

Assessing the evidence on
Indigenous socioeconomic
outcomes:
A focus on the 2002 NATSISS

B. H. Hunter (Editor)



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Foreword

This monograph presents the refereed, and peer-reviewed, edited proceedings of the conference on Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes: Assessing Recent Evidence. The conference was organised by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and held at the Shine Dome, the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra on 11 and 12 August 2005. The conference aimed to present the latest evidence on Indigenous economic and social status, and family and community life, and discuss its implications for government policy. The recently released 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) provided a valuable new source of data on these issues. The conference featured a variety of presentations that provide an evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the NATSISS methodology and the quality of the survey data and existing output.

In the same year that NATSISS was conducted, the Prime Minister wrote to Gary Banks, as Chairman of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), to ask for a regular report to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. This is now available on a biennial basis as the Productivity Commission Report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*. In addition, the annual Report on Government Services issued by the SCRGSP now includes a separate compendium of Indigenous statistics drawn from the administrative databases of Australian, State and Territory governments.

Given the growing number of Indigenous statistics collected and reported in Australia, it is more important than ever before to provide critical scrutiny of the data and related analysis. By publishing this report via the ANU E Press, we aim to ensure the timely and wide access to research findings throughout the Indigenous policy community. I recommend this monograph to anyone who wants to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the existing statistical archive for Indigenous Australians.

Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR
June 2006

Preface

The origin of this book arose from a growing personal concern with the quality of assessment of evidence in public debates. The modus operandi of journalism means that it is necessary to simplify evidence of 'experts' who conduct a detailed analysis of statistical data. The exigencies of daily deadlines mean that the reporting of experts' interpretation of the evidence is sometimes incorrect. However, the alleged experts have fewer excuses, and there is a need to ground their analysis in peer review. This monograph attempts to do this by providing readers with the capacity to critically engage with the evidence presented in public forums.

The volume of quality data in Indigenous affairs has grown exponentially in recent years. Unfortunately, our capacity to analyse it has not increased at the same rate. The main issue is that there is not the number of suitably qualified social scientists focusing on Indigenous issues in Australia to analyse all the data. Another issue is that the sheer volume of data allows some researchers to search for statistics that suit their ideological predisposition. Hughes (2005a) provides an example of the art of selective citation of other people's analysis to support arguments that are otherwise based on assertions and hyperbole (see Hunter's [2005] critique of Hughes [2005a] and Hughes and Warin [2005]). Needless to say, this sort of approach violates fundamental principles that most social scientists hold dear. It should be made clear that advocates on all sides of the debate have used this strategy to look for either a statistic or an expert whose conclusions are consistent with their own.

This monograph presents the refereed and peer-reviewed, edited proceedings of the conference on Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes: Assessing Recent Evidence. The conference was organised by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and held at the Shine Dome, the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra on 11 and 12 August 2005. The conference, which was attended by around 200 people from universities, the government sector, non-profit organisations and private corporations and citizens, aimed to present the latest evidence on Indigenous economic and social status, and family and community life, and discuss its implications for government policy.

After the preliminaries, the conference started with a recent history of the political economy of statistical collections and a brief introduction to NATSISS methodology and the quality of survey questions. While the main focus was on analysing the 2002 NATSISS outputs, many presentations provided an assessment of changes in Indigenous social conditions over time and examined how Indigenous people fared vis-à-vis other Australians in other statistical collections. All contributors were invited to reflect on how NATSISS might be improved when it is next undertaken in 2008. Notwithstanding the fact that one of the

main rationales for the conference was to evaluate the NATSISS, considerable time was allocated to providing a broad framework for the discussion, with several overviews provided by generalists who presented fresh perspectives, and a panel discussion of Indigenous public intellectuals who debated the broad Indigenous policy context.

The structure of this monograph closely follows the order of presentations in the conference, with two exceptions: those by Bob Gregory and Tim Rowse. Bob Gregory's presentation was the first presented on the second day of the conference, but his chapter has been placed in the groups of chapters that deal with labour market issues, as his focus is almost exclusively on such issues. This change of order is in no way a reflection on the quality of the presentation, as it received the most votes for 'best paper' at the conference by the participants who filled in the conference evaluation. The contribution from Tim Rowse has been placed at the beginning of this monograph because it provides the historical overview of what he calls the Indigenous statistical archive, a precursor to the rest of the chapters in this volume. Rowse's penultimate position on the conference timetable had been a 'historical accident', as he accommodated last minute changes to the schedule. For the remainder of this preface, unless otherwise indicated, the contributors to the volume have a direct affiliation with CAEPR.

The second chapter in this monograph is written by Jon Altman and John Taylor. It provides a recent history of omnibus social surveys of Indigenous Australians and analyses the political economy of Indigenous statistics. The next two chapters are more methodological in nature. Andrew Webster, Alistair Roger, and Dan Black from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) examined survey design and output issues, while Nicholas Biddle and I examined selected, more general, methodological issues that were relevant to the NATSISS.

Indigenous demography is given due prominence with John Taylor and Yohannes Kinfu critically examining mobility issues within the NATSISS. Yohannes Kinfu then explores the crucial issues of fertility and child survival issues that drive much of the development dynamics in Indigenous Australia.

The important dimensions of Indigenous socioeconomic status are then addressed, starting with Will Sander's evaluation of the utility of housing in NATSISS. I then examine the treatment of income, financial stress, social exclusion issues with a provocative reference to the so-called 'poverty wars'. Ruth Weston and Matthew Gray, from the Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS), provide a framework for analysing family and community life. Matthew then teamed up with Bruce Chapman (RSSH, ANU) to provide an evaluation of labour force issues. Bob Gregory's paper then addressed which were the right questions to ask in Indigenous policy, focusing almost exclusively on labour market issues. The

important issue of the customary or non-market economy is then examined by Jon Altman, Geoff Buchanan and Nicholas Biddle.

The proceedings of the first day of the conference wrapped up with the panel discussion by prominent Indigenous Australians. Larissa Berhendt (Jumbunna, University of Technology Sydney [UTS]), Tom Calma, and Geoff Scott (Distinguished Professor of Indigenous Policy at UTS) discussed the diverse perspectives on the needs for various data to be collected for Indigenous Australians. In contrast to most other papers in this monograph, this chapter is an edited transcript which includes the questions asked of the panelists at the end of the formal contributions.

The second day of the conference started with the aforementioned paper by Bob Gregory. Jerry Schwab then discussed the contribution of the 2002 NATSISS in education and training-related issues. The next contribution arose from a session on transport and information technology that packed two distinct papers into one (half-hour) slot. While Sarah Holcombe and Peter Radoll (School of Business and Information Management, ANU) (information technology) were constrained to talk for around 15 minutes because of time pressure on the day, these authors provided excellent separate chapters in this monograph on transport and information technology respectively.

Most of the remaining sessions at the conference covered complex social issues facing Indigenous communities. Russell Ross (University of Sydney) provided some fresh insights into Indigenous health. This is the first time he has written on the area, although he has written a considerable number of papers on economic issues facing Indigenous people. Maggie Brady and Tanya Chikritzhs (Curtin University) then provided a critical analysis of the NATSISS data on substance abuse and tobacco. Mick Dodson (National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU) and I then examined crime and justice data in NATSISS, and call for a greater consistency in the survey collections for Indigenous and other Australians. Nicolas Peterson (School of Archaeology and Anthropology, ANU) examines cultural issues in the 2002 NATSISS before Inge Kral and Frances Morphy focus on how the information on language might be optimised in a survey context. Bill Arthur provides an overview of Torres Strait Islanders, using the now conventional distinction of those who live in the Strait and those who live on the mainland. Tom Calma (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC]) provides a detailed analysis of social justice issues.

In the final chapter, Jon Altman and I provide some concluding remarks and a wrap-up for the monograph, which pays particular attention to summarising the lessons learned from the conference and highlights how future statistical collections might be improved.

The conference also included an informal presentation by Nicholas Biddle which described an easy-to-use, CAEPR do-it-yourself spreadsheet for customised

hypothesis tests on NATSISS data. This spreadsheet is now available on the CAEPR web site, and can be used to validate all the significance tests conducted in this monograph. Since this spreadsheet is publicly available, I have encouraged authors to report results of the significance tests in the text but to not necessarily report the statistics themselves. In addition to avoiding any duplication, it hopefully makes the monograph easier to read without compromising the rigour required in a scholarly publication. Readers should note that the spreadsheet only provides approximate (usually conservative) significance tests based on standard errors expressed in levels. For a discussion about the reliability of 2002 NATSIS data and alternative procedures for estimating significance tests, see ABS (2004c: 68–9).

The authors of the monograph chapters were largely left to their own devices when writing their contribution, before the refereeing process for publication. Before the conference, I sent out an e-mail to get the contributors to think about the substantive outstanding issues in their subject areas and how NATSISS and other future data collections might address the needs identified. It will be apparent in what follows that the authors adopted unique approaches to their respective subject matter(s). This is to be encouraged because it is the strength of an edited volume. As is usual in academic publications, it should be noted that the views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the institutions to which they are attached.

Finally, in my time at CAEPR I have encountered some suspicion of statistical evidence mostly from the occasional qualitative researcher who seems to think that statistics objectify Indigenous people and only provide extremely limited insights for Indigenous people and policy makers. I would be the first to acknowledge the limitations of statistical analysis, but it is important to honour the participation of all the 10 000 respondents who spent many hours filling in the form, and work out what they were telling the ABS. Quantitative and qualitative research each have different and valid insights to yield, but both need to acknowledge that they are based on the generosity of respondents who entrusted their knowledge and experience to the people who collect the data. Consequently, the main focus of this conference should be to work out what, if anything, the ABS survey data tells us.

The strength of this monograph, as with all edited volumes, is that it can explore different perspectives. While this point might be characterised as being ‘post-modern’ by some, it is not necessarily so. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the obvious—that is, there is considerable uncertainty about which theoretical model should be adopted, and hence there are legitimate issues about how to interpret the 2002 NATSISS data.

Having mentioned the word ‘post-modern’ I want to assure readers that not all of the authors drink Chardonnay! Indeed, I could not find one person who

admitted to drinking Chardonnay with an informal straw poll revealing that the most popular drink among authors is a full-bodied red. Furthermore, the award for the best paper at the conference was a bottle of whisky, albeit an Irish whisky. Notwithstanding their drinking habits, none of the authors admitted to disparaging others for their consumption habits.

The diversity of opinions of authors will be obvious to all those who persevere in reading through the entire book. I hope readers will find their perseverance rewarded because the contrasting approaches of the various chapters suggest some research directions for the academy. However, for those who pick and choose which chapters they are interested in, I commend you to the concluding chapter which briefly draws together the disparate themes of the monograph.

Boyd Hunter
Fellow, CAEPR

Acknowledgements

The contributors to the conference were leading analysts, commentators and researchers in Indigenous policy. The presenters came from all over Australia to provide a stimulating, enjoyable, and informed debate. While I am grateful to all contributors, I would particularly like to thank Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, who spent more time on the Shine Dome stage than almost any other presenters. I would also like to give a special mention to the chairs of the respective sessions at the conference who provided rigour, discipline and breadth to the discussion. Four chairs deserve special thanks in this regard: Craig Linkhorn (New Zealand Crown Law Office and Visiting Fellow, CAEPR), Peter McDonald (Demography Program, Research School of Social Sciences), Sandra Pattison (National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research), and Ben Smith (Post-Doctoral Fellow, CAEPR).

The ABS were supportive of the event as they were keen to facilitate responsible and informed use of their data. The main form of that support was extra data provided to facilitate our evaluation of the 2002 NATSISS. While much of the data used in this monograph is available from the official ABS (2004c) publication on 2002 NATSISS (Cat. No.4714.0), some customised cross-tabulations were provided specifically for the conference and this publication. I would like to acknowledge the staff at the ABS's National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics, who generously gave their time in providing data and clarifying any queries about how the data was collected, coded and outputted.

The final acknowledgment must go to the dedicated and professional Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) team who were responsible for the organisation of the conference over several months, especially Hilary Bek, Geoff Buchanan, Ruth Nicholls, John Hughes, Vicki Veness and Maria Davern. Without their hard work, the conference would never have been completed successfully. Two anonymous referees and many readers also gave invaluable comments on early drafts of the chapters for this monograph. I would like to take this opportunity to thank ANU E Press for publishing this report in such a professional manner. A final thanks must go to Hilary Bek and Jeneen McLeod for assistance with the copy-editing of a draft of the manuscript for this book.

Abbreviations and acronyms

- ABS** Australian Bureau of Statistics
- ACER** Australian Council for Education Research
- ACS** Australian Construction Services
- ACT** Australian Capital Territory
- ADAC** Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council
- AEDP** Aboriginal Employment Development Policy
- AEP** Aboriginal Education Policy
- AGPS** Australian Government Publishing Service
- AIATSIS** Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- AIC** Australian Institute of Criminology
- AIFS** Australian Institute for Family Studies
- AIHW** Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- ANU** Australian National University
- ARIA** Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia
- ASGC** Australian Standard Geographic Classification
- ATSI** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- ATSIC** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
- AVCC** Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee
- CAEPR** Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
- CA** Community Area
- CAI** computer assisted interviewing
- CD** Collection District
- CDEP** Community Development Employment Projects
- CDHSH** Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health
- CESCR** Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights
- CHINS** Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Surveys
- CIF** Community Information Forms
- CIS** Centre for Independent Studies
- CNOS** Canadian National Occupancy Standard
- COAG** Council of Australian Governments

CPI Consumer Price Index
CURF Confidentialised Unit Record File
DCITA Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
DEWR Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
FaCS Department of Family and Community Services
FATSIL Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages
GSS General Social Survey
HILDA Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
HREOC Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
ICC Indigenous Coordination Centre
ICT Information and Communication Technology
ICVS International Crime Victims Survey
IL Indigenous language
LFS Labour Force Survey
MCATSIA Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
MCEETYA Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MURF Main Unit Record File
NATSIS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey
NATSISS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey
NCA Non-Community Area
NCSS National Crime and Safety Survey
NCVER National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research
NCSAGIS National Centre for Social Applications of Geographic Information Systems
NDSHS National Drug Strategy Household Survey
NHS National Health Survey
NILF Not in the labour force
NPYWC Ngaanyatharra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara Women's Council
NSCSP National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing
NSW New South Wales
NT Northern Territory

OIPC Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination
PAPI pen and paper interview
PNG Papua New Guinea
PSS Personal Safety Survey
QLD Queensland
RCADC Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
RSE relative standard error
RADL Remote Access Data Laboratory
RSSS Research School of Social Science
SA South Australia
SAE Standard Australian English
SAS Statistical Analysis Software
SCRGSP Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SIF Special Indigenous Form
SOIL State of Indigenous Languages
SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SRA Shared Responsibility Agreement
TAS Tasmania
TSI Torres Strait Islander
UN United Nations
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
USA United States of America
UTS University of Technology Sydney
VET vocational education and training
VIC Victoria
WA Western Australia