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Aboriginal socio–economic status: are there any evident changes?

H. Tesfaghiorghis and J.C. Altman

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Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR
The Australian National University

ABSTRACT

As the relative poverty of Aboriginal people in the Australian context is increasingly gaining recognition, equity issues between Aboriginals and other Australians have become matters of urgent concern for policy formation and implementation. This paper provides a statistical overview of the economic and social deprivation of the Aboriginal population as a whole by examining Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data from 1971 to 1986. The paper undertakes a comparative analysis between the Aboriginal and total population with respect to labour force characteristics, employment and unemployment, education, and individual incomes. The occupations and industry profiles of employed persons are also analysed. The analysis shows that levels of educational qualification, incomes and employment levels were substantially lower for Aboriginal Australians, while the reverse was true for unemployment and dependency ratios. Statistical data also reveal that Aboriginal employment status has declined between 1971 and 1986 relative to the total population, despite numerous Federal Government programs to improve their economic situation.

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Dr Habtemariam Tesfaghiorghis is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. Dr Jon Altman is Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University.

This paper examines changes in Aboriginal socio-economic status. This task is undertaken using census data from 1971 to 1986, as these statistics form the major source of available information on the Aboriginal population (including Torres Strait Islanders throughout). The choice of the 1971-86 period is not coincidental, as this is the only time frame in which Aboriginals have been included in the official censuses of population and housing of Australia, Aboriginality being determined primarily by self identification. Census data have been used for studying the relative deprivation in a number of studies of Australian Aborigines (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen 1979; Western 1983; Fisk 1985; Treadgold 1988; Gray 1989a, 1989b; Tyler 1990; Ross and Whiteford 1990). Relative deprivation is usually assessed by comparing demographic and socio-economic characteristics of one defined group and the rest of the population (or the total population if the relative size of the defined group is small). As the relative size of the Aboriginal population is small, it is valid to make comparisons between the Aboriginal and total populations. However for some crucial variables such as unemployment and income, distinctions are made between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. However, if the analysis were to be carried out at a regional level, then the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal comparisons become important. For example, in the Northern Territory, comparisons must be made between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal components of the Territory population, because the Aboriginal population constituted a significant 22.4 per cent of the total population.

The reliance of this analysis on census data, does not imply that Aboriginal data are necessarily accurate, but available statistics can be pieced together to examine change over time. Statistical data on the Aboriginal population are limited and are not readily available; one has to manually retrieve them from microfiche. It is clear from the trend analyses in this paper that for some variables comparable published information does not exist for all census periods. There is a shortage of accurate statistical data on the Aboriginal population. The data quality may be poor given the low level of Aboriginal education and their geographic remoteness and language difficulties which have implications for accessibility of enumeration and accuracy of data. The counts of Aborigines from the Censuses have not been consistent. Gray and Smith (1983) show that the 1981 Census underenumerated Aborigines, and Treadgold (1988) suggested that the Aboriginal income data from the 1981 Census may be biased downward because it underenumerated areas where Aboriginal incomes were higher. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1989) evaluated the count of Aborigines in the 1986 Census as reasonably accurate, and attributed the large population increase between 1981 and 1986 to the increasing willingness of persons of Aboriginal descent to identify as Aboriginal.

There are no time series studies on the socio-economic status of the Aboriginal population. There are, however, some studies that examined changes in some aspects of Aboriginal socio-economic status. These include Treadgold's (1988) analyses of intercensal change in Aboriginal incomes and Ross and Whiteford (1990) study of changes in poverty among Aboriginal families with children.

The analysis here subjects the Aboriginal population to socio-economic analysis over time. This is an exploratory attempt to assess both levels and changes in Aboriginal status using a number of socio-economic variables and census data from 1971 to 1986. It has to be recognised that the social indicators used here may not be relevant in some Aboriginal contexts given that the values attached to work, education, income, material resources and status may be inapplicable in some cross-cultural contexts. Altman (1988: 201-3) discusses the problems of using economic status to measure the relative material well-being of Aboriginal people: these include the cultural heterogeneity of the Aboriginal population, the culture-relative nature of the indicators used to measure status and the inherent bias of formal measures of employment and income that concentrate on labour markets and on cash incomes and consequently disregard potentially significant informal economic activities, like subsistence.

In examining socio-economic status, gender issues are especially relevant, as there are claims that Aboriginal women are the most disadvantaged group within the disadvantaged Aboriginal population (Daylight and Johnstone 1986). To address this issue, most of the tabulations are broken down and analysed by gender. Another important question is whether Aboriginal poverty is a function of remoteness or locational disadvantage. This is an issue that has been specifically considered elsewhere (Tesfaghiorghis 1991).

Population

Any discussion of changes in Aboriginal economic status needs to be preceded by an analysis of the growth of both the total Aboriginal population, and population subgroups such as children, labour force participants and the employed. Although Aborigines are a demographic minority, they have grown faster than the total Australian population since 1971. The Aboriginal population grew by 4.5 per cent per annum between 1971 and 1986 from 115,953 to 227,645. However, this apparent rapid population growth is due to a number of factors including the increasing tendency of persons of Aboriginal descent to identify as Aboriginal, enumeration problems and problems in defining Aboriginality. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that the 'true' growth of the Aboriginal population is at least 2 per cent per annum (Gray and Smith 1983: 7). The corresponding growth rate for the total Australian population was 1.3 per cent per annum. In the period 1971 to 1986, the share of the total population that was Aboriginal increased from 0.9 to 1.5 per cent. This rapid population growth has been accompanied by an increasing shift in Aboriginal population settlement from rural areas into towns and major urban areas: the proportion of the Aboriginal population living in rural areas declined from 56 per cent in 1971 to 34 per cent in 1986, whereas the percentage residing in major urban areas increased from 15 to 24 per cent and those residing in other urban areas rose from 29 to 42 per cent over the same period.

Population subgroups growth

Population growth rates have been uneven both between and within a number of population subgroups: children aged 0-14 years, the conventionally defined working age population aged 15-64 years, and employed persons aged 15 years and over. Changes in size of these subgroups are measured in relation to a 1971 base figure of 100 for each subgroup. Table 1 shows that there has been substantial growth for all subgroups over time, except for children aged 0-14, in the total population. The Aboriginal subpopulation aged 0-14 years grew by 183 per cent between 1971 and 1986 in marked contrast to no growth in this category for the total population. The more significant feature of Table 1 is that the Aboriginal working age population showed the most dramatic growth by 246 per cent between 1971 and 1986, in contrast to only 129 per cent for the total population.

While the growth of the Australian working age population was consistent with the growth of total employment, employment growth for Aborigines fell far short of the growth of the Aboriginal working age population. The number of employed Aboriginal people grew by 182 per cent between 1971 and 1986 compared to the 246 per cent growth of the working age population. While the ratio of the growth of employed persons to the growth of the working age population has remained about unity for the non-Aboriginal population, it was considerably below unity for the Aboriginal population.

It has to be noted though that growth rate comparisons between subgroups have to be viewed with caution due to the substantial Aboriginal population increase between 1981 and 1986. However, while this may affect the interpretation of absolute growth, its effect on the rates used in this paper is limited, as the numerators and denominators of the rates are both likely to be affected by errors of a similar magnitude in the base census data.

Table 1. Growth rates of population subgroups between Aboriginal and total population: 1971 figures = 100

Year	Children aged 0-14 years	Working age population aged 15-64 years	Employed persons
Aboriginal population			
1971	100	100	100
1976	141	163	158
1981	138	164	139
1986	183	246	182
Total population			
1971	100	100	100
1976	101	108	110
1981	100	118	120
1986	99	129	124

Dependency ratios

The rapid growth in the number of Aboriginal children results in heavy dependency burdens. Four measures of dependency burden are used to calculate the economic consequences of demographic structure on the Aboriginal population. These are:

the childhood dependency ratio defined as the ratio of the number of children (under the age of 15 years) to the number of the working age population, 15-64 years, times 100;

the childhood burden defined as the ratio of the number of children to the number of employed persons aged 15 years and over, times 100;

the dependency ratio defined as the ratio of children and economically inactive persons to the labour force, times 100; and

the economic burden defined as the ratio of children and economically inactive persons to employed persons, times 100.

The resulting ratios calculated in Table 2 reveal marked disparities between the two populations. Although Aboriginal childhood dependency ratios showed a steady decline from 93 children per 100 persons of working age in 1971 to 69 in 1986, the Aboriginal level was still twice as high as that for the total population. Whereas Aboriginal childhood dependency ratios have declined, childhood burden remained high at more than two child dependants per employed Aboriginal person. On the other hand, the childhood burden for the total population has declined from a low level of 0.70 of a child in 1971 to only 0.56 of a child per employed person in 1986. The two populations show marked differences in economic burden ratios. While the number of persons to be supported by an employed Aborigine has risen from 3.5 to 4.2 persons, for the total population it has

Table 2. Comparisons of various measures of dependency ratios (per base of 100) between Aboriginal and total population: 1971-86

	1971	1976	1981	1986
Aboriginal population				
Childhood dependency	93	80	78	69
Childhood burden	210	188	220	211
Dependency ratio	310	256	268	243
Economic burden	351	312	370	415
Total population				
Childhood dependency	46	43	39	35
Childhood burden	70	64	58	56
Dependency ratio	139	124	118	114
Economic burden	143	134	132	136

remained stable at about 1.4 persons or less. Altman (1988) has identified structural, labour market, cultural, and locational disadvantage factors as causes of Aboriginal poverty; the data presented in Tables 1 and 2 highlight structural and labour market factors.

Table 3. Selected educational indicators by gender and population: 1976-86.

Indicators	Aboriginal males			Total males		
	1976	1981	1986	1976	1981	1986
% left school under 15 years	34.5	31.4	25.0	31.0	26.6	22.6
Still at school at 15-19 years %	n/a	24.0	26.4	38.0	34.9	41.4
Median age	15.4	15.5	15.7	15.7	15.9	16.1
% never attended school	12.2	10.9	6.6	1.0	0.9	0.9
Indicators	**Aboriginal females**			**Total females**		
	1976	1981	1986	1976	1981	1986
% left school under 15 years	31.6	27.8	24.0	31.6	27.5	23.3
Still at school at 15-19 years %	n/a	26.1	28.1	36.3	36.4	42.8
Median age	15.5	15.6	15.7	15.6	15.8	16.0
% never attended school	11.7	10.5	6.5	1.0	0.9	0.9
Indicators	**Aboriginal population**			**Total population**		
	1976	1981	1986	1976	1981	1986
% left school under 15 years	33.1	29.6	24.5	31.1	27.1	23.0
Still at school at 15-19 years %	n/a	25.0	27.2	37.2	35.6	42.5
Median age	15.5	15.6	15.7	15.7	15.8	16.0
% never attended school	12.0	10.7	6.6	1.0	0.8	0.8

Educational characteristics

Table 3 shows changes in Aboriginal educational characteristics. There were considerable reductions both in the percentage of persons who left school under 15 years of age and those who never attended school, and a small increase of Aborigines in the age group 15-19 years who were still at school. The median age of leaving school has remained stable. In the period 1971 to 1986, the number of Aborigines under 15 years of age who left school declined from 35 to 25 per cent for males, and from 32 to 24 per cent for females. The median age of leaving school increased from 15.5 to 15.7 years. The differences in these indicators between males and females were negligible.

Table 4. Per cent of population aged 15 years and over who never attended school by age, gender and population: 1981-86.

Age group	Aboriginal males		Total males	
	1981	1986	1981	1986
15-19	1.6	1.6	0.3	0.2
20-24	2.2	2.4	0.3	0.3
25-34	5.0	3.1	0.4	0.4
35 & over	24.0	14.4	1.0	1.0
Total, 15 +	10.9	6.6	0.7	0.7
Age group	**Aboriginal females**		**Total females**	
	1981	1986	1981	1986
15-19	1.3	1.4	0.3	0.1
20-24	2.0	2.1	0.3	0.3
25-34	5.1	2.9	0.4	0.4
35 & over	23.0	14.0	1.3	1.3
Total, 15 +	10.5	6.5	0.9	0.9
Age group	**Aboriginal population**		**Total population**	
	1981	1986	1981	1986
15-19	1.4	1.5	0.3	0.1
20-24	2.1	2.2	0.3	0.3
25-34	5.0	3.0	0.4	0.4
35 & over	23.5	14.2	1.2	1.2
Total, 15 +	10.7	6.6	0.8	0.8

Despite the improvements in educational status, Aborigines still leave school relatively early. Among young Aborigines aged 15-19 years, 24 per cent of males and 26 per cent of females in 1976 were attending school. In 1986 these percentages increased slightly to 26 and 28 per cent, respectively. This is in contrast to 41 per cent of males and 43 per cent of females in this age category in the total population attending school in 1986. While the differences between the Aboriginal and total population in the percentage of persons who did not go to school and the percentage of 15-19 year olds still at school have remained large, there seems to be parallel and converging movements in the proportion of those who left school under 15 years of age, and the median age of leaving school. The percentage of Aborigines who did not go to school had declined from about 12 per cent in 1976 to 6.6 per cent in 1986, in contrast to about 1 per cent for the total population. The higher percentage of Aborigines who never attended school was largely due to the higher incidence of non-attendance among older people; this proportion has been declining, as is shown by the age and gender analysis in Table 4. Among persons aged 35 years and over, the percentage who never attended school declined from about 24 to 14 per cent between 1981 and 1986, while among young people aged 15-24 years it was only about 2 per cent. Although the level of school non-attendance among young Aborigines was low, it was still high relative to the total population (see Table 4).

Although the educational qualifications of Aboriginal people have generally remained relatively low, there have been some improvements as shown by the data in Table 5. Among Aborigines aged 15 years and over, the percentage of persons with some form of educational qualifications increased in the period 1971-86 from 3.2 to 10.6 per cent for males, and from 1.4 to 7.5 per cent for females. The categories with certificate qualifications are not directly comparable, as the categories used in the 1971 and 1976 Censuses were trade and technicians certificates, while trade and other certificates were used in the 1986 Census. If the two certificate categories are combined for comparative purposes, the percentage of Aborigines with certificate qualifications, who form the majority of qualified Aborigines, increased from 2.9 to 6.6 per cent for males, and from 0.6 to 4.2 per cent for females. Although the percentage of Aborigines with a tertiary diploma or higher qualifications have increased, their numbers are still negligible. With respect to Aboriginal gender differences in qualifications, males had higher qualifications than females, especially in certificate qualifications, while tertiary qualification levels were similar.

Aborigines in general had much lower educational qualifications than the total population. The proportion of the total population who had some form of qualification in 1986 was more than three times higher than the Aboriginal population. An examination of the differences between the two populations by level of qualification shows that the differences were especially marked between those with tertiary diploma or higher qualifications; 8.6 per cent of the total population had attained this level in contrast to 0.9 per cent for the Aboriginal population.

Table 5. Educational qualifications of persons aged 15 years and over by year, sex and population.

Aboriginal males	1971	1976	1986
Tertiary diploma/degree	0.2	0.6	0.9
Trade certificate	2.7	5.9	5.6
Other certificate	0.2	0.6	1.0
Inadequately described	0.2	0.0	3.1
With qualification	3.2	7.1	10.6
No qualification/not stated	96.7	92.9	89.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal females	**1971**	**1976**	**1986**
Tertiary diploma/degree	0.1	0.5	1.0
Trade certificate	0.2	1.1	0.5
Other certificate	0.4	1.2	3.7
Inadequately described	0.7	0.7	2.3
With qualification	1.4	3.5	7.5
No qualification/not stated	98.6	96.5	92.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal population	**1971**	**1976**	**1986**
Tertiary diploma/degree	0.2	0.5	0.9
Trade certificate	1.5	3.5	3.0
Other certificate	0.3	0.9	2.4
Inadequately described	0.4	0.4	2.7
With qualification	2.4	5.3	9.0
No qualification/not stated	97.6	94.7	91.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total males	**1971**	**1976**	**1986**
Tertiary diploma/degree	6.3	7.0	9.5
Trade certificate	17.9	17.0	17.9
Other certificate	3.4	3.9	5.6
Inadequately described	1.0	0.7	4.4
With qualification	28.6	28.6	37.4
No qualification/not stated	71.4	71.4	62.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

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Table 5. Continued.

Total females	1971	1976	1986
Tertiary diploma/degree	4.1	5.1	7.7
Trade certificate	1.5	2.6	1.9
Other certificate	3.5	4.8	9.8
Inadequately described	3.3	2.3	3.8
With qualification	12.4	14.8	23.2
No qualification/not stated	87.6	85.2	76.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total population	**1971**	**1976**	**1986**
Tertiary diploma/degree	5.1	6.0	8.6
Trade certificate	9.7	9.7	9.7
Other certificate	3.4	4.4	7.7
Inadequately described	2.2	1.5	4.1
With qualification	20.4	21.6	30.1
No qualifications/not stated	79.6	78.4	69.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Labour force participation

The extent of economic opportunities and employment available to the Aboriginal labour force cannot be adequately gauged by labour force participation rates alone. Measures of labour force participation are important in determining the level of Aboriginal labour force participation in the formal economy. However, in many remote Aboriginal communities there are few, or even no, formal employment opportunities. Labour force participation is a fairly meaningless concept in the absence of a labour market. Nonetheless, labour force participation is gauged here partly because many Aboriginal people have access to labour markets and partly because Federal Government policy (see below) is oriented to formal employment equity for Aboriginal people. The percentage distribution of the population aged 15 years and over by labour force status, by sex, and Aboriginal and total population is shown in Table 6. Aboriginal overall labour force participation rate (the number of employed plus unemployed as per cent of total population aged 15 years and over) was considerably lower than for the total population, 48 per cent compared to 60 per cent in 1986. The growth in overall participation rates over the period 1971-86 for the two populations was small: from 45.6 to 48.3 per cent for Aborigines, and from 58.7 to 60.0 per cent for the total population. The overall participation rates during the period were maintained at about a constant level due to divergent tendencies in the components of the

labour force of the two populations. In the case of Aborigines it was the increasing growth of the unemployed that compensated for the decline in employment, while for the total population stable levels of employment and slow growth in unemployment complemented each other to maintain an overall constant level (see Table 6).

An examination of overall participation rates by gender reveals an increasing labour force participation trend for females and a declining trend for males of both populations. Although the increase in female labour force participation is significant, the Aboriginal female level is still low compared to both their male counterparts and to all Australian females. Aboriginal female participation in 1986 was 35 per cent compared to 47 per cent for all Australian females. The corresponding rates for males were 63 per cent for Aborigines and 74 per cent for the total population. Another interesting feature of Table 6 is the marked decline in the percentage of employed Aborigines, compared to a slower decline for the total population accompanied by a faster increasing unemployment trend for Aborigines. In the case of males, the percentage employed in the period 1971-86 dropped from 60.4 to 40.4 per cent for Aborigines, compared to 57.7 to 54.4 per cent for the total population. The proportion of the total Aboriginal population aged 15 years and over that was unemployed was 17 per cent, in contrast to 5.6 per cent for the total population.

Table 6. Percentage distribution of persons aged 15 years and over by labour force status, sex and population: 1971-86.

Year	Employed	Unemployed	Labour force	Not in labour force	Total population
Aboriginal males					
1971	60.4	6.5	66.9	33.1	28,943
1976	56.2	12.6	68.8	31.2	45,649
1981	47.0	16.4	63.4	36.6	44,919
1986	40.4	22.7	63.1	36.9	66,419
Aboriginal females					
1971	21.7	1.9	23.6	76.4	28,005
1976	25.1	5.1	30.2	69.8	45,677
1981	24.8	7.1	31.9	68.1	46,901
1986	22.7	11.8	34.5	65.5	70,714
Aboriginal population					
1971	41.4	4.2	45.6	54.4	56,948
1976	40.7	8.8	49.5	50.5	91,327
1981	35.7	11.6	47.3	52.7	91,819
1986	31.3	17.1	48.3	51.7	137,133

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Table 6. Continued.

Year	Employed	Unemployed	Labour force	Not in labour force	Total population
Total males					
1971	79.1	1.2	80.3	19.7	4,532,154
1976	76.1	3.2	79.3	20.7	4,884,460
1981	73.1	4.2	77.3	22.7	5,394,929
1986	66.9	6.6	73.5	26.5	5,904,292
Total females					
1971	36.3	0.8	37.1	62.9	4,553,432
1976	41.6	2.2	43.8	56.2	4,973,640
1981	42.5	3.1	45.6	54.4	5,524,497
1986	42.3	4.5	46.8	53.2	6,061,019
Total population					
1971	57.7	1.0	58.7	41.3	9,085,586
1976	58.7	2.7	61.4	38.6	9,858,098
1981	57.6	3.7	61.3	38.7	10,919,426
1986	54.4	5.6	60.0	40.0	11,965,311

The labour force participation rates calculated for persons aged 15 years and over are defined as the ratio of the labour force (the employed plus those reported as unemployed) to the total population in a given age-sex category. An examination of the age-sex specific labour force participation rates displayed in Table 7 show similar trends for the two populations, but different patterns by gender and age within each population. For both Aborigines and the total population, there has been a decline in participation rates for young persons aged 15-19 years. A similar decline was evident for older persons starting at ages 45 and over for Aborigines, and at ages 55 years and over for the total population. The lower participation for the age group 15-19 years may be due to school attendance and lack of employment opportunities for the young, while that among the older groups could be due to early exit from the labour force owing to retirement, lack of employment, and morbidity, especially among male adult Aborigines. The data clearly show that Aboriginal age-sex specific participation rates were considerably lower than for the total population.

The data in Table 7 reveal that while there has been an increase in labour force participation for young and adult persons aged 20-44 for the total population, for Aborigines participation only increased between 1971-76 and then stabilised just below

Table 7. Labour force participation rates by age-sex groups, population and census year

	Aboriginal males			Total males		
Age	1971	1976	1986	1971	1976	1986
15-19	55.8	54.7	49.3	59.0	56.0	52.9
20-24	77.7	79.9	74.6	91.8	89.4	88.2
25-34	79.9	82.9	76.5	97.5	95.8	92.7
35-44	76.3	78.2	71.8	97.8	95.9	92.5
45-54	72.2	71.9	61.2	95.6	93.2	88.4
55-59	63.1	60.5	46.4	90.6	86.9	77.1
60-64	46.1	40.5	27.5	77.4	68.4	45.7
65+	10.3	9.4	8.2	22.3	16.8	9.2
Total	66.9	68.8	63.1	82.7	79.3	73.5
	Aboriginal females			Total females		
Age	1971	1976	1986	1971	1976	1986
15-19	34.7	36.9	37.8	56.5	50.3	50.9
20-24	29.1	37.0	44.4	60.6	65.0	73.7
25-34	21.8	30.0	36.8	40.6	49.9	59.4
35-44	22.8	31.6	37.3	47.7	57.9	63.1
45-54	22.1	26.1	27.4	42.2	50.7	53.9
55-59	12.8	20.9	17.6	29.5	35.2	31.6
60-64	5.3	7.1	8.0	16.9	18.2	13.8
65+	2.4	3.3	3.2	3.8	5.1	3.1
Total	23.6	30.2	34.5	39.2	43.8	46.8
	Aboriginal population			Total population		
Age	1971	1976	1986	1971	1976	1986
15-19	45.2	45.8	43.5	57.8	53.2	51.9
20-24	53.5	58.5	59.3	76.3	77.3	81.0
25-34	51.2	56.5	56.0	69.9	73.2	76.0
35-44	49.7	54.0	53.8	73.5	77.4	78.0
45-54	48.2	49.5	43.4	69.1	72.5	71.6
55-59	39.4	41.9	31.3	59.6	60.8	54.7
60-64	24.8	23.2	16.8	46.7	42.3	29.4
65+	6.7	6.4	5.4	11.8	10.0	5.7
Total	45.6	49.5	48.3	60.7	61.4	60.0

the 1976 level. Aborigines show a divergent trend by gender: male age-specific participation rates showed a continuous declining labour force participation trend, while females showed an increasing trend. A high increase in labour force participation of females of both populations is especially evident in Table 7. For males of both populations an opposite trend to reduced labour force participation.

Employment levels

There has been declining employment for both the Aboriginal and total populations. Employment levels (calculated as the ratio of the number employed persons to the labour force, times 100) classified by gender and population in Table 8, show that the magnitude of the decline has been substantial for Aborigines and moderate for the total population. Whereas the level of employment for the total population has declined from 98.3 (almost full employment) in 1971 to 90.8 per cent in 1986, for Aborigines this level has declined from 90.7 to 64.7 per cent over the same period. The share of total employment in 1986 that was Aboriginal was 0.7 per cent compared to the Aboriginal share of the total population of 1.5 per cent. In terms of the unemployed, the Aboriginal share was even larger, 3.5 per cent of the total number of unemployed persons.

Table 8. Employment levels as per cent of labour force by sex and population: 1971-86.

	1971	1976	1981	1986
Aboriginal population				
Male (%)	90.1	81.7	74.1	64.0
Female (%)	91.6	83.2	77.9	65.9
Total (%)	90.7	82.2	75.4	64.7
Sex ratio[1]	2.9	2.2	1.8	1.7
Total population				
Male (%)	98.5	95.9	94.5	91.0
Female (%)	97.8	95.0	93.2	90.4
Total (%)	98.3	95.6	94.1	90.8
Sex ratio[1]	2.2	1.8	1.7	1.5

Note: 1. Sex ratios of employed males per employed females expressed in terms of per person rate.

Despite the marked differences in the levels and declines in employment between the two populations, the sex-specific employment levels of the labour force within each population show small differences. However, there are considerable differences in absolute employment levels by gender, as revealed by the sex ratios of the employed in Table 8. The sex ratios of employed persons expressed in terms of male per female ratio declined from 2.9

males per every employed female in 1971 to 1.7 males per every female in 1986 for the Aboriginal population. For the total population, it has declined from 2.2 to 1.5 over the same period. In relation to men, female employment, especially among Aboriginal people, has increased significantly over time, although gender equity in employment is still a long way off.

Unemployment levels

While there has been an increase in overall unemployment levels among the two populations, the level of Aboriginal unemployment irrespective of gender is high (see Table 9). While the data suggest that the two populations have experienced rapid increases in levels of unemployment, it has to be noted that the total population started from a low unemployment base in 1971, while the Aboriginal labour force had an unemployment level of 9.3 per cent at that time. Even in 1986, the Aboriginal unemployment level was about four times higher than that of the total population: 35.3 per cent for the Aboriginal population in contrast to 9.2 per cent for the total population.

While Aboriginal males had higher unemployment levels than their female counterparts, females in the total population had higher levels than males. Furthermore, the data in Table 9 show considerable differences in the the number of unemployed by gender, males being the majority of the unemployed. In absolute terms, males predominate among employed as well as unemployed persons. Among Aborigines, there were 3.5 unemployed men for every unemployed female in 1971. The corresponding figure for the total population was 1.4. By 1986, the sex ratio of the unemployed has markedly dropped to 1.8 men for every female for Aborigines, and has remained stable at 1.4 men for every female

Table 9. Unemployment levels as per cent of the labour force by sex and population:1971-86.

Sex	1971	1976	1981	1986
Aboriginal population				
Male (%)	9.6	18.3	25.9	36.0
Female (%)	8.3	16.8	22.1	34.1
Total (%)	9.3	17.8	24.6	35.3
Sex ratio	3.5	2.5	2.2	1.8
Total population				
Male (%)	1.5	4.1	5.5	9.0
Female (%)	2.3	5.0	6.8	9.6
Total (%)	1.7	4.4	5.9	9.2
Sex ratio	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.4

for the total population. While these figures indicate that the sex ratios of unemployed persons were much larger for Aborigines than for the total population, the rapid decline of these ratios for Aborigines also suggests that Aboriginal females are increasingly becoming unemployed (partly due to greater labour force participation) relative to females in the total population.

Census-based Aboriginal unemployment levels, though high, considerably underestimate the true level of Aboriginal unemployment. The number unemployed according to the censuses increased from 2,410 in 1971 to 8,062 in 1976, and to 23,409 in 1986, while the number of unemployed people registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) rose from 3,653 in 1971 to 11,812 in 1976 and to 36,462 in 1986 (CES data from Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1987: 33) Both sets of data showed about a ten fold increase over the 1971-1986 period. The Census-based estimates of the number of unemployed Aborigines were about 35 per cent short of the number of unemployed registered with the CES (see Miller 1985). Even the CES data may be an underestimate, as shown by Loveday's (1985: 126-7) survey of Katherine.

Youth unemployment is high, and it is especially high among Aboriginal youth. Owing to lack of comparative data, the age-sex structure of the unemployed is illustrated using 1986 Census data only (see Table 10). The majority of the unemployed, 79 per cent of the Aboriginal and 67 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population in 1986, were aged 15-34 years. Among these young people unemployment was heaviest among those aged 15-24 years. The number of unemployed in the age group 15-24 years was twice in the age bracket 25-34 years for the Aborigines, and 1.7 times for the non-Aboriginal population. In the young labour force aged 15-24 years, 46 per cent of Aborigines, and 16 per cent of non-Aborigines were unemployed. Even among older Aborigines aged 35 years and over, about a quarter of the labour force was unemployed. Although the age pattern of unemployment for the two populations was similar, Aboriginal unemployment levels at

Table 10. Unemployment rates as per cent of the labour force by sex-age groups, and population: 1986

Age group (years)	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
15-24	45.9	45.2	15.9	15.7
25-34	33.3	28.0	8.2	8.9
35-54	26.5	22.0	5.6	6.1
55 +	26.7	25.3	7.5	4.6
Total				
Reported, 15 +	36.0	34.1	8.7	9.4
Adjusted, 15 +	32.5	30.3	8.7	9.4

every age group were at least three times higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population. Among the non-Aboriginal population, attention also has to be drawn to the high youth unemployment level of 16 per cent in the age group 15-24 years, in contrast to a level of 6 per cent or less among those aged 35 years and over.

The exceptionally high unemployment rates among Aboriginal people could be due in part to the young age structure of the population. However, controlling for differences in age structure between the two populations by applying the age distribution of the non-Aboriginal labour force to the age-sex specific unemployment rates of the Aboriginal population shows that the youthfulness of the Aboriginal population explains only a small part of the difference in unemployment between the two populations. The overall Aboriginal unemployment level was reduced from 36 per cent to 33 per cent for males and from 34 per cent to 30 per cent for females as a result of controlling for differences in age structure, that is by assuming the Aboriginal labour force has the same age structure as the non-Aboriginal population.

In 1986, 80 per cent of the unemployed of both populations were looking for full-time work. However, a considerably higher proportion of females than males, especially of the total population, were looking for part-time work. Among males, relatively more Aborigines were looking for part-time work. The percentages looking for part-time jobs among Aborigines were 15 per cent for males and 28 per cent for females. For the total population, they were 11 per cent for males and 34 per cent for females.

Industry

There have been substantial shifts in the nature of Aboriginal employment since 1971. A major feature of Tables 11 and 12 is the substantial decline in Aboriginal employment in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting to a level approaching that of the total population: from 24.3 per cent employed in this sector in 1971 to only 7.0 per cent in 1986. Another important change is the large and growing public sector employment of Aborigines in areas such as community services and public administration: employment in these sectors accounted for a very significant 40.6 per cent of the total in 1986. Independent data on Aboriginal people employed under the Federal Public Service Act support the evidence of increased Aboriginal employment in the public sector. Aboriginals employed in the Commonwealth public service rose from 584 people in 1973 to 1,423 in 1985, representing respectively 0.4 and 0.8 per cent of total Commonwealth public service employment (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1987: 35). Employment in sectors such as manufacturing and construction, which employed a significant proportion of Aborigines in the past, has declined. However, there were increases in Aboriginal employment in wholesale and retail trade, transport and storage, and recreation, personal and other services. In contrast to Aborigines, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade provided significant share of employment for the total population. The role of public administration and defence, and community services, though significant, was considerably lower than that for Aborigines.

Table 11. Major industry of employed persons by population: 1971-86.

Aboriginal population	1971	1976	1981	1986
Agriculture, forestry, fish & hunt	24.3	11.6	10.2	7.0
Mining	2.6	1.7	1.9	1.9
Manufacturing	11.7	14.5	8.7	8.8
Electricity, gas, water	0.8	1.2	1.4	1.6
Construction	9.8	11.0	5.2	6.0
Wholesale & retail trade	6.1	9.8	6.6	9.5
Transport & storage	3.0	4.9	5.6	6.2
Communication	0.7	1.1	1.1	1.5
Finance, property & business services	1.2	2.9	2.2	3.9
Public administration & defence[1]	3.7	9.5	10.4	12.1
Community services	25.8	15.4	22.0	28.5
Recreation, personal & other services	3.8	4.1	3.6	5.4
Non-classifiable, not stated	6.6	12.3	21.1	7.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total population	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Agriculture, forestry, fish & hunt	7.4	7.0	6.0	5.7
Mining	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.5
Manufacturing	23.2	19.7	17.7	15.0
Electricity, gas, water	1.7	1.8	2.0	1.9
Construction	7.9	7.4	6.3	6.6
Wholesale & retail trade	18.9	18.0	17.4	18.9
Transport & storage	5.2	5.0	5.2	5.1
Communication	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.1
Finance, property & business services	6.9	7.2	8.4	10.1
Public administration & defence	5.4	5.6	5.6	6.0
Community services	10.8	13.5	14.9	17.3
Recreation, personal & other services	5.1	4.9	5.2	6.0
Non-classifiable, not stated	4.0	6.8	7.7	3.7
Total[2]	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: 1. Of the Aborigines in public administration and defence, most of them were in public administration; for example, in 1986 only 10 per cent of Aborigines in this sector were in defence.

2. The total number of employed Aborigines were 23,546 in 1971, 37,144 in 1976, 33,744 in 1981, and 42,878 in 1986. The corresponding figures for the total population were 5,240,428, 5,788,145, 6,292,631, and 6,513,515, respectively.

There were major gender differences in industry groups of Aboriginal employment, as shown in Table 12. Female employment in community services was considerably higher than for males, while there were relatively more males than females in public administration and defence. There were relatively more females than males in wholesale and retail trade, recreation, personal and other services, and finance, property and business services. There were higher proportions of males than females in manufacturing, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, transport and storage, and construction; each accounting between 9 and 11 per cent of male employment. There were also relatively more males than females in mining, and electricity, gas and water; each accounted for between 2 and 3 per cent of male employment.

Table 12. Industry of employed Aboriginal population by sex: 1971-86.

Males	1971	1976	1981	1986
Agriculture, forestry, fish & hunt	28.1	14.6	13.9	9.4
Mining	3.3	2.2	2.8	2.8
Manufacturing	12.3	16.1	10.4	10.6
Electricity, gas, water	1.0	1.8	2.0	2.3
Construction	13.1	15.5	7.6	8.8
Wholesale & retail trade	5.4	8.4	6.0	8.4
Transport & storage	3.8	6.5	8.1	8.9
Communication	0.6	1.1	1.2	1.7
Finance, property & business services	0.7	2.0	1.6	2.7
Public administration & defence	4.2	10.3	11.7	12.9
Community services	20.1	9.4	15.5	19.6
Recreation, personal & other services	1.5	2.5	2.2	4.0
Non-classifiable, not stated	6.0	9.6	17.0	7.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Females	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Agriculture, forestry, fish & hunt	13.3	5.0	3.4	3.1
Mining	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.4
Manufacturing	10.1	10.9	5.5	5.8
Electricity, gas, water	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4
Construction	0.3	1.0	0.8	1.3
Wholesale & retail trade	8.2	12.7	7.6	11.3
Transport & storage	0.6	1.3	1.0	1.6

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Table 12. Continued.

Females Continued	1971	1976	1981	1986
Communication	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.3
Finance, property & business services	2.5	5.1	3.1	5.7
Public administration & defence	2.4	7.9	8.2	10.7
Community services	42.4	28.7	33.7	43.3
Recreation, personal & other services	10.5	7.7	6.2	7.9
Non-classifiable, not stated	8.1	18.2	28.8	7.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Occupational status and employment sector

The data in Table 13 clearly indicate little or no improvements in the occupational status of employed Aborigines between 1971 and 1986, improvements being measured by increases in the percentage of employers and self-employed among the employed. On the other hand, there have been modest improvements in the occupational status of the total population, especially females, as relatively more people moved to self-employed and employer categories. Almost all Aborigines (96 per cent) employed were wage or salary earners, compared to 83 per cent for the total employed population. The pattern of occupational status between male and female Aboriginals was similar, with males being relatively more self-employed and employers. This was also true for the total population. There were, however, significant status differences by gender between the populations. The males in the total population had a considerably higher proportion of employers and self-employed persons and lower proportion of wage or salary earners than male Aborigines (see Table 13). Females in the total population also had higher worker status than both male and female Aboriginals, but lower status than their male counterparts.

The data on industry sector in Table 14 show that the public sector is the major employer of Aborigines. The proportion of the Aboriginal population employed by Federal, State and local governments increased from 31 per cent in 1976 to 40 per cent in 1986. On the other hand, public sector employment for the total population remained stable at about 25 per cent, as the majority of employment was in the private sector. The contribution of the private sector to Aboriginal employment appears large (having declined from 68 to 55 per cent during the period), though low relative to the total population. However, the contribution of the private sector may be exaggerated, as some remote communities where there is little private sector activity were shown to have large employment from this sector in the 1986 Census, presumably due to misclassification of employment in

Aboriginal organisations and community councils as private instead of public sector employment. It also seems that in some cases participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme is considered as private sector activity when such employment is funded by the Federal Government (Tesfaghiorghis 1990: 82-83).

Comparisons of industry sector by sex of Aboriginal people show more females than males work at Federal and State government levels, while relatively more males than females work with local governments. Among the total population, relatively more males than females work for Federal and local government, while more females work with State governments. With regard to the private sector, sex differences in employment in both populations were small.

Table 13. Occupational status of employed persons by sex, Aboriginal and total population: 1971-86.

Aboriginal males	1971	1976	1981	1986
Wage/salary earner	96.4	95.0	96.9	95.3
Self-employed	2.8	4.3	1.9	3.1
Employer	0.5	-	0.7	1.3
Unpaid helper	0.3	0.7	0.5	0.3
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal females	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Wage/salary earner	97.2	93.5	96.2	96.3
Self-employed	1.4	3.2	1.7	1.9
Employer	0.5	-	0.6	0.9
Unpaid helper	0.9	3.3	1.5	0.9
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal population	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Wage/salary earner	96.6	94.5	96.6	95.7
Self-employed	2.4	3.9	1.8	2.6
Employer	0.5	-	0.7	1.2
Unpaid helper	0.5	1.6	0.9	0.5
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

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Table 13. Continued.

Total males	1971	1976	1981	1986
Wage/salary earner	85.3	84.4	83.7	81.1
Self-employed	8.3	9.5	10.0	11.5
Employer	6.1	5.6	6.0	7.0
Unpaid helper	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.4
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total females	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Wage/salary earner	90.3	85.1	86.2	85.8
Self-employed	4.7	7.3	7.5	7.7
Employer	3.6	4.3	4.3	4.8
Unpaid helper	1.4	3.3	2.0	1.8
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total population	**1971**	**1976**	**1981**	**1986**
Wage/salary earner	86.7	84.7	84.6	82.9
Self-employed	7.3	8.7	9.1	10.0
Employer	5.4	5.1	5.4	6.2
Unpaid helper	0.7	1.5	0.9	0.9
Total employed	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: - included with self-employed.

Table 14. Employment/industry sector by sex, Aboriginal and total population: 1976-86.

Aboriginal males	1976[1]	1986
Federal government	6.8	8.5
State government	18.0	20.9
Local government	6.9	9.3
Private sector	68.3	54.7
Not stated	n/a	6.6
Total	100.0	100.0

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Table 14. Continued.

Aboriginal females	1976[1]	1986
Federal government	8.4	11.0
State government	20.2	27.3
Local government	1.4	2.9
Private sector	70.0	51.3
Not stated	n/a	7.5
Total	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal population	**1976[1]**	**1986**
Federal government	7.3	9.4
State government	18.7	23.3
Local government	5.2	6.9
Private sector	68.8	53.5
Not stated	n/a	6.9
Total	100.0	100.0
Total males	**1976[1]**	**1986**
Federal government	8.5	8.5
State government	14.4	14.2
Local government	2.3	2.7
Private sector	74.8	72.7
Not stated	n/a	1.9
Total	100.0	100.0
Total females	**1976[1]**	**1986**
Federal government	5.8	6.5
State government	16.8	18.0
Local government	0.8	1.4
Private sector	76.6	71.7
Not stated	n/a	2.4
Total	100.0	100.0
Total population	**1976[1]**	**1986**
Federal government	7.6	7.7
State government	15.3	15.7
Local government	1.7	2.2
Private sector	75.4	72.3
Not stated	n/a	2.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: 1. The 'not stated' category for 1976 was included with the private sector.

Income

Income estimates from censuses produced by Treadgold (1988) suggest that there have been considerable increases in intercensal mean and median gross incomes of individuals aged 15 years and over (see Table 15). However, Treadgold's (1988: 594-6) estimates of real mean and median Aboriginal incomes (deflated by the Consumer Price Index) show little or no improvements between 1976 and 1986. In fact there has been substantial reductions in real incomes of Aboriginal males and increases for females, though from a low base for females (Treadgold 1988: 594-7). However, if 1975-76 is used as a base instead of the 1980-81 year used by Treadgold, there has been improvements in Aboriginal real incomes. Real incomes of the total population also declined due to a decline in male incomes, a phenomenon similar to the decline for Aboriginal males. However, the decline for non-Aboriginal males was slower than for Aboriginal males. Real incomes of females of both populations have increased, but at a faster rate for Aboriginal females. In real terms, the ratio of Aboriginal median annual individual income to total population individual annual income, rose from 59.7 per cent in 1976 to 64.8 per cent in 1986. Income differences between the two populations were widest between males, and this difference was increasing, while that between females was becoming narrower. The ratio of Aboriginal to total population male median incomes declined from 64.2 per cent in 1976 to 50.5 per cent in 1986. On the other hand, the ratio between females increased from 77.0 per cent in 1976 to 96.7 per cent in 1986. With respect to Aborigines, the ratio of female to male median annual income rose from 39.8 per cent in 1976 to 74.9 per cent in 1986. For the total population, female incomes as a ratio of male incomes rose from 33.2 to 39.1 per cent over the same period.

As regards income differences between the two populations, the largest difference was observed when income was measured in terms of income per head. Treadgold (1988: 597) shows that the ratio of Aboriginal income per head to that of total population remained stable at 51 per cent between 1976-1986. The widest income gap revealed by the per capita income calculation is due to the disproportionately large number of children in the Aboriginal population.

Gross median annual incomes of employed Aborigines increased from $7,540 in 1981 to $13,034 in 1986, a 73 per cent increase. The corresponding figures for the total population were $10,734 and $16,304 respectively, a 52 per cent increase. The employed male Aboriginal income rose from $8,216 in 1981 to $13,920 in 1986. The corresponding incomes of employed female Aborigines were $6,344 and $11,460, respectively. For the total population, respective incomes were $12,219 and $18,624 for males, and $8,217 and $12,648 for females. These gross incomes of employed persons reinforce the findings about individual incomes: that is, female incomes are rising faster in relation to male incomes and the income gap differences between the two populations are wider for males and narrower for females.

Table 15. Estimates of median and mean individual annual gross incomes by population and sex: 1976-86.

Median income: Aboriginal population			
Year	Males	Females	Total
1976	4,313	1,716	2,681
1981	4,775	3,053	3,668
1986	7,588	5,687	6,214
Median income: total population			
Year	Males	Females	Total
1976	6,714	2,229	4,491
1981	10,493	3,597	6,509
1986	15,039	5,883	9,593
Mean income: Aboriginal population			
Year	Males	Females	Total
1976	4,362	2,191	3,276
1981	5,756	3,559	4,634
1986	9,482	6,642	8,017
Mean income: total population			
Year	Males	Females	Total
1976	7,028	3,057	5,025
1981	11,232	5,101	8,130
1986	16,322	8,285	12,251

Source: Treadgold (1988).

The real incomes of employed Aborigines increased between 1981 and 1986. When gross median incomes were deflated by the Consumer Price Index, real incomes increased by 15 per cent for both sexes, 12 per cent for males, and 20 per cent for females. Again it must be noted that these increases have been from a relatively low base.

Some key policy implications

The analysis undertaken here on change in Aboriginal economic status as measured by social indicators for the period 1971 and 1986 can be summarised as follows. Aboriginal

educational status has improved markedly and Aboriginal income status has also improved, albeit from a low base. The former is probably due to an emphasis in Government policy on education and the latter to greater incorporation of Aborigines in the Australian social security system (see Altman and Sanders 1991). However, Aboriginal employment status has declined. In particular, for the period 1971 to 1986 Aboriginal employment growth did not keep up with the growth in the Aboriginal working age population, whereas for the total population the growth trend for employment and working age population were almost identical. There have been structural changes in Aboriginal occupations, with employment in the historically important primary sector declining substantially and employment in the public sector increasing. Overall though the occupational status of Aborigines has remained low and has not shown any improvement.

These data on the low economic status of Aboriginal people to 1986 reinforce the findings of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs that used census data to 1981 (Miller 1985). The recommendations of the Miller Committee resulted in a special Federal Government policy focus on Aboriginal employment problems incorporated in the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) launched in 1986 (Commonwealth of Australia 1987). The AEDP has two broad policy goals: first, to ensure Aboriginal economic equality (as measured by employment, income and education status indicators) by the year 2000; and second, to achieve a concomitant (and closely linked) reduction in Aboriginal welfare dependency to a level commensurate with that of other Australians (ibid: 2-4). The analysis here suggests that the broad thrust of government policy has correctly targeted Aboriginal employment as a crucial area requiring attention. About one billion dollars have been earmarked for expenditure under the AEDP between 1987 and 1992. The data presented here are from 1986 (at the latest) and pre-date AEDP program expenditures. Consequently it will not be possible to assess the effectiveness of the introduction of the AEDP until 1991 Census data become available.

Analysis undertaken here already indicate some potential problems that may arise in AEDP strategies and some issues that will require early remedial policy focus. We highlight three broad areas of concern here.

An initial issue is linked to changes that are evident in the age structure of the Aboriginal population. There has been a rapid growth in the Aboriginal working age population and demographic projections made to the year 2001 indicate that the population aged 15-64 years will continue to grow faster than any other age group (Gray and Tesfaghiorghis 1990). The broad social implications of this population structure is that there will be a rapidly expanding Aboriginal population of working age needing more employment and housing. There will also be a continuing (though declining) economic burden on employed Aboriginal people. The critical issue from the policy perspective is that any goals of employment equity will not only require expansion of employment opportunities

for Aboriginal people that are currently unemployed, but also additional expansion for those Aboriginal youth aged under 15 years that will be entering the labour force in the next decade. The attainment of Aboriginal employment equity will require a doubling of the current level of Aboriginal employment. Similarly, while progress in education and training under both the AEDP, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) launched in 1989, is likely given past policy outcomes evident in improvements in educational status, the goal of educational equity is optimistic. On the one hand, Aboriginal educational status is currently still low. On the other hand, many of the educationally disadvantaged live in remote locations that lack suitable educational institutions.

A second broad issue is linked to the large variations in Aboriginal economic status by place of residence, examined in some detail by Tesfaghiorghis (1991). There are wide inter-state differences. For example, Aborigines in the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Tasmania had relatively high economic status, while Aborigines in Western Australia and the Northern Territory had lower status. Aboriginal economic status is also linked to the economic status of non-Aboriginal people in the State or Territory in which they live. The major exceptions occurred in the Northern Territory where high non-Aboriginal economic status was not reflected in high Aboriginal status, and Tasmania where non-Aborigines had relatively low status, but Aborigines had the greatest equity. Analysis by section-of-State reveals more complications. As a general rule, Aboriginal residents of major urban centres had a higher economic status than residents of other urban areas, while residents of rural areas had the lowest status. However it must be emphasised that it is dangerous to simplify even to this level in what is a very complex and dynamic reality. For example, further divisions exist within urban areas, with the residents of town camps identified as a particularly disadvantaged group.

The AEDP recognises very broad geographic imbalances in Aboriginal socio-economic status, but most programs only differentiate between Aboriginal people living in rural and remote communities with severely limited access to formal employment opportunities and Aboriginal people living in urban and rural areas, with access to mainstream labour markets. The strategy for rural and remote communities emphasised by the Miller Committee and the AEDP is to create an economic base that will in turn generate jobs for local people. However, there is no concrete evidence to date that this strategy which incorporates a focus on enterprise development is having any success. Indeed some commentators question whether economic equality is possible for remote Aboriginal communities owing to structural, cultural and locational disadvantages (Altman 1990). This in turn implies that a contradiction may exist, in such contexts, between policy goals of statistical equality and self sufficiency (Altman 1987). For example, there are concerns that some programs, like the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, are not generating any jobs in remote regions that are independent of on-going government support (CDEP Working Party 1990).

The final broad issue is linked to the matching of employment opportunities and available Aboriginal labour; this issue is primarily about Aboriginal labour migration. The absence of jobs in remote regions has led to a change of emphasis to active employment programs. Such programs will deliver training to Aboriginal clients, but will then require them to migrate to seek jobs in mainstream labour markets. Such a policy shift will have problems. For example, it has been argued elsewhere that Aboriginal labour migration from remote areas may have associated cultural and social costs that may outweigh benefits (Altman 1987). More importantly Taylor (1988, 1989) has shown that Aboriginal people who live at remote communities and are tradition-oriented are relatively immobile. Taylor's case study of Katherine has also demonstrated that when new employment opportunities are created, they may not benefit local Aboriginal people. In the Katherine situation it was mainly Aboriginal people from outside the region that found employment in the expanding town economy. The creation of jobs for migrating Aboriginal people may be welcomed by policy makers searching for outcomes, but it will not alleviate the relative poverty and dependence at remote Aboriginal communities.

From both the research and policy-making perspective, this paper clearly highlights the need for, and value of, comprehensive statistics on the economic situation of Aboriginal people. At present there is a problematic reliance on information from the five-yearly census of population and housing. This is problematic because the census is not designed for labour market or economic policy analysis. The preceding discussion suggests that meeting Federal Government AEDP objectives will be both an expensive and long-term exercise. While it is always difficult to assess the effectiveness of policy in broad terms (as distinct from more narrowly defined individual program terms), the discussion here suggests that while the economic situation of Aboriginal people may have improved between 1971 and 1986, this has required a rapid escalation in expenditure (in real terms) on special Aboriginal programs (Altman and Sanders 1991). Of course, without such expenditure, the Aboriginal economic situation may well have been far worse. Yet even with such expenditure, the Aboriginal employment situation has deteriorated.

It is clear that given the demographic structure of the Aboriginal population and its geographic distribution, the goal of employment equity may require a substantial escalation in government expenditure. However, such growing subvention will not assist the AEDP goal of reduced dependency. Furthermore, in the current economic climate, and with recent reforms in Australian public administration, it is likely that all expenditure on Aboriginal special programs will come under increasing bureaucratic and public scrutiny. It is already clear that any broad evaluation of the AEDP will be largely dependent on the early availability of 1991 Census data that will facilitate comparisons between the pre-AEDP situation (1986 Census) and after three to four years of the AEDP (1991 Census). It will be of immense policy interest to assess whether there have been more evident positive changes in Aboriginal economic status between 1986 and 1991, in contrast to the period 1971 to 1986; and it will also be of interest to assess whether there is any obvious correlation, at the regional and sub-regional levels, between government expenditure on economic programs and improvement in statistical social indicators.

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