

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION

INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION

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The politics of Indigenous population counts

A Submission to the Commonwealth Grants Commission Inquiry into the distribution of funding for programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

by

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Recent disputation over the estimate that the 'Stolen Generations' accounted for no more than 10 per cent of Indigenous children over the period 1910 to 1970 highlights the fact that demography forms a critical component of political discourse in Indigenous affairs. More directly, in the context of the Commonwealth Grants Commission's (CGC's) terms of reference for an Inquiry into relative needs, the following have been recognised for some time:

- The broad parameters for a charter of social justice for Indigenous peoples are determined by the size, growth, composition and changing location of the Indigenous population. Only by accurate measurement of these factors can needs be adequately assessed and resources fairly and equitably distributed.
- There is growing awareness within Indigenous affairs of a need to better understand the dynamics of change in the size and composition of the Indigenous population so as to formulate policies that are based, not solely on current or historic assessment of government obligations, but also on some estimation of anticipated requirements.

Data sources

What, then, are the key population data issues that have a bearing on the capacity of government processes to respond to needs in the Indigenous community? The first point to note is that the CGC has been asked to develop a method of needs assessment based on existing data sources. This raises the question of what these sources are and what they tell us about the numbers and composition of the client group. There are three main sources of data:

- 5-yearly censuses,
- irregular surveys,
- on-going administrative records (Government/Indigenous organisations).

Each of these yield counts or estimates of the size and selected composition of the Indigenous population, or sub-groups within it. While survey populations are generally benchmarked against census data, some surveys (such as CHINS) do yield their own population estimates.

A key point to note is that these sources frequently lack compatibility in terms of methodology, data content, temporal and spatial coverage. As a consequence they inevitably produce different 'populations'. Even within the same source, both the nature of data acquired and the means to its acquisition may differ. An example here is the use of Special Indigenous Forms for the collection of census data in remote areas (c. 20 per cent of the Indigenous population) which, contrary to the majority enumeration, involve interview techniques and yield information on CDEP employment. Likewise, different methodologies may yield alternate results for the same functional area.

A good example of this is provided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit study of the completeness of hospital admissions records at 11 hospitals in 5 States and Territories. This involved re-interviews of patients to verify their demographic characteristics. The results showed a that a range from 55-100 per cent of patients identified as Indigenous in both admissions data and at interview. Lower concordance has been found in hospital catchment areas where Indigenous people form a lower share of the total population (ABS/AIHW 1999).

Political demography

Fundamental to such variations are matters that led Alan Gray some years ago to describe the demography of Indigenous Australians as a 'political demography' (Gray 1985). The point here is that the interplay between political, administrative and cultural processes, including the highly variable way in which States, Territories and the Commonwealth have attempted to enumerate and categorise Indigenous people and the choices made by respondents to the census and other statistical collections, produces the statistical entity we call 'the Indigenous population'.

In the not so distant past, these sociological and political processes effectively excluded or devalued Indigenous representation in official statistics. By contrast, the more recent politics of data collection have seen moves to encourage identification. This is manifest most recently in ministerial level agreements for the priority adoption of the standard Indigenous status question in State and Territory collections on health, births deaths and marriages, education and housing. Similar requirements are in place with Commonwealth agencies such as Centrelink.

Thus, at the simplest conceptual level, we have, on the one hand, a theoretical total population of any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry and, on the other hand, a variety of sources of official figures which variously reveal fractions of this population (Smith 1980).

Over the past three decades, the population revealed by the census has steadily expanded with growth rates highest in the south and east of the continent and in major towns and cities. Had this Inquiry occurred 30 years ago using data available at the time, then per capita Indigenous needs would have been viewed as relatively minor and largely rural-based. Today, they are much greater and overwhelmingly urban. In a very real sense, this turnaround has emerged from the unfolding interaction between the political, administrative and cultural processes referred to above.

It is ironic then, that we actually know very little about the complex processes that shape racial or ethnic self-perceptions and the declaration of these in official statistics. In this context, it is worth recalling the Commonwealth's three-part definition of an Indigenous Australian:

- that an individual has Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- is accepted as an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander by the community in which he or she lives.

It can be argued that the Indigenous population revealed by the census conforms with only the second of these criteria, but only to the extent that a collection of individuals tick the appropriate box on a census form which asks if they are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. The first criteria is strictly only verifiable with genealogical evidence (though it is implied by the second), while the third criteria is only rarely tested (for example in accessing some special programs) and is certainly not a condition in most applications of the standard Indigenous status question.

One aspect of this definition which, since 1996 has become more obscure, is that regarding the declaration of dual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. It has been clear for some time that the census count of Torres Strait Islanders is problematic and the task of interpreting such data is not aided by the inclusion of a third category of Indigenous identity. If those who identified solely as Torres Strait Islander in the census are considered, then the population barely increased. If, however, those claiming dual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins are added then the Torres Strait Islander population increased substantially, especially on the mainland.

This raises an issue with regard to the Commission's terms of reference which seek a separate estimate of need for Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland – should all of these dual identifiers be added to those identifying solely as Torres Strait Islanders or should this be done on a pro rata basis? If the former, then they should also be added to those identifying solely as Aboriginal, which involves double counting. There are other issues regarding the statistical visibility of Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland that are best summarised in the work of Bill Arthur from CAEPR.

Features of Indigenous population data

For all the reasons outlined above, the data available to the Commission for the purposes of assessing relative needs within the Indigenous population share several features which require the Commission's attention:

- They are contestable,
- incomplete,
- and volatile.

Contestability

It is not uncommon to hear the criticism that official statistics inadequately reflect Indigenous numbers. This can be in the form of an undercount or an overcount. While this often reflects misunderstanding of the distinction between population counts and population estimates, there are numerous examples where the criticism seems quite valid and care should be taken to ensure that reasonable population numbers are acquired. Admittedly, the ABS produces Estimated Resident Populations (ERPs) at the ATSI Regional level but two issues should be noted here. First, while population numbers can be adjusted for error, population characteristics cannot, short of pro-rating which is a debateable approach. Second, many of the contestability concerns emerge within regions at the community level where data error is most starkly evident and where adjustment by ABS is not possible. For example:

- Between 1991 and 1996 Indigenous usual resident numbers in Kakadu National Park fell by around 20 per cent - this in a region that is known (from the increased load of service delivery providers) to have experienced rapid Indigenous population growth over the same period. On close scrutiny, a large increase in non-response to the Aboriginal origins question was detected as well as a failure to enumerate the Jabiru town camp. Adjusting for these errors suggests that the population should have been 35 per cent higher, not 20 per cent less (Taylor 1999).

Partly for such reasons, Local Government Grants Commissions and community-based service providers tend to employ estimates of service populations rather than rely purely on census counts. Should the Inquiry follow suit by seeking to establish the best available local estimates?

Incompleteness

Major discrepancies often exist between census-based population estimates and administrative data. This is particularly, but not exclusively, so in the southern and eastern States and in major towns and cities. The basic issue here is that high and stable Indigenous identification in administrative collections has not yet been achieved.

For example, under-identification of Indigenous people in hospital records remains an issue. If the level of under-recording were known then a correction factor could be applied. Based on studies to date it seems that the correction factor would range from about 5 per cent in the Northern Territory to 100 per cent in some hospitals and jurisdictions (ABS/AIHW 1999). As a measure of the level of incomplete reporting in terms of mortality, Indigenous

deaths account for only 1.1 per cent of all deaths in Australia despite the fact that Indigenous people represent 2.1 per cent of the total population (Cunningham and Paradies 2000).

In other functional areas, discrepancies occur between census counts of unemployment and Centrelink payments for Newstart Allowance. In Kakadu, if census data are used as the denominator, then administrative data indicated an enrolment rate for Aboriginal school-age children of 120 per cent. If service provider population estimates are used as the denominator, only 50 per cent are enrolled (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999). In Katherine East communities, the census-based estimate of annual non-employment income amounts to \$1.1m whereas payments from Centrelink amount to \$3.1m (Taylor and Westbury 2000). One issue that these discrepancies point to is the difficulty of establishing consistent and meaningful numerators and denominators for use in the calculation of rates of events.

VOLATILITY

Between 1991 and 1996, the census count of the Indigenous population increased by 33 per cent. Using ABS projections, the 1996 population of 386,000 is now (in 2000) either 420,000 (low series projection) or 477,000 (high series projection). According to estimates of job needs generated by CAEPR, just to have maintained the employment to working-age population ratio at its low 1996 level of 38 per cent we would by now have to have created an additional 10,000 jobs since 1996 (Taylor and Hunter 1998). The message here is that the Indigenous population is dynamic and data on Indigenous Australians age quickly.

There are two components to this dynamism. The first noted above is relatively rapid but unpredictable population growth (for further details of the processes involved here see Ross 1999). The second is high population mobility.

High levels of short-term inter-regional movement raise a number of access and equity issues with regard to the provision of services (Taylor 1998). For example, the residence pattern of many Indigenous people is best described as bi-local or even multi-local. This raises a series of question for the estimation of need:

- In which location can services be legitimately claimed?
- Should services be duplicated to cater for frequent movement between places?
- Urban areas have been found to be net recipients of temporary sojourners. Therefore, should urban services be augmented to compensate for additional loads? Although this does occur to some extent through the provision of services such as hostel accommodation, what of the pressure on housing in town camps and suburban areas that frequently host visitors?
- At the very least, in planning for service provision recognition needs to be given to the role that central places fulfil on behalf of adjacent hinterlands.
- Also apparent is a need to consider how temporary residents might be included in estimations of household size and pressure on infrastructure. While movement of people between households may be an infrequent occurrence in the general Australian population, this is not the case for Indigenous households. This point is reinforced by

the detailed analyses of housing and infrastructure needs conducted by Healthhabitat (Pholeros, Rainow and Torzillo 1993).

Many of the issues raised in regard to urban areas apply in reverse in rural contexts, for example, in terms of the interactions between outstations and associated host townships. Reflecting this, one response by ATSIC has been to suggest different levels of infrastructure and service need depending on whether occupancy at outstations is occasional, seasonal or permanent. Of course, this requires that such information on occupancy exists and in this context the impending release of data from the 1999 CHINS is timely.

High levels of Indigenous population movement raise many issues for the Commission's exercise that are difficult to prescribe but essential to contemplate (Taylor and Bell 1999). However, two broad sets of issues seem apparent:

- The difficulties in defining 'populations at risk' presented by shifting propensities to identify as Indigenous in different statistical contexts are added to by high population turnover in many regions.
- Because of high mobility, by the time needs assessments emerge out of data analysis, the population in many regions may well have changed. This point is best illustrated with an empirical example. The Moreton region on the outskirts of Brisbane which encompasses much of the South East Queensland ATSIC Regional Council Area provides a case in point. What are the implications for assessing needs in this region when it is clear that the population profiled using 1996 Census data would by now, in all likelihood, have been added to by newly identifying Indigenous people with numerous movers out of the region replaced by numerous movers in? We know, for example, that around 40 per cent of recent population growth was due to increased propensity to identify. Of those who declared Indigenous status in 1996, 75 per cent had changed residence since 1991, 33 per cent changed residence each year, and there was an almost 60 per cent inter-regional turnover of the population in the five-year period since 1991.

In this context, a fundamental consideration for the Commission is, what use do 1996 Census data serve for an Inquiry that aims to measure needs in 2000-01?

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