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

B. H. Hunter (Editor)
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# Table of Contents

List of Figures: v  
List of Tables: vii  
Foreword: xi  
Preface: xiii  
Acknowledgements: xix  
Abbreviations and acronyms: xxi  

1. Towards a history of Indigenous statistics in Australia  
   Tim Rowse  

2. Statistical needs in Indigenous affairs: the role of the 2002 NATSISS  
   Jon Altman and John Taylor  

3. The 2002 NATSISS—the ABS survey methodology and concepts  
   Andrew Webster, Alistair Rogers and Dan Black  

4. Selected methodological issues for analysis of the 2002 NATSISS  
   Nicholas Biddle and Boyd Hunter  

5. Differentials and determinants of Indigenous population mobility  
   John Taylor and Yohannes Kinfu  

6. Aboriginal child mortality in Australia: Recent levels and covariates  
   Yohannes Kinfu  

7. Understanding housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians: what can the 2002 NATSISS add?  
   Will Sanders  

8. Revisiting the poverty war: income status and financial stress among Indigenous Australians  
   Boyd Hunter  

9. Family and community life  
   Ruth Weston and Matthew Gray  

10. Labour market issues  
    Matthew Gray and Bruce Chapman  

11. Asking the right questions?  
    Bob Gregory  

12. The real ‘real’ economy in remote Australia  
    Jon Altman, Geoff Buchanan and Nicholas Biddle
13. Panel Discussion: Diverse perspectives on the evidence 153
   Larissa Behrendt, Tom Calma, Geoff Scott, (with introductory remarks by Jon Altman)

14. Education and training: the 2002 NATSISS 171
   R.G. (Jerry) Schwab

15. Indigenous Australians and transport—what can the NATSISS tell us? 183
   Sarah Holcombe

16. Information and Communication Technology 197
   Peter Radoll

17. Health 213
   Russell Ross

18. Substance use in the 2002 NATSISS 231
   Tanya Chikritzhs and Maggie Brady

19. Crime and justice issues 249
   Mick Dodson and Boyd Hunter

20. Culture 269
   Nicolas Peterson

21. Language 279
   Inge Kral and Frances Morphy

22. Torres Strait Islanders and the national survey model 291
   Bill Arthur and John Hughes

   Tom Calma

24. Influencing Indigenous policy making with statistics 311
   Jon Altman and Boyd Hunter

References 321
Notes on Contributors 341
List of Figures

3.1. Form type by area, 2002 NATSISS 26
3.2. Mainstream employment by State, 1994 and 2002 28
4.1. School attainment in non-remote areas, 2001 and 2002 42
4.2. School attainment in remote areas, 2001 and 2002 43
4.3. Labour force status in non-remote areas, 2001 and 2002 44
4.4. Labour force status in remote areas, 2001 and 2002 44
4.5. Non-school qualifications, 2001 and 2002 51
5.2. Indigenous movement propensities by State and Territory, 2002 61
6.1. Average number of children born per woman: Aboriginal Australians, 2002 71
6.2. Proportion of children who have died by age of women: Aboriginal Australians, 2002 71
8.1. Financial stress by labour forces status and remoteness, 2002 96
12.1. Conceptual representation of the hybrid economy 142
16.1. Home computer use and home internet use by Indigenous status, 2002 198
16.2. Computer use and internet use by income quintile, 2002 199
16.3. Computer use and internet use by education level, 2002 200
16.4. Computer use and internet use by remoteness, 2002 201
16.5. Computer use by location and remoteness, 2002 202
16.6. Purpose of internet use by remoteness, 2002 203
16.7. Frequency of internet use by remoteness, 2002 204
16.8. Information and Communication Technology use by employment status, 2002 205
16.9. Information and Communication Technology use by age, 2002 206
16.10. Information and Communication Technology use by health status, 2002 207
16.11. Computer use by whether ever charged, 2002 208
16.12. Telephone status by remoteness, 2002 209
16.13. Money access mode by remoteness, 2002 210
17.1. Disabilities by quintile of household income 221
17.2. Disabilities by age and gender 222
17.3. Self-assessed health status by Indigenous status, non-remote areas 223
17.4. Labour force status by self-assessed health 226
18.1. A comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous drinking levels, from the 2002 NATSISS and the 2001 NDSHS 236
18.2.  Estimated national alcohol-attributable death rates for Indigenous people versus the general Australian population   238

18.3.  Estimates of alcohol use by Indigenous Australians: a comparison of three surveys   242

18.4.  2002 NATSISS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander risky/high-risk alcohol consumption   242

22.1.  Torres Strait Islander population, 1880–2001: a contextual note   292

22.2.  Selected characteristics for Islanders living in the Torres Strait and rest of Australia   295

22.3.  Selected comparisons between Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders   296
List of Tables

2.1. ABS Indigenous household surveys program: 1999–2011 17
3.1. Sample size, 2002 NATSISS 25
4.1. Differences in data collection in CA and NCA areas 36
4.2. Implications of ABS definition of low income 52
5.1. Social, economic and geographic differentials in movement propensity 62
5.2. Net effects of socioeconomic, spatial and household characteristics on Indigenous mobility: logistic regression results, 2002 NATSISS 64
5.3. Reasons for last move by age group: 2002 NATSISS 65
6.2. Estimated effects of socioeconomic, spatial and household characteristics on Aboriginal child mortality: results of Poisson regression model, 2002 NATSISS 76
7.1. Tenure of dwellings containing Indigenous households by remoteness, 2002 81
7.2. Housing tenure of Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over by remoteness, 2002 82
7.3. Household size of dwelling containing Indigenous households by remoteness, 2002 82
7.4. Household size of Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over by remoteness, 2002 82
7.5. Housing tenure of Torres Strait Islander persons aged 15 years and over by area, 2002 83
7.7. Adequacy and affordability characteristics of dwellings containing Indigenous households by tenure, 2002 85
7.8. Housing adequacy and affordability characteristics of Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over by tenure, 2002 86
7.9. Adequacy and affordability characteristics of dwellings containing Indigenous households by remoteness, 2002 87
7.10. Housing adequacy and affordability characteristics of Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over by remoteness, 2002 87
7.11. Housing tenure characteristics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons aged 18 years or over, 2002 88
7.12. Housing tenure characteristics of Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, 1994 and 2002 89
8.1. Income summary by Indigenous status in non-remote areas, 2002 95
8.2. Income summary by remoteness, 2002 95
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, selected income characteristics by remoteness, Australia, 2002</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, mean weekly equivalised gross household income quintiles by selected characteristics, Australia, 2002</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Proportion with less than 50 per cent of median equivalised household income</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Scoping the feasible range of equivalence scales: proportion with less than 50 per cent of median household income, 2002</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Use of child care by persons with primary responsibility for children according to employment status, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, 2002</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Removal from natural family</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Indigenous labour force status by region, 2002</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Labour market data collected in the 2002 NATSISS</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Duration on CDEP by region of residence, 2002</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Participation in VET in the last 12 months, by labour force status and region, 2002</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>OLS wage regressions</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Effect of experience on wage (percentage)</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>Effect of experience on probability of employment (percentage)</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Various employment-to-population ratios for adult Indigenous Australians</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Selected characteristics of the Job Network eligible population, 2002–03</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Employment and population changes for Indigenous Australians (in 000's)</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Hypothetical estimates of labour market circumstances 16 months after being referred to Intensive Assistance</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>Percentage of Indigenous population in CAs who did and did not fish or hunt in a group in the last three months, by recognising and living on homeland, 2002</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>Percentage of Indigenous population in CAs who fished or hunted in a group in the last three months, by industry and hours worked, 2002</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>Percentage of Indigenous population who participated in, and were paid for, various cultural activities, by remoteness, 2002</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>Presence of, and ability to meet, cultural responsibilities while in employment, by remoteness (number of persons), 2002</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>Percentage of population who were able to meet cultural responsibilities, by industry and remoteness, 2002</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>Percentage of each State/Territory engaged: in fishing or hunting in a group; paid; and unpaid arts and crafts activity, 2002</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14.2. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, selected education characteristics, Australia, 1994 and 2002  173
14.3. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, main reason left school by remoteness, Australia, 2002  174
14.4. Unemployed Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, main difficulty finding work by remoteness, Australia, 2002  175
14.5. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, whether attended vocational training, by remoteness, Australia, 2002  175
14.6. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, whether used vocational training, by remoteness, Australia, 2002  176
14.7. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, how vocational training was used, by remoteness, Australia, 2002  177
14.8. Indigenous persons aged 15 years or over, non-school qualification by highest year of school completed by selected characteristics, Australia, 2002  178
15.1. Access and use of motor vehicles and walking (aged 15 and over) by sex and remoteness, 2002  190
15.2. Indigenous people aged 15 years or over, modes of transport usage by remoteness, Australia, 2002  193
15.3. Perceived level of difficulty with transport—percentage of the population (aged 15 plus) by sex  194
17.1. Summary health indicators by remoteness and Indigenous status  219
17.2. Selected disability characteristics by remoteness  220
17.3. Self-assessed health variables by quintile of weekly equivalised gross household income  220
17.4. Self-assessed health status by age and gender  222
17.5. Indigenous health, Australia, 1994 and 2002  224
17.6. Non-school qualification by highest year of school completed by selected health characteristics  225
17.7. Labour force status by disabilities  227
17.8. Self-assessed health status by age and disability  228
18.1. Drug use among Indigenous Australians: results from the 2002 NATSISS  234
18.2. Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates of hospitalisation (per 1000) for a selection of alcohol-attributable conditions 2002–03  237
19.1. Indigenous people aged 15 years or over, selected law and justice issues in Australia, 1994 and 2002  259
19.2. Selected law and justice issues by remoteness, 2002  260
19.3. Interactions with the justice system by remoteness and sex, 2002  260
19.4. Law and justice by age first formally charged, 2002  261
19.5. Socioeconomic factors underlying formal interactions with the criminal justice system by ever formally charged, 2002

20.1. Cultural participation/involvement in social activities in 1994 and 2002

20.2. Cultural participation/involvement in social activities by remoteness, 2002

20.3. Paid and unpaid participation in cultural activities, 2002

20.4. Participation in sporting activity by remoteness, 2002

20.5. Activities participated in during the three months before the 2002 NATSISS

20.6. Identification with a tribal group, a language group or a clan 2002

20.7. Relations with homeland/traditional country, by remoteness in 2002


21.2. Those whose main language at home is an Indigenous language, by state, 2002

21.3. Knowledge and use of Indigenous language by age group

21.4. Language fluency, by remoteness category

21.5. Educational attainment: Indigenous language versus remote areas

21.6. Whether speaks an Indigenous language (remote versus very remote areas), by labour force status

22.1. Relevant Islander population groups, 2001

22.2. Relevant Islander and Aboriginal population groups, 2001

22.3. The survey events and data requested: 1992 to 2002
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
Kinifu critically examining mobility issues within the NATSISS. Yohannes Kinifu
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 (RSSS, 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 NATSISS 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
NPYWCC 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