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**Indigenous poverty since the
Henderson Report**

J.C. Altman and B. Hunter.

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DISCUSSION PAPER

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income distributions do not include an Indigenous identifier (Altman 1992) and the NATSIS did not generate information directly comparable with the general population (Altman and Taylor 1996). Notwithstanding these shortcomings, this paper will utilise income data from five-yearly censuses and the NATSIS; it will also use data on Indigenous income distribution that merges data from the 1991 Census with Household Income Distribution Surveys and examines Indigenous poverty in relation to the updated Henderson Poverty Line.

Indigenous poverty: then and now

Income measures of poverty

The Henderson Report provides a useful starting point for any examination of Indigenous poverty. Henderson's discussion of Indigenous income poverty uses data from two studies sponsored by the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty and undertaken in Brisbane (Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith 1974) and Adelaide (Gale and Binnion 1975). The results of a third related study undertaken in Perth (Killington 1977) were not available at the time the First Main Report was completed in 1975, but are presented here. In Table 1, these results are presented alongside estimates for the total population at that time.

Table 1. Weekly income of income units in relation to poverty line in 1973 and 1974.

Survey	Less than poverty line (very poor) Per cent	100-120 per cent of poverty line (rather poor) Per cent	Total poor Per cent
Australian population National Income Survey	12.5	8.1	20.6
Indigenous population			
Brisbane, May 1973	48.0	7.0	55.0
Adelaide, May-July 1973	22.4	33.1	55.4
Perth, late 1974	58.3	18.3	76.7

Sources: Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith (1974); Gale and Binnion (1975); Killington (1977); Altman and Nieuwenhuysen (1979).

However, even within these specific case studies there is substantial variation between areas. For example, more than twice as many Indigenous income units in Brisbane as in Adelaide were classified as very poor: 48 per cent of Aboriginal households in Brisbane compared to 22.4 per cent of Aboriginal families in Adelaide (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen 1979: 167).

The rate of poverty among Aborigines in Perth was almost 60 per cent (58.3 per cent). Henderson speculates that the higher levels of poverty in Brisbane were due to the larger numbers of recent arrivals from rural Queensland, but this suggestion cannot be substantiated from primary data in the Brisbane case study or in sample selection methodology.

Henderson attempts to capture the 'depth' of the experience of poverty among urban Aboriginal families by measuring those income units which are rather poor, with income between 100 and 120 per cent of the poverty line. If these rather poor income units are included then the level of Indigenous poverty was almost identical in Adelaide and Brisbane. Given that Indigenous poverty is very sensitive to the definition of the poverty line, Henderson's findings are consistent with the concerns expressed later in this paper about the adequacy of a single poverty line which compares poverty in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts.

Henderson's coverage of Indigenous poverty is necessarily incomplete because there was then no existing rural study of Indigenous incomes. However, he speculates that rural poverty will be more prominent because of the higher levels of unemployment in such areas (Henderson 1975: 261).

Indigenous poverty varied from 32.5 to 58.3 per cent of income units in the three urban samples; non-Indigenous poverty was estimated, using contemporaneous National Income Survey data, at 12.5 per cent. If we include all income units with income of less than 120 per cent of the poverty line, the range of Indigenous poverty increases to between 55 and 76.7 per cent and non-Indigenous poverty to 20.6 per cent (see Table 1). These estimates based on sample surveys indicate that a far larger proportion of the Indigenous income units were very poor (that is, are below the poverty line) compared to all Australians, ranging from 1.8 times in Adelaide to 3.8 times in Brisbane and 4.7 times in Perth. When those who are 'rather poor' (income between 100 and 120 per cent of the poverty line) are added, the differential declines somewhat overall, to 2.7 times in Brisbane and Adelaide and 3.7 times in Perth.

How has the overall poverty of Indigenous Australians changed since the early 1970s? Interestingly, there have been very few attempts to answer this very pertinent policy question. This is partly due to methodological and data source problems. Most estimates of poverty for the total population are derived from the ABS's Income and Housing Surveys (ABS 1989, 1993a). However, these surveys do not include an Indigenous identifier and even if they did would only include about 300 Indigenous individuals (Ross and Mikalauskas 1996: 3). It was only in 1990, that Ross and Whiteford (1990) innovatively addressed this problem by merging the very detailed income data from the Income and Housing Costs and Amenities Survey with data from the 1 per cent public use unit record

file from the census. These results have been published using 1986 (Ross and Whiteford 1990, 1992) and 1991 (Ross and Mikalauskas 1996) Census data and 1985 and 1990 Income Survey data.

The focus on Indigenous Australians in metropolitan areas in the 1975 First Main Report means that one must be careful when making comparisons over time with the most recent estimates that use a sample of 340 Indigenous families spread across all sections-of-State. After all, the geographic processes which underpin Indigenous poverty include variable access to mainstream employment, different preference structures of the respective Indigenous populations and different access to education and infrastructural services (for example, hospitals and other government services).²

Ross and Mikalauskas's (1996) recent analysis is far more detailed than the case study material available to Henderson especially as poverty is analysed within various family types. Notwithstanding substantial differences in the family composition and the geographic distribution of income units of Henderson's (1975) and Ross and Mikalauskas's (1996) estimates, it is instructive to compare the 1970s estimates with recent poverty estimates. Ross and Mikalauskas (1996) found that among Indigenous families with children, 50.1 and 61.5 per cent were classified as 'very poor' and 'rather poor' respectively. Among non-Indigenous families the corresponding proportions were 20.9 and 31.3 per cent. Therefore despite large increases apparent in the proportion of poor in the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous poverty remains remarkably close to the range described by the Poverty Inquiry.

Table 2. Comparison of proportion of income units below the Henderson poverty line, 1991.

Income unit type	Indigenous Per cent	Non-Indigenous Per cent
Couple with		
one child	15.7	8.1
two children	23.3	9.4
three children	43.6	17.6
four or more children	74.4	32.5
Sole parent with		
one child	67.6	46.3
two children	79.1	57.5
three or more children	88.6	67.8

Source: Ross and Mikalauskas (1996).

Notwithstanding potential problems in comparing Hendersons urban samples with the more extensive sample examined by Ross and Mikalauskas, Tables 1 and 2 show that there has been some general improvement in the level of Indigenous poverty, if one accepts Henderson's contestable assumption that those in rural and remote regions were worse off than those in urban and metropolitan situations.³ Certainly relative to the total population, Indigenous poverty has declined from a factor of 2.7 to 3.7 in the 1970s to a factor of 1.96 in 1991. The differential in the early 1990s remains substantial, but at least the trend is in the right direction. Interestingly, the persistently high levels of Indigenous families in poverty is corroborated by other research findings. For example, Altman and Daly (1995: 70) calculated the change in Indigenous and non-Indigenous median individual incomes between 1976 and 1991 (using constant 1981 dollars) and found that the former increased by 4.8 per cent and the latter declined by 12.1 per cent. The overall ratio of Indigenous to other Australians increased from 0.53 in 1976 to 0.63 in 1991. Other studies have demonstrated a continuing high dependence on non-employment income, and the existence of poverty traps, especially for sole-parent Indigenous households (Daly 1992, 1995; Smith and Daly 1996).

Despite the difficulty in ensuring the comparability of these measures of Indigenous poverty, the overall conclusion that Indigenous welfare, as measured by income, is improving relative to the rest of the population is consistent with the analysis of income distributions in Appendix A. The relative improvements in Indigenous income are more the result of increases in the proportion of low-income non-Indigenous households than reductions in the proportion of low-income Indigenous households. The conclusions of this section are, therefore, reasonably robust.

Employment, unemployment and Indigenous poverty

Henderson pointed out that many Indigenous people face multiple problems in securing employment including: being located in areas where there are insufficient jobs; competing with better trained and more experienced non-Indigenous workers; and dealing with prejudice among some employers who regard all Indigenous people as lazy and unreliable workers. The Report concludes that poor employment prospects is the primary factor underlying Indigenous poverty.

Gale and Binnion found that 21 per cent of income units with an employed head were 'rather poor' compared to 75 per cent of income units with an unemployed head.⁴ They also found that non-employment income was directly supporting 54 per cent of their sample (Gale and Binnion 1975: 40). The relationship between employment and poverty is even more pronounced in Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith's (1974: 61) study which found that 94 per cent of households where no members had any work, were 'rather poor' compared with 63 per cent of those with one worker and

35 per cent of those with two workers. Killington (1977) found that 100 per cent of unemployed income units were rather poor.

Ross and Mikalauskas (1996) conclude that unemployment among family members is still the primary factor underlying Indigenous poverty. Table 3 indicates that those families where no adults were employed were substantially more likely to be in poverty. This proposition is, more or less, equally true for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.

Table 3. Estimates of poverty among Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with children, by employment status of adults, 1991.

Type of family by employment status of adults	Poverty rate by percentage of poverty line ^a					
	Indigenous families			Non-Indigenous families		
	80	100	120	80	100	120
Couple with children both adults employed	1.8	8.8	17.5	0.7	1.7	3.5
Couple with children one adult employed	6.5	23.7	45.2	0.9	5.5	20.0
Couple with children no adults employed	26.7	52.3	76.7	23.4	54.1	78.4
Sole parent, employed	8.0	28.0	56.0	6.4	14.7	26.2
Sole parent, not employed	33.0	73.2	93.8	25.0	59.4	93.5

a. These numbers represent the proportion of families below 80, 100 and 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line.

Source: Ross and Mikalauskas (1996).

A second generalisation arising from Table 3 is that employment reduces poverty more rapidly for non-Indigenous families. This is explicable in terms of the reliance on the social security system that families must experience, irrespective of their origin, when all adults members are unemployed. However, where either one or both adults is/are employed, Indigenous families appear significantly disadvantaged compared to non-Indigenous families. This may reflect a number of factors, including the differences between full-time and part-time labour force participation (and/or full-year and part-year participation which may not be recorded in the census) and differences in salary and wage rates.

The Henderson Report also found that the lack of skills among the Indigenous workforce is a major factor behind the poor level of employment. The 1971 Census showed that the great majority of Aboriginal people were employed as farm or unskilled workers. Indeed,

the Brisbane study found that 90 per cent of males were in unskilled jobs. The same survey found that about half the women surveyed were employed in white collar jobs with higher employment status than the men. By the time of the 1991 Census about 50 per cent of employed Indigenous males remained in unskilled jobs (Taylor 1993: 57).⁵ While this represents a clear improvement in the skill base of the Indigenous workforce there has been a general decline in the demand for unskilled and other workers with low education (Katz and Murphy 1992). That is, the improvements in the skill base were necessary to ensure that employment prospects of Indigenous workers did not decline and that Indigenous poverty did not increase. The failure to secure employment remains a major cause of dependence on welfare and poverty among Indigenous people.

The role of housing and government services

Poor housing is one of the most visible manifestations of poverty among Indigenous families, with many living in substandard and overcrowded accommodation. The Poverty Inquiry's Brisbane survey in 1973 showed that only 12 per cent of the sample rented from the Housing Commission and another 8 per cent were in houses owned or being bought by one of the occupants. The remainder were in rented accommodation where rents were much higher than those for Housing Commission houses (Henderson 1975: 263). Henderson (1975: 263) noted that in rural areas of most States there were many Indigenous people living in improvised dwellings. For example, in the North-West Statistical Division of New South Wales, 20 per cent of Aboriginal people lived in improvised dwellings - a shed, tent, garage, or humpy.

The Brisbane study on which Henderson based much of his chapter on Aboriginals also included an estimate of 'after-housing' poverty (AHP) (Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith 1974).⁶ On the whole the after-housing measures of poverty do not change much with slightly fewer households being classified as very poor and more households being classified as rather poor, 44 and 59 per cent respectively (see Henderson 1975: 260).

Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith (1974: 24, 44-6, 59) concluded that low-income extended family households lived in overcrowded dwellings due to economic necessity rather than choice. This conclusion probably remains valid in such situations. In 1994, Jones's study of the housing needs of Indigenous Australians based on 1991 Census data reports the continuing lack of housing, overcrowding and AHP amongst Indigenous Australians. His analysis indicates that 8 per cent of Indigenous families are either living in an improvised dwelling or are sharing an overcrowded dwelling with another family; 21 per cent of Indigenous households are inadequately housed; and almost 40 per cent of family households in rented government housing are in AHP (Jones 1994: 149-54, 164). Again, notwithstanding the different basis of calculation, Jones's estimate of AHP is of a similar order of magnitude to that estimated by Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith (1974: 60).

In summary, there is evidence of moderate improvement in the economic status of Indigenous Australians. Unfortunately, the lack of a consistent application of the existing methodology has hampered the proper evaluation of trends in Indigenous poverty. The next section questions whether the conventional poverty methodology adequately captures important aspects of Indigenous poverty.

Some conceptual complexities underlying Indigenous poverty

Poverty, like economic status, is a value-laden concept that reflects the priorities of mainstream society (Altman 1988). In assessing the extent of Indigenous poverty, the diversity of Indigenous circumstances and the dominance of alternative value systems, in many situations, must be recognised. This is not merely an epistemological issue. In the last 20 years, under the broad policy ambit of self determination, many Indigenous people have chosen to move from townships to small outstation communities distant from mainstream labour markets and commercial opportunities. These conscious choices limit options to alleviate poverty as measured by standard social indicators. Similarly, many mainstream measures of wellbeing, like home ownership and low household population densities are either not options for Indigenous Australians owing to residential location, or are low cultural priorities. Any discussion of changes in Indigenous poverty over time needs to recognise emerging Indigenous priorities, as increasingly articulated by Indigenous people themselves. Accordingly, the following discussion specifically addresses a select range of issues that operate as an overall caveat questioning whether conventional poverty analysis is applicable to Indigenous Australians.

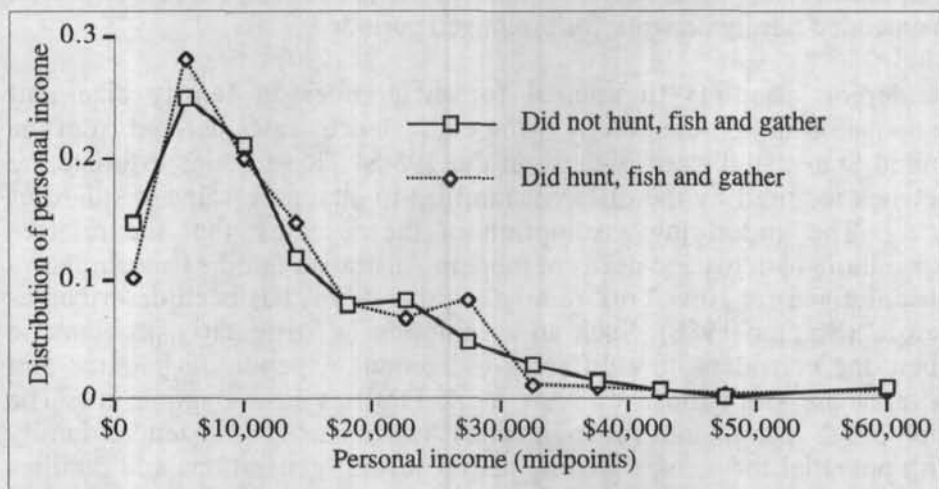
Is there a need for a separate Indigenous poverty line?

In many situations, contemporary Indigenous cultures recognise the special social and economic significance of hunting, fishing and gathering. Such activities play a crucial role in providing for the welfare of the community over and above the direct sustenance they might provide. While the intrusion of non-Indigenous settlement has altered the social and economic role of these activities they still play an important economic role in many remote and rural communities.

Income-based measures used in quantifying conventional poverty fail to capture the role of such informal productive and income generating activities. Indeed, notwithstanding Henderson's acute sensitivity to differences between Indigenous and mainstream Australian societies, lack of any reliable data in the early 1970s precluded any analysis of the possible income enhancing role of hunting, fishing and gathering in ameliorating the experience of poverty. The availability of detailed data on income and informal activities in the NATSIS mean that this omission in the literature can now be partially addressed.

Figure 1 indicates that there is very little difference between the personal income distribution for Indigenous people who did and did not engage in subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering. This probably reflects the fact that there is little substitution between these means of securing non-market sustenance and monetary income. If this is the case, then the conventional measures of poverty will provide a relatively accurate measure of Indigenous poverty. However, several important questions remain about the correct interpretation of the NATSIS variable which captures the extent of traditional work (Smith and Roach 1996). For example, the fact that the Survey questioned Indigenous people about their hunting, fishing and gathering activities in the context of voluntary work means that respondents may have understated such activities if they did not perceive them to be 'voluntary' or indeed 'work'.

Figure 1. Personal income by whether individual engaged in hunting, fishing and gathering, 1994 NATSIS.



Source: NATSIS unit record file.

Hunter (1996) points to the possibility that the hunting and gathering as measured by the NATSIS, is capturing some consumption activity rather than providing a productive alternative to employment and a viable alternative to providing the basic needs of Indigenous families. To the extent that subsistence activities are consumption activities they will not unduly influence the experience of poverty for Indigenous people.

One rationale for devising a distinct measure of Indigenous poverty rests on the ability of subsistence activities to provide an alternative to money as a means of sustenance. If we can demonstrate empirically that hunting and gathering is a significant substitute for monetary income, then it may need to be given a monetary weight so that this alternative means of sustenance

can be incorporated in the existing measures of poverty.⁷ Such monetary weights need to take into account the market value of the produce and the extent to which the produce of such non-market activities can substitute for the needs or wants of Indigenous communities. The evidence provided above on subsistence income indicates that there is no clearcut case for a separate Indigenous poverty line. However, intrinsic differences between the income units used to measure poverty in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities may provide a rationale for a separate poverty lines.

Family/household size and composition

Research by Smith and Daly (1996) suggests that Indigenous families are experiencing substantial and multiple forms of economic burden arising from the size and structure of families and households. Indigenous households are more likely to have more than one family in residence than other Australian households and are more likely to be multi-generational with older Indigenous people more likely to be living with younger people in extended family households. Older generations remain ensconced within an extended family network for prolonged periods.

Henderson attempts to control for differences in family size and composition in his research by using equivalence scales derived from the United States studies of poverty in the 1950s. These scales estimate the incomes required by the different families to attain the same standard of living. The underlying assumption of these scales, that the relative expenditure patterns and needs of modern Australian families are similar to those derived for New York families in the 1950s, has been described as 'heroic' (Stanton 1980). Such an assumption is particularly problematic when one considers how different Indigenous expenditure patterns and cultures are from those of New York families in a bygone era. The appropriate income unit for Indigenous Australians is an extended family with potential for income sharing across several generations and families rather than a conventional western nuclear family.

The large differences between the size of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and households means that the issue of economies of scale in household production has particularly important implications for the measurement of Indigenous poverty. For example, equivalence scales should accurately reflect the real cost of raising large families. Unfortunately, the range of equivalence scales used by poverty researchers becomes significantly wider as the number of children increases (Whiteford 1985: 13, 106-107). More importantly, while Henderson's equivalence scales do not differ markedly from other researchers, they do diverge for large income units (Saunders 1994: 251). Given that the average size of Indigenous households was almost twice that of other Australian households in 1991,⁸ the large variations in the poverty line estimates for large households cannot be ignored. This is an important area

for reform of poverty lines if they are to be relevant for analysis of Indigenous poverty.

The role of relative prices and expenditure patterns

Conventional poverty measures typically do not adequately account for the differences in the purchasing price of necessities. Therefore where there are large differences in the relative price of daily necessities, it is difficult to compare the levels of poverty between groups (Sen 1992: 115). To the extent that the Indigenous population is disproportionately concentrated in high-cost rural and remote localities, the basic poverty comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are problematic. Smith (1991) points out that the higher price of food and other goods at remote communities exacerbates Indigenous poverty. However, Henderson's original contribution to Indigenous poverty analysis does not suffer from this problem as it concentrates on metropolitan Indigenous populations for whom the prices of food and other daily necessities would have been much the same as for other urban residents.

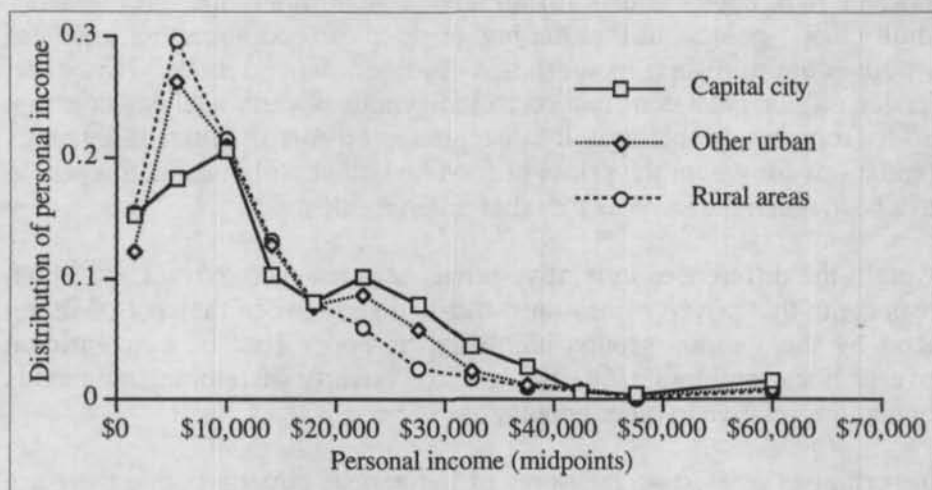
Overall, the differences in relative prices between remote/rural and urban areas mean that poverty lines must distinguish between the cost-of-living faced by the various groups identified as poor. That is, conventional poverty lines may understate the level of poverty of remote Indigenous populations relative to other populations of poor.

One criticism of existing measures of Indigenous poverty is that there are large differences in the patterns of Indigenous expenditure on food, housing and transportation from that associated with other poor people.⁹ Low-income Indigenous households appear to be spending a higher proportion of their incomes on basic necessities such as food, than the lowest income households amongst the total population. Indigenous expenditure patterns are also characterised by expenditure on poor quality, cheap foodstuffs, second-hand goods, reliance on credit and on subsidised services (Smith 1991). However, it should be recognised that such expenditure patterns probably as much reflect the high price of consumer goods and services in remote and rural areas vis-à-vis Indigenous incomes as much as they do the cultural differences in the value of such goods. That is, poor quality and cheap consumer goods are consumed because that is all poor people in remote and rural areas can afford.

Figure 2 confirms that Indigenous people in rural and remote areas have substantially lower incomes than those in capital cities. However, while it is true that many consumer goods and services will be more expensive in remote Australia, the greater supply of cheap land tends to lower housing prices. Therefore it is not possible to draw any conclusions about Indigenous poverty using simple income distributions because the fact that a larger proportion of the budget is spent on food and other daily necessities may reflect the relative prices and the income opportunities of

remote Australia rather than the welfare of Indigenous Australians. It will not be possible to adequately summarise Indigenous poverty or changes in Indigenous poverty until the large differences in prices in the various parts of Australia are adequately accounted for in poverty analysis. That is, the geographic composition of the population being studied needs to be accounted for in studies of Indigenous poverty given that more than one-third of the population lives in rural and remote areas.

Figure 2. Personal income by part-of-State, 1994 NATSIS.



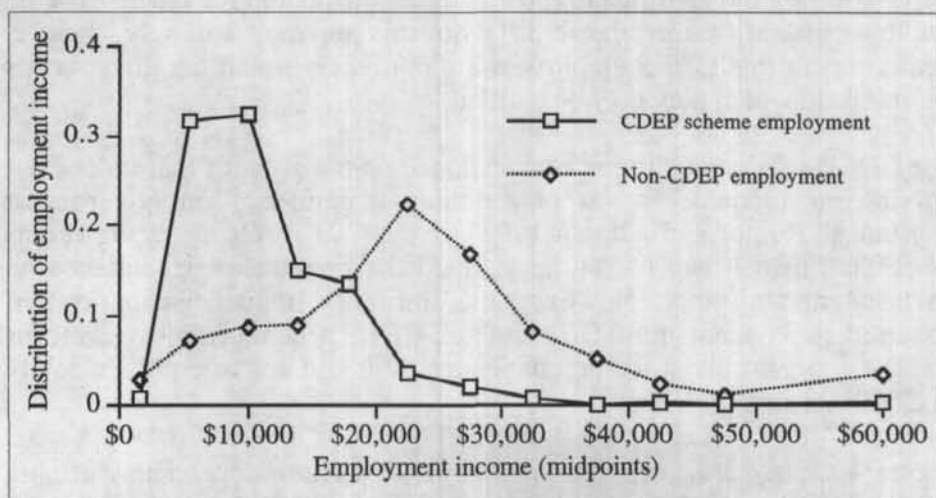
Source: NATSIS unit record file.

The role of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme and welfare dependency

Prolonged experience of poverty or near-poverty levels of income can lead to welfare dependency. The complex relationship between poverty and welfare dependency is not unique to the Indigenous poor. One conventional means of escaping poverty is to secure paid employment. However, the rise of the work-for-the-dole CDEP scheme means that a significant proportion of Indigenous employment is in work which can arguably be viewed as welfare (Altman and Sanders 1991; Sanders 1993).

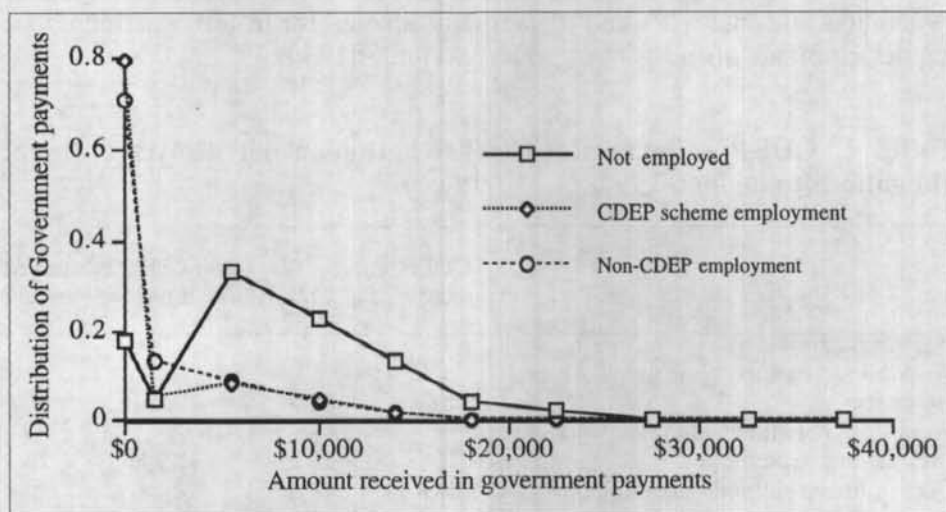
Figure 3 illustrates that the income received from participation in the CDEP scheme is substantially lower than that received from other employment. Indeed, almost all of the income a recipient can receive from CDEP scheme employment is below the mean level of income from non-CDEP employment. This finding is consistent with the fact that most CDEP scheme employment is part-time. Thus the low level of income of families who rely on CDEP scheme employment mean that they are usually entitled to supplementary assistance from other Department of Social Security sources (CDEP Working Party 1990).

Figure 3. Employment income by participation in CDEP scheme, 1994.



Source: NATSIS unit record file.

Figure 4. Level of government payments by employment status.



Source: NATSIS unit record file.

However, notwithstanding the high level of eligibility for Family Allowance Supplement (FAS)¹⁰ identified by the CDEP Working Party (1990), Figure 4 indicates that participants in the scheme actually receive less government payments than non-CDEP employees. Indeed, almost 30 per cent of non-CDEP employees receive some financial government assistance, compared to about 20 per cent of CDEP scheme employees.

The importance of the discrepancy in receipt of government payments is emphasised by the significantly lower levels of income for CDEP scheme employees identified in Figure 3. Given this apparent anomaly, there is clear concern that CDEP employees are not receiving all the government assistance to which they may be entitled.

The CDEP scheme itself may be questioned on the grounds that it does not provide an adequate means of reducing dependency on government assistance (Hunter and Altman 1996). If the CDEP scheme is viewed as 'workfare', then it can hardly be claimed that it reduces dependence on government assistance. However, the similarity of the distributions of government payments for CDEP and non-CDEP scheme employees means that the concerns about welfare dependency should not be confined solely to CDEP scheme participants.

Figure 4 clearly indicates that high levels of welfare dependency are not the sole domain of the non-employed, with 70 to 80 per cent of employees receiving some payment from government. The high level of 'working poor' among Indigenous Australians is of concern to policy makers. It provides indirect evidence of the role of casual and seasonal work in propagating low incomes and therefore the conditions in which poverty thrives. Unfortunately, NATSIS data does not allow a detailed analysis of casual and seasonal work and this remains an area for future research about the determinants of Indigenous poverty (Hunter 1996).

Table 4. CDEP scheme status by whether work allows cultural obligations to be met, 1994.

	CDEP employed		non-CDEP employed	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Work allows cultural obligations to be met	11,207	66.9	19,040	39.4
Work does not allow cultural obligations to be met	1,706	10.2	12,142	25.1
Does not have cultural obligations	2,681	16.0	14,282	29.6
Not stated	11,68	7.0	2,852	5.9
Total	16,763	100.0	48,315	100.0

Source: NATSIS unit record file.

The prominence of the CDEP scheme in the Indigenous workforce raises important questions about the validity of using Henderson Poverty Lines in the Indigenous context. CDEP scheme employment is different to other market-based work because it is designed by and for the community and is

therefore more likely to be culturally appropriate than other work. NATSIS data confirms this, as 66.9 per cent of CDEP scheme employment is described as culturally appropriate, compared to 39.4 per cent in the rest of the Indigenous workforce (Table 4). The community nature of CDEP scheme employment clearly contributes to the welfare of Indigenous families and may need to be accounted for in research into Indigenous poverty.

The depth of Indigenous poverty and inequality among the poor

The headcount measure of poverty remains the dominant measure of Indigenous poverty, even though it only captures the depth of poverty in a rudimentary fashion. For example, Henderson also examined the extent to which Indigenous people were 'rather poor', or more precisely, had monetary income of less than 120 per cent of the poverty line. While sensitivity tests of poverty, such as these, are relevant to determining the appropriate level of the poverty line, they do little to uncover the depth of Indigenous poverty. Given that the Indigenous distribution of income is so markedly different from that of other Australians, and assuming that all income units which fall below an arbitrary line indicate equal poverty to this, is difficult, if not impossible to justify the use of these (see Appendix A).

Sen's distributionally-sensitive index of poverty provides a more complete measure of the extent and depth of Indigenous poverty which attempts to control for inequality among the poor (Sen 1992: 102-107).¹¹ Since the Indigenous poor are, by definition, a subset of the total poor, Sen's distributionally-sensitive index should be used, wherever possible, to evaluate trends in Indigenous poverty or difference in the incidence of poverty among Indigenous and other Australians. Unfortunately, the grouped nature of the publicly available data on the personal income of the Indigenous population precludes effective analysis of Sen's index in the near future.¹²

There are several alternative measures of the depth of Indigenous poverty including poverty gaps (that is, the average shortfall in income from the poverty line) and ranges of income below a poverty line. While these measures only capture elementary aspects of the depth of poverty, they may be preferable to Sen's measure, given that they are easily interpretable by the lay reader. Future studies of Indigenous poverty should supplement the headcount measures of poverty with these elementary poverty gap measures.

The policy impacts of Henderson

It is interesting to assess the impacts of the Henderson Inquiry on Indigenous policy formulation with the benefit of 20 years hindsight. As

noted at the outset, in an intellectual and academic sense, Henderson's very inclusion of Indigenous issues in the poverty inquiry was ground-breaking. In a way this was not altogether unorthodox during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the Whitlam Labor Government's reformist years, 1972-75. After all, during the same period a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights was conducted (Woodward 1974), a National Aboriginal Consultative Committee was established, the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs was created and the National Population Inquiry under the chairmanship of Professor Borrie also examined Indigenous issues.

Indeed, it could be vigorously debated whether the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty's First Main Report, which devoted one chapter out of 18 and ten pages out of 324 to Indigenous issues, did enough. In particular, of the 34 research studies arranged by Professor Henderson only three were specifically on Indigenous issues (Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith 1974; Gale and Binnion 1975; Killington 1977). On a per capita basis, such a level of focus may be regarded as equitable, but given the very evident extent of Indigenous poverty, it is surprising that more was not done. In particular, we would argue, the focus of the First Main Report and its recommendations on major urban areas may have undermined its influence in subsequent policy developments in Indigenous affairs.

It is instructive to examine the nine specific recommendations that Henderson (1975: 268) made for Indigenous Australians, bearing in mind his caveat that a number of recommendations made for the general population (like a guaranteed income scheme) were also applicable to Indigenous Australians. Five of Henderson's specific recommendations paid what could be termed lip service to the dominant paradigms of the Whitlam years: the new (1972) policy of self determination was endorsed; calls were made for enhanced affirmative employment strategies; the continuation and extension of government subvention of the new mode of community-based service delivery (including housing associations) was encouraged; culturally-appropriate vocational training schemes, with mentoring, were recommended; and the need for technical and financial advice and training for self-employment was identified. Three of the remaining recommendations focused on issues associated with provision of housing and hostel accommodation, while another somewhat anomalously and perhaps paternalistically suggested that government departments might, where requested by Indigenous clients, make regular deductions from income support payments to cover major expenses like rents.

The shortcomings of these recommendations are primarily threefold. First, a number of recommendations were based on what could then have been termed common sense (or, perhaps, ideology) rather than rigorous empirical assessment. To be fair to Henderson though, a number of policy initiatives were then very recent and rigorous assessment was probably

impossible. Second, Henderson, in our view, was somewhat limited in his vision for Indigenous Australians: his focus was primarily urban and his solutions to Indigenous poverty were firmly located in the mainstream economy. Such oversight is explicable: Henderson himself was Melbourne-based and at the time of the Poverty Inquiry only some 20 years ago there was still something of an intellectual division of labour that resulted in anthropologists focusing on remote Indigenous communities (see Anderson 1988), with the economist Coombs (1972, 1974) being the major exception. While strongly supporting the policy principle of self-determination, there are hints in Henderson's recommendations that the only means available to ameliorate Indigenous poverty was via incorporation into the mainstream economy. In the fullness of time, this view, which has some currency at present, might prove correct, but in the last 20 years policies moved in somewhat different directions. Perhaps the final shortcoming in Henderson's recommendations is that he did not appear to appreciate the extent of the social costs of decades of exclusion and the infrastructural backlogs and human capital shortfalls that Indigenous Australians faced. While the issue of education was not addressed until the Fifth Main Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *Poverty and Education* (Fitzgerald 1977), Henderson did not appear to appreciate the poor competitive advantage of Indigenous jobseekers, even in those urban situations where (in the mid 1970s) vibrant labour markets existed. It must be appreciated, however, that Henderson was making a brief foray into a very complex policy area and his speciality was the study of poverty, not the diversity of circumstances and cultural heterogeneity of Indigenous Australians.

Two other political factors, well beyond Henderson's control, may have limited the policy effectiveness of the First Main Report's research on Indigenous Australians. First, while the Commission of Inquiry was established by the McMahon Coalition Government in August 1972, it reported to Prime Minister Whitlam in 1975; it is possible that the subsequent change of government in November 1975 limited the potential impact of Henderson's recommendations (see chapter 3). Second, there is a tendency for Indigenous policy issues to lack articulation with mainstream social policy debates; it is almost as if there is an artificial divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous bureaucratic policy-making communities. Henderson's report and recommendations may have never received an adequate hearing within the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio.

Interestingly, it was a major study directed by another economist Fisk titled 'The Aboriginal Component of the Australian Economy' started in 1978 and completed in 1985 that proved far more influential. This is not surprising because this was research sponsored by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs specifically on the Indigenous population in all its diversity: major urban, urban, rural and remote. Fisk's final report was published in 1985 (Fisk 1985), a decade after *Poverty in Australia* but just

in time to significantly influence the Miller Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs (Miller 1985).

The Miller Report (1985) is interesting on two counts. From a negative perspective, it is noteworthy that it made no mention of the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty; there was far more emphasis on using 1981 Census data to establish the extent of Indigenous disadvantage. More positively, the Miller Report clearly recognised the diversity of Indigenous circumstances and the extent of backlogs. It recommended broad strategies to alleviate the economic disadvantage of Indigenous Australians in situ rather than only via the mainstream labour market. In rural and remote situations where mainstream labour markets did not exist, an attempt was made to either establish or enhance the regional economic base, often via the recommendation of measures to reconstitute or provide scarce factor endowments, particularly of land and capital. The Miller Committee also recommended an array of enhanced special measures in education and labour market programs.

If Henderson was hampered by political cycles, Miller was advantaged in making its recommendations directly to its sponsors, the relatively new Hawke Labor Government. Subsequently, many recommendations were incorporated into the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) launched in 1987 (Australian Government 1987). The AEDP aimed to achieve economic equality between Indigenous and other Australians by the year 2000. One key initial goal of the AEDP was a quest for income equality between Indigenous and other Australians by the year 2000 and a reduction in the extent of Indigenous welfare dependence to levels commensurate with those for the total population. These goals were articulated prior to then Prime Minister Hawke's commitment, first voiced in the context of the December 1987 Federal election to end child poverty by 1990. The Labor Government that set these goals did not wait to the year 2000 to admit that economic equality for Indigenous Australians was overambitious and destined to fail (see Sanders 1991; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 1994).

Conclusion

Henderson's Report provides a rudimentary baseline for the analysis of Indigenous poverty. Unfortunately, the lack of consistent application of poverty analysis techniques since that time has rendered comparisons with Henderson's baseline problematic. Notwithstanding these difficulties the conclusion that there has been some reduction in Indigenous poverty relative to the rest of the population is robust. However, most of the improvement occurred because of the increase in the level of poverty amongst other Australians rather than any absolute improvements in Indigenous poverty.

While this conclusion appears to be justified on the basis of available statistics, it begs the question of the conceptual complexities underlying Indigenous poverty. For example, does the nature of 'Indigenous work', mean that poverty among Indigenous Australians cannot be measured using the same money metric as other poverty. The issue of the influence of non-market work and its effects in abating poverty is an imponderable problem which afflicts poverty analysis among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. That is, the status of non-market work is an ongoing conceptual issue that needs to be borne in mind in any comparative poverty analysis.

The conceptual problems for Indigenous poverty raised in this paper are largely recognised as a problem in the general poverty literature (Sen 1992; Saunders 1994). The problems for poverty analysis arising from non-market work, family size and composition, relative prices and the geographic distribution of the population indicate that there is a need for better measures of poverty rather than a specific measure for Indigenous poverty. The major challenge is to ensure that the distinctive circumstances of Indigenous people are taken into account in any reform of Henderson's equivalence scales and general methodological approach.

One response to the mounting criticisms of the Henderson poverty line is the Budget Standards project commissioned by the Department of Social Security and conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC). The Budget Standards Unit (BSU) of the SPRC is attempting to determine the budget necessary for particular types of households to achieve a modest but adequate standard of living (Saunders 1996). From the perspective of measuring Indigenous poverty, the most appealing aspect of the BSU's approach is that it attempts to take into account the geographic variations in costs. Given the problems with using a single Australia-wide poverty line noted above, the geographic dimension of budget standards provides an unambiguous improvement in the measurement of Indigenous poverty. While the budget standard will provide a recent estimate of the cost of children and potential economies of scale within various income units, it may not capture the diseconomies of very large Indigenous families and inherent differences in the income sharing arrangements within Indigenous and other Australian households.¹³ However, it is probably unreasonable to expect a general analysis to account for the statistical requirements of a small portion of the population.

The comparative assessment of Indigenous poverty in the 1970s and 1990s is complex because the Indigenous population for which official statistics are available has fundamentally changed. The increased willingness to identify oneself and one's family as Indigenous may have profound implications for interpreting changes in economic status (ABS 1989).¹⁴ For example, the moderate improvement in real income status noted in this paper may reflect the recent self-identification of previously 'integrated'

Indigenous people who would probably have already enjoyed a relatively higher income status (Altman 1992).

Given the fundamental difficulties in measuring and interpreting Indigenous poverty, it is worth asking whether poverty lines tell us anything that creative and sophisticated use of unit record files data do not? It is likely that concerted analysis of several social indicators will provide a better perspective on Indigenous wellbeing than one single measure of wellbeing. Our understanding of Indigenous poverty will be enhanced by examining the problem from several angles rather than placing too much emphasis on a summary measure which may misrepresent the problem in important ways. For example, income-based poverty measures should be supplemented with research into the underlying causes of poverty including employment prospects, the housing stock, welfare dependency and even more general social indicators such as long-term health status and arrest rates.

The major impediment to comprehensive analysis of the condition of Indigenous Australians remains the general lack of detailed data. Notwithstanding the availability of census and NATSIS data, there is still no Indigenous identifier, on most of the major income surveys (Altman and Taylor 1996).¹⁵

We end this paper by clearly acknowledging Professor Henderson's pioneering contribution in this important policy area which focused attention on the extent of Indigenous poverty. Henderson's major contribution to the research into Indigenous poverty is the way in which he raised community awareness about the nature and extent of poverty among Indigenous Australians. The Poverty Inquiry drew attention to the particular situation of the Indigenous poor and generated awareness that the solutions to Indigenous and non-Indigenous poverty are not necessarily identical.

While Henderson, if he were alive today, might be disturbed that Indigenous poverty has not declined by much, his analysis provided us with an early benchmark for future studies. The challenge for today and tomorrow's researchers is to further develop our understanding of the seemingly intractable nature of Indigenous poverty using available data sources. The challenge for policy makers is to distil this understanding into a viable policy framework to address the ongoing problem of Indigenous poverty.

Notes

1. Sensitive to changes in census procedures and problems with the Tasmanian count, Henderson (1975: 258) defines Aboriginal as a person who identifies as Aboriginal, Torres Strait or Cape Barren Islander. The term Indigenous, referring to people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who so identify in official surveys, is used here whenever possible to reflect current conventions.

2. For example, Taylor (1993: 39) using 1986 and 1991 Census data divided into major urban, other urban and rural (less than 1,000 persons) categories, shows that both mean and median individual income for both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders consistently declines as one moves from major urban to rural localities. This supports Henderson's (1975) assumption about relatively enhanced wellbeing in urban situations.
3. This assumption was supported by evidence presented in Altman and Nieuwenhuysen (1979).
4. 'Rather poor' is defined as any income unit which is less than 120 per cent of the poverty line.
5. This calculation allocates those people who did not state their occupation proportionately across all occupational categories.
6. AHP is assessed by specification of an AHP line for each household comprised of the disposable income required to support the needs of the household for other non-housing goods and services. Comparison of the AHP line with after-tax household income levels allows identification of AHP.
7. For a discussion of this issue see Altman (1987) and Fisk (1985). A survey of data on the economic significance of subsistence is provided in Altman, Bek and Roach (1996).
8. Using data from the 1991 Census, Smith and Daly (1996) found that the median household size was 4.3 persons for Indigenous, 2.6 for other households. If household size are calculated on a slightly different basis, Indigenous households are more than twice the size of other households (Smith and Daly 1996, footnote 6).
9. For example, Indigenous cultural priorities and values may act as a disincentive to the accumulation of capital and consumer durables. Also, irregular receipt of income among some Indigenous communities makes for highly unstable expenditure patterns and associated economic disadvantage (Smith 1991).
10. FAS is the predecessor of the Additional Family Payment paid to low-income families irrespective of whether they are dependent on other government welfare or paid employment.
11. Sen attempts to capture the depth of poverty by incorporating the average shortfall of income of poor people from the poverty line (I) and a Gini coefficient (G), to measure the extent of inequality among the poor, into the simple headcount measure of poverty (H). Sen's distributionally-sensitive index is defined as:

$$P = H*[I+(1-I)*G]$$

This definition of poverty can not only capture the depth of Indigenous poverty vis-à-vis other poor groups through the inclusion of I, but also incorporates the possibility that transfers among poor people can affect their experience of poverty. That is, if transfers are made from a very poor person to a poor person this will increase poverty measured by P, but will leave the headcount measure unaffected.

12. The process of confidentialising the NATSIS unit record file has precluded the possibility of estimating Gini coefficients for the Indigenous poor and, therefore, Sen's measure of poverty. That is, while the NATSIS can be used to discern the depth of Indigenous poverty, 'I', the grouping that occurred when the unit record

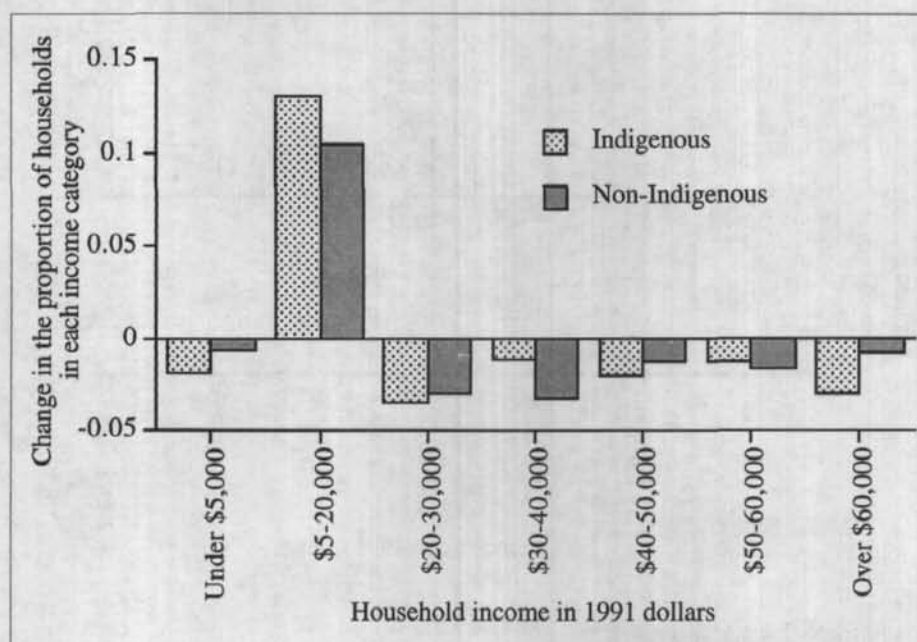
file was 'confidentialised', has removed much of the information about variations in the level of poverty for the many Indigenous families whose income falls under the Henderson poverty line (Jones 1996).

13. Indeed, despite the fact that 24.0 per cent of Indigenous households in the 1991 Census have more than six residents, the largest household that the BSU examines has only six residents. If the diseconomies of maintaining larger households are not linear, then the BSU will not be able to accurately estimate Indigenous poverty vis-à-vis other poverty.
14. The changing attitudes towards self-identification and willingness to report all members of a household as Indigenous are most prevalent in the urban areas and among Torres Strait Islanders. However, there is some evidence that the increase in the Islander population may be due to the mis-identification of other Islanders. For example, many Bass Strait islander mis-identified themselves in the 1986 Census as Torres Strait Islanders (ABS 1993b).
15. Even when general surveys include an Indigenous identifier the small sample size of the Indigenous population precludes meaningful analysis of income. One example of a small number of Indigenous respondents to such surveys is the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey.

Appendix A. The changing distributions of household and family income, 1976-1991.

The lack of comparability among these measures of Indigenous poverty mean that it is advisable to supplement the results by examining changes in the family and household income distributions between the 1976 and 1991 Censuses (Figures A1 and A2). The advantage of expressing these Figures as changes in the distribution of income is that, as well as being an economical means of expressing the changes in income distribution, they control, in a sense, for differences in the size and composition of the income unit. That is, the changes in the distribution are relative to the size and composition of the respective income units that existed in 1976. Therefore, to the extent that such factors are slow to change over time, these Figures abstract from the large differences in household and family size and composition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Figure A1. Change in the distribution of household income in 1991 dollars between the 1976 and 1991 Censuses.^a



a. Household size increases slightly for the Indigenous population from 4.7 to 4.9 and falls slightly from 3.1 to 2.7 for other Australians between the two censuses.

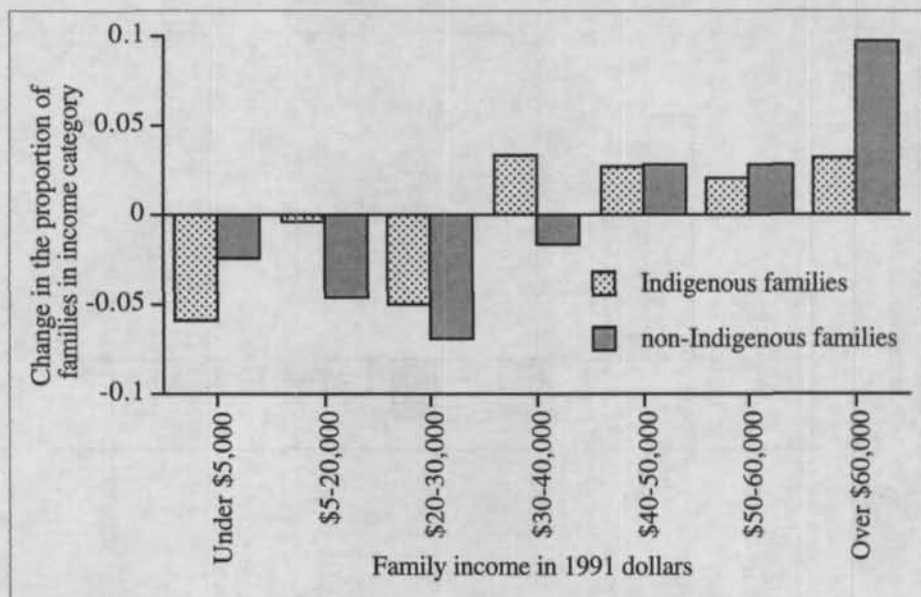
Source: Appendix Table A1 and A2.

Figure A1 illustrates that the changes in the annual gross income of Indigenous households have largely mirrored those observed in the wider Australian community. While there was an overall increase in low-income households there was also a fall in very low-income households. Indeed, the reductions in the proportion of Indigenous households with less than \$5,000 income (in 1991 dollars) was proportionately higher than in the rest of the community. The proportion of households with over \$20,000 in income fell for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. The increase in the proportion of households with relatively low incomes of between \$5,000 and \$20,000 came from both very low- and high-income Indigenous households while the

increase among non-Indigenous households came largely from the high-income groups. This provides prima-facie evidence that there is a convergence of the income distributions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households.

One impediment to drawing welfare conclusions from changes in income distributions is that it is difficult to control for changes in household size and composition among the income units. For example, the number of people in Indigenous households is much higher in both Censuses. The average number of persons per household increases slightly from 4.7 to 4.9 for Indigenous households, but falls slightly from 3.1 to 2.7 for other Australians. Given that the changes in household size are quite small, the observation that there is a convergence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous households remains valid. However, the convergence is more a result of increases in low-income non-Indigenous households than reductions in the number of low-income Indigenous households.

Figure A2. Change in the distribution of family income in 1991 dollars between 1976 and 1991 Censuses.



Source: Appendix Table A1 and A2.

Figure A2 confirms that there has been a general decline in the proportion of very low-income families in the Australian communities. The relatively large declines in the proportion of Indigenous families living on less than \$5,000 indicates there has been substantial improvement in the welfare of very poor Indigenous families. One explanation for the reductions in the proportions of very poor families is the improved access to social security, especially among Indigenous families, rather than any increases in independence from government payments.

Simple income measures such as these fail to capture changes in the cost of maintaining a family. For example, increases in the cost of housing in the major urban areas may mean that low-income families need higher incomes in order to maintain the same standard of living. Notwithstanding, the substantial reductions in the number of families with less than \$30,000 indicates that there has been an general improvement for many

families. There has been an unambiguous increase in the real family income for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.

Definitive welfare conclusions about the observed changes in the income distribution must wait consistent poverty studies which adequately account for the differential composition of income units. Unfortunately, while the methodology used in poverty analysis does control for the size and composition of income units, it may introduce bias to the measured level of poverty over time through a degree of arbitrariness in the way in which the poverty line is adjusted over time (Saunders 1994). In any case, as noted above, the failure to apply a consistent methodology to the Indigenous poverty noted above renders inter-temporal comparisons problematic.

Table A1. Income distribution of Indigenous families and households in 1991 dollars, 1976 and 1991.

	1976 Census				1991 Census			
	Family		Household		Family		Household	
Under \$5,000	3,142	8.5	1,394	4.4	1,780	2.6	1,971	2.5
\$5,001-20,000	15,049	40.8	7,612	24.3	27,806	40.4	29,920	37.3
\$20,001-30,000	10,397	28.2	8,212	26.2	15,980	23.2	18,223	22.7
\$30,001-40,000	3,912	10.6	4,893	15.6	9,589	13.9	11,500	14.4
\$40,001-50,000	2,550	6.9	3,931	12.5	6,585	9.6	8,381	10.5
\$50,001-60,000	1,079	2.9	2,169	6.9	3,447	5.0	4,506	5.6
Over \$60,00	741	2.0	3,125	10.0	3,569	5.2	5,630	7.0
Total ^a	36,870	100.0	31,336	100.0	68,756	100.0	80,131	100.0

a. Excludes those income units which failed to completely describe their income.

Source: Indigenous sub-sample of 1976 and 1991 Censuses.

Table A2. Income distribution of non-Indigenous families and households in 1991 dollars, 1976 and 1991.

	1976 Census				1991 Census			
	Family		Household		Family		Household	
Under \$5,000	128,452	3.4	84,083	2.3	33,519	1.0	77,117	1.6
\$5,001-20,000	1,099,072	28.9	807,638	22.0	819,420	24.3	1,529,272	32.5
\$20,001-30,000	916,671	24.1	735,530	20.0	580,492	17.2	802,159	17.0
\$30,001-40,000	625,309	16.4	613,868	16.7	502,024	14.9	635,910	13.5
\$40,001-50,000	447,910	11.8	497,258	13.5	496,062	14.7	575,100	12.2
\$50,001-60,000	287,869	7.6	370,098	10.1	350,334	10.4	398,580	8.5
Over \$60,00	299,410	7.9	566,437	15.4	593,364	17.6	687,567	14.6
Total ^a	3,804,693	100.0	3,674,912	100.0	3,375,215	100.0	4,705,705	100.0

a. Excludes those income units which failed to completely describe their income.

Source: Indigenous sub-sample of 1976 and 1991 Censuses.

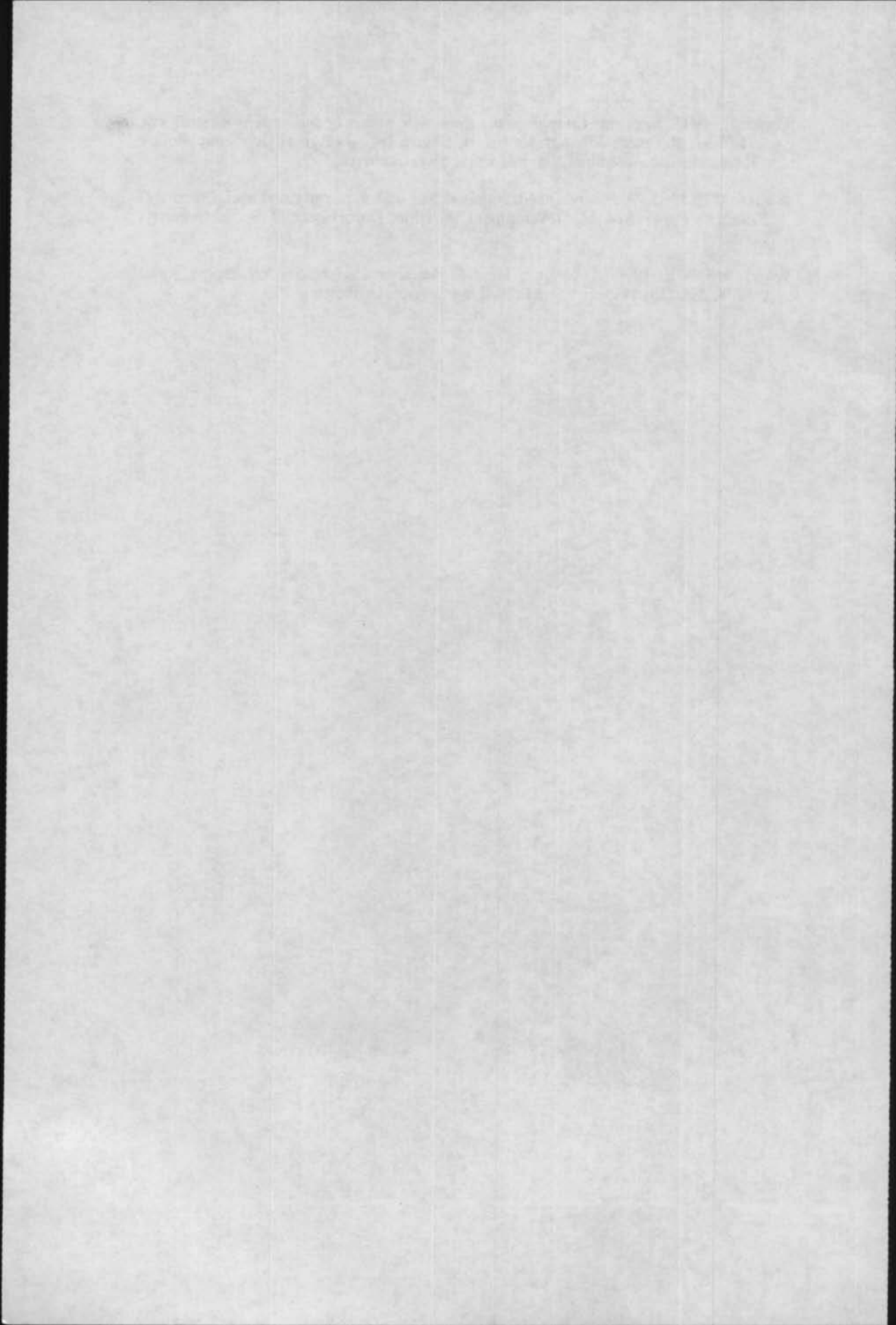
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