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Discussion Paper



**The economic status of older  
indigenous Australians**

**A.E. Daly**

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## SERIES NOTE

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- identify and analyse the factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force; and
- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

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Jon Altman  
Director, CAEPR  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses data from the 1986 and 1991 Censuses to describe the position of older indigenous people, those over 50 years of age, in the labour market. Older indigenous people had markedly lower levels of education than other Australians in this age group. They were also less likely to be in employment and more likely to be unemployed or outside the labour force than their counterparts among other Australians. Those in employment were found mainly in public administrative and community services and were in low skilled occupations. These characteristics were reflected in their lower median incomes than other Australians. However, in comparing 1986 and 1991 Census results for this age group, there were some positive signs. The share of indigenous people over 50 years of age with no schooling declined and the share in employment increased. There was also evidence of a relative decline in the importance of labouring as an occupation. These positive signs were not, however, reflected in an improvement in the income status of older indigenous people relative to other older Australians.

## **Acknowledgments**

This paper forms part of a larger study of the position of indigenous Australians in the labour market. I would like to thank Jon Altman for his comments on an earlier draft and Linda Roach, Krystyna Szokalski and Hilary Bek for their help and patience in preparing the final draft.

## Foreword

In April 1992, Dr Anne Daly, then Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), ANU took up a concurrent half-time Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Research Fellowship. The ABS objectives in providing research fellowships are to allow greater use of ABS data in academic research and to encourage the development of new techniques for the analysis of data. In Dr Daly's case, a principal aim of applying for this competitive Fellowship was to allow unimpeded access to the Aboriginal population sub-file so that statistical analysis from the conceptual framework of human capital theory could be undertaken for the first time. Dr Daly's ABS Fellowship ran to 31 March 1994 and in this time she completed research for a monograph with the working title 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in the Australian Labour Market'. The monograph is to be completed and published by ABS later this year.

CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 66 uses 1991 Census data to update an earlier discussion paper (No. 43) that examined a similar topic using 1986 Census data. What is of special significance about this paper is Dr Daly's ability, with unimpeded access to the Aboriginal population sub-file, to examine intercensal change in the educational and employment status of older indigenous Australians aged 50 to 64 years. This paper is the first analysis that has focused exclusively on both the contemporary socioeconomic situation of older indigenous Australians and recent intercensal change in their status.

Dr Daly is publishing this work-in-progress, which will form a chapter in the above-mentioned monograph, for two reasons. First, it is important that the results of her research at CAEPR and ABS are made widely available as soon as completed, especially given their topicality. Second, Dr Daly is seeking feedback, from policy makers and academics, that might assist her overall project. The active collaboration between CAEPR and ABS in this research project is very welcome and the assistance of ABS staff is greatly appreciated. I would like to thank Dr Daly for her willingness to disseminate her research findings in the CAEPR Discussion Paper series prior to finalisation in recognition that her research will better inform policy formulation in a very complex area.

Jon Altman  
Series Editor  
July 1994

The purpose of this paper is to use census data to document the educational and economic status of older indigenous Australians.<sup>1</sup> These people, aged over 50 years in 1991, grew up under a very different legal regime than that in place today. Prior to the legal and policy changes of the 1960s and 1970s, almost all indigenous people were excluded from many of the rights of citizenship held by non-indigenous Australians (Rowley 1971a, 1971b; Broom and Jones 1973; Altman and Sanders 1991a). Each State government was responsible for the welfare of its indigenous population and Commonwealth government intervention in indigenous affairs was very limited, except in the Northern Territory. Many indigenous people belonging to the age group covered in this paper spent their formative years under regimes, varying according to State, which restricted their movements, limited their ability to receive cash payments for work or their entitlement to social security, and offered limited educational opportunities.

The first part of the paper examines the consequences of some of these policies for the educational status of these older indigenous people. The second part describes their labour market status, including the distribution of the employed by occupation and industry, and their income status. These outcomes are a product of both past and present actions. A final section considers the changes in these indicators between 1986 and 1991 for those in this age group. These changes reflect both the changes in the opportunities available to different age cohorts during their formative years and the prevailing conditions at the time of the 1986 and 1991 Censuses.

There are important differences in the demographic structure of the indigenous and non-indigenous populations of Australia. The indigenous population is on average younger than the rest of the Australian population; in 1991, 35.3 per cent of the adult indigenous population was under 25 years of age, compared with 20 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. Older people form a much smaller proportion of the adult indigenous population than older non-indigenous people. In 1991, 14.6 per cent of the indigenous population aged 15 and over were over 50 years of age, compared with 31.9 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. Women accounted for 53 per cent of each group. Between 1971 and 1991, the over 50 age group accounted for a fairly constant 31 per cent of the non-indigenous population aged over 15 years, however, the percentage of the adult indigenous population in this age group was much smaller and actually fell. In 1971, 19 per cent of the adult indigenous population was aged over 50 years compared with 15 per cent in 1991.

These figures reflect not only the higher birth rate of indigenous people, compared with non-indigenous Australians (Gaminiratne 1992), but also their shorter life expectancy. The life expectancy of indigenous people varies by region across Australia, and estimates put it at between 10 and 20 years less than that of the total Australian population.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous

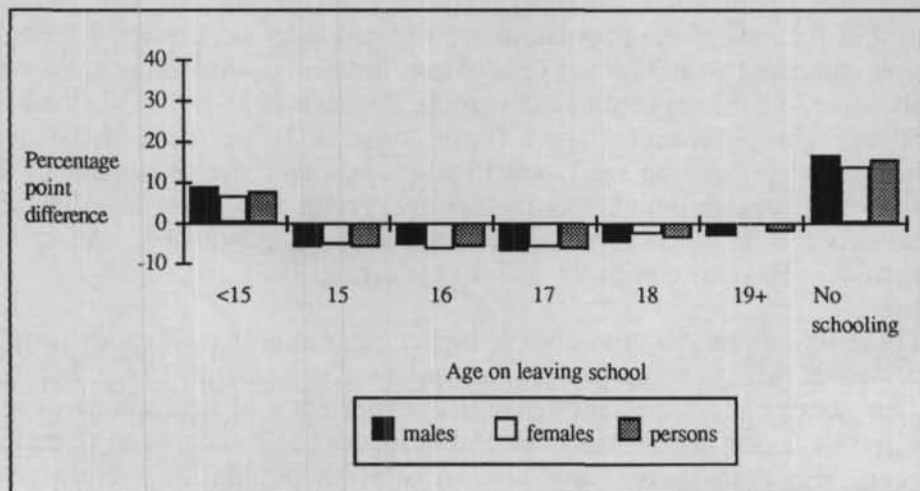
Australians have a much higher death rate during their adult years than non-indigenous Australians; the major causes of death being circulatory diseases and external causes, such as motor vehicle and other accidents, suicide and homicide (Gray 1990; Siggers and Gray 1991; Thomson and Briscoe 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1991e). The higher adult death rate is indicative of wider indigenous health problems which inhibit the ability of individuals in older age groups to actively participate in paid employment. Unfortunately, the important issue of health is not addressed in the census.

The focus of the paper is on a comparison of the status of older indigenous Australians in relation to non-indigenous Australians of the same age. In order to highlight this aspect of the data, the results have been presented, in general, in the form of differences in the percentage of the relevant population which fell into particular categories. Where this results in a negative figure, it means that a smaller percentage of the indigenous population compared with the non-indigenous population fell into a particular category; a positive figure implies that indigenous people were more likely to be in a particular group than were non-indigenous people. The detailed tables upon which the Figures are based, are presented in the appendix.

### The educational attainment of indigenous people over 50 years

Figures 1a, 1b and 2 present comparative data on the educational attainment of indigenous men and women over the age of 50 years (see Appendix Tables A1 and A2 for the data used in these graphs).

**Figure 1a. The percentage point difference in the distribution of 'age on leaving school' for indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 50-64 years, 1991.**



It is important to remember that these data relate to people born before 1941, and as such their involvement in the education system substantially predates all the recent government policies which have aimed to raise the educational attainment of indigenous people.

Figures 1a and 1b compare the age on leaving school of 50-64 year-olds and those over 65 years of age. In each age group indigenous people had less formal schooling, on average, than non-indigenous Australians. Seventeen per cent of indigenous people aged 50-64 years in 1991 had not attended school compared with 2 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. Only 6 per cent had continued at school after the age of 16 years compared with 18 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. A similar pattern was in evidence for each sex. There is some evidence however, of improved access to schooling for indigenous Australians in the 1930s and 1940s compared with earlier periods. Among the older age group, those aged over 65 years, 32 per cent had received no schooling compared with 2 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. While the share with no schooling had therefore remained constant between the two age categories for non-indigenous Australians, it fell by 15 percentage points for indigenous Australians.

**Figure 1b. The percentage point difference in the distribution of 'age on leaving school' for indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 65+ years, 1991.**

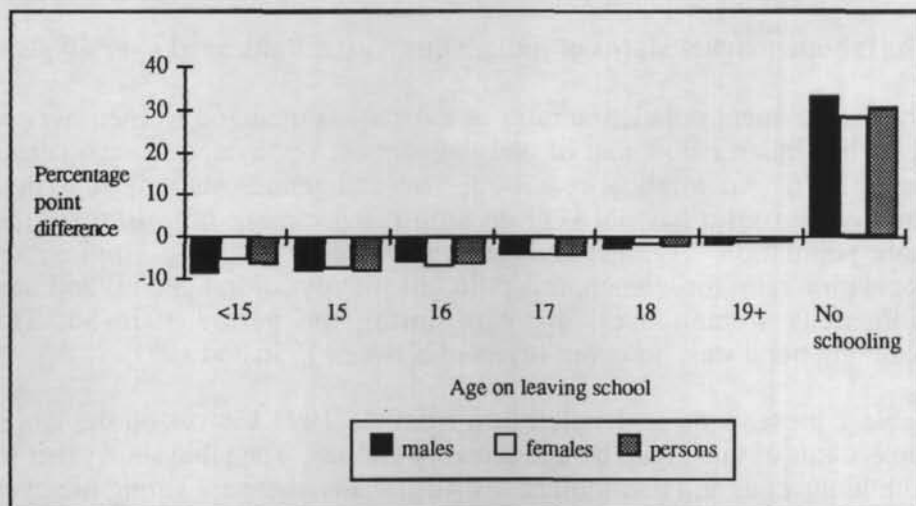
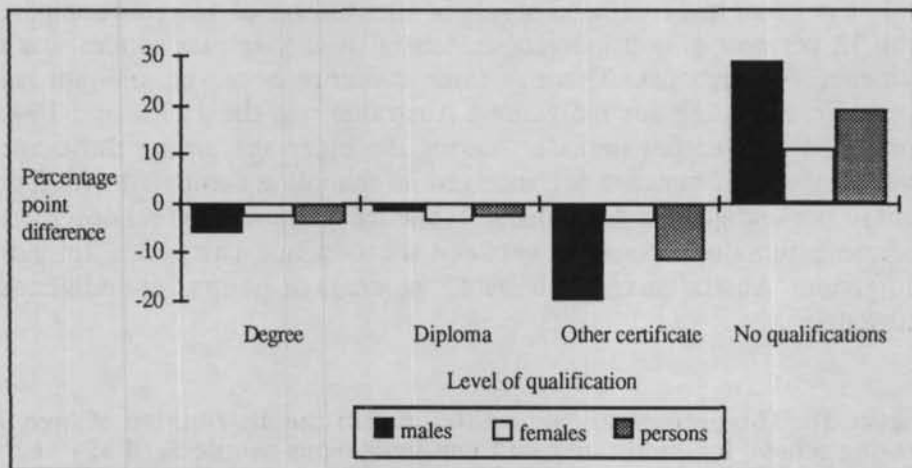


Figure 2 also shows a substantial difference in the level of qualifications held by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. (In the interests of economy of space, the two age categories have been combined as the broad conclusions remain the same.) Ninety-five per cent of indigenous men and women over 50 years of age held no qualification, compared with



75.3 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. Men were somewhat more likely to hold a qualification than women. Certificates were by far the most common qualification held by men, but there was a 20 percentage point difference between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in the share of men with these qualifications.

**Figure 2. The percentage point difference in the distribution of 'qualifications' for indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 50+ years, 1991.**



### The labour market status of indigenous Australians aged over 50 years

The employment population ratio of indigenous men and women over 50 years has fallen below that of non-indigenous Australians in each census since 1976. An implication of this for indigenous men is that their employment ratio has not kept up with the declining ratio in the wider male population.<sup>3</sup> Against the general trend of a rising employment population ratio for women, this ratio fell slightly for indigenous and non-indigenous women over 50 years during the period 1976-86. This declining trend was, however, reversed between 1986 and 1991.

Table 1 presents more detailed data from the 1991 Census on the labour force status of this group by age category and sex. The table shows that for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, there are strong life cycle effects on labour force participation and employment.<sup>4</sup> A familiar pattern, however, is apparent. Indigenous people experienced lower rates of employment, higher rates of unemployment and a higher incidence of people outside the labour force. Even among the age group most likely to be in the labour force, 50-54 year-olds, over half of indigenous people were not in the labour force compared with 26.5 per cent of non-indigenous Australians.

Full-time employment accounted for the larger share of those in employment for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Although the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme provides part-time jobs for people in indigenous communities, and therefore could be expected to add to the number of reported part-time workers, the proportion of persons working part time was higher among non-indigenous Australians than among indigenous people.<sup>5</sup>

Among 50-54 year-old non-indigenous men, 79.8 per cent were in employment, but for those over 65 years and entitled to a pension, paid employment was a minority activity. An equivalent pattern of declining employment rates was also in evidence for indigenous men but even among 50-54 year-olds, only 37.5 per cent were in employment. The lower employment rates of indigenous men in this age group were offset by higher unemployment rates, but more importantly by a larger proportion who described themselves as being outside the labour force. Forty per cent of the indigenous men in this age group considered themselves outside the labour force, compared with 13 per cent of non-indigenous men. Either this group had never actively participated in paid employment, or the transition out of the labour force came at a much earlier age for indigenous than for non-indigenous men.

There was a similar proportion of indigenous and non-indigenous men in part-time employment. In the case of indigenous men, this should include those men who were working part time under the CDEP scheme. However, as a share of total employment, part-time employment was more important for indigenous men, accounting for a quarter of employment compared with 17.5 per cent of employment among non-indigenous men over 50 years of age.

There were proportionately fewer women aged over 50 years in paid employment than men, but the same pattern of reducing attachment to the labour force with age was apparent. Fifty-five per cent of non-indigenous women aged 50-54 years were in employment, while 3.4 per cent of those over 65 years of age were in this category. There was a similar, but not so dramatic, decline in the employment rate of indigenous women. Even at its peak, among 50-54 year-olds only 27.9 per cent of indigenous women were in employment, but this figure fell to 3 per cent among those over 65 years. Women are currently eligible for the old age pension from 60 years, but the steady decline in the proportion in employment preceded the age of eligibility for the old age pension. Unemployment was markedly lower among women than among men, but the indigenous rate remained above the non-indigenous rate. Any effect of the CDEP scheme in promoting part-time employment for indigenous women, was not sufficient to make part-time employment a more frequent activity for indigenous compared with non-indigenous Australian women.

**Table 1. Labour force status of older indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by sex, 1991.**

Age	Full-time employment <sup>a</sup>	Part-time employment <sup>b</sup>	Total employment <sup>c</sup>	Labour force status <sup>d</sup>		Total labour force	Not in labour force
				Full-time unemployment <sup>e</sup>	Part-time unemployment <sup>f</sup>		
<b>Males</b>							
Indigenous							
50-54	32.8	11.5	47.6	10.0	2.3	59.9	40.1
55-59	27.6	8.9	39.5	8.8	2.3	50.6	49.4
60-64	16.4	8.5	27.4	6.4	2.0	35.8	64.2
65+	3.4	2.8	7.4	1.4	0.9	9.7	90.3
Total	20.0	7.8	30.5	6.5	1.8	38.8	61.2
Non-indigenous							
50-54	65.9	10.4	79.8	6.4	1.0	87.2	12.8
55-59	54.4	9.6	67.3	7.5	1.1	75.9	24.1
60-64	33.2	10.4	46.3	6.9	1.5	54.7	45.3
65+	4.4	3.3	8.7	0.2	0.3	9.2	90.8
Total	32.0	7.3	41.6	4.1	0.8	46.5	53.5
<b>Females</b>							
Indigenous							
50-54	14.0	11.3	27.9	3.6	1.8	33.3	66.7
55-59	7.8	8.3	18.0	2.0	2.0	22.0	78.0
60-64	3.2	2.9	7.0	1.2	1.1	9.3	90.7
65+	0.7	1.3	3.0	0.7	0.9	4.6	95.4
Total	6.4	5.9	14.0	1.9	1.4	17.3	82.7
Non-indigenous							
50-54	28.2	23.9	55.0	2.7	1.4	59.1	40.9
55-59	17.5	16.7	36.0	1.8	1.2	39.0	61.0
60-64	7.6	7.4	16.2	0.3	0.4	16.9	83.1
65+	1.2	1.5	3.4	0.1	0.3	3.8	96.2
Total	9.8	9.0	20.2	0.9	0.6	21.7	78.3

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Table 1. Continued.

Age	Full-time employment <sup>a</sup>	Part-time employment <sup>b</sup>	Total employment <sup>c</sup>	Labour force status <sup>d</sup>		Total labour force	Not in labour force
				Full-time unemployment <sup>e</sup>	Part-time unemployment <sup>f</sup>		
Persons							
Indigenous							
50-54	23.2	11.4	37.5	6.8	2.0	46.3	53.7
55-59	17.5	8.6	28.5	5.3	2.1	35.9	64.1
60-64	9.0	5.3	15.9	3.5	1.5	20.9	79.1
65+	1.9	2.0	5.0	0.9	0.9	6.8	93.2
Total	12.9	6.8	21.7	4.1	1.6	27.4	72.6
Non-indigenous							
50-54	47.5	17.0	67.7	4.6	1.2	73.5	26.5
55-59	36.5	13.0	52.3	4.7	1.1	58.1	41.9
60-64	20.3	8.9	31.1	3.6	0.9	35.6	64.4
65+	2.6	2.3	5.7	0.16	0.3	6.1	93.9
Total	20.3	8.2	30.3	2.4	0.7	33.4	66.6

a. 35+ hours worked per week.

b. Less than 35 hours worked per week.

c. Includes those who stated that they were employed but did not state their hours of work.

d. Excludes those who did not state their labour force status.

e. Includes those who were actively looking for full-time employment.

f. Includes those who were actively looking for part-time employment.

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

**Table 2. Labour force status of older indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State, 1991.**

Section-of-State	Indigenous			Non-indigenous		
	Major urban	Other urban	Rural	Major urban	Other urban	Rural
<b>Males</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	25.0	36.0	39.0	63.8	19.2	17.0
Labour force status						
Employed	45.9	35.9	40.8	66.5	60.5	66.7
Unemployed	12.3	12.6	8.7	8.1	7.8	8.4
NILF <sup>a</sup>	41.7	51.5	50.5	25.4	31.7	24.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	23.0	30.2	46.7	55.3	16.8	27.9
Labour force status						
Employed	7.4	5.5	9.2	7.6	5.7	19.6
Unemployed	2.7	2.2	1.6	0.4	0.6	0.5
NILF <sup>a</sup>	89.8	92.3	89.3	92.0	93.7	79.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Females</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	33.0	40.2	26.8	65.3	18.1	16.5
Labour force status						
Employed	25.5	17.9	15.3	37.5	30.6	41.3
Unemployed	4.2	5.3	2.8	2.8	2.3	2.3
NILF <sup>a</sup>	70.4	77.3	81.9	59.7	67.2	56.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	29.5	41.0	29.5	55.9	19.8	24.3
Labour force status						
Employed	3.8	2.2	3.3	2.8	2.6	9.8
Unemployed	1.6	2.4	0.7	0.4	0.4	0.4
NILF <sup>a</sup>	94.7	95.3	96.0	96.8	97.0	89.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Persons</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	27.7	37.4	34.9	64.3	18.8	16.8
Labour force status						
Employed	34.4	27.0	28.5	52.1	45.4	54.9
Unemployed	7.7	8.9	5.8	5.5	5.0	5.5
NILF <sup>a</sup>	57.9	67.3	65.7	42.4	49.7	39.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	25.4	34.3	40.3	55.5	17.8	26.6
Labour force status						
Employed	5.2	3.7	6.2	4.8	3.9	14.9
Unemployed	2.0	2.3	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.5
NILF <sup>a</sup>	92.7	94.0	92.7	94.8	95.6	84.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

a. NILF means not in the labour force.

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

Location of residence, as measured by section-of-State, is an important determinant of labour force status for indigenous people (Daly 1991, Taylor 1993).<sup>6</sup> Table 2 presents labour force status of older indigenous and non-indigenous Australians for two broad age categories; those still of working age, those aged 50-64 years, and those over 64 years, by section-of-State.

A first important difference between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is the geographical distribution of these older Australians. Older indigenous men and women were more likely to live outside the major urban areas. In contrast, over half of non-indigenous Australians lived in the major urban areas. Indigenous men and women of working age were more likely to be in employment in the major urban areas than in rural areas. This difference was offset by a larger group not in the labour force in rural areas. Indigenous people were more likely to be unemployed in the urban centres but there were similar unemployment rates in the rural areas for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. This probably reflects the shift of people, particularly men, out of unemployment into employment under the CDEP scheme (Taylor 1993).

Retirement from paid employment was the major activity for all people over the age of 64 years. The largest group to remain in employment among this age group were those living in rural areas. Almost one-fifth of non-indigenous men over the age of 64 years and living in a rural area were employed.

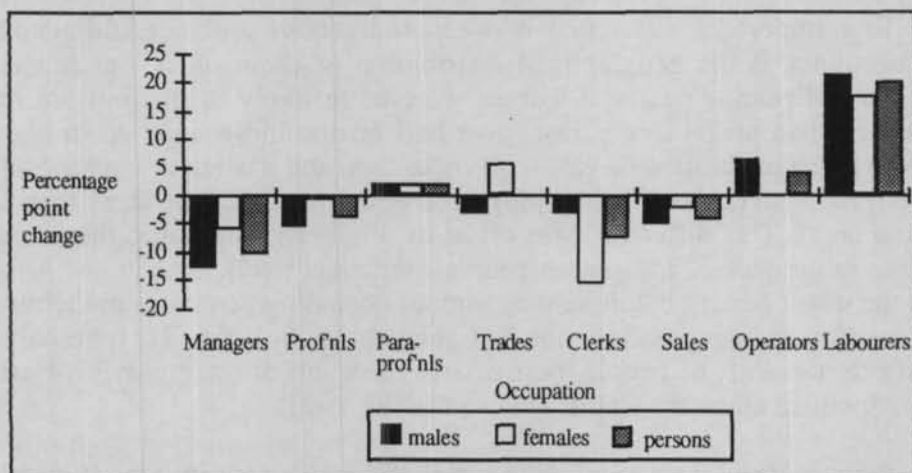
### **Industry and occupation of employment of older indigenous people of working age**

As Table 1 shows, paid employment among these older people was mainly restricted to those of working age, that is people aged 50-64 years. Figures 3 and 4 therefore relate to this age group (see Appendix tables A3 and A4 for the data used in these Figures). The results follow the general patterns of indigenous employment concentration in the less skilled occupations, and in particular industries.

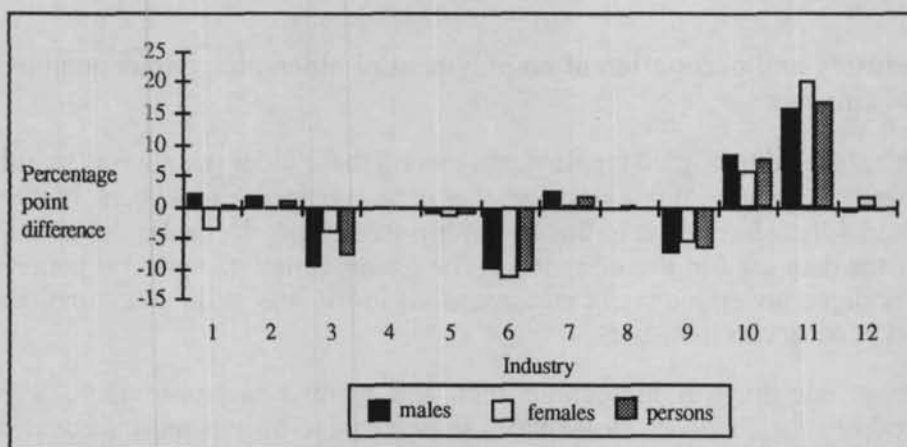
About one-third of indigenous men and women in employment were occupied as labourers, over twice the percentage of non-indigenous men and women (see Figure 3). Indigenous men were correspondingly under-represented among the more skilled occupations of managers, professionals and para-professionals. While proportionately fewer indigenous women were occupied as managers and professionals, it is interesting to note that para-professionals represented a slightly larger proportion of employed indigenous women than non-indigenous women. Older indigenous women were less likely to be employed as clerks than non-indigenous women. For each sex, there was a positive, but not particularly close, correlation between the occupational distributions of

indigenous and non-indigenous Australians at this level of occupational aggregation; (simple correlation coefficient,  $r = 0.40$  for men and  $0.42$  for women).

**Figure 3.** The percentage point difference in the occupational distribution of employed indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 50-64 years, 1991.



**Figure 4.** The percentage point difference in the distribution of industry of employment for indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 50-64 years, 1991.



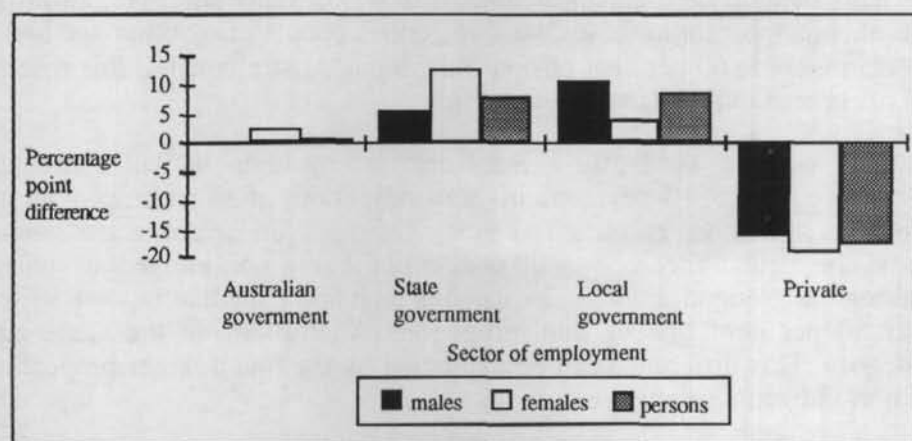
Industry: 1. agriculture; 2. mining; 3. manufacturing; 4. electricity, gas and water; 5. construction; 6. wholesale and retail trade; 7. transport and storage; 8. communications; 9. finance, property etc; 10. public administration; 11. community services; 12. recreation, personal services.

Figure 4 describes the industry of employment of indigenous people aged 50-64 years and compares this to the industry distribution of non-indigenous Australians. While there was a close positive correlation between the industry distribution of employment for females ( $r = 0.89$ ),

there was a relatively low correlation for males ( $r = 0.39$ ). The general result that indigenous people tend to be concentrated in community services and public administration is also apparent among these older workers (Taylor 1992). Half of older indigenous people were employed in these two sectors compared with one-quarter of non-indigenous Australians. Indigenous men were less likely to be in the manufacturing (industry 3) and wholesale and retail trades (industry 6) than non-indigenous men. Indigenous women were also under-represented in wholesale and retail trade and in the finance and property industries (industry 9).

Figure 5 presents industry data in terms of the government/private sector split of employment. The standard results are apparent. Both indigenous men and women were more likely to work in the public sector than their non-indigenous counterparts. The State governments were particularly important employers of Aboriginal people, accounting for almost one-quarter of the total indigenous employment in this age group.

**Figure 5. The percentage point difference in the distribution of employed indigenous and non-indigenous people aged 50-64 years by sector of employment, 1991.**



### The income of older indigenous people

A major research question which arises from any discussion of the declining labour force participation of people over 50 years relates to their alternative sources of income outside employment. Unfortunately, the census does not provide any information on sources of income, but case study evidence relating to indigenous people suggests that welfare transfers from government accounted for an important part of the income of people who were not in paid employment (Fisk 1985; Altman and Smith 1993). Among Australians in general, the 1986 Income and Housing



Survey showed that for those over the age of 50 years, 50 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women cited a government pension as their principle source of income. Amongst those not in the labour force, 70 per cent received more than half of their income from government pensions.<sup>7</sup>

In the Australian context, there has been some discussion of the effects of the availability of a pension on people's labour supply decisions. Woodland (1987) examined the labour force participation behaviour of a cross-section sample of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide people over the age of 60 years and concluded that the availability of pension benefits was a major reason for people to retire from paid employment. He argued that health, age, sex and level of education were the other deciding factors, although the close relationship between health status and the eligibility for income support from sickness and disability pensions makes it difficult to separate health effects from the income effects on labour force status. Unfortunately, the data collected in the census on indigenous people are not appropriate for further investigation of this issue, which remains an important research question.

The census does however, provide a breakdown of income according to labour force status, and these figures for indigenous and non-indigenous men and women aged 50-64 years are presented in Table 3. The table also presents data on the median income of those 65 years and over. Familiar themes are apparent in these data. Indigenous people of working age had a median income 60 per cent of non-indigenous Australians but this rose to 90 per cent among the over 65 year-olds.

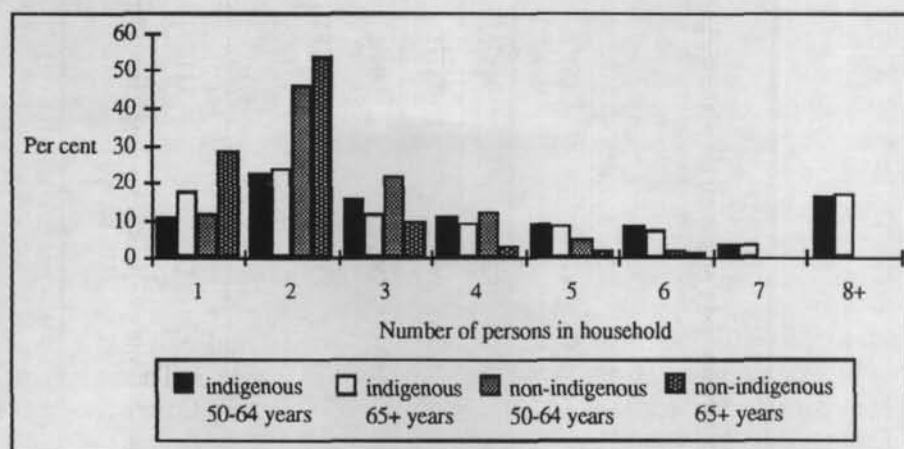
Indigenous men aged 50-64 years and in employment had a median income equal to 70 per cent of non-indigenous men in employment. However, for those classified as either unemployed or not in the labour force, the median income was 90 per cent of that of non-indigenous males. Taking the group as a whole, indigenous men had a median income which was 50 per cent that of non-indigenous Australians in the same age category. This difference can be explained by the much larger proportion of non-indigenous men in employment.

There was a smaller income gap for indigenous women aged 50-64 years compared with non-indigenous women, than for men, a ratio of 90 per cent. The median income of indigenous women who were unemployed was equal to that of non-indigenous women and for those outside the labour force, it was 10 per cent higher. Indigenous women in employment had a lower income than their non-indigenous counterparts.

In 1991, the basic annual old-age pension was \$150.80 per week (\$7,841.60 per year) for an individual and \$251.50 per week (\$13,078 per year) for a couple living together. Women over the age of 60 years and men over the age of 65 were entitled to this, subject to both income and assets tests. The median income for those 65 years and over reported in

Table 3 is rather low given this pension entitlement, and suggests that there may be some under-reporting of income by this group or perhaps a group of people who have not taken up their pension entitlement. The census figures show that indigenous men had an income which was 80 per cent of their non-indigenous counterparts, while indigenous women had the same median income.

**Figure 6. The distribution of older indigenous and non-indigenous people by size of household, 1991.**



The data presented in Table 3 relate to individual incomes. An individual's economic wellbeing also depends on the incomes of other members of the household and the number of people who share the household income. Figure 6 shows that there are substantial differences in the types of households in which older indigenous and non-indigenous Australian people lived. The most striking feature of the Figure is the much larger percentage of older indigenous people living in large households. Twenty-nine per cent of indigenous persons in each age category lived in households of six or more people, compared with 2-3 per cent of non-indigenous Australians. This difference was offset by the smaller percentage of non-indigenous Australians living in small households. It is not proposed to investigate these differences in household structure in greater detail here, but they do suggest that the level of household, as well as individual income, may be an important determinant of the economic status of this age group.

Table 4 compares the median income per household member for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in two age categories: 50-64 years and those over 64 years. There are a number of shortcomings with these figures, and they should be thought of as a rough guide to the order of magnitude of income differences between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. A major problem has been one of non-response.

**Table 3. Median incomes of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged over 50 years by labour force status, 1991.**

	Males			Female			Persons		
	Indigenous \$ (1)	Non-indigenous \$ (2)	Ratio (3)	Indigenous \$ (4)	Non-indigenous \$ (5)	Ratio (6)	Indigenous \$ (7)	Non-indigenous \$ (8)	Ratio (9)
Aged 50-64 years									
Labour force status									
Employed	18,728	25,255	0.7	15,191	17,549	0.9	17,521	22,727	0.8
Unemployed	7,466	7,985	0.9	6,929	6,670	1.0	7,304	7,636	1.0
NILF <sup>a</sup>	7,231	7,996	0.9	7,381	6,792	1.1	7,319	7,168	1.0
Total	9,546	20,028	0.5	7,828	8,632	0.9	8,403	13,591	0.6
Aged 65 years and over									
Total	7,457	8,928	0.8	7,531	7,913	1.0	7,497	8,265	0.9

a. Not in the labour force.

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

In the 1986 Census, the 'not stated' category for indigenous household income accounted for 24 per cent of all indigenous households because household income was not calculated whenever any of the necessary individual income data for its calculation were missing. In 1991, for the first time, the ABS imputed missing income data and this has reduced the 'not stated' category for household income to 6 per cent of households. It should also be noted that these figures relate to individuals living in private dwellings and exclude those in hospitals, nursing homes, prisons etc.

**Table 4. Median household income per household member for households with indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged over 50 years, 1991.<sup>a</sup>**

	Indigenous (1)	Non-indigenous (2)	Ratio (3)
<b>Aged 50-64 years</b>			
Median household income	\$26,329	\$30,692	0.86
Median household size (persons)	2.8	1.8	1.6
Median income/household member	\$9,370	\$17,243	0.54
<b>Aged 65 and over</b>			
Median household income	\$21,932	\$15,916	1.38
Median household size (persons)	2.5	1.3	1.9
Median income/household member	\$8,879	\$12,532	0.71

a. An indigenous household is defined here as one in which there was an indigenous person aged 50 years or more in residence. A household is one in which there was a person aged 50 years or more who was not an indigenous person, in residence.

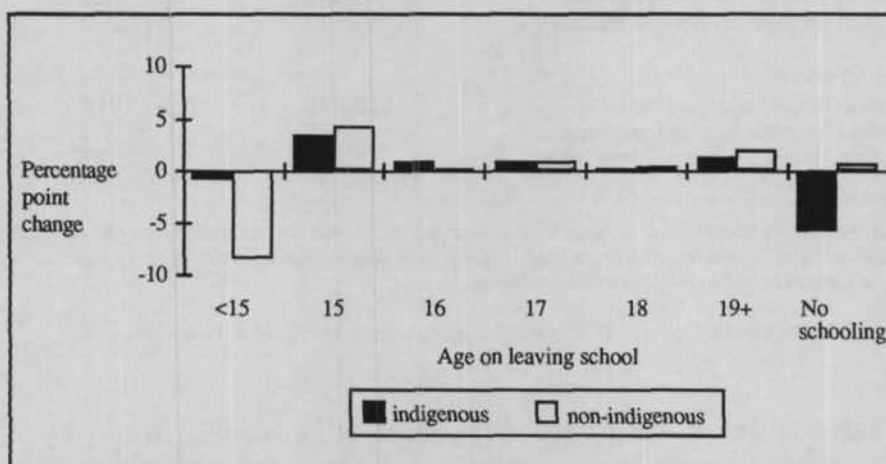
Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

As Table 4 shows, taking the differences in household structures into account changed the relative position of older indigenous people compared with non-indigenous Australians. The median income of indigenous households which had one resident aged 50-64 years was 90 per cent of non-indigenous Australian households containing a person in this age group. However, once the larger size of indigenous households was taken into account, the median income per household member fell to half that of non-indigenous households. There was a similar fall in the income ratio for households containing a person aged 65 years and over. The median income for these indigenous households was 40 per cent higher than for non-indigenous households but the larger household size meant that ratio of income per household member for indigenous households fell to 71 per cent of that of non-indigenous households.

### Changes in the educational and employment status of older indigenous Australians, 1986-91

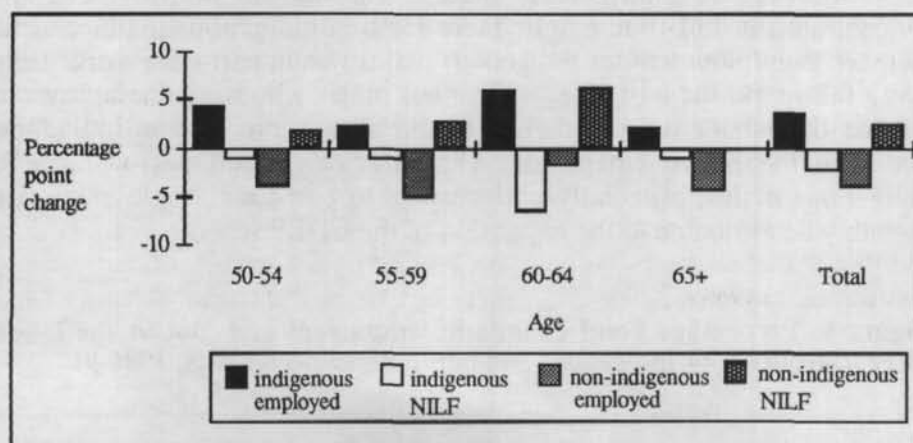
This section presents data on the changing education and employment status of older indigenous Australians compared with non-indigenous Australians, over the period 1986-91. The outcomes reflect both changes between age cohorts and the more widespread conditions prevailing at the time of each census. So, for example the changing educational attainment reported in Figure 7 suggests an improvement in educational opportunities for indigenous Australians approximately between the 1930s and 1940s. It is unlikely that changes in the educational opportunities of indigenous Australians between 1986 and 1991 will have significantly altered the educational attainment of these older people. However, the improvement in labour force status between the two census years indicates the effects of changing conditions in the labour market over that period in addition to any cohort-specific effects.

Figure 7. Percentage point change in each 'age on leaving school' category for indigenous and non-indigenous persons, 1986-91.



The major focus of interest here is the changing relative importance of each educational or labour market category, the absolute number of people in each category is of less interest. The changes reported in each figure and table are, therefore, the absolute percentage point changes between 1986 and 1991 in each of the relevant categories. So, for example, the rise in indigenous male employment of 3.7 percentage points reported in Figure 8 is the growth in the share of employment from 26.8 per cent in 1986 to 30.5 per cent in 1991. A fuller discussion of the 1986 data is presented in Daly (1993).

**Figure 8. Percentage point change in 'employed' and 'not in the labour force' categories for indigenous and non-indigenous males, 1986-91.**

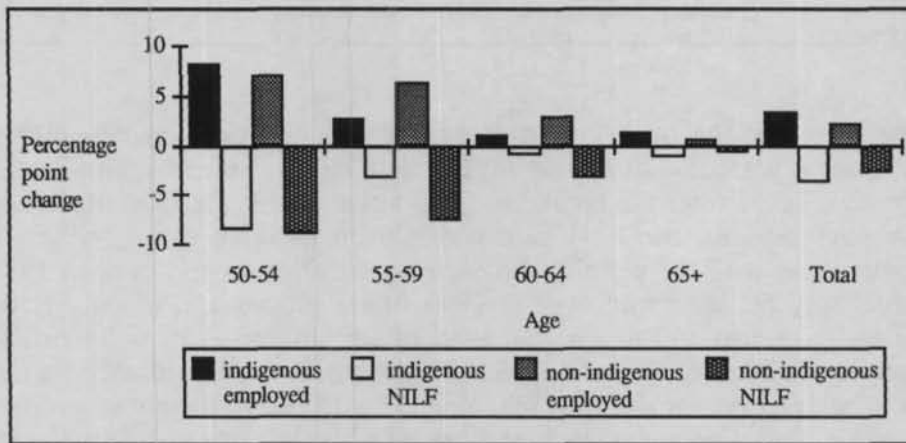


The effect of the birth cohort is apparent in the data on educational attainment presented in Figure 7. (The data relate to those aged 50 years and over as the finer age breakdown was not available for 1986. Appendix table A1 presents the 1991 data which form an input to this table.) In comparison with the people who were aged 50 years and over in 1986, those aged 50 years and over in 1991 (these groups are, of course, not mutually exclusive) had a higher level of educational attainment. Among indigenous people, there had been a substantial decline in the share of those who had never attended school, and among non-indigenous people a substantial decline in the share of those who had left school before the age of 15 years. Although there is evidence that there was some improvement in the access to schooling for this age group of indigenous Australians, the fact that non-indigenous Australians also increased their age on leaving school means that indigenous people remained behind in terms of years of schooling. As there were major changes in the qualification classification between 1986 and 1991, a comparison of the level of qualifications in the two years has not been attempted.

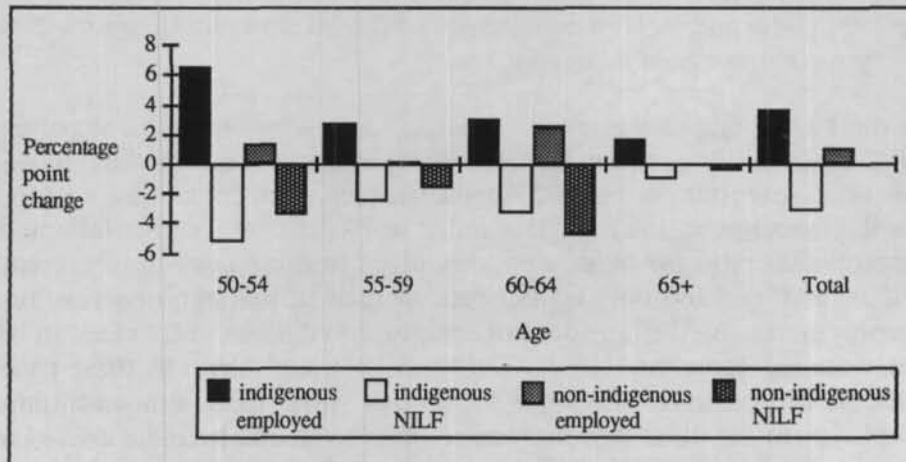
In the 1970s, one of the most dramatic changes in employment patterns took place among older men. In the period preceding the 1974-75 recession, over 80 per cent of Australian men aged 50-64 years were in employment but by 1981 this had fallen to 74 per cent. Further falls in the employment ratio for older men took place in the recession of the early 1980s, and by 1986 only 65 per cent of men in this age group were in employment. A further decline might have been expected in the deteriorating economic climate between 1986 and 1991, if these earlier patterns had persisted. Figure 8 shows that while there was a decline in employment for older non-indigenous men over this period, this did not occur for indigenous males. (Table 1 presents the 1991 data which form an

input to this table.) Total employment for non-indigenous males aged 50 years and over fell by 4 percentage points in contrast to the 4 percentage point increase for indigenous males. The fall in employment was concentrated in full-time employment for non-indigenous males and the increase in employment for indigenous males was in part-time work. There was a fall in the share of older indigenous males who were unemployed or outside the labour force and rises in the proportions of non-indigenous males in these two categories. The relatively good performance of indigenous males, especially with respect to part-time employment, can probably be attributed to the expansion of the CDEP scheme.

**Figure 9. Percentage point change in 'employed' and 'not in the labour force' categories for indigenous and non-indigenous females, 1986-91.**



**Figure 10. Percentage point change in 'employed' and 'not in the labour force' categories for indigenous and non-indigenous persons, 1986-91.**



**Table 5. Percentage point change in the share in each labour force category of older indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by section-of-State, 1991.**

Section-of-State	Indigenous			Non-indigenous		
	Major urban	Other urban	Rural	Major urban	Other urban	Rural
<b>Males</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	5.9	-3.3	-2.6	-0.1	-1.5	1.6
Labour force status						
Employed	2.8	0.7	7.3	-3.3	-1.9	-3.5
Unemployed	2.5	0.8	-5.6	3.5	2.0	2.7
NILF	-5.4	-1.5	-1.7	-0.2	-0.2	0.7
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	8.5	-10.2	1.7	-6.6	-7.4	14.0
<b>Females</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	10.3	0.0	-10.3	0.9	-3.9	3.0
Labour force status						
Employed	5.1	3.7	3.8	6.6	6.8	4.0
Unemployed	1.0	1.9	-1.8	1.4	0.9	1.3
NILF	-6.0	-5.2	-2.0	-8.0	-7.6	-5.3
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	8.5	0.0	-8.5	-10.9	-3.9	14.8
<b>Persons</b>						
50-64 years age group in each section-of-State (%)	7.2	-2.1	-5.1	0.1	-2.5	2.3
Labour force status						
Employed	4.3	3.0	6.0	1.5	2.6	-0.1
Unemployed	1.7	-1.6	-3.7	2.5	1.5	2.0
NILF	-5.9	-1.4	-2.3	-4.0	-3.9	-1.9
65+ years age group in each section-of-State (%)	7.4	-6.0	-1.4	-9.2	-6.1	15.2

Source: 1991 Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and 1 per cent ABS sample; 1986 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent section-of-State public use sample.

In contrast to the changes in male labour force status, the pattern of change for both indigenous and non-indigenous females was similar (see Figure 9). The share of employment grew particularly for indigenous females, while there was some decline in the proportion outside the labour force and the unemployment share stayed fairly constant. Of particular interest, is the increase in the percentage of indigenous women aged 50-54 years in both full-time and part-time employment. The net result shown by these figures is that indigenous employment grew more than non-indigenous employment at a time when the share of those in employment could have been expected to decline (see Figure 10).



Table 5 presents data on changes in labour force status according to section-of-State of residence. (Table 2 presents the 1991 data which form an input to this table.) It is interesting to note that while the share of older indigenous people living in major urban areas has increased and that of those living in rural areas has declined, the opposite trends are apparent for older non-indigenous people. In all sections-of-State, particularly the rural areas, there was an increase in the share of indigenous people aged 50-64 years in employment and a decrease in those outside the labour force. This general pattern was apparent also for non-indigenous people in this age group.

The aggregate pattern of an increase in the employment share for all females and indigenous males was apparent in each section-of-State. In contrast, the male non-indigenous employment share declined in each section-of-State. There is some evidence to support Taylor's (1993) hypothesis that the CDEP scheme has had its major impact on indigenous employment in the rural areas. While the share of unemployment grew for both indigenous males and females who lived in the major urban areas, it fell for working-aged males in particular, in the rural areas.

**Figure 11. Percentage point change in occupational categories for indigenous and non-indigenous males, 1986-91.**

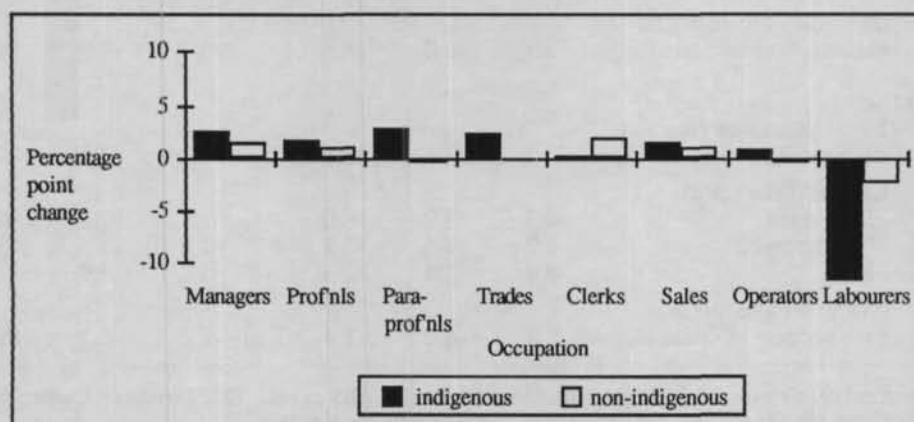
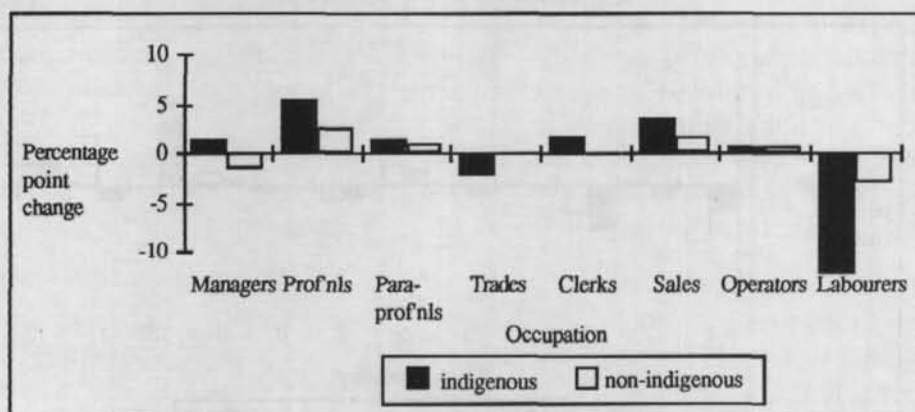
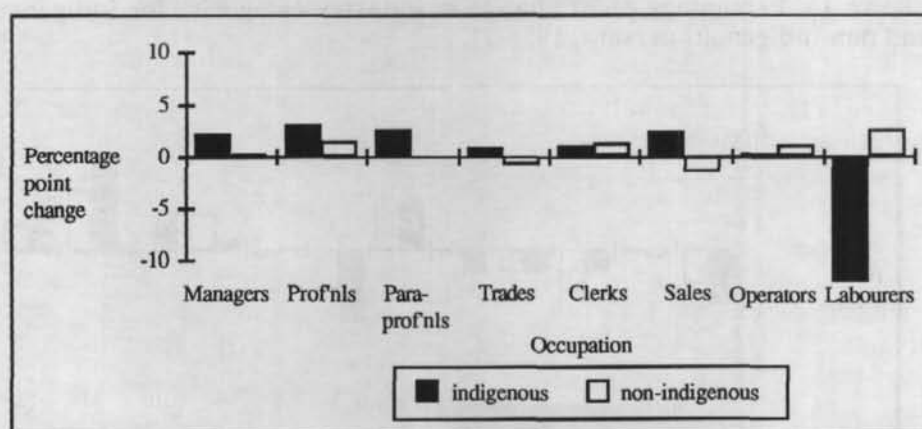


Figure 13 shows that there was a substantial decline in the share of indigenous Australians employed as labourers and increases in the proportion employed in the more skilled occupations. These results held for both males and females and there were larger absolute changes in the occupational distribution of indigenous compared with non-indigenous Australians. While the decline in the relative importance of labouring jobs for indigenous males was offset by an increasing share of employment across a range of occupations (see Figure 11), for indigenous females there was particularly strong growth among professionals and salespersons (see Figure 12).

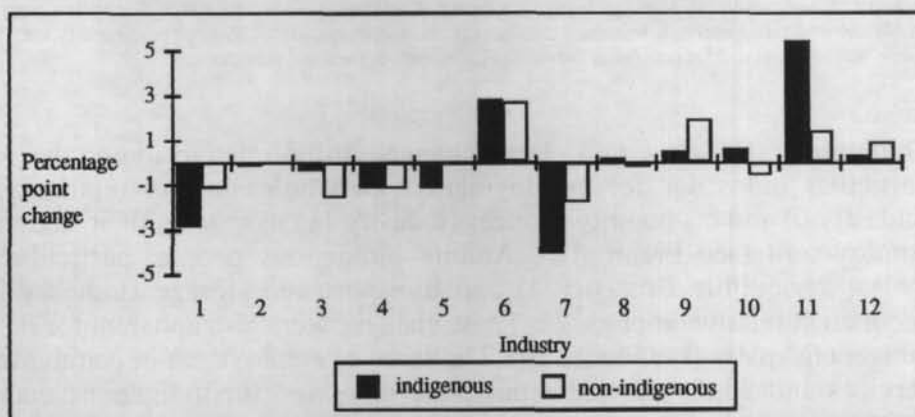
**Figure 12. Percentage point change in occupational categories for indigenous and non-indigenous females, 1986-91.**



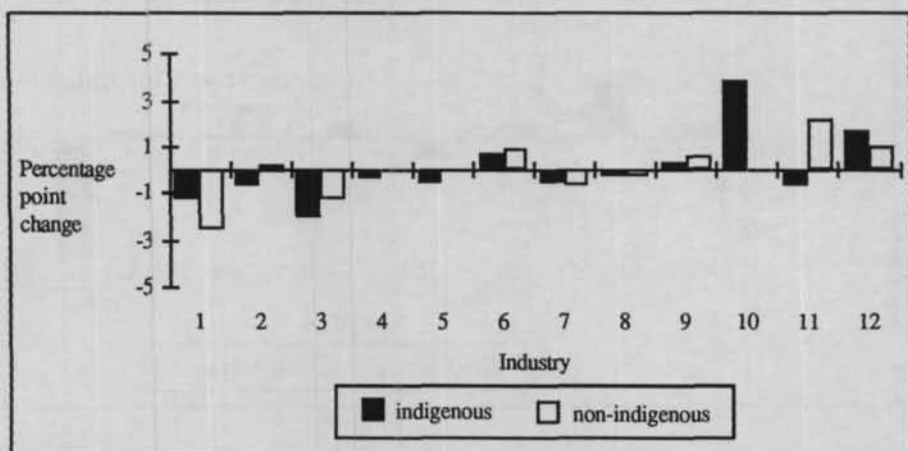
**Figure 13. Percentage point change in occupational categories for indigenous and non-indigenous persons, 1986-91.**



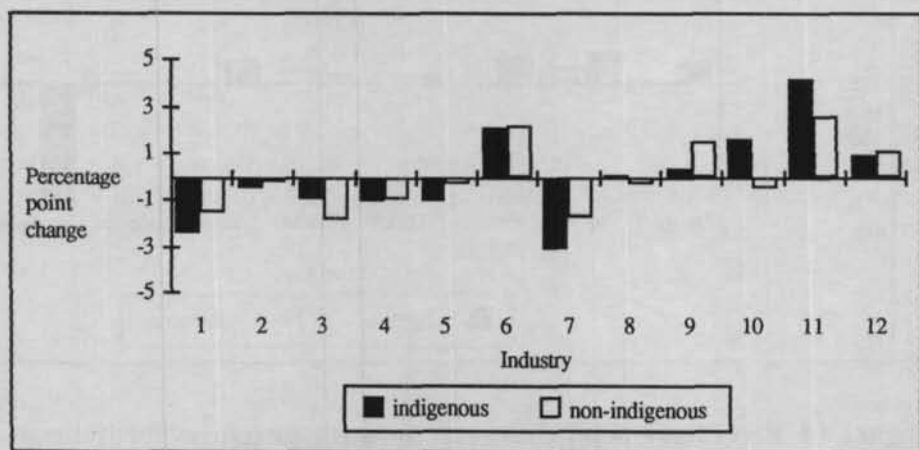
**Figure 14. Percentage point change in industry categories for indigenous and non-indigenous males, 1986-91.**



**Figure 15. Percentage point change in industry categories for indigenous and non-indigenous females, 1986-91.**



**Figure 16. Percentage point change in industry categories for indigenous and non-indigenous persons, 1986-91.**



Industry: 1. agriculture; 2. mining; 3. manufacturing; 4. electricity, gas and water; 5. construction; 6. wholesale and retail trade; 7. transport and storage; 8. communications; 9. finance, property etc; 10. public administration; 11. community services; 12. recreation, personal services.

There were also some quite large changes in the relative importance of particular industries for employment with wholesale and retail trade (industry 6) and community services (industry 11) increasing their share of employment (see Figure 16). Among indigenous people, particularly males, agriculture (industry 1) and transport and storage (industry 7) declined in relative importance. These changes were also apparent for non-indigenous males (see Figure 14). The share of employment in community services and wholesale and retail trade increased for indigenous males

while public administration (industry 10) was the major growth area for indigenous females (see Figure 15).

**Figure 17. Percentage point change in sector of employment for indigenous and non-indigenous persons, 1986-91.**

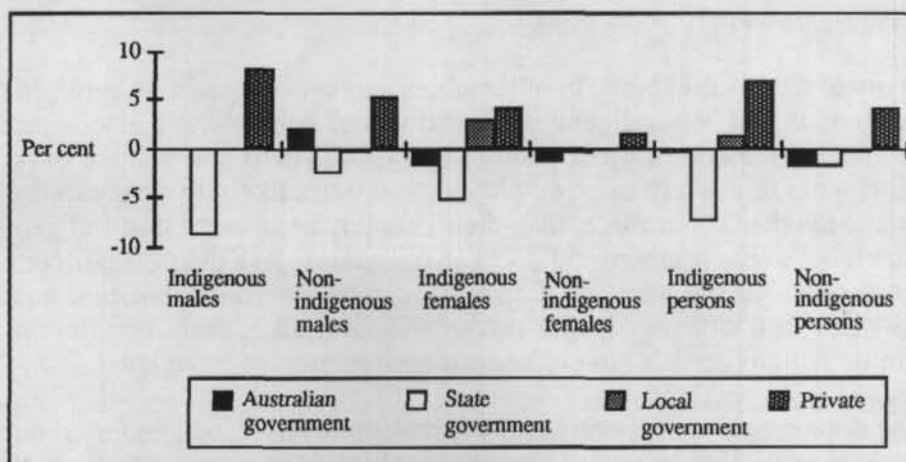


Figure 17 suggests that most of the growth in indigenous female employment in public administration took place at the local government level. There was a large reduction in the share of employment, particularly for indigenous people, in State governments. The growth in the share of employment of older indigenous people in the private sector probably in part reflects growing employment in indigenous organisations, often publicly funded but classified to the private sector.

As there was no change between 1986 and 1991 in the income ratio for males and females in the two age categories identified, it is not proposed to discuss these results in detail.

### Summary and conclusion

This paper uses data from the 1991 Census to describe the position of older indigenous people in the labour market. People over 50 years of age accounted for a smaller part of the indigenous adult population than for the rest of the Australian population. An important determinant of this fact is the health status of indigenous adults, and other research documents some of the special problems faced by this group.

Older indigenous people had markedly lower levels of educational attainment than non-indigenous Australians in these age groups. Twenty-two per cent had not attended school, compared with less than 2 per cent in

the rest of the Australian population. Over 90 per cent of older indigenous people had no qualifications. This low level of educational attainment had important implications for the type of occupations available to those indigenous Australians who were in work. About one-third of both men and women in employment were working as labourers, a category which accounted for 15 per cent of employment among non-indigenous Australians over 50 years of age.

Many of the results shown in other labour market comparisons between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations of Australia are also apparent in this comparison of older people. Indigenous men and women over 50 years were less likely to be employed, and more likely to be unemployed or outside the labour force, than their counterparts among non-indigenous Australians. Even among 50-54 year-old males, less than 50 per cent of indigenous Australians were employed, compared with 80 per cent among the same age category in the rest of the Australian male population. A similar pattern was also in evidence at each section-of-State level.

The importance of the public sector as an employer of indigenous labour in general was also apparent for these older indigenous people. Older indigenous workers were concentrated to a greater extent than non-indigenous Australians in the industry divisions of public administration and community services.

Lower levels of employment and the concentration of older indigenous people in less skilled occupations were reflected in their median individual incomes. Men of working age, those aged 50-64 years, had a median income which was 50 per cent of that of non-indigenous males of the same age. Even among those over 65 years of age, the age of pension eligibility for men, indigenous men had lower incomes. In terms of individual income, indigenous women were better off relative to non-indigenous women than indigenous men, with their median income equal to that of non-indigenous Australians. However, it is important to remember the difference in the types of households in which indigenous and non-indigenous Australians lived. Indigenous people were less likely to live in sole person households than non-indigenous people. A comparison of median household income per household member showed that indigenous people were relatively worse off when the differences in household structure were taken into account.

In comparing 1986 and 1991 Census results for this age group, there were some positive signs. The share of indigenous people over 50 years of age who had received no schooling fell by five percentage points and the share of those in employment increased. There was also evidence of a relative decline in the importance of labouring as an occupation. These changes were, however, not reflected in an improvement in the relative income of older indigenous Australians.

The census data, however, do not enable a formal investigation of the effects of poor health on the ability of older Aboriginal people to participate in paid employment. This is an important issue which requires further investigation.

### Notes

1. The terms indigenous, Aborigine and Aboriginal will be used here to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations of Australia.
2. Siggers and Gray (1991) report that in 1983-84, life expectancy for indigenous people varied from 51 years for males and 59 years for females in country New South Wales to 61 years for males and 65 years for females in the Kimberley. This compared with 72 years for males and 79 years for females in the general population.
3. For a discussion of the international trend towards declining participation rates among older men see Pencavel (1986) and Juhn (1992).
4. These data are cross-sectional data and relate to one point in time. In order to infer life-cycle patterns of behaviour from these data, it is necessary to assume that each age cohort will behave over its lifetime as those of a comparable age in the cross-section, but actual outcomes will reflect additional factors. While age affects behaviour over time, different outcomes may arise due to cohort and period effects. Cohort effects are those which are specific to a group born in the same period and include such things as attitudes to paid employment and the size of the birth cohort. Period effects include any time specific influences on behaviour, for example the state of the business cycle at the time an individual enters the labour force, or changes in the eligibility rules for pensions. See Bowman (1987) for a more detailed discussion of these effects.
5. For a fuller discussion of the CDEP scheme see Sanders (1988), Altman and Sanders (1991b), Morony (1991) and Altman and Daly (1992), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (1994).
6. These categories are derived from the section-of State variable in the census. The three settlement size categories used here are defined as follows: an urban centre is 'one or more adjoining collection districts with urban characteristics and representing a population cluster of 1,000 or more people' (ABS 1986: 150); major urban centres have over 100,000 inhabitants; and other urban areas between 1,000 and 99,999 inhabitants. The rural category used here includes both ABS categories 'rural locality' and 'rural balance'. Localities include population clusters which can 'be expected to contain at least 200 people (but not more than 999) by the next census; have at least 40 occupied non-farm dwellings with a discernible urban street pattern; have a discernible nucleus of population' (ABS 1986: 97). The rural balance includes all the collection districts not included elsewhere (ABS 1986: 132).
7. These figures have been calculated from the 1986 public use Income Distribution Survey conducted by the ABS.

## Appendix Tables

**Table A1. Age on leaving school for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged 50 years and over by sex, 1991.**

Age	Males		Females		Persons	
	Indigenous Per cent (1)	Non- indigenous Per cent (2)	Indigenous Per cent (3)	Non- indigenous Per cent (4)	Indigenous Per cent (5)	Non- indigenous Per cent (6)
Age 50-64 years						
Age on leaving school						
14 or younger	41.7	32.5	37.4	30.5	39.5	31.5
15	24.2	30.2	27.9	33.4	26.1	31.8
16	10.0	15.3	11.4	17.7	10.7	16.5
17	2.8	9.6	3.2	9.3	3.0	9.5
18	1.1	5.9	1.2	3.9	1.2	4.9
19 and older	1.9	5.0	2.2	2.7	2.1	3.9
No schooling	18.2	1.5	16.7	2.4	17.4	1.9
Age 65+ years						
Age on leaving school						
14 or younger	42.7	51.4	43.1	48.6	42.9	49.8
15	11.1	19.5	13.6	21.4	12.5	20.6
16	6.3	12.7	7.7	14.7	7.1	13.8
17	1.9	6.6	2.5	7.1	2.3	6.9
18	1.1	3.9	1.3	3.4	1.2	3.6
19 and older	2.5	4.6	1.3	2.7	1.9	3.5
No schooling	34.4	1.4	30.4	2.2	32.2	1.8

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

**Table A2. Level of qualification for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged over 50 years by sex, 1991.**

Age	Males		Females		Persons	
	Indigenous Per cent (1)	Non- indigenous Per cent (2)	Indigenous Per cent (3)	Non- indigenous Per cent (4)	Indigenous Per cent (5)	Non- indigenous Per cent (6)
Type of qualification						
University degree	0.5	6.9	0.6	3.5	0.6	5.2
Diploma	0.3	2.5	0.9	4.9	0.7	3.8
Other certificate	6.6	26.6	1.8	5.7	4.0	15.7
No qualification	92.6	63.9	96.8	85.9	94.8	75.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

**Table A3. Occupation of employed indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged 50-64 years, 1991.**

Age	Males		Females		Persons	
	Indigenous Per cent (1)	Non- indigenous Per cent (2)	Indigenous Per cent (3)	Non- indigenous Per cent (4)	Indigenous Per cent (5)	Non- indigenous Per cent (6)
Managers and administrators	8.2	21.0	7.0	13.0	7.8	18.2
Professionals	5.9	11.5	10.8	11.6	7.6	11.5
Para-professionals	7.4	5.4	9.5	7.3	8.2	6.0
Tradespersons	16.1	19.2	9.2	3.5	13.8	13.8
Clerks	3.9	7.0	13.5	29.3	7.2	14.8
Salespersons, etc.	3.1	8.5	13.7	16.2	6.7	11.2
Plant and machinery operators and drivers	19.0	12.4	2.6	3.1	13.4	9.2
Labourers	36.4	15.1	33.6	16.0	35.4	15.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Correlation coefficient (r) - Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians	0.40		0.42		0.26	

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

**Table A4. Industry of employment for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged 50-64 years, 1991.**

Age	Males		Females		Persons	
	Indigenous Per cent (1)	Non- indigenous Per cent (2)	Indigenous Per cent (3)	Non- indigenous Per cent (4)	Indigenous Per cent (5)	Non- indigenous Per cent (6)
Agriculture	10.1	7.9	3.1	7.1	7.8	7.6
Mining	2.8	1.2	0.0	0.4	1.8	0.
Manufacturing	9.1	18.9	6.2	10.5	8.1	16.0
Electricity, gas, water	2.8	2.8	0.0	0.3	1.8	1.9
Construction	7.0	8.4	0.8	2.4	5.0	6.3
Wholesale, retail trade	7.4	17.5	7.7	19.4	7.5	18.1
Transport, storage	9.8	7.3	2.1	1.9	7.2	5.4
Communications	1.6	2.3	1.4	1.0	1.6	1.9
Finance, property etc.	2.6	10.0	4.6	10.4	3.2	10.1
Public administration	15.1	6.8	9.9	4.2	13.4	5.9
Community services	27.6	12.0	54.4	34.2	36.6	19.7
Recreation, personal services	4.1	5.0	9.8	8.2	6.0	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Correlation coefficient (r) - Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians	0.39		0.89		0.66	

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.



**Table A5. Government and private sector employment of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians aged 50-64 years, 1991.**

Age	Males		Females		Persons	
	Indigenous Per cent (1)	Non- indigenous Per cent (2)	Indigenous Per cent (3)	Non- indigenous Per cent (4)	Indigenous Per cent (5)	Non- indigenous Per cent (6)
Government						
Australian		5.8	5.8	6.2	3.8	5.1
State		19.3	13.8	30.5	18.0	15.3
Local		14.6	3.7	5.9	1.8	3.0
Private		60.3	76.7	57.4	76.4	76.6
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 1991 Population Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and the 1 per cent ABS sample.

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