

**Location and socioeconomic status:
Torres Strait Islanders, 1996**

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Table of Contents

Summary	v
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Location, economy and the policy environment	3
A note on the data	4
Measures of parity	6
Interpretations and conclusions	14
Notes	18
References	18

Tables

Table 1. Distribution of Torres Strait Islanders in the States/Territories of the Australia, 1996	5
Table 2. Rate of employment by State/Territory, 1996	7
Table 3. Those self-employed and employers, by State/Territory, 1996	8
Table 4. Those employed in the private sector by State/Territory, 1996	9
Table 5. Those employed in State/Territory government, by State/Territory, 1996	10
Table 6. Housing rented from the State/Territory government, by State/Territory, 1996	11
Table 7. Housing owned or being bought, by State/Territory, 1996	12
Table 8. Attendance at tertiary institutions, by State/Territory 1996	12
Table 9. Those with a post-school qualification by State/Territory, 1996	13
Table 10. Median household incomes corrected for household size 1996.....	14
Table 11. Mainland Torres Strait Islander/non-Indigenous ratios for selected characteristics, by State/Territory, 1996	16

Figures

Figure 1. The Indigenous population by ATSI region, 1996	2
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Summary

Using several categories of data from the 1996 Census, this paper assesses the socioeconomic status of Torres Strait Islanders compared to that of non-Indigenous people.

As in earlier research, the paper points out that Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait live in a different economic and policy environment from those on the mainland, suggesting the need for different policy strategies to improve socioeconomic status. The data indicate that Islanders on the mainland are closer to achieving parity with non-Indigenous people than are those residing in Torres Strait.

The paper proposes that the policy environment for Torres Strait Islanders also varies across the mainland, with only the Queensland Government making any particular concessions to Torres Strait Islanders as a specific group. However, overall, the data suggest that it is in Queensland that Islanders are furthest from parity with non-Indigenous people.

In no State/Territory do Torres Strait Islanders own their own homes to the same extent as non-Indigenous people, nor are they as likely to have tertiary qualifications. Though the employment data are influenced by the fact that it includes those working in the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, it suggests that Islanders are close to parity with non-Indigenous people in waged-employment and self-employment in all States except Queensland and the Northern Territory. Islanders are approaching parity in private sector employment everywhere on the mainland, but appear highly dependent on public sector employment in all locations, except Victoria.

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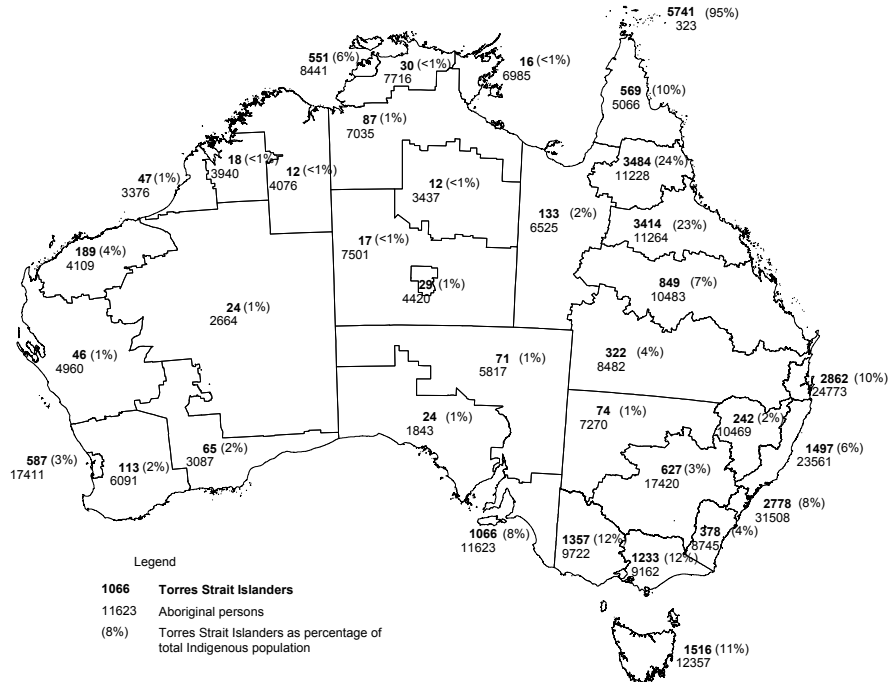
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Introduction

The 1996 Census estimated there were 30,081 Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, accounting for about 9 per cent of all Australian Indigenous peoples (Figure 1).¹ This proportion varies across the States and Territories. Islanders on the mainland account for 13 per cent of the Indigenous population in Queensland, but for only 2 per cent in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The variation is even greater at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) regional council level, from less than 1 per cent in some of the ATSIC regions in Western Australia and the Northern Territory to around 23 and 24 per cent in the Townsville and Cairns regions.²

In the 1950s, the Queensland Government relaxed its earlier restrictions on the movement of Torres Strait Islanders and they began to leave Torres Strait in significant numbers (Taylor and Arthur 1993) so that today some 81 per cent of those enumerated reside on the Australian mainland. Several reasons have been given for this move. One is that Torres Strait Islanders wanted to escape what they considered to be the oppressive control of the Queensland Government in Torres Strait. Another was their desire to gain their full citizenship rights—which they felt were being denied them in Torres Strait (they characterise this as a wish to obtain their ‘freedom’) (Beckett 1987). During the same period, the marine economy of the Torres Strait collapsed and employment for Islanders fell and so many also moved to get work. Others moved to increase their access to services which were generally more available on the mainland than in remote Torres Strait. In broad terms then, it can be said that Islanders moved to improve their political and socioeconomic status.

In 1997, the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) commissioned the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research to carry out research to identify any difficulties that Islanders were experiencing accessing government programs and services at the Commonwealth, State and Territory levels (see Arthur 1998). OTSIA has also indicated that, for the purpose of assisting them to carry out their functions, they require analyses that compare the position of Torres Strait Islanders with non-Indigenous people across the country. The Commonwealth Grants Commission (CGC) has been asked by the Commonwealth Government to inquire and report into the distribution of funding for programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Inquiry is required to consider Commonwealth and State funding over key functional areas in each State and Territory. The CGC has been asked to develop a method that can be used to determine the needs of groups of Indigenous Australians relative to one another, ensuring that any method they develop takes account of Torres Strait Islanders, including those living outside Torres Strait. At a more general level, the present Commonwealth government is interested to see Indigenous people increase their socioeconomic status and reduce their dependence on the welfare system.³ The above range of issues makes research on the socioeconomic status of Torres Strait Islanders currently relevant.

Figure 1. The Indigenous population by ATSI region, 1996

	Torres Strait Islanders	Aboriginal persons	Torres Strait Islanders/ total Indigenous population
	Number	Number	Per cent
Torres Strait	5,741	323	95
Qld mainland	11,633	77,821	13
Vic.	2,591	18,883	12
Tas.	1,516	12,357	11
SA	1,161	19,283	6
ACT & NSW	5,595	98,974	5
WA	1,102	49,713	2
NT	743	45,534	2
Australia	30,082	322,889	9

A study using 1991 Census data showed that, at a national level, Islanders on the mainland had a socioeconomic status somewhat higher than that of those in the Strait and for some indicators they were approaching statistical equality, or parity, with other Australians (Arthur and Taylor 1994: 14). The purpose of this paper is to reassess to what extent mainlanders are approaching socioeconomic parity with other Australians using more recent 1996 Census data. However, given the interests of both the CGC and OTSIA noted above, this analysis is prepared at the State/Territory level.

Location, economy and the policy environment

Torres Strait

In Torres Strait, Islanders live in the regional centre of Thursday Island and in small Indigenous communities on the scattered islands of the archipelago. The regional economy is dominated by two industries: commercial fishing and the provision of services to the local population. An aspect of the Islander labour force is that a significant proportion of the Islander population participates in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (Arthur 1999a).⁴ Monitoring the programs and services specifically for Islanders is primarily the responsibility of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), which is a Commonwealth body, and the Island Coordinating Council, which is a Queensland Government body. In addition, it is to these two bodies that Islanders in Torres Strait make applications for financial assistance such as for business start-ups and housing loans. The bodies also act as a regional political voice for many Islanders. Islanders make up an estimated 75 per cent of the total population in Torres Strait and have a significant political and social profile in the region.

Mainland Australia

Initially, most 'mainlanders'⁵ lived in Queensland. Nowadays they reside in many urban centres and cities along the coast, like the majority of non-Indigenous Australians. They tend to be dispersed throughout the general population where they form a very small proportion of the total. Although they are living outside Torres Strait, they potentially have access to a wide variety of mainstream labour market opportunities and general services (Arthur and Taylor 1994: 1). Under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*, OTSIA in Canberra is responsible for monitoring government policies as these affect mainlanders. Under the same legislation, the political concerns of mainlanders have largely been addressed at an official level by the Commonwealth's Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (Arthur 1998: 1). If mainlanders wish to access any ATSIC Indigenous-specific funds and programs, they must apply along with Aboriginal people, to the regional councils of the ATSIC regions in which they live. Given, as noted above, that Islanders form a small part of the total Indigenous population of many ATSIC regions on the

mainland,⁶ they feel they have difficulty competing with Aboriginal people for these funds and services (Arthur 1998). Compared to Islanders living in Torres Strait, on the mainland Islanders have a comparatively low political profile within the Indigenous policy arena.

Therefore, we can say that Islanders live in two broadly social and economic environments—Torres Strait and the Australian mainland.

However, in addition to this division, earlier research has revealed that mainlanders also experience different policy environments across the various States and Territories (Arthur 1998). For example, the Queensland Government is conscious of the existence of mainlanders in its State and believes that it has a good working relationship with them (Arthur 1998). Torres Strait Islanders are included within the name of Queensland's Indigenous-specific department (The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development) and mainstream departments, such as those dealing with health and housing, also give some specific attention to Islander issues (Arthur 1998). On the other hand, in States/Territories outside Queensland, Islanders are relatively invisible at a policy level. They are not mentioned or recognised specifically within Indigenous departments, nor are they acknowledged in government programs or policies. Indeed, most State/Territory governments believe that there are either none, or very few, Torres Strait Islanders in their jurisdictions or that those that *are* there manage quite well without specific programs and services. They suggest that mainlanders are adequately catered for by mainstream or Aboriginal programs (Arthur 1998). One result of this is that mainlanders feel excluded from any Indigenous-specific programs and services in States other than Queensland (Arthur 1998).

The above suggests that just as the policy environment for Islanders differs between Torres Strait and the mainland, it also differs, at least in form, between Queensland and the other States/Territories. This difference was illustrated at the annual meeting of the State ministers of Indigenous affairs in 1999. At that meeting the Queensland Minister strongly backed an OTSIA proposal that all State/Territory governments officially recognise Islanders as a distinct people when implementing their programs and policies. Queensland's proposal was rejected by the other State/Territory ministers (*Townsville Bulletin* 13 September 1999).

A note on the data

In the 1996 Census, Indigenous people were given the opportunity to identify (a) as an Aboriginal person (b) as a Torres Strait Islander and (c) as someone who identifies as both a Torres Strait Islander *and* as an Aboriginal person. For the purpose of analysing the census data, groups (b) and (c) are combined in this paper as 'Torres Strait Islanders'.

The Torres Strait Islander population is not evenly distributed across the country as shown in Table 1. More than half of all Islanders live in Queensland. Of all Islanders, 77 per cent live in just two States, Queensland and New South

Wales. The number living in all other States/Territories is very small and this factor influences the quality of the data. As an example of this, the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (though a sample survey not a census) could confidently produce data only for those mainlanders in Queensland (see ABS/CAEPR 1997).

Table 1. Distribution of Torres Strait Islanders in the States/Territories of the Australia, 1996^a

State/Territory	Torres Strait Islanders	Per cent
Queensland (Torres Strait) ^b	5,741	19
Queensland (mainland)	11,633	39
New South Wales/ACT	5,595	19
Victoria	2,591	9
Tasmania	1,516	5
Western Australia	1,102	4
South Australia	1,161	4
Northern Territory	743	2
Australian mainland	24,341	81
Australia total	30,082	100

Notes: a. For the purposes of Table 1, those who identified as both have been allocated to the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander populations on a pro rata basis.

b. This represents the Torres Strait Islanders counted within the jurisdiction of the TSRA.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census, 1996.

With the exception of Table 1, which shows the estimated population in all States and Territories, Tasmania is not included in this paper because of doubt about the validity of the census figures. Although the 1996 Census revealed a population of 1,516 Torres Strait Islanders in Tasmania, it is thought that these people are not in fact Torres Strait Islanders, but are descendants of Aborigines who were relocated to the islands off the north-east coast of Tasmania in the early 19th century. (For example, Aboriginal people were moved to Cape Barren Island under the *Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1912*.) These people often refer to themselves, and have been referred to in government policy, as 'Straitsmen' or 'Islanders' and it is thought that they are incorrectly marking the 'Torres Strait Islander' box on the census forms (ABS/CAEPR 1997: 30). Data problems may not, however, be limited to Tasmania. During a survey of mainlanders in 1997, a prominent mainlander in South Australia suggested that the census estimates of Islanders in that State were inflated. Concerns about the accuracy of population numbers are not new. In 1987 Beckett noted that:

There is no doubt that there are sizeable numbers in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, but the large populations 'discovered' in the major urban centres of New South Wales and Victoria are problematic. According to Islanders I have questioned, Townsville and Cairns, the original points of entry, remain the principal centres (Beckett 1987: 180).

An additional concern regarding the data is the high rate of increase of the total Islander population, from around an estimated 4,000 people in 1956 to almost 31,000 in 1996. This has been represented by large and erratic increases over the last few censuses. For example, there was an increase of 40 per cent between 1981 and 1986; of 25 per cent between 1986 and 1991; and of 11.8 per cent between 1991 and 1996. Some of the increase may be due to the errors in self-identification noted above. On the other hand, some of it could result from intermarriage between mainlanders and other people, including Aboriginal people. This possibility is supported by the data. In Torres Strait only 6.3 per cent of people identified as both Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander while across the mainland the average was almost one-third, varying from 18.5 per cent in Victoria to 60 per cent in the Northern Territory.⁷

All of the census data used here relating to employment include Islanders who are involved in the CDEP scheme. The result of using data which includes those involved in the scheme can be to inflate the number of people classified as employed.

Measures of parity

The remainder of this paper presents socioeconomic data over a number of standard census characteristics. An assessment is made of the extent to which Islanders have achieved parity with non-Indigenous people. This is shown as the ratio between the two groups (the extreme right hand column in the tables). If the ratio is less than 1.00 then Islanders have not achieved parity, if it is 1.00 or more than 1.00 then they have. For example, in Table 2, it is evident that Islanders are far from achieving parity in employment in the Northern Territory (the ratio is 0.54) but have almost reached it in the Australian Capital Territory (the ratio is 0.93). To illustrate more clearly how the situation varies across the States/Territories, these are ranked in the tables according to the degree of parity between Islanders and non-Indigenous people. Some of the standard categories used for measuring socioeconomic status are used in the analysis. These include, employment (both waged-employment and self-employment), level of tertiary qualifications, home ownership and income. Other categories are also used such as the level of employment in the State/Territory governments, and the extent to which people rent government housing. These can help show the level to which Islanders are dependant on these. The measures of socioeconomic status used here also reflect the particular areas of interest to OTSIA (see Arthur 1998: 1).

Rates of employment

In terms of employment rates, mainlanders are currently close to parity with non-Indigenous people in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales (Table 2). They are faring less well in Queensland and the Northern Territory. As noted above, all these data include people employed in the CDEP scheme which tends to overstate the employment status of mainlanders. However, this possible distortion may be

limited by the fact that many mainlanders live in urban areas (Arthur and Taylor 1994: 1, 3) and so are less likely to be involved in the CDEP scheme which is located mostly in rural and remote areas.

Except in the Northern Territory, mainlanders are closer to reaching parity with non-Indigenous people than are Islanders in Torres Strait. Given that a higher proportion of Islanders in Torres Strait are employed in CDEP than mainlanders (Arthur 1999a) (that is, the 'real' rate of employment of Islanders in Torres Strait may be lower than stated in the Census), the difference between the Strait and the mainland is almost certainly greater than is indicated here.

Self-employment

The data in Table 3 relate to Torres Strait Islander people who are either self-employed or are employers indicating their involvement in business. Table 3 shows that mainlanders are close to parity with non-Indigenous people in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. However, this is much less the case in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and in Queensland.

No mainlanders are in business in the Australian Capital Territory and this possibly reflects the fact that many of those living in Canberra are there specifically to work for government.

Table 2. Rate of employment by State/Territory, 1996

	Torres Strait Islanders: number in employment ^c	Employment/Population ^b		
		Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	Ratio (1/2)
Torres Strait ^a	1,785	50	73	0.68
ACT	71	62	66	0.93
South Australia	482	46	54	0.85
Victoria	992	48	56	0.85
Western Australia	546	48	59	0.81
New South Wales	1,996	43	56	0.77
Queensland (mainland)	3,501	39	57	0.68
Northern Territory	428	38	70	0.54
Australian mainland	7,986	42	57	0.73

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

b. The rate of employment is the number of those 15 and over who are employed divided by the number of all those 15 and over, expressed as a percentage.

c. Includes those in CDEP employment.

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Table 3. Those self-employed and employers, by State/Territory, 1996

	Self-Employment/Population			Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islanders: number in self-employment ^b	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	63	4	na ^c	na ^c
South Australia	37	8	10	0.80
Victoria	57	6	8	0.75
New South Wales	95	5	7	0.71
Western Australia	25	5	10	0.50
Northern Territory	9	2	6	0.33
Queensland (mainland)	84	2	9	0.22
ACT	0	0	5	0.00
Australian mainland	307	4	9	0.44

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

b. Includes those in CDEP employment.

c. na = not available.

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Private sector employment

Generally, mainlanders are close to parity with non-Islanders in employment in the private sector everywhere on the mainland. They are particularly close to achieving this in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia (Table 4).

Even in those places where mainlanders are furthest from achieving parity (the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory), their position appears much stronger than that of Islanders in Torres Strait.

Public sector employment

Mainlanders are as likely or are more likely than non-Indigenous people to be employed by State/Territory governments in Queensland, the Northern Territory and in Western Australia. (Table 5). Though this could indicate that certain States/Territories have policies that successfully encourage mainlanders into government employment, such policies were not evident in surveys carried out in 1997 (see Arthur 1998). Comparing the data in Table 5 with that in Table 4, it can be seen that in those places where government employment is high, private sector employment is low (and vice versa). This is particularly noticeable in the cases of the Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria. If the aim of government is to decrease the reliance on government employment and increase the participation in private sector employment (as indicated by the Commonwealth's *Indigenous Employment Policy* launched in 1999) then the

strong showing of Islanders in public sector employment may not necessarily be viewed positively.⁸

Table 4. Those employed in the private sector by State/Territory, 1996

	Employment/Population			Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islanders: number in employment ^b	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	457	26	63 ^c	0.41
South Australia	352	76	79	0.96
Victoria	794	80	83	0.96
New South Wales	1,464	75	80	0.93
Western Australia	373	74	81	0.91
Northern Territory	2,012	62	80	0.77
Queensland (mainland)	190	51	68	0.75
ACT	28	39	52	0.75
Australian mainland	5,213	69	79	0.87

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

b. Excludes those in CDEP employment.

c. For Inner Islands only. From Taylor (1997: 25).

Source: ABS Census 1996.

With the exception of those in Victoria, mainlanders are more likely than non-Indigenous people to be employed in the government sector than are Islanders in Torres Strait. A factor contributing to this may be that Islanders often do not have the necessary skills and/or qualifications to compete with non-Indigenous people who are recruited to Torres Strait to fill government positions in service areas requiring a high level of skills (for example in health and education) (see Arthur 1999a).

State/Territory government rental accommodation

Mainlanders are much more likely to rent housing from State/Territory governments than are non-Indigenous people. This is particularly the case in Queensland and Western Australia and is less so in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory (Table 6). Though these data may show that mainlanders are able to, or choose to, access government housing, they can also suggest a dependency on this sector. Therefore, in this case, the higher 'statistical status' of mainlanders could be viewed negatively (and is similar to the case made above with respect to employment in the State/Territory governments). The data, while suggesting that mainlanders have good access to public housing, could also indicate that they have poor access to other forms of housing, such as private rentals or, to housing loans (see Arthur 1998).

Table 5. Those employed in State/Territory government, by State/Territory, 1996

	Employment/Population			Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islanders: number in employment	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	273	16	29 ^b	0.55
Queensland (mainland)	643	20	12	1.66
Northern Territory	96	26	19	1.36
Western Australia	61	12	12	1.00
New South Wales	198	10	11	0.83
South Australia	46	10	13	0.76
ACT	6	8	11	0.72
Victoria	51	5	9	0.55
Australian mainland	1,101	14	12	1.16

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

b. For the Inner Islands only (Taylor 1997: 25).

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Levels of home ownership

Given that property values traditionally increase over time, home ownership allows people to accumulate wealth. This is not the case of course with any form of rented accommodation. Mainlanders are considerably less likely to be home owners than are non-Indigenous people everywhere on the mainland (Table 7). They are closest to parity in South Australia and Victoria and furthest from it in the Australian Capital Territory and in Queensland. As we might expect these data are somewhat of a mirror image of those in Table 6. That is, in those States where home ownership is highest, residence in government rental housing is often lowest (and vice versa). It is not possible to say if these figures indicate that mainlanders are being drawn away from private housing through accessible government housing, or that they are unable to purchase their own homes through limited access to housing loans and limited collateral (Arthur 1998).

Table 6. Housing rented from the State/Territory government, by State/Territory, 1996

	Housing rental/Population			
	Torres Strait Islanders: number in rented housing	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	Ratio (1/2)
Torres Strait ^a	241	20	na	na
Queensland (mainland)	1,389	22	4	5.50
Western Australia	190	21	5	4.20
Victoria	179	11	3	3.66
New South Wales	657	15	5	3.00
Northern Territory	198	31	13	2.38
South Australia	176	22	10	2.20
ACT	16	15	10	1.50
Australian mainland	2,805	19	5	3.80

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.
Source: ABS Census 1996.

The data suggest that Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait are less likely to be purchasing their own homes than are those on the mainland. This is possibly because Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait are more likely to live in communities where the community council owns the housing. This form of housing cannot be sold on the real estate market and so the incentive to purchase it is reduced. The only apparent advantage to purchasing such housing would be to escape paying rent. An exploration of the pros and cons of offering community owned housing for sale, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Attendance at tertiary institutions

Mainlanders are as likely to attend tertiary educational institutions as non-Indigenous people in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, and they are close to this situation in Western Australia (Table 8). In other States/Territories this is less the case. Mainlanders are furthest from reaching parity with non-Indigenous people in New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

Islanders in Torres Strait are further from reaching parity with non-Indigenous people than are mainlanders. This possibly reflects the limited access to tertiary facilities in Torres Strait compared to the mainland and the high educational status of visiting white-collar workers (Arthur 1999a).

Table 7. Housing owned or being bought, by State/Territory, 1996

	Housing purchase/Population			Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islanders: number purchasing housing	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	171	14	26 ^b	0.54
South Australila	368	47	71	0.66
Victoria	797	48	73	0.65
Northern Territory	164	26	49	0.53
Western Australia	316	35	71	0.49
New South Wales	1,491	33	68	0.48
ACT	31	29	66	0.43
Queensland (mainland)	1,565	25	67	0.37
Australian mainland	4,732	32	70	0.45

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

b. From Taylor (1997: 36).

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Table 8. Attendance at tertiary institutions, by State/Territory 1996

	Attending tertiary/Population			Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islanders: number attending tertiary institutions	Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	93	2	5	0.40
South Australia	79	5	5	1.00
ACT	20	10	10	1.00
Western Australia	85	5	7	0.71
Victoria	111	4	6	0.66
Queensland (mainland)	638	4	6	0.66
Northern Territory	73	4	7	0.57
New South Wales	257	3	6	0.50
Australian mainland	1,263	4	6	0.66

Note: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Tertiary qualifications

Mainlanders are considerably less likely to be qualified than are non-Indigenous people. This is the case in all States/Territories (Table 9). They are

closest to parity in the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria and furthest from parity in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Comparing this with attendance at tertiary institutions (Table 8), we can see that despite the fact that mainlanders in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory are attending institutions at the same rate as non-Indigenous people, they are much less likely to be qualified. If we acknowledge that Indigenous people are now attending institutions more than in the past (Gray, Hunter and Schwab 1998), then the data may indicate the sort of lag we could expect between increasing attendance at institutions, and increasing people's likelihood of gaining a qualification.

In most cases mainlanders are considerably closer to parity than are Islanders in Torres Strait. This situation no doubt reflects the fact that Islanders in Torres Strait are less likely to attend an educational institution (Table 8), and that the non-Indigenous people who are in Torres Strait are very likely to be qualified (Arthur 1999a).

Table 9. Those with a post-school qualification by State/Territory, 1996

	Torres Strait Islanders: number with qualifications	Number with qualifications/Population		Ratio (1/2)
		Torres Strait Islanders Per cent (1)	Non-indigenous Per cent (2)	
Torres Strait ^a	276	9	55	0.16
ACT	34	18	34	0.52
Victoria	335	11	24	0.45
South Australia	154	10	25	0.40
Western Australia	161	9	27	0.33
New South Wales	634	8	27	0.29
Queensland (mainland)	1,107	7	25	0.28
Northern Territory	116	6	31	0.19
Australian mainland	2,541	8	26	0.30

Notes: a. Due to data restrictions, includes non-Indigenous and Aboriginal data for Torres Strait region.

Source: ABS Census 1996.

Household incomes

Indigenous households are usually larger than non-Indigenous households, and this complicates estimates of income parity. Following Gray, Hunter and Taylor (forthcoming) the method adopted here has been to divide the median household income by the average number of people in a household and use this figure to estimate income per capita (Table 10).⁹

Mainlanders have lower household incomes than non-Indigenous people. They are closest to reaching parity in Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia, and furthest from reaching it in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. Despite the fact that the employment status of mainlanders in Queensland is fairly low (Table 2), their household incomes are comparatively high.

Mainlanders are considerably closer to parity than are their counterparts in Torres Strait. This is possibly due to two factors. One is that for a large proportion of people in Torres Strait, their primary source of income is the CDEP scheme and this generally provides a lower income than the labour market. A second factor is that the non-Indigenous people in Torres Strait have quite high wages (Table 10). This is probably because they are often imported especially for their skills (Arthur 1999a) and their contracts are likely to include wage loadings associated with contracts in remote areas.

Table 10. Median household incomes corrected for household size 1996

	Median household incomes (\$)		Median household incomes corrected for household size (\$)		Ratio (1/2)
	Torres Strait Islander:	Non-indig.	Torres Strait Islanders (1)	Non-indigenous (2)	
Torres Strait	617	849	116	354	0.32
Queensland (mainland)	570	616	154	228	0.67
Victoria	499	644	161	238	0.67
Western Australia	607	657	152	243	0.62
New South Wales	499	656	151	243	0.62
South Australia	431	553	131	221	0.59
ACT	517	903	172	335	0.51
Northern Territory	809	889	150	329	0.45

Source: ABS Census 1996; Taylor (1997).

Interpretations and conclusions

Torres Strait

Where data are available, it suggests that generally, Islanders in Torres Strait are further from parity with non-Indigenous people than are those on the mainland. Likely reasons for this include that there are fewer opportunities for socioeconomic advancement in Torres Strait than there are on the mainland and (Altman 1991) that Islanders in Torres Strait must compete with a quite skilled imported non-Indigenous labour force (Arthur 1999a).

When considering policy intervention in Torres Strait, comments from earlier research still appear relevant

The challenge in the Strait has as much to do with moving CDEP scheme participants beyond the income generating capacity of social security entitlements as it has with improving access to mainstream jobs. As with any small community in remote Australia, Strait residents seeking greater diversity of opportunity may still be forced to migrate to larger population centres. At the same time, with the granting of native title and with greater Islander control over economic resources, the potential exists for increased Islander involvement in private sector developments, either wholly Islander –owned enterprises or in joint venture arrangements, most notably commercial fishing and potentially, tourism (Arthur and Taylor 1994: 72).

More recent work reiterates some of these findings, though suggesting that economic development might also be furthered through the strategy of forming ‘regional agreements’ as in the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993*, through the possibility of greater control for Islanders through increased regional autonomy, and through significantly increasing the skills levels among Torres Strait Islanders (Arthur 1999a, 1999b; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1997).

Mainland Australia

As noted at the beginning of this paper, OTSIA and the current CGC Inquiry are interested in the status and the needs of Torres Strait Islanders in various parts of the country, and the data included in this paper go some way to providing information on this. However, when considering the socioeconomic status of mainlanders in each State/Territory we can see some variation by location. This is so significant that an aggregate figure for the mainland for each characteristic and location is not entirely appropriate. Table 11 shows the ratio of Torres Strait Islander/non-Indigenous people for each of the characteristics (the figure that indicates the extent to which mainlanders are reaching parity) in each location. A ratio of 0.70 and over has been arbitrarily chosen to suggest where mainlanders are close to parity with non-Indigenous people. The following observations can be made from Table 11.

In no State/Territory are mainlanders close to parity with non-Indigenous people with regard to buying their own homes. As a corollary to this, mainlanders are heavily dependent on government housing. With regard to gaining tertiary qualifications, the situation is poor in all States/Territories. Attendance at tertiary institutions is close to parity in South Australia, Western Australia and The Australian Capital Territory. With the exception of the Australian Capital Territory, there is seems to be little correlation between attendance and achieving tertiary qualifications.

Table 11. Mainland Torres Strait Islander/non-Indigenous ratios for selected characteristics, by State/Territory, 1996

Location	Employment	Self employment	Private sector employment	State govt. employment	Rent. govt. house	House owners/buyers	Attend. tertiary inst.	Tertiary quals.	Household income
Near parity									
SA	0.85	0.80	0.96	0.76	2.20		1.00		
Vic.	0.85	0.75	0.96		3.66				
WA	0.81		0.91	1.00	4.20		0.71		
NSW	0.77	0.71	0.93	0.83	3.00				
ACT	0.93		0.75	0.72	1.50		1.00		
Qld/mnld			0.77	1.66	5.50				
NT			0.75	1.36	2.38				
Below parity									
SA						0.66		0.40	0.59
Vic.				0.55		0.65	0.66	0.45	0.67
WA		0.50				0.49		0.33	0.62
NSW						0.48	0.50	0.29	0.62
ACT		0.00				0.43		0.52	0.51
Qld/mnld	0.68	0.22				0.37	0.66	0.28	0.67
NT	0.54	0.33				0.53	0.57	0.19	0.45
Torres	0.68	na	0.41	0.55	na	0.54	0.40	0.16	0.32

Source: Tables 2 to 10.

In waged-employment, mainlanders appear close to parity with non-Indigenous people in the southern and more populated States and not in Queensland or the Northern Territory. A similar pattern applies in self-employment. Mainlanders are approaching parity with non-Indigenous people in private sector employment everywhere on the mainland, but also appear dependent on public sector employment in all locations except Victoria. However, as noted earlier, employment rates are probably overstated by the fact that they include those working in the CDEP scheme and are not a completely true reflection of the labour force status of Islanders.

The above suggests some possible policy interventions. In all locations some greater attention could be given to encouraging Islanders to obtain tertiary qualifications. Some effort could also be made to ensure that Islanders can access the relevant information and funds to enter business. This would have the potential of raising levels of self-employment. Similarly, levels of home ownership could possibly be raised by increasing Islander access to housing loans. As noted above, mainlanders believe that they experience difficulties accessing both business funding and housing loans through ATSIC channels. There are no

reliable data to support or refute this claim (Arthur 1998). On the other hand, it can be argued that access would most likely be improved by designating a proportion of these program funds for mainlanders, and having them accessible through OTSIA.

A penultimate point to make is that, when taken together, the data tend to suggest some connection between location, policy and parity. In this pattern, mainlanders appear to be doing best in the southern States such as South Australia and Victoria and least well in the Northern Territory and Queensland. The situation in the Northern Territory can be explained by the limited opportunities there. The situation in Queensland is less easily explained as many Islanders there live in urban settings (as they do in other States) where there *are* opportunities. It seems that Islanders in Queensland are less able to take advantage of these opportunities than they are in other States.

The policy environment for mainlanders is different in Queensland from that in all other States and Territories. Queensland is the only State which takes any particular account of Islanders in its policies and programs. This stems from the twin facts that Queensland is the State from which they originate and that a significant number of Islanders live there. In all other States, there are few Islanders, they are aggregated with other Indigenous people and are largely invisible to policy makers as a distinct group. The general impression gained from this is that mainlanders are relatively 'closer' to government in Queensland than they are in other places. This suggests that the data can be recast in slightly different terms: mainlanders seem to be doing less well in Queensland where they are given some particular (though limited) recognition by government and better in the other places where they are largely ignored by government and are treated like other citizens. Beckett has noted that on the mainland

as workers and as unemployed, Islanders have encountered the state in the same way as other Australians (Beckett 1987: 203).

This paper suggests that this may be particularly true for those living outside Queensland. However, it must be stressed that the connection between these factors is highly speculative and it is not possible to suggest any cause and effect. It is not possible to say for example that mainlanders are doing better outside Queensland because they are largely ignored by government. The data could simply indicate that those who can operate to their best advantage live outside Queensland.

Finally, as noted at the outset, the quality of the data on Islanders on the mainland, especially when these data are disaggregated to the State and Territory level, is uncertain. Therefore, some effort could be made to improve the quality of the socioeconomic data on Torres Strait Islanders (see Arthur 1998)—the Indigenous General Social Survey planned for 2002, could present an opportunity for this to occur. Also, as indicated in several pieces of earlier research, the Australian Bureau of Statistics could review and increase its commitment to publishing census data relating specifically to mainland Torres Strait Islanders (see Arthur 1992, 1994, 1998).

Notes

1. As explained below, in the 1996 Census, Indigenous people had the opportunity to identify in three ways: as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. For the purposes of Figure 1, those who identified as both have been allocated to the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander populations on a pro rata basis.
2. Islanders are 95 per cent of the Indigenous population in the Torres Strait region.
3. See the Commonwealth *Indigenous Employment Policy 1999*.
4. This is an Indigenous-specific 'work for the dole' scheme which was established in 1979.
5. Many Torres Strait Islanders now use the terms 'mainlander' to refer to those who reside on the mainland of Australia and 'homelander' to denote those who reside in Torres Strait.
6. From less than 1 per cent in several regions in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, through to a high of 24 per cent in Cairns.
7. As noted above, in the 1996 Census people were given the opportunity to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander. This was the first census in which this has happened.
8. The Commonwealth *Indigenous Employment Policy* was released by the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, Peter Reith, on 25 May 1999.
9. Due to the data restrictions, in all cases except Torres Strait, the figure used for the average size of Torres Strait Islander households is, in fact, the average size of Indigenous households derived from the 1996 Census.

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