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Indigenous Fertility and Family Formation

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2011 Census Papers

In July 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics began releasing data from the 2011 Census of Population and Housing. One of the more important results contained in the release was the fact that the number of people who identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) had increased by 20.5 per cent since the 2006 Census. There were also significant changes in the characteristics of the Indigenous population across a number of key variables like language spoken at home, housing, education and other socioeconomic variables. In this series, authors from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) document the changing composition and distribution of a range of Indigenous outcomes. The analysis in the series was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) through the Strategic Research Project as well as FaHCSIA and State/Territory governments through the Indigenous Populations Project.

The opinions expressed in the papers in this series are those of the authors alone and should not be attributed to CAEPR, FaHCSIA or any other government departments.

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the fertility and family formation patterns of Indigenous Australians in the 2006 and 2011 Censuses of Population and Housing. Marital status is sometimes seen as a precursor to family formation. However, there are differences in the notion of marriage as a legal process, with the Indigenous population more likely to be in de facto relationships rather than legally married. The analysis in this paper suggests that the fertility patterns of Indigenous females differ from non-Indigenous females both in terms of the level and the timing of fertility. Indigenous females have higher fertility rates and are more likely to have children at a younger age in comparison with non-Indigenous females. This has implications for the education and career prospects of females, but also for the wider Indigenous population through flow-on impacts on the future labour force.

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List of Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIGC	Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification
ANU	Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
FaHCSIA	Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

1. Introduction and overview: Fertility and family formation

Partnering and having children are two of the biggest events that occur across a person's lifecourse (Biddle & Yap 2010). The timing of child-bearing along with child-rearing responsibilities has implications on the lifecourse of women and men. A number of surveys show that females with children report lower levels of subjective wellbeing, even after controlling for other characteristics (Shields & Wooden 2003). However, children can also bring substantial benefits to their parents and families that need to be traded off against the costs. For example, Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) show a higher level of social integration with relatives, friends and neighbours for new parents compared to those who are childless. Ultimately though, their analysis shows that the effect of having children on subjective wellbeing is highly contingent. That is:

... unmarried parents report lower self-efficacy and higher depression than their childless counterparts. Married mothers' lives are marked by more housework and more marital conflict but less depression than their childless counterparts. Parental status has little influence on the lives of married men (Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003: 356).

Around the world, with Australia being no exception, fertility rates have fallen over the last generation. These changes have occurred alongside equally dramatic changes in education attainment and labour force participation (United Nations 2011). Australia's labour force participation has been increasing as more females work outside the home (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2007). This is a trend evident in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. In 1986, 22 per cent of Indigenous females of working age were employed. By 2006, just twenty years later, that proportion had increased to almost 40 per cent.

The social institution of marriage has also undergone significant changes. The proportion of the population who are married has declined in most countries (Browning, Chiappori & Weiss 2011). The number of partners in a de facto relationship has risen, whilst rates of registered marriages have been falling over time (De Vaus 2004). In 1991, 51 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population had never been married, 35 per cent were married and a further 9.4 per cent were divorced or separated. By 2011, the proportion that had never been married had increased to 61.3 per cent, and the proportion of Indigenous people who were married had fallen to 24.4 per cent.

Families are often seen as economic units that share consumption, coordinate work activities, accumulate wealth and invest in children (Browning, Chiappori & Weiss 2011: 1). The family as an economic unit has been subject to considerable modifications. The availability of social support, the rise of working couples, along with the increased opportunity cost for females staying at home has resulted in a shift in family sizes. The allocation of time and labour within households reflects the changing role of women contributing to the accumulation of wealth within the economic unit. Whilst women are disproportionately represented in providing unpaid child care, a large share of men also reported having undertaken unpaid child care. In the 2011 Census, 30 per cent of Indigenous males reported that they had undertaken unpaid child care in the last week, compared to 43 per cent of Indigenous females.

Although far from necessary, marriage is often associated with family formation. Individuals in a registered marriage have a higher propensity of becoming parents than those who were in a de facto marriage and those who were not married. In the 2011 Census, 87 per cent of all Australian women who were in a registered marriage had one child or more, compared to 53 per cent of those in a de facto marriage and 47 per cent for those not married.

The corresponding Indigenous figures were substantially higher, reflecting higher fertility rates for the Indigenous population. However, while there were differences for those who were in a registered marriage (with 90.4% of those Indigenous females having had at least one child), the differences were particularly pronounced for those in a de facto marriage (76.8%) and not married (58.0%).

This different fertility profile points to a somewhat different level of importance placed on the legal institution of marriage amongst certain Indigenous populations in Australia. Though the notion of the nuclear family is far from universally held amongst the total Australian population, this is particularly the case for Indigenous Australians (Morphy 2006). While the census can capture some of this diversity, it is far from perfect in its design, especially with regards to Indigenous notions of the household and kinship networks. We will return to this issue in the concluding section of the paper.

Although the biggest impact of fertility patterns is on the individual and their family, they have a significant impact on population size. A significant flow-on effect from changing fertility patterns is the stock of future labour force, particularly for a country like Australia facing a rapid ageing of the population. In the short term though, high fertility rates lead to a youthful population distribution, with Indigenous Australians having a much younger age distribution relative to the non-Indigenous population.

In the next section of this paper, we look in detail at the changing size and composition of the Indigenous population. We then turn our attention to patterns of Indigenous marriage and how this has changed through time. In Section 4 we look at the distribution of Indigenous fertility outcomes through the census question on the 'number of children ever born', with Section 5 providing some concluding comments.

2. Data and geography

In 2001, there were 410,003 Indigenous Australians counted in the census. This rose by 11.0 per cent over the subsequent intercensal period, reaching 455,030 in 2006. Growth over the most recent intercensal period was even greater, with a 2011 population count of 548,370—a 20.5 per cent increase. Understanding the size and distribution of this population growth is clearly an important component of understanding changes in Indigenous marriage and fertility.

Whilst fertility rates have fallen across most of the developed world, including Australia, Indigenous females generally have higher fertility rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, a large minority of children born to a non-Indigenous mother with an Indigenous father are likely to be identified as being Indigenous. There are, therefore, structural reasons for a rapidly growing Indigenous population. There are two further reasons for why the Indigenous population count might be growing relatively quickly. Either more Indigenous people are being captured as part of the census process (changes in enumeration), or a number of people who did not identify as being Indigenous in 2006 changed their response in 2011 (changes in identification).

The question used in the census to identify whether a person identifies as Indigenous or not has stayed reasonably consistent over the last decade. In 2011, those filling out the household form were asked the following about each individual in the household—'Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?'. Three options were given for the response: 'No'; 'Yes, Aboriginal'; or 'Yes, Torres Strait Islander'. Instructions on the form also indicated that 'For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both "Yes" boxes'.

While the question may have stayed the same, a person's response to it may differ. This is likely to occur across an individual's lifecourse anyhow, as they begin to fill out census forms on their own behalf (as opposed to as a child on a household form) and get a better sense of their own identity. One-off events may also have an impact, with some suggesting that the Apology to Australia's Indigenous

Peoples made by the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made some Indigenous Australians who did not identify as such beforehand more comfortable in doing so in the most recent census. There were also significant changes to the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy between 2006 and 2011, with an increased focus on urban areas and a greater level of ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities in remote areas between censuses.

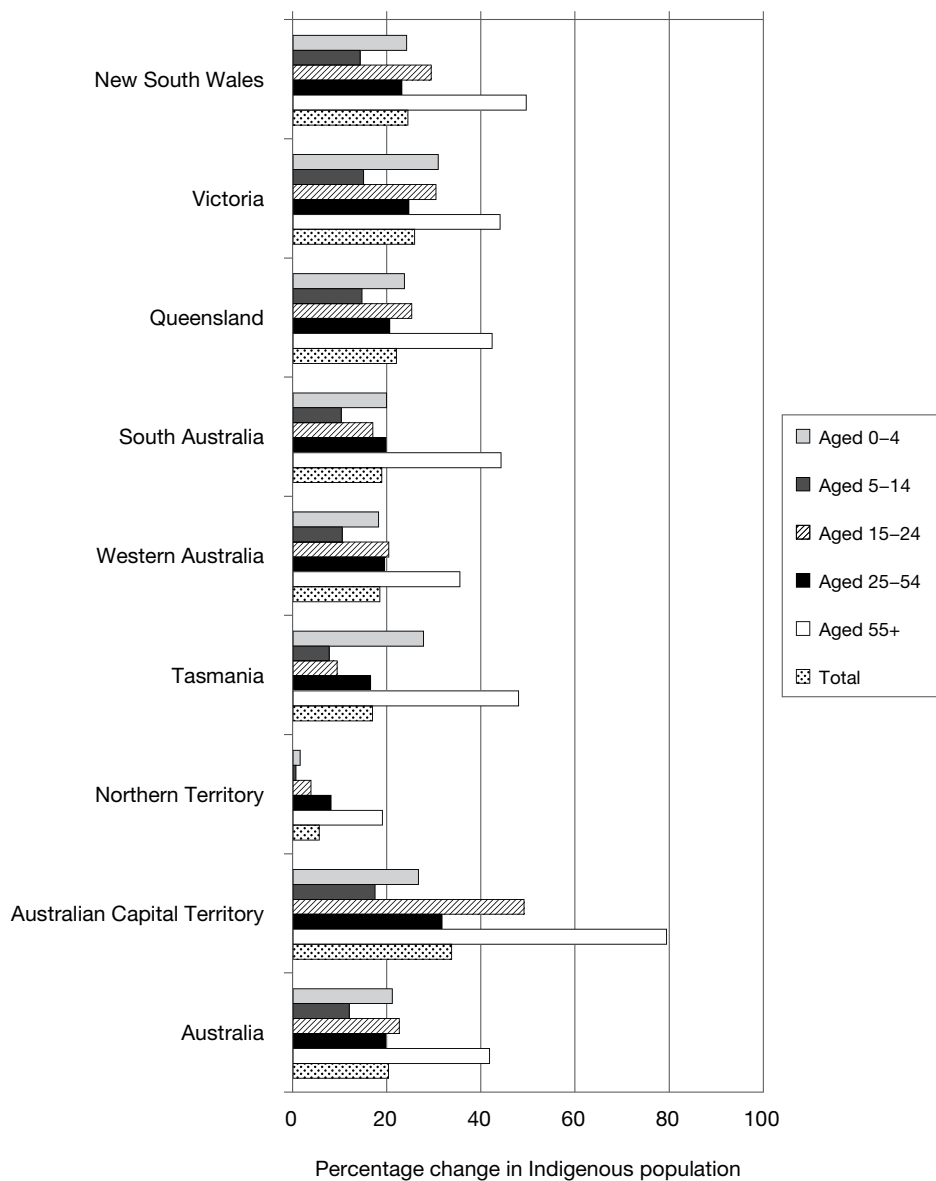
While the above are all plausible reasons for why the Indigenous population grew so rapidly over the last intercensal period, the reality is that without a more thorough evaluation framework incorporated into ABS procedures (for example through randomisation at the geographic level of collection strategies), we are never going to know what the main drivers were. Looking at Figure 1, however, we can see that changes in the Indigenous population were concentrated in particular age groups and in particular jurisdictions.

This figure examines the change in the Indigenous population count between 2006 and 2011 for five age groups (as well as the total Indigenous population) across the eight Australian States and Territories. The final set of results looks at the change in the count for Australia as a whole, which includes Other Territories. Looking by State and Territory, the fastest rate of growth was in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (33.8% over the period), Victoria (26.0%), New South Wales (24.6%) and Queensland (22.1%). South Australia (19.1%), Western Australia (18.7%) and Tasmania (17.1%) grew at a slightly slower rate than the Australia average, with the Northern Territory (5.8%) growing very slowly over the period.

For all jurisdictions, it was the population group aged 55 years and over that grew the fastest (in relative terms) over the period. Nationally, there were 42.0 per cent more Indigenous Australians aged 55 years and over in 2011 than in 2006. The ACT—and to a lesser extent New South Wales and Tasmania—all saw an even more rapid ageing of the Indigenous count. Growth in the other age groups was not as consistent. In Victoria, there was a 31.0 per cent increase in the population aged 0–4 years. In the Northern Territory, on the other hand, growth in this age group (1.7% over the period) was negligible.

Two general trends emerge from Figure 1. In 2011, the population who identified as being Indigenous was older and more likely to live on the east coast than the population who identified as being Indigenous in 2006. While the trends identified at the jurisdictional and regional level are important for broad policy settings, the reality is that many Indigenous policies are delivered locally to individual regions or communities. In addition, there is significant variation in a number of outcomes within jurisdictions and

Figure 1. Percentage change in Indigenous population count, 2006–11



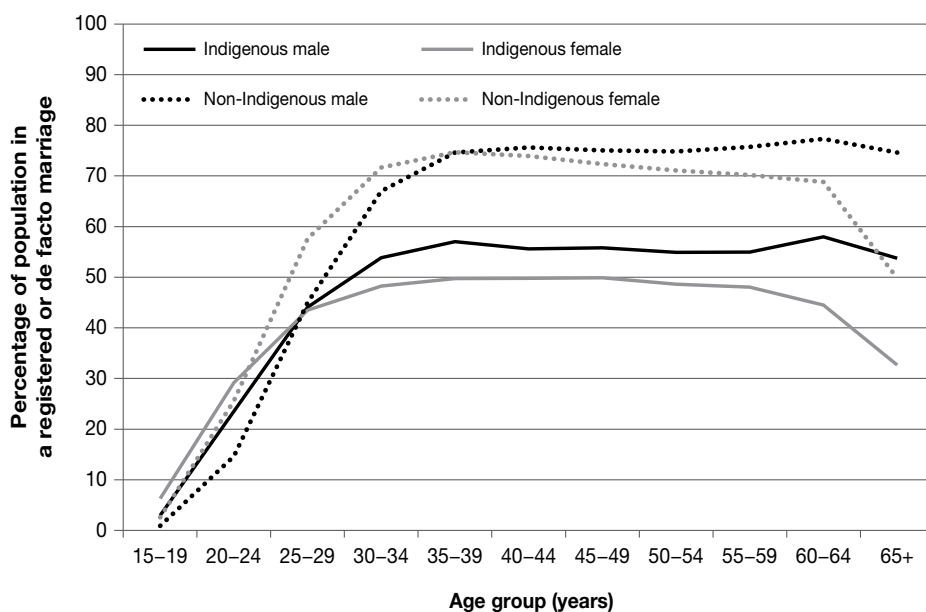
Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

even within smaller regional classifications. For example, in an analysis of 2006 Census data, Biddle (2009) showed that there were a number of suburbs within Sydney that had socioeconomic outcomes that were as disadvantaged as a number of remote or regional towns. For this reason, analysis in this series also looks at changes in outcomes at the regional and community level.

To undertake analysis at the regional and local level, the papers in this series utilise the Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification (AIGC). The AIGC is a four-level structure that builds up from the Statistical Area Level 1,

which is common to both the AIGC and the Australian Standard Geographic Classification. The next level above the Statistical Area Level 1 in the AIGC is Indigenous Locations, of which there were 1,116. The next level above Indigenous Locations are Indigenous Areas, of which there were 429. This number lowers to 411 substantive areas after excluding administrative codes representing those in a particular State or Territory who did not give any additional detail on their place of usual residence, or who were migratory on the night of the census.

Figure 3. Percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and females who were in a registered or de facto marriage, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

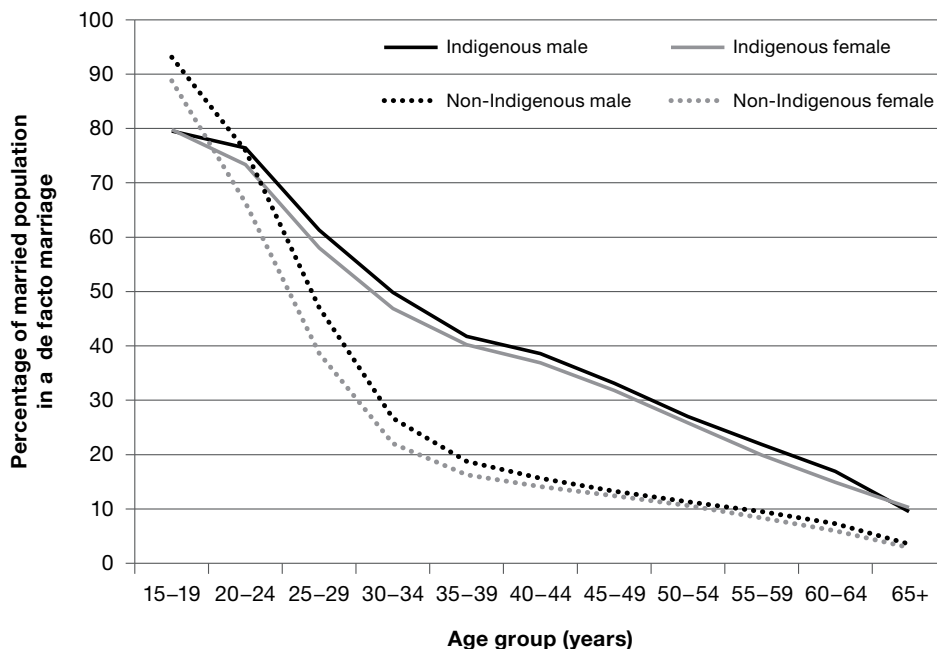
3. Marriage amongst the Indigenous population

Marriage is a central feature of traditional Indigenous societies and has importance for family formation and cultural maintenance (Berndt & Berndt 1985). However, while the data seems to suggest that Indigenous males and females are less likely to be legally married, it is important to keep in mind that the notion of marriage may be quite different in Indigenous societies (Australian Law Reform Commission 1986). Of those who were married, Indigenous men and women were less likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to be in a registered—as opposed to a de facto—marriage. In 2011, 23.3 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over reported being married in a registered marriage, compared to 49 per cent of the non-Indigenous population. On the other hand, 16 per cent of Indigenous Australians reported being married in a de facto marriage compared to 9 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians.

Some of these differences are driven by the younger age profile of the Indigenous population. Indigenous Australians are much more likely to be found in these age groups where marriage has not yet occurred and where those who are married are more likely to be in a de facto (as opposed to registered) marriage. However, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, there are also differences within particular age groups. In Figure 3, we look at the Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and female population in five-year age groups (with those 65 years and over grouped together) who were in a registered or de facto marriage, expressed as a percentage of the total age group.

There are three notable features in Figure 3. First, Indigenous Australians are slightly more likely to be married when young, but substantially less likely to be married from the 30–34-year age group and onwards. These patterns are also repeated by sex, with Indigenous females aged under 25 years more likely to be married than males, but the reverse true for those aged 30 years and over. The final point to note is the significant drop in female marriage rates in the 65-plus age group (slightly younger for Indigenous females), reflecting the lower life expectancy for males relative to females.

Figure 4. Percentage of married Indigenous and non-Indigenous population in a de facto marriage, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

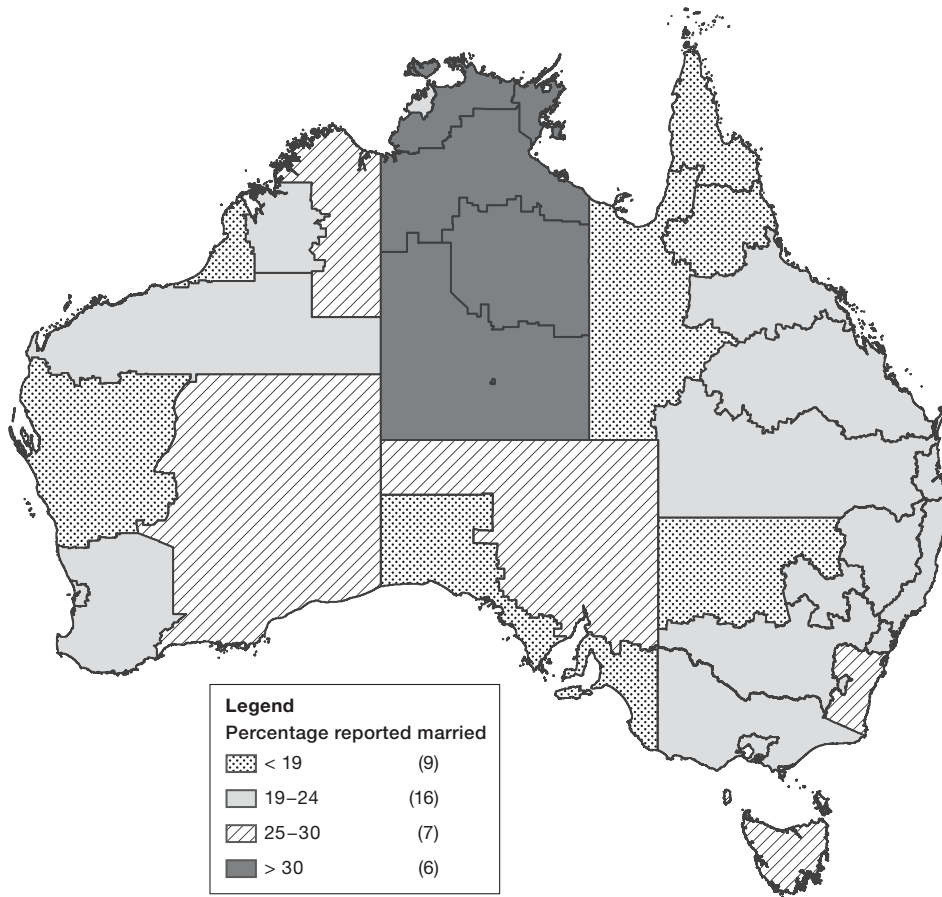
In Figure 4 we focus on those who identify as being married. Within this population, we look at the percentage who are in a de facto as opposed to a registered marriage. While there are few legal differences between registered and de facto marriages, research suggests that registered marriages are less likely to dissolve and more likely to result in children (Dempsey & de Vaus 2004). This signals potentially different motivations for—and outcomes from—the two types of marriage.

Results presented in Figure 4 show that amongst the few males and females aged 15–19 years who were married, a slightly higher proportion of the non-Indigenous population were in a de facto rather than a registered marriage. However, from the 25–29-year age group and onwards, it is the Indigenous population who is most likely to be in a de facto marriage.

In addition to variation by age, there is quite a large difference in marriage rates by geography. As an example, Figure 5 shows the percentage of the Indigenous population aged 15 years and over who were married by Indigenous Region.

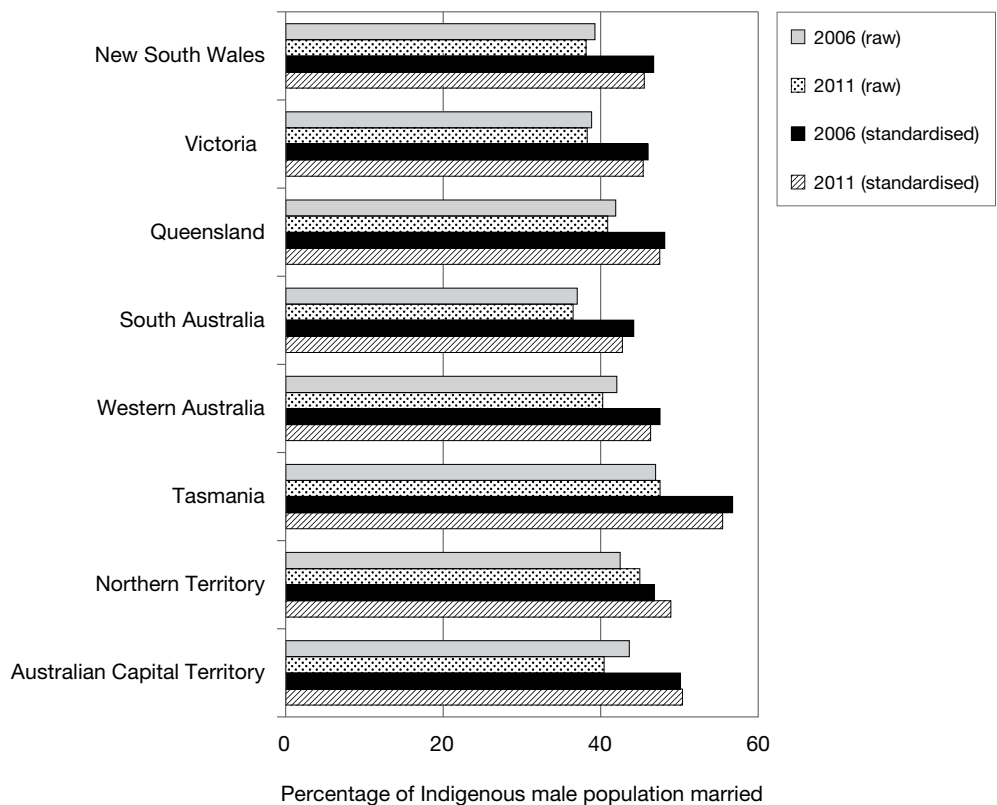
Interestingly, marriage amongst the Indigenous population was highest in the Indigenous Regions in the Northern Territory. Nhulunbuy and Apatula registered the highest proportion who reported being married, both with values over 50 per cent. Northern Queensland and inland New South Wales had some of the lowest percentages of marriage in the Indigenous population. Around the capital cities, roughly one in every five Indigenous people is married.

Figure 5. Percentage of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over who were married, by Indigenous Region, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

Figure 6. Age-standardised and raw marriage rates for Indigenous males by State or Territory, 2006 and 2011



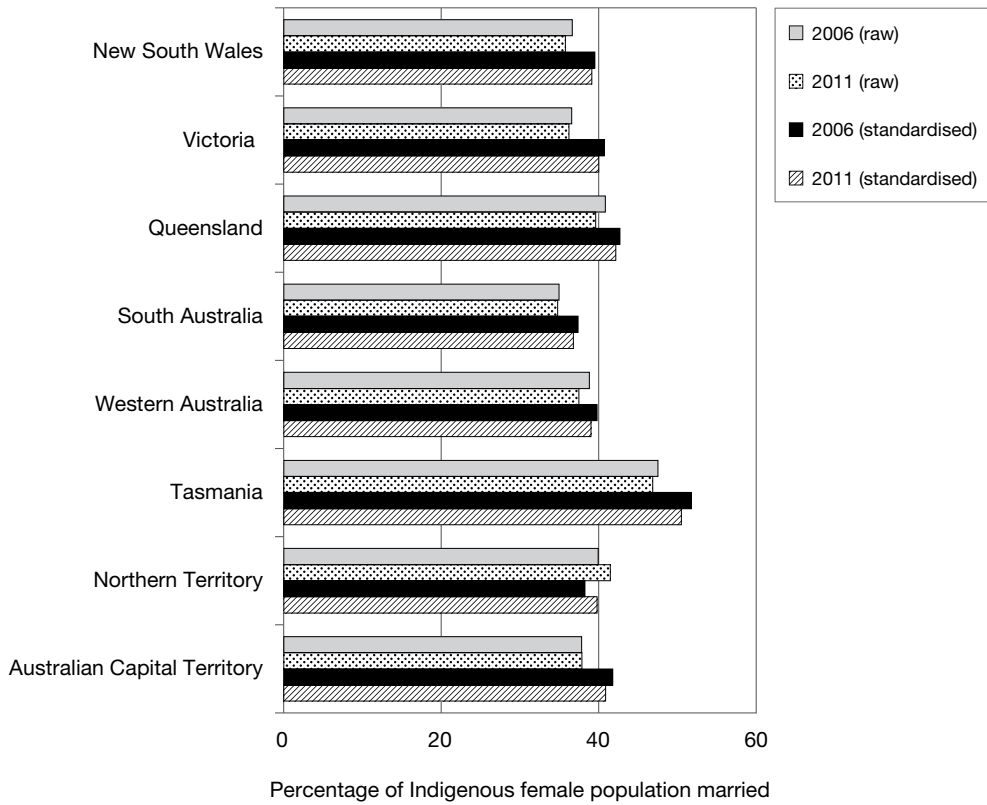
Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

In the final set of analysis in this section, we look at how marriage patterns have changed over the last intercensal period. We do this at the jurisdictional level and control for the different age distributions of the Indigenous population, both compared to the non-Indigenous population and by State or Territory. Four percentages are given—raw percentages for 2006; age standardised percentages for 2006; raw percentages for 2011; and age standardised percentages for 2011. Rates are given separately for males (in Figure 6) and females (Figure 7), and we age-standardise the rates to the male and female age distribution of the total Australian population in 2006. In essence, the age-standardised rates show what the rate of marriage would be if the Indigenous population had the same age distribution as the total Australian population in 2006.

Although the levels are slightly higher for males than females, the patterns by year and State or Territory in terms of the raw and age-standardised rates of marriage for the Indigenous population are fairly similar. In both cases, standardising the population to the age distribution of the total Australian population leads to an increase in the rate of marriage, showing that one of the reasons for relatively low rates of marriage is a young age profile. It should be noted that in neither case do the differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population disappear. The differences are, however, reduced.

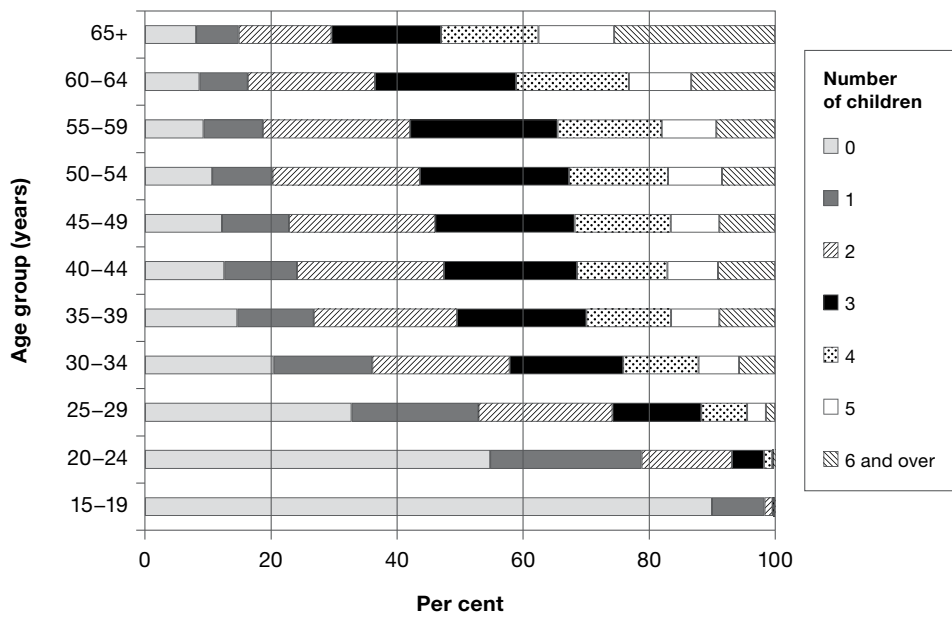
The second point of note is that there has been a small decline in the percentage of the Indigenous population who were married between 2006 and 2011. This was not due to a changing age structure, as the result is also found after age-standardising. The only exception to this is the Northern Territory, where the rate increased for both males and females over the last intercensal period.

Figure 7. Age-standardised and raw marriage rates for Indigenous females by State or Territory, 2006 and 2011



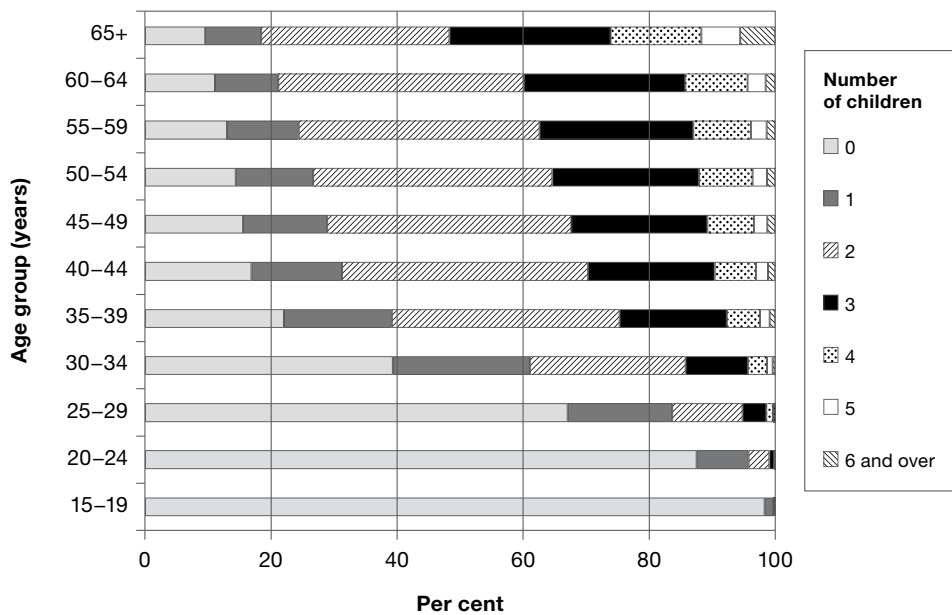
Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

Figure 8. Distribution of Indigenous women by age by the number of children ever born, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

Figure 9. Distribution of non-Indigenous women by age by the number of children ever born, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

4. Indigenous fertility

The Indigenous population is relatively youthful with, according to the 2011 Census, a median age of 21 years compared to 37 years for the non-Indigenous population. One explanation behind the younger age distribution is the higher level of fertility amongst Indigenous females. The 2011 Census suggests that Indigenous females aged 15 years and over had an average of 2.1 children compared to 1.7 for non-Indigenous females. Both figures were slightly lower than those from the 2006 Census.

The average number of children amongst the Indigenous population varied. The average number of children for females identifying as Aboriginal only was 2.06. For Torres Strait Islanders, that figure was 2.18, and for those who identified as being both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, the average number of children was 1.96.

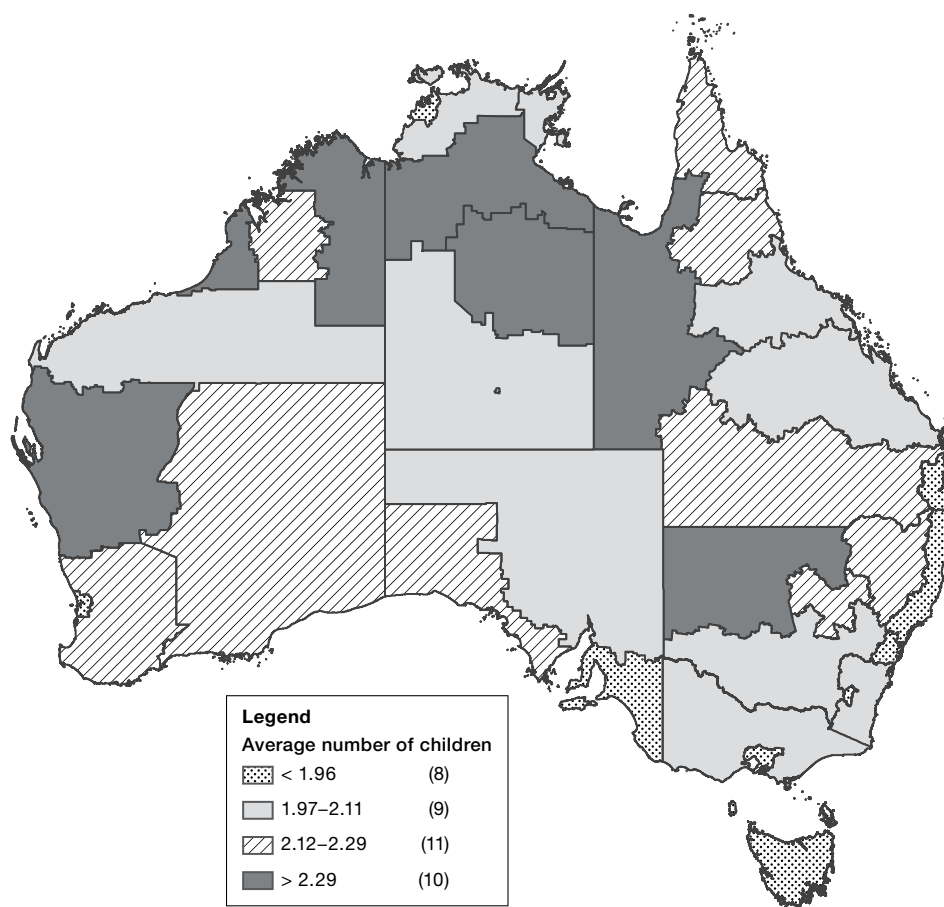
In 2011, over 60 per cent of Indigenous and non-Indigenous females reported having at least one child. The proportion varied depending on age, marital status and socioeconomic status. Over 90 per cent of Indigenous females who were—or had been—married before reported having had at least one child, compared to 87.6 per cent for non-Indigenous females. Amongst those who had never married, 52 per cent of Indigenous females had at least one child, whereas only one in every five non-Indigenous females reported having at least one child. Figures 8 and 9 show the distribution of the number of children ever born to Indigenous and non-Indigenous females by age.

It is evident from Figures 8 and 9 that child-bearing occurs at a later stage for non-Indigenous women. Amongst those aged 15–19 years, roughly 10 per cent of Indigenous females have had one child or more, compared to 2 per cent for non-Indigenous females. From a health

perspective, teenage mothers in the total Australian population are more likely to have low-birthweight babies and have a higher rate of complications (Cunningham 2001; Adelson et al. 1992). The evidence on this for the Indigenous population is more mixed (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012)—perhaps more importantly from an economic perspective, limited education and employment opportunities place teenage mothers and their children at a higher risk of poverty. Teenage mothers have a higher probability of not finishing high school and a higher likelihood of not participating in the labour force in the future (Maynard 1996). Amongst Indigenous females who have had one child or more, those aged 15–19 tended to have personal individual income of less than \$200 per week compared to those aged 25 years and over (14% compared to 8%). There are also intergenerational linkages between the outcomes of the mother and those of her children, with Leigh and Gong (2010) suggesting that children of older mothers had better outcomes than those of younger mothers.

By the 30–34-year age group, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous females in terms of having had at least one child closes somewhat. This reflects the higher fertility rate for non-Indigenous females in this age group, as documented by the ABS (ABS 2011). Nonetheless, across the lifecourse, Indigenous women have a higher propensity to have larger families than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Amongst those age 65 years and over, a quarter of Indigenous females reported having six children or more. This is approximately four times the proportion of non-Indigenous women.

Figure 10. Average number of children ever born for Indigenous females by Indigenous Region, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

In addition to age, there is also variation in fertility rates by geography. This is demonstrated in Figure 10, which gives the average number of children ever born for females aged 15 years and over in each Indigenous Region.

The regions of Mount Isa, the Torres Strait, Broome and Geraldton had the highest average number of children ever born to Indigenous females. The average number of children in the capital cities tended to be lower than that of other regional or remote areas, with the ACT having the lowest average number of children (1.5 per female).

There was a slight decline in the number of children ever born for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous females between 2006 and 2011. Figure 11 illustrates this through the average number of children per woman by State or Territory in 2006 and 2011.

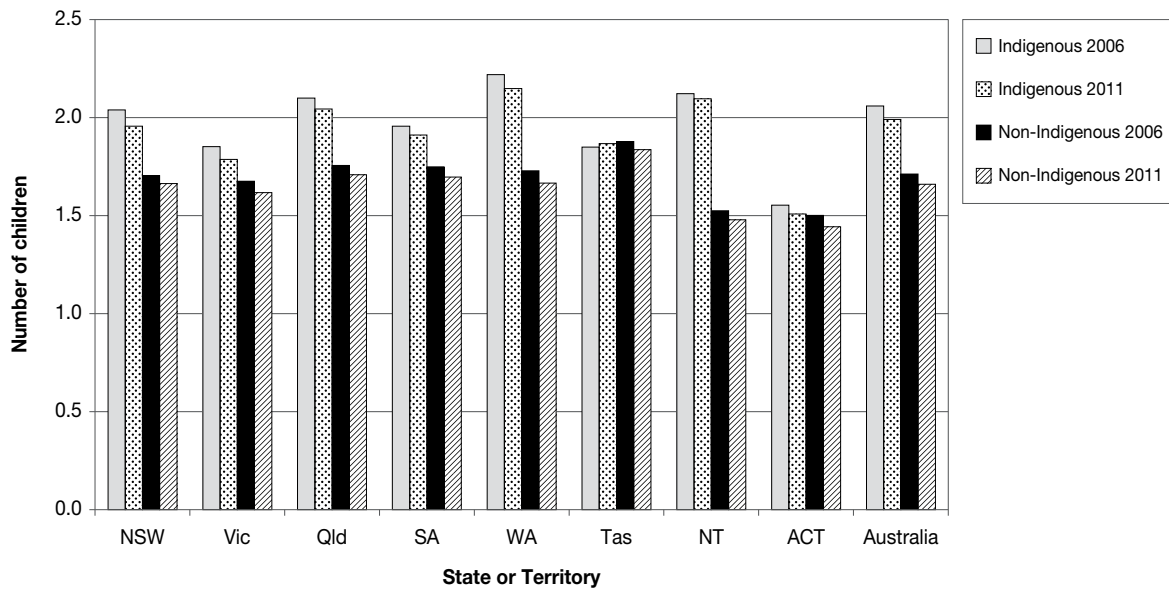
There are three important points to note from Figure 11. First, there were only two jurisdictions (ACT and Tasmania) for which the average number of children ever born was

similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous females. The second point to note is that there is substantial variation across jurisdictions, with the average number of children close to, or above, two in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, but somewhat lower in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT. Finally, in all jurisdictions apart from Tasmania, there was a decline in the average between 2006 and 2011.

Figure 12 examines the age distribution of this change across time through the average number of children ever born by age for Indigenous and non-Indigenous females in 2006 and 2011.

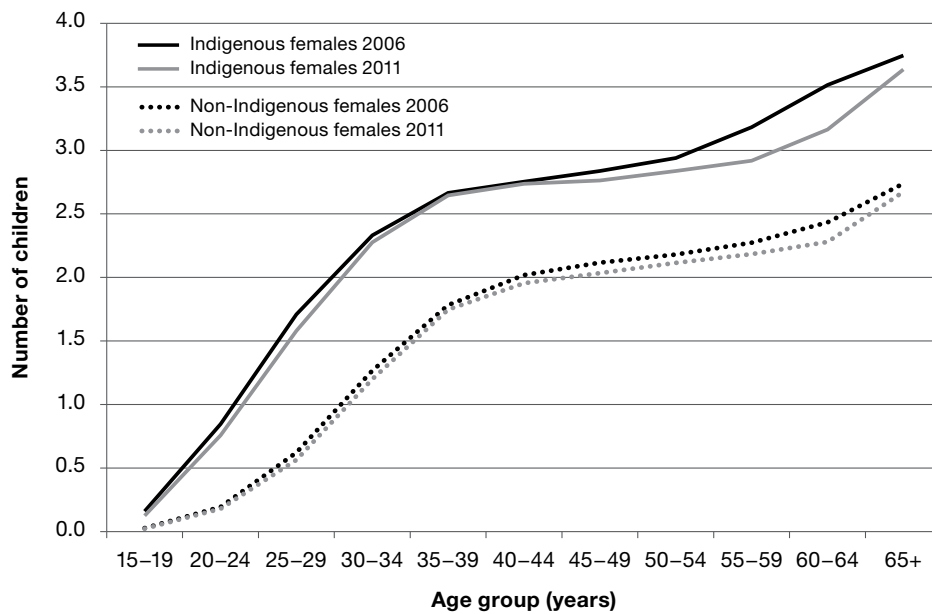
Results presented in Figure 12 show that there was a very small decrease in the number of children ever born for those Indigenous females aged 15–34 (compared to someone of the same age in 2006). However, the largest decrease is amongst those 55–64 years and over, well beyond the standard child-bearing age. What this implies

Figure 11. Average number of children per woman by State or Territory and Indigenous status, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

Figure 12. Average number of children per woman by age group and Indigenous status, 2006 and 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

is that the decrease in the average number of children ever born between 2006 and 2011 was driven by fertility decisions 20 or more years ago. The current cohorts of Indigenous females aged 55–59 years and 60–64 years had fewer children across their child-bearing years than those born five years earlier.

One of the factors likely to be driving the small change in the number of children ever born to Indigenous females is an improvement in education rates, which will be covered in more detail in a later paper in this series. Indigenous and non-Indigenous females who did not go to school had the highest fertility rates, with the fertility rates falling as the highest level of schooling increased. The mean number of children per Indigenous female who had not attended school was 3.23. This is 1.06 children higher than those who completed Year 10 or equivalent, and 1.83 higher than those who completed Year 12 or equivalent. This pattern was evident amongst non-Indigenous females as well. Non-Indigenous females who had not attended school had on average 3.0 children. This was 1.71 higher than those who completed Year 12 or equivalent.

5. Summary and conclusions

Analysis of the 2011 Census confirms previous findings around Indigenous family formation and fertility patterns. The Indigenous population is less likely to be legally married than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, those who are married are more likely to be in a de facto marriage rather than a registered marriage. We will return to this issue in a later paper in this series when data on household structure and partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians become available.

The average number of children ever born for Indigenous females was 2.1. This was only a slight decline from 2006, with most of the change at the upper end of the age distribution. In other populations, fertility rates have tended to fall with higher education attainment. While there appears to be a small association, the increase in education attainment observed over the last intercensal period (and documented in a future paper in this series) does not appear to have resulted in large decreases in fertility rates.

Indigenous females tend to have children at an earlier stage and also have more of a propensity to have larger families. There are health and economic consequences of both early motherhood and overall high fertility rates. While there are many other factors at play, the availability of information around reproductive health and pre- and ante-natal care is highly relevant for young teenage mothers. Analysis presented in this paper shows that this is particularly the case for those living in remote areas of the Northern Territory and Queensland, where the average number of children ever born is relatively high.

From an economic perspective, interruption to schooling has implications for the future career prospects of young parents. More thought needs to be given to how schools and informal education institutions might have a role in facilitating the continuing education of teenage mothers so that they remain engaged and connected to learning. Child-bearing has implications on employment opportunities, as well as the generation of income for families. This can place mothers and children at a higher risk of living in poverty. Given that Indigenous females have a higher likelihood of having larger families, the career pathways of Indigenous females may be intermittent, with child-rearing responsibilities taking over. This can be particularly problematic where affordable care or informal care may not be readily available. Affordable and culturally appropriate care for Indigenous children will help Indigenous mothers to work part-time or be economically active if they so wish.

Society has experienced significant change over the last two decades. Females, including Indigenous females, are now more likely to be employed, more likely to be educated and as a result experience a higher opportunity cost in having children. While there were only small declines over the last five years, fertility rates have declined quite substantially over the longer term. In 1986, about a quarter of Indigenous women had no children. By 2011, this had risen to 32 per cent. Having said that, the Indigenous population is a youthful one, despite a growing elderly population. The falling Indigenous fertility rates can have significant flow-on impacts on the future Indigenous labour force. An important source of a future labour force is women and, in particular, women who have had children. Given that Indigenous females represent a significant part of that potential Indigenous labour force, policies aimed at reducing barriers to that transition have the potential to contribute towards meeting Closing the Gap employment targets, as well as improving overall Indigenous wellbeing.

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