

## 22. Torres Strait Islanders and the national survey model

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This is the fourth event related to the NATSISS-type surveys that I have participated in. The three others have been a pre-NATSIS workshop in 1992 (Arthur 1992), a post-NATSIS workshop in 1996 (Arthur 1996) and a publication prepared by me and published jointly by the ABS in 1997 (ABS/CAEPR 1997).<sup>1</sup> That previous work followed my principal brief at the CAEPR which was to increase the commitment to provide policy-relevant data and information on Torres Strait Islanders (Islanders). In this role, much of what I said in the former work noted first that Islanders were not generally given much priority in standard ABS publications, and that there were certain conditions specific to Islanders that should be noted and recorded in any social surveys. In this paper I will review the earlier work to estimate the quality and coverage of data on Islanders in the 2002 NATSISS.

The Islander homeland is Torres Strait, a remote archipelago of small islands located on the political and cultural borderland between Melanesian Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Aboriginal Australia. Under Queensland legislation, Islanders were not allowed to move out of the Strait until the 1950s, after which many shifted to the mainland with a degree of enthusiasm. Many moved to improve their access to education, employment and to the generally higher level of services on the mainland. This movement, from a one-spot source, has continued and has been likened to a 'Diaspora'. As shown in Figure 22.1, initially, most Islanders moved to mainland Queensland,<sup>2</sup> and although they later spread to other States and Territories, the greatest numbers are still found in Queensland.<sup>3</sup> Those in Torres Strait live in the small regional town of Thursday Island and its

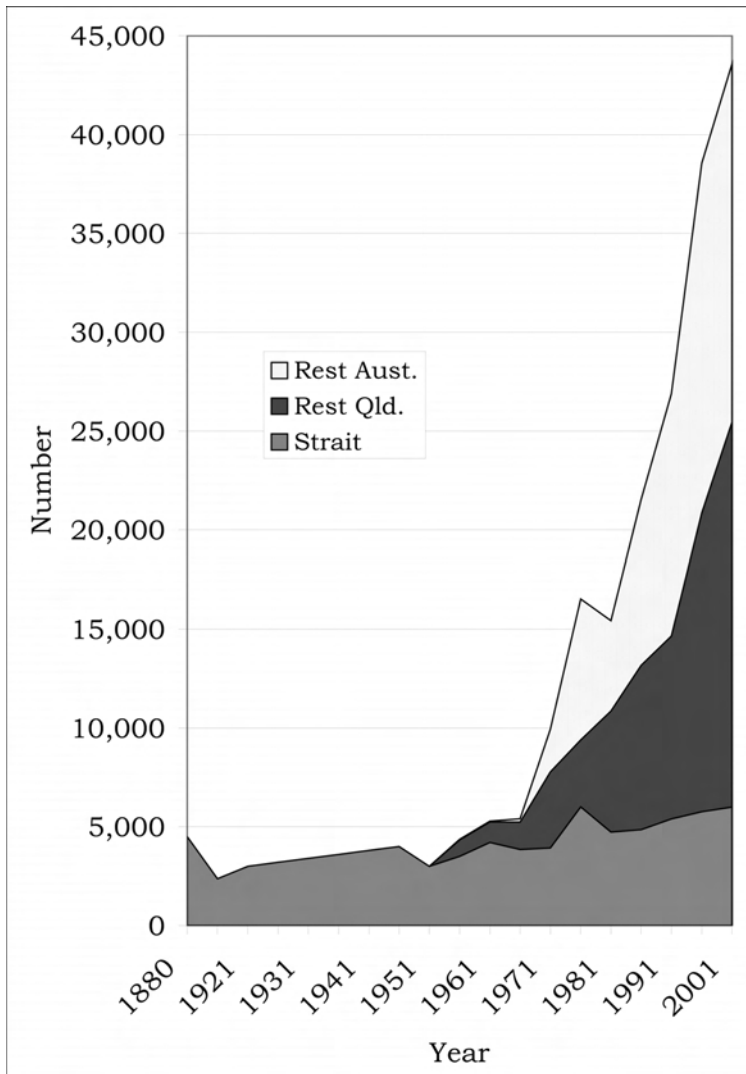
<sup>1</sup> The 1992 and 1996 workshops were both hosted by CAEPR at the ANU (Altman 1992; Altman & Taylor 1996a).

<sup>2</sup> For policy purposes, the region and communities that make up Torres Strait are those within the purview of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. This includes two communities on the tip of Cape York Peninsula (Seisia and Bamaga). These communities largely consist of Islanders and their descendants who were relocated there from islands in the Strait after World War II (Arthur 1990). References made here to Islanders within Torres Strait include those in Seisia and Bamaga, while references made to Islanders on the mainland means all of the others. This, for the reasons of policy noted above, is despite the fact that Seisia and Bamaga are geographically on Cape York (part of the mainland of Queensland and Australia).

<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 also shows that the mainland population increased dramatically following the move out of Torres Strait. It is thought that this can be explained partly by numbers of Islanders forming unions and having children with non-Islanders. Assuming these children identify as Torres Strait Islanders, such 'out-marriage' mathematically increases population growth (Sanders & Arthur 1997). In addition, there is some concern about the accuracy of more recent census data due to the possibility of other island people identifying in censuses as Torres Strait Islanders (see ABS/CAEPR 1997: 29–31).

surrounding small island communities, while Islanders outside Torres Strait reside mostly in urban coastal centres, just like the vast majority of Australia's population. This aspect of the population distribution has implications for socioeconomic status: when compared with mainland urban centres, the formal labour market in the Strait is rather restricted.

**Figure 22.1. Torres Strait Islander population, 1880–2001: a contextual note**



Source: Census of population and housing, various years.

Other work, largely (but not only) based on census data, has revealed several policy-related factors regarding Islanders, including that:

- only in Queensland are Islanders given any particular or Islander-specific attention in that State government’s programs (Arthur 1998)
- Islanders in Torres Strait have a different socioeconomic status from those in the rest of Queensland. This is largely because, as noted above, they live in different kinds of places—a remote archipelago and urban centres (Arthur & Taylor 1994), and
- Islanders seem to have had a different socioeconomic status from Aboriginal people at a national level (Taylor & Gaminiratne 1992).

The historical distribution of Islanders, together with the policy and socioeconomic factors noted above, suggest that it would be valuable to obtain policy-relevant data on Islanders for particular groupings. Using data from the 2001 Census, these groupings and their size are shown in Tables 22.1 and 22.2. The groupings are Islanders in Torres Strait, Islanders on the mainland of Queensland, and Islanders in other States. We should note that these populations are quite small: there are only 6000 Islanders in Torres Strait, 19 000 on the Queensland mainland and 18 000 in all of the other States/Territories, and this makes them rather hard to survey adequately. Also, whereas in Torres Strait, Islanders are the majority, in all other places they are a small part of the Indigenous population. Overall, as we can see, Islanders are only some 11 per cent of the total Indigenous population.

**Table 22.1. Relevant Islander population groups, 2001**

Population groupings	Number	Per cent of total Islander population
Islanders in Torres Strait	6000	14
Islanders on the mainland of Queensland	19 450	44
Islanders in other States and Territories	18 124	42
All Islanders	43 574	100

Source: 2001 Census

**Table 22.2. Relevant Islander and Aboriginal population groups, 2001**

Population groupings	Number	Per cent of total Australian Indigenous population
All Islanders	43 574	11
All Aboriginal people	366 429	89
All Indigenous people	410 003	100

Source: 2001 Census

I will now comment on some aspects of the 1992 pre-NATSIS workshop, the 1996 post-NATSIS workshop, and the 2002 NATSISS. Bearing in mind what I have said about the significance of the distribution of Islanders, this will be my principal interest.

## **The 1992 pre-NATSIS workshop**

In 1992 at the pre-NATSIS workshop, I proposed that factors of culture, socioeconomic status and history legitimised the view that Islanders are a distinct group that should be viewed separately from Aboriginal people (Arthur 1992). I noted, however, that the ABS did not generally produce standard publications that were dedicated solely to Islanders, or that allowed us to compare Islanders with Aboriginal people (Arthur 1992: 64). I noted that Islanders in Torres Strait obtained their income from a mix of sources: commercial fishing, welfare, and subsistence (what Jon Altman later characterised as a 'hybrid economy' (2002)) and that it would be good if NATSIS could find out more about each element of this income (Arthur 1992: 62). I also proposed that, unlike the situation in mainland Aboriginal communities, in Torres Strait the dinghy was probably a more important work tool than the car and so any survey should attempt to find out more dinghy running costs, rather than car costs (Arthur 1992: 62). Given what we knew about language use in Torres Strait, I suggested that proficiency in oral communication should be determined there with some reference to the use of Creole (Arthur 1992: 64–5). However, as something of a 'catch-all', I noted that it was likely that most of what we wanted to know or needed to know about Islanders could probably be gleaned from the five-yearly censuses (Arthur 1992: 60) and, indeed, this remains very much my position today (see below).

## **The 1996 post-NATSIS workshop and publication**

The 1992 workshop was followed by a post-NATSIS workshop in 1996. At this workshop I noted that the 1994 NATSIS had provided some new data across many of the survey categories, such as those for health, family and culture, law and justice (Arthur 1996: 170). However, I also said that the 1994 standard publications did not provide any data specifically for Islanders. Rather, it gave data on Indigenous people in Torres Strait. On the other hand, as the vast majority of Indigenous people in the Strait are, in fact, Islanders, this represented a de-facto measure of Islanders in Torres Strait and was therefore quite adequate (Arthur 1996: 166–7).

To improve the Islander-specific findings from the 1994 survey, the ABS and I collaborated on a publication dedicated solely to data on Islanders. However, because of the sample size, this work could only deal with Islanders in Torres Strait and in the rest of Queensland (Arthur 1996: 166–7). This publication looked at several of the NATSIS categories (see ABS/CAEPR 1997).

Also, the 1994 NATSIS did not provide data on Islanders in States other than Queensland (Arthur 1996: 170). Therefore, a comparison between the characteristics of the Islander population in Torres Strait and that in the rest of Australia could not be made. Nor did the data allow one to compare fully all Aboriginal people with all Islanders.

## The 2002 NATSISS

The 2002 NATSISS provided the following data. For the standard survey categories, the ABS (2004c: 20) allows us to compare the total Australian Aboriginal population with the total Torres Strait Islander population. This allows the national comparison of Islanders and Aboriginal people that I requested in the earlier work. The data are not provided at the State and Territory level, but I am less certain that this level of analysis is really required. As noted above, in many cases the census data are adequate.

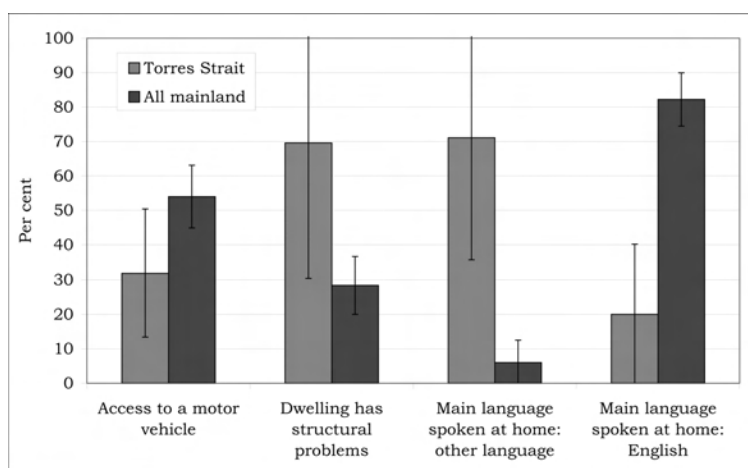
For slightly fewer categories in the 2002 NATSISS, ABS (2004c: 50) allows us to compare:

- Islanders in the Strait with Islanders in the rest of Queensland, and
- Islanders in the Strait with Islanders in all of the rest of Australia (that is, all of the mainland).

This provides the data requested earlier and allows an adequate, if not a good, comparison of the Torres Strait and the national Islander populations. The 2002 NATSISS does not provide results for Islanders in State and Territories other than Queensland, but again these may not really be necessary and in most cases census data will probably suffice for policy purposes.

## Some results from 2002 NATSISS

**Figure 22.2. Selected characteristics for Islanders living in the Torres Strait and rest of Australia**

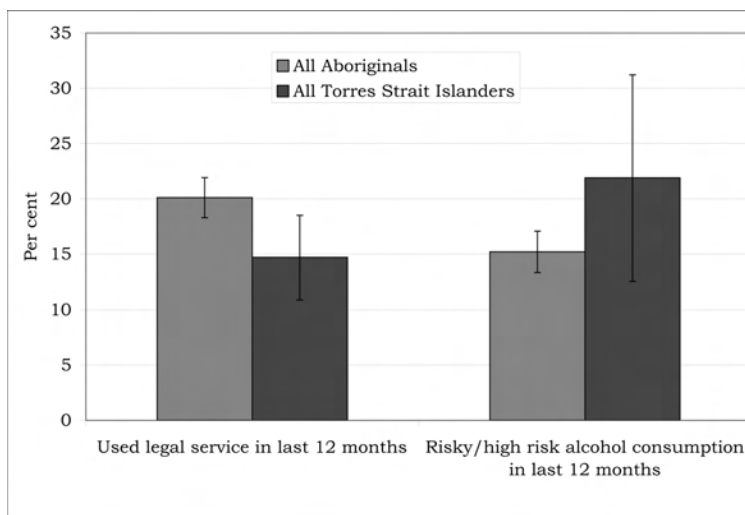


Source: ABS (2004c: Table 23).

Figure 22.2 shows several results from the 2002 NATSISS comparing Islanders in Torres Strait with those in the rest of Australia. We see that on the mainland, the main language spoken at home was English while in the Strait it was an 'other' language, in this case Creole. As we are aware that Islanders are engaging

with mainstream society on the mainland, the different use of language in the two locations is exactly what we would expect. As regards rental housing, houses in Torres Strait were more likely to have structural problems than were those on the mainland and, again, this is what we would expect as most housing in the Strait is community rental housing located on small islands. This is generally of a lower standard than public rental housing on the mainland. Regarding access to a motor vehicle, although the data in Figure 22.2 are probably correct, in Torres Strait, as I noted 1992, the more important data would be about access to a dinghy and the 2002 result on motor cars may not be very relevant. On the other hand, while some more data on access to dinghies might be relevant, it is probably quite easy to obtain for other sorts of surveys that focus directly on Torres Strait.

**Figure 22.3. Selected comparisons between Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders**



Source: ABS (2004c: Table 1).

Figure 22.3 shows several results from the 2002 NATSISS comparing all Islanders with all Aboriginal people nationally. The data here suggest that Islanders are ‘riskier’ drinkers than Aboriginal people. This seems counter-intuitive given what we already know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drinking habits (see Brady & Chikritzhs in this volume, and Arthur 1996) and I am unable to explain this apparent anomaly.

The data also show that Islanders use the legal service less than Aboriginal people. It is worth noting here that although the imperative for the 1994 NATSIS came from recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Commission’s reports did not list any Islanders as having died in custody. This was despite the fact that overall, Queensland had the second

highest number of deaths in custody of any State or Territory (Arthur 1992: 64). I can also add that an Islander working in a Queensland legal service office told me that he had not dealt with a single Islander client in his time there. Therefore, the NATSIS data may well reflect the situation on the ground.

Table 22.3 summarises the various survey type events discussed above, indicating the extent to which data requested have been supplied.

**Table 22.3. The survey events and data requested: 1992 to 2002**

Data requested in 1992 for 1994 NATSIS	Data provided in 1994 NATSIS	Data requested in 1996 post-NATSIS	Data provided in 2002 NATSIS	Comments
Dedicated Islander data	No	Dedicated Islander data	Yes	Adequate
Data on income sources	No		No, but too hard for a national survey—better by another technique	Not relevant for a national survey
Data on dinghies	No		Probably not, but possibly better from other surveys	Adequate
Data on Creole	Yes		Yes	Adequate
		Data for other States	No, but probably data from censuses will suffice	Adequate
		Data for the mainland	Yes	Adequate

## Conclusion

This paper has not been a full study of the 2002 NATSIS data. However, a brief analysis of the data indicates that they reveal little that is unexpected. The type of data collected and the geography of the collection and its publication—the geography of the statistics—seem quite adequate. There are still no data for Islanders in States other than Queensland, but are these really required? There are not many Islanders, and they are a small part of the Australian Indigenous population, making them quite hard to pick up in a national Indigenous survey. Other work has analysed the socioeconomic status of Islanders in other States from census data and it is likely that, as predicted in 1992, these will be prove adequate for policy purposes. Where census data are inadequate, it is also likely that another form of survey would better capture the features of such a small population. In addition, it worth recalling that the rationale for the NATSIS type surveys was the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and this rationale may have had less relevance for Islanders than for Aboriginal people. Therefore, it is possibly time to reassess the purpose of the NATSIS type of survey against current issues. In doing this, some attention should be given to demarcating the potential for the censuses to provide adequate data. In considering the potential for NATSIS-type surveys to address current policy issues, a relevant priority of questions might be: In what subject areas is the census adequate? Which of the remaining subject areas can be addressed by a

national survey? By which means can the balance of the information needed (if any) be collected?