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Indigenous Population Project 2011 Census Papers

Paper 1
Indigenous Language Usage

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2011 Census Papers

In July 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics began releasing data from the 2011 Census of Population and Housing. One of the more important results contained in the release was the fact that the number of people who identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) had increased by 20.5 per cent since the 2006 Census. There were also significant changes in the characteristics of the Indigenous population across a number of key variables like language spoken at home, housing, education and other socioeconomic variables. In this series, authors from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) document the changing composition and distribution of a range of Indigenous outcomes. The analysis in the series was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) through the Strategic Research Project as well as FaHCSIA and State/Territory governments through the Indigenous Populations Project.

The opinions expressed in the papers in this series are those of the authors alone and should not be attributed to CAEPR, FaHCSIA or any other government departments.

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Abstract

This paper analyses data on those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians who reported in the 2006 and 2011 Censuses of Population and Housing that they spoke an Indigenous language at home. The analysis shows an increase in the number of Indigenous language speakers from 51,990 in 2006 to 60,550 in 2011. However, as the number of people identified as being Indigenous also increased over the last intercensal period, there was in fact a small decline in the percentage of the relevant population speaking an Indigenous language—from 12.1 per cent to 11.6 per cent. The paper also looks at the geographic and demographic distribution of Indigenous language usage.

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List of Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIGC	Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification
ASCL	Australian Standard Classification of Languages
ANU	Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
FaHCSIA	Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
IARE	Indigenous Area
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

1. Introduction and overview: The importance of Indigenous languages

There were between 200 and 300 Indigenous languages spoken in Australia at the time of European colonisation. These figures rise to between 500 and 600 when one makes less of a distinction between a language and a dialect. However, according to McConvell and Thieberger (2001), less than half of these languages are still spoken, with many more currently endangered. Specifically, according to the most recent National Indigenous Languages Survey (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2005), of the 145 Indigenous languages still spoken in Australia, 110 are severely or critically endangered. Despite this decline in the number of languages spoken since colonisation, data from the most recent (2011) Census shows that there were 60,550 speakers of Indigenous languages across Australia.¹ Most of these, however, were concentrated in four jurisdictions—the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia.

Languages are more than a means of communication. They also hold knowledge about a people's history, culture and world view. According to Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007: 393), the loss of an Indigenous language 'spells the end of another way of looking at the world, of explaining the unknown and of making sense of life'. Furthermore, according to McConvell and Thieberger (2001: 1), 'the Indigenous languages of Australia represent a great storehouse of knowledge and tradition about the environment and ancient culture of Australia, both for the Indigenous people themselves, and for all Australians'. According to Obata and Lee (2010), 'each Australian Indigenous language is associated with an area of land and has a deep spiritual significance' and it is 'through their own languages, that Indigenous people maintain their connection with their ancestors, land, law and culture'.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies maintains an archive of over 200 Indigenous languages.² This is a valuable source of information for future generations of Australians (Indigenous or otherwise). However, these archives can only hope to capture limited aspects of each language, with speakers of Indigenous languages remaining the key to their survival. According to Walsh (2005), 'it takes a tremendous commitment on the part of the Indigenous communities and those who might assist them if Indigenous languages are to survive'.

1. The exact question on the 2011 Census was 'Does the person speak a language other than English at home?', with space given to record the specific language. For those who spoke more than one language at home (other than English), an instruction was given to 'write the one that is spoken most often'.

2. See <<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/language.html>>.

Historically, this commitment has been in the face of active discouragement of the use of Indigenous languages by the Indigenous population. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission:

Decades of Australian government policies and practices have banned and discouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from speaking our languages during the assimilation years. Many people who were forcibly taken to hostels and missions lost their languages due to the prohibitionist polic[i]es and practices of governments and churches. These policies and practices lasted in Australia right up to the 1970s (Australian Human Rights Commission 2009: 58).

More recently, Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have been actively supporting the maintenance of Indigenous languages. This includes through the National Indigenous Languages Policy,³ which has as a key element Indigenous Languages Support funding, with a focus on funding community-based language projects.

The richest source of data on contemporary Indigenous language usage is the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). According to analysis of the NATSISS presented in Biddle and Swee (2012), a little under a quarter (24.7%) of Indigenous adults aged 15 years and over could either understand or speak an Indigenous language. This varies by remoteness though, with rates of a little over 40 per cent for those aged 15–19 years in remote Australia to over 60 per cent for Indigenous males aged 30 years and over. Compared to this, only 4.8 per cent of Indigenous females and 5.8 per cent of Indigenous males aged 15–19 years living in non-remote areas spoke or understood an Indigenous language. While the percentage in non-remote areas does increase across the age distribution, it never goes much above 15 per cent.

While there are benefits to the wider Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous community from the maintenance of Indigenous languages and therefore cultural knowledge, there are also potential benefits to the individual. According to analysis presented in Biddle and Swee (2012), Indigenous Australians who were learning an Indigenous language were significantly more likely to report that they were a happy person all or most of the time in the previous four weeks compared to those who were not. Although it is not possible to test for causality using a cross-sectional survey, the results indicate the potential for language

3. See <<http://www.arts.gov.au/indigenous/languages>>.

support from governments and the wider community to improve the wellbeing of the Indigenous population.

While there is a rich amount of information in the 2008 NATSISS, the fact that it is a sample survey means that it is not possible to look in detail at the geographic distribution of Indigenous language usage. Furthermore, because the questions on the NATSISS change significantly through time, it is not possible to identify trends in outcomes. The Census of Population and Housing, on the other hand, has a much more consistent set of questions and a much longer time series.

According to the Indigenous Community Profiles from the 2001 Census, there were 49,764 Indigenous Australians who spoke an Indigenous language at home at the turn of the 21st Century.⁴ This represents 13.2 per cent of the population who spoke either an Indigenous language or English only. By 2006,⁵ the number had increased to 51,990, but the percentage had declined to 12.3 per cent. A similar pattern was found between 2006 and 2011 with 60,550 now speaking an Indigenous language, or 11.8 per cent of the Indigenous population.⁶

Data from the last three censuses reveal a somewhat paradoxical result, with overall increases in the number of Indigenous language speakers alongside declines in the relevant percentages. This result is driven, of course, by the rapid growth in the Indigenous population over the period. In 2001, there were 410,003 Indigenous Australians counted in the census. This rose by 11.0 per cent over the subsequent intercensal period, reaching 455,030 in 2006. Growth over the most recent intercensal period was even greater, with a 2011 population count of 548,370 or a 20.5 per cent increase. Understanding the size and distribution of this population growth is clearly an important component of understanding changes in Indigenous language usage. For this reason, the next section in this paper looks in a little bit of detail at the geographic distribution of the Indigenous population and how this has changed over the last five years. A future paper in this series will look in greater detail at this issue.

Section 2 of this paper documents the most recent population change, while Section 3 examines the geographic distribution of the Indigenous population at both the regional level and at smaller levels of geography. Section 4 looks at changes through time in Indigenous language usage, with Section 5 looking at variation by demographic characteristics. In the final section of the paper I provide a brief summary and some concluding comments.

2. Data and geography

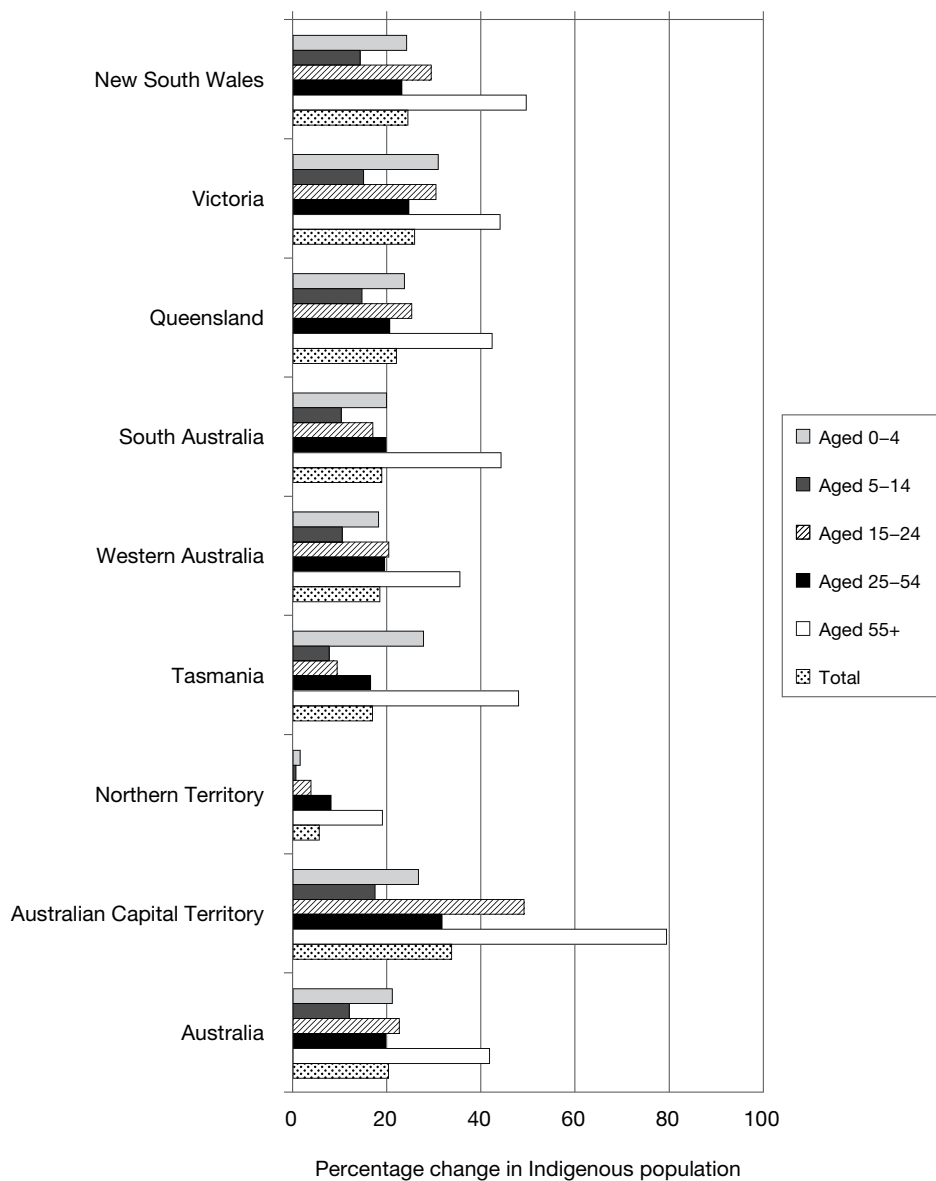
There are structural reasons for a rapidly growing Indigenous population. Indigenous females have a relatively high fertility rate compared to non-Indigenous females, an area that will be examined more in a future paper in this series. Furthermore, a large minority of children born to a non-Indigenous mother with an Indigenous father are likely to be identified as being Indigenous. There are two additional reasons for why the Indigenous population count might be growing relatively quickly. Either more Indigenous people are being captured as part of the census process (changes in enumeration), or a number of people who did not identify as being Indigenous in 2006 changed their response in 2011 (changes in identification).

The question used in the census to identify whether a person is Indigenous or not has stayed reasonably consistent over the last decade. In 2011, those filling out the household form were asked the following about each individual in the household—'Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?' Three options were given for the response: No; Yes, Aboriginal; or Yes, Torres Strait Islander. Instructions on the form also indicated that 'For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes'.

While the question may have stayed the same, people's response to it may differ. This is likely to occur across an individual's lifecourse anyhow as they begin to fill out census forms on their own behalf (as opposed to appearing as a child on a household form) and get a better sense of their own identity. One-off events may also have an impact, with some suggesting that the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples made by the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made some Indigenous Australians who did not identify as such more comfortable in doing so in the most recent census. There were also significant changes to the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy between 2006 and 2011, with an increased focus on urban areas and a greater level of ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities in remote areas between censuses.

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4. See <<http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/censusfree.nsf/log?openagent&IPP%5F0%2Ezip&0&2001%20Census%20Indigenous%20Profile&F263ACCE91D93800CA256C7C0001250C&0&2001&19%2E11%2E2002&>>.
 5. See <<http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/2006Census4.nsf/LogByLookupView?openagent&2002%20DIP%2DAustralia%2Ezip&20060&Main%20Features&02006%20Census%20Indigenous%20Profile25/10/071&0&2006&25%2E10%2E2007-&Latest>>.
 6. See <[http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/CensusOutput/copsub.NSF/All%20docs%20by%20catNo/2011-Community%20Profile-0/\\$File/IP_0.zip?OpenElement](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/CensusOutput/copsub.NSF/All%20docs%20by%20catNo/2011-Community%20Profile-0/$File/IP_0.zip?OpenElement)>.

Figure 1. Percentage change in Indigenous population count, 2006–11

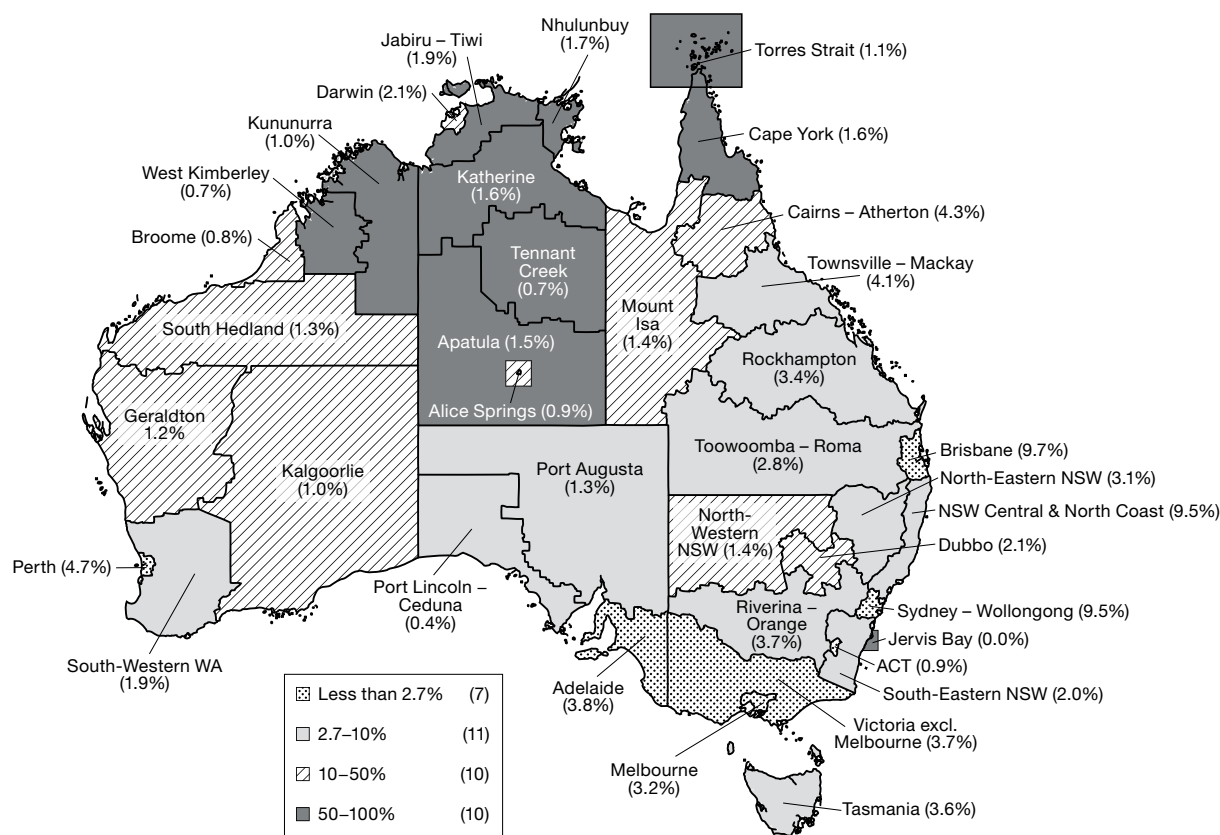


Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

While the above are all plausible reasons for why the Indigenous population grew so rapidly over the last intercensal period, the reality is that without a more thorough evaluation framework incorporated into Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) procedures (for example through randomisation at the geographic level of collection strategies), we are never going to know what the main drivers were. Looking at Figure 1, however, we can see that changes in the Indigenous population were concentrated in particular age groups and in particular jurisdictions.

This figure looks at the change in the Indigenous population count between 2006 and 2011 for five age groups (as well as the total Indigenous population) across the eight Australian States and Territories. The final set of results looks at the change in the count for Australia as a whole, which includes Other Territories. Looking by State/Territory, the fastest rate of growth was in the Australian Capital Territory or ACT (33.8% over the period), Victoria (26.0%), New South Wales (24.6%) and Queensland (22.1%). South Australia (19.1%), Western Australia (18.7%) and Tasmania (17.1%) grew at a slightly slower rate than

Figure 2. Percentage of Indigenous Region census count who identify as being Indigenous (shading) and percentage of total count of Indigenous Australians (text), 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

the Australia average, with the Northern Territory (5.8%) growing very slowly over the period.

For all jurisdictions, it was the population group aged 55 years and over that grew the fastest (in relative terms) over the period. Nationally, there were 42.0 per cent more Indigenous Australians aged 55 years and over in 2011 than in 2006. The ACT, and to a lesser extent New South Wales and Tasmania, all saw an even more rapid ageing of the Indigenous count. Growth in the other age groups was not as consistent. In Victoria, there was a 31.0 per cent increase in the population aged 0–4 years. In the Northern Territory, on the other hand, growth in this age group (1.7% over the period) was negligible.

Two general trends emerge from Figure 1. In 2011, the population who identified as being Indigenous was older and more likely to live on the east coast than the population who identified as being Indigenous in 2006. I will return to the implications of these changes throughout the paper.

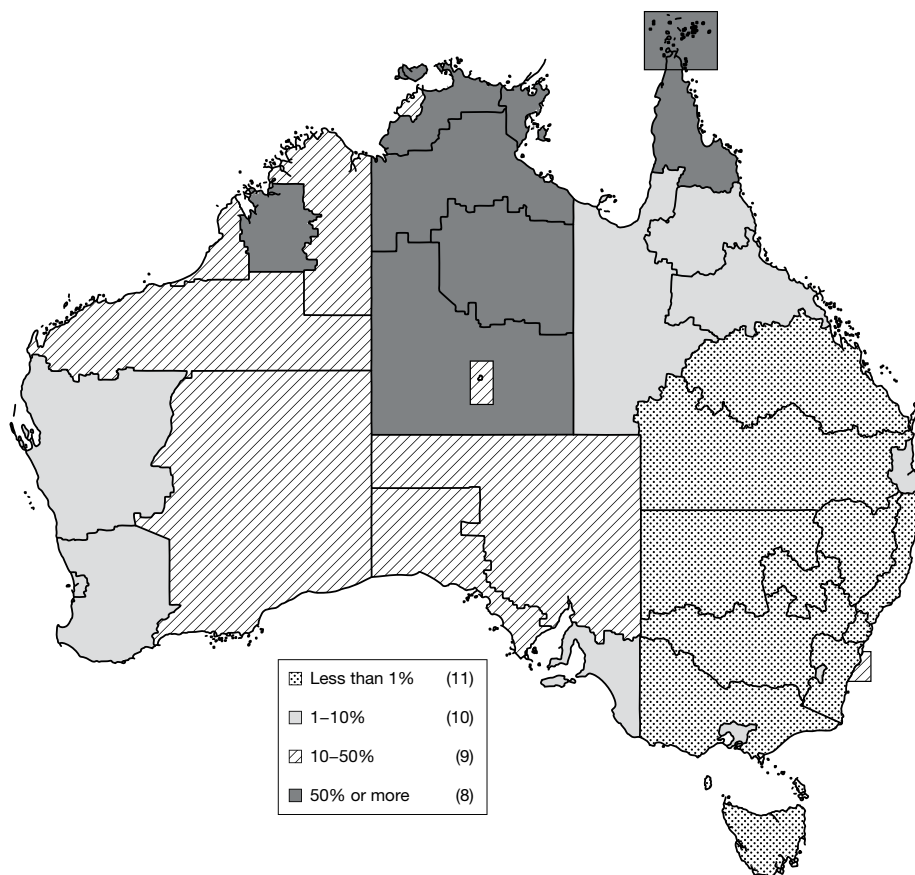
While the trends identified at the jurisdictional and regional level are important for broad policy settings, the reality is that many Indigenous policies are delivered locally to individual regions or communities. In addition, there is significant variation in a number of outcomes within jurisdictions and even within smaller regional

classifications. For example, in an analysis of 2006 Census data, Biddle (2009) showed that there were a number of suburbs within Sydney that had socioeconomic outcomes that were as disadvantaged as a number of remote or regional towns. For this reason, analysis in this series also looks at changes in outcomes at the regional and community level.

To undertake analysis at the regional and local level, the papers in this series utilise the Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification (AIGC). The AIGC is a four-level structure that builds up from the Statistical Area Level 1 which is common to both the AIGC and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard. The next level above the Statistical Area Level 1 in the AIGC is Indigenous Locations of which there were 1,116. The next level above Indigenous Locations are Indigenous Areas (IAREs) of which there were 429. This number lowers to 411 substantive areas after excluding administrative codes representing those in a particular State or Territory who did not give any additional detail on their place of usual residence, or who were migratory on the night of the census.

The most aggregated level of geography in the AIGC is Indigenous Regions. There were 57 of those in the 2011 version of the AIGC. After excluding administrative regions and the Christmas—Cocos (Keeling) Island Region (which has very few Indigenous Australians), this

Figure 3. Percentage of Indigenous population who speak an Indigenous language at home, by Indigenous Region, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

leaves 38 Indigenous Regions used in the analysis for this series. Figure 2 gives the name and location of each of these regions. The shading for the regions refers to the percentage of the population in the region who identify as being Indigenous, ranging from less than the national average (2.7%) in the dotted areas to more than half of the population (the darkest shading). The numbers after the Indigenous Region name refer to the percentage of the total Indigenous population count who identified that region as their place of usual residence on the night of the census.

There are two key points that emerge from Figure 2. First, it is in relatively remote regions that the share of the population who identify as being Indigenous is highest. There are 10 regions where more than half of the population counted in the 2011 Census identified as being Indigenous, with the Torres Strait (83.4%), Apatula (80.2%) and Jabiru-Tiwi (78.9%) all having more than three out of every four usual residents being Indigenous.

While it is remote regions in north, central and western parts of the country that have the highest percentage of the population Indigenous, the regions with the greatest absolute number of Indigenous Australians are in the south and the east of the country. The Brisbane, New South Wales Central and North Coast, and Sydney–

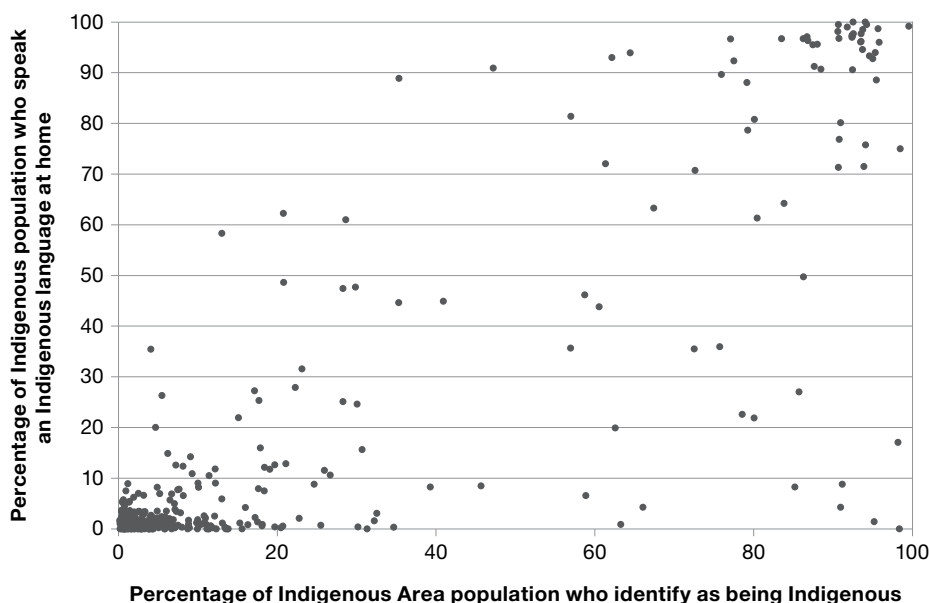
Wollongong regions all have an Indigenous population count of 50,000 or more, whereas most of the remote regions have populations of under 5,000. In essence, the Indigenous population count in 2011 was relatively remote (in comparison to the non-Indigenous population), but in absolute terms quite urban.

3. Indigenous language usage: Variation across the nation

Figure 3 examines the percentage of the Indigenous population in each Indigenous Region who, in 2011, reported that they spoke an Indigenous language at home.⁷ Regions are grouped into four categories, based upon the percentage of the population speaking an Indigenous language:

7. The data in this figure and the remainder of the paper is calculated slightly differently to the time series data presented in the introduction to this paper. Because of the way in which 2001 Census data was made available, it was not possible to include those who spoke neither English nor an Indigenous language on the denominator. To keep the comparisons consistent through time, it was necessary to exclude these individuals from the 2006 and 2011 calculations as well. However, in this section and in the remainder of the paper, customised tables were constructed, which allows for all Indigenous Australians who stated their Indigenous status to be included in the denominator.

Figure 4. Indigenous language usage by Indigenous share of the Indigenous Area, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

- less than 1%
- from 1–10%
- from 10–50%
- 50% or more

Not surprisingly, the regions with the largest percentage of Indigenous language speakers were in the Northern Territory and northern Queensland. In Nhulunbuy, 95.8 per cent of the Indigenous population were reported to speak an Indigenous language at home. Apatula (92.5%) and Jabiru—Tiwi (89.4%) had close to—or above—9 out of 10 usual residents reporting that they spoke an Indigenous language at home. Although not as high, Jervis Bay on the south coast of New South Wales also had a high percentage (20.0%) relative to the surrounding regions.

While there was some variation within Indigenous Regions in terms of Indigenous language usage, unlike a number of other variables in the census, the broadest level of geography in the AIGC is a pretty good predictor of what the percentage will be at the suburb, town or community level. For example, across the 411 IAREs with usable data, the mean percentage of the Indigenous population who spoke an Indigenous language was 16.1 per cent,⁸ with a

standard deviation of 30.4. The vast majority of the overall variance (83.8%), however, is due to differences between regions as opposed to differences within regions. If you know what Indigenous Region a particular area is in, you can get a pretty good estimate of the proportion of the Indigenous population who speak an Indigenous language.

One reason for this consistency by regions is that Indigenous language usage is highly correlated with the percentage of the overall population in the area who are Indigenous. This is demonstrated in Figure 4, which plots the Indigenous share of the population of each IARE on the x-axis and the percentage of that population who speak an Indigenous language at home on the y-axis.

The results presented in this figure demonstrate a clear relationship between Indigenous language usage in an area and the percentage of the population in that area that identify as being Indigenous. There are some outliers. For example, in the IAREs of Cherbourg and Palm Island (both in Queensland), more than 95 per cent of the population identify as being Indigenous, despite there being very few Indigenous language speakers. This clearly reflects past government policy in these (and other) areas with, as noted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2009), many Indigenous people being actively discouraged, and at times prohibited, from speaking their own language. Nonetheless, with a correlation of 0.86, there is considerable overlap between language usage and the Indigenous share of the area.

8. It is possible for the mean of the IARE percentages to be different from the percentage for Australia as a whole because not all areas have an equal population size. The fact that the mean of the IARE percentages is higher than the Australian percentage shows that IAREs with relatively high populations tend to be those with relatively low language usage.

There are three potential reasons for why living in an area with a high Indigenous percentage is associated with a high level of Indigenous language usage. Firstly, although the question on the census only asks about language usage at home, living in an area with very few other Indigenous people is likely to lead to very few opportunities to maintain one's own language. This is likely to be exacerbated if the particular language background of the Indigenous population in the area in which a person lives is different to their own. At the very least, there is a greater incentive to learn and use English if there are very few other Indigenous language speakers around.

The second possible reason is that living or growing up in an area with a low Indigenous population is strongly associated with high rates of exogamy (Khoo, Birrell & Heard 2009)—the demographic term for marrying or partnering with a person from a different ethnic background to oneself. It should be noted, however, that there were 873 non-Indigenous Australians in the 2011 Census who identified that they spoke an Indigenous language at home, and a further 376 people who did not state their Indigenous status who reported speaking an Indigenous language. While these numbers are fairly low at present, increasing rates of exogamy may have the somewhat positive effect of intimately exposing an increasing number of non-Indigenous Australians to Indigenous languages (and culture).

These first two reasons assume that the causality runs from Indigenous population share to language usage. However, a third explanation takes into account the potential for reverse causality, with Indigenous Australians who have the ability and inclination to speak an Indigenous language likely to move to areas where there are other potential speakers.

Whatever the causal mechanism, the observed relationship between Indigenous population share and Indigenous language usage in the area may have a certain degree of downward pressure on Indigenous language usage in the future. Although the Indigenous population is growing at a faster rate than the non-Indigenous population, most of this growth is occurring in relatively urbanised areas, where Indigenous Australians currently make up a small percentage of the population. This means that Indigenous Australians are increasingly living in areas where they make up a minority of the population.

The issue of residential sorting will be taken up in greater detail in a future paper in this series, as migration data and population estimates become available. Initial analysis of 2006 and 2011 IARE data highlights the potential effect though. In 2006, the average Indigenous Australian lived in an area where 18.8 per cent of the total

population identified as being Indigenous. By 2011, this had declined to 16.4 per cent. Demographically, there is less of an opportunity for Indigenous Australians to speak an Indigenous language with others in their area in 2011 compared to 2006, and a greater incentive to speak English only. This may explain some of the decline in Indigenous language usage raised in the introduction to this paper and discussed in more detail in the following section.

4. Indigenous language usage: Change through time

There are a number of competing pressures on Indigenous Australians in terms of Indigenous language usage and maintenance. On the positive side, there is recognition of the role of Indigenous languages in maintaining important cultural information and traditions, as well as a view (that is increasingly being supported by academic research) that language maintenance can have direct impacts on the wellbeing of individuals. There are also government and non-government initiatives to maintain Indigenous languages, including through AIATSIS and the Federal Government's Indigenous Languages Support funding. As noted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2009: 69–72), there are also a number of programs specific to States and Territories in operation.

There are countervailing pressures though, both demographic and political. As was shown in the previous section, Indigenous Australians are increasingly living in urban and regional areas where they make up a relatively small percentage of the overall population. Although we do not have the data yet from the 2011 Census, analysis of previous censuses has shown that these areas are typically those that have been associated with high rates of exogamous marriage or partnership (Khoo, Birrell & Heard 2009), which also makes it difficult to maintain an Indigenous language. The age structure of Indigenous language speakers documented earlier in this paper (and found in previous years) also means that relatively old Indigenous language speakers who die over a given period are unlikely to be replaced (in proportional terms) by an equal number of young language speakers.

Finally, although the details aren't yet fully fleshed out, it is pretty clear that a large component of the growth in the Indigenous population over the most recent intercensal period came from individuals who previously did not identify as being Indigenous. It is likely that these new Indigenous identifiers have less experience and knowledge of Indigenous languages.

Table 1. Number and percentage of the population who spoke an Indigenous language at home, by State/Territory, 2006–11

State or Territory	Number of language speakers			Percentage of population		
	2006	2011	% change	2006	2011	% change
New South Wales	802	1 194	48.9	0.6	0.7	18.8
Victoria	286	400	39.9	1.0	1.1	10.2
Queensland	11 246	11 739	4.4	9.2	7.8	-15.2
South Australia	2 955	3 497	18.3	12.2	12.2	-0.3
Western Australia	7 616	9 427	23.8	13.9	14.6	4.5
Tasmania	32	62	93.8	0.2	0.3	65.0
Northern Territory	28 974	34 086	17.6	59.1	64.7	9.5
Australian Capital Territory	82	103	25.6	2.2	2.0	-5.7
Australia	51 993	60 553	16.5	12.1	11.6	-4.0

Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

With such competing factors, it is not surprising that a complex picture emerges from the comparison of Indigenous language users through time. This is demonstrated in Table 1, which gives the number and percentage of the population who spoke an Indigenous language at home by State or Territory in 2006 and 2011. The third column in each section of the table looks at the change through time over the period.

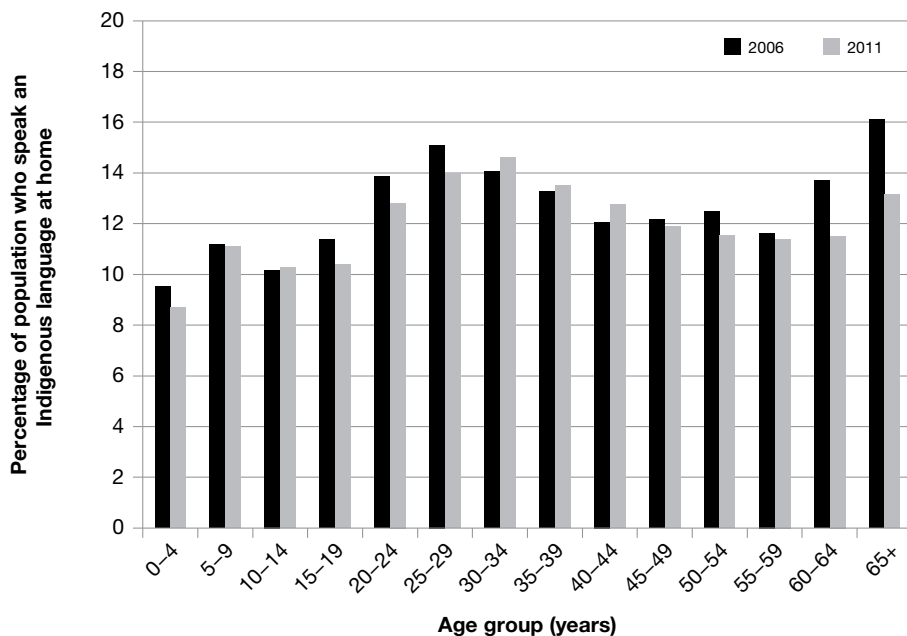
Looking at the first three columns in the table, we can see that in all jurisdictions, the absolute number of Indigenous language speakers has increased. In some jurisdictions (like New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT) this is from a very low base. However, even in some jurisdictions that have historically had a large number of language speakers (like the Northern Territory and Western Australia) there was a sizeable increase in the number of Indigenous language speakers between 2006 and 2011.

The jurisdiction with the smallest increase in the absolute number of Indigenous language speakers between 2006 and 2011 was Queensland. Here the fall in the number of language speakers as a proportion of the total Indigenous population was the greatest, with 7.8 per cent of the state's Indigenous population speaking an Indigenous language in 2011 compared to 9.2 per cent in 2006. South Australia and the ACT also had small decreases in the percentage who spoke an Indigenous language.

The Northern Territory—the jurisdiction with by far the largest number of Indigenous language speakers—experienced an increase in the percentage of the population who spoke an Indigenous language between 2006 and 2011. There were four other jurisdictions (New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania) that witnessed a proportionate increase over the period. If five out of the eight jurisdictions witnessed an increase in language users and one of these was the Northern Territory, why then was there a decline in the overall percentage of the Australian Indigenous population who spoke an Indigenous language?

From a purely mechanical point of view, the answer to this question is that there were more Indigenous people living in jurisdictions with low language usage in 2011 compared to 2006. Some of this change is likely to have come from new Indigenous identifiers. However, although migration data is not yet available to test this, it may also be that there was a net migration of Indigenous Australians to the east coast and south west of the country, and that some of these internal migrants stopped speaking an Indigenous language after they had migrated.

Figure 5. Percentage of the population who speak an Indigenous language, by age, 2006 and 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

5. Indigenous language usage: Variation by demographic characteristics

In the final section of results presented in this paper, I look at the age distribution of Indigenous language speakers and how this has changed through time. The results are summarised in Figure 5, which gives the percentage of 13 five-year age groupings who reported that they spoke an Indigenous language at home, as well as the relevant percentage for those aged 65 years and over. The first (black) bar in the figure gives the percentage for the age group in 2006, whereas the grey bar gives the figure for people of the same age in 2011.

The age distribution is quite similar for 2006 and 2011. The percentage of those aged 0–4 who speak an Indigenous language (as opposed to another language)⁹ is relatively low. The percentages increase up until the 25–29 or 30–34 year age groups. There is then a gradual decline across the next six or seven age groups, with an increase seen again in the population aged 65 years and over.

While the patterns were consistent, there were some important differences between the two censuses. Firstly, there are some cohort effects. The group with the highest percentage of Indigenous language speakers in 2011 was

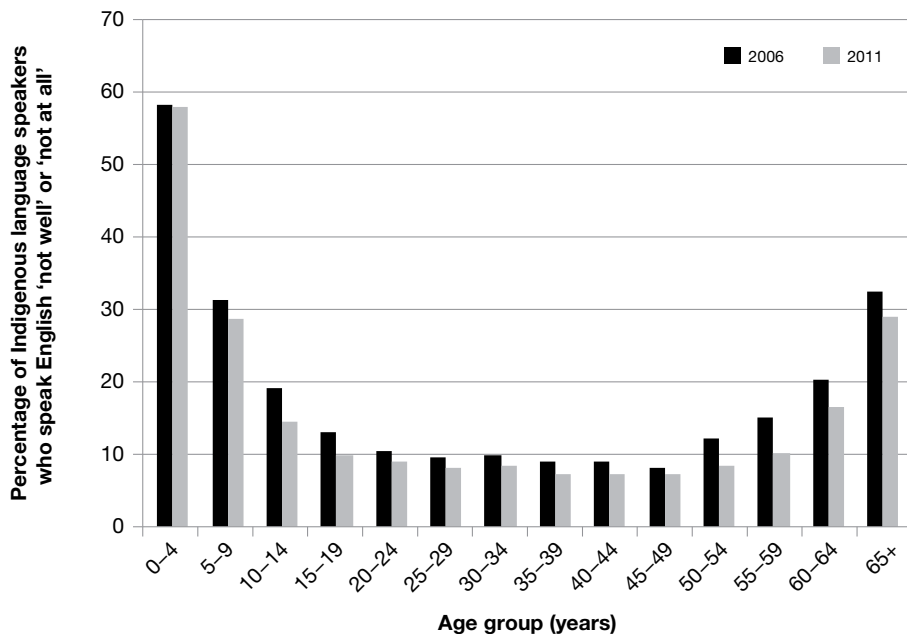
9. Those who are not speaking any language are excluded from the analysis.

those aged 30–34 years. These Indigenous Australians also had a relatively high level of usage in 2006 (when they were aged 25–29 years).

In 2011 there is a significant decline in the percentage of the population who speak an Indigenous language aged 60–64 years, as well as 65 years and over, relative to the same age groups in 2006. This is again partly a cohort effect, as the population aged 55–59 years in 2006 had a relatively low level of Indigenous language usage. However, this does not explain the entire decline, and it is possible that many of the new Indigenous identifiers were in these age groups.

There are potential costs in speaking an Indigenous language. In particular, if done so at the expense of developing a person’s English language ability, then this has the potential to put them at a disadvantage in education settings, the labour market and in accessing government services. However, there need not be a direct link between speaking an Indigenous language and English language proficiency. What’s more, only a small minority (17.5%) of Indigenous Australians who do speak an Indigenous language are reported in the census to not speak English well or to not speak English at all. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 6, this percentage varies quite substantially across the age distribution and declined between 2006 and 2011 (from 19.6% for all Indigenous language speakers).

Figure 6. Percentage of Indigenous Australians who speak an Indigenous language and who are reported to speak English not well or not at all, 2006 and 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

Results presented in Figure 6 show that it is only amongst the very young (those aged under 10 years) and the relatively old (65 years and over) that self-assessed English language ability is low. It would appear that, at least in people's own views, speaking an Indigenous language does not preclude being able to communicate effectively in English. Indeed, although it is difficult to find any direct evidence in the Australian context, it would appear from research in other countries that bilingualism (and multilingualism) enhances rather than slows cognitive development (Kovács & Mehler 2009).

Not only is there considerable diversity amongst Indigenous language speakers, there are also significant differences in the languages themselves (Obata & Lee 2010). Figure 7 shows the main Indigenous language spoken by Indigenous language speakers, categorised by the 2-digit classification in the 2011 Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL). Results are presented separately for four age groups.

Reflecting the concentration of Indigenous language speakers in the Northern Territory, the most commonly spoken language grouping in Australia was 'Arnhem Land and Daly River Region Languages' with close to 20 per cent of those aged 0–54 years speaking a language within that classification. Leaving aside those who spoke an 'Other Australian Indigenous Language' the language grouping with the highest share of speakers aged 55 years

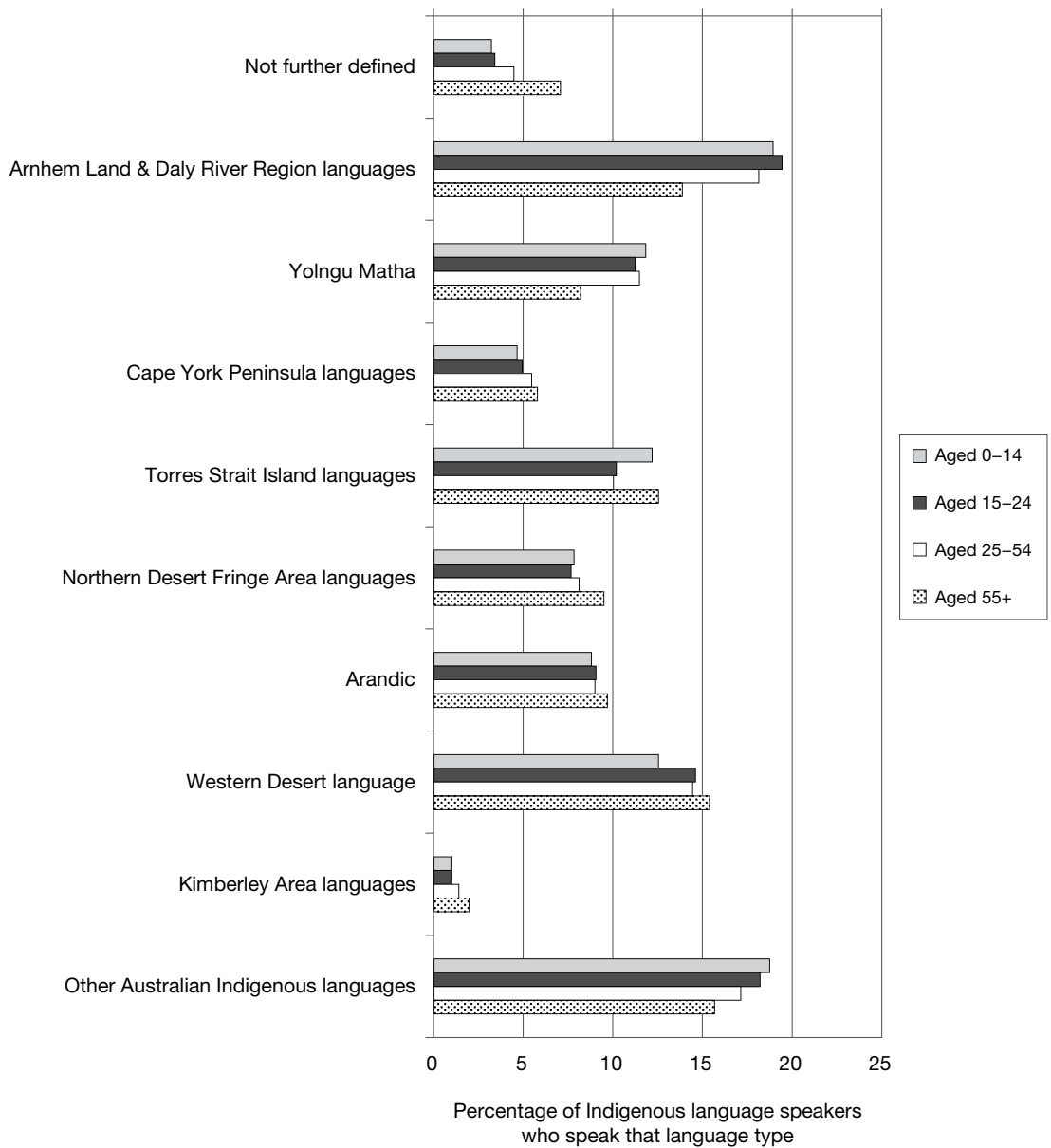
and over was Western Desert Languages. Clearly, there are some differences in the age structure of particular language groupings.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to look at changes in specific languages,¹⁰ it is worth noting that, of those classified languages with at least 100 Indigenous speakers in 2006, the biggest increase over the last intercensal period was amongst those who reported that they spoke 'Aboriginal English, so described'.¹¹ There were 1,037 speakers in 2011 compared to 471 in 2006—a 120 per cent increase over the period. There were, however, also a number of specific languages that increased substantially over the period. This includes Nungubuyu (114% increase), Manyjilyjarra (107%), Kunwinjku (80%) and Ngarrindjeri (71%).

Although it is a little more difficult to discount random variation in census responses and coding as driving changes through time in languages with a smaller number

10. This is particularly difficult given the revisions made to the ASCL between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses. While the 2011 classification does appear to have substantially reduced the proportion of Indigenous language speakers in the 'Not Further Defined' category, thereby improving the accuracy and usefulness of the data in a cross-sectional sense, this has occurred at the cost of time series comparability.
11. Aboriginal English is as much a dialect of English as opposed to an Indigenous language. Nonetheless, it is included in the ASCL as an 'Other Australian Indigenous Language'.

Figure 7. Specific language type spoken by Indigenous language speakers, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

of speakers in 2006, there were some other languages with rapid increases, albeit from a very low base. In an accompanying spreadsheet to this paper (available for download at <http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Indigenous-language-usage.php>), the number of speakers in 2011 for each Indigenous language is presented alongside the number of speakers in 2006 (as well as the percentage change). This spreadsheet should be treated with caution as there were a number of changes to Indigenous languages in ASCL (ABS 2011). Nonetheless, the Commonwealth Government and a number of State and Territory Governments have invested heavily in some of the languages just mentioned. It is hoped that the accompanying spreadsheet will provide a useful resource for those with an interest in particular languages and enable careful evaluation of the potential effect government investment may have had.

6. Summary and conclusions

This paper began with a discussion of the potential benefits of Indigenous language usage for the Indigenous population as a whole, individual Indigenous Australians and the nation at large. I then used data from three censuses to see how language usage has changed over time, and to examine the current distribution by geography and demography. The main finding was that there has been a steady decline in the percentage of Indigenous Australians who speak an Indigenous language between 2001 and 2011. Given the potential individual and community benefits of Indigenous language retention, this is clearly a negative finding.

On the other hand though, there has been a rapid growth in the Indigenous population over the decade. Given that much of the growth in the population has been in areas where Indigenous language usage is quite low (New South Wales, Victoria, ACT), the fact that there has been such a small decline is somewhat positive. Furthermore, in the Northern Territory, where one might be most worried about a decline in language usage (due to its high concentration of speakers), there was in fact a 9.5 per cent increase in the proportion of the Indigenous population who spoke an Indigenous language between 2006 and 2011.

One of the major benefits of ongoing language usage is the preservation of the languages themselves. The census doesn't tell us much about the extent or fluency of the language usage. Perhaps more than proportions, what matters the most for the preservation of the languages themselves though is the number of speakers. There are a number of languages with very few speakers left alive and this is clearly an ongoing concern. However, there was a 16.5 per cent increase in the number of people who identified as being Indigenous and speaking an Indigenous language over the last five years. Increases were found across all jurisdictions, with the largest absolute increase (that is, change in the total number of speakers) found in the Northern Territory. That there were an additional 8,560 people who identified as Indigenous speakers of an Indigenous language shows the importance to the community and gives some hope that this unparalleled store of cultural and historical knowledge will continue for some time yet.

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