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**Centre for  
Aboriginal  
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**The continuing disadvantage of  
indigenous sole parents:  
a preliminary analysis of 1996  
Census data**

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

**No. 153/1998**

**Discussion Paper**

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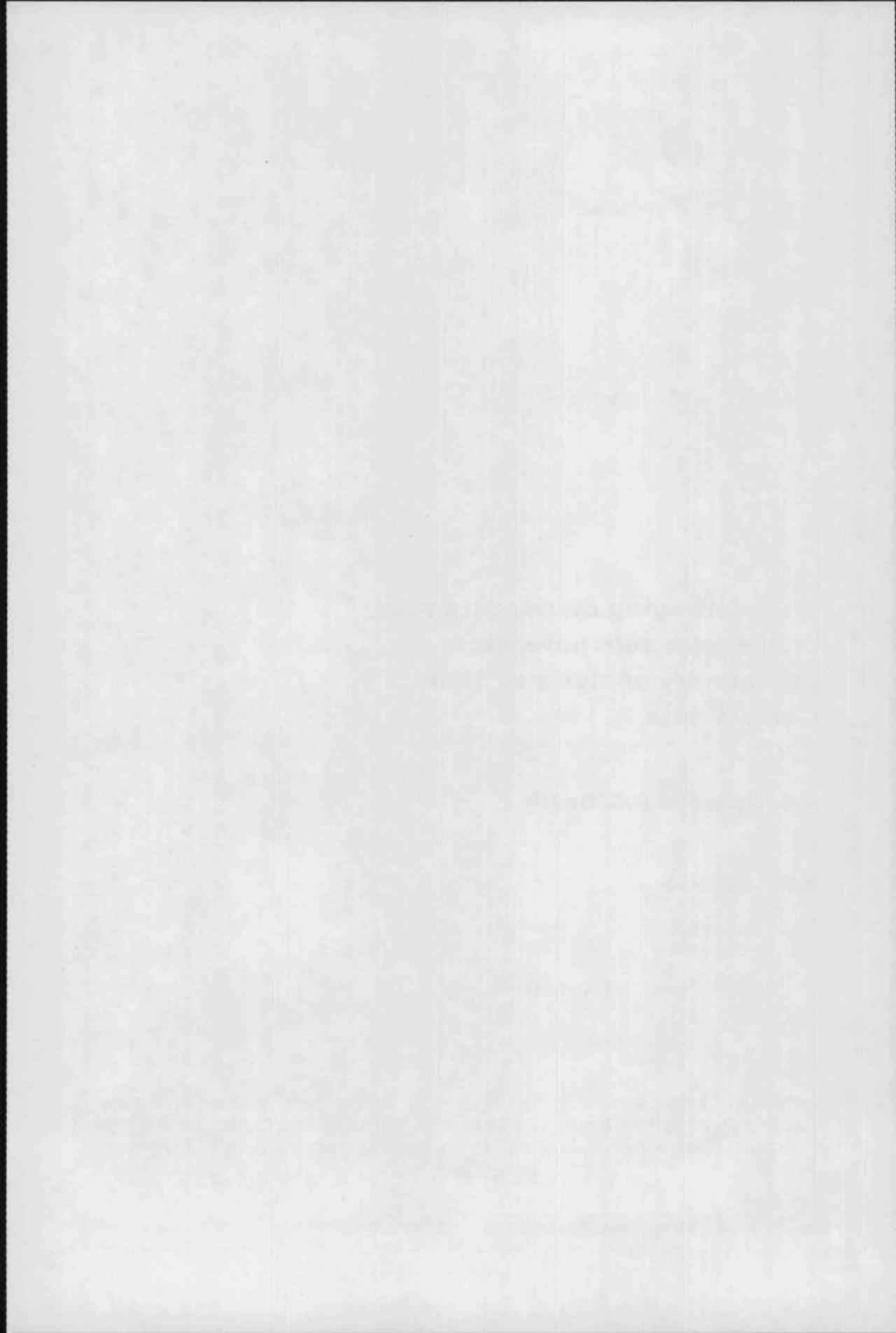
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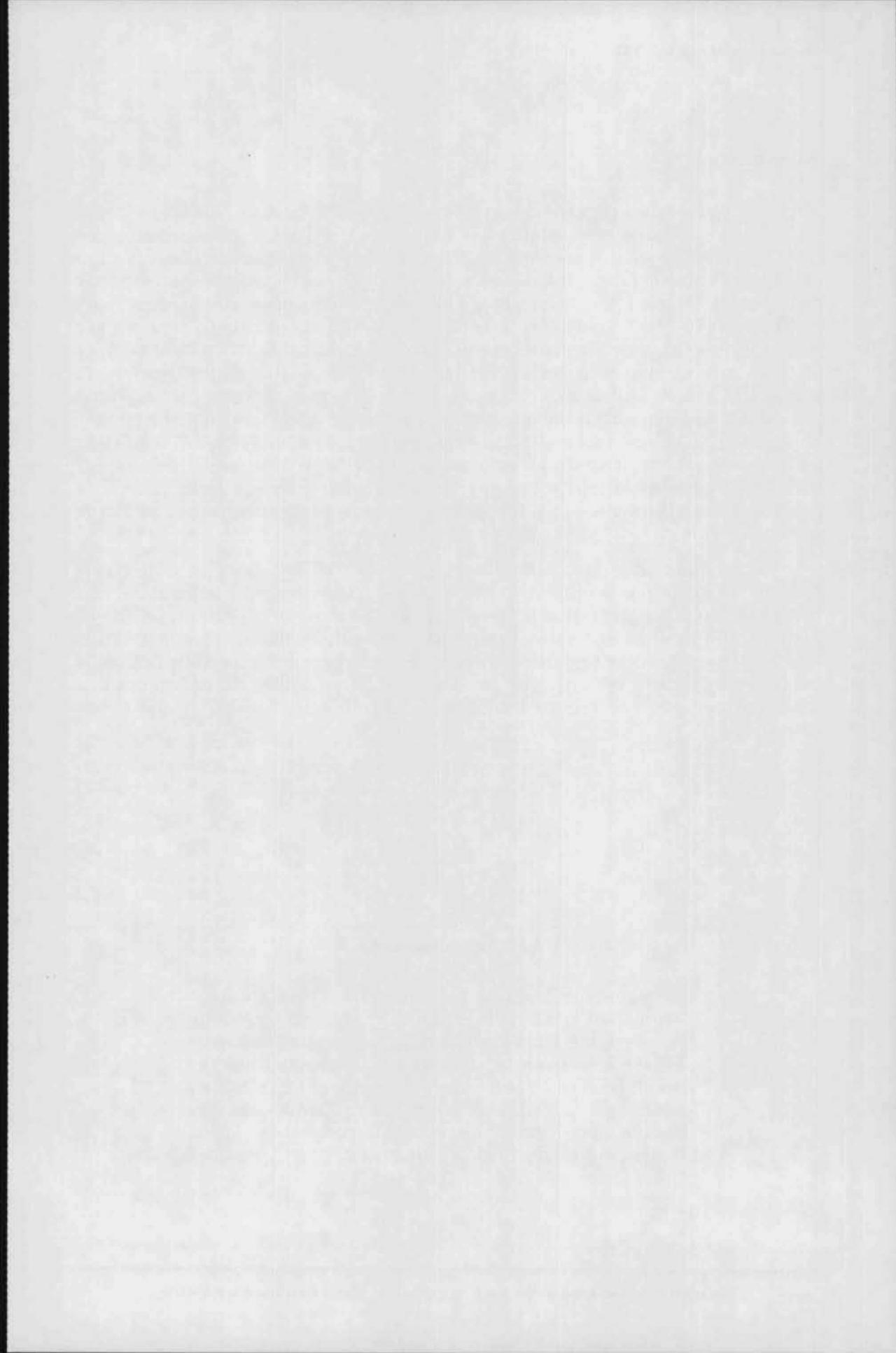
## Summary

This paper presents a preliminary analysis of 1996 Census data relating to female indigenous sole parents. It confirms results from the 1991 Census which show that sole parent families account for a larger share of indigenous families than sole parents among 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. All these factors have important implications for the economic status of indigenous sole parent families and for any attempts to reduce welfare dependency and make them more economically self-sufficient. This preliminary analysis of inter-censal trend indicates that increasing numbers of such families are being formed and that they continue to have low income levels. Marginal increases in some areas of their educational qualifications and employment rate between 1991 and 1996, appear to be substantially offset by the greater proportion of female indigenous sole parents leaving the mainstream labour force and identifying themselves as 'not in the labour force'.

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. Their access to education, vocational training and employment skills, and assistance with overcoming transportation and child-care barriers to participation in the workforce are especially critical to creating welfare exit options. The position of children within these families is a matter of concern and requires further community-based research and policy attention.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Bob Birrell from the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University for providing 1996 Census data specific to indigenous female sole parents, and Virginia Rapson from the Social Science Data Archives in Canberra for providing additional data to us at short notice. Thanks are also due to Jon Altman for editorial comments, Linda Roach and Hilary Bek for proof-reading, and Jennifer Braid for layout.



## Introduction

Previous analyses of 1991 Census data has enabled us to quantify for the first time, at an aggregate level, some important characteristics of indigenous sole parent families (Daly and Smith 1997; Daly and Smith 1998). Indigenous sole parents in 1991 were younger than their counterparts, were less likely to ever have been married, and had more children than other Australian sole parents. They also had lower levels of education and were less likely to be in employment than their counterparts. These characteristics were associated with low family incomes.

This paper updates previous research with a preliminary analysis of 1996 Census data, confirming the earlier results and highlighting some important trends. In 1996, indigenous sole parent families suffer continuing high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, but with the added dimension of an increasing number of such families being formed. A preliminary analysis of the 1996 Census is presented below, and consideration given to the implications of inter-censal trends for current program and policy. Future research needs are also raised.

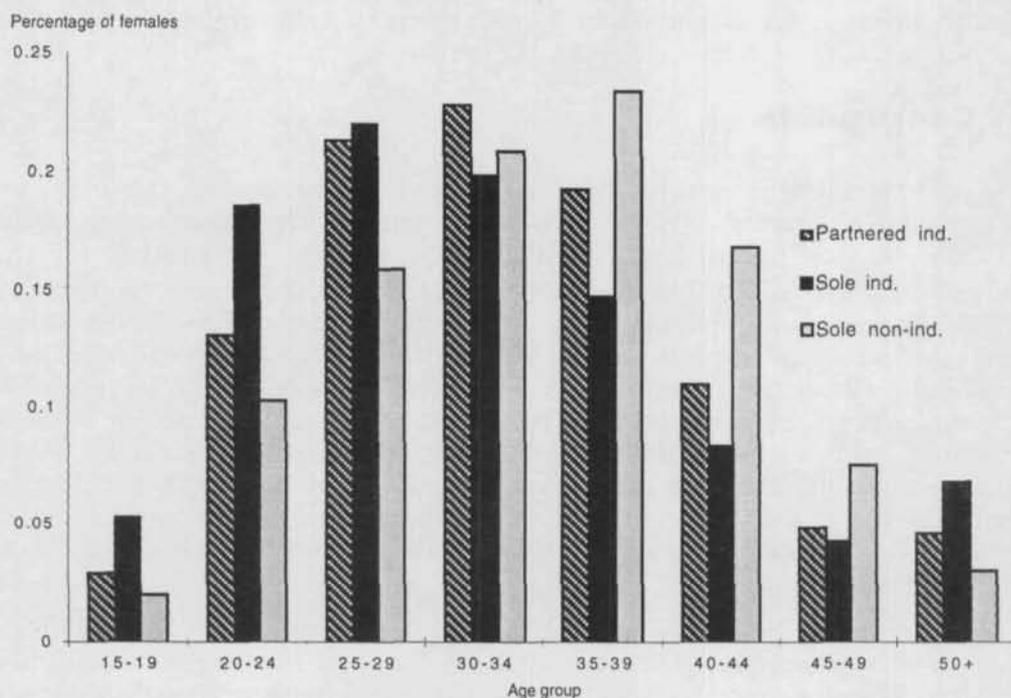
## 1996 Census data

According to the 1996 census, about 40 per cent of indigenous families with children under 15 years of age were sole parent families. The following discussion will focus on sole parent families headed by women, accounting for the overwhelming majority of these sole parent families. The data currently available relate to this group and, therefore, to a sub-group of sole parents with dependent children that we reported on in earlier studies (Daly and Smith 1997).<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 compares the age distribution of indigenous female sole parents with two other groups; indigenous females who were partnered, either in a married or de facto relationship, and non-indigenous female sole parents. Indigenous female sole parents were younger than the other two groups: 24 per cent were under 25 years of age compared with 15 per cent of partnered indigenous female parents and 12 per cent of non-indigenous female sole parents. The latter group was concentrated in the 30-44 age groups.

Indigenous female sole parents were much less likely to have been married than other Australian female sole parents (see Table 1). Two-thirds of them had never been married compared with one-third of other Australian female sole parents. While 60 per cent of non-indigenous female sole parents were either divorced or separated, only a quarter of indigenous female sole parents fell into these categories. These differences raise the question as to whether indigenous sole parent families tend to form in a different way from other Australian sole parent families. It is more typical in the wider Australian community for sole parent families to be formed after the breakdown of a partnered relationship, but these results suggest the possibility that a substantial proportion of indigenous

female sole parents may never have been part of a long-term *de jure* or *de facto* marital relationship, and may not class short-term serial *de facto* relationships as being marital unions.<sup>2</sup> This may have important implications for their access to maintenance from the non-custodial parent. As Table 1 shows, there was a high incidence of indigenous female members of a partnered relationship reporting that they had never been married. In these circumstances, if the partnership ceased, female parents may well report that they had never been married. An improved understanding of the typical history of indigenous sole parent families is an important issue for policy in this area. It is interesting to note, in the light of the lower life expectancy of indigenous males, that a larger proportion of indigenous female sole parents described themselves as widowed than amongst other Australian female sole parents.

**Figure 1. The age distribution of indigenous and non-indigenous females with children under 15 years of age, 1996**



The average indigenous female sole parent had given birth to a larger number of children than other female sole parents (see Table 1). Given that they were, on average, younger, these figures may differ from the average completed family size more than for non-indigenous sole parents. Earlier research by Daly and Smith (1996, 1997) shows that this is only part of the story concerning the child dependency ratios faced by this group. According to 1991 Census data, about one quarter of indigenous sole parent families included step and foster

children compared with 10 per cent of other Australian sole parent families. The average number of children in the care of indigenous female sole parents therefore exceeded the average number with other female sole parents in 1991.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of indigenous and non-indigenous female sole parent families, 1996**

	Indigenous sole parents (proportion)	Non-indigenous sole parents (proportion)	Indigenous partnered parents (proportion)
Marital status			
Never married	0.63	0.33	0.29
Widowed	0.07	0.05	0.00
Divorced	0.09	0.30	0.03
Separated	0.15	0.29	0.02
Married	0.05	0.03	0.66
Total	1.00 (19,250)	1.00 (320,779)	1.00 (26,720)
Total no. children born			
None	0.02	0.01	0.02
1	0.26	0.34	0.17
2	0.23	0.33	0.26
3	0.19	0.19	0.23
4	0.13	0.08	0.15
5	0.07	0.03	0.08
6+	0.09	0.02	0.09
Total <sup>a</sup>	1.00 (17,870)	1.00 (310,920)	1.00 (25,264)

Notes: a. Excludes the 'not stated' category.

Source: 1996 Census data supplied by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University.

Table 2 compares the educational qualifications of indigenous female sole parents with the two comparison groups. There was little difference between the qualification levels of the two groups of indigenous females, but the indigenous sole parent group were less likely to hold a post-secondary qualification than non-indigenous sole parents.

Earlier studies show that indigenous people with post-secondary qualifications were more likely to be in employment than other indigenous Australians (Daly 1995). The low educational levels of indigenous female sole parents are probably one of the factors contributing to the low levels of employment. Only 25 per cent of indigenous female sole parents were employed compared with 43 per cent of other Australian female sole parents. There are common factors which influence the employment status of all indigenous females and these are evident in the fact that the proportion of partnered indigenous females who were employed was below that of non-indigenous sole parents, a group with low levels of employment compared with other Australian females

(Daly and Smith 1996). Among those who were employed, indigenous female sole parents tended to be concentrated in the less skilled occupations, and to be underrepresented in the professional occupations compared with other Australian female sole parents. This was also true for indigenous females with partners and reflects such factors as the lower educational status of the indigenous population (Taylor and Liu 1996).

**Table 2. Education and labour force characteristics of indigenous and non-indigenous female sole parents, 1996**

	Indigenous sole parents (proportion)	Non-indigenous sole parents (proportion)	Indigenous partnered parents (proportion)
Highest qualification held			
Bachelor and above	0.02	0.08	0.02
Diploma	0.03	0.07	0.03
Skilled vocational	0.01	0.03	0.01
Basic vocational	0.03	0.05	0.03
No qualifications	0.92	0.78	0.90
Total	1.00 (19,250)	1.00 (320,779)	1.00 (26,720)
Labour force status			
Employed	0.24	0.43	0.39
Unemployed	0.08	0.09	0.06
Not in the labour force	0.68	0.49	0.55
Total <sup>a</sup>	1.00 (18,614)	1.00 (317,324)	1.00 (25,872)

Notes: a. Excludes the 'not stated' category.

Source: 1996 Census data supplied by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University.

The implications for family income of low levels of employment are apparent in Table 3. The estimated median weekly family income of indigenous female-headed sole parent families was 91 per cent of that of other Australian female-headed sole parent families. Given that they were less likely to be receiving child maintenance support from the non-custodial parent than were other Australian sole parent families and were less likely to be in employment, it is perhaps surprising that the estimated ratio is not smaller. However, if the family income were corrected for the number of people it supported, the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous sole parent families would increase.

**Table 3. Family incomes of indigenous and non-indigenous female sole parent families, 1996**

	Indigenous sole parents \$	Non-indigenous sole parents \$	Indigenous partnered parents \$
First quartile	161	188	388
Median	321	354	583
Third quartile	464	476	851

Source: 1996 Census data supplied by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University.

### Changes in economic status—1991 and 1996 Censuses

This preliminary analysis of 1996 Census data suggests that, overall, indigenous female sole parents suffer continuing economic disadvantage. Both 1991 and 1996 data confirm that indigenous sole parents remain much younger than their non-indigenous counterparts, and their comparative youthfulness appears to have increased. In 1991, 41 per cent were under 29 years of age compared to 45 per cent in 1996. The increasingly youthful demographic profile of indigenous female sole parents may have negative implications for both their income status and their capacity to gain educational qualifications and employment skills early in life.

While indigenous sole parents were much less likely to have been married than other Australian female sole parents in both 1991 and 1996, an important trend is becoming apparent within the indigenous group. In 1996, the proportion of indigenous female sole parents who had never been married has increased significantly: from 51 per cent in 1991 to 63 per cent in 1996. While there was a slight decrease in the proportion who declared they were widowed (falling from 10 per cent in 1991 to 7 per cent in 1996) or divorced (from 13 per cent in 1991, to 9 per cent in 1996), there was also a decrease in the proportion who stated they had been previously married (decreasing from 12 per cent in 1991 to 5 per cent in 1996). This trend has significant income implications for indigenous female sole parents. 1996 Census income data clearly indicate that two-parent families continue to be better off than sole parents in terms of their median family income amongst both the indigenous and the wider Australian population (Daly and Smith 1997; Ross and Mikalauskas 1996). The apparent rise of indigenous sole parenthood in 1996, especially in circumstances where female sole parents will continue to have negligible access to maintenance payments from a spouse, will serve to entrench poverty amongst these parents and their children.

There appears to be little significant change in the inter-censal educational status of indigenous female sole parents. While remaining substantially behind their female counterparts in all areas of qualification in 1996, there has been a slight increase in the proportion with a post-secondary qualification (from 1 per

cent in 1991 to 2 per cent in 1996) and a corresponding minor improvement in the proportion who have no qualification at all (decreasing from 94 per cent to 92 per cent). There has been a slight inter-censal improvement in the employment status of indigenous female sole parents (from 20 per cent in 1991 to 24 per cent in 1996) and a corresponding decrease in unemployment (from 16 per cent to 8 per cent).

The small improvement in the labour force status of indigenous female sole parents may be due to their increased participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. Furthermore, the seeming increase in employment status arguably is mitigated by a trend also indicated by 1996 Census data, namely: that more indigenous female sole parents appear to be exhibiting the 'discouraged worker' response and disassociating themselves entirely from the labour force, with those identifying as 'not in the labour force' increasing from 64 per cent to 68 per cent between 1991 and 1996. In any event, their overall employment status continues to remain substantially below that of other Australian female sole parents. In addition, this indigenous family type remains more youthful than other Australian sole parent families, and increasingly so—and indigenous female sole parents appear to represent a growing proportion of indigenous family types. This group needs, therefore, to be the subject of urgent program attention focusing on their educational qualifications and employment status.

## Summary and conclusion

Previous research has reported that given the generally youthful demographic profile of the indigenous population and its growth rate,<sup>3</sup> it is likely that the numbers of indigenous people moving into the ages where they form families will increase rapidly over the next decade. It has been further suggested that the number of indigenous sole parent families will increase accordingly (Daly and Smith 1997). This analysis of 1996 Census data appears to confirm that trend. Indigenous sole parents continue to remain younger than other such parents when their children turn 16 years of age, have lower educational status, are less likely to be in employment, and have higher childhood dependency burdens to bear than their non-indigenous counterparts. Given their increasing numbers, indigenous sole parent families may be encountering a potentially worsening economic future.

Sole parenthood is closely associated with poverty for all Australians, but this is particularly so for indigenous Australians (Daly and Smith 1997; Ross and Mikalauskas 1996; Ross and Whiteford 1990). Department of Social Security data show that indigenous female sole parents are more likely to be wholly reliant on the Sole Parent Pension (now referred to as the Parenting Allowance) than other Australian female sole parents (Daly and Smith 1997). They are also far less likely to receive child support from the non-custodial parent. This raises the issue of the problems associated with welfare dependence. There has been an international

trend to tighten conditions attached to the receipt of welfare payments. While there may be long-term benefits for the individuals concerned in encouraging self-sufficiency, these changes may create considerable hardship in the short to medium term.

The high level of welfare dependence among indigenous sole parents implies a long-term absence from the labour market and entrenched poverty. This cycle is of particular concern given its potential inter-generational effect on children who remain at great risk from the low economic status of their parent. 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 for.

This, and earlier analyses, indicate that indigenous sole parent families have a distinct set of socioeconomic and culturally-based characteristics. More finely-tuned program delivery and policy formulation based on those distinctive characteristics could play a critical role in improving the outcomes of service delivery. 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.

Importantly, more detailed case study information is needed about the position of children within these families, such as: the domestic arrangements in place for their care; the kin involved in looking after them; their mobility and visitation patterns with other households; and their educational arrangements. Unfortunately, we have little data on the actual domestic and socioeconomic circumstances of children in these families; the exception being Finlayson's (1991) long-term research in north Queensland (see also Choo 1990; Smith 1980). Answers to these questions will only be provided by the conduct of community-based research with sole parents and their children.

In 1996, indigenous sole parent families represent 40 per cent of indigenous families with children under 15 years of age. This proportion remains approximately twice as high as for the wider population, and it appears that this proportion is increasing. The access of these families to education, vocational training and employment skills, and assistance with overcoming transportation and child-care barriers to participation in the workforce, are especially critical to creating welfare exit options. The socioeconomic position of children within these families should be a matter of urgent policy and program concern and requires further community-based research.

## Notes

1. These 1996 Census data have been supplied to us by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University.
2. See Daly and Smith (1996, 1997) for a discussion of the some of culturally-based aspects of indigenous marital status in the context of sole parent families and households.
3. In 1993 it was estimated that the indigenous population was growing at almost double the national average (see Tesfaghiorghis and Gray 1991). This estimate may have to be substantially revised as a result of the considerable increase in the indigenous count from the 1996 Census.

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