15. Indigenous Australians and transport—what can the NATSISS tell us?[1]

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The 2002 NATSISS is the first national survey of Indigenous Australia that includes a transport module and, as such, provides a unique opportunity to examine Indigenous transport needs. The analysis of the transport data in this chapter is approached from an anthropological perspective, comparing this survey data with the ethnographic record. In doing so, I focus primarily on the findings of the remote area NATSISS but I also (as relevant) highlight comparative findings using the data from the non-remote NATSISS and the GSS. My focus reflects the concentration of ethnographic research in remote areas. It also reflects the fact that the issue of adequate transportation is magnified for Indigenous people in these areas because of their low socioeconomic status, the large distances, poor roads and relatively low access to vehicles.

In a short paper such as this, the obvious complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the topic also necessitates a narrowing of the analytic frame. The questions that drive this analysis are: Does the data adequately fix the scale of the issue of transport availability? Do we get a picture of vehicles per capita in remote regions? Can any distinction be drawn between types of vehicles, such as those purchased by government or those purchased privately? Finally, does the data reveal any relationship between transport and equity of access, including by gender?

Although it is far from comprehensive, the ethnographic record on transport in remote Indigenous contexts is rich in local and regional detail. This literature indicates that vehicle access is significantly more restricted in remote areas than the 2002 NATSISS data suggests. While the 2002 NATSISS data offers statistically significant evidence of a divide between remote and non-remote areas in terms of access to a vehicle to drive (of approximately 15%), the ethnographic evidence indicates that this divide is far greater. Recent evidence suggests, however, that transport disadvantage for Indigenous people in non-remote areas in NSW, for instance, is also significant—perhaps more so than is indicated by the 2002 NATSISS (Wadiwel 2005). The ethnographic research for remote areas suggests that the figure for Indigenous access to a vehicle 'to drive' may be as low as 5–10 per cent in some areas. According to the NATSISS data, 44.2 per cent of

[1] I would especially like to thank John Taylor and Ben Smith for their editorial insights and Boyd Hunter for his unrelenting humour.

Indigenous people in remote areas have such access. This compares to 85 per cent of the general population. How could these remote area figures be so different? I suggest that cultural factors have played a major role in the interpretation of the question and, thus, the data generated.

The question that elicited this figure in both the 2002 NATSISS remote and non-remote surveys and in the GSS is similar, though the phrasing and contextual information varies. This headline question reads: *'(Including community vehicles you can drive at any time) is there a car, 4WD or truck that you can drive if you want to?'*. This question conflates the issue of *access* to transport with the availability of a vehicle *to drive*. In the remote context, one does not imply the other. This confusion of issues sets the tone for the remaining three sets of questions: all modes of transport used in the last two weeks; main reason for not using public transport; and the perceived level of difficulty with transport. The questions could be re-focused and re-sequenced, while several of them are too general to gain meaningful data. The fundamental issue concerns *access* to transport and this is addressed in the final set of questions: *'Can you get to places you need to go?'*.

I will return to this crucial question. But first, in order to make a prognostic assessment of how the next NATSISS could be improved, the assumptions and issues that the headline question (see above) raises require unpacking. This question assumes that having access to a vehicle 'to drive if you want to' indicates ready availability of access and is thus implicitly indicative of a form of vehicle 'ownership'. Unlike the data produced from this question in the GSS, the results in this remote NATSISS survey give us little indication of vehicle numbers per head of population. This is one of the key areas in which the survey questions impact on the quality of data that is available.

Another significant issue that impacts on the quality of the data is the aggregation of the ARIA classifications 'remote' and 'very remote' areas. This collapsing of geographic regions in the data compounds the lack of regional data, so that the NATSISS results provide a blunt instrument of comparison. I also note here that the ethnographic data called on is from very remote regions, according to this five-fold classification system, although like the 2002 NATSISS I simply use the term 'remote'.

The issue of transport is fundamentally tied to Indigenous spatial mobility, which depends on access to a vehicle. A focus on transport, rather than mobility, refers to *how* people travel, what options they have and how these options are influenced by infrastructural factors, such as availability of access to public transport and socioeconomic factors which impact on private vehicle ownership. *Why* people travel and how frequently they do so, is addressed in the mobility section of the survey (in the remote survey, this follows the transport module).

There is value in understanding the relationship between the two data sets, as they reflect the broader social dimensions of transport. [2]

Remote area ethnography of transport

The ethnographic literature on remote area Indigenous vehicle usage examines the social dimensions of vehicles, providing a grounded analysis of this complex issue. Known variously as 'Toyotas' or 'trucks', vehicles have come to play an essential role in the livelihood practices of remote Indigenous peoples. Research has shown us that vehicles are a necessity, not a luxury, for Indigenous people in remote areas. Research has been undertaken in desert settlements in the Northern Territory and South Australia (Hamilton 1987; Peterson 2000; Stotz 2001; Young 2001; Young & Doohan 1989), the Western Desert (Holcombe 2004; Lawrence 1991; Myers 1989), Arnhem Land, (Altman & Hinkson 2005; Fogarty 2005; Gerrard 1989), the Kimberley in Western Australia (Kolig 1989) and Cape York in Queensland (Smith 2000a, 2004). The tyranny of distance is sharply drawn in this literature.

Settlement decentralisation was actively encouraged in the early 1970s across Central and Northern Australia, occurring during the same period as citizenship rights and social service benefits, enabling Indigenous Australians to purchase vehicles for the first time. This policy shift from assimilation also saw the establishment of various federal funding regimes to assist in purchasing vehicles to enable this 'homelands movement' to occur (Cane & Stanley 1985; Coombs, Dexter & Hiatt 1982; Nathan & Japanangka 1983). As Stotz noted 'it was only the Toyota that could actually replace the loss of mobility people had suffered since they were institutionalised [from] the late 1940s' (2001: 227). Without access to a reliable vehicle, people cannot now reside on homelands or in outstations, which limits their participation in customary economy and land management activities. 'Looking after country', ceremonially and through foraging, fire regimes and other land use and management activities, requires living on country, and today people will say this is not possible without access to a vehicle (Payne 1984; Young 2001: 38). This is more apparent in desert regions than in tropical and sub-tropical regions, due to environmental constraints.

During the 1990s there was considerable criticism about government expenditure on such vehicles for homelands or outstations (documented in Altman 1996; Altman 1999; Cooke 1994) and a resultant limitation on funding vehicles for mobility purposes (Smith 2004). The vehicles now purchased via government funds tend to be driven only for specific purposes, such as aged care support

[2] The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody emphasised the importance of mobility, and thus access to transport, as an Indigenous mechanism for social control. The report noted that 'the option to resolve conflicts by simply moving away was one of the deepest and most significant freedoms of Aboriginal society' and that this 'practice remains important in urban and rural as well as remote areas' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991: 104).

or community policing ('night patrol').[3] They are not freely available for general purposes, such as visiting the nearest service centre, for shopping, banking etc. Such vehicles also tend to be monopolised by certain individuals and are not shared across the settlement 'community'. Perhaps as a result, one hears anecdotally that privately purchased vehicles are becoming more common. The focus on private and 'community-owned' vehicles also underlines the lack of public transport options in very remote regions. There remains a dearth of data about the forms and costs of public transport availability, such as charter aircraft, commercial buses, etc.

The anthropological literature is unambiguous on the issue of vehicle availability: vehicles are a scarce resource, with severely limited access to vehicles common for significant proportions of the remote Indigenous population. In the late 1980s, Gerrard observed a 'chronic shortage' of vehicles in the Arnhem Land settlement of Maningrida where there were 'roughly 60 functioning vehicles at any given time for a population of approximately 800 people' (Gerrard 1989: 101). Of these, Gerrard estimated one Aboriginal-owned car for every 44 Aboriginal people, a ratio of less than 2 per cent, in broad NATSISS terms, of access to a vehicle 'to drive' at any given time. In 2005, fifteen years after Gerrard's study, Altman and Hinkson (2005) found that for a sub-set of this population in the Maningrida region, there was 'a ratio of one truck (or 4WD) for up to 30 Kuninjku'. Even though this group is more affluent (in cash terms) than ever before, the community of 300 still shares between only 10 and 20 functioning vehicles at any one time (2005: 6). A similar figure is evident in an ethnographic example from the Tanami Desert, where the family from one outstation (which includes 25 permanent and 25 non-permanent residents) shared a single Toyota Land Cruiser and a tractor (Stotz 2001). In the Central Australian settlement of Papunya in the late 1980s, Myers (1989) found that only a very small percentage of the population had cars. In the mid-1990s Smith found that in the township of Coen, in Cape York Peninsular (which has a majority Indigenous population of approximately 200), 14 'community' and 'private' vehicles were available for relatively general access (2000a: 152–3).

There appears to have been only marginal growth in actual vehicle numbers across the 20-year time period in which these studies were conducted. These figures all suggest approximately 5–10 per cent of the Indigenous population having access to a vehicle 'to drive' at any given time.

This data clearly raises questions about the veracity of the 2002 NATSISS remote area figure of 44.2 per cent of access to a vehicle to drive. That people in remote areas do not have ready access to a motor vehicle, either as a driver or passenger, is also suggested by the 2002 NATSISS figure of 74.4 per cent of people who

[3] Night patrol is community policy.

used walking to 'get around'. This differs very significantly from the non-remote figure of 49.2 per cent of people who walked as a form of transport.

Another consistent theme that emerges in the ethnography, and which is corroborated by the 2002 NATSISS data, is the issue of women's limited access to vehicles relative to men. Men have more ready access to vehicles to drive, both private and 'community'. According to Altman and Hinkson, there are no Kuninjku women who drive (2005: 8), though they may be recognised as co-owning a private vehicle with their spouse. The issue of lack of women's access to vehicles was recognised as a special needs case in the Pitjantjatara Lands in SA, NT and WA where, with the assistance of the Ngaanyatharra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPYWC), an active program of both purchasing women-specific vehicles and teaching women to drive was implemented in 1988 (NPYWC 1990: 9). This government-sponsored program sought to address the paucity of vehicles for women's own use. Nevertheless, this program only resulted in one such vehicle per settlement, limiting vehicle access to senior women associated with the Women's Council. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that women have limited access to private vehicles, either as owner or driver (Holcombe 2004; Stotz 2001; Young 2001).

A key aspect of the value of vehicles in Aboriginal Australia is in their capacity to generate and sustain relationships between people. The social importance of vehicles means that the chronic vehicle shortage creates an intense demand, often referred to as 'humbugging' and an expectation that the person in possession of a car has a duty to share the resource (Gerrard 1989). Vehicles are a dynamic resource, flowing into and out of remote settlements at a far greater rate than non-remote areas. There are several other interrelated reasons for this short lifespan. The lack of remote area road infrastructure ensures that the driving conditions are difficult, and often dangerous, on unsealed and often unformed and un-maintained roads (see Lawrence 1991). This lack of infrastructure, combined with poor vehicle maintenance on vehicles that are already generally secondhand, ensures that the lifespan of cars is extremely short. They may last from several weeks (Myers 1989: 25) to several years (Gerrard 1989:101). The sheer use wear of vehicles also attests to the fact that 'if faced with a choice between caring for their property or for their relatives, they prefer to invest in people rather than things' (Myers 1989: 24). Vehicles are often regarded as necessarily expendable and the loss of a vehicle compounds the demands made on other vehicles owned by, or accessible to, others in a 'community'.

Vehicles are now essential to the production of remote Indigenous culture. In the Arnhem Land region, the purchase of vehicles is a crucial motivator in Kuninjku production of art for sale (Altman & Hinkson 2005: 5). The importance of having access to a vehicle is also often cited by people as a means to avoid

social conflict (Hamilton 1987; Young 2001: 37), as noted in the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody . Awareness of the cultural importance of decentralisation is embedded in an innovative mobile schooling program operating for outstations in the Maningrida region, which relies on 4WD vehicles to take schooling to the children in an adaptive classroom approach (Fogarty 2005). Similarly, Smith (2000a, 2004) argues that access to vehicles has formed an essential foundation for central Cape York outstation development and for the various social and economic benefits that flow from outstation use.

Does having access to a vehicle mean being able to drive it, if you want to?

The headline question in the remote survey, as for the 2002 NATSISS non-remote and the 2002 GSS, implies an individualistic form of transport use and mobility. In remote areas, the intersection of Indigenous values and practices with the welfare economy precludes such a standard from developing. Being able to drive a vehicle at 'any time' assumes vehicle ownership, or at least primary control. Thus, in a non-Indigenous context this may provide a relatively accurate figure of vehicle ownership, as suggested by the figure of 85 per cent of access to a vehicle (or vehicles) to drive. Ironically, it is this very phrasing that has likely caused the figure of almost one vehicle, available to drive, for every two Indigenous people to be so high.

An explanation for the remote Indigenous figure is the cultural norm of 'demand sharing' (Myers 1989) which is particularly prevalent in regard to vehicles. As vehicles are among the most valued objects in contemporary remote Indigenous life, demands to access a vehicle are 'difficult to refuse', and 'open rejection is impossible' (Myers 1989: 23). As Myers notes, 'to have a car, one might say, is to find out how many relatives one has' (1989: 23). When one considers demand-sharing in the context of the 2002 NATSISS headline question, we can assume that the respondent's pre-emption to vehicle access relates to *any* family member within the settlement who has vehicle access, as they will have a right to demand access to that vehicle. Thus, the NATSISS question does not tell us about actual vehicle numbers, but rather about perceptions of vehicle access and self-perceptions of rights to vehicles within the kin group. In order to provide meaningful data, this issue of *access* must be separate from the availability of a vehicle *to drive*. The 2008 NATSISS could usefully distinguish between rates of access to transport and enumerating vehicle numbers per head of Indigenous population.

Sample selection: remote, very remote and non-remote [4]

The conflation of selected ARIA classification areas in the publicly available data (e.g. the CURF)—the remote with the very remote areas—in the data sample selection has implications for assessing transport needs by geography. Hence, the issue of access to transport and locational disadvantage cannot adequately be drawn because of this blunt level of aggregation. [5]

There is a number of government and non-government bodies noting the dearth of evidence on the availability of transport and related infrastructure in remote and very remote areas (Brice 2000). Transport and associated infrastructural needs differ significantly between remote and very remote Australia. There is considerable locational diversity between these two classes of remoteness, a diversity that affects transport infrastructure, and thus access to employment and education opportunities. These, in turn, impact on socioeconomic status, which affects vehicle access. In very remote areas, where Indigenous people account for approximately 42 per cent of the population, detachment from services is more pronounced than the basic remoteness structure can portray, reflecting unique aspects of the Indigenous settlement pattern (Taylor 2002: 4).

Equity and access to vehicles

Both the remote and non-remote area 2002 NATSISS data and the available remote area ethnographic data suggest that gender is a key dimension in vehicle access (Table 15.1). There are two issues about this inequality of access that are worth raising here. These concern access to vehicle-related training, as these corroborate the ethnographic evidence on gender equity, and issues of equity of access within the Indigenous population generally.

[4] Comparison with the GSS, though useful on a national scale in identifying major trends, is limited by the scope of the survey, as it was only conducted in urban and rural areas, not in sparsely settled areas (as are to be found in NSW, Qld, SA, WA and the NT). The GSS notes that, with the exception of the Northern Territory, the population living in sparsely settled areas represents only a small proportion of the total population (ABS 2003b: 58). However, in terms of the Indigenous demographic profile by geographic classification, 69% of Indigenous people live outside of major urban areas. In 2001 approximately 1 in 4 Indigenous Australians lived in remote areas compared with only 1 in 50 non-Indigenous Australians (ABS 2003b: 1).

[5] Even if customised cross-tabulations were purchased from the ABS, the relatively small sample sizes in very remote areas are unlikely to withstand the substantial disaggregation into the various transport categories. That is, the resulting estimates might not be particularly reliable.

Table 15.1. Access and use of motor vehicles and walking (aged 15 and over) by sex and remoteness, 2002[a]

	Remote	Non-remote
	%	%
Male		
Has access to motor vehicles to drive	50.5	62.5
Used car/4WD/motorcycle/motorised scooter as driver	47.7	58.3
Used car/4WD as passenger	55.1	56.7
Walked	73.4	46.5
Female		
Has access to motor vehicles to drive	38.2	55.3
Used car/4WD/motorcycle/motorised scooter as driver	30.7	50.6
Used car/4WD as passenger	61.9	61.6
Walked	75.4	51.6
Population		
Has access to motor vehicles to drive	44.2	58.7
Used car/4WD/motorcycle/motorised scooter as driver	39.0	54.2
Used car/4WD as passenger	58.6	59.3
Walked	74.4	49.2

a. The estimates of access to motor vehicles are slightly larger than figures presented in ABS (2004c), as we exclude from the calculations those who did not answer the question. In their calculations, the ABS implicitly assumed that the 'not stated' (31 individuals) did not have access to motor vehicles to drive.
Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS CURF

Daly found a significant discrepancy between male and female rates of undertaking training in transport-related fields through non-CDEP training providers in the 1994 NATSIS, with 15.2 per cent of males undertaking training in this area compared with 2.6 per cent of females. In CDEP training, 9.6 per cent of males undertook training in transport-related fields, while no females undertook training in this area (Daly 1996:100). This male monopoly on vehicles is also suggested by the figures on transport-related accidents. In the Pilbara, transport-related accidents are the third-highest cause of death among Indigenous men (at 8.9% of the population), while among Indigenous women it is the seventh-highest cause of death (at 4.3%) (Taylor & Scambary 2005). In 1991–92 there were 661 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men hospitalised due to transport-related accidents, compared with 329 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Indigenous Australians are over-represented in road fatalities by approximately 3.5 times (Moller, Dolinis & Cripps 1996) .

Given the general vehicle shortage found in the ethnographic evidence, the 2002 NATSISS figure of a 12.3 per cent discrepancy between male and female access to a vehicle to drive in remote areas would appear to overstate both the extent of availability and access. A gendered discrepancy in access is also apparent in the non-remote NATSISS, where women have 7.2 per cent less vehicle access than men. In the GSS, women were found to have 9.3 per cent less access than men, suggesting that regardless of scarcity men will always have greater vehicle access.

Equity of access to vehicles within the settlement is also assumed in the presupposition of the headline question, that 'community' vehicles are equally shared among the group or household. As Gerrard notes, 'in reality, access to Aboriginal-owned vehicles [is] strictly limited by clan and family affiliation, meaning it [is] unevenly distributed' (1989: 101). Likewise, the notion that a 'community vehicle' can be driven at any time is not supported by the ethnographic evidence. Vehicles for general community or group purpose use are virtually non-existent; they tend to be allocated to specific purposes. And where government-sponsored vehicles are allocated for less specific purposes, such as for outstations, they are associated with an individual: the outstation 'boss' and his immediate family.

Forms of transport and questions of availability

The 2002 NATSISS survey also investigated all forms of transport used in the last two weeks and the main reasons for not using public transport. The vast majority of the data produced from this section highlight statistically significant differences between patterns of remote and non-remote transport use and availability. However, given the findings of the ethnographic research on the first or headline question, the veracity of a number of the figures from these other sections of the survey may also be thrown into some doubt.

The figures generated for the total number of Indigenous people who used transport for both the remote and non-remote categories seem very high (85.9% and 98.1% respectively). What can these figures tell us? They indicate that transport of some form or another is readily available. Yet, as the preceding discussion suggests, we cannot assume that this is motorised transport, particularly for remote areas. Rather, these figures beg the question of what 'transport' is and what the NATSISS wants to elucidate in terms of access to it. This figure is a conflation of all forms of transport used in the last two weeks, including walking. I query the value of including walking and more generally 'other modes of transport' that are unidentified in this total figure—might it also include horse riding, for instance? Walking is an important form of transport and it needs to be distinguished as separate from motorised transport, as indeed it is in the survey form. A total figure that stated clearly 'all forms of motorised transport' would be more useful.

The numbers of people who use walking as a form of transport in remote areas is high. The figure of 74.4 per cent of the remote area population who walked in the last two weeks 'to get around' compares with the non-remote figure of 49.2 per cent. This very significant difference seems anomalous. However, it may be reflective of remote area people regularly walking locally within the settlement and walking for customary economy activity. It might also be reflective of the severe lack of motorised transport that remote area respondents seem to be suffering and the lack of choices that this necessitates. In many rural

areas in developing countries, for instance, walking is the major form of transport, and it is clear that in these contexts this transport method is closely associated with lack of access to economic and social services, transport infrastructure, and thus 'real' poverty (Starkey et al. 2002).

Interestingly, the GSS does not include any reference to walking as a form of transport. Rather, it is only included as a form of leisure, such as exercise. So, comparisons cannot be drawn here.

In remote areas, 63.3 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not use public transport, as no service was available, compared to 16.3 per cent in non-remote areas. This very significant difference does seem to reflect actual availability of public transport. However, it needs to be read closely in relation to the total figures for both the remote and non-remote respondents who did not use public transport. This total is qualified by the statement that it 'includes persons who did not use public transport for reasons of personal safety, cost, racial discrimination and time considerations'. In remote areas, a total of 85.6 per cent of people did not use public transport. I suggest that the specific qualification or reason for such a high figure would (principally) be because no service was available, as the figure of 63.3 per cent suggests, and the cost. Consider the cost of charter planes and commercially run buses, such as the 'fizzer bus' near Katherine in the Northern Territory: the cost for this 'public' bus, which is run commercially, is $350 per person for a 180km trip (Toohey 2000).

In non-remote areas, the total number of respondents who did not use public transport is 65.1 per cent, which may appear surprising given the apparent availability levels. However, the qualifications listed above may also well apply to this non-remote figure, as reported in a recent article in the NCOSS newsletter on transport disadvantage in NSW Aboriginal communities. Lack of coordination of public transport services between country towns means that a 208 km trip by sealed road can take up to eight hours (Wadiwel 2005: 7). Likewise, there is a real issue of affordability where CDEP participants lose their public transport concession entitlements, despite receiving an equivalent income to unemployment allowance. Discrimination is also a factor where 'across NSW Aboriginal people are routinely being refused bus, taxi or other services on what can only be said to be racial grounds' (Wadiwel 2005: 7).

Diversity of transport

The 2002 NATSISS category 'other modes of transport' could be further clarified (Table 15.2). In remote areas, other forms of transport include chartered aircraft (planes and helicopters) and horses. With the advent of the new rail link from Alice Springs to Darwin, trains are also a possibility in that region. Likewise, in other remote areas across Australia, trains have long been a transport possibility.

Establishing figures of particular types of transport usage could be useful in clarifying demand and costs. Air charter and trains tend to be significantly more costly than road transport, yet air charter, in particular, may be the only option at certain times of the year, given the impact of seasonal weather patterns on road access.

In remote areas, 'public' transport is not necessarily easily defined. Buses, such as the 'fizzer bus' mentioned above, are specific for Indigenous use, and thus not really 'public' in the general sense of the term. They tend to be private enterprise buses run for commercial gain by local non-Indigenous entrepreneurs. Likewise, there are no public or government subsidies for airline charters, even though in some remote regions (in Arnhem Land and Cape York, for instance) there may be no other way to access services, such as clinics or stores, during the wet.

Table 15.2. Indigenous people aged 15 years or over, modes of transport usage by remoteness, Australia, 2002

	Remote	Non-remote	Total
	%	%	%
All modes of transport used in last 2 weeks [b]			
Bus [a]	13.6	29.6	25.2
Car/4WD as passenger [a]	58.6	59.3	59.1
Car/4WD as driver [a]	38.6	53.4	49.3
Taxi [a]	10.6	19.0	16.7
Bicycle [a]	4.2	9.0	7.7
Walking [a]	74.4	49.2	56.1
Total used transport [a c]	85.9	98.1	94.7
Did not use transport [a]	14.1	1.9	5.3
Main reason for not using public transport in last 2 weeks			
Did not use public transport in last 2 weeks			
Prefer to use own transport or walk [a]	17.5	33.6	29.2
No service available at all [a]	63.3	16.3	29.1
No service available at the right/convenient time [a]	2.3	5.0	4.3
Total did not use public transport [a d]	85.6	65.1	70.7
Used public transport [a]	13.8	34.6	28.9
Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over	100.0	100.0	100.0

a. An asterisk denotes that the difference between remote and non-remote data is statistically significant at the 5% level.
b. Respondents may have indicated more than one response category.
c. Includes other modes of transport.
d. Includes persons who did not use public transport for reasons of personal safety, cost, racial discrimination and time considerations.
Source: ABS (2004c, Tables 1 and 20)

Perceived level of difficulty with transport

The final set of 2002 NATSISS transport questions relate to the perceived level of difficulty in accessing transport (Table 15.3). Unfortunately, the key question about difficulty of access relates to perceptions rather than facts. The questions,

which include, *'Do you have difficulty getting to places needed?' and 'Do you have these problems often or sometimes?',* offer a subjective self-assessment in terms of perceived level of difficulty. Such questions carry similar methodological baggage to self-assessed health measures (e.g. Anderson & Sibthorpe 1996: 124; Brady 2005: 133). Likewise, the concept of 'conditioned satisfaction' may play a role in the self-perception of difficulty and how this relates to needs (Nussbaum 2001).

This final set of questions is so generalised that the figures generated tell us little. The figures generated for people who 'can easily get to the places needed' are 65.6 per cent and 71.8 per cent for remote and non-remote respectively. This compares with 84.3 per cent of the general population who 'can easily get to the places needed'. This begs questions of where the 'places' are, how people are getting there, and how 'need' is defined? Clearly, the answers are different in all three cases, as are transport needs. As a result, these figures are not comparable.

Table 15.3. Perceived level of difficulty with transport—percentage of the population (aged 15 plus) by sex

	Remote	Non-remote	Non-Indigenous [a]
	%	%	%
Male			
Can easily get to the places needed	68.2	72.5	86.8
Sometimes have difficulty getting to the places needed	15.9	17.2	10.4
Often have difficulty getting to the places needed	2.8	4.5	2.4
Can't get to the places needed/never go out/housebound	13.1	5.8	0.4
Female			
Can easily get to the places needed	63.0	71.2	81.9
Sometimes have difficulty getting to the places needed	18.5	18.9	13.3
Often have difficulty getting to the places needed	3.8	4.8	4.1
Can't get to the places needed/never go out/housebound	14.8	5.1	0.7
Persons			
Can easily get to the places needed	65.6	71.8	84.3
Sometimes have difficulty getting to the places needed	17.2	18.1	11.8
Often have difficulty getting to the places needed	3.3	4.6	3.3
Can't get to the places needed/never go out/housebound	14.0	5.4	0.6

a. Non-Indigenous statistics refer to people aged 18 and over.
Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS and GSS CURF

Suggestions for re-phrasing and re-sequencing the questions

Questions in the next NATSISS could be improved by proceeding from the general to the specific, by changing the sequencing of questions, and by separating out the issues. A less deterministic approach to structuring and framing the questions could be followed, starting with the questions on access to transport. The key question is, *' Can you get to places you need to go?',* followed by questions on *'How do you get there?'*. By clarifying the *how* in transport, actual

vehicle numbers and types could also be elicited, while further choices could be given, such as types of transport (as suggested above for the remote areas).

One approach to establishing approximate numbers of private vehicles would be to begin with the question, *'Do you own a vehicle?'*. If the answer is *no*, then the question could be followed with 'Do you have access to a vehicle?'. If the answer to this question is *yes*, it could be followed with, '*Who owns this vehicle: family member, the council, clinic, school, other?'*.

In asking '*What other forms of transport do you use*?', a broader range of options could be listed. Finally, I have not discussed in detail the issue of drivers licenses in this paper. However, gaining and maintaining a license for Indigenous people in remote and non-remote areas is a significant issue, and has a major impact on the ability to drive and to teach others (see also Wadiwel 2005). Thus, it needs to be a separate question, rather than conflated with another question, as it is in the 2002 NATSISS. A specific question could be, 'D*o you hold a current drivers license*?' and if the answer is *no*, the next question could be, '*Have you ever held one?'*.

Conclusion

The aggregation of very remote areas with remote areas in the NATSISS data means that the relationship between access to transport and locational disadvantage cannot adequately be drawn. Yet, there is considerable locational diversity between these two classes of remoteness which impact very significantly on transport infrastructure, and thus on access to employment and education opportunities. These factors impact on socioeconomic status, in turn affecting transport access.

The 2002 NATSISS suggests that access to transport in remote Australia is lower than elsewhere, but that almost half of the Indigenous adult population does have access to some form of transport. This level is substantially higher than indicated by evidence (admittedly partial) from select ethnographic case studies, leading to some doubt regarding the validity of 2002 NATSISS findings. Thus, although the transport access patterns identified in remote areas are correct (for example, the limitations on access to motorised transport and women's lack of access relative to men's), it is likely that the headline question was misleading. If this is true, it is unfortunate: the importance of transport needs in remote areas are heightened, because of the dispersed population and services, the need to access lands, the vast distances and road quality. A recent World Bank paper noted that 'patterns of transport demand and supply are [always] linked to population density and income levels' (Starkey et al. 2002: 3). Gaining an accurate

fix on the scale of the issue is fundamental to developing an informed policy approach to remote transport needs. Despite the survey, we still do not have a fix on the proper scale of the issue. Nor do we get a picture of vehicles per capita in this remote region, nor gain any sense of the predominant vehicle types.