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Discussion Paper



**The economic status of indigenous  
Australian families**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A shorter version of this paper was presented to the International Year of the Family National Conference on 'Australian Families: the Next Ten Years', in Adelaide 20-23 November 1994. This longer paper presents a preliminary analysis of the economic status of indigenous families relative to other Australian families. A methodological combination of economic analysis of current census data, and anthropological research is used in the paper, revealing that indigenous families are experiencing substantial and multiple forms of economic burden in comparison to other Australian families. They also display significantly different structural and organisational characteristics which are assessed in terms of their economic impacts. Indigenous families are more likely to be sole parent families and have on average, a larger number of children and larger households. The adults are younger, have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in employment than other Australians. The poor economic position of indigenous sole parents is highlighted, and the economic role of the aged, matrifocal families, young adults and children are considered. The paper concludes by examining the important policy and program implications raised by the research, and argues the need for an increased focus on the particular socioeconomic and locational circumstances of indigenous families.

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## Introduction

While it is becoming commonplace to report the continuing disadvantage of indigenous Australians, there has been little consideration of their socioeconomic status from the viewpoint of the family. Detailed analysis of census data to assess the position of indigenous families relative to other Australian families is also lacking. This paper attempts to fill that gap by presenting an overview of the comparative economic position of indigenous Australian families, based on the preliminary results of a longer-term research project focusing on indigenous families and the households in which they live.

A cross-disciplinary approach has been used, bringing to bear the methods and tools of anthropology and economics; a hybrid union perhaps, but one that has resulted in the development of a wider perspective on the issues involved. At the heart of the paper is an analysis of 1991 Census data, considering family type, relationships within and between families, levels of income, labour force status and educational attainment. Aggregate data are analysed at national and section-of-State level.

However, the national Census of Population and Housing has been criticised as a blunt tool when used cross-culturally, in particular, for lacking culturally appropriate concepts and definitions (Commonwealth of Australia 1991; Smith 1992, 1994). At the same time, census data have been instrumental in documenting the continuing economic disadvantage experienced by indigenous Australians, and are increasingly used by indigenous organisations to support their program initiatives and funding requirements.

In an effort to enhance the usefulness of census data, we firstly attempt to compare it with anthropological research results from Smith (1980, 1991) in areas related to indigenous family life, and by reviewing the wide range of ethnographic case studies and indigenous writings on the subject. This highlights some important features of indigenous family life, and documents the historical impacts on it of colonisation .

We then assess the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definitions of family and familial relations, to clarify the extent of their conceptual validity and operational coverage in respect to indigenous family structures. Against this backdrop, we analyse 1991 Census data concerning the economic status of particular indigenous family types relative to each other and to other Australian families. Despite some obvious limitations, the analysis of census data supports a number of key findings from the case study material. Furthermore, the census data highlight some of the influential factors in family economic wellbeing. The paper concludes by considering the significant policy and program implications raised by the research, and argues the need for an increased focus on the particular socioeconomic and locational circumstances of indigenous families.

## Aboriginal families - a review of case study literature

There is a considerable research literature available on indigenous Australian families. However, not all of it is accessible or of a uniform quality. Carried out with different academic and government objectives in mind, the research employs a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. Often based on detailed field-based case studies (many of them long-term), the research frequently uses participant observation, small survey and interview techniques within particular communities, and focuses on small groups and families. An increasing number of these studies are being initiated by indigenous groups for their own purposes. A valuable aspect of such case studies are the fine-grained descriptions of culturally-based behaviours and values, and of the circumstances underlying indigenous family life. A major limitation is that the research outcomes are focused at the micro-level, making comparison across communities, regions or States difficult, if not impossible. Also, while much has been written about Aboriginal families and their lifestyles, very little information is available on Torres Strait Islander families. There is good reason to believe that they will display different cultural forms (Beckett 1987; Arthur 1992; Taylor and Arthur 1992). For this reason, in the first half of this paper, the literature review concentrates on the documented features of Aboriginal families.

### *Diversity*

In 1991, Aboriginal Australians numbered 238,575, constituting 1.6 per cent of the total Australian population, but growing at almost double the national average (Tefaghiorghis and Gray 1991; Taylor 1993). Ethnographic research reveals significant cultural diversity, with Aboriginal groups differing in fundamental aspects of their kinship structures, key aspects of social organisation, music, art forms and ceremonial life, and with distinctive local identities and cultural priorities being emphasised. The population is relatively remote in geographic terms, close to one-third live in rural localities of less than 1,000 persons. It is also extremely dispersed, residing at a wide variety of localities including remote settlements, outstations and pastoral excisions, in fringe-camps, in rural townships, and inner city and suburban areas. Not surprisingly, family circumstances are noted as varying significantly across these locations and even within single communities (Anderson 1982; Taylor 1988; Khalidi 1989).

### *Commonalities*

At the same time, there are continuities that create an Aboriginal 'commonality' across Australia (Sansom 1982). This common Aboriginal identity is based on the continuing significance of kinship ties and the prominent ethic of sharing; common socialisation practices; the continuing use by some of Aboriginal languages and by others of distinctive forms of Aboriginal English; and by patterns of mobility within long-standing social

networks. Also common is the focus on a land-based identity grounded in a religious framework, through marital networks and common residential histories (Langton 1982; Sansom 1982; Beckett 1988; Berndt and Tonkinson 1988; Keen 1988; Coombs 1994). The history of colonisation itself has reinforced shared understandings of the impact of dispossession and discrimination. This shared identity extends to urban families (Barwick 1974; Brown et al. 1974; Gale and Wundersitz 1982; Langton 1982; Young and Fisk 1982; Keen 1988; Commonwealth of Australia 1991, 1992).

#### *Family structures*

Family, that is, the elementary structure of mother, father and their children, is commonly reported to be the central ordering principle within Aboriginal society. However, the nuclear or elementary family is not the most common residential form, as each individual's investment in family relationships is widely distributed within a complex kinship system that emphasises classificatory and consanguineal relatedness, and is used to 'familiarise' strangers (Smith 1980; Hamilton 1981; Coombs et al. 1983; Myers 1986; Birdsell 1988).

This results in the actual residential arrangements emphasising extended family formations (often referred to as 'mobs', 'one family', 'all family' and 'company') in which family membership is open to liberal interpretation and expanded through consociate ties borne of historical association, friendship, political alliance and other purposes (Sansom 1980; Anderson 1982; Finlayson 1991). Aboriginal families thus tend to be multi-generational and compositionally complex, with porous social boundaries that change through time as certain relationships are emphasised. While the households in which individuals live are often multi-family, researchers have noted that this has more to do with economic pressures than with a cultural proclivity to big households (Ross 1987; Choo 1990; Moisseeff 1994). In other words, overcrowding is not the necessary concomitant outcome of extended family structures. Older generations are reported as assuming key cultural, social and economic responsibilities within them. Their welfare transfers provide important income security for many impoverished families (Rowse 1988; Finlayson 1991).

#### *The impact of mobility*

Mobility and its residential outcome of high visitor numbers, plays a crucial role in determining the composition of families and their economic viability. Surveys (Taylor 1988) of Aboriginal households in Katherine found that approximately one-quarter had visitors on a more or less constant basis and that visitor rates increased the average number of people per dwelling from 5.4 to 7.8 persons (Taylor 1987: 43). Such mobility is a commonly reported feature of Aboriginal life and is the cause of substantial fluctuations in household membership, giving rise to descriptive labels such as 'concertina' and 'recomposing' households (Young 1981;



Sansom 1982; Taylor 1988; Taylor and Bell 1994a). In such numbers, visitors can severely tax family resources, while often not contributing to costs (Dagmar 1982: 151; Loveday and Lea 1985; Ross 1987: 93; Finlayson 1991; ).

The transient population of young adults is especially noted as having a significant economic impact on Aboriginal families, helping to create a cycle of segmentation and reformation in households (Altman 1982: 8; Anderson 1982: 98, 143; Bryant 1982: 95; Finlayson 1991; Taylor and Bell 1994b). The impact of mobility is not limited to adults. The changing residence of children, especially their high short-term mobility, has an impact on the economic viability of families, especially those which are welfare-dependent (Choo 1990; Finlayson 1991: 222). Ethnographic research indicates that many urban Aboriginal households have similar fluctuations in membership and dynamic developmental cycles.

#### *Matrifocal families?*

Researchers have documented the importance of matrifocal (women-centred) families and the female kin networks within them (Barwick 1974; Eckerman 1977; Peterson 1978; Collmann 1979, 1988; Gale and Wundersitz 1982; Smith 1985; Finlayson 1991). Undoubtedly, factors related to the impact of colonisation, welfare dependence, poor health profiles, including the high adult male death rates (Gray 1987), and the high rate of young motherhood (Burbank and Chisholm 1989) are critical in the creation of such multi-generational, female-centred families.

However, it has also been argued that matrifocality is not necessarily evidence of family disintegration or a transition from the male-centred norm. Rather, it is seen to reflect the continuing importance of women in determining the composition of domestic groups, and a preferred form of female co-residence (especially between female siblings and uterine kin). Female kin networks are reported as performing an important role in the sharing of childcare and providing economic stability within extended families, especially through their welfare income (Peterson 1978; Bell 1980, 1983; Smith 1980, 1985; Finlayson 1989).

#### *Childcare and rearing*

The responsibility for childcare and rearing is distributed widely amongst a range of kin outside the conjugal unit, contrary to the anglo-Australian norm (Smith 1980; Finlayson 1989). Aged grandmothers are frequently mentioned as key carers of grandchildren, retaining a 'mothering' role for small grandchildren long past their own reproductive years. Shared parenting reinforces patterns of relatedness that position each individual within a web of personal rights and responsibilities. It also promotes the support of children who might otherwise be marginalised in their receipt of care, and bolsters the viability of economically vulnerable families (Smith 1980; Daylight and Johnstone 1986; Finlayson 1989; Choo 1990).

However, there are economic consequences to these arrangements, as a result of low family incomes, high rates of childhood dependency and overcrowding, and the attachment of welfare income to maternal childcare may create economic burdens for other carers of children (especially grand-maternal and maternal sibling carers) if that income remains with the mother and is not transferred to the carer (Choo 1990: 15).

#### *Linked households*

A general feature of Aboriginal family economies, reported in a number of case studies, is their reliance upon kin networks across several linked households. These networks enable, some say demand, the redistribution of cash and resources (Anderson 1982; Peterson 1991). In effect the discrete household is not the most basic economic unit for many Aboriginal families. Rather, the linkages across households are reported as instrumental to the economic survival of many families: ameliorating the impact of low and erratic incomes, enabling the payment of bills, and the purchase of consumer durables and basic food necessities (Anderson 1982; Dagmar 1982; Altman 1987; Carter 1988; Rowse 1988; Gerrard 1991). Linked households and their networks of resource redistribution make it possible for some individuals to survive without any income at all for long periods. Unfortunately, at the same time, such mechanisms can also limit the further saving and expenditure of others, and place severe economic burdens upon particular family members.

#### *Historical impacts on Aboriginal families*

The current economic status of Aboriginal families must be understood in terms of the impacts of historical colonisation. Over successive generations, Aboriginal families have been subject to ongoing, often intense, government surveillance (Rowley 1972; Edwards and Read 1989). On the moving frontier of settlement, Aboriginal men became unpaid though often indispensable workers, and women were used as a convenient pool of domestic and sexual labour. Across the country, dispersed nomadic groups were removed from their traditional lands and brought in to centralised settlements.<sup>1</sup> From the early 1800s onwards, governments in all Australian States established legislative jurisdiction over Aboriginal families, enabling official control (for many decades) over their rights of movement and residence, allowing intervention in sexual relations, control over the right to marry, the imposition of white parental and gender roles, and denying their access to welfare transfers. For many Aboriginal families, equal and direct access to social security payments has only been secured from the 1970s onwards (Sanders 1986; McCorquodale 1987).

Foremost amongst government instruments for controlling Aboriginal family life was the legislated control assumed over children, many of whom were forcibly removed from their own families, institutionalised and trained as an indentured labour force (Morgan 1987; Edwards and Read 1989; Cummings 1990; O'Connor 1990; Finlayson 1991). In many cases,

children could be legally classified as neglected and made wards of the State, simply because they were 'born of an Aboriginal or half-caste mother', or being reared within an extended family situation. Both circumstances were seen to constitute evidence of an 'unstable' living environment and parental neglect, warranting removal. Under this official gaze, Aboriginal family life was pathologised and stigmatised as deviant, backward and brutal. However, these very same interventions have often served to reinforce the extended kin-based systems of support and parental roles that lie at the heart of family life (Morgan 1987; Cummings 1990; Jackomos and Fowell 1991). Today, 'family' continues to be a vital feature in defining and maintaining Aboriginal identity in all its diverse expressions.

### **The 1991 Census - definitional issues**

Can census data realistically be expected to represent this diversity and complexity? Census indicators attempt to measure nationally certain social and economic phenomena, but they do so at a point in time and on the basis of concepts that are, by their nature, exclusive of many cultural nuances. The 'family' and 'household' are notoriously difficult to define, and especially elusive in a cross-cultural context. Similar inadequacies in census definitions and methodology have been documented for many Asian populations, and in light of similar cultural realities to those found amongst Australian Aboriginal families (Saradmoni 1992). To answer this we must first consider the nature of the operational definitions that the ABS uses to construct family types and relations.

#### *Constructing the family in the census*

The standard ABS census approach is to focus questions and analysis on individuals and in turn, on the grouping that is seen to be the primary domestic and economic unit: the family and, finally, the households in which they live. The family is defined as 'a group of related individuals where at least one person is aged 15 years or over' (ABS 1991: 47). Indigenous families are constructed on the basis of self-identification by adults on the census form, where at least one person within the unit is indigenous.

A set of criteria is used for defining the membership of families. 'Related' is taken to include consanguineous ties (by birth) and by the formation of a marital union (both *de jure* and *de facto*). The 1991 Census sought information on related people 'usually resident' in a dwelling, including those temporarily absent. 'Usual residence' was defined as 'that address at which the person has lived or intends to live for a total of six months or more in 1991'. For those people who had no such residence, the census allocated the dwelling where they were enumerated as their 'usual residence' (ABS 1991: 123). Certain key individuals who might have been

absent on census night, but are usual residents, such as spouses, offspring and co-tenants, are included by census coders in determining family classifications. Those excluded in the 1991 Census were 'visitors' (both individual adults and children, and visiting families) living in a dwelling that was not their 'usual place of residence'. Such visitors were not coded to family data, though counts of total visitors to households are available separately.

For the ABS, the elementary nuclear family form of mother, father and children is the base family structure and coding device around which all family types are constructed. Initially, all people listed on a household census form are coded in relation to a person designated by the respondents as 'Person 1' and family structure is constructed around this person. 'Person 1' is usually the parent (male or female) with dependent children, or the person so listed by respondents. This person then becomes the 'family reference person'. But if the person designated by householders is not deemed the most appropriate for ABS purposes of constructing family structures, they will reassign the family reference person on the basis of age, marital status and relationship considerations.

#### *Family types*

The ABS classifies four main elementary family types: the two parent family, the couple with no offspring, the one parent family, and the family of related individuals only. A number of sub-categories are developed within these:

- i. Two parent family:
  - Couple with dependent offspring only
  - Couple with dependent offspring and other related individuals only
  - Couple with other offspring only
  - Couple with other offspring and other related individuals only
  - Couple with dependent and other offspring only
  - Couple with dependent, other offspring and other related individuals
- ii. Couple with no offspring:
  - Couple only
  - Couple and other related individuals only
- iii. One parent family:
  - With dependent offspring only
  - With dependent offspring and other related individuals only
  - With other offspring only
  - With other offspring and other related individuals only
  - With dependent and other offspring only
  - With dependent, other offspring and other related individuals
- iv. Family of related individuals only:
  - Other related individuals only (for example, sisters)

The last category is an attempt to cover other family types, but applies only to the designated 'primary family' within a household.

In a household with more than one of these family types, the ABS accords a 'primary family' designation to the structure which most approximates the norm of couple and dependent children, and which is capable of having as much relational complexity mapped on to it as possible (ABS 1991: 101). Other family types that may be residing within a dwelling are created in relation to this 'primary family' and to the 'primary reference person' within it. For multiple family households there is a family reference person for each family, though the reference person for the primary family becomes the household reference person.

The ABS classifies a limit of two other family types within a household after the primary family. These are constructed by reference to the relationships of remaining individuals within the household. If more than three families are found in a single household, the adults in them are 'disbanded' as separate relatives, and thereafter referred to as 'other related individuals'. They are coded only in respect to the primary family. Related adults may be individually present in a household (for example, as an individual brother, sister, aunt or uncle), but similarly, the details of these relationships are coded only to the primary family.

#### *Defining familial relationships - parenting and children*

Within the census, the norm of parenthood from which other parenting models are deduced is taken to be the married couple of mother and father (for example, couple without children; single parent with offspring). Marriage is taken to include legal and de facto arrangements. Question five on the census form specifies the range of family relationships which the ABS records: husband/wife; de facto partner; child (natural); stepchild; brother or sister; unrelated person and an 'other relationship' category (to be specified by the interviewee). These relationships are established with respect to the 'primary reference person' for the primary family.

Parenting includes social parenting arising from de facto, as well as biological relationships. However, it is not known to what extent the wide range of classificatory 'mothers' and 'fathers' common in many Aboriginal kinship systems find their way into the ABS category of parents. All children under 15 years of age within a household have to be coded as related to some adult. Children or 'family offspring' are classified as either 'dependent' or 'other' (that is, adult offspring who have no partner or offspring of their own).<sup>2</sup> The 'dependent offspring' variable contains the following categories about which data can be derived:

- i. Natural/adopted child of both parents or sole parent;
- ii. Stepchild of male parent;

- iii. Stepchild of female parent;
- iv. Foster child;
- v. Child in a secondary family.

These dependent offspring are in turn divided into three categories: family children up to 14 years of age; family children aged 15-24 years who are full-time dependent students and have no partner of their own; and foster children in either of the previous two categories.

Fostering covers legal and customary arrangements and includes both related and unrelated children who usually live in the household. Foster children who are also related to the family reference person are coded as dependent offspring, not by their actual kin relationship to that person. That is, a nephew or niece of the family reference person who is usually resident is classified as a 'dependent offspring', not as a nephew or niece. But these dependent offspring are classified as 'foster children', thereby distinguishing them from biological ('natural') offspring. The census does not identify adopted children. In most cases they will be reported as the offspring of 'Person 1' and/or 'Person 2' in the relationship question (Question 5) and are coded as natural offspring. Details about the type of offspring within a family and the number of dependent offspring are only classified against the primary family, not to the second or third family within a household. Related and unrelated children present on census night, but who do not 'usually reside' there, are classified as visitors. In the 1991 Census, visitors were not taken into account in classifying family structures.<sup>3</sup>

When coding children, the stepchild relationship within a blended family takes precedence over the natural relationship. That is, a natural or adopted child of only one partner in a marriage is coded as a stepchild of that family. Again, stepchildren are coded only within the primary family. Because of this, it should be remembered that the final census categories of stepchild and foster child, are not pure counts because the same child may be differently classified by its respective parents; for example, for one parent, the child may be a natural child, but a stepchild to the other parent. Much depends upon how the child is classified by the adults on the census form.

### **The validity and limitations of census data**

Not surprisingly, the ABS acknowledges the real difficulties in trying to accommodate indigenous cultural forms and practices into census categories and coding procedures. Firstly, the very nature of the indigenous population makes it relatively inaccessible to standard data collection methods. Secondly, the census is conducted at a point in time and presents an essentially static model of family structures. The type of indigenous

marital relationship cannot always be established by census collectors, and considerable difficulty is experienced in transferring complex Aboriginal kin relationships into the census format; for example, in separating classificatory from consanguineal relationships, dealing with several families in one dwelling, especially where there are a number of non-consanguineal relationships between residents; determining the relationships of visitors, and in the relationship of offspring to adults.

The level of 'boundedness' established by ABS operational definitions of family types cannot accommodate the more complex Aboriginal family formations. The focus on single dwellings, for example, means that multi-residential family groups in linked households are treated not as a single economic entity, but as independent households and economic units. The ABS approach constructs discrete families within a single dwelling which may be perceived by Aboriginal residents themselves as being 'one family', not as separate families. Clearly, there is a high level of interpretation involved in actually constructing family types.

The census is oriented towards residentially stable families. Perhaps stable household membership is found more often in major urban areas where Aboriginal family types (as classified by the 1991 Census) tend to be smaller, but generally, ethnographic research indicates that many urban Aboriginal households have similar fluctuations in membership and dynamic life cycles. It is not possible, from census data, to examine the impact of short-term and frequent mobility on family structure and economic wellbeing. Likewise, the fluid nature of childcare arrangements within the Aboriginal world of extended kin, is not easily accommodated.

What constitutes 'usual residence' for highly mobile family members, and for those who may have more than one usual residence, is also an interesting question. The approach taken in the census is to allocate people who have no 'usual place of residence' with one; namely, the place of enumeration on census night. This procedure can effectively 'immobilise' transients. The ABS also excludes various kinds of 'visitors' from the census construction of families and households, thereby omitting individuals whose coming and going has considerable economic impact.

The census is simply not the most convenient or appropriate tool for researching these particular areas. But this is so for all families covered by the census. Furthermore, many of the dynamic aspects of Aboriginal family life and informal economic transactions cannot effectively be understood without long-term field research.

The census does, however, provide a valuable snapshot of basic family structures and economic wellbeing at a point in time (for example, the four weeks prior to the census). It also presents detailed information on a range

of socioeconomic variables (such as family type, residential location, income, labour force status, education and so on) commonly thought to be key determinants of economic wellbeing. It provides this data for indigenous families at a national, State and section-of-State level, and importantly, enables an assessment of their economic status relative to other Australian families. The lack of such comparability is a major disadvantage of the case study research. The approach taken in this paper is then, to use census data as indicative of important trends and to highlight variations. The objective is not simply to point out the limitations in census definitions and resulting data sets in portraying the actual circumstances of Aboriginal families; these deficiencies have been presented in some detail elsewhere (Smith 1991, 1992, 1994; Taylor 1993). Rather the intention is to expand the validity of census data by also considering the insights afforded by long-term, detailed ethnographic research and by placing the statistical analysis within an historical framework. In this way, the inadequacies of the census can be tempered by reference to Aboriginal practice and experience, and the analysis of census data will have more pertinence for policy formulation and programs oriented towards Aboriginal families.

### **The 1991 Census view of the indigenous family**

While much has been written on the Aboriginal family, there have been few attempts to present an aggregate statistical picture of the structure of these families and to compare their socioeconomic status with that of other Australian families. This section uses data from the 1991 Census to compare the economic status of indigenous families with those of other Australians. Indigenous families have been defined here as those families with an adult who has identified as being either of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Table 1 presents the broad breakdown by type of family for indigenous and other Australians in 1991. Two parent families accounted for about half of all Australian families, but there were significant differences between indigenous and other Australians in the share of sole parent and couple (without children) families. Sole parent families accounted for over twice the proportion of indigenous compared with other Australian families, 28 per cent compared with 12 per cent. It is interesting to note, in view of the emphasis on matrifocal indigenous families discussed earlier in the paper, that male indigenous sole parent families accounted for over twice the share of all families of their non-indigenous counterparts. Couples were a much smaller proportion of indigenous than non-indigenous families, 15 per cent compared with 32 per cent. The table shows that for each of the relevant family types, indigenous families had on average a larger number of children. This was particularly so for sole parent families.



**Table 1. Percentage of each family type in total number of families and median number of children, 1991.**

Family type	Indigenous		Others	
	Per cent	Median no. children	Per cent	Median no. children
One parent	28.4	2.7	12.3	1.9
Female sole parent	24.0		10.2	
Male sole parent	4.4		2.1	
Couple	15.1	0.0	31.9	0.0
Two parent	54.3	2.8	53.9	2.4
Other <sup>a</sup>	2.2	0.0	1.8	0.0
Total	100.0	2.5	100.0	1.1
Number	65,780		4,171,000	

a. 'Other' families include families of related individuals, for example, brothers and sisters.

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

**Table 2. The distribution of family type by section-of-State, 1991.**

Family type	Section-of-State			Total
	Major urban	Other urban	Rural	
<b>Indigenous</b>				
One parent	9.6	12.4	6.4	28.3
Couple	5.1	5.4	4.6	15.1
Two parent	15.2	22.4	16.7	54.3
Other	0.8	0.8	0.6	2.2
Total	30.6	41.0	28.4	100.0
Number	20,150	26,976	18,654	65,780
<b>Others</b>				
One parent	8.3	2.8	1.2	12.3
Couple	19.8	7.4	4.8	32.0
Two parent	34.1	11.3	8.5	53.9
Other	1.4	0.3	0.1	1.8
Total	63.6	21.8	14.6	100.0
Number	2,653,400	908,500	609,100	4,171,000

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

There were important differences between indigenous and other Australians in the geographical distribution of families (see Table 2).

Almost two-thirds of Australian families lived in major urban areas compared with only 31 per cent indigenous families. The largest concentration of indigenous families was in the 'other urban' category, the medium-sized towns. There was also twice the share of indigenous families living in rural areas compared with other Australians.

The locational distribution of the four family types also differed. For example, while one parent families living in 'other urban' settlements accounted for only 2.8 per cent of non-indigenous families, this group accounted for 12.4 per cent of indigenous families. On the basis of aggregate Australian figures, this group of indigenous families could easily be overlooked in any general policies directed toward sole parent families.

As the literature review shows, indigenous families were much more likely to be sharing a household with other families or individuals than were other Australian families. In 1991, over half of non-indigenous Australian households had only one or two residents compared with 31 per cent of indigenous households. In contrast, a much larger share of indigenous households had six or more residents; 18 per cent compared with 4 per cent of other Australian households.

These differences were also reflected in the fact that 6 per cent of indigenous families were second or third families compared with 1 per cent of other Australian families (see Table 3). This difference is almost certainly a minimum estimate as already noted, the ABS did not recognise more than three families in a household and disaggregated any further family units to 'related individuals'. The distribution of relationships between the primary family and other families in the household bears out the results of case study research that indigenous families were more likely to live with brothers, sisters and other relatives than were other Australian families. Forty-two per cent of second and third families were brothers, sisters or other relations of the primary family compared with 14 per cent of other Australian second and third families. The other major relationship between second and third families and the primary family was that of son or daughter's family. This confirms ethnographic research about the frequency and importance of multi-generational families in the same indigenous household.

This extension of families beyond the nuclear family was also in evidence in the greater mix of categories of dependent offspring in indigenous families than in other Australian families (see Table 4). Almost all non-indigenous families with children had only 'natural' and/or 'step' children. While these types of families accounted for 82 per cent of indigenous families, the remaining families included foster children (either fostered legally or by custom). Among indigenous one parent families, a quarter included foster children.

**Table 3. Relationship of second and third families to the primary family, 1991.**

	Indigenous Per cent	Others Per cent
Relationship		
Mother's/father's family	10.7	25.6
Grandparents' family	0.1	0.0
Son's/daughter's family	40.8	51.2
Grandchild's family	1.2	0.0
Brother's/sister's family	25.2	9.6
Other related families	16.3	4.3
Unrelated families	5.7	9.3
Total number of second and third families	4,110	37,500
Per cent of families who were second and third families	6	0.9

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

**Table 4: Family type by mix of dependent offspring, 1991.<sup>a</sup>**

	Family type		Total Per cent
	One parent Per cent	Two parent Per cent	
Indigenous			
Mix of dependent offspring			
Natural only	74.3	70.5	71.7
Step only	0.2	7.0	4.8
Step and natural	0.1	7.6	5.3
Foster only <sup>b</sup>	14.3	6.2	8.8
Natural and foster <sup>b</sup>	11.1	7.4	8.5
Step and foster <sup>b</sup>	0.0	0.8	0.5
Natural, step and foster <sup>b</sup>	0.0	0.5	0.4
Total number of families	14,173	30,811	44,984
Other			
Mix of dependent offspring			
Natural only	90.3	89.1	89.3
Step only	0.3	5.0	4.2
Step and natural	0.2	3.3	2.9
Foster only <sup>b</sup>	7.7	1.6	2.4
Natural and foster <sup>b</sup>	1.5	0.9	1.0
Step and foster <sup>b</sup>	0.0	0.1	0.1
Natural, step and foster <sup>b</sup>	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total number of families	337,000	1,823,000	2,160,000

a. The data in this table relate to primary families only; that is they exclude second and third families.

b. Foster children can be related or unrelated but must be usually living with the family. They may be either fostered legally or by custom.

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

There were some interesting differences between indigenous and other Australians in the typical age of the adults in the three main family types

(the category 'other' has been omitted because it is difficult to interpret the results). Given the age structures of the two groups, it is not surprising to find that the adults in indigenous families were on average, younger than in other Australian families (see Table 5). In the families with children (one and two parent families), the indigenous females were 5-6 years younger than the non-indigenous females and the indigenous males were 3-5 years younger. More detailed calculations show that a third of indigenous sole parents were under 30 years of age compared with 17 per cent of other female Australian sole parents.

The most dramatic difference in median age of adults in indigenous compared with other Australian families was, however, between the males and females in couples. Among indigenous males and females in this family type, the median age was 37 and 34 years respectively compared with 57 and 53 years among other Australians. There are a number of possible explanations for this result. Research based on data from the 1980s shows that the life expectancy of indigenous Australians fell well behind that of other Australians. It varied by region, but estimates put it at between 10 and 20 years less than that of the total Australian population (Saggers and Gray 1991). The high average age of other Australians in this category probably reflects the fact that there are more old people living as 'empty nest' couples than among indigenous people. Another possible factor contributing to this difference is the earlier age at which indigenous people tend to have their children (Burbank and Chisholm 1989) and the age these children leave home. Indigenous couples in their mid-30s and without children may be 'empty nest' couples. The implications of these results for service delivery to older indigenous people will be discussed in the conclusion.

**Table 5. Family type by median age of female and male in couple or median age of sole parent, 1991.**

Family type	Females		Males	
	Indigenous	Others	Indigenous	Others
One parent	35.1	41.1	42.0	45.4
Couple	33.6	53.1	36.8	56.9
Two parent	33.1	38.3	36.4	41.6
Total	33.4	41.3	37.0	43.7

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

The preceding tables have presented data on the structure of indigenous families, while the remaining tables consider the employment and income status of these families.

**Table 6. Family type by labour force status of female and male in one parent, couple and two parent families, 1991.**

	Family type			Total
	One parent Per cent	Couple Per cent	Two parent Per cent	
<b>Indigenous females</b>				
Labour force status				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	21.9	46.2	35.5	35.0
Full-time employment	10.6	28.9	16.6	17.0
Part-time employment	9.2	14.8	18.4	15.4
Unemployed	10.2	11.2	7.9	9.0
Not in the labour force	67.9	42.6	54.4	56.0
Total (number)	15,180	9,488	33,597	58,265
<b>Other females</b>				
Labour force status				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	41.2	46.1	56.8	51.5
Full-time employment	21.4	30.3	23.9	25.8
Part-time employment	17.1	13.9	29.7	23.1
Unemployed	8.0	3.2	4.3	4.4
Not in the labour force	50.8	50.7	38.9	44.1
Total (number)	422,600	1,298,400	2,173,800	3,894,800
<b>Indigenous females/Other females ratio</b>				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	0.53	1.00	0.63	0.68
Full-time employment	0.50	0.95	0.69	0.66
Part-time employment	0.54	1.06	0.62	0.67
Unemployed	1.30	3.50	1.84	2.05
Not in the labour force	1.30	0.84	1.40	1.27
<b>Indigenous males</b>				
Labour force status				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	42.1	57.0	62.5	60.2
Full-time employment	27.4	43.4	46.3	44.6
Part-time employment	11.6	10.5	11.7	11.4
Unemployed	16.5	15.2	19.4	18.4
Not in the labour force	41.4	27.8	18.1	21.5
Total (number)	2,739	9,553	33,997	46,289
<b>Other males</b>				
Labour force status				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	58.6	55.2	82.6	72.0
Full-time employment	46.4	45.1	69.9	60.3
Part-time employment	9.2	7.9	8.4	8.2
Unemployed	11.2	5.1	7.7	6.9
Not in the labour force	30.2	39.7	9.7	21.1
Total (number)	85,800	1,298,700	2,181,200	3,565,700
<b>Indigenous males/Other males ratio</b>				
Total employed <sup>a</sup>	0.72	1.03	0.76	0.84
Full-time employment	0.59	0.96	0.66	0.74
Part-time employment	1.26	1.33	1.39	1.39
Unemployed	1.47	2.98	2.52	2.67
Not in the labour force	1.37	0.70	1.87	1.02

a. Includes those who did not state their hours of work.

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

Table 6 presents data on the labour force status of males and females in sole parent, couple and two parent family types for both indigenous and other Australians. They confirm earlier studies using individual rather than family data showing that adults in indigenous families were less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force than other Australians. The discussion of the results reported in the table will concentrate on the differences between indigenous and other Australians of the same sex and on differences between family types.

The first part of the table relates to females and shows that females in indigenous families had an employment/population ratio which was 68 per cent of that of females in non-indigenous families and an unemployment/population ratio which was twice as great. There were substantial differences in the employment ratio of females in the different types of families. Among non-indigenous families, women in two parent families had the highest employment rate (57 per cent) and sole parents the lowest (41 per cent) but among indigenous families, the women in couples had the highest employment rate (46 per cent) while sole parents also had the lowest (22 per cent). Part-time employment was particularly important for females in two parent families.

While females in all Australian sole parent families were less likely to be in employment than were other females, there appear to be particular factors relating to indigenous female sole parents. Even compared with other Australian sole parent females, indigenous sole parents had half the employment/population ratio (see the ratio for indigenous sole parents/other Australian sole parents). They had a higher unemployment rate and were more likely to be not in the labour force.

The second part of the table relates to males. Males in indigenous families were less likely to be in employment than males in other Australian families. The unemployment/population ratio for males in indigenous families was over twice that of males in other Australian families. There were differences in the employment ratio according to family type. Among both indigenous and other Australian families, males in two parent families had the highest employment/population ratio, 63 per cent for Aborigines and 83 per cent for others. Indigenous male sole parents had the lowest employment ratio among the different types of indigenous families and males in couples had the lowest ratio among other Australian families. This latter result probably reflects the older age structure of non-indigenous families.

One of the interesting results to highlight here is the effect of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme on part-time employment among indigenous males. This community-based scheme enables indigenous people to work on a part-time basis on community projects for their welfare entitlement (for a fuller discussion of the scheme

see Altman and Sanders 1991). For each of the family types, the part-time employment/population ratio was higher for males in indigenous families compared with other families. In other words, the CDEP scheme appears to have been successful in offering indigenous males the opportunity of gaining some employment experience.

Table 7 considers the relationship between the employment status of partners either with or without children. It shows that among almost half of non-indigenous couples (49 per cent) both partners were employed compared with 35 per cent of indigenous couples. Partners in an indigenous couple were over three times as likely to both be unemployed than were other Australian couples. These results confirm those of other studies which show that there is a correlation between the labour force status of partners (Miller 1989). In addition, in 11 per cent of couples in an indigenous family, the male was unemployed while the female was classified as 'not in the labour force', over three times the share among non-indigenous families.

**Table 7. Labour force status of female by labour force status of male in couples and two parent families, 1991.**

	Labour force status of female			Total Per cent
	Employed Per cent	Unemployed Per cent	NILF <sup>a</sup> Per cent	
<b>Indigenous</b>				
Labour force status of male				
Employed	34.6	2.4	23.8	60.7
Unemployed	2.5	5.7	10.5	18.7
NILF	2.5	0.5	17.5	20.5
Total	39.5	8.7	51.8	100.0
Number	16,529	3,629	21,647	41,805
<b>Others</b>				
Labour force status of male				
Employed	48.8	2.0	21.3	72.2
Unemployed	1.8	1.7	3.3	6.8
NILF	2.1	0.2	18.8	21.1
Total	52.7	3.9	43.3	100.0
Number	178,380	13,130	146,880	338,390
<b>Indigenous/Other ratio</b>				
Employed	0.71	1.20	1.12	0.84
Unemployed	1.39	3.35	3.18	2.75
NILF	1.19	2.50	0.93	0.97
Total	0.75	2.23	1.20	

a. Not in the labour force.

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

The results presented in Table 8 show that there was some variation in educational qualifications by family type. A larger proportion of the adults in sole parent families had no qualifications than in the other family types and it was in two parent families that the highest proportion of adults with post secondary school qualifications was found. This may in part, reflect the differences in the age structures of two parent and couple families. These differences, in conjunction with the results presented in Table 6, conform with the prediction that more educated people are more likely to be in employment than those with lower levels of education.

**Table 8. The distribution of qualifications by family type for males and females in couples and sole parent families, 1991.**

	One parent Per cent	Couple Per cent	Two parent Per cent	Total Per cent
Females				
Indigenous				
Qualification type				
Post secondary	6.3	12.1	9.1	8.9
No qualifications	93.7	87.9	90.9	91.1
Total <sup>b</sup>	15,787	8,794	31,941	56,522
Others				
Qualification type				
Post secondary	18.5	22.3	26.0	23.9
No qualifications	81.5	77.7	74.0	76.1
Total <sup>b</sup>	4,254	11,691	20,548	36,493
Males				
Indigenous				
Qualification type				
Post secondary	10.2	21.6	20.1	19.8
No qualifications <sup>a</sup>	89.8	78.4	79.9	80.2
Total <sup>b</sup>	2,894	8,878	32,201	43,973
Others				
Qualification type				
Post secondary	31.7	39.8	46.4	43.7
No qualifications <sup>a</sup>	68.3	60.2	53.6	56.3
Total <sup>b</sup>	876	11,870	20,889	33,635

a. Includes those with 'level of attainment inadequately described'.

b. The different numbers of males and females in couples and two parent families are due to differences in the numbers of males and females not stating their qualifications. Those not stating their qualifications have been omitted from the table.

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

Differences in the labour force status of the adults in indigenous and other Australian families has important implications for the income of these



families. Summary data are presented in Table 9. For each of the family types, indigenous families had a lower median income, the lowest ratio being for two parent families. The ratio for all families reflects the different share of each type of family in the total. It is important to remember that these figures represent a minimum estimate of the differences between indigenous and other Australians in the level of income per family member. As shown in Table 1, indigenous families have more children and given the greater importance of the extended family, the incomes presented here can be expected to support a larger number of people.

**Table 9. Median income by family type, 1991.**

Family type	Indigenous \$	Others \$	Ratio
One parent	16,322	19,867	0.82
Couple	24,734	26,965	0.92
Two parent	27,753	39,608	0.70
Other	21,144	29,451	0.72
Total	23,272	34,958	0.67

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

### Conclusions and policy implications

It has become almost commonplace to report the economic disadvantage of indigenous Australians. The analysis of census data and case study material presented in this paper not only confirms this continuing disadvantage, but the focus on indigenous families reveals that they are experiencing substantial and multiple forms of economic burden in comparison to other Australian families. Indigenous families are more likely to be sole parent families and have on average a larger number of children. The adults are younger, have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in employment than other Australians.

The census results reported here complement the results of the case study evidence. Indeed, given the prevalence of extended family formations, kin-based demand sharing, the erratic sources of cash income and recycling unemployment noted amongst contemporary indigenous families, it is likely that the economic burden experienced by low-income families is more substantial than the census depicts. This is reinforced by the results of other research. Jones (1994) has recently documented the higher levels of homelessness and overcrowding amongst indigenous families. Whilst indigenous families are 1.4 per cent of Australian families they are in 38.3

per cent of dwellings classified as improvised. They are more reliant on rental accommodation: two-thirds of all indigenous families live in rented dwellings, a third of which is government housing. Indigenous Australians are much more likely to live in multi-family households (12.5 per cent compared to 1.6 per cent amongst other Australians). Of those second and third indigenous families living in multi-family households, Jones has estimated that approximately 70 per cent are on the poverty line. Indigenous Australians continue to experience severe health problems. Infant mortality, whilst declining, is still four times the national rate and age-specific death rates are between two and seven times those of the total population. Importantly for families, the highest ratios are in the middle-age brackets. They have more frequent admissions to hospital and hospitalisation is more likely to occur for acute episodes of illness (Gray 1987, 1990). These factors combine with poverty to produce considerable economic and emotional stress within families (Sibthorpe 1988).

The results presented here focus attention on a number of key aspects of indigenous family life, and raise important policy and program issues.

#### *Indigenous and other Australian families*

The first priority issue identified by the National Council for the International Year of the Family, was 'to recognise the diversity of families in Australia in terms of their composition, life stage, culture and race ...' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). This recommendation has immediate relevance to the position of indigenous families. The programs and services that are currently oriented to the socioeconomic needs of other Australian families will not necessarily be appropriate or effective for indigenous families. The preliminary research presented here indicates that there are significant variations in the characteristics of indigenous and other Australian families. Thus we find that the aged are living in different types of households, with different kinds of economic demands and responsibilities placed upon them; indigenous sole parents are living in very different geographic locations to other sole parent families; and young children are in fact growing up in very different kinds of families.

#### *Focus on family*

A greater focus on indigenous families is needed in Aboriginal affairs policy formulation and service delivery. Refocussing on the family enables a more holistic approach, especially in the arena of Aboriginal affairs where attention is more often focused on community and organisational needs and service delivery. For example, Ian Anderson, Director of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Melbourne, discussing the relationship between the health of Victorian Koories and western medical practice, argues that the dynamics of family are fundamental to a Koorie vision of wellbeing, and that the focus on the individual, their ailments and medical care, will miss important influences on individual health that arise from

within the family. Anderson asks how medical strategies and outcomes might change if the focus was redirected to include the family (Anderson 1994: 43). This question is pertinent to many other, if not all, areas of government policy, programming and service delivery in Aboriginal Affairs.

#### *Diversity amongst indigenous families*

Greater finesse, based upon more comprehensive research, needs to be introduced to program and policy formulation to orient them to the diversity evident within indigenous families. For example, there are significant differences in indigenous family types and their economic circumstances according to their residence in remote, rural and urban locations. Servicing and program needs may be different for families across those areas.

#### *Sole parents*

The low economic status of indigenous sole parent families is a cause for considerable concern. Sole parent families within the wider Australian population are seen to be economically vulnerable and requiring specific program support. In comparison, indigenous sole parents are worse off. The adults are younger, have lower educational status, are less likely to be in employment and have more children to support than their counterparts in the rest of the Australian population. They are more likely to live outside the major urban centres. Their median family income is also below that of other Australian one parent families. The ethnographic evidence suggests that a wide range of adult kin are heavily reliant upon the stable income of sole parents. This group therefore face particular economic problems in raising families. Further investigation into the specific nature and impact of their low economic status is strongly recommended.

One unique opportunity for indigenous sole parents to gain labour force experience is through the CDEP scheme run by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Administrative data from the scheme suggests increased participation by sole parents. The evidence presented here, however, shows a low rate of part-time employment among indigenous female sole parents and suggests that those participating in the scheme do not regard themselves as 'employed', but primarily see themselves as pensioners. For these people, participation in the CDEP scheme acts as a 'top up' to pension income, in addition to offering the chance to gain working experience. In the longer term, it is however, important to remember that income from the CDEP scheme is limited to the equivalent of benefit entitlement.

#### *The aged*

Aboriginal people aged 50 years and over typically live in larger households than do other Australians in this age group (Daly 1994). The census results presented here suggest that these older people do not live as

couples (without children). The ethnographic information indicates that they remain supported within extended families. This has implications for the delivery of services to this age group. The problems of couples with a declining ability to look after themselves are likely to be less important than the problems of surviving in a large household with a low income. The implication is that indigenous families assume greater carer responsibility for their aged than other families, and this in itself may require specific service and income support. Also, the high mortality rates amongst Aboriginal adults, mean that the Aboriginal aged group (the 'elders') are, in fact, younger than their other Australian counterparts, but are nevertheless exhibiting, in many cases, worse health profiles than the latter; that is, there is a different kind of aged indigenous population.

#### *Family carers*

The extensive kin networks involved in indigenous childcare and rearing are highlighted in the literature, and supported in census data regarding a higher rate of fostering. The implications are that Aboriginal families are experiencing greater caring burdens because of the higher rate of childhood dependency; and that multiple generations of older women are assuming long-term mothering roles - all of which have significant economic impacts on indigenous families. It may be that income support for children should be more attached to them than to adults, and that older carers may require greater economic assistance in their roles.

#### *Indigenous families in the next decade*

Research by Tesfaghiorghis and Gray (1991), Altman and Gaminiratne (1993) and the 1991 Census point to the youthful demographic profile of the indigenous population. This is generally true at a national, State and regional level. It is also a population that is growing at almost double the national average. The numbers of indigenous people moving into the ages in which families are being formed will increase rapidly over the next decade. As a result, the number of young families and households being formed will also increase rapidly, and the issues that are affecting teenagers and young adults within those families will be of increasing policy importance. The economic burdens noted in this paper are likely to have increasing or widening impact as more of these new families enter into poverty and unemployment. The review of case study literature indicates that indigenous families successfully mobilise a range of cultural strategies to maintain a viable standard of living, and have probably done so over the many decades of colonisation. However, this may well be at great cost to them, given their continuing experience of low incomes, high unemployment, substandard housing and overcrowding, and poor health. Government needs to urgently address the continuing economic disadvantage of indigenous families, not simply of individuals, and to devise services and programs oriented to their diverse circumstances.

## Notes

1. While some Aboriginal families are said by early reporters to have voluntarily moved to mission and government settlements and pastoral stations, this often occurred in the context of the widespread killings and other depredations carried out upon them by white settlers. The latter were keen to have Aboriginal people entirely removed from lands where they were seen to be in competition with whites for scarce water resources. The impact of cattle, sheep, horses and rabbits severely restricted the availability of Aboriginal food resources and access to traditional waterholes. Drought seasons, the availability of rations at stations, and fear of ongoing violence, drew Aboriginal families to the relatively safer confines of government and mission settlements. Even then, in a number of cases, the appalling health of Aboriginal people on the fringes of cattle stations and at some remote settlements led to State Government Protectors initiating further removals, forcibly taking whole families away to rural and coastal reserves often located hundreds of kilometres away from their kin and traditional lands.
2. If such adult offspring do have a partner or offspring, they are coded as another family in the household.
3. In the 1986 Census they were coded as 'other children of primary family'.

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