Indigenous economic futures in the Northern Territory: The demographic and socioeconomic background

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
ANU	The Australian National University
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CHINS	Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey
ERP	estimated resident population
GSP	Gross State Product
IEP	Indigenous Employment Policy
NILF	not in the labour force

Abstract

This paper examines 1996 and 2001 Census data to establish recent changes in Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment and income status in the Northern Territory. Also explored are some of the constraints and opportunities facing Indigenous people in their effort to increase their share of Territory income and raise their levels of participation in the labour market. The paper builds on previous analyses of Indigenous employment and income indicators for the Northern Territory, providing a window on recent trends in relative economic status. This time series is then extended by projecting the Indigenous working-age population and likely employment outcomes to 2011, in an attempt to estimate the scale of the task ahead for Indigenous people and governments as they attempt to raise Indigenous economic status. The findings suggest that the scale of this task is growing with time—Indigenous employment in the mainstream labour market is trending downwards along with the overall level of labour force participation, while the income gap between Indigenous and other Territory residents is widening. Given projected expansion of the working age population, the numbers in work need to rise just to keep the already low employment rate from falling further. The Northern Territory has a serious economic development problem—around one fifth of its resident adult population remains impoverished, structurally detached from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage with it.

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Introduction

In March 2003, the Northern Territory government convened the first of a series of Indigenous Economic Forums to discuss and explore options for the enhancement of Indigenous participation and stakeholder interest in economic development. This paper provides a summary and discussion of statistical information presented to the forum that concerned recent and likely future changes in the relative socioeconomic status of Indigenous people in the Territory. Since information on key economic indicators such as employment and income is generally not available from local sources, it is necessary to build this profile using data from the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing.

There are deficiencies in this data in terms of the reliability of basic population figures and the lack of cross-cultural fit in many of its statistical concepts and questions (Martin et al. 2002). However, census data still remain the primary source of information with which to chart the level and direction of change in the relative economic status of Indigenous people. Policy analysts eagerly await the release of the census results because they provide a test of the effectiveness of policy initiatives by reporting actual outcomes over a five-year period against a common set of definitions, and ostensibly for the whole population. Thus they also allow direct comparison between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous population.

Recent results from the 2001 Census are of special interest. They they provide the first indication of outcomes related to policy settings enacted during the first two Howard administrations, which ran almost exactly from the 1996 to the 2001 Census. They also establish the net result of social and economic impacts inherited by the new Northern Territory administration after a quarter of a century of single party rule.

From a labour market perspective, key Commonwealth policy initiatives enacted between 1996 and 2001 included a dismantling of the Keating government's *Working Nation* labour market programs, the privatisation of employment services, increased mutual obligation within the welfare system, the introduction of the Indigenous Employment Policy (IEP) with its explicit goals of enhancing private sector employment, and a focus in the reconciliation process on practical reconciliation—including increased mainstream employment and reduced welfare dependency (Commonwealth of Australia 2002; Shergold 2002).

Over the same period, the strengthening of defence redeployment to the Top End, the final go-ahead for the Alice Springs to Darwin railway, progress towards the exploitation of Timor Gap resources, and continued expansion of the tourism and mining sectors were all significant for overall growth in the Northern Territory. For much of the period, these helped to sustain a buoyant regional economy—one (it might be assumed) that would provide a fertile economic climate in which many of the policy ambitions in relation to Indigenous economic development might be fulfilled. The ongoing handing back of land (albeit slowly) to Aboriginal owners, and the leverage acquired to further the economic interests of Indigenous

stakeholders under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cwlth), need also to be considered in this context (Altman 1996; Pollack 2001).

Against this developmental backdrop, this paper examines 1996 and 2001 Census data to establish recent change in Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment and income status in the Northern Territory. Also explored are some of the constraints and opportunities facing Indigenous people as they attempt to increase their share of Territory income and raise their levels of participation in the labour market. The paper builds on previous analyses of Indigenous employment and income indicators for the Northern Territory (Taylor 1994; Taylor & Roach 1998), providing a window on recent trends in relative economic status. This time series is extended in the present analysis by projecting the Indigenous working-age population and likely employment outcomes to 2011, in an attempt to estimate the scale of the task ahead for Indigenous people and governments, and to encourage proactive, or premptive (as opposed to reactive), policy making.

Demographic characteristics

Population size

At the 2001 Census, a total of 202,729 persons were counted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as present on census night (7 August) in the Northern Territory. Of these, 50,785 indicated an Indigenous status, but as many as 12,100 did not respond to the ethnicity question on the census form (see Table 1). Of the population counted around the whole of Australia on census night, a smaller total (just over 188,000) indicated that the Northern Territory was their usual place of residence. As shown in Table 1, the number of Indigenous usual residents of the Territory was similar to those counted as present there on census night, whereas the number of non-Indigenous usual residents counted was much smaller than the place of enumeration count.

Table 1. Indigenous and non-Indigenous census counts and post-censal estimates, Northern Territory, 2001

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Not stated	Total
Census count (de facto)	50,785	139,839	12,105	202,729
Usual residence count (de jure)	50,845	125,686	11,544	188,075
Estimated resident population (ERP)	56,875	140,825	distributed pro rata	197,700

Source: ABS 2002b, 2003.

The similarity between Indigenous de facto and de jure counts probably reflects two things. First, the Northern Territory office of ABS attempts to enumerate the majority of the Territory's Indigenous population on a usual residence basis under special enumeration procedures for remote and town camp populations

(Sanders 2002). Second, few Indigenous usual residents of the Territory are likely to be interstate on census night. The difference in the non-Indigenous census counts is of greater significance for the establishment of relative economic status because the number counted as present in the Territory on census night includes a relatively large contingent (14,100) of visitors from other States and Territories (as well as from overseas, although these are excluded here). These interstate visitors have somewhat different characteristics from those who indicate the Territory as their usual place of residence. If these visitors were retained in the analysis of economic status, then the Territory's average personal income would rise, as would occupational status, while the industry profile of employment would be distorted. For a true comparison of the economic status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the Territory they must be excluded from any analysis, and the social and economic characteristics of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of the Territory described using usual residence data only.

The ABS acknowledges that the census under-enumerates the population in each State and Territory, and it is obliged under legislation to develop post-censal estimates of State and Territory residents for the purposes of electoral representation and financial distribution from the Commonwealth Grants Commission. Accordingly, a methodology is applied to generate estimated resident populations (ERPs) for each State and Territory (and Statistical Local Area) within the country. It involves an estimate of undercount and a pro rata distribution of those who did not state their Indigenous status. In 2001, this produced an ERP for the Northern Territory of 197,700 persons, 56,875 of whom were estimated to be Indigenous.

When utilising this estimate, it is important to note that ABS ERPs have been observed to differ from other (unofficial) population estimates generated by alternative means (Taylor & Bell 2001, 2003). Also worth bearing in mind are methodological tendencies within the special procedures adopted by the ABS in remote communities and urban town camps in northern Australia that are likely to produce an undercount of Indigenous people (Martin & Taylor 1996; Sanders 2002). It is questionable whether the standard ERP methodology adequately compensates for this (Taylor & Bell 2003).

Population distribution

The spatial distribution and residential structure of the population are more significant factors than population counts (whatever their adequacy) in modelling the future potential for Indigenous economic development in the Northern Territory. One way of depicting these is as in Table 2, which classifies the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations by section-of-State (ABS nomenclature for broad settlement size categories). Thus, in 2001, about 40 per cent of the Indigenous population was counted as resident in one of the Territory's urban centres or larger Aboriginal communities (places with 1,000 or more residents). This was far less than the 88 per cent of non-Indigenous residents who were counted in such places—the overwhelming proportion of

whom were in Darwin and Alice Springs. This mismatch in spatial distribution immediately removes the majority of Indigenous people from direct access to the key regional centres of economic activity. Moreover, since the weight of numbers in the Northern Territory remains substantially in favour of non-Indigenous residents, Indigenous residents in urban centres form a very small percentage of the total urban population. Typically, most Indigenous people are located in relatively small settlements of less than 1,000 residents, and these are invariably remote from mainstream labour markets.

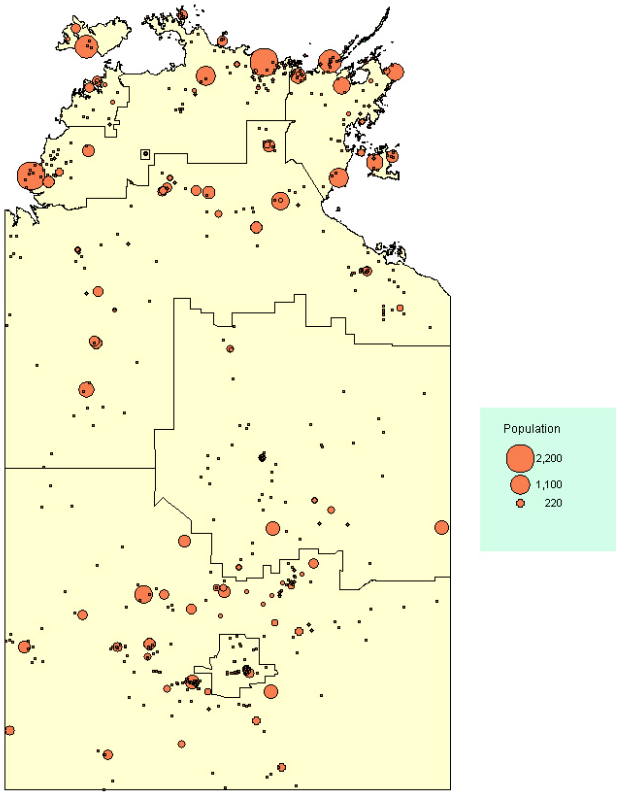
Table 2. Indigenous and non-Indigenous population distribution by section-of-State, Northern Territory, 2001

Settlement size Category	Indigenous count	% of Indigenous count	Non-Indigenous count	% of non-Indigenous count	Indigenous % in each category
Over 1,000	19,722	39.6	108,117	88.3	15.4
200–999	16,705	33.5	3,588	2.9	82.3
<200	13,397	26.9	10,754	8.8	55.5
Total	49,824	100.0	122,459	100.0	28.9

Note: This table is based on the usual residence count of the Northern Territory population. It excludes those who did not indicate their Indigenous status on census forms.
Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

The ABS section-of-State classification reveals only part of the reality of Indigenous settlement structure in the Northern Territory. Fortunately, the ABS has acquired a new means of representing Indigenous population distribution via the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) which is rolled out ahead of the national census and includes an estimate of the resident population of all discrete Indigenous communities across the nation.[1] According to the 2001 CHINS there are a total of nine discrete Aboriginal communities (or towns) in the Northern Territory with populations of between 1,000 and 2,000. In aggregate, these account for an estimated 12,000 people. As Fig. 1 illustrates, these Aboriginal towns are all located across the Top End. Below this strata in the settlement hierarchy is a group of 50 localities with between 200 and 999 inhabitants that together account for an estimated population of 20,000. These are spread more widely across the Territory and include most of the more substantial communities of central Australia, as well as communities in the pastoral belt to the east and west of Katherine. Of particular significance, from the perspective of economic development potential, is the fact that the Indigenous settlement hierarchy is supported at its base by some 570 widely dispersed and small population clusters comprised of family groups on outstations, pastoral excisions, and (to a lesser extent) in town camps. This spatial fragmentation, born of legal access to traditional lands, creates contrasting conditions for economic participation. On the one hand, it presents a barrier to mainstream participation. On the other, it is a necessary (and valued) feature of the customary economic sector (Altman 1987, 2002; Altman & Taylor 1989; Taylor 1999).

Fig. 1. Distribution of discrete Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, 2001

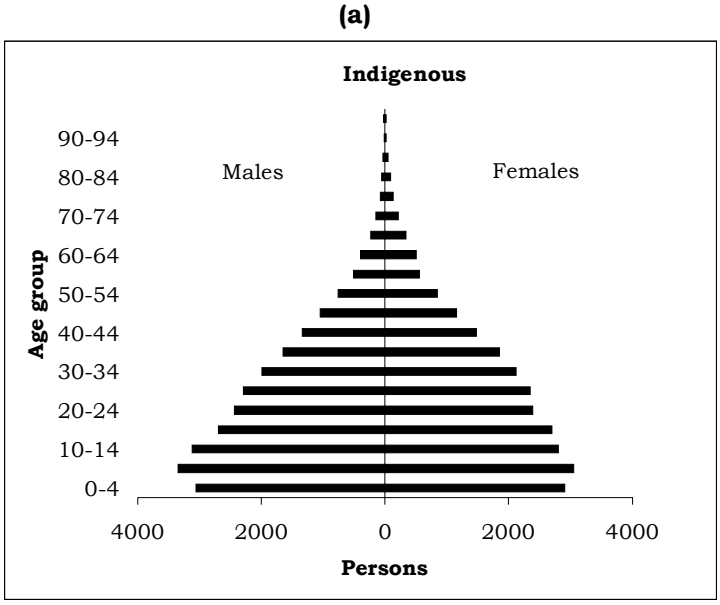


The availability of CHINS population data for even the smallest Indigenous communities, together with precise geographic coordinates for each locality, allows, for the first time, an estimation of the usual resident population on Aboriginal lands. These are defined here as those parts of the Territory held under various forms of legal tenure—Aboriginal freehold tenure pursuant to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth), areas designated as Aboriginal Living Areas under Northern Territory legislation, and special purpose lease town camp areas within or close to urban centres. In 2001, the collective population estimated as resident on such lands was 42,370, or 72 per cent of the Indigenous ERP.[2] Thus, the vast majority of the Territory's Indigenous population (in essence all of those not living in town or city suburbs) are resident (at least part of the time) on legally-defined Aboriginal land. This is a remarkable statistic in the postcolonial context and underlines the distinctiveness of the Northern Territory in terms of the current and potential future direction of Indigenous economic development.

Age composition

Also striking, in terms of assessing current economic status and future economic need, is the contrast between the age distribution of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, as shown in Figs. 2a and 2b. For the Indigenous population (Fig. 2a), several features are noteworthy. First, the broad base of the age pyramid describes a population with continued high fertility (a total fertility rate of 2.9—still the highest of all States and Territories). Second, the rapid taper with advancing age highlights continued high adult mortality (with life expectancies for males and females seemingly fixed at 56 and 63 years respectively). Third, uniformity in the decline of population with age points to a net interstate migration balance. Finally, relatively large numbers of women in the child-bearing ages, and even larger cohorts beneath them, indicate high potential for future population growth.

Fig. 2a. Distribution of the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory by age and sex, 2001



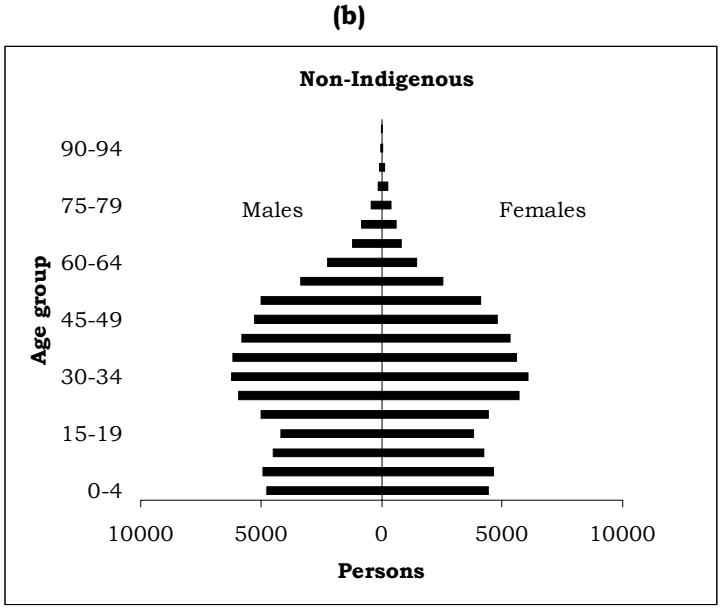
Source: ABS 2001 ERP.

By contrast, the non-Indigenous age distribution (Fig. 2b) is typical of a population that is subject to selective interstate migration, which produces net gains among those of working age and their accompanying children, and net losses in the teenage years and at retirement. Underlying this pattern are the highest rates of population turnover in the country (Taylor & Bell 1996, 1999). Furthermore, stability in the shape of the non-Indigenous age pyramid over time reflects the Territory's ongoing spatial role in the national economy as a place of short-term employment opportunity (Bell & Maher 1995; Hugo 1997; Taylor 1989a). The significance of this contrast in age distributions becomes apparent in the comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous labour force status.

Indigenous people in the Northern Territory labour market

During the mid to late 1990s, the Northern Territory economy out-performed the rest of Australia. Gross State Product (GSP) increased at an average rate of 6.1 per cent per annum, while employment rose at an average annual rate of 5.8 per cent (Northern Territory Government, 2001: 17–23). Against this positive backdrop, previous analysis of census data has revealed the highly segmented nature of Indigenous employment within the Northern Territory labour market (Taylor 1995), with sustained low Indigenous labour force participation, and relatively high unemployment and low employment rates (Taylor 1994; Taylor & Roach 1998). Results from the 2001 Census suggest no change—if anything, in terms of mainstream employment the relative labour force status of Indigenous people in the Territory has worsened.

Fig. 2b. Distribution of the non-Indigenous population of the Northern Territory by age and sex, 2001



Source: ABS 2001 ERP.

Labour force statistics

Table 3 quantifies the change in absolute numbers of Indigenous adults by labour force category between 1996 and 2001. In Table 4, these figures are used to produce labour force status rates for comparison with the non-Indigenous population. The only growth in census-recorded Indigenous employment since 1996 has occurred in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, with Indigenous numbers in mainstream (non-CDEP) employment actually falling from 5,492 to 4,994. The impact of this is seen in Table 4, with the proportion of Indigenous adults aged 15 years and over employed in CDEP

rising from 15 per cent to 17 per cent, and the proportion in mainstream employment falling from 20 per cent to 16 per cent. The CDEP scheme has thus overtaken mainstream employment as the primary employer of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory.

Table 3. Indigenous adults by labour force category, Northern Territory, 1996 and 2001

Labour force category	1996	2001	Net change	% change
Employed: CDEP	4,044	5,165	1,121	27.7
Employed: mainstream	5,492	4,994	-498	-9.1
Unemployed	2,071	1,601	-470	-22.7
Not in the labour force	15,862	18,813	2,951	18.6
Total (15+)	27,469	30,573	3,104	11.3

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

Table 4. Indigenous and non-Indigenous labour force status, Northern Territory, 1996 and 2001

	CDEP[a]	Mainstream[b]	Unemployed[c]	Labour force participation[d]	Unemployed (including CDEP)
	Indigenous				
1996	14.7	20.0	17.8	42.2	52.7
2001	16.9	16.3	13.6	38.4	57.5
	Non-Indigenous				
1996	n/a	74.4	5.8	79.0	N/a
2001	n/a	75.0	5.0	78.9	N/a

Notes: a. Census-based CDEP employment as a per cent of 15+ population;
b. % of 15+ population;
c. % of labour force;
d. labour force as a per cent of 15+ population.

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

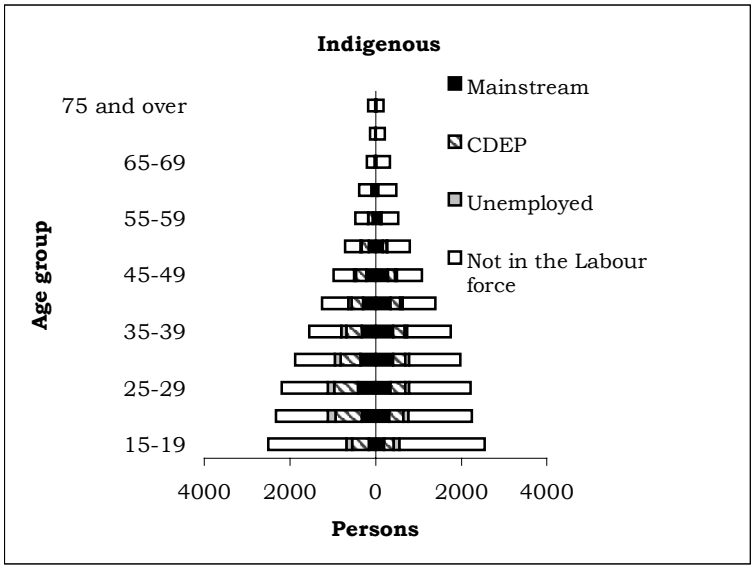
This trend is amplified if the number of CDEP participants recorded by ATSIC in August 2001 (at 7,362) is accepted in place of the census-based count of 5,165 shown in Table 3. The reason for the discrepancy between the two sets of data is unclear. However, aside from the possibility of census undercounting, it is worth noting that interpretation of CDEP as 'work' in the mainstream sense is by no means unambiguous in the local context, raising the possibility of census misclassification of labour force status (Morphy 2002: 70–1).

It is likely that the decline in the number recorded as unemployed between 1996 and 2001 reflects a category shift out of 'unemployment' to 'employment' created by an expansion of CDEP scheme participation, in combination with the enforcement of stricter work requirements for CDEP participants following the review of the scheme in 1997 (Spicer 1997). This sort of category shifting can produce quite variable outcomes. For example, if all CDEP scheme workers were classified as unemployed (on account of the notional link between funding for the scheme and Newstart Allowance), then the Indigenous unemployment rate would be seen to have risen from 53 per cent of the labour force in 1996 to 57 per cent in 2001 (Table 4). The apparent 'drop' in the Indigenous unemployment rate shown in Table 4 should also be placed in its full context: Centrelink records reveal that as many as 7,500 Indigenous adults in the Northern Territory were in receipt of Newstart Allowance at the time of the 2001 Census. Thus, census unemployment figures probably reflect genuine job seeking activity, as many of those on Newstart Allowance are exempt from the activity test. Clearly, the labour force model underlying the terms 'unemployment' and 'labour force participation' is misleading in the many parts of the Northern Territory where mainstream labour market opportunities are absent.

The final observation concerns those not in the labour force. This number increased substantially between 1996 and 2001, with the result that the Indigenous labour force participation rate dropped from its already low level of 42 per cent to 38 per cent. One possible reason for this—increased participation in post-secondary education—can be discounted, as the number of Indigenous people recorded by the census as attending TAFE, university or any other post-secondary educational institution barely changed between 1996 and 2001. Of equal note is the fact that Indigenous labour force participation is low at all ages (Fig. 3a), in striking contrast to the non-Indigenous adult population (Fig. 3b). Only among Indigenous males in the prime working age group of 25–49 does the labour force participation rate rise above 50 per cent. But in this age range, the comparable rates for the non-Indigenous population stand at well over 90 per cent.

Given the emphasis in recent Commonwealth policy on encouraging Indigenous employment in the private sector, especially under the auspices of the IEP, it is of interest to consider which industry sectors contributed to the decline in non-CDEP employment. This is revealed in Table 5, which shows the shift in the distribution of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment by industry sector. While private sector employment was an area of growth for the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous employment in the private sector declined and now accounts for only 27 per cent of the Indigenous workforce. Aside from CDEP, where the majority of additional Indigenous jobs were created, employment in Commonwealth government agencies was the only other area of job growth for Indigenous people, in line with general trends.

Fig. 3a. Labour force status of Indigenous adults by five-year age-group and sex, Northern Territory, 2001



Note: As in Fig. 2a, the vertical line in each graph separates males (on the left) from females (on the right).

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

Table 5. Percentage distribution of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment by industry sector, Northern Territory, 1996 and 2001

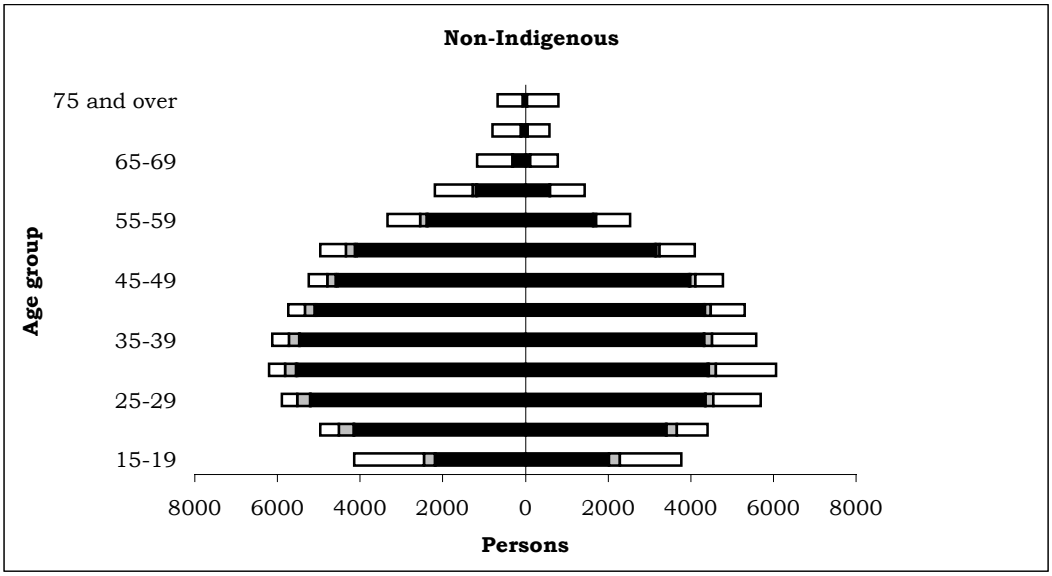
	Indigenous		Non-Indigenous	
Industry sector	1996	2001	1996	2001
Commonwealth	6.0	6.9	10.1	11.4
Territory	11.8	10.3	19.8	17.7
Local Government	8.8	3.2	1.6	1.1
Private	29.3	27.3	68.5	69.1
CDEP	44.0	52.3	0.0	0.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

Employment and income

Gross income reported in the census is intended to include family allowances, pensions, unemployment benefits, student allowances, maintenance, superannuation, wages, salary, dividends, rents received, interest received, business or

Fig. 3b. Labour force status of non-Indigenous adults by five-year age-group and sex, Northern Territory, 2001



Note: As in Fig. 2b, the vertical line in each graph separates males (on the left) from females (on the right).

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

farm income, and worker's compensation received. Whether all such sources are reported is unknown. Accurate data on income and its sources are notoriously difficult to obtain due to a variety of conceptual problems. For one thing, most measures of income refer to a period of time, such as annual or weekly income, whereas the flow of income to Indigenous individuals and households is often intermittent. Census data, for example, are collected for all sources of income in respect of a 'usual week' and then rounded up to annual income. What might constitute 'usual weekly' income in many Aboriginal households is difficult to determine. On the revenue side, there is the likelihood of intermittent employment and windfall gains from sources such as the sale of arts and crafts, gambling, cash loans, and royalty payments (Morphy 2002: 48, 71). This sort of income combines with debits, for example due to loss of employment, breaching of Centrelink requirements, and cash transfers to others, to create a highly complex picture even over a short space of time, and one that census methods of data gathering are likely to misrepresent (Smith 1991). Leaving this complexity to one side, it is assumed for the sake of analysis here that income is either sourced from employment, or not, with the latter sources used as a surrogate measure of income from the welfare state.

To the extent that income is related to labour force status, the decline in Indigenous mainstream employment and the increase in reliance on CDEP for work appear to be reflected in a widening gap in average incomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Territory (Table 6). In 1986, the average annual personal income for Indigenous people was $7,700 compared to $16,800 for non-Indigenous adults. In 2001, the equivalent figures were $12,222 and $32,151. These changes represent an annual rate of growth in mean income of 3.1 per cent for Indigenous people and 4.3 per cent for the non-Indigenous population. Consequently, the income gap as measured by the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous incomes steadily widened between 1986 and 2001. Underpinning this was a failure to narrow the differences in income between those at the top end of the income distribution. In 1986, the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous incomes at the 75th percentile was 0.47; by 2001 this had fallen to 0.30. The most likely explanation for such a clear trend is a corresponding decline in the relative occupational status of higher earning Indigenous workers. At the lowest end of the income distribution, the income gap first closed substantially, but has stabilised at around 0.62.

Table 6. Changes in individual income by Indigenous status, Northern Territory, 1986–2001

		Summary measures of income in current prices			
Census	Indigenous status	Average ($)	Lowest 25 % ($)	Median ($)	Top 25 % ($)
1986[a]					
	Indigenous (1)	7,700	1,400	5,800	10,700
	Non-Indigenous (2)	16,800	5,600	15,300	22,800
	Relative gap (1/2)	0.46	0.25	0.38	0.47
1991[a]					
	Indigenous (1)	9,700	5,400	7,600	11,900
	Non-Indigenous (2)	23,100	8,900	20,200	30,800
	Relative gap (1/2)	0.42	0.61	0.38	0.39
1996[b]					
	Indigenous (1)	11,100	6,700	8,800	11,800
	Non-Indigenous (2)	26,300	10,100	23,300	35,900
	Relative gap (1/2)	0.42	0.66	0.38	0.33
2001[b]					
	Indigenous (1)	12,200	8,100	9,500	12,700
	Non-Indigenous (2)	32,200	13,100	32,200	42,900
	Relative gap (1/2)	0.38	0.62	0.30	0.30

Source: a. Taylor (1993: 17, 1994: 14); b. Author's calculations.

The significance of mainstream employment in raising Indigenous income levels is highlighted in Table 7, with average Indigenous income from mainstream employment recorded at almost $28,000. While Indigenous employment income overall is barely three-quarters of the level of non-Indigenous income, it is clearly highest in the Territory's urban centres (even for those on CDEP), while the income gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers widens substantially in rural areas.

Table 7. Indigenous and non-Indigenous average annual employment income by section of State, Northern Territory, 2001

	Mainstream		CDEP
Section of State	Non-Indigenous ($)	Indigenous ($)	($)
Urban	39,510	30,020	12,830
Bounded locality	46,820	22,030	10,820
Rural balance	35,780	10,180	9,980
Total (NT)	35,740	27,990	10,780

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

This combination of relatively higher incomes and greater participation in mainstream jobs in urban areas results in less dependency on non-employment (welfare) sources of income among urban Indigenous people. At the same time, Indigenous dependency on welfare income is exceedingly high regardless of location, but especially so in remote rural communities (Table 8). Overall, half (51%) of Indigenous income is derived from non-employment sources, compared to only 9 per cent among other Territory residents.

Table 8. Percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous income from non-employment (welfare) sources by section of state, Northern Territory, 2001

Section of State	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Urban	40.0	9.0
Bounded locality	62.3	5.8
Rural balance	58.1	10.3
Total (NT)	51.2	9.0

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

Clearly such disparity in income earning capacity has an impact on the overall share of Territory income that accrues to Indigenous people. In 2001, the non-Indigenous population of the Northern Territory reported a gross income of $2.7 billion, with the bulk of this derived as earnings from employment (Table 9). In the same year, gross Indigenous income is estimated at $339 million—only 11 per cent of the Territory total, despite the fact that Indigenous people comprise 25 per

cent of the adult population. If the focus is solely on income derived from mainstream employment, then the Indigenous share is reduced to only 4 per cent ($113m out of $2.55 billion). Also of note is the fact that almost one-quarter ($16m) of the gross income reported by CDEP employees is attributed to non-Indigenous individuals, no doubt reflecting their involvement in the CDEP scheme mostly as managers and skilled personnel.

Table 9. Indigenous and non-Indigenous gross reported income by labour force category, Northern Territory, 2001

Labour force category	Indigenous ($m)	Non-Indigenous ($m)
Mainstream	113	2,441
CDEP	54	16
Unemployed	14	39
NILF	158	204
Total	339	2,700

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, customised usual residence tables.

Future job requirements

Clearly, the worsening economic status of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, as measured by relatively declining dollar incomes and growing reliance on welfare, is to a large extent a function of their continued failure to adequately participate in the mainstream labour market. To date, the thrust of Commonwealth policy aimed at reducing welfare dependence and raising economic status has been towards increasing mainstream employment, especially in the private sector. As we have seen, this has not been achieved in the Northern Territory. What then is the scale of the task ahead if the aims of Commonwealth policy remain the same? To establish this, it is necessary to project the future size of the Indigenous working-age population and consider the outcome against expected growth in employment.

Accordingly, a cohort component projection method was applied to the 2001 Indigenous ERP by five-year age-group and sex to project the ERP to 2011. In this exercise, no fertility assumptions were required as only the population aged 15 years and over was being projected. To factor in mortality, the latest available ABS Indigenous life table for the Northern Territory was applied and held constant for the projection period (ABS 2002). Interstate net migration was also held constant at zero, which is more or less consistent with information from the 2001 Census.

The results of this analysis indicate that, by 2011, the estimated Indigenous population of the Northern Territory will rise from 56,875 to 67,512, an increase of 1.9 per cent per annum. The working-age component of this is expected to rise at a faster rate of 2.2 per cent per annum from 36,526 to 44,544, an increase of just over 8,000 persons. Accordingly, the share of the Indigenous population in

adult age groups over 15 years will rise from 64 per cent to 66 per cent. Depending on which ABS projection series one assumes for the total Territory population over this period (ABS 2002c), the Indigenous share of the total population would thus increase to between 30 per cent and 32 per cent. Table 10 shows the implications of these projections for future Indigenous employment requirements.

Two employment scenarios are explored. The first considers the number of jobs that would be required by 2011 if the 2001 Indigenous employment to population ratio were to remain unchanged at 33 per cent. The answer is 14,789, or an additional 2,662. However, with the expectation of only 1,654 additional jobs (a projection based on the experience of employment growth recorded between 1996 and 2001), there will be around 1,000 fewer jobs than the number required to maintain the status quo in terms of the employment to population ratio. The second scenario considers the extra jobs required to raise the Indigenous employment to population ratio to the level recorded for the non-Indigenous population (75%). This produces a massive job deficit by 2011 of almost 20,000. In other words, the number of Indigenous people in work would need almost to double over the 10-year period, with some 2,000 extra jobs required each year—a task of an order of magnitude way beyond the capacity of current policy settings.

Table 10. Extra Indigenous jobs required in the Northern Territory by 2011

Employment/ population ratio in 2001	Base employment 2001	Total jobs required by 2011	Extra jobs required by 2011	Extra jobs likely by 2011	Jobs deficit by 2011
33.2[a]	12,127[c]	14,789[d]	2,662	1,654[e]	1,008
75.0[b]	12,127	33,408	21,281	1,654	19,627

Notes: a. the Indigenous census-derived employment/population ratio in 2001;
b. the non-Indigenous census-derived employment/population ratio in 2001;
c. adjusted upwards to match the 2001 ERP;
d. based on projection of working age population to 2011;
e. based on 1996–2001 Indigenous employment growth rate of 1.3% p.a.

Policy implications, policy dilemmas, and the way ahead

Against the stated aims of key Commonwealth policy initiatives, it is clear that outcomes for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory are deficient. Employment in the mainstream (and in particular the private sector) labour market has declined, not increased as had been intended. The Indigenous share of total Territory income has declined, while the gap in personal income levels has widened. Indigenous people are less likely now to be participating in the workforce than before, and their levels of dependence on welfare have increased accordingly. The Northern Territory has a serious economic development problem: around one-fifth of its resident adult population, representing the majority of its Indigenous population, remains overly-dependent on welfare, structurally

detached from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage it. Even more disconcerting, perhaps, is the prognosis that these indicators will worsen as a consequence of population growth if recent trends in the rate of Indigenous employment growth continue. From a policy perspective, 'business as usual' is simply insufficient to meet the expanding needs of the Indigenous population.

This same scenario at the national level, reported by Taylor and Altman (1997) and Taylor and Hunter (1998), led to development by the Commonweath of the IEP in 1999. Given the current situation reported here for the Northern Territory, it is interesting to note that a recent internal review of the IEP by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations concluded that over its first two years of implementation (July 1999 to June 2001), it had laid solid ground for future development and had begun to show encouraging signs of growth in participation and job outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia 2002: 1). That being the case, there is an urgent need to examine why reported outcomes in the Northern Territory appear to be so at odds with this conclusion.

One likely reason is that most Indigenous people in the Territory reside far away from urban centres where most mainstream jobs are to be found. If the logic of current employment policy were taken to its extreme, it would therefore depend for its success on substantial migration from rural to urban areas. Evidence to date regarding Aboriginal residential preferences and patterns of labour migration suggest that this outcome will not be forthcoming, short of absolute necessity (Taylor 1989b, 1992, 1999; Young & Doohan 1989).

In any event, there are much deeper structural hurdles to be overcome if Indigenous people are to successfully compete for skilled mainstream jobs with other Territory residents (and interstate migrants). These include poor literacy and numeracy levels. In 2000, 34 per cent of Indigenous children in the Territory achieved the Year 5 benchmark for literacy, and 37 per cent for numeracy. For Territory students as a whole, the figures were 71 percent and 74 per cent respectively (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 3.22, 3.26). Also, in the face of continuing high adult morbidity and mortality—a 15 year old Indigenous male in the Territory has only a 60 per cent chance of reaching age 60—then the physical limitations on prolonged and full participation in the workforce become all too apparent, especially if we add to this the high rates of morbidity and disability that are prevalent through the prime working ages.

With an estimated three-quarters of the Indigenous population of the Territory retaining residential access to Aboriginal lands, the extent to which real lifestyle choices are being made has to be factored into any policy response. Clearly, the sheer scale of continuing ties to country requires that opportunities for economic activity be exploited wherever they emerge. In considering such options, one issue is the extent to which existing economic activities are adequately reflected in the official census statistics presented here. For example, it would appear that many locally significant tasks are either subsumed under the label of 'CDEP', or 'labouring' in the census, or overlooked altogether due to their lack of fit with mainstream labour force categories (Morphy 2002: 70). Examples of such activity

abound in the literature and are associated with aspects of customary economy (hunting, fishing and gathering), art and craft manufacture, land management and ceremonial business (Altman 1987, 1989; Altman & Allen 1992; Altman, Bek & Roach 1996; Altman & Taylor 1989; Altman & Whitehead forthcoming; Bomford & Caughley 1996). These often have fledgling or well-established employment potential. For example, the Northern Land Council's 'Caring for Country' program employs some 200 Aboriginal people across remote areas of the Top End in land management activities, but these jobs are invisible in census statistics and are probably categorised as CDEP labouring work. Likewise, the 2001 Census recorded 110 Indigenous visual artists in the Northern Territory, despite evidence from other sources that those participating (admittedly to varying degrees) in the industry via community art centres number in the thousands (Altman 1989; 1999: 83–5; Wright 1999: 25). To underscore the local economic importance of activities that are likely to be overlooked by the census, it has been claimed that, by Australian standards, Aboriginal people on some Aboriginal lands are fully employed in the informal sector (Altman & Allen 1992:142; Altman & Taylor 1989).

Given their labour-intensive nature and widespread occurrence, it is important to consider ways of strengthening these elements of customary economic activity as part of the broad strategy of raising employment levels. To date, the primary focus with respect to export-oriented activities has been on mining and pastoralism, and while these provide employment potential for some communities, this is limited both in terms of numbers and spatially. The scale of the challenge ahead requires that emphasis now be given to options with more labour-intensive outcomes, such as are seen in wildlife harvesting and related land management, as well as in the arts industry.

In the meantime, Indigenous employment generation in most remote communities, and to some extent in towns as well, is most likely to occur via an import substitution model embracing activities such as the construction and maintenance of physical infrastructure, education, health services, retailing, public administration, transport, media, land restoration, land management, and tourism. Some of the diversity in economic activity encompassed here is already in place via CDEP schemes, although it is rarely recognised as such, often being seen amorphously as 'just' CDEP work. As for the jobs in remote communities that are currently occupied by imported non-Indigenous workers, these tend to be managerial and professional positions requiring particular skills and job-readiness. There is unlikely to be rapid 'Indigenisation' of such jobs. Moreover, there are real limits to the import substitution model in these cases. According to the 2001 Census, non-Indigenous usual residents in the larger Aboriginal communities—those who hold such jobs, and their families—numbered just over 2,000.

Short of any sustained migration for employment away from rural areas, which has not been evident to date and which could not necessarily guarantee employment anyway, there is a continued need for public subvention along with flexibility and realism in the drive to raise the economic status of Indigenous

Territorians. In particular, it is important to ask how the broad strategy of raising employment levels might be targetted to suit particular regional and local circumstances. There is an immediate requirement for detailed regionally-based quantitative assessments of the supply of, and demand for, Indigenous labour for different economic activities that already exist, or that may be created at the local level. Only then can the appropriate mix of resources for enterprise development and training be appropriately channelled.

Ultimately, there are two facts that should underpin any discussion of the current and potential future economic status of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. The first is their large and growing share of the jurisdictional population. The second is their sizeable and growing ownership and occupance of the land base. These facts combine to produce vast areas of the Northern Territory that are essentially Indigenous domains with their own economic imperatives and characteristics. The challenge for economic policy is to identify and articulate with these more fully.

Notes

1. Discrete communities are defined by the ABS as geographic locations that are bounded by physical or cadastral boundaries, and inhabited by or intended for the habitation of predominantly (more than 50%) Indigenous people, with housing and infrastructure that is either owned or managed on a community basis (ABS 2000a: 66).
2. This calculation for the usual resident population on Aboriginal lands is based on data from the CHINS which reports ERPs of each community using information provided to survey collectors by key informants in community housing organisations. These estimates are often based on historical series and population data drawn from administrative collections, but they also involve some assessment of population levels informed by local knowledge. In all likelihood, they might be closer to an estimate of service populations rather than of usual residents.

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