

**Shoe or stew? Balancing wants  
and needs in indigenous households:  
a study of appropriate income support  
payments and policies for families**

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Professor Jon Altman  
Director, CAEPR  
The Australian National University  
June 1999

## Foreword

In July 1998, The Australian National University and the then Department of Social Security (now the Department of Family and Community Services) signed a multi-year agreement for The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) to provide consultancy services to the Department. The agreement stipulates that CAEPR undertake a mix of general and project specific research.

One element in the project specific research was the requirement for a study of 'Indigenous children and their families: the effectiveness of social security income support payments'. This study broadly aims to examine the relationship between income support payments and the socioeconomic welfare of indigenous children and their families in selected community types. It is stipulated that the research undertaken will be long-term, extending over the five-and-a-half years of the consultancy agreement. Methodologically, the study will require the collection of primary data via questionnaires, participant observation and collection of Centrelink program data.

To test methodology, it was anticipated from the outset that a pilot study would be undertaken at Kuranda, near Cairns, in north Queensland. This community was selected, in part, because of Dr Finlayson's long-term (including doctoral) research in this locality and her overall familiarity with its residents and circumstances. It was also anticipated that a discussion paper analysing the outcomes from this pilot would be published.

This foreword is provided primarily to badge this particular product in the CAEPR Discussion Paper series. As it goes to press, a team of researchers including Dr Finlayson, Ms Smith and Dr Daly (University of Canberra and Visiting Fellow, CAEPR) are undertaking further fieldwork at Kuranda and in the Cairns region. It is expected that this will be the first in a series of discussion papers that will both progressively describe, and longitudinally track, the effectiveness of income support measures for indigenous families, while also providing very policy-significant pointers to how such payments might be modified to ensure appropriateness.

Professor Jon Altman  
Series Editor  
June 1999

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## Summary

Can service delivery and program development accommodate cultural parameters? What bureaucratic mechanisms could encompass such accommodations in program delivery and/or policy stance?

Such fundamental questions are addressed in this discussion paper by charting the process of undertaking field-based research on the effectiveness of government income support payments to indigenous families for care of children. The paper details how the pilot study for the field investigation led firstly, to issues of appropriate research methodology and field practice, and secondly, required careful specification of the arenas of indigenous domestic life which could, or should, give grounds to justify State intervention and scrutiny as an action in the 'best interests' of indigenous people. An immediate outcome of the pilot study is that Aboriginal domestic circumstances and family life are far more complex and volatile than policy makers might expect, or than service deliverers may be able to accommodate. Ethnographic literature confirms this. It adds weight to the view argued here, that policy and program intervention must be carefully handled because many of the identified internal dynamics of indigenous welfare-based households have yet to be fully understood. These dynamics relate to income poverty, patterns of household expenditure and wider issues of sociality as these are impacted upon by residential mobility and the differential demands of age and gender on household membership, stability and economic wellbeing.

Arguably, the conclusions of the Kuranda pilot study project indicate that basic issues of infrastructure, namely, appropriate and adequate housing and access to public transport, remain core concerns for indigenous households and the quality of life that they experience. Amelioration of these factors of service provision alone would directly enhance the circumstances in which welfare-reliant indigenous families in Kuranda endeavour to care for their families' needs.

**Please note:** Some slight changes have occurred to the pagination of this document in its conversion to PDF format. In all other matters, the document reproduces the printed original.

### **Acknowledgments**

From its inception, the research project has been a team effort during both the planning stages and in the field research. We thank the staff of local and regional Aboriginal organisations and State and Commonwealth departments in Cairns and Kuranda who spoke of their experiences in the administration of benefits to indigenous families with indigenous children. Most particularly, we are appreciative of the individual Aboriginal people, many of them women, who willingly and openly shared the issues of their domestic situations with the research team. CAEPR field researchers are also especially appreciative of the insights and assistance of Aboriginal field workers. These outreach workers recognised the importance of knowledge being grounded in social realities and therefore assisted the field team in meeting and speaking directly to a range of Aboriginal people involved in different experiences and situations of child support and childcare.

The CAEPR research team has enjoyed collegial discussion at a number of junctures during the development of the pilot study with staff from the Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) and the Indigenous Services Units of Centrelink in Canberra and Cairns. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a CAEPR seminar on 28 April 1999 with Barry Smith and Cordelia Hull of the Indigenous Policy Unit, DFACS, as discussants. We thank them for helpful commentary on the paper, including further points for consideration. At CAEPR, Diane Smith provided perceptive commentary that has substantially enhanced the present paper. Linda Roach and Hilary Bek provided careful editing and proofreading and Jennifer Braid applied her considerable skills with layout.

## **Introduction**

### **Background to the project**

This paper reports on a range of research, methodological, program and policy considerations arising from a pilot field-based research project in Kuranda near Cairns. It is part of a larger longitudinal research project being conducted by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) researchers under contract for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS).<sup>1</sup> The project is expected to contribute to current, wider policy inquiries by the Indigenous Policy Unit, DFACS, into alternative income support payments to indigenous families. In particular, the project will investigate the effectiveness and appropriateness of Family Allowance and Parenting Payments for the care of the children of indigenous families.

In the discussion below, we raise what might be described as the visible tip of critical issues for the further investigation of indigenous domestic economies. For this reason, the focus of the paper is twofold. First, to raise specific methodological issues for such research; to identify the methodological and conceptual limitations in our capacity to make definitive statements on how indigenous welfare economies operate; to investigate the dominant features of household life relating to the care of children; and to identify program and policy limitations and possible opportunities. Second, to warn that policy intervention into indigenous domestic relationships, for example, between parents and children, demands careful forethought, if only because policy makers may be operating in many respects with limited data, and on the basis of unexamined assumptions of how indigenous domestic life operates. Over the duration of the project, CAEPR's contribution to DFACS's Indigenous Families Project will provide fine-grained empirical data about indigenous families and their households based on a case study approach in two communities.

A broad policy objective of the research is its potential for enhanced service delivery through key administrative changes in Centrelink's program delivery and DFACS's policy formulation. In the area of policy formulation on Family Allowance payments, such changes will require detailed knowledge of customary indigenous childcare practices (especially since childcare within extended kin networks has been identified as a primary source of difference between indigenous and non-indigenous customers) as well as detailed knowledge of the family structures and household economies within which children are placed.

The selected field sites in the first year of the CAEPR research are Kuranda in North Queensland and Yuendumu in Central Australia. These choices are largely the consequence of having identified field workers with established community relations and ethnographic knowledge, and the availability of longitudinal data for socioeconomic comparisons. Once established, the project may seek to extend into a southern urban community.

## **Project research methodology**

The effectiveness of income support (both in terms of access and delivery) will be investigated in each community (Kuranda and Yuendumu) on the basis of a sample of 15 to 20 households and the individuals within them, with the intention of trying to track those households over the life of the project.

At the level of each household the project aims to identify:

- the welfare economy of the household on the basis of the sources of income of the individuals resident;
- the household and family organisational structures, membership and relationships;
- the cultural parameters of childcare, including domestic arrangements, the patterns of mobility of children and their parents (and other carers), and the impact of that mobility on childcare and on delivery of income payments for their care;
- the key community services available to families, focusing specifically on those relevant to the welfare and care of children; and
- family members' perceptions about the above.

The intention will be to evaluate:

- the welfare economy of households and the impacts of mobility upon households, in particular, upon the care of children;
- whether there is appropriate access to Centrelink payments for indigenous children and families within households;
- whether the method of delivering Centrelink payments to indigenous children and their families are appropriate considering community type, geographical location and cultural issues; and
- relevant policy and program issues.

In the full research project the methodology will require the researchers in each community to include a minimum of 15 households, consisting of a mix of family types where there are adults who rely on Centrelink payments as their major source of income. There are, of course, significant issues involved in the selection process, including at the level of obtaining consent from individuals and households, and a need to work closely with community leaders and organisations if the project is to be successful.

A major component of the field methodology consists of the administration of a general questionnaire to all adults within selected households, together with a short, general overview household questionnaire to ensure a reasonable data consistency across the two communities. Indigenous field workers will be used in each community to facilitate the conduct of the project, administration of questionnaires and communication with the local community and organisations. Consent forms for interviews have been developed.



An important methodological component, the questionnaire, constitutes only one part of the research methodology. Other avenues of inquiry will include informal interviews with family members; construction of family and household organisational and genealogical structures; interviews with other community residents and organisations involved in the delivery of services oriented towards children and their families; and in-depth interviews with regional Centrelink staff. The latter discussions have already commenced.

Project researchers have already spent considerable time examining Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (particularly the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Survey), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Australian Institute of Family Studies, and other questionnaires and have considered a range of definitional, conceptual and cultural issues in the development of the questionnaire. The community-based research will be contextualised by a statistical analysis of 1996 Census and Centrelink aggregate data, and by a review of relevant policy and international literature.

## **Current status of the project**

To date, the project researchers have spent considerable periods of time with weekly meetings developing the questionnaire, having received comments from the Indigenous Services Unit at DFACS and from Centrelink officers at the national and regional levels. This has assisted in focusing questions on program and policy realities. The questionnaire has been substantially revised as a result of the very valuable pilot process, and a number of issues were highlighted as deserving of more attention, enabling the research to be focused more tightly.

The published research results will be made available to Centrelink at the regional and national levels and to all participating households and to indigenous community organisations involved in family and child welfare. No confidential individual information will be published, or made available to any department or agency.

## **The Kuranda pilot**

Over one fortnight in February 1999, CAEPR researchers undertook a pilot study of the proposed methodology in Kuranda. The project research team decided to use a questionnaire as the standardised instrument of inquiry in order to enhance data consistency and comparability between the two communities. We felt it was important (for the reasons outlined above) to trial the design and content of the proposed questions first-hand to ensure systematic collection of household data. The questionnaire would therefore pose a series of standardised questions across a range of topics with at least 15 indigenous households in the two field contexts.

The pilot questionnaire was initially broad ranging and aimed at two types of interview, one with the individual, and the other, with the household. For the purposes of the questionnaire, all persons over the age of 16 years were considered adults. Principal topics of investigation were:

- household and family structures and membership;
- family mobility;
- the cultural and community context for children's care and socialisation;
- families' perceptions of key issues in childcare;
- the relationship between indigenous families and government service providers such as Centrelink; and
- the employment, training and educational histories of the parents in each family.

### **Definitional issues**

In spite of pruning sessions prior to the pilot, we knew the questionnaire was too long and that certain methodological difficulties could be anticipated. Field experience confirmed this. However, the pilot also confirmed the methodological value of adopting staged research strategies for fine tuning research tools and objectives. Although we had spent considerable time and energy in careful construction of the questionnaire in the field, we adopted a range of inquiry strategies. These strategies included formal and informal interviews and focus group discussions. More details of the methodologies are provided below. The pilot also tested some policy and program issues; for example, views about changes with the potential to improve program delivery, and assessment of the viability of these changes for policy implementation.

The present discussion paper is a preliminary and broad interpretation of the ethnographic material obtained from the pilot study, including issues of research method raised by the process.

### **Centrelink's indigenous policy research**

The research objective for the pilot was largely methodological. However, the project objective is exploration of the relationship between income support payments and the impact of specific cultural parameters on indigenous childcare and therefore on service delivery of income payments. Many of these issues were raised during the pilot.

According to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups interviewed at workshops, DFACS was aware from their own policy research that income support payments to indigenous families were ineffectively delivered.<sup>2</sup> They recognised a range of reasons for this, such as the inappropriateness of certain definitions of family, the role of the extended family in indigenous childcare, and

high levels of residential mobility amongst indigenous children. Anecdotal evidence suggested that older women often looked after their daughters' children without any formal financial assistance; indeed, that the parent often continued to receive regular Family Allowance payments even though they might not be caring for the child in question. From the Department's perspective there is a strong desire to ensure that members of the extended family caring for children should be appropriately accommodated or supported through flexible service delivery, and perhaps more flexible delivery of welfare income. DFACS's Indigenous Policy Unit is currently developing another pilot program (the Carers Statement Trial) to trial shared benefit payments with indigenous families for potential resolution of anomalies in the relationship between child and carer.

Centrelink's Indigenous Services Unit staff in Cairns are certainly aware of diverse childcare practices among indigenous families. The cultural differences in childcare practices amongst indigenous families and the inapplicability of standard carer definitions used by Centrelink as the standard means to gauge who is the child's primary carer, were teased out in detail in a series of workshops on these matters. Workshops were held at key centres Australia-wide and involved discussion with indigenous clients. Dr Finlayson attended the Cairns workshop in October 1998. The workshops confirmed for the DFACS Indigenous Policy Unit the potentially inappropriate nature of Centrelink's program delivery to indigenous families. The Unit had anecdotal evidence which

suggested that there was a mismatch between indigenous care arrangements and the assumptions underpinning the guidelines for paying Family Allowance. It was decided that the issue warranted further investigation. The Indigenous Policy Unit wanted to find out more about how indigenous families operated to discover what cultural and family issues lay behind the apparently high rates of change of care and the problems associated with notifying Centrelink of the changes. A related task would be to revisit current Family Allowance ... program guidelines to see what changes might be possible to better accommodate Indigenous caring and child-raising patterns (Hull and Page 1998: 4).

In this paper we argue that changes in program design and delivery to accommodate perceived cultural practices can be a problematic research objective and both the assumptions and objectives behind such research need to be carefully scrutinised, not least in terms of the potential consequences of instrumental action. Preliminary findings of the Kuranda pilot have alerted us to a number of important research and policy issues which would need to be thoroughly investigated and analysed before significant changes in program delivery should be initiated. These can be summarised as matters such as the complexity of indigenous household dynamics, the importance of thorough preparation and knowledge of the available literature on crucial factors such as indigenous household expenditure patterns, the impact of the social risks and cultural investment in indigenous 'demand sharing' (see Finlayson 1989; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995), and matters of comparability in measuring poverty levels in indigenous families and communities. None of these issues is particular to the situation in Kuranda; indeed, they represent matters of continuing

complexity for systematic analysis of welfare-based households. In other words, there is no easy or simplistic relationship between culture, culturally-based behaviours and the improvement or refinement of service delivery. All possible options need to be carefully considered.

## **Conduct of the pilot project**

The service bodies interviewed were not limited to Centrelink. During the first week of the fortnight research pilot, researchers Drs Daly and Finlayson spoke with a number of organisations with responsibility for service delivery to Kuranda's Aboriginal residents.<sup>3</sup> The researchers raised questions such as what procedural arrangements might be the most appropriate in terms of effective service delivery for the care of Aboriginal children; for dealing with associated problems of access to facilities and infrastructure; and for support options to improve areas of currently perceived difficulties.

In the second week of the pilot, Dr Finlayson interviewed Aboriginal people using the draft questionnaire, managing to work through seven questionnaires in total. A realistic assessment of the field circumstances and the length of the document indicated, however, that an interviewer might expect to complete less than thus, in this timeframe. Considerable time was spent with respondents discussing question format, relevance and wording.

As mentioned above, certain methodological difficulties were immediately apparent in the field context and required adjustment. The most useful research tool was the household genealogy. These 'social maps' made it possible to record the gender, age and income structures of the household group and to distinguish between the core residential group and those who are regular visitors. It was also possible to discuss these features in a context that allowed both interviewer and interviewee to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern. A number of significant, common features of the households were immediately obvious. These factors were:

- the large sizes of household membership resident in standard three bedroom homes;
- the high proportion of young people relative to older people in households;
- the heavy reliance on income support payments for financial viability, and the precariousness of a domestic economy where welfare is the principal means of income; and
- the degree to which the economic viability of households is adversely subject to economic pressures and the impact of visitors.

## **Locating interviewees**

Locating people in the field and finding time to interview them is subject to many constraints. To most field workers this is a banal observation. However, an

unexpected field difficulty during conduct of the pilot was the limited availability of household members to participate in interviews and undertake questionnaires. Effectively, a small window of opportunity exists in the field situation in which to locate and identify people and to impinge on their time. Typically, once income support payments are paid, Aboriginal people are single-mindedly consumed with their own domestic and financial business. In addition, being 'flush' enables people to travel beyond the immediate area. Where households operate on a hand-to-mouth cycle of management, 'pay day' represents an important moment for personal and household activity (Finlayson 1991; Martin 1993).

In Kuranda the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme operates each Monday and Tuesday. This is currently an important employment enterprise in the Kuranda communities with 120 indigenous participants engaged in activities ranging through furniture making, operating a take-away and café, production and retailing of their artefacts, and development of recreational infrastructure at Mona Mona.<sup>4</sup> On each Monday and Tuesday the availability of Aboriginal people for interviews is guaranteed.

## **Kinship**

Apart from access to potential respondents, another field issue was the extent to which Kuranda Aboriginal people use classificatory kinship terms to identify and describe their relationships to one another. In the draft questionnaire we adopted standard Anglo-Australian kinship terms, primarily based on presumptions of biological connections, to describe childcare arrangements between the generations. (See Appendix Figures A1, A3 and A5.)

We discovered that in Kuranda people use kinship terms in ways that do not necessarily align with assumptions held by the researchers. For example, a child in the care of a mother's mother's sister refers to the older woman as her 'granny' or grandmother, and the older woman calls these children her 'grannies' (as a gloss for grandchildren). There may be further methodological implications with regard to kin terminology when identifying household members in a kin-based social world as Martin and Taylor (1995) describe below.

In further project research kinship terms will need careful identification to ensure that the researcher is clear about the actual genealogical relationship. Similarly, terms like 'Aunt' and 'Uncle' cannot be assumed to be unproblematic translations, or even literal applications, of an Anglo-Australian kinship system.

## **Cultural assumptions**

Field interaction during the pilot uncovered other cultural assumptions built into the questionnaire. For example, although we were aware of the socialisation of children within the extended family, we nevertheless asked questions about who had the *main* (rather than *primary*) responsibility for the child.

The notion of a *primary carer* is, of course, deeply embedded in cultural constructions about familial relationships and about what actions and practices constitute the physical care and social development of the child. DFACS now recognises that not all families operate with the same notions of a primary carer and have adopted this as their starting point for the Carers Statement Trial project. However, asking a question about who has the *primary*, in the sense of *main* responsibility for the child is difficult in Aboriginal communities; not least because responsibility can be variously handled by different people and is not necessarily systematically apportioned. For example, various family members may assume responsibility for specific mundane tasks (ensuring school attendance; visiting the doctor, feeding a child, and the like) but such arrangements tend to operate with a degree of fluidity and are not necessarily organised in advance (see Anderson 1984; Finlayson 1989, 1991; Smith 1991; Martin 1993; Schwab 1995).

### **Leading and misleading questions**

The pilot also indicated that the questionnaire needs modifications because of problems with the form in which questions were asked. For example, the intent of questions was sometimes unclear to the interviewee; questions that sought opinions rather than 'facts' were unhelpful; other questions failed because they had an obvious 'right' answer. Moreover, the field trial demonstrated the range of questions to be too broad. It was equally evident that different arenas of inquiry were clustered into the one conceptual basket. While this was done because the areas appeared logically related, participants found them distracting and confusing.

One solution to these technical issues, aside from a determined pruning of the volume of questions, is to develop profiles of the likely interviewee (for instance of a person on CDEP, Newstart, or single Supporting Parent payments). The research must necessarily attempt to focus on key structures and family-type scenarios. To do this successfully requires a degree of familiarity with individuals and their particular circumstances. Questions framed by such information would then concentrate on a person's particular employment context and family situation and pose relevant questions within these parameters. If researchers assume that their first task is to ask appropriate questions, these can be defined as questions that have a clear appreciation of the particular geographical, historical, and socioeconomic contexts in which an individual moves.

### **Focus groups versus individuals**

Above, it was mentioned that only a limited number of full questionnaires were trialed. In addition, not all questions were answered by individuals. Group discussion was often a productive inquiry strategy and one often 'forced' upon the interviewer by the social dynamics within the household. Critics argue that focus groups carry liabilities for data collection, at least at the level of garnering individual information. However, extensive field experience with Aboriginal people

suggests that a conversational style of inquiry is a more successful long-term investigative strategy than the 'hit and run' approach often characteristic of questionnaires. There are also data collection issues that benefit from participant observation and an understanding of the particular cultural and social world. In many situations, a group of people will listen to a questionnaire interview if not also participating and helping to answer questions. As a result, individual interviews frequently turn into group discussions. Clearly, these dynamics need to be accommodated and used positively, not seen as a hindrance.

One important problem for us was how to establish comprehensive data sets. We realised from experience in the pilot that we needed to access a range of additional data sources, such as CDEP administration records for gross income and levels of automatic deductions and Centrelink aggregate data. In the absence of such data and for the purpose of reflecting on results from the pilot, where data was not available we made assumptions based on the limited oral evidence about the benefit payments individuals received in households.

### **Field questions to further explore**

A major focus of the project is on indigenous children. The existing empirical literature draws attention to the high degree of mobility among indigenous children, a phenomenon that DFACS is aware of from their own experience in service delivery. However, methodologically it has been difficult to identify the age and gender groups who are regularly involved in household mobility, and to factor such data into analysis of the relationship between mobility, population data and household composition (see Martin and Taylor 1995).

The difficulty of resolving this relationship between age, gender and mobility from fieldwork is not simply technical.

Factors in Aboriginal population surveys which underlie omissions and inconsistencies in the initial aggregation of individuals as a community listing, should not be seen as simply technical or procedural in nature. The elicitation of a seemingly unproblematic list of co-residents has to be placed against particular cultural considerations. Depending from whom the information is being sought, these could relate to such matters as an unwillingness to directly use the name of a co-resident with whom the person has a respect or avoidance relationship, or unwillingness, perhaps to acknowledge co-residence because to do so could be akin to admitting publicly to relationships or conflicts which had led to their residing in the particular household at that time. Furthermore, lists of people are typically ranked, according to factors such as the closeness or otherwise of kin relatedness, gender and generation asymmetry, and political hierarchy. Such principles operate in the context of eliciting those with rights in a particular tract of traditional lands but are also germane in household surveys (Sutton 1978: 154–5). ... it is important to note that these principles are likely to operate whether the person seeking the information is indigenous or not (Martin and Taylor 1995: 13).

Cultural limitations on public disclosure of co-residency are often *sleepers* or an unrecognised factor in surveys of indigenous households as Martin and Taylor explain. Martin was alerted to the issue after conducting household surveys in a remote Aboriginal community in Cape York, North Queensland.

In the ethnographic surveys conducted at Aurukun, it was common to find smaller children and the more politically marginal omitted from the initial survey. Only subsequent direct questioning yielded information on the current place of residence of these individuals. Such factors clearly have major implications for the conduct of ABS censuses in the light of the substantial under-enumeration of younger children in comparison with the ethnographic survey (Martin and Taylor 1995: 13–14).

Martin suggested that any assumptions about the mobility of children (in addition to other householders) require careful field attention. While preliminary results from the pilot questionnaire identified obvious service delivery issues, more intensive fieldwork is required to fully appreciate the internal dynamics of household expenditure, management of income and the impact of mobility amongst different sectors of the indigenous community, and thus how appropriate program adjustment might be achieved. The questionnaire has been significantly refined to reflect these methodological findings and to target these key research areas.

### **Centrelink service issues in Kuranda: preliminary findings**

The Kuranda pilot study suggests that for indigenous parents (often women) in receipt of income support for care of children, most individuals are capable of accessing Centrelink's services and dealing with changes in care situations. For example, if a child moves between family carers for extended periods, then each recipient is capable of, and does in fact, telephone Centrelink to ensure the necessary adjustments to Family Allowance. But, it is also true that some individuals do not choose to inform Centrelink of the changes for cultural and personal reasons. These individuals make an assessment of their potential to carry the extra financial burden for additional children against the consequences of exposing the recalcitrant family member to scrutiny from Centrelink and, potentially, other government agencies. In a later section of the discussion we allude to Schwab's (1995) analysis of how demand sharing operates and his observation that social and kin relationships are frequently *tested* in terms of worth by such strategies.

In Kuranda, preliminary findings of the pilot suggest potential program adjustments to accommodate indigenous childcare practices are not central concerns of indigenous people involved in childcare and child support. Nevertheless, there are service delivery issues to address and these will be targeted for further investigation in the full project research components.



## **Location as a service issue**

For Kuranda interviewees, the most significant access issue for Centrelink services is surmounting the limitations of Kuranda's geographical location. Location also impinges on the availability of other services (such as medical, educational, recreational and social services) and the sense of social isolation interviewees claimed was a predetermining feature of life in Kuranda. The lack of facilities for children and youth were mentioned repeatedly. So too was the socioeconomic profile of the town as a tourist destination where many of the town's businesses and facilities were aimed at the transient visitor and not local residents.

A key issue is lack of a reliable, efficient and accessible transport system to Cairns as the major regional service centre. Kuranda is promoted as the 'village in the rainforest' and is reached by 26 kilometres of winding road cut into the Macalister Ranges. In 1987, the daily motor rail service between Kuranda and Cairns ceased. Today, a privately owned and operated bus line operates the daily public transport service between Mareeba, Kuranda and Cairns.

The bus departs Kuranda early in the morning, returning at the end of the day, and provides a convenient service for the needs of day-trippers and residential commuters, but it is not a service the Aboriginal population finds accessible. In part, the problem of access is a problem of appropriate transport. It is an issue further compounded by the geographic dispersal of the Kuranda Aboriginal community and their limited individual access to either private or public transport.

Indeed, the majority of Kuranda's Aboriginal people live in small rural, outlying communities such as Mantaka, Kowrowah, Koah or at the former Mona Mona mission. The three communities of Mantaka, and Top and Bottom Kowrowah are located approximately 15 km north-west of Kuranda following the now unused Kuranda-Mareeba rail line. Mona Mona, the former Seventh Day Adventist mission community, is even less accessible and at certain times of the year can only be reached by four wheel drive vehicle. In the wet season for example, it is only possible to get in and out of the mission by Black Mountain Road since the higher water levels of the Barron River make usual fording places impassible.

The Black Mountain Road access route entails almost an hour's drive along dirt tracks and through State forests. The isolation of the Mona Mona settlement has meant that housing and other facilities are basic and until recently, the makeshift housing lacked heating, mains electricity, reticulated water or sewerage. The Centre for Appropriate Technology in Cairns is currently engaged in community development and planning workshops with Mona Mona residents and the wider Kuranda Aboriginal community to develop a staged plan for the property's future development.

In the meantime, Mona Mona residents are restricted in their access to the usual consumer facilities and services. Once they leave the former mission site,

the first point of access to shopping facilities is the store adjacent to the Top Kowrowah community on the Oak Forest road. The store supplies basic groceries and household items, and offers shoppers credit facilities. Prices of goods tend to be higher than in the Kuranda supermarket, but the combination of lack of transport and the capacity to buy on credit means that many Mona Mona residents and those in the Kowrowah community regularly shop here.

Top Kowrowah is one of the Kuranda Aboriginal communities. It is an incorporated community organisation with a CDEP scheme administered through a centralised CDEP administration based in Kuranda. The community has an access phone for Centrelink inquiries, a community hall, and offices to accommodate visiting service agencies. A number of women on CDEP wages staff the community office two days per week and give assistance with Centrelink issues. The settlement consists of 13 terraced-style houses rented to residents by the Queensland Department with responsibility for Aboriginal and Islander affairs. State-owned accommodation is also rented to families at Bottom Kowrowah and Mantaka communities. In other cases, such as Kowrowah and Mona Mona, people have constructed their own homes and pay no rent.

Interviews during the pilot study indicate that transport and access to services generally is a major source of concern to Kuranda's Aboriginal population. In the past, community-run buses regularly linked all residential communities with Kuranda. But the impact of ATSIC's funding cuts to community organisations has meant the demise of most community bus services because necessary repair costs cannot be met. Yet the transport and access issues are not limited to Aboriginal residents in the outlying villages. Few Aboriginal residents in Kuranda have private transport, and experience similar problems when expected to make regular visits to Centrelink offices in either Cairns or Mareeba for essential case reviews, lodging of applications and interviews.

A further exacerbation of the access issue is Centrelink's standard procedural rule that those in receipt of income support personally lodge their forms at the regional Centrelink office. Consequently, a number of people complained that Centrelink made no exception for their isolation in Kuranda and the limited public transport available. Aboriginal people see Kuranda as a remote location in terms of access issues, but for the purposes of government service provision the area is considered 'urban' and fails to attract any special consideration for service delivery. For example, some Aboriginal people wanted to fax their forms to the Centrelink office, but were prevented from doing so, except where prior permission was given and this was only likely to be in exceptional circumstances. To meet the requirement some Centrelink clients began hitch hiking down the range to lodge their forms. Local police increasingly frowned upon this practice and began systematically fining those caught doing so. Inevitably, people felt trapped by the increasing difficulties of trying to meet the regulations of different bureaucracies.

The other major complaint made by Kuranda Aboriginal people was their inability to get through to the Centrelink office on the telephone hotline number. Even when they were successful, a number of people experienced difficulties using the automatic message system. Arguably, the latter is an issue of knowing what it is you want to ask and which section of Centrelink can appropriately deal with the inquiry. This presumes knowledge of the conceptual structure of Centrelink services and the organisational structure of service delivery. Nevertheless, women interviewed for the pilot generally had a reasonable working knowledge of benefits they were entitled to. Their familiarity with the range of benefits may reflect the advantage of regularly held Centrelink workshops for increased client awareness of available services and application procedures.

Despite their sound knowledge of the system, Kuranda Aboriginal interviewees were adamant that the community needed yet more sustained access to the Centrelink Indigenous Service Officer than the access afforded by a visit every four to six weeks. At the time of the pilot, the officer spent one day in the Ngoonbi Aboriginal Housing Cooperative Office in Kuranda for consultations with clients and discussions with the Honorary Agent. Some clients listed other agencies that were able to provide a high level of contact and wondered why Centrelink could not.

The transport and access issues in Kuranda result, first, in many indigenous people feeling the impact of their isolated location and the limitations this imposes on their ability to access mainstream urban services and facilities, and, secondly, lack of access leads to feelings of isolation and marginality. The irony of their position is that while they are physically located close to Cairns, a major urban centre, their experience of service delivery, including access to infrastructure and mainstream facilities, is more typical of the experiences of a remote community. Smith (1991) has remarked that when assessing access to facilities and services to Aboriginal communities this should be done on a case-by-case basis. This approach is necessary to gain a full appreciation of what financial subsidisation is necessary and how this can ameliorate the impact of poverty on household expenditure.

All Aboriginal families in Kuranda are historically linked to the former Mona Mona mission with the majority of the older generation having been born and raised there. From 1913 until it closed in 1962, the mission provided limited services to the Aboriginal residents. Once it was officially disbanded, former residents were expected to ensure their own access to mainstream services in the major regional towns of Mareeba and Cairns. Residents who continued to live outside Kuranda in the small settlements mentioned above, only gained access to services such as reticulated sewerage and water, council garbage collections and electricity from the mid 1980s.

Smith suggests that:

One cannot assume, even with special government program funding and the involvement of Aboriginal organisations, that Aboriginal households in different regions are provided with the basic essential services and resources

which are assumed to be a citizenship right by most Australians. The source and amount of government funds provided can vary greatly between communities regardless of their geographical location and associated infrastructural shortfalls, and the current economic status of the Aboriginal residents (Smith 1991: 26).

These comments are certainly applicable to the history of Kuranda Aboriginal people's access to mainstream local and State government services (see Taylor 1988). For example, access to transport has a history. In Kuranda, taxis have historically operated, as a *de facto* form of public transport to Aboriginal clients, primarily because few people had privately owned vehicles and in the mid 1980s local rail services closed. In the mid 1990s the transport situation improved temporarily. Grants from ATSIC for community run buses enabled incorporated organisations to offer an essential community service. But cuts to ATSIC's global budget have reversed the situation. During the pilot study Aboriginal people were experiencing continuing transport problems, and a concomitant need to access other regional services and bureaucracies.

At the mundane level of everyday household management, lack of transport impacts on consumer choices and expenditure patterns. In practical terms, in a tropical climate where perishable foods had a very limited shelf life, many people in Kuranda's outlying communities who were without electricity and refrigerated (electrical) appliances found it essential to shop daily. Once again, transport was a key issue, since eating fresh food was only possible if transport to and from Kuranda was assured.

The local supermarket and butcher's shop has a long operating history in Kuranda (see Finlayson 1991). These businesses have always enjoyed a significant Aboriginal clientele. In part, this has been because consumers without transport options cannot travel to larger centres for fortnightly shopping, as much as it has been the result of both businesses extending credit to indigenous customers.

Expenditure on food, and the type of food purchased, continue to be an important component in evaluation of household poverty. In Kuranda, residents of outlying villages are likely to regularly buy their groceries at the Top Kowrowah shop. Prices are high, but again, the offer of credit to Aboriginal customers is attractive to households operating on a boom-to-bust fortnightly cycle. Smith suggests why such options are attractive. After surveying available data on indigenous food expenditure she concludes:

Aboriginal households are spending a greater proportion of their incomes on food than all Australian households. The pattern of expenditure on food also appears to differ markedly, with a greater emphasis on meats, cereal and sugar products. Also, Aboriginal residence in remote and rural areas, and their locational disadvantage on the outskirts of many towns, means that Aborigines incur considerable expenditure on transportation (Smith 1991: 29–30).

The Kuranda pilot study has shown that any consideration of Centrelink's service delivery and of household economies and the position of children within them

must be contextualised within the wider range of services available, or unavailable, to families and the general problems in accessing them. Further project research will ensure inclusion of this wider context.

## **What conclusions can be made from the pilot project data?**

### **Methodological considerations**

In general, the pilot proved a valuable strategy for honing specific research tools, in particular, the role and delivery of the questionnaire as our principal instrument of inquiry. We also discovered the importance of household genealogies as a critical component of the questionnaire. Another advantage of the pilot study was the opportunity for a 'reality check' on the challenges of face-to-face interviewing pointing up the importance of the appropriate articulation of tone, form and content of questions for interviewees. Furthermore, field contact ensured direct observation and exposure to aspects of everyday Aboriginal domestic circumstances. Importantly, our investigative process has been problematised by such contact and is not in danger of presuming outcomes or expectations of the research. The Kuranda pilot study showed that our methodology is unique, being a hybrid of both questionnaire and interview techniques and therefore might aptly be referred to as 'questionnaire interviewing'.

Field contact ensures that researchers directly confront the basic realities of indigenous domestic experience. For example, prior to the pilot did we imagine that 20 Aboriginal people regularly lived together in a standard three bedroom house? (see Appendix Figure A1) or wonder how two single female adults could manage eight children under 12 years of age? or understand what kinds of pressures are experienced by a fragile household economy when beset by weekend visitors? (see Appendix Figure A3).

As a sole method of inquiry, questionnaires render the dynamics of household life opaque. They are useful for establishing comparable and consistent data across a range of subjects. But we also know from ethnographic work on indigenous families elsewhere that they do not reveal how culturally embedded ideals of gender, role, autonomy, independence, childhood and demand sharing, deeply impact on the domestic practices of care, management and socialisation (see Sibthorpe 1988; Finlayson 1989; Schwab 1995).

Our recommendations for such projects' methodology are first, that the instruments of inquiry should be tested and appropriately adjusted after initial field contact; second, that critical reflection on the development of the methodology needs to be on-going; and third, that indigenous informants may respond best to a combination of inquiry techniques, significantly, what we call here 'questionnaire interviews'. In addition, researchers must appreciate that there are parameters within which they will need to work and must identify arenas where policy and program developments may contribute to positive

outcomes, without assuming that all aspects of household life are open to unfettered scrutiny on the grounds of policy interest. Finally, success in field research is based on a grounded familiarity with the distinctive socioeconomic history of the study community and a wide appreciation of the relevant literature.

## **Policy implications**

Much of the ethnographic literature points to intra- and inter-household networks as influential determinants of Aboriginal domestic life. To understand childcare issues one must understand the key dynamics of indigenous domestic economics. For example, in Kuranda Finlayson interviewed two neighbouring households headed by women who were sisters. These women were both on limited welfare-based income support and, to operate viable households within these financial constraints, they shared food and financial resources.

Policy makers and departmental staff recognise some of the parameters indigenous households face as a result of their contact with families during service delivery by Centrelink. Other avenues have provided the opportunities for further exploration. The content of the DFACS workshops for example, increased administrators' awareness of the poor resource management skills confronting many indigenous families. Consequently, a common suggestion to help people to move beyond the boom-to-bust cycle of indigenous domestic economies with the participants' inability to establish a household budget, was to suggest providing clients with simple budgeting skills. Armed with such skills, families could then make the necessary choices in how income support payments were used, either to meet family needs or to satisfy individual wants; a dilemma captured in the title of this paper, 'Stew or shoe'? Of course, if the solution to indigenous household management were simply a matter of access to the appropriate knowledge and skills in budgeting, many problems of resource distribution and management would have been solved already. The complexities of indigenous household financial management should be neither under-estimated nor trivialised. For many Aboriginal households the critical budgetary decision is often a prioritising choice between the material needs of children and youths, and that of the regular and daily demand to eat.

During the pilot we contacted local and regional service organisations for discussion of service delivery issues to indigenous families and children particularly. Personnel in these organisations offered a range of policy and service options to ensure DFACS Family Allowance payments would actually reach the appropriate beneficiary. These options ranged from a view that service organisations should receive the lump sum of the benefits and then distribute them in accordance with authenticated need, to suggestions for up-skilling in home-making and budgeting as designated activity testing for indigenous people applying for social security benefits. Other suggestions argued for direct program intervention, notably by ensuring a close association between entitlements and access to them. For example, one proposal was that only families whose children regularly attended school were entitled to full Family Allowance benefits and

where children were not regularly attending school, the benefit would be progressively 'docked' on a pro rata basis. A major issue in relation to the wide range of proposed remedies for ensuring children benefit from Family Allowance money is distinguishing between what are effective remedies and what are acceptable ones. For example, penalising families whose children have poor school attendance may be effective (or not), but it may not be an acceptable way to deal with entitlement to benefits and the citizenship issues involved.

### **Important policy issues**

As mentioned previously, the preliminary findings of the Kuranda pilot study resonate with identified research issues raised elsewhere in the policy and empirical literature for indigenous families and their socioeconomic status. For example, Smith (1991) surveyed a wide range of available empirical studies of indigenous families and noted the gap in expenditure data for Aboriginal households. She argues that although:

Assessments of the adequacy of government social security programs, of taxation policy, the equity of income distribution and of the impact on Australian households of changing economic conditions all rely heavily on expenditure data obtained from Household Expenditure Surveys (HES) ... the few Aboriginal households included in the HES are not identified. There are currently no equivalent national data available on Aboriginal expenditure levels and patterns (Smith 1991: abstract).

Smith (1991) further noted that research into the nature of indigenous household expenditure is under-researched with available databases capable of offering only tentative or partial conclusions; not least, because Aboriginal household expenditure patterns differ from those of the wider community. Smith estimates that most of our knowledge of indigenous households is largely derived from unpublished ethnographic literature. The empirical focus has also enabled us to see that intra-household networks are a critical element in sustaining and maintaining the viability of Aboriginal household economies. Smith (1991), in common with Martin and Taylor (1995), points out the influential role of social and cultural factors in indigenous household dynamics. But more broadly, Smith found geographic location, financial subsidisation and the price of commodities equally critical. Smith examined expenditure patterns and levels for indigenous housing, food and transport and concluded that low incomes remain a key factor in relation to continuing poverty in Aboriginal households. This corresponds to observations made during the Kuranda pilot project.

The analysis shows that an important impact of Aboriginal poverty is that with a high proportion of income being spent on basic commodities, many households do not have the cash to pay for service provision (Smith 1991: abstract).

How members of indigenous households spend their income and how it is proportionally allocated between commodities and services of various kinds is difficult to ascertain from survey questionnaires, and no less so from supporting data from participant observation. In the context of short-term fieldwork such as

the present project, it is not possible to undertake such studies or to provide definitive answers to questions of indigenous household expenditure patterns. Mindful of the attendant ethical issues, we do not expect to undertake an expenditure study with Kuranda's indigenous households. At best, it may be possible to provide indicative findings about indigenous household expenditure from the field research, but we suggest that this area is generally a difficult and fraught arena for policy research and one in which inquiry may not be welcome for obvious reasons of privacy and intrusion.

### **Demand-sharing, reciprocity and risk assessment**

Schwab (1995), too, argues the importance of cultural factors on household dynamics and choices. In his view, policy makers have failed to accommodate the importance of such factors when trying to improve or explain the position of Aboriginal people in the wider economy. He addresses the question of reciprocity or demand sharing and the instrumental effect this has on Aboriginal social relations and the flow and use of material resources. Schwab's observations of how demand sharing works in social life contribute to the present project as a lens through which we might sharpen the focus of the relationship between income support payments, childcare and indigenous domestic life. Schwab argues that analysis of empirical material demonstrates

that the notions of sharing that underlie the act of sharing are part of a complex cultural system involving a calculus of reciprocity in which individuals and groups make decisions regarding the provision of economic assistance to one another but also variously display, shape or deny social alliances (Schwab 1995: abstract).

For him the empirical literature is an important source of information about the cultural principles of demand sharing and intra-indigenous household dynamics. (See Smith (1991) and Schwab (1995) for surveys of the important ethnographic literature on rural, urban and remote Aboriginal households and economies; also Smith and Daly (1996).)

Schwab (1995) acknowledges that the wider society may well have ideological expectations and assumptions about the principles and content of Aboriginal sociality, particularly with regard to sharing. Indeed, socialisation for sharing is often observed as a pan-Aboriginal pattern.

This pattern is widespread among Aboriginal people in remote and urban settings, and creates the expectation that generosity and sharing are the normal states of affairs, particularly among those defined as kin. Yet this simple expectation is founded on a variety of complex assumptions about the breadth of Aboriginal kinship, the nature of generosity, and the basis of social and cultural identity. These assumptions underpin a system of strategic interaction through which individuals evaluate and respond to requests for assistance from other Aboriginal people. This social interaction is guided by what might be described as the calculus of reciprocity (Schwab 1995: 7).



Ultimately, Schwab (1995) concludes that Aboriginal generosity and sharing is neither simple nor uncomplicated in practice, although it may be presented as an uncomplicated point of distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Generosity and sharing is also used as a signifier of Aboriginality. Additionally, the practice of sharing for Aboriginal people is quintessentially an expression of group membership and belonging.

Schwab (1995) argues that the cultural assumptions and principles behind Aboriginal reciprocity can be systematically articulated. While describing the position of people who refuse a demand, Schwab is equally aware that demands can be managed and deflected and that at certain points people do this on the basis of risk assessment. Schwab suggests that on balance, people generally, and some individuals in particular, have much to lose by refusing requests. The social pressure brought to bear on these individuals is usually sufficient to modify their aberrant behaviour. This is an important point.

DFACS has initiated the present research project in response to their understanding that indigenous family and childcare practices differ from that of other Australians. The Indigenous Policy Unit is considering adjusting service delivery anomalies based on recognising and responding to cultural differences. However, questions arise as to, first, whether an instrumental connection between program delivery and mundane practices exists, and second, whether bureaucratic intervention simply undermines the agency of Aboriginal clients to determine, according to their cultural mores (through the mechanisms of shame, embarrassment and diplomacy), intra-community relations. The pilot has identified this issue as a key research issue for the project; that is, how can policies and programs respond to culture? If a degree of synergy is possible between these arenas, in what areas of 'culture' is it possible and acceptable to intervene?

Such questions raise the vexed and complex question of where intervention might be sought in terms of policy directions and program adjustment. Arguably, there is need to clarify the distinction between actions likely to be effective and those likely to be acceptable. Consequently, policy makers will need to ask whether there are areas of indigenous domestic life that should be off limits to bureaucratic intervention through program delivery.

Complaints may not necessarily be the best grounds for radical action unless a causal relationship is first established. For example, complaints about recalcitrant kin to departmental officers may simply be that; whereas seeking departmental action against one's daughter may be of a different magnitude of action and have implications that the complainant does not actually want. Wider interpretative issues for policy makers are also at stake in this process since administrators and policy makers cannot assume necessary and causal relationships for indigenous families in welfare-based households. For example, how do we measure Aboriginal household poverty in the light of cultural evaluations? How should we weight cultural factors in relation to other factors? Indeed, the methodological questions of how to measure indigenous household

expenditure and how best to understand it, have yet to be resolved. At the broad interpretative level what is the relationship between individuals and groups and at which level should policy and programs be focused?

The impact of fluctuating incomes, the high mobility of some groups of residents and the use of inter-household incomes have not always been appreciated by policy makers. One of the devastating effects of the increasing number of sole parent indigenous households and the associated limitations of access to wider social and educational forums is the potential for inter-generational poverty for children. Moreover, while Schwab (1995) alerts policy makers to the ambiguities of demand sharing, similar tensions operate for sole parents and their capacity to manage their income support, even to quarantine it from the demands of the extended family. Daly and Smith (1998: 7) caution:

While case study evidence highlights the important contribution of the extended family in caring for indigenous children, there is also evidence that access to a reliable income from the Sole Parent Pension may act as a magnet for other members of the extended family (Daly and Smith 1996; Daylight and Johnstone 1986; Rowse 1988), so that parents in receipt of that pension may support more people than the pension is intended.

Preliminary findings from the Kuranda pilot confirm the attraction of Parenting Payment. Informants admitted that 'humbugging' by others, especially men, including the children's father, was a hassle on pension days. Colloquially, these payment days were referred to in Kuranda and Cairns as 'fathers' day' or 'pram day', and it was not uncommon to see men steering prams in the company of women en route to the local bank or building society for a cut of income support money.

### **What contribution can the empirical data make to policy debate in service delivery and program design for indigenous clients on income support payments?**

Despite the identified research limitations of the pilot study, definitive statements about the nature of indigenous households can be made with confidence, especially when articulated in tandem with the available literature and with aggregate Centrelink data on the topic. These conclusions are mindful of the contingencies of economic, geographic and cultural variables between remote and urban communities. First, we were able to glean important indicative data on household structure and composition and also important data on relationships between household members. Second, the Kuranda data on welfare-based indigenous household economies showed households were amenable to research through a methodology combining questionnaire and interview format. The importance of such a methodology is that it represents one of the few times that information on children has been systematically obtained via questionnaires and in relation to welfare. In previous research projects information about indigenous children and family relations in welfare-based household economies has largely come from ethnographic data based primarily on participant observation.

## How to measure indigenous poverty

Methodologically, specific quantitative issues remain, such as how to measure and assess indigenous household reliance on welfare and the resulting poverty. Some of the relativities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations have been referred to above (factors such as geographic location and the associated advantages and disadvantages, financial subsidisation, cultural proclivities, and the status of indigenous households relative to that of all other Australians).

We know, for example, that Aboriginal people, relative to the wider community, experience higher levels of poverty and disadvantage across a number of fronts (health, employment, education, and housing, for example). But the variations in this picture are partly the outcome of different assessment scales and the role and impact of different factors in shaping indigenous poverty. Consequently, the Henderson poverty line might not be especially useful for understanding the welfare economy at the indigenous household level. Yet Altman and Hunter suggest that the inability to confidently comment on the nature of indigenous poverty is part of a wider research problem.

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 (Altman and Hunter 1997: 19).

Nevertheless, Altman and Hunter (1997), in company with others (see Smith 1991; Martin and Taylor 1995; Schwab 1995) identify conceptual problems and methodological issues fundamental to analysis and description of the indigenous welfare economy at the household level. Admittedly, our knowledge of change in the indigenous socioeconomic profile is improving. One reason for this is the capacity to use identifiers in official data collections, coupled with an increasing willingness by indigenous people to identify themselves and their families as indigenous. This change alone has better enabled researchers to monitor longitudinal changes in indigenous socioeconomic status. Another reason for improved data is the imperative for government service agencies (at least at the Commonwealth level) to assess the efficiency and quality of their service delivery to indigenous clients, and to improve outcomes for welfare recipients generally.

Yet to effectively link understanding of the indigenous welfare economy to outcomes in service delivery, government will require data at the household level.

To improve service delivery, however, a better picture is needed of the actual circumstances in which indigenous sole parent families live, including: data on how these families are formed; the nature of their domestic cycles and household economies; the nature and impact of their immediate social

environment; and the role which males and other kin play in sole parent family economies (Daly and Smith 1998: 7).

In the following sections of the paper we briefly allude to areas where research has already indicated the interrelatedness of the factors which shape and perpetuate indigenous poverty in welfare-based households. Relevant published data on welfare-based indigenous households have an important bearing on the indicative conclusions from the Kuranda pilot study. Such material provides the research team with the means to ensure our research focus coincides with key research issues in this arena.

### **Household size, composition and mobility**

Simple observation would indicate that the size and composition of household membership impacts on housing (see, for example, Appendix Figures A2, A3 and A5). A study by Jones (1994) indicated the widespread nature of poor housing and overcrowded housing amongst indigenous families.

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 [after-housing poverty] 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 cited in Altman and Hunter 1997: 7).

Altman and Hunter also comment that:

Poor housing is one of the most visible manifestations of poverty among Indigenous families, with many living in substandard and overcrowded accommodation (Altman and Hunter 1997: 7).

### **Who lives in Aboriginal households?**

The Kuranda household genealogies confirm a widespread characteristic of many indigenous households; namely, a large number of permanent household residents, a high ratio of young people to older household members, and frequent residential, kin-related 'visitors'. Finlayson (1991) and Sansom (1988) alerted researchers to the impact on household economies of visitors, while Sansom coined the phrase 'concertina household' to describe the fluctuation of resources and residents.

Martin and Taylor (1995) also discuss the impact of visitors, although their discussion focuses on how this group is often 'invisible' in household census collections and how researchers have consequently misunderstood the nature and extent of mobility. They write:

An additional factor which adds complexity to the elicitation of lists of household residents, is the high level of day-to-day inter-household visitation. This is one manifestation of the importance placed on sociality in many indigenous households. Commonly, for example, such visiting takes place

within the kin or clan groupings whose members are dispersed across many households. In conducting surveys, it is common to find that there are no individuals present in some houses, while at others there may be large gatherings comprising both residents and visitors. In such circumstances, the compilation of lists of household residents is clearly rendered problematic. These factors are further compounded by the high mobility between households which is a characteristic of Wik social life. High mobility also implies that short-term visitors, or 'floaters' who move frequently between residential groupings, may well not be identified in a survey of a particular household even if they are associated with it at the time (Sutton 1978) (Martin and Taylor 1995: 14).

Martin and Taylor cover a range of factors responsible for mobility based on Martin's ethnographic knowledge of households in Aurukun. Two important reasons for short-term household mobility in their view are inter-personal conflict and access to resources. Indeed, these writers (Martin and Taylor 1995: 15) estimate that:

The availability of food and money within households (in part determined) by the regular cycle of welfare and Community Development Employment Projects scheme payments) is a significant factor.

Based on earlier ethnographic work undertaken in Kuranda in the mid 1980s, Finlayson suggests that similar dynamics operate in these households too. She suspects that we are looking at continuity in household management within the context of inter-generational poverty. Interestingly, income support payments and welfare-based households have not been offset by the opportunities for salaried and wage labour offered by local enterprises like Tjapukai Cultural Park or Skyrail (both of which employed local Djabugay people in accordance with employment agreements; see Finlayson (1995); Holden and Duffin (1998)).

### **Indigenous sole parents**

Indeed, data from the 1996 Census now enables us to draw conclusions about the demographics of age and family types within indigenous households. Consequently, we know that about 40 per cent of indigenous families with children under 15 years of age are sole parent families (Daly and Smith 1998: 1).

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 living with younger people in extended family households (Altman and Hunter 1997: 10).

Daly and Smith's analysis of 1996 Census data found a continuing trend in that:

It confirms results from the 1991 Census which show that sole parent families account for a larger share of indigenous families than sole parents amongst other Australian families. Indigenous female sole parents tend to be younger, have larger numbers of children, less education and are less likely to be in employment than other Australian sole parents. Indigenous sole parent families represent over one-third of indigenous families with children: a

proportion twice as high as for the wider population, and it appears that this proportion is increasing. The position of children within these families is a matter of concern and requires further community-based research and policy attention (Daly and Smith 1998: v).

In the Kuranda pilot we, too, found that sole female parents (and in one case, the sole male parent) were usually living with others in a composite household (often that of a sibling and his/her family) (see Appendix Figure A3). Despite these conclusions in the early stages of the Kuranda research, the field evidence to date shows a close correspondence with empirical and Census data for welfare-based households in other indigenous communities. Indeed, the emerging picture of welfare-based households is one replete with the same characteristics: overcrowding, a high proportion of young children and youth, a significant proportion of visitors or 'floaters' of no fixed address, and considerable welfare dependency resulting in a fragile economy. The interrelationship of these issues will be central to continuing fieldwork amongst Kuranda households, and a critical aspect of the ethnographic investigation of welfare-based indigenous households in Yuendumu.

## **Expenditure**

As noted in earlier sections of the paper, systematically describing indigenous household expenditure patterns is problematic. Nevertheless, some points of generalisation are possible. For example, we know that Aboriginal household expenditure patterns and levels of expenditure on food differ from that of other Australians and concentrate on certain cheap food stuffs, predominantly bread, cereal and sugar.

Overall, Aboriginal people spend proportionally more of their incomes on food staples than the total population, and less on dairy products, breakfast cereals, and fruit and vegetables (Smith 1991: 18).

In common with the wider society, many Aboriginal communities are increasingly using take-away foods as the primary source of daily food, although studies also indicate that convenience foods are often poor nutritionally. It may also be that changes in food preparation correspond to a loss of food preparation skills and this impacts significantly on the care of children and children's health. In the Aurukun community in remote Cape York, Martin estimated that:

Children were responsible for approximately 50 per cent of sales of take-away foods ... representing some 7 per cent of total community expenditure on this type of food (Martin 1993 quoted in Smith 1991: 19).

We also know from empirical data and ethnographic literature that Aboriginal domestic economies tend to comprise, and operate through, linked households (see Anderson 1982; Altman 1987; Finlayson 1991; Smith 1991, 1992; Martin 1993).

Co-residence (even in the limited sense of who sleeps where), commensality, family groupings, and domestic economic units are not necessarily

coterminous. For instance, people who live together may not eat together (Martin and Taylor 1995: 17–18).

Linked domestic groups or families also operate as a network for intra-household mobility. The current project will, realistically, only be able to consider the most general aspects of household economies and sharing, and will focus on this issue in relation to caring for children.

## **Conclusion**

For policy makers and program deliverers, the preliminary conclusions from the Kuranda pilot are cautionary. (For detailed extrapolation of data from the pilot study, see Appendix.) To begin with, it is clear that many welfare-based indigenous households are continuing to struggle with basic and ongoing infrastructural issues (poor and overcrowded housing, lack of public transport, high rates of unemployment and subsequent domestic poverty). These factors have both immediate and long-term impacts on the capacity of families to adequately care for the wellbeing of children.

However, we also know that research on the quantification of poverty in indigenous families is methodologically under-developed and a complex field of inquiry. Nevertheless, through a combination of questionnaire and interviews we have uncovered a range of key issues of indigenous household membership, domestic organisation and resource management. Many of the issues have implications for policy and program arenas. Yet many of these issues, despite their impact on indigenous families and children, will not be amenable to intervention by service deliverers. Indeed, program and policy limitations must be carefully and clearly identified and acknowledged, as much as the potential opportunities for better outcomes. Ultimately, possibilities for program and policy change must be carefully defined; not least in terms of arguments about the impact of social engineering and what constitutes ‘effective’ and ‘acceptable’ intervention. Nor should policy makers presume relationships of congruence between cause and effect without a firm grounding in the particular ethnographic reality.

Our field experience suggests no simple resolution exists between identification of a problem in program outcome and program adjustment. The missing ingredient in such an equation, and one which policy makers often misconstrue, is the impact of culture and its capacity to operate as a filter through which programs impact on indigenous communities and by which indigenous clients in turn, impact upon, subvert, and change program and policy objectives.

## Appendix

This Appendix is designed to provide the preliminary results of the Kuranda pilot study of the Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) Project. The results are to be interpreted as indicative of the current welfare economies of the households interviewed during the pilot study. Although data for five households are presented in Table A1, only three households (Households One, Three and Five) will be examined in detail here. First, the assumptions underpinning the analysis of data from the Kuranda pilot will be examined, followed by a brief description of Households One, Three and Five. Figures A1 to A6 at the end of this Appendix provide more detailed information on welfare income, wage income, gender and age characteristics. Finally, on the basis of the results of the pilot study, four recurring themes will be discussed.

### Limitations of the pilot study

The individual questionnaire was the principle instrument of inquiry used to gather data on indigenous families in this pilot study. During the pilot process it became clear that used alone, the questionnaire would not yield the necessary results and a more open, conversational, style of interview was more appropriate. From the data collected during the pilot study, household income was estimated based on some qualifiers. It is important to note that these qualifiers only apply to the pilot study. Subsequent changes to the questionnaire and a tighter focus on recording sources of income (i.e. welfare payment type) will render most of these qualifiers unnecessary when analysing the results of the major study.

The Kuranda pilot study demonstrated that interviewees showed a high degree of awareness of welfare payments types, including their own eligibility for such payments. In order to estimate household income, the first qualifier made was that if an individual is eligible to receive a payment they will more than likely be receiving that payment. While this assumption certainly may not be true for the wider indigenous population in Australia, anecdotal evidence suggests that Centerlink is doing a good job informing indigenous people in Kuranda about their 'citizenship rights' with respect to government welfare entitlements. Indeed, if welfare is the sole source of income then recipients have a vested interest in knowing how to maximise welfare income. This requires knowing the 'system'.

A second qualifier to the pilot study data is that persons over age 16 are defined as adults. For children under 16, no payments have been included in household income except for those payments going to parents/guardians on their behalf. For example, Abstudy payments for children under age 16 are not included. On the genealogies that follow (Figures A1-A6) the adult gender descriptor is shaded black and the child gender descriptor is shaded grey.

A final qualifier is that Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) scheme workers are assumed to earn \$360 per fortnight for 30 hours



work (Allen Consulting Group Pty Ltd 1999) and this income is treated as welfare payment. When total welfare-derived income is estimated it therefore includes any CDEP wages.

There are a number of other limitations that the reader should be aware of when interpreting the results of the pilot study. First, the ages of some individuals are uncertain. Second, individual payments could therefore not be determined for *all* individuals in the household. Based on the rationale that individuals eligible for welfare payments will more than likely be receiving that payment, the type and amount of welfare payment was estimated for some individuals in each household. For this reason, and other reasons mentioned below, household income information can at best only be an estimate. For example, Abstudy entitlements for dependent students at home vary from \$145 per fortnight for a 16–17 year old to \$280 per fortnight for a student 21 years and over (Centrelink 1998). While complete information on individual income would be useful, it is beyond the scope of this project to accurately determine each individual's income and therefore the total household income. The purpose of providing estimates of household income is to show the extent and nature of welfare dependence, and in particular, which payments are linked to children.

A final limitation is that the pilot data applies strictly to the pilot sample so that at the moment we cannot draw conclusions about the wider indigenous Kuranda community. Research findings of the DFACS project will be supplemented with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), DFACS and other administrative data at the community, State and national level.

## **The households**

### **Household One**

Household One is a three bedroom home with 20 usual residents, 12 adults and eight children. The household is headed by a married couple in their mid to late 50s. The most distinguishing feature of this household is the large number of residents and the young age composition of the household. Only three of 20 usual residents are older than 23 years of age. Consequently, the average age of persons in the household is just over 19 years of age. Household One also consists of three single parents, each with two children, all dependent on welfare. (Refer to Figure A2 for more detail about the age and gender characteristics of this household.)

Table A1, below, shows that there is almost exclusive reliance on welfare (98 per cent) with almost half (48 per cent) of household income derived from child related payments. Child related payments are defined as Parenting Payment Partnered (PPP), Parenting Payment Single (PPS), Family Payment Allowance (FPA), Family Tax Payment (FTP) and Carer Payment (CP). In particular, PPP with the FPA and FTP, PPS and Abstudy were all important contributors to the overall household income of \$3,288 per fortnight. From Table A1 we can see that

although there is a large flow of welfare income into the household, per capita income is a mere \$164 per person per fortnight. Data on median individual income from the 1996 Census show that the indigenous people of Kuranda earn \$189 per fortnight, while non-indigenous people earn \$280 per fortnight (ABS 1998). The median household income per person per fortnight for the Kuranda Indigenous Area (\$189) also happens to be equal to the mean household income per person per fortnight listed in Table A1 (\$189). (Refer to Table A1 for more detail about income characteristics of this household.)

### Household Three

Household Three is also a three bedroom home with 13 usual residents, six adults and seven children. A married couple aged in their late 30s to early 40s jointly heads this household. Only two of 13 usual residents are older than 22 years of age. The average age of persons in this household is lower than that of Household One, at approximately 18 years. (Refer to Figure A4 for more detail about the age and gender characteristics of this household.)

**Table A1. Kuranda pilot household income (HHI) estimates, 1999**

Household	HHI total per fortnight \$	Total number of persons	HHI per person fortnight \$	Welfare as a proportion of HHI Per cent	Child related payments Per cent*
<b>1</b>	<b>3,288</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>44</b>
2	1,213	5	243	42	16
<b>3</b>	<b>2,048</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>20</b>
4	1,700	9	189	100	53
<b>5</b>	<b>1,786</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>80</b>
Average	2,007	11.2	189	80	42

Note: \*Child related payments are defined as Parenting Payment Partnered (PPP), Parenting Payment Single (PPS), Family Payment Allowance (FPA), Family Tax Payment (FTP) and Carer Payment (CP). This column gives child related payments as a proportion of total welfare income. In the Appendix only Households One, Three and Five are presented.

The Household Three case study highlights the impact that one full-time wage earner can have on the extent of household welfare dependency. With just one adult earning a full-time wage the proportion of household income derived from welfare is 61 per cent, with 20 per cent of household income derived from child related payments. Table A1 shows that, similar to Household One, per capita income is a low \$186 per person per fortnight. This amounts to approximately two-thirds of the Kuranda non-indigenous median individual income recorded in the 1996 Census.

Figure A3 shows that there are also four adults and two children who visit the household. The major study will attempt to capture more adequately the duration and financial impact (where possible) that a visitor can have on total household resources. Some mobility patterns are highly variable while others are more predictable. For example, the two youngest visitors (denoted by 'bricked' shading in Figure A3) regularly visit each payment cycle for a few days. In this case, mobility is crisis driven with the mother unable to care for the children at certain times.

### **Household Five**

Household Five is also a three bedroom home with 11 usual residents, three adults and eight children. A single woman in her late 40s heads the household with only three of 13 usual residents being older than 14 years of age. The residents of Household Five have the lowest average age of the three households presented here at approximately 16 years. In contrast to the typical non-indigenous family, all households are multi-generational, usually with the most senior family members heading the household. (Refer to Figure A6 for more detail about the age and gender characteristics of this household.)

Household Five is totally reliant on welfare for household income, with a very high 80 per cent of income derived from child related payments. Not surprisingly, child payments make up a large proportion of the welfare income of this household as there are almost three children to every adult. Table A1 shows total fortnightly household income is \$1,786 which averages out to \$162 per person per fortnight. This is 58 per cent of the non-indigenous median income in Kuranda. (Refer to Table A1 for more detail about income characteristics of Household Five.)

### **Main themes**

The three households presented here vary in size, age composition and welfare dependency, yet they all reveal a number of recurring themes. These themes are: household overcrowding; the impact of formal employment on income and welfare payments; and the effects of intra- and inter-household dynamics.

Overcrowding continues to be a problem for the indigenous people of Kuranda. Table A2 shows that in the pilot sample there is twice the average number of indigenous persons per dwelling than for the Kuranda Indigenous Area,<sup>5</sup> three times the national average. The higher number of persons per dwelling is even more pronounced when indigenous/non-indigenous comparisons are made. In terms of persons per dwelling, the pilot study sample had almost five times the average number of non-indigenous persons in the Kuranda Indigenous Area, which was just over four times the national non-indigenous average. According to Jones (1994) much of the national indigenous overcrowding problem can be attributed to homeless families and individuals being accommodated by those with housing (who usually rent). Homelessness usually

occurs because of the lack of sufficient income to rent privately and supply factors associated with public housing. Household One is an example of this phenomenon with three single parents living in the household.

**Table A2. Overcrowding: average number of persons per dwelling**

	Kuranda Indigenous Area	Australia	Pilot sample
Indigenous	5.63	3.7	11.2
Non-indigenous	2.28	2.7	–

Source: ABS 1998.

There are a number of implications of overcrowding, only three of which will be noted here. Firstly, the potential exists for more household conflict, especially when resources are not pooled. Secondly, there is greater wear on the house and therefore increased maintenance costs borne by the government/community organisation. This, in turn, reduces the ability of the government/community organisation to satisfy housing needs. Finally, an overcrowded environment is not conducive to education and may therefore impede access to the formal labour market.

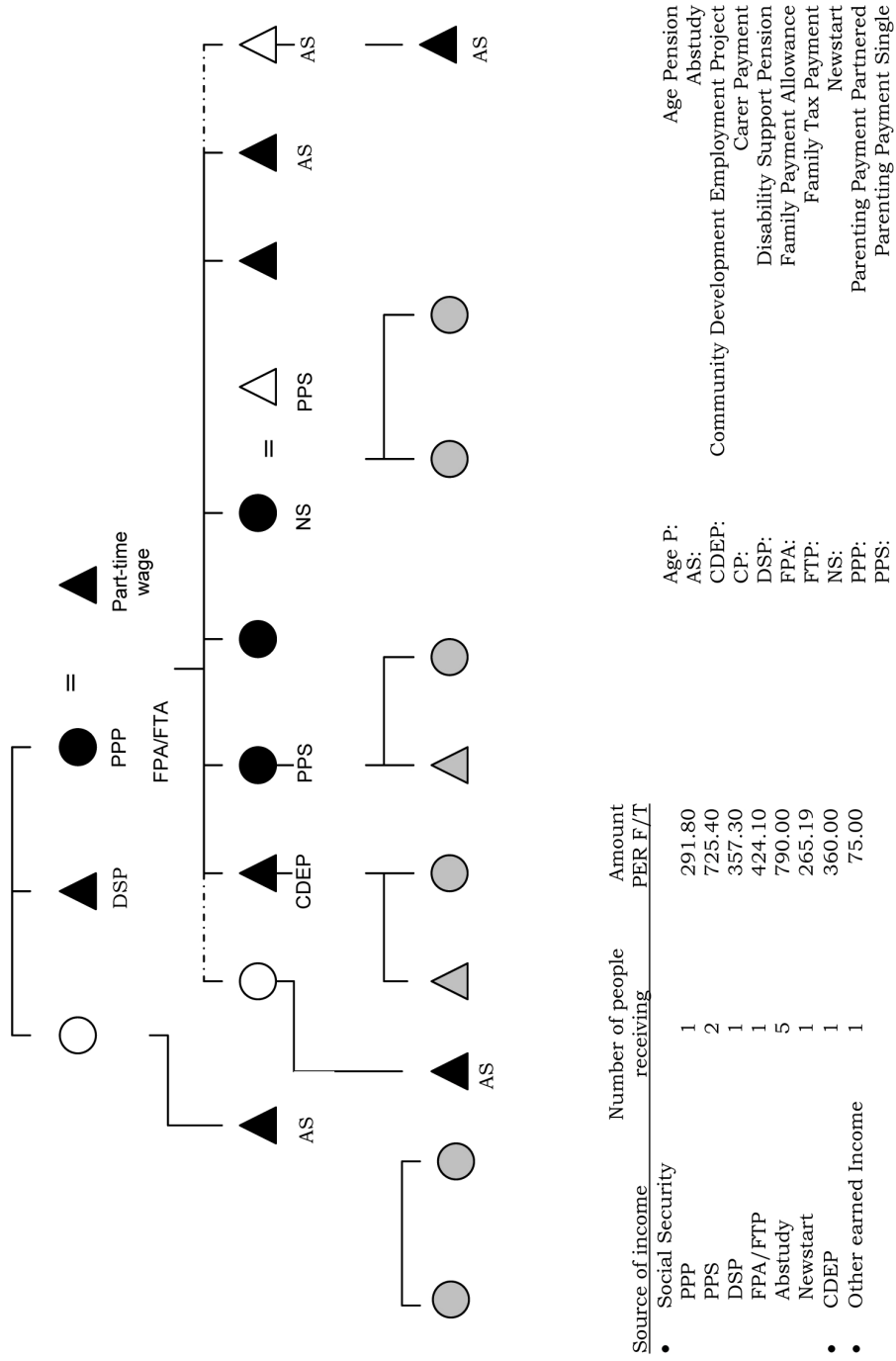
The impact of formal employment on household income is the second reoccurring issue of households in the pilot sample. The data in Table A1 clearly demonstrate the double impact that employment in the formal labour market can have. The first impact is that of raising household income while, secondly, household dependence on welfare is reduced. Of the three households examined in this Appendix, household Three is the only household with an individual in full-time employment. Household Three has both the lowest proportion of household income derived from welfare (61 per cent) and the lowest proportion of welfare derived from child payments (20 per cent). Ross and Mikalauskas (1996) in their analysis of poverty among indigenous families with children state:

The most important factor, however, appears to be the employment status of adults; where no adults in a family are employed, then the poverty rates are similar (and very high) for indigenous and non-indigenous families ... low income is a symptom of poverty rather than a fundamental cause. The fundamental cause continues to be the lack of meaningful employment (Ross and Mikalauskas 1996: 15–16)

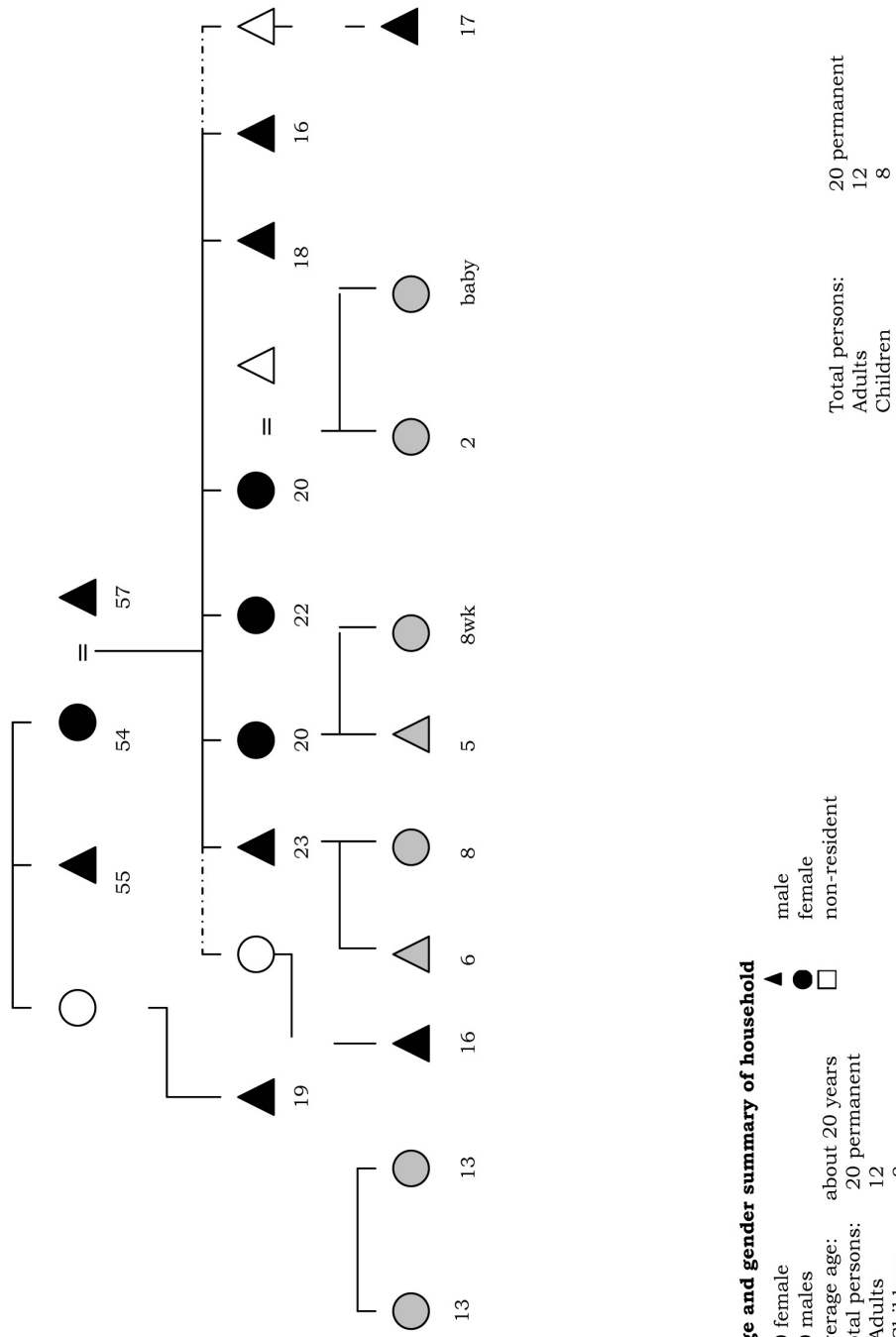
Another important issue is the role of intra- and inter-household dynamics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of young adults do not appear to contribute significantly to household expenses and in some cases fail to provide for their young children. When disposable income runs out individuals are then dependent on the household (or other households) to sustain them until their next welfare payment. The mobility of indigenous people in the Kuranda community appears somewhat crisis driven and dependent on the availability of resources at the household level (demand-sharing). The results from the major

study may give a clearer indication of the dynamics of inter-household mobility, especially of children.

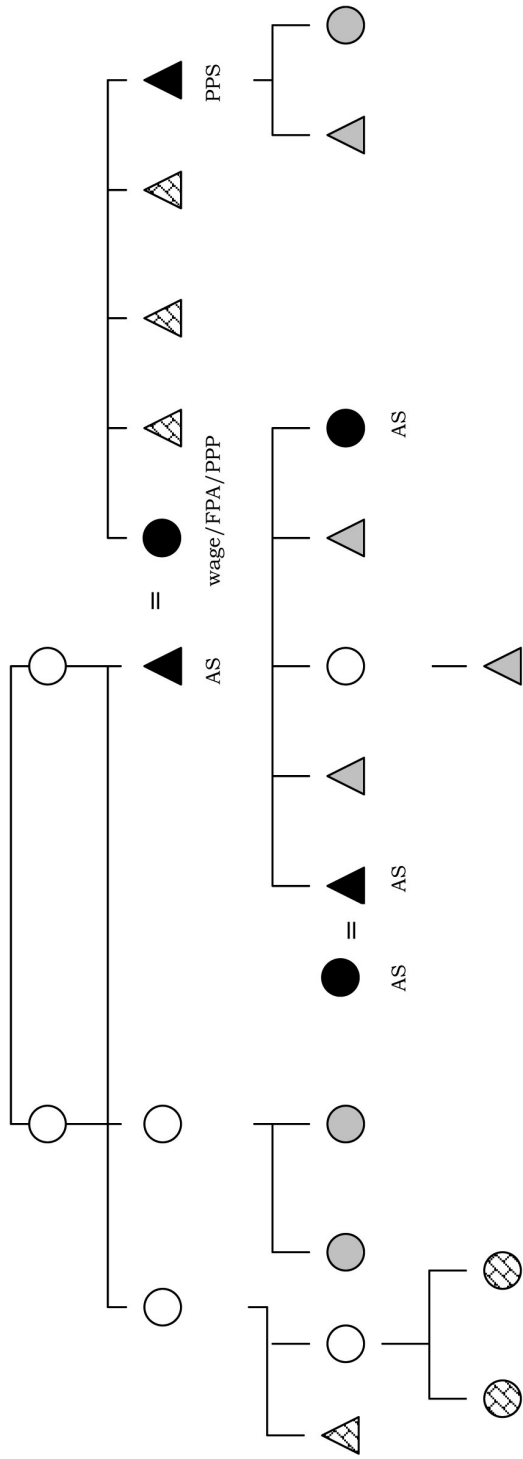
**Figure A1. Household One: payment structure, February 1999**



**Figure A2. Household One: age and gender structure, February 1999**



**Figure A3. Household Three: payment structure, February 1999**



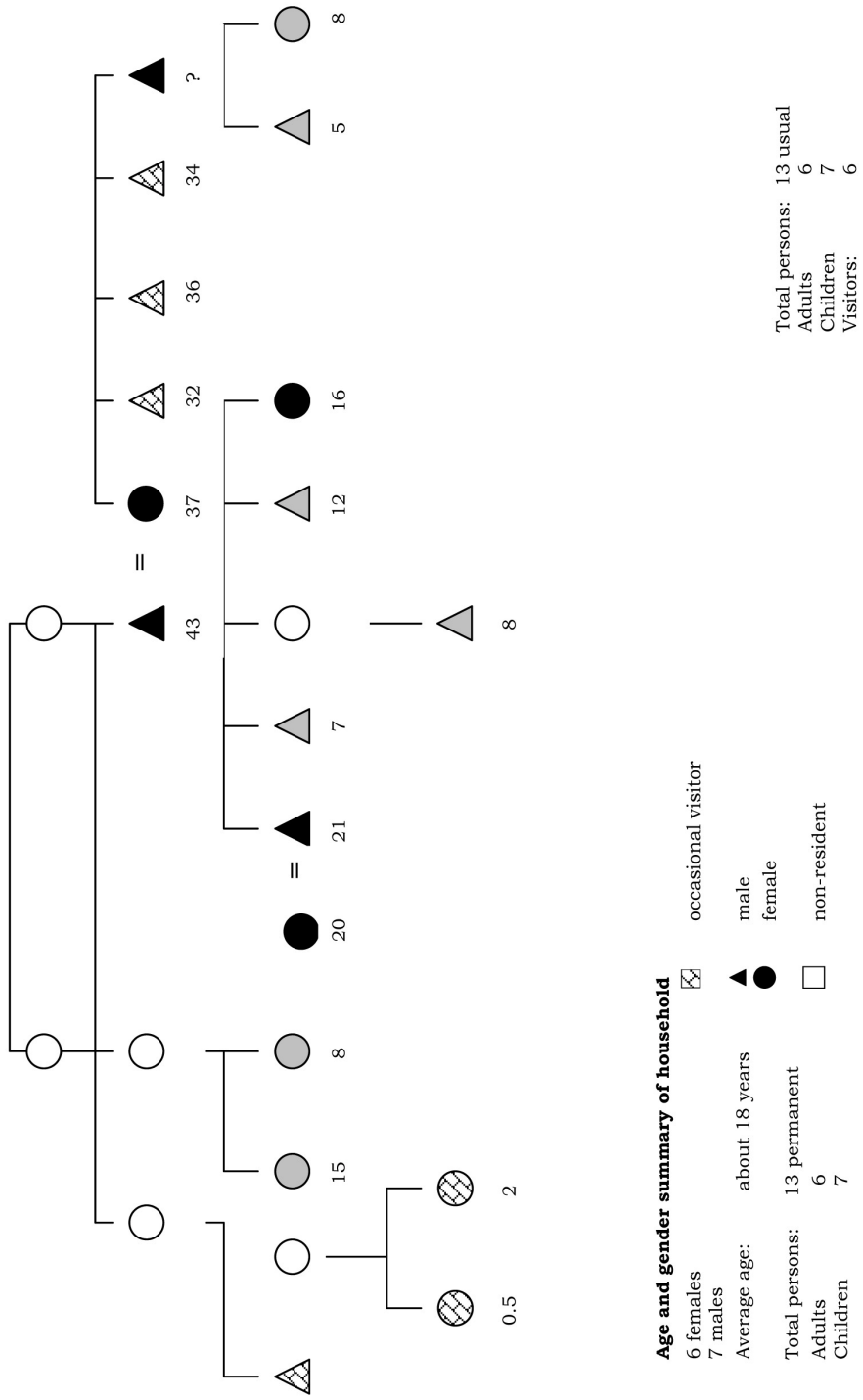
Source of income	Number of people receiving	Amount PER F/T
• Social Security		
PPS	1	360
FPA/FTP	1	47
Absturdy	4	841
• Other earned income	1	800
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$2,048</b>

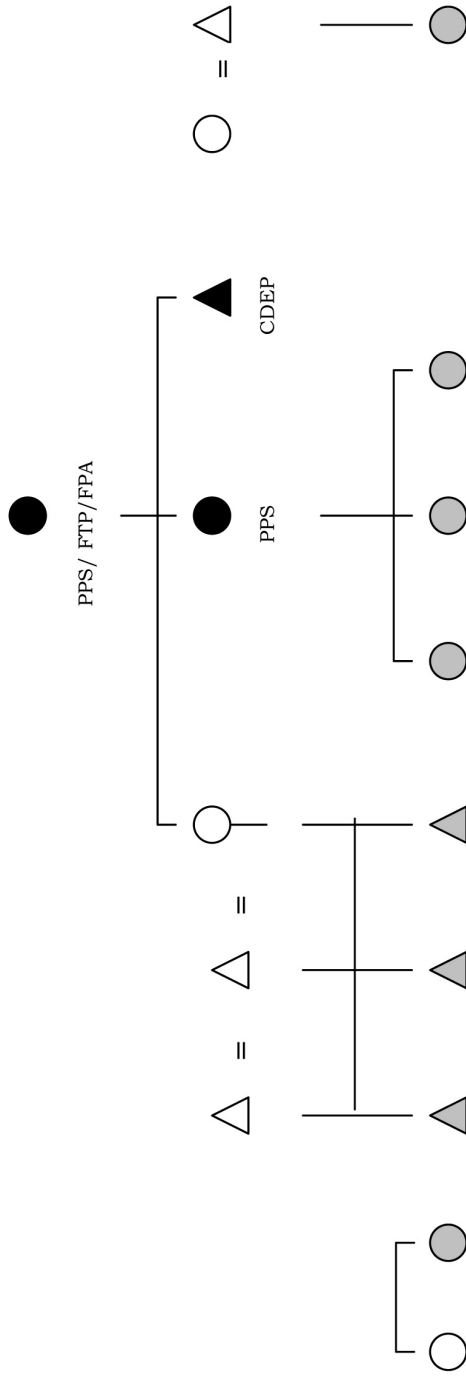
Age P:	Age Pension
AS:	Absturdy
CDEP:	Community Development Employment Project
CP:	Carer Payment
DSP:	Disability Support Pension
FPA:	Family Payment Allowance
FTP:	Family Tax Payment
NS:	Newstart
PPP:	Parenting Payment Partnered
PPS:	Parenting Payment Single



**Figure A4. Household Three: age and gender structure, February 1999**



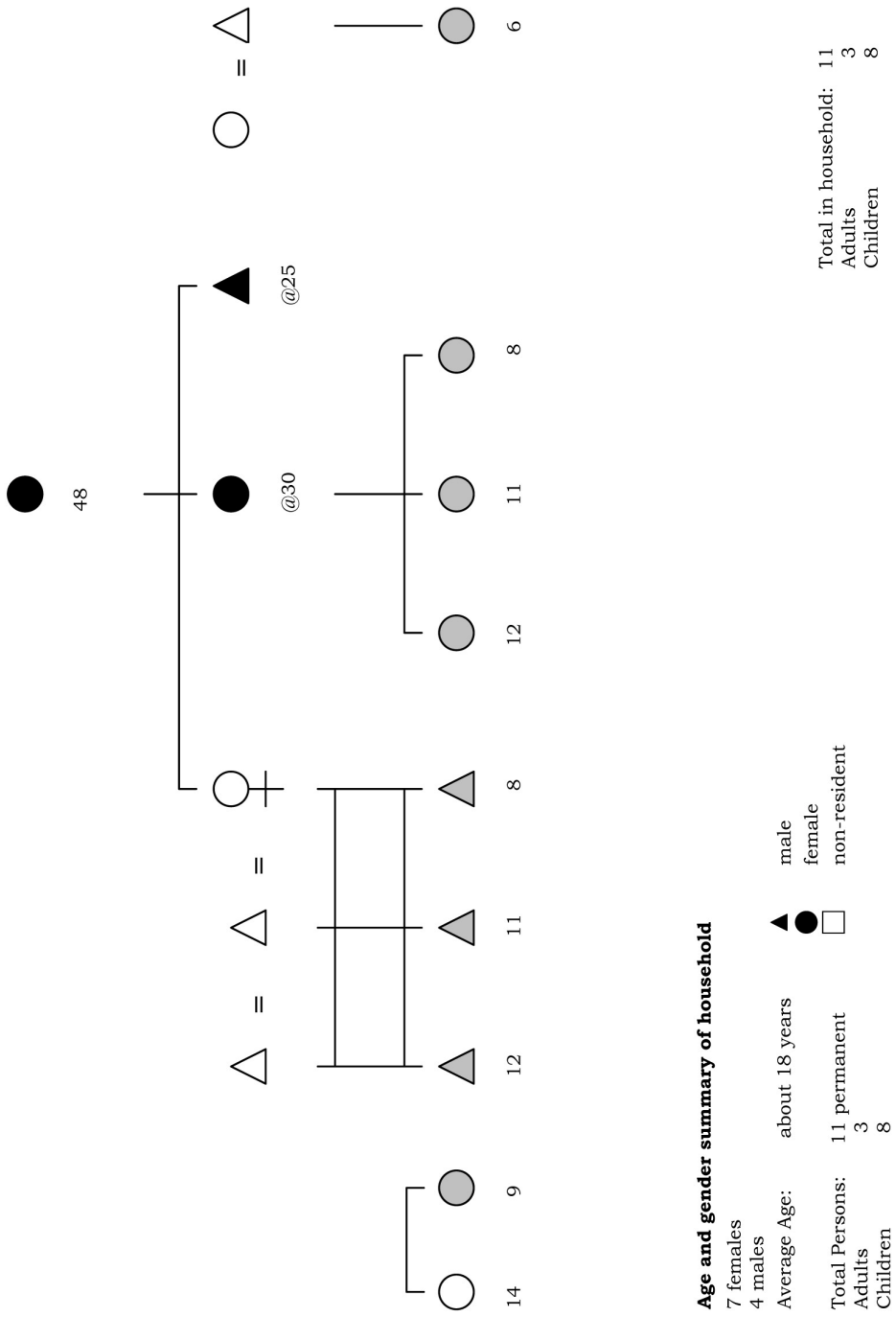
**Figure A5. Household Five: payment structure, February 1999**



Age P: Age Pension  
 AS: Abstudy  
 CDEP: Community Development Employment Project  
 CP: Carer Payment  
 DSP: Disability Support Pension  
 FPA: Family Payment Allowance  
 FTP: Family Tax Payment  
 NS: Newstart  
 PPP: Parenting Payment Partnered  
 PPS: Parenting Payment Single

Source of income	Number of people receiving	Amount PER F/T
• Social Security		
• PPS	2	720.00
• FPA/FTP	1	705.70
• CDEP	1	360.00
• Other earned income		
• Other income		
Total		\$1785.00

**Figure A6. Household Five: age and gender structure, February 1999**



## Notes

1. CAEPR researchers involved in the Kuranda study are Drs J.D. Finlayson, and A.E. Daly, Ms D.E. Smith and Mr T.J. Auld.
2. Staff of DFACS's Indigenous Policy Unit participated in seven workshops Australia-wide between 28 September and 22 October 1998. The locations of these workshops were Launceston (Tasmania), Kattaning (Western Australia), Mt Druitt (Victoria), Katherine (Northern Territory), Thursday Island (Torres Strait), Cairns (Queensland) and Mt Martha (Victoria) (see Hull and Page 1998).
3. Apart from Centrelink's Indigenous Services Unit in Cairns, other organisations contacted by the CAEPR researchers were Ngonbi Aboriginal Housing Cooperative in Kuranda, the Kuranda Primary School, the Queensland Community Health outreach workers for Kuranda and Cairns, the Queensland Tropical Health Injuries Unit, Cairns ATSIC Regional Council Women's Officer, and officers at Apunipima Cape York Health Council.
4. The Aboriginal population of Kuranda is spread between a number of locations and communities. Apart from Kuranda township, Aboriginal people also live at Mantaka, Top and Bottom Kowrowah, Koah and on the former Mona Mona mission land beyond Oak Forest. Kin-related families live in Mareeba and Cairns.

## Appendix note

5. The ABS indigenous geographical classification 'Indigenous Area' comprises around 280 indigenous persons. The Kuranda indigenous area name is 'Mareeba: Kuranda', identified as Indigenous Area 101801.

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