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DISCUSSION PAPER

**The economic status of Indigenous  
Australian households: a  
statistical and ethnographic  
analysis**

**D.E. Smith and A.E. Daly**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents an overview of the contemporary economic status of Indigenous households relative to other Australian households, based on an analysis of 1991 Census data and a review of ethnographic case study evidence. The analysis is expanded by a brief consideration of information on households from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey. The paper complements an earlier one by Daly and Smith (1995) focusing on Indigenous families and is part of a longer-term project to investigate changes in the economic status of families and households over time. A multidisciplinary approach is employed, reviewing ethnographic case study research to give a qualitative depth to the quantitative analysis. The paper highlights critical differences in the socioeconomic status of Indigenous households relative to others and suggests a number of policy implications.

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## Introduction

This paper presents an overview of the contemporary economic status of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> households relative to other Australian households, based on an analysis of 1991 Census data and a review of ethnographic case study evidence. The analysis is expanded by a brief consideration of information on households from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS). The paper complements an earlier one by Daly and Smith (1995) focusing on families and is part of a longer-term project to investigate changes in the economic status of Indigenous families and households over time.

The family and household are notoriously difficult to define, especially in a cross-cultural context. In this paper we employ a multidisciplinary approach, reviewing ethnographic case study research to give a qualitative depth to the quantitative analysis. The paper highlights critical differences in the socioeconomic status of Indigenous households relative to others, and suggests a number of policy implications arising from their status.

### Indigenous households – the case study evidence<sup>2</sup>

Ethnographic case studies report that Indigenous households are characterised by compositional complexity, porous social boundaries and large size, commonly consisting of extended families whose members may reside together in a single dwelling or at several nearby dwellings. Typically, they are subject to considerable fluctuations in membership, often consisting of a small, multigenerational core of kin-related residents, with a highly mobile fringe of transient members. Households dissolve and reform in a developmental cycle giving rise to such descriptive labels as the 'concertina household' (Sansom 1982: 118) and the 'recomposing household' (Young 1981: 68).

#### *Household economies*

Contrary to the popular notion of Indigenous households as communistic and egalitarian, where members share resources automatically and equally, adult household members do not necessarily share resources nor will they all contribute to common domestic costs. Finlayson's (1991) comprehensive research on rural Aboriginal household developmental cycles and their related economies indicates that members often take the attitude that their income (welfare in large part) belongs exclusively to themselves. Even amongst core family members, joint contributions to household finances are not always regularly made nor are resources necessarily shared. Rather, the pattern of sharing food, cash and other resources within a household is strategically determined by (and directed towards) kinship ties and socioeconomic alliances which extend beyond the immediate dwelling (see also Martin 1993; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995).

Aboriginal households are not necessarily demarcated by the physical boundary of a dwelling. Indeed, a feature of Aboriginal household economies noted in a number of case studies is their reliance upon wider kin networks across several dwellings. These wider formations are referred to in the literature as 'linked' or 'clustered' households and in Aboriginal English are variously referred to as 'mobs', 'company' or 'all one family'. They vary in size from small kindred groups living in close proximity, to larger groupings consisting of a number of households. Linked households are reported as being characterised by cooperative efforts for subsistence production, food purchases and capital accumulation, by overlapping ownership and use of consumer durables, by common histories and residential proximity. Patterns of marriage and shared childcare arrangements further reinforce the economic linkages across households. Linked households constitute important economic formations in remote, rural and urban areas, providing a structural base for the exploitation and distribution of mixed subsistence, welfare and waged sources of income, and underwrite the viability of economically vulnerable families (Finlayson 1991; Smith 1991b).

The economic complexities associated with such household networks have been described by Rowse (1988) who analysed the financial payments of Alice Springs town campers for food, rent and electricity. Rowse concluded that town campers within particular dwellings did not behave as cohesive households in the organisation of their finances. Rather, the most common strategy for paying electricity bills was for household members to wait until cut-off was imminent or actual and then quickly seek contributions from a number of people who were not necessarily members of the household. Similarly, Rowse found that almost one-third of rental payments were made by persons who were not officially responsible tenants nor even recorded members of households, yet they still paid some rent. The effective economic unit determining family viability amongst the town campers was not within the household of a particular dwelling but rather was to be found in the wider social grouping which overlapped the boundaries of dwellings. Case study research with metropolitan and other urban households indicates similar patterns of economic exchange and linked household interdependency.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Visitors and the impact of mobility*

Mobility is a significant factor affecting Aboriginal households in remote, rural and urban communities, creating a cyclical pattern to their composition. Some people are short-term visitors; others appear to be permanently transient, repeatedly moving between households in the same and surrounding communities. Taylor's survey of Aboriginal households in Katherine found that approximately one-quarter of all Aboriginal households had visitors on a more or less constant basis and that visitor rates increased the average number of people per dwelling from 5.4 to 7.8 persons (Taylor 1988, 1989). Martin and Taylor (1995: 16) report that 35

per cent of the total Aboriginal population at Aurukun, Western Cape York, had shifted their place of residence within the community over a four month period. Smith (1995) noted an especially high level of longer-term mobility amongst Redfern residents in Sydney where some 62 per cent indicated a different 'usual address' between the 1986 and 1991 Censuses.

Indigenous mobility and its residential outcome of high visitor numbers, has been described as having a significant impact on household economic status. Researchers report that high visitor numbers severely tax household resources and may contribute little to household finances. Jones (1994: 116), using an analysis of 1991 Census housing data, estimated that the effect of visitors increased the national number of overcrowded Indigenous dwellings by 16 per cent and total bedroom need by 19 per cent. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definitional treatment of transients and visitors is thus critical to the types of households it classifies and to their resulting economic profile.

### **Census definitions of the household**

The 1991 Census classifies all individuals living in private dwellings into larger domestic and economic units: namely the family and the household. These census concepts are closely interrelated and nested to create a data hierarchy; for example, each 'household' may contain a number of 'family' data records each of which, in turn, may contain a number of 'person' records.

The household is defined broadly by the ABS as '... a group of people who reside and eat together (in a single dwelling) ... as a single unit in the sense that they have common housekeeping arrangements, i.e. they have some common provision for food and other essentials of living' (ABS 1990: 58; 1991: 60). In other words, the household definition is concerned with ascertaining the effective domestic units within a dwelling. Indigenous households are those where the primary reference person or the second person (usually the spouse or partner of the reference person) on the census form is Indigenous.

In the 1991 Census, households were classified into the following types:

- Family household:
  - One family
  - Two families
  - Three families
- Other household:
  - Group household
  - Lone person household
  - Visitor only
  - Not classifiable<sup>4</sup>



There are a number of key elements to this seemingly straightforward ABS classification which need to be kept in mind when using household data.

#### *Households and dwellings*

Firstly, the relationship between households and dwellings is not clear-cut. A dwelling is classified by the ABS as a building or structure in which people live, and can include houses, flats, caravans, tents, corrugated iron humpies and park benches. An occupied dwelling is defined as the premises occupied by a household on census night. Persons living in the same dwelling, but having separate catering arrangements, theoretically constitute separate households and can be classified as a separate household under the ABS approach. For example, in a group house, occupants who share the same dwelling but usually supply their own food could be counted as separate households. Furthermore, the ABS in effect equates one household with one physical dwelling (ABS pers. comm.). If there are ascertained to be a number of separate household units within a single house (for example, different family units with separate housekeeping arrangements), the ABS will count them as separate households in separate dwellings – even though all the people concerned reside in one structure. The result is to create an additional three dwellings which are, in fact, non-existent as physical entities.

The extent to which this occurs is possibly minimal. The ABS acknowledges that it is extremely difficult for census collectors to determine that separate domestic arrangements actually exist within a single physical dwelling, especially if they are not so indicated by the householders asking for separate household forms to fill out. According to the ABS, such requests are rare (ABS 1991: 61).

Conversely, because household collection units are often decided on by the census collector, in remote areas where there may be a high proportion of improvised dwellings, the collector might decide that all the persons living in three physically separate dwellings (camp sites) are in fact all the same family and so classify them as one household in one dwelling. On the basis of the ethnographic research reviewed above, this particular ABS methodology correlates more closely with Indigenous perceptions and domestic arrangements. However, the correlation between the number of dwellings and households is complicated and not necessarily clear-cut, and probably varies across the country. The implication is that the census dwelling count for the Aboriginal population, especially in remote areas, is of doubtful accuracy.

#### *Criteria for household membership*

The ABS criteria for establishing the membership of its household types is based on definitions of 'usual residence', 'visitors' and 'absentees'. For the 1991 Census, usual residence is defined as 'that address at which the

person has lived or intends to live for a total of six months or more in 1991'. For people who have 'no usual address', the dwelling in which they reside on census night is recorded as their 'usual address'. Certain key household members who might have been absent on census night, but are 'usual residents' – in particular, spouses, offspring and co-tenants – are still included by census coders in determining household and family types. However, their further socioeconomic characteristics are not recorded. Whilst there is a specific household type for 'visitors only', all visitors to other households were excluded for the first time in the 1991 Census from the classification of household types, though their total numbers for each household are recorded. The relationship of visitors to usual residents, and to each other, is not further classified.

In the 1991 Census, householders were instructed to complete a household form with any adult householder as Person 1. Person 1 is usually the parent with dependent children, or the person so listed by respondents. This person then becomes the 'family reference person' around whom the construction of family types are derived. Their spouse or partner becomes Person 2. In a household with more than one family, the ABS accords a 'primary family' designation to the structure which most approximates the nuclear family norm of a couple and their dependent children (ABS 1991: 101).<sup>5</sup> In the 1986 Census, up to four families in a household were coded, but only up to three families in a household were coded in 1991. The result is that the ABS currently classifies only two other family types within a multi-family household after the primary family, by reference to the relationships of the remaining individuals. If more than three families are found in a single household, the adults are 'disbanded' as separate relatives, referred to as 'other related individuals' and coded against the primary family.

#### *Combining statistical and ethnographic data*

When used within their definitional limits, census data provide invaluable comparative information about a range of socioeconomic indicators (such as household type, residential location, income, labour force status, education and so on) commonly thought to depict Indigenous economic wellbeing. Importantly, in comparison to ethnographic research which is localised, case specific, employs markedly variable methods and theoretical perspectives and lacks comparability, census data are systematically and simultaneously collected at a national, State and section-of-State level on the basis of definitional uniformity. Accordingly, census data are critical in enabling a comparison of Indigenous socioeconomic status against key Australian and international benchmarks.

We would also suggest that when used in conjunction with ethnographic research findings, the utility of census data can be substantially broadened. In turn, the findings of localised ethnographies can be more widely applied in conjunction with State and national census data. For example, Martin

and Taylor (1995) have advocated the construction of regional and community de jure population checklists based upon longer-term field research knowledge of actual family and household structures in order to validate census data. Daly and Smith (1995) similarly promote the use of ethnographic case study evidence in conjunction with census analyses of the socioeconomic status of Indigenous families to broaden the utility of census benchmarks by situating them within cultural parameters.

Not surprisingly, there are dynamic areas of Indigenous socioeconomic relations that census methods cannot easily capture. However, many such relations cannot effectively be studied or understood without long-term field research, and even then, reliable information is only obtained with some difficulty. While certain census definitions can be criticised as being culturally obtuse, it is important to recognise that the census is simply not the most convenient or appropriate mechanism for researching complex social and economic relationships and should not be criticised for lacking information about those matters.

The ABS acknowledges the difficulties experienced in trying to fit Indigenous social and cultural practice into census definitions and coding procedures. The census presents a snapshot model of household structures and economic status and is oriented to residentially stable households. ABS operational definitions truncate extended kin relations and census collectors have difficulties establishing the type of relationships involved; dealing with several families in one dwelling or across different dwellings; and determining the status of visitors. As a result, several discrete households may be created where Aboriginal residents consider there to be only one.

As noted above, ethnographic research points to ways in which census data might be made more useful. Smith (1991b) has also suggested that a more useful definition of household, for the purposes of assessing Indigenous economic status, would be to include all visitors as members. For similar reasons, the census indicator of household income is a more reliable measure of Indigenous income and status than family income, given that the census concept of household at least has the potential to capture extended kin formations via the multi-family household type, than does the discrete 'family' concept.

### **Indigenous households – the broader view**

This section presents some preliminary results for Indigenous households drawing on aggregate data from two sources collected by the ABS; firstly the 1991 Population Census and secondly the 1994 NATSIS. The first source covers all who identified themselves as being either of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin and can be used for comparisons between



Indigenous and other Australians. Results are also reported here for the three section-of-State categories identified in the Census: the major urban areas, other urban areas and rural areas. The second source, the NATSIS, was conducted by the ABS from April to July 1994. This nationwide survey of over 15,700 Indigenous Australians originated from a recommendation in the National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Commonwealth of Australia 1991: 62). The ABS has produced a summary report on the findings of the survey and separate reports for the 36 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) regional councils (ABS 1995). More detailed analysis of the labour market and socioeconomic characteristics of the NATSIS population has also been produced by the ABS in conjunction with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ABS 1996).

### *Household size*

Table 1 compares the distribution of the population by household size for Indigenous and other Australians as reported in the 1991 Census. The data confirm earlier research showing larger households among Indigenous households than other Australian households. Eighteen per cent of Indigenous people lived in households with six or more occupants compared with only 4 per cent of other Australians. In 1991, the median household size for Indigenous households was 4.0 persons compared with a median of 2.9 for other Australians (see Table 2). This is likely to be a minimum estimate of the difference in occupants per dwelling if there is a higher incidence of households sharing a physical dwelling among Indigenous Australians than among other Australians. Indigenous households were relatively small in the major urban centres and largest in the rural areas. The largest difference in household size between Indigenous and other Australians was apparent in the other urban category.

**Table 1. The distribution of persons resident by household size, 1991.**

Persons resident	Indigenous Australians Per cent	Other Australians Per cent
1	10.4	21.1
2	20.9	31.6
3	19.4	17.3
4	18.6	17.7
5	12.9	8.5
6	9.0	3.0
7	3.1	0.6
8+	5.9	0.3
Total per cent	100.0	100.0
Total number households	76,142	5,454,500



Table 2 presents the median Indigenous household size of 4.3 persons estimated from the 1994 NATSIS survey.<sup>6</sup> Given the assumptions necessary to make these calculations and some differences in the presentation of the data upon which they are based, this is encouragingly close to the 1991 Census estimate also shown in Table 2 and suggests no change in household sizes between 1991 and the 1994 NATSIS survey. Appendix Table A.1 reports in more detail the median household size for the 36 ATSI regional council areas. There were substantial differences between the regions, with the median household size ranging from 3.6 persons in the Sydney and Tamworth regions to 7.9 persons in the Nhulunbuy region. Households tended to be larger in remote areas than in the metropolitan areas.

**Table 2. Membership characteristics of Indigenous and other Australian households, 1991 and 1994.**

	Median household size - persons	Percentage of households with no visitors	Percentage of households with no one temporarily absent
Indigenous Australians			
1991 Census			
Section-of-State			
Major urban	3.5	89.1	94.4
Other urban	4.1	87.7	92.7
Rural	4.5	90.0	94.0
Total	4.0	88.7	93.6
1994 NATSIS	4.3	na	na
Other Australians			
1991 Census			
Section-of-State			
Major urban	2.8	95.8	95.2
Other urban	2.8	94.6	94.2
Rural	3.1	91.6	92.5
Total	2.9	95.5	94.6

Source: 1991 Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and 1 per cent ABS sample; ABS (1995) NATSIS regional profiles.

One of the features of Indigenous households identified in case studies is their dynamic nature, with a substantial flow of incoming visitors and usual residents who were absent. While the 1991 Census reported a larger number of Indigenous households with visitors and usual residents absent than in other Australian households, the difference was much smaller than might be expected (see Table 2). According to these figures, about 90 per cent of Australian households had no visitors and no usual residents absent

at the time of the Census. The small differences suggest that there may be considerable problems for the Census, designed to take a snapshot of households at a particular time, in capturing the dynamic nature of Indigenous household membership identified in case study work.

Among the issues raised by these figures are the following. Firstly, what constitutes 'usual residence' for highly mobile people is not clear-cut (Smith 1991a, 1991b; Taylor 1992). The standard approach taken for the census is to allocate people who may have 'no usual place of residence' to one; namely, the place of enumeration on census night. This procedure effectively immobilises those who may be consistently transient. For example, the census is likely to understate the mobility of children and young adults who move as a result of changing domestic care arrangements (Finlayson 1991; Martin and Taylor 1995: 13-4). In addition, there may be people who see themselves as having more than one 'usual residence' and it is not clear how to classify them. In 1991, the ABS excluded various kinds of 'visitors' from the census classification of families and households. The rationale for this was 'the requirement for more accurate data, and simpler and more relevant classifications reflecting the usual family and household structure...' (ABS 1991: 48). Jones (1994: 113) argues that this procedure is 'clearly desirable' and reflects much more accurately the permanent status of the household. However, the ethnographic evidence reports that Indigenous households can have high visitor numbers over long periods of time. That is, there are some households where visitors are the norm and reflect the 'permanent status' of the household. To exclude them means omitting persons who in fact contribute significantly to (or deplete) the 'usual' membership structure and economic wellbeing of a household. Some policy implications of this potential understatement of the dynamic aspects of Indigenous households will be discussed in the conclusion.

Available evidence at both the aggregate and case study level shows that Indigenous households are more likely to include more than one family and to span generations. In 1991, 12.5 per cent of Indigenous households included more than one family compared with 1.6 per cent of other Australian households (Daly and Smith 1995). According to the NATSIS survey, 7 per cent of Indigenous households contained more than one family. Once again, there was considerable regional variation, with 1 per cent of households in the Tamworth region being occupied by two or three families, compared with 35 per cent in the Apatula region (see Appendix Table A.1). The intergenerational nature of households is illustrated by the following figures. In 1991, 66 per cent of non-Indigenous households containing people aged 65 years and over had no younger occupants compared with only 33 per cent of Indigenous households with people in this age group. In other words, most old Indigenous Australians lived with younger people, while most old non-Indigenous Australians did not.<sup>7</sup>

*Household income*

Table 3 presents data on household incomes taken from the 1991 Census. Household income is the sum of the personal incomes of each 'usual' resident present in the household. For each household the principal source of income is derived from the key 'household reference person'. Visitors' incomes are excluded from household incomes for all household types except the visitors-only households.

**Table 3. Income of Indigenous and other Australian households, 1991 and 1994.**

	Major urban \$	Section-of-State Other urban \$	Rural \$	Total \$
Median household income				
Indigenous (1)	26,318	23,744	23,599	24,456
Others (2)	32,140	25,644	25,996	29,393
Ratio 1/2	0.82	0.93	0.91	0.83
1994 NATSIS (\$A 1991 constant)				26,190
Median household income/ median no. in household				
Indigenous (3)	7,477	5,834	5,256	6,319
Others (4)	11,397	9,325	8,468	10,423
Ratio 3/4	0.66	0.63	0.62	0.61
1994 NATSIS (\$A 1991 constant)				6,090

Source: 1991 Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and 1 per cent ABS sample; ABS (1995), Table 50.

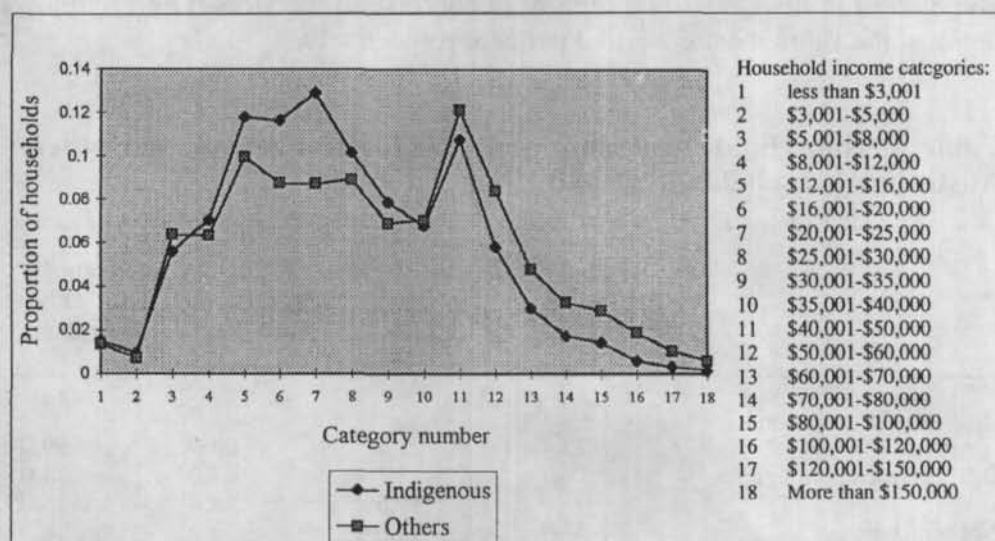
The crude ratio of median household income for Indigenous compared with other Australian households was 0.83 but, when the difference in household size was taken into account, the ratio fell to 0.61. On the assumption that household members receive an equal share of the total household income, the income per household member in an Indigenous household was therefore 61 per cent of that of other Australian households. However, as the case study evidence shows, income is not always distributed equally within a household. The estimated median household income from the NATSIS suggests there was little change in household income per median household resident between 1991 and 1994.

The median Indigenous household income was closer to that of other Australian households in the other urban and rural areas than in the major urban centres. In these section-of-State categories, median Indigenous

household income was over 90 per cent of that of other Australian households in these categories. However, the smaller median household size in the major urban areas meant that the ratio of median income per median household member for the Indigenous population compared with other Australians was highest in the major urban areas at 0.66 (see Table 3).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of household incomes by the income categories identified in the 1991 Census. It shows that Indigenous household incomes were more concentrated at the lower end of the income distribution and closer to the median than among other Australian households. In 1991, 25 per cent of Indigenous households had a household income below \$15,370 and 25 per cent had a household income above \$39,116.

**Figure 1. The distribution of household incomes by category, 1991.**



#### *Nature of occupancy of households*

Given the lower incomes of Indigenous households, it is not surprising that the proportion not renting (for example, either owning or buying) their homes is considerably smaller than among other Australians (see Table 4). While in 1991, 74 per cent of other Australian households were not renting their homes, only 39 per cent of Indigenous households were in this category. The NATSIS showed similar results with 30 per cent of households not renting. Low incomes also have implications for the quality of housing. Jones (1994) uses data from the 1991 Census to consider the adequacy of the housing stock available to Indigenous Australians. On the basis of conventional measures of housing need, he concluded that there was scope for considerable improvement in Indigenous housing. Eight per



cent (4,700) of Indigenous Australian families are either living in an improvised dwelling (1,687 families) or are sharing an overcrowded dwelling with another family (3,013 families) (Jones 1994: 149).<sup>8</sup>

State housing authorities and the private sector, including community organisations, were important landlords for Indigenous Australian households. In the Census, private landlords and community organisations are included in the same 'other' category. The 1994 NATSIS survey enables a division of this category into community and private landlords. For the ATSI regions for which data were available in 1994, 20 per cent of those renting did so from community organisations, 29 per cent from private landlords and 44 per cent from State agencies (see Appendix Table A.3). The remainder included housing supplied by employers. There were some major regional differences, with community organisations being more important in the remote regions than in the metropolitan regions for which data were available. For example, community organisations were the landlords for 91 per cent of the renters in the Tennant Creek region and 86 per cent in the Cooktown region. In contrast, in the Hobart and Sydney regions, the figures were 3 and 2 per cent respectively.

**Table 4. Household ownership and rent for Indigenous and other Australian households, 1991 and 1994.**

	Households (per cent)		Median rent (\$)	
	Indigenous Australians	Other Australians	Indigenous Australians	Other Australians
Housing Commission or Authority	23.4	5.4	66.0	59.0
Other government agency	4.7	1.2	67.0	74.0
Other	33.0	19.5	89.0	128.0
Not renting	38.9	74.0		
Total	100.0	100.0	73.0	112.0
NATSIS (\$1994)			68.0	

Source: 1991 Census, full Aboriginal sub-file and one per cent ABS sample, ABS, NATSIS Regional Council Reports.

Table 4 also contains details on the median rent recorded in the Census by type of landlord. Rents were higher in the private sector than in publicly owned housing for both Indigenous and other households. The higher median rental payments in public housing for Indigenous households presumably reflect the type of housing they were renting. The NATSIS did not break down rental payments by category of landlord but the median rent estimated from this source was broadly comparable to the Census

figure (see Table 4). Table A.2 shows the median household rent by ATSI region. The median rent varied from \$24 per week in the Nhulunbuy region to \$128 per week in the Brisbane region.

## Conclusions

Previous research by Daly and Smith (1995) suggests that Indigenous families are experiencing substantial and multiple forms of economic burden in comparison with other Australian families. An important question addressed in this paper is the extent to which this is also the case for particular types of Indigenous households. Not surprisingly, the preliminary analysis of 1991 Census data is indicative of ongoing poverty for many households. Indigenous people live in larger households than do other Australians and have smaller incomes which, once corrected for household size, are much smaller incomes. There is more likely to be more than one family in an Indigenous household compared with other Australian households and they are more likely to be multigenerational with older Indigenous people more likely to be living with younger people in extended family households.

These household characteristics have economic implications. They positively suggest that older generations are not having to survive independently but remain ensconced within an extended family network. This can have benefits for a household, especially as aged adults are often in receipt of reliable sources of pension income and provide childcare and stability to household membership. However, there may also be economic disadvantages to these social arrangements. The census analysis here indicates that the income per household member in an Indigenous household was only 61 per cent of that of other Australian households and that 25 per cent of Indigenous households had a household income below \$15,370. Thus, impoverished households may be particularly at risk from their reliance on kin such as aged pensioners and sole parents with low welfare incomes. These welfare recipients may, in turn, be under substantial economic pressure from other adults and children who are dependent upon their incomes (Rowse 1988; Finlayson 1991). Such dependents will not necessarily qualify as dependents under Department of Social Security criteria. Children will be particularly at risk in such economically vulnerable households. Clearly, further research is needed into the relative reliance on welfare and employment incomes within large Indigenous households; particularly those where sole parents and pensioners are resident with large numbers of children and other unemployed adults. Their situation will be exacerbated by the economic burden that visitors place upon such low-income households. Areas of particular concern for policy-makers and service deliverers should include the economic wellbeing of large multi-family households in which there are high rates of adult unemployment and high visitor numbers.

In 1974, a study of Indigenous poverty in Brisbane concluded that low-income extended family households lived in overcrowded dwellings as a result of economic necessity rather than choice (Brown et al. 1974: 23, 44-6, 59). This conclusion remains valid. In 1994, Jones' study of the housing needs of Indigenous Australians based on 1991 Census data reports the continuing lack of housing, overcrowding and 'after-housing' poverty amongst Indigenous Australians.<sup>9</sup> 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 after-housing poverty. Single adults contribute to overcrowding in just over half the dwellings in which they are present (Jones 1994: 149-54, 164).

Given the economic impact of high mobility rates and visitor numbers reported by ethnographic case studies, it is likely that Jones' assessment of after-housing poverty, which excluded visitors, is an underestimate. There are policy and funding implications which relate to the possible census understatement of the dynamic aspects of Indigenous households. High visitation rates are likely to lead to greater and faster deterioration in the condition of the Indigenous housing stock; exacerbate environmental health problems associated with overcrowding; and create 'visitor-induced' stress on the expenditure capacity of core household members and their potential to save cash and other resources. These impacts will simply reinforce poverty entrapment for low-income households. Further research on the rate and economic impact of visitors to Indigenous households is required. The ABS may need to consider field methods which more comprehensively capture visitors to Indigenous households, and explore the Indigenous interpretation of what might constitute 'usual residence'. If another NATSIS survey is to be conducted, attention could be given to specific 'hot spots' such as visitor and mobility rates affecting Indigenous economic wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

The preliminary analysis of NATSIS household level data indicates considerable variation across ATSI regional councils in household types and size. Larger households were found in remote regions, with more of them having more than one family resident than those in urban and other urban regions. Census data also indicates smaller urban households which meant that the ratio of median income per median household member compared with other Australians was highest in the major urban areas. An implication of these income- and size-related household characteristics across regions is that consideration may need to be given to government program funding in the key areas of housing, health and infrastructure service delivery to specific household types at the regional level. However, for this to occur, ATSI regional councils would have to include the household characteristics of their regional population as an assessment factor in their program funding decisions.

## Notes

1. The term 'Indigenous', where it is used throughout this paper, refers to both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Otherwise, 'Aboriginal' is used when ethnographic research is being referred to which deals solely with that population.
2. Much of the ethnographic literature relevant to the evaluation of census definitions of family and households has already been reviewed in detail by Smith (1991a, 1991b, 1992); Daly and Smith (1995); Finlayson (1995); and Schwab (1995). The reader is referred to the bibliographies in those papers. The ethnographic research is summarised in the present paper with minimal referencing.
3. See references cited in Finlayson (1991) and Schwab (1995).
4. The 'not classifiable' category is allocated to a dwelling which was temporarily unoccupied at the time of the census but was ascertained by the collector to have been normally occupied; or a household containing only people under 15 years of age (ABS 1991: 66).
5. The ABS definition of family is fundamental to the household concept. A more detailed consideration of the complexities involved in the ABS classification of family types and the implications for data interpretation are presented in Daly and Smith (1995).
6. The median has been calculated on the assumption that the observations in each category are spread evenly across the category. The 1991 Census has categories for each additional person in the household until the open-ended category of eight or more people. The NATSIS uses the following categories; 1-2, 3-5, 6-7, and 8+ persons. If the Census categories were aggregated in this fashion the median Indigenous household size in 1991 would have been 4.1 persons and for other Australian households 1.9 persons.
7. For a fuller discussion of the economic status of older Indigenous Australians, see Daly (1994).
8. For a fuller discussion of the physical characteristics of Indigenous housing and the concept of housing need see Jones (1994).
9. After-housing poverty (AHP) is assessed by specification of an AHP line for each household comprised of the disposable income required to support the needs of the household for other non-housing goods and services. Comparison of the AHP line with after-tax household income levels allows identification of after-housing poverty.
10. Taylor (1992) suggested a range of pertinent questions relevant to these issues that could be included in the first NATSIS but which unfortunately were not taken up.



Appendix Table A.1. Characteristics of Indigenous Households, 1994.

ATSIC region	Median household Size	Proportion of household types			Total Per cent	Total number
		1 family Per cent	2/3 families Per cent	lone/group Per cent		
NSW East						
Tamworth	3.6	0.77	0.01	0.22	1.0	3,320
Coffs Harbour	4.4	0.85	0.07	0.08	1.0	5,490
NSW West						
Bourke	4.9	0.87	0.09	0.04	1.0	1,590
Wagga Wagga	4	0.93	0.02	0.06	1.0	5,040
Queanbeyan	3.9	0.72	0.03	0.26	1.0	2,780
NSW Metropolitan						
Sydney	3.6	0.81	0.03	0.17	1.0	9,300
Victoria						
Ballarat	3.7	0.82	0.05	0.13	1.0	3,600
Wangaratta	3.8	0.84	0.04	0.12	1.0	3,110
Qld South						
Roma	4.5	0.93	0.04	0.03	1.0	2,020
Rockhampton	4.1	0.88	0.04	0.09	1.0	3,050
Qld Metropolitan						
Brisbane	4	0.79	0.08	0.14	1.0	6,429
Qld North						
Townsville	4.6	0.87	0.06	0.06	1.0	2,700
Cairns	5	0.80	0.16	0.04	1.0	3,010
Qld Far North West						
Mount Isa	5.8	0.72	0.23	0.05	1.0	1,190
Cooktown	5.7	0.72	0.24	0.04	1.0	1,350
Torres Strait						
Torres Strait	5.1	0.75	0.18	0.07	1.0	1,460
South Australia						
Adelaide	4.1	0.85	0.04	0.11	1.0	3,420
Ceduna	4.7	0.73	0.20	0.08	1.0	400
Port Augusta	4.3	0.71	0.12	0.17	1.0	1,495
WA South West						
Narrogin	4.4	0.75	0.04	0.21	1.0	1,670
Perth	4.3	0.87	0.04	0.09	1.0	4,170
WA South East						
Kalgoorlie	4.3	0.81	0.08	0.11	1.0	630
Warburton	na	0.68	0.26	0.06	1.0	530
WA Central						
Geraldton	4.5	0.80	0.10	0.10	1.0	1,262
South Hedland	4.3	0.78	0.08	0.14	1.0	1,530
WA North						
Broome	4.5	0.82	0.11	0.08	1.0	920
Derby	5.3	0.54	0.29	0.17	1.0	900
Kununurra	5.8	0.68	0.29	0.03	1.0	730
Tasmania						
Hobart	3.7	0.90	0.01	0.09	1.0	4,440
NT Central						
Alice Springs	3.9	0.77	0.08	0.14	1.0	1,060
Apatula	6.3	0.59	0.35	0.06	1.0	1,190
Tennant Creek	5.3	0.74	0.20	0.06	1.0	690
NT North						
Darwin	4.3	0.80	0.08	0.11	1.0	1,940
Jabiru	7.6	0.55	0.45	0.00	1.0	1,130
Katherine	6.2	0.66	0.32	0.02	1.0	1,220
Nhulunbuy	7.9	0.69	0.31	0.00	1.0	980
Total Australia	4.3	0.81	0.08	0.11	1.0	85,746

Source: ABS 1995, NATSIS Reports.

Appendix Table A.2. Household type.

ATSIC region	Rented Per cent	Owned Per cent	Proportion of total		Total Per cent	Median rent \$
			Being purchased Per cent	Other Per cent		
NSW East						
Tamworth	0.75	0.10	0.05	0.11	1.0	60.00
Coffs Harbour	0.68	0.18	0.13	0.01	1.0	81.00
NSW West						
Bourke	0.76	0.17	0.03	0.05	1.0	62.00
Wagga Wagga	0.57	0.18	0.24	0.02	1.0	71.00
Queanbeyan	0.85	0.10	0.01	0.04	1.0	76.00
NSW Metropolitan						
Sydney	0.66	0.17	0.17	0.00	1.0	77.00
Victoria						
Ballarat	0.66	0.14	0.16	0.04	1.0	77.00
Wangaratta	0.59	0.14	0.28	0.00	1.0	69.00
Qld South						
Roma	0.66	0.25	0.09	0.00	1.0	74.00
Rockhampton	0.84	0.11	0.05	0.00	1.0	68.00
Qld Metropolitan						
Brisbane	0.62	0.18	0.17	0.02	1.0	128.00
Qld North						
Townsville	0.84	0.05	0.11	0.00	1.0	72.00
Cairns	0.79	0.09	0.06	0.05	1.0	69.00
Qld Far North West						
Mount Isa	0.94	0.02	0.01	0.04	1.0	39.00
Cooktown	0.75	0.01	0.00	0.25	1.0	31.00
Torres Strait						
Torres Strait	0.56	0.18	0.01	0.25	1.0	69.00
South Australia						
Adelaide	0.79	0.08	0.12	0.01	1.0	70.00
Ceduna						60.00
Port Augusta	0.80	0.10	0.07	0.03	1.0	50.00
WA South West						
Narrogin	0.70	0.14	0.11	0.05	1.0	62.00
Perth	0.60	0.11	0.29	0.00	1.0	71.00
WA South East						
Kalgoorlie	0.91	0.06	0.02	0.02	1.0	62.00
Warburton	na	na	na	na	na	30.00
WA Central						
Geraldton	0.85	0.07	0.08	0.00	1.0	66.00
South Hedland	0.93	0.01	0.06	0.00	1.0	66.00
WA North						
Broome	0.94	0.01	0.03	0.01	1.0	52.00
Derby	0.74	0.00	0.00	0.26	1.0	32.00
Kununurra	0.71	0.06	0.00	0.24	1.0	44.00
Tasmania						
Hobart	0.46	0.27	0.25	0.01	1.0	74.00
NT Central						
Alice Springs	0.72	0.05	0.14	0.09	1.0	69.00
Apatula	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.57	1.0	24.00
Tennant Creek	0.84	0.03	0.00	0.13	1.0	33.00
NT North						
Darwin	0.70	0.06	0.17	0.07	1.0	72.00
Jabiru	0.93	0.01	0.00	0.07	1.0	29.00
Katherine	0.74	0.13	0.01	0.12	1.0	32.00
Nhulunbuy	0.96	0.00	0.00	0.04	1.0	24.00
Total Australia	0.70	0.13	0.13	0.04	1.0	68.00

na - not applicable.

Source: ABS 1995, NATSIS Reports.

Appendix Table A.3. Type of landlord.

ATSIIC region	Proportion of total by type of landlord				Total Per cent	Total Number
	State Per cent	Community Per cent	Private Per cent	Other Per cent		
NSW East						
Tamworth	0.57	0.21	0.22	0.00	1.0	2,480
Coffs Harbour	0.40	0.24	0.30	0.05	1.0	3,640
NSW West						
Bourke	0.13	0.45	0.25	0.17	1.0	1,150
Wagga Wagga	0.72	0.16	0.11	0.01	1.0	2,760
Queanbeyan	0.28	0.09	0.45	0.18	1.0	2,250
NSW Metropolitan						
Sydney	0.62	0.02	0.35	0.00	1.0	6,310
Victoria						
Ballarat	0.46	0.07	0.42	0.05	1.0	2,320
Wangaratta	0.38	0.13	0.27	0.22	1.0	1,820
Qld South						
Roma	0.43	0.15	0.39	0.03	1.0	1,310
Rockhampton	0.21	0.20	0.56	0.03	1.0	2,090
Qld Metropolitan						
Brisbane	0.23	0.11	0.56	0.11	1.0	3,890
Qld North						
Townsville	0.49	0.18	0.20	0.13	1.0	2,160
Cairns	0.49	0.18	0.16	0.17	1.0	2,280
Qld Far North West						
Mount Isa	0.06	0.70	0.17	0.07	1.0	1,070
Cooktown	0.00	0.86	0.01	0.13	1.0	980
South Australia						
Adelaide	0.38	0.14	0.44	0.05	1.0	2,660
Ceduna	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.0	340
Port Augusta	0.69	0.29	0.02	0.00	1.0	1,070
WA South West						
Narrogin	0.79	0.08	0.13	0.00	1.0	1,110
Perth	0.71	0.00	0.28	0.01	1.0	2,200
WA Central						
Geraldton	0.87	0.07	0.01	0.05	1.0	1,010
South Hedland	0.78	0.07	0.13	0.02	1.0	1,260
Tasmania						
Hobart	0.37	0.03	0.51	0.10	1.0	1,990
NT Central						
Tennant Creek	0.09	0.91	0.00	0.00	1.0	570
NT North						
Darwin	0.48	0.18	0.22	0.13	1.0	1,200
Jabiru	0.00	0.78	0.00	0.22	1.0	1,000
Katherine	0.29	0.70	0.00	0.01	1.0	870
Nhulunby	0.09	0.74	0.00	0.17	1.0	900
Total Australia	0.44	0.20	0.29	0.07	1.0	52,690

Source: ABS 1995, NATSIS Reports.

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