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Inequality: an overview

The absence of reliable demographic data on the Aboriginal population of Australia reflects their unequal status in contemporary Australian society . . . Under the criteria applied until recently by Australian immigration authorities to screen potential settlers, most Aborigines would have been denied the right to settle in their own country: they are non-European, have few technologically useful skills, are often unemployed, suffer from malnutrition and sickness to such a degree that by age 40 many are unemployable, figure predominantly in crime statistics, and have a low reputation in the large society.

F. L. Jones, *Racial and Ethnic Minorities: The Case of Aboriginal Australians*

What socio-economic differences are there between the Aboriginal population as a group and the remainder of Australian society? While most people in Australia could probably give some suggestion as to these differences, it is unlikely that there is any simple source to which someone interested in the question could turn to find a reasonable summary of the information necessary to make a useful comment. In this chapter, therefore, a synthesis is given of the available material on various aggregate socio-economic indicators. These assist a comparison of the standard of living of Aborigines as a group with that of the rest of the Australian population.

For this synthesis, it is not 'primary' material that has been collected: only the available 'secondary' information has been drawn together; and Aborigines as a general, internally undifferentiated group are discussed. In this grouping, the analysis is based upon an examination of the aggregate 'Aboriginal population' of Australia as at present 'officially' defined. (By 'officially' is meant the definition – self-

identification – favoured by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA). The statistics on Aborigines thus refer to the grouping of people who identify themselves as Aboriginal.) The analysis excludes the Torres Strait Islanders (who were the subject of a recent six-volume study by the Australian National University) except in those instances where the aggregative nature of the data preclude this. Of course, this attempt to describe the socio-economic conditions of the Aboriginal population as a whole is by no means intended to imply homogeneity in this group of people, and the differences within the population will be examined in later chapters. It must also be emphasised that the general material contained in this chapter is somewhat bare and thin. In subsequent parts of the book greater detail is given on particular areas and regions.

Sources and availability of data

In the 1966 Population Census, a question on race asked for distinction by proportion, i.e. people were requested to identify their proportionate 'racial' categorisation (for example, $\frac{3}{4}$ Aboriginal/ $\frac{1}{4}$ European, or $\frac{1}{2}$ Aboriginal/ $\frac{1}{2}$ European, or 'full-blood' Aboriginal). Because only those with half or more than half 'Aboriginality' were enumerated as Aborigines, the results of the 1966 census are generally regarded as an underestimate of the Aboriginal population. It is only since the 1967 referendum, which abolished section 127 of the Constitution and allowed people to identify themselves as they wished in subsequent censuses, that data on the Aboriginal population have become more reliable. Even so, the paucity of population statistics specifically on Aborigines has frequently been noted – the prefacing quote by Jones (1973) is but one illustration. It is therefore particularly regrettable that the results of the 1976 Census of Population and Housing are not available at the time of writing. (Shortage of staff has restricted the capacity of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to publish all but the most aggregative and 'vital' of 1976 census findings.) Most of the statistical material in this chapter is, therefore, perforce based upon the results of the 1971 Census of Population and Housing (although some reference is made to the 1966 census where it is considered that intercensal comparisons are not unduly unreliable. However, comparisons are in general difficult in this regard in view of the different definitions of an Aboriginal person which, as mentioned, were used in the 1966 and 1971 censuses).

Social indicators used

While a great variety of 'social indicators' might be imagined, the statistical material available permits only two to be studied here: (1) demographic indicators, which measure the demographic characteristics of a population and (2) welfare indicators, which seek to measure the degree of 'satisfaction' of human needs. Clearly, of the two, welfare indicators present special problems of measurement: welfare is not directly measurable, and there are inherent imperfections in the indirect methods which must be employed. For instance, indicators cannot cover all components of welfare. On the other hand, even an indirect measurement of welfare is better than none at all or than broad aggregates such as per capita income (which is in any event not available for Aborigines). Secondly, there is a number of ways in which welfare can be measured, i.e. as progress or regression over time, or as the 'quality of life' at one moment in time. It is the simpler of the two – welfare at one point in time – that is discussed below. Thirdly, and most important, a concept of human welfare is not an 'objective' one – it cannot be divorced from value judgements. In this chapter, the broad areas of human well-being examined will be education, employment and occupation, and housing and health. The very selection of indicators to contrast the Aboriginal population with the general Australian population is not neutral in value. For the system of needs considered is, of course, culturally determined – a 'European'-derived system of values.

There are two special problems in the use of the available material which should be mentioned as a further caveat to the analysis. Firstly, many of the census results used are rather aggregative and this may conceal differences within groups, especially as regards employment and education data which measure the quantity rather than the quality of occupations or services delivered. Secondly, as mentioned previously, because censuses before 1971 are not strictly comparable, the analysis is mostly restricted to a cross-sectional one – the comparison between socio-economic factors affecting Aborigines and the Australia-wide population.

The Aboriginal population: demographic indicators

Population

In the 1971 Census of Population and Housing, 106,290 people ident-

ified themselves as Aborigines. In Table 1 the State distribution of the Aboriginal population is indicated. It was also estimated in the 1971 census that there were some 9,663 Torres Strait Islanders (TSIs), making a total of 115,953 together. By contrast, State and Territory estimates suggested that the total Aboriginal and TSI population was apparently 150,945 (according to L. R. Smith, 1975b, p. 368) while the National Population Inquiry (1975, p. 465) estimated the figure as being 153,445.

There is thus an immediate and great discrepancy in the statistics. It arises because the higher estimates are based on whom, in the various parts of Australia, DAA field staff regarded as persons of Aboriginal or Islander descent, whereas the 1971 census employed the test of self-identification. Clearly, because attitudes to group identity shift, this feature can play havoc with attempts to measure population growth rates, and there seems no easy way out of the dilemma.

Table 1. Enumeration of the Aboriginal population of Australia, by State, 1966 and 1971

State or Territory	Census year		
	1966 ^a	1966 ^b	1971
New South Wales	14,219	20,601	23,101
Victoria	1,790	2,707	5,656
Queensland	19,003	23,040	24,414
South Australia	5,505	6,584	7,140
Western Australia	18,439	21,146	21,903
Tasmania	36	79	575
Australian Capital Territory	96	169	248
Northern Territory	21,119	22,306	23,253
AUSTRALIA	80,207	96,632	106,290

^aOfficial estimate based on the definition of Aboriginal as someone with $\frac{1}{2}$ or more Aboriginal origin. This is an underestimate.

^bJones's (1973) estimate based on definition of Aboriginal as someone with $\frac{1}{4}$ or more Aboriginal origin. This appears to be a slight overestimate.

Source: Jones (1973), Australian Bureau of Statistics (1973).

In the 1966 census, the 'official' estimate of the Aboriginal population (i.e. persons with $\frac{1}{2}$ or more Aboriginal origin) was 80,207 persons. If one includes all persons who identified themselves as having $\frac{1}{4}$ Aboriginal origin, then a more realistic estimate of the 1966 Aboriginal

population would be 96,632 (Jones, 1973, p. 56). In the National Population Inquiry it is the latter figure that is taken as the more accurate. In Table 1 this estimate of the 'total' Aboriginal population is also presented by State.

On the basis of the 1971 census population and age profile, and making the assumption of declining fertility and mortality rates, L. R. Smith (1975b, p. 368) estimated that the 1976 Aboriginal and TSI population (self-identifiers) would be 132,789. One can estimate the total Aboriginal population by subtracting from this total Caldwell's (1975, p. 39) estimated projection of the TSI population in 1976, which also utilised the 1971 census and an assumption of declining birth rate, and was 11,254. This method produces an estimate of the 1976 Aboriginal population of 121,535 (self-identifiers).

Recent State and Territory estimates (which are based on a variety of definitions of an Aboriginal person) and communications with L. R. Smith of the Australian National University suggest a 'minimum' 1976 estimate of 'potential identifiers' of 175,600 (Aborigines and TSIs). Subtracting Caldwell's 'high' estimate of TSIs in 1976 (13,732) this gives a total of approximately 162,000 Aborigines (people of Aboriginal descent). This implies that either the 1976 figure based on the 1971 census is an underestimate (which seems a likely possibility and may be confirmed when the 1976 census results are published); or that the number of self-identifiers has reached a saturation point, and a large number of people of Aboriginal descent do not wish to identify as Aboriginal. The second option seems somewhat unlikely on the basis of current trends.

In summary, the most reliable estimates of the Aboriginal population are 96,632 for 1966, 106,290 for 1971 and 121,535 for 1976. This represents 0.83 per cent of the total Australian population in 1966 and 1971 and an estimated 0.87 per cent of the population in 1976. While it is recognised that there may be as many as 40,000 more 'potential identifiers', the numbers of special interest here are those who *have* identified themselves as Aborigines.

Table 1 also shows the State distribution of the Aboriginal population. Most Aborigines live in Queensland, the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Western Australia. Each of these areas had an Aboriginal population of more than 20,000 in the 1966 and 1971 censuses. Victoria and South Australia had smaller but significant Aboriginal populations, whereas only 575 Aborigines were estimated to live in Tasmania and 248 in the Australian Capital Territory in 1971.

The National Population Inquiry (1975, pp. 500–1) noted that the interstate geographic mobility of Aborigines from 1966 to 1971 was extremely limited. The largest inter-State movement was from Western Australia to the Northern Territory, and this involved only 285 people. In general, while as mentioned below the propensity for Aborigines to move from rural to urban areas seemed great, net inter-State movements appeared very limited.

Age Profile of the Aboriginal Population

In Table 2 the age distribution of the Aboriginal population in 1971 is given. The most unusual feature of the Aboriginal population was its

Table 2. Comparison of percentage age distribution of the Aboriginal population with that of the total Australian population, 1971 census

Age (years)	Age distribution (per cent)	
	Aboriginal population	Australian population
0– 4	17.7	9.6
5– 9	15.4	9.6
10–14	13.3 <u>46.4</u>	9.6 <u>28.8</u>
15–19	10.1	8.7
20–24	8.5	8.6
25–29	6.6	7.3
30–34	5.5	6.3
35–39	4.9	5.8
40–44	4.3	6.2
45–49	3.5	6.1
50–54	2.9	5.2
55–59	2.0	4.7
60–64	1.8 <u>50.0</u>	3.9 <u>62.9</u>
65–59	1.5	3.0
70–74	1.1	2.3
75+	1.0 <u>3.6</u>	3.0 <u>8.3</u>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1976a)

extreme youth, with 46.4 per cent under 15 years of age and 17.7 per cent under 5 years of age, compared with figures of 28.8 per cent and 9.6 per cent, respectively, for the general population. By contrast, only 3.6 per cent of the Aboriginal population was over 65 years of age compared with 8.3 per cent for the general population. As mentioned

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by the National Population Enquiry (1975, p. 505) 'a population of this kind is the result of high growth in the past and, because of its age structure, carries the potential for high growth in the future, even given relatively modest rates of reproduction per head'. The welfare ramifications of this age distribution are very considerable. The ratio of children aged 0–14 to the population aged 15–64 (the dependent-age ratio) for Aborigines is 0.93, whereas for the general population it is only 0.46. This implies that the burden of bringing up young dependants, which usually falls on the parents, is far greater for Aborigines. Equally, even though the ratio of aged dependants to the population aged 15–64 for Aborigines is 0.07 and for all Australians 0.13, the extended family system among Aborigines implies that the burden of caring for the aged does not fall especially lightly upon them, particularly in view of their relatively low incomes.

Urbanisation and Geographic Distribution

In Table 3, details of the Aboriginal and general population residing in the major urban, other urban and rural areas for the census years 1966

Table 3. *Urbanisation of the Aboriginal and Australian population (percentage distribution)*

	Aboriginal population		Aboriginal population		Australian population	
	1966	1971	1966	1971	1966	1971
Metropolitan ^a	8,310	15,667	8.6	14.7	58.1	64.5
Other urban ^b	22,805	30,594	23.6	28.8	25.1	21.1
Rural ^c	65,420	59,987	67.7	56.4	16.8	14.4
Total	96,632	106,290	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^a Metropolitan or major urban, defined as population concentrations of 100,000 people or larger.

^b Other urban, refers to population concentration of 1,000 to 100,000 people.

^c Rural and migratory.

Sources: Jones (1973); Australian Bureau of Statistics (1973); Australian Bureau of Statistics (1975a).

and 1971 are given, though all reservations of intercensal comparisons mentioned before should be borne in mind. The figures certainly imply that there has been rapid urbanisation of the Aboriginal population.

But this conclusion must be guarded. While there seems little doubt that the number of Aborigines in the rural sector decreased absolutely and as a percentage of the population, the increase of their number in metropolitan areas, by nearly 100 per cent, seems dramatic. However, the extent to which the question of changes in 'racial identification' (racial immigration) entered in to alter the figures, as mentioned above, cannot be judged.

In comparison with the total population, Aborigines were still very much a rural community in 1971. In that year, only 14.4 per cent of the total population lived in rural areas, compared with 56.4 per cent of the Aboriginal population. (In 1971 the Aboriginal population represented 0.19 per cent of Australia's major urban population, 1.13 per cent of the 'other urban' category and 3.28 per cent of the rural population.) There is a welfare implication of the rural concentration of Aborigines, since employment opportunities and educational facilities are likely to be more fully available, on a per capita basis, in urban than in rural areas. As Jones (1973, p.59) has remarked, the 'present geographical distribution (of Aborigines) reflects their marginal status'.

In regard to future Aboriginal population growth rates, estimates in the National Population Inquiry were based on both the possibility of constant fertility and mortality and declining fertility and mortality. Since the age structure of the population is biased towards youth, it was also growth-biased, and the Inquiry concluded (p. 529) that, with either growth rate, the Aboriginal population would double by the year 2000.

Education

Educational status is the first welfare indicator to which attention is turned. The information in Table 4 gives details of school participation rates by Aboriginal and general-population children, according to the 1971 census.

The two features in Table 4 which distinguish Aboriginal children from general-population children are that they tend to start school later (23 per cent more in the 7–11 category as against the 5–6 category) and finish earlier. The marked difference in the 15–18 age group is perhaps the worst, for it is usually during this age that School-Leaving and Matriculation examinations (generally the prerequisites for tertiary education) are taken. This table is purely a quantity indicator – quality considerations are not evidenced. There is every indication, as

later described, that schooling for Aborigines in rural and remote areas and in small country towns tends to be of a lower quality.

Table 5, which depicts the highest level of formal schooling attended by Aborigines and others, reinforces the features of Table 4. The most

Table 4. *Aboriginal and general-population children – school participation rates by age, 1971 census*

	Percentage of age group attending school			
	Aboriginal children		Australian children	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
5– 6	73.0	73.5	90.9	91.9
7–11	96.5	96.5	99.4	99.4
12–14	97.0	97.2	99.8	99.7
15–18	23.9	26.9	41.5	36.7

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1976a).

notable statistic here is that 24.7 per cent of Aborigines had (in 1971) never attended school (excluding those of pre-school age) as against 0.8 per cent for the general Australian population. Whereas only 26.1 per cent of the Aboriginal population had attended school past level 5 in 1971, 69.3 per cent of the Australian population had done so. Table 5 refers of course to attendance level and *not* the completion of level. While the figures in Table 5 are not strictly comparable (since total general population refers to those over 20 years of age) the indication is that Aborigines are receiving less schooling than Australians as a whole. This has two important consequences (apart from the obvious handicap of illiteracy). Firstly, it acts as a constraint on the type of occupations for which Aborigines are eligible (on the basis of educational attainment) and, secondly, it makes many Aborigines ineligible (and insufficiently experienced) for most tertiary courses. The second of these assertions is borne out by the evidence presented in Table 6, which shows the post-school qualifications of the Aboriginal and general population. It will be seen that, in 1971, 96.6 per cent of the Aboriginal population had no post-school qualifications as compared with 79.1 per cent for the general population. Overall, the proportion of Aboriginal people with qualifications was between one-eighth and one-ninth of the proportion of all Australians with qualifications for both males and females. The largest proportion of qualified Aborigines

was in the trade level category. Examination of the source material for Table 6 suggests that Aborigines had a particularly low number of qualifications in administrative, commercial, health and medical fields.

Table 5. *Highest level of schooling attended, Aboriginal and general population, 1971 census*

Level	Aborigines ^a (per cent)	Australians ^b (per cent)
Never attended	24.7	0.8
Level 1	7.8	0.7
Level 2	5.3	1.0
Level 3	7.4	2.2
Level 4	7.3	3.8
Level 5	14.9	17.1
Level 6	7.0	6.8
Level 7	8.4	14.6
Level 8	7.3	20.5
Level 9	1.8	9.6
Level 10	1.6	17.8
Not stated	6.6	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0

^aAs a percentage of Aboriginal population omitting those currently attending school and children not yet attending school.

^bAs a percentage of the Australian population over 20 years of age.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1976a).

It can be concluded that Aborigines participate in education far less than the general population and have a significantly lower adult population holding recognised qualifications. The consequences of this situation are all too clear.

Employment

Labour Force Participation

In Table 7, participation rates for the Aboriginal and general populations are presented for 1971. The picture in this table is bleak. Overall participation for Aborigines is extremely low, with 45.6 per cent of the adult population being defined as part of the labour force. This is in