

Preface

During the period leading up to and during the 2006 Census, a team of four researchers from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at The Australian National University undertook an observation of the census enumeration in four remote locations. Three of these were in the Northern Territory—the Alice Springs town camps (Will Sanders), Wadeye (John Taylor) and a group of homelands in the Yolngu-speaking area of eastern Arnhem Land (Frances Morphy)—and one was in Western Australia, at Fitzroy Crossing (Kathryn Thorburn). One researcher (Frances Morphy) also spent time at the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Northern Territory Census Management Unit (CMU) in Darwin and at the Data Processing Centre (DPC) in Melbourne, observing the training of the Northern Territory Census Field Officers (CFOs) and their assistants, the handling of the Northern Territory Interviewer Household Forms (IHF) in Darwin after the count and the coding of the data from the forms at the DPC. This research was undertaken as an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, with the ABS as the collaborating institution. The researchers signed an Undertaking of Fidelity and Secrecy under the terms of the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*, and are thus bound by its conditions of confidentiality.

This work builds on previous research undertaken by CAEPR researchers on the 2001 Census, published as Martin et al. (2002 [2004]) (see also Morphy 2004, 2006; Sanders 2004). In 2001, only the count itself was observed. Morphy and Sanders were also members of the ABS's 2006 Census Indigenous Enumeration Strategy Working Group, which considered all aspects of the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy (IES), but particularly the design of the forms to be used in 2006, in the light of the 2001 experience. Morphy also participated in the field testing of the 2006 form (see Morphy 2003).

In 2006, Morphy and Sanders returned to the same areas they had covered in 2001, enabling a comparison between the two censuses in these two locations.¹ The other two sites were new study areas. The four sites chosen comprised a group of discrete Aboriginal communities in an urban location (Alice Springs), a smaller town where Aboriginal people lived in discrete communities and in 'mainstream' locations (Fitzroy Crossing), a large discrete Aboriginal community (Wadeye) and a group of remote and scattered homeland communities (Arnhem Land). These sites were chosen so that the operation of the IES could be observed in a variety of situations, and also because, in each case, the researchers were working in areas where they had previously undertaken research and with which they were therefore familiar. Finally, the inclusion of Fitzroy Crossing

¹ Morphy's 2001 study was limited to a single homeland ('Community A'). Her 2006 study was more wide ranging.

enabled a comparison between the 'rolling count' strategy adopted in the Northern Territory with the 'standard count' strategy adopted in Western Australia.

One aspect of our 2006 observations that we would like to note is the way in which, as researchers, we were drawn almost inevitably into a role that was somewhat more than just that of observer. This relates to the difficulty of the census and the fact that everyone in the hierarchy of census administration represents a distinct interest and we, as researchers, had to win them over to cooperate with our research efforts. The obvious way to win people's cooperation is to offer them some help with their difficult task. At the very least therefore, we would end up offering our vehicles as an extra resource that could be used by Community Coordinators (CCs) and collector-interviewers (CIs). More substantially, some of us effectively became CCs and CIs for periods or, at other points in the process, someone's assistant on some task that needed to be done, but which they were finding difficult to resource. This could be seen as our failing as objective researchers, but we were winning the cooperation of others with our research by helping them with their difficult administrative tasks. In reality, this is probably the only way that this sort of research can proceed. Having the top of the ABS hierarchy give us the status of official observers was only the beginning of the job of persuading others to cooperate with our research and see something in it for themselves as they struggled with difficult tasks.

Our aim in this monograph is to provide a frank and objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the IES as it applied in 2006. This project was based on the premise that the national census was a necessary instrument of the nation-state and that its purpose was, firstly, to count the population of the country and, secondly, to collect data that allowed broad-brush comparisons of different sectors of the population across a variety of basic demographic parameters. We acknowledge that this puts constraints on the design of the census. Our focus, then, will be on suggestions that will improve the ability of the IES to fulfil these purposes.

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