Anderson.
- 180/1999** *Northern Territory land rights: purpose and effectiveness*, J.D. Finlayson.
- 181/1999** *Indigenous household demography and socioeconomic status: the policy implications of 1996 Census data*, A.E. Daly and D.E. Smith.

