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ABORIGINAL COUPLES AT THE 2001 CENSUS

■ Bob Birrell and John Hirst

One important indicator of the integration of Aborigines into non-aboriginal Australian society is the level of couple intermix. Analysis of the 2001 census shows that: a majority of couples with an Aboriginal partner are intermixed, that this majority is increasing in both metropolitan and non- metropolitan locations and that intermix is widening the economic base of Aboriginal families.

What is the worst blot on Australian society? There can be only one answer: the position of the Aborigines. We have tried many policies and programmes and yet many believe that the situation is getting worse not better.

As the rethinking takes place, perhaps we should return to a basic question. Instead of asking what to do in Aboriginal policy, we might ask who are the Aborigines?

To think of them as the group most separate from the rest of Australian society is very misleading. Only a small minority live in rural or remote areas. Most live in urban settings. Nearly one third of the Australian residents who self- identified as Aboriginal and/or as Torres Strait Islander persons in the 2001 Census live in the capital cities of the states. (The great majority identified as Aborigines. For simplicity they are referred to as such below.) Their presence in the cities is well enough known, though not well enough remembered. When we speak of Aborigines we think of people living in degraded circumstances in country towns or in the outback.

Then there is the issue of with whom Aborigines live, whether within or outside the capital cities. If we look at Aboriginal families in the capital cities, we find very few in which an Aboriginal man and an Aboriginal woman are living together. According to data drawn for this analysis

from the 2001 Census, 87 per cent of couples with an Aboriginal member were intermixed. That is they were composed of an Aboriginal man and a non-Aboriginal partner or an Aboriginal woman and a non-Aboriginal partner. On this test these metropolitan Aborigines are very well integrated into the wider society. A far greater proportion of first and second-generation Greeks and Italians living in Australia marry within their own group than do Aborigines living in the capital cities.

Outside the state capitals Aborigines are more likely to have Aboriginal partners but, nevertheless, 60 per cent of all couples with an Aboriginal member were intermixed. Only outside Perth in Western Australia and Darwin in the Northern Territory are a majority of couple families with an Aboriginal member composed of both an Aboriginal man and an Aboriginal woman. Within the Northern Territory (other than Darwin) the great majority of families — 87 per cent — are purely Aboriginal. But couples with an Aboriginal member in the Northern Territory (other than in Darwin) amount to less than 10 per cent of all such couples in Australia. And yet, the exceptional case is often taken as the norm.

By 2001, intermixed couples made up 69 per cent of couples with an Aboriginal member. The proportion of mixed households has been steadily growing from 46

Table 1a: Indigenous couple families by location and age of female partner, 1996

Female partner's age (yrs)	Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are				Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are			
		Both Indig.	Female Indig. ^b	Male Indig. ^c	Total		Both Indig.	Female Indig. ^b	Male Indig. ^c	Total
	Sydney					Rest of New South Wales				
15-24	813	9.3	48.0	42.7	100.0	1,656	24.3	38.0	37.6	100.0
25-34	2,011	9.6	51.7	38.7	100.0	3,770	25.3	40.8	33.9	100.0
35-44	1,723	12.6	48.9	38.5	100.0	3,297	25.0	41.2	33.8	100.0
45+	1,739	16.8	45.1	38.1	100.0	2,985	34.8	34.6	30.6	100.0
Total ^d	6,320	12.3	48.4	39.3	100.0	11,804	27.3	38.6	34.1	100.0
	Melbourne					Rest of Victoria				
15-24	265	12.5	50.6	37.0	100.0	283	14.8	45.2	39.9	100.0
25-34	715	16.1	46.6	37.3	100.0	656	19.5	47.3	33.2	100.0
35-44	626	16.3	41.7	42.0	100.0	525	20.0	44.6	35.4	100.0
45+	578	21.5	39.6	38.9	100.0	552	28.3	39.9	31.9	100.0
Total ^d	2,208	16.9	43.3	39.7	100.0	2,042	21.1	43.7	35.2	100.0
	Brisbane					Rest of Queensland				
15-24	672	15.3	41.4	43.3	100.0	1,813	39.2	32.4	28.4	100.0
25-34	1,410	12.4	46.0	41.6	100.0	4,049	38.4	35.8	25.8	100.0
35-44	1,123	13.4	48.9	37.8	100.0	3,116	39.6	37.1	23.3	100.0
45+	880	17.2	49.3	33.5	100.0	2,729	46.2	37.0	16.9	100.0
Total ^d	4,106	14.1	46.5	39.4	100.0	11,810	40.3	35.6	24.1	100.0
	Adelaide					Rest of South Australia				
15-24	254	24.8	42.1	33.1	100.0	239	46.9	29.3	23.8	100.0
25-34	501	16.4	44.5	39.1	100.0	551	47.0	31.6	21.4	100.0
35-44	389	23.9	42.7	33.4	100.0	418	42.1	36.1	21.8	100.0
45+	303	28.4	38.3	33.3	100.0	348	50.3	31.6	18.1	100.0
Total ^d	1,457	22.2	42.0	35.8	100.0	1,571	46.0	32.1	21.9	100.0
	Perth					Rest of Western Australia				
15-24	444	33.1	31.8	35.1	100.0	830	66.9	17.8	15.3	100.0
25-34	946	27.1	39.2	33.7	100.0	1,761	60.9	22.8	16.3	100.0
35-44	720	34.3	43.2	22.5	100.0	1,241	61.6	24.9	13.5	100.0
45+	539	34.5	39.9	25.6	100.0	1,062	65.9	23.5	10.5	100.0
Total ^d	2,677	31.2	38.8	30.0	100.0	4,939	62.6	22.4	15.0	100.0
	Greater Hobart					Rest of Tasmania				
15-24	165	10.9	46.7	42.4	100.0	312	11.2	48.7	40.1	100.0
25-34	333	10.2	47.1	42.6	100.0	849	12.1	45.6	42.3	100.0
35-44	335	8.7	49.9	41.5	100.0	745	13.0	44.7	42.3	100.0
45+	254	11.8	46.9	41.3	100.0	617	11.7	44.1	44.2	100.0
Total ^d	1,102	10.1	47.2	42.7	100.0	2,544	12.1	45.0	43.0	100.0
	Darwin					Rest of Northern Territory				
15-24	155	29.0	39.4	31.6	100.0	1,237	90.5	5.1	4.4	100.0
25-34	370	30.0	43.5	26.5	100.0	1,837	87.4	8.3	4.4	100.0
35-44	292	34.6	42.8	22.6	100.0	1,334	82.6	11.2	6.1	100.0
45+	231	35.5	42.4	22.1	100.0	1,067	85.3	11.5	3.2	100.0
Total ^d	1,057	32.1	42.1	25.8	100.0	5,485	86.3	8.9	4.8	100.0
	Australian Capital Territory					Australia ^e				
15-24	87	6.9	48.3	44.8	100.0	9,228	37.6	32.6	29.8	100.0
25-34	206	11.2	40.8	48.1	100.0	19,973	33.4	37.2	29.4	100.0
35-44	174	12.1	37.9	50.0	100.0	16,066	32.8	38.5	28.7	100.0
45+	89	23.6	37.1	39.3	100.0	13,984	37.8	36.1	26.1	100.0
Total ^d	565	12.6	39.8	47.6	100.0	59,717	34.7	36.3	29.1	100.0

^a An Indigenous couple is one where at least one partner declares as Indigenous.

^b Female Indigenous but male either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown

^c Male Indigenous but female either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown

^d Totals include a few cases where the spouse was temporarily absent.

^e Australia includes 30 families who reside in Other Territories.

Source: Table prepared by the Centre for Population and Urban Research from Australian Bureau of Statistics, unpublished customised matrix, 1996 Census

Table 1b: Indigenous couple families by location and age of female partner, 2001

Female partner's age (yrs)	Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are				Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are			
		Both indig.	Female indig. ^b	Male indig. ^c	Total		Both indig.	Female indig. ^b	Male indig. ^c	Total
	Sydney					Rest of New South Wales				
15-24	736	8.0	47.7	44.3	100.0	1,557	22.7	37.1	40.1	100.0
25-34	2,198	7.2	50.9	41.9	100.0	3,990	22.7	41.7	35.5	100.0
35-44	2,021	8.9	46.1	45.1	100.0	4,015	21.5	42.2	36.3	100.0
45+	2,246	10.7	48.0	41.3	100.0	4,262	26.6	39.7	33.7	100.0
Total ^d	7,263	8.8	47.9	43.3	100.0	13,945	23.4	40.4	36.3	100.0
	Melbourne					Rest of Victoria				
15-24	219	10.0	45.2	44.7	100.0	259	19.3	43.6	37.1	100.0
25-34	758	7.7	46.7	45.6	100.0	645	13.6	47.9	38.4	100.0
35-44	604	9.8	48.2	42.1	100.0	612	13.2	43.0	43.8	100.0
45+	732	9.0	47.1	43.9	100.0	759	18.7	45.2	36.1	100.0
Total ^d	2,340	8.8	46.5	44.7	100.0	2,288	15.8	44.9	39.3	100.0
	Brisbane					Rest of Queensland				
15-24	680	12.8	44.1	43.1	100.0	1,855	39.2	29.2	31.6	100.0
25-34	1,695	9.9	47.6	42.5	100.0	4,309	37.6	35.3	27.1	100.0
35-44	1,370	11.5	45.7	42.8	100.0	3,804	33.9	39.1	27.0	100.0
45+	1,303	13.0	48.7	38.3	100.0	3,549	39.8	38.5	21.7	100.0
Total ^d	5,085	11.4	46.5	42.0	100.0	13,641	37.0	36.0	27.0	100.0
	Adelaide					Rest of South Australia				
15-24	228	14.0	43.4	42.5	100.0	262	54.6	20.2	25.2	100.0
25-34	530	9.2	51.5	39.2	100.0	560	52.5	27.9	19.6	100.0
35-44	456	14.3	47.6	38.2	100.0	552	45.1	32.8	22.1	100.0
45+	421	19.2	43.7	37.1	100.0	553	44.3	31.6	24.1	100.0
Total ^d	1,638	13.9	47.2	38.9	100.0	1,944	47.9	29.1	23.0	100.0
	Perth					Rest of Western Australia				
15-24	380	27.4	35.0	37.6	100.0	908	64.2	19.6	16.2	100.0
25-34	932	26.6	37.6	35.8	100.0	1,742	60.7	21.9	17.4	100.0
35-44	846	28.8	41.6	29.6	100.0	1,502	57.8	24.9	17.3	100.0
45+	753	29.0	44.6	26.4	100.0	1,366	58.8	27.9	13.3	100.0
Total ^d	2,935	27.7	39.9	32.4	100.0	5,579	59.3	23.6	17.1	100.0
	Greater Hobart					Rest of Tasmania				
15-24	175	8.0	45.7	46.3	100.0	332	10.2	47.0	42.8	100.0
25-34	328	5.5	52.1	42.4	100.0	755	10.9	50.9	38.3	100.0
35-44	353	10.2	45.0	44.8	100.0	801	10.2	47.7	42.1	100.0
45+	354	8.8	49.2	42.1	100.0	822	10.3	43.9	45.7	100.0
Total ^d	1,213	8.2	48.1	43.7	100.0	2,732	10.4	47.0	42.7	100.0
	Darwin					Rest of Northern Territory				
15-24	199	40.2	31.2	28.6	100.0	1,264	91.8	3.8	4.4	100.0
25-34	474	28.1	43.7	28.3	100.0	1,990	87.5	7.7	4.8	100.0
35-44	373	24.4	42.6	33.0	100.0	1,547	85.8	9.6	4.7	100.0
45+	320	26.9	49.1	24.1	100.0	1,206	84.0	11.9	4.1	100.0
Total ^d	1,375	28.4	42.5	29.1	100.0	6,023	87.0	8.2	4.8	100.0
	Australian Capital Territory					Australia ^e				
15-24	85	10.6	38.8	50.6	100.0	9,145	37.8	30.9	31.3	100.0
25-34	260	11.9	42.7	45.4	100.0	21,175	31.4	37.6	30.9	100.0
35-44	205	15.1	37.6	47.3	100.0	19,073	29.5	38.5	32.0	100.0
45+	162	12.3	43.2	44.4	100.0	18,832	30.6	39.5	29.9	100.0
Total ^d	724	12.6	40.2	47.2	100.0	68,776	31.3	37.2	31.5	100.0

^a An Indigenous family is one where at least one partner declares as Indigenous.

^b Female Indigenous but male either not Indigenous or Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander status unknown

^c Male Indigenous but female either not Indigenous or Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander status unknown

^d Totals include a few cases where the spouse was temporarily absent.

^e Australia includes 51 families who reside in Other Territories.

Source: Table prepared by the Centre for Population and Urban Research from Australian Bureau of Statistics, unpublished customised matrix 2001 Census

per cent in 1986, to 51 per cent in 1991, to 64 per cent in 1996 and to 69 per cent in 2001. Tables 1a and 1b show the level of intermix in 2001 and 1996 for each capital city and rest of state area. The trend towards higher levels of intermix is evident across all the locations listed except rest of Northern Territory and the ACT.

Sexual relations between black and white have been occurring since European settlement began. In colonial times there was virtually only one form this could take: a brief coupling of a European man and an Aboriginal woman. A European woman would not have sex with an Aboriginal man.

We have come a long way since then. Relationships are now ongoing, and non-Aboriginal women are as likely to be involved in them as non-Aboriginal men.

In most cases the children of these mixed households are identified by their parents as Aborigines. When the children grow up they may well continue to identify as Aborigines and so count officially as Aborigines. The official definition of an Aborigine is a person of Aboriginal descent (with no proportion specified) who identifies as an Aborigine and is accepted by other Aborigines as Aboriginal.

So Aborigines partnering with non-Aborigines will not reduce the number of Aborigines. To the contrary, it is an important source of the overall rapid growth in the self-identified Aboriginal population in Australia. At the 2001 Census this was 410,003, up from 352,970 in 1996 and 227,593 in 1986.

In this respect Aboriginal mixed households are different from other inter-ethnic unions. If an Italian marries a Greek, their children will most likely think of themselves as Australian. If an Aboriginal man marries an Italian woman, their children will likely identify as Aboriginal.

These developments make the question

of who is an Aborigine significant for the development of government policy. People are free, of course, to identify themselves as they wish, but should government programmes for Aborigines extend to all the children of the mixed households in the capital cities? Say a household is made up of an Aboriginal man of mixed descent (one of his four grandparents may have been Aboriginal) and a woman of non-Aboriginal descent. If their children identify as Aboriginal should they be eligible for special programmes to benefit Aborigines? Would they be included among the Aborigines with whom a treaty might be made? Do special land rights or political self-determination have any relevance to their situation? Are they victims of colonialism or part of the wonderful mixing of people that is modern Australia?

The answer might depend on how far they remain people in special need. Perhaps they do, since there are continual reports attesting to the disadvantage of Aboriginal families. If intermix is not improving the economic situation of couples with an Aboriginal partner, then perhaps Aboriginal persons are partnering into a non-Aboriginal underclass. In addition, perhaps intermixed couples and their families are being dragged down by the racism some allege Aboriginal people experience from the mainstream community.

The 2001 Census allows an assessment of these speculations. For this purpose, data were collected on the education and income levels of the men and women making up Aboriginal, intermixed and non-Aboriginal couples. These data indicate that the economic situation of couples in which the Aboriginal person marries out is far better than it is for dual Aboriginal couples. The consequence is a widening of the economic base of

Aboriginal families.

The way this occurs is that the Aboriginal women who partner with non-Aboriginal men are doing so with men who possess more years of education and higher incomes than do the Aboriginal men living with Aboriginal women. This upward class mobility is substantial and it occurs in each capital city and the regional areas of each state and territory. Table Two provides data on these relationships aggregated to metropolitan and non-metropolitan levels.

There is a similar pattern for the Aboriginal men who partner non-Aboriginal women. These women have more years of education than do Aboriginal women who partner Aboriginal men. This finding, too, applies across all the capital cities and regional areas of Australia. Table 3 shows the

highest level of schooling of the female's partners in both Aboriginal and intermixed couples at the metropolitan and non-metropolitan level. For example in the case of non-metropolitan areas, the table indicates that 20 per cent of the Aboriginal women partnered with Aboriginal men have schooling to years 11 and 12 compared with 38 per cent of the non-Aboriginal women who partner Aboriginal men.

Since most of the children currently being identified as Aboriginal now come from intermixed families, this should translate into better life chances for the children. It is true that Aboriginal Australians are starting well behind their fellow Australians on most indicators of well-being. Nevertheless, there is evidence, confirmed by the results of the 2001 Census, that the Aboriginal and

Table 2: Income of male partners by Aboriginal status of couples in metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia, 2001

Location and Aboriginal status of parties in couple families		Weekly income of male partner (%)						
		Total	<\$300	\$300-599	\$600-999	\$1000+	Not stated	Total
Metropolitan areas								
Neither Aboriginal	2,303,897	21	22	28	26	3		100
Both Aboriginal	2,441	41	26	16	8	9		100
Female Aboriginal*	8,518	23	26	32	16	4		100
Male Aboriginal*	7,752	23	27	32	15	3		100
Total **	2,381,289	22	22	28	26	3		100
Non-metropolitan areas								
Neither Aboriginal	1,480,161	27	27	25	17	3		100
Both Aboriginal	19,144	63	19	8	3	7		100
Female Aboriginal*	15,659	32	29	23	11	4		100
Male Aboriginal*	13,384	32	31	25	10	3		100
Total **	1,571,432	28	27	25	17	3		100
Australia								
Neither Aboriginal	3,784,058	24	24	27	23	3		100
Both Aboriginal	21,585	61	20	9	3	7		100
Female Aboriginal*	24,177	29	28	26	13	4		100
Male Aboriginal*	21,136	29	29	27	12	3		100
Total **	3,952,721	24	24	27	22	3		100

* Includes some whose partners did not state their Aboriginal status (less than two per cent).

** Includes couples who did not give Aboriginal status.

The table does not include 113,050 couples (including 1,878 Aboriginal couples) where the male partner was temporarily absent on Census night.

Source: Table prepared by Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University from unpublished data, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 2001

Table 3: Highest level of schooling of partners in couples by indigenous status and by metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, Australia, 2001

Metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, Australia, 2001									
Location and Aboriginal status of parties in couple families	Total	Highest level of schooling male partner %				Highest level of schooling female partner %			
		Yr 10 or below	Yr 11- 12	Not stated	Total	Yr 10 or below	Yr 11- 12	Not stated	Total
Metropolitan areas									
Neither indigenous	2,303,897	41	55	4	100	42	55	4	100
Both indigenous	2,441	65	25	11	100	61	29	10	100
Female indigenous*	8,518	57	38	5	100	57	39	4	100
Male indigenous*	7,752	62	35	3	100	51	46	3	100
Total**	2,350,365	42	54	4	100	42	54	4	100
Non-metropolitan areas									
Neither indigenous	1,480,161	57	39	4	100	53	44	4	100
Both indigenous	19,144	75	16	9	100	72	20	8	100
Female indigenous*	15,659	67	28	5	100	64	32	4	100
Male indigenous*	13,384	70	27	4	100	59	38	3	100
Total**	1,547,953	57	39	5	100	53	43	4	100
Australia									
Neither indigenous	3,784,058	47	49	4	100	46	50	4	100
Both indigenous	21,585	74	17	9	100	71	21	8	100
Female indigenous*	24,177	64	31	5	100	62	34	4	100
Male indigenous*	21,136	67	30	4	100	56	41	3	100
Total**	3,898,318	48	48	4	100	46	50	4	100

Notes: See Table 2.

Table does not include 167,453 couples where either the male or female partner was temporarily absent on Census night. No additional information is available for an absent partner.

non-Aboriginal situation is converging (particularly on the income dimension)

The situation of some Aborigines in Australia remains a blot on our society. But on the test of income, it is a problem which is concentrated amongst the minority of Aboriginal families which are not intermixed. Most of these families are located in regional areas of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The income statistics in Table 2 show that there is a huge gap between the earnings of males in intermixed and other Aboriginal families. Some 63 per cent of males in 'both Aboriginal' families in non-metropolitan Australia

earned the very low incomes of less than \$300 per week in 2001 compared with 32 per cent of males in intermixed families and 27 per cent of males in non-indigenous couples.

Assessments of Aboriginal issues in Australia which generalise across the universe of those who identify as Aboriginal obscure, rather than illuminate, the search for answers.

Notes

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