



The National Library supplies copies of this article under licence from the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL). Further reproductions of this article can only be made under licence.

## AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

John Taylor

*The demography of Australia's indigenous population is quite distinct from that of the mainstream. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 3rd National Population Outlook Conference of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research held in Adelaide, 22nd-24th February. It provides a summary of the contemporary dynamics of indigenous demographic change and considers a range of policy implications.*

The tenth anniversary issue of the *Journal of the Australian Population Association* published in 1994 comprised five review articles by some of the country's leading demographers. These variously examined progress in Australian demography. Only one article, however, contained explicit reference to indigenous people, and this only briefly to note their distinct fertility and mortality levels.<sup>1</sup> It may be that this lack of interest in Australia's original population reflects research priorities based on statistical reality, with the demography of indigenous Australians viewed as a minority concern in the face of issues of much broader import and application. At the national level this is understandable as indigenous people comprise only 1.6 per cent of the total population. At the regional level, however, the situation can be quite different. Indeed, the demography of large tracts of remote Australia, in particular, is effectively the demography of indigenous inhabitants. Another explanation may stem from the relatively recent inclusion of indigenous people in official demographic statistical collections. However, this began more than 20 years ago now and indigenous people have been counted on a consistent basis in the past five censuses providing for disaggregation of their characteristics according to the full range of census variables. While it is true that major deficiencies pervade the collection and analysis of statistics relating to indigenous people, any shortcomings could be taken more as a research challenge rather than as a deterrent.

Whatever rationale is advanced, it appears that the relative exclusion of indigenous people from mainstream demographic analysis is out of step with public policy developments. In recognition of their uniquely disadvantaged status in education, health, housing and the labour market,

indigenous people increasingly command public attention way beyond their mere numbers or proportional representation. Accordingly, in the current political and economic environment there are growing demands for information to represent indigenous interests. Not least of these is concerned with population. According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), both planning and policy formulation begin with the facts of demography. In a fundamental sense, the broad parameters of ATSIC's charter are viewed as determined by the size, growth, composition and location of indigenous populations. These factors also provide the basis for assessment of indigenous social justice issues: the recognition of need, access and equity, and fair and equitable distribution of resources.<sup>2</sup>

Given the pressing policy significance of demographic analysis in indigenous affairs, three questions, in particular, appear of immediate relevance: How fast is the population growing and how is it likely to grow over the coming years? What is the age structure of the population and how is this likely to change? What is the spatial distribution of the population and how is this changing? This paper outlines the basic facts regarding each of these questions and considers the broad policy implications of indigenous population change into the new millennium.

### ESTIMATING POPULATION SIZE

The true size of the indigenous population remains elusive. Suffice it to say, the official number derived from census counts almost certainly represents an underestimate, but to what degree is unknown. Leaving aside practical issues to do with enumeration, this anomaly derives ultimately from the social construction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. The most complete

exploration of this issue from a demographic perspective remains the work of Smith<sup>3</sup> who identified a continuing (and continuous) gap between the theoretical (in that it remains unknown) total population of any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry and the lower official census-based figure which he refers to as the 'revealed' population. Given this discrepancy, latent potential exists for growth due to changes in the propensity of individuals to identify themselves in official statistics as indigenous Australian.

The volatility that this presents is illustrated by the fact that changes in identification may have provided up to half of the growth in the indigenous population since 1971.<sup>4</sup> Such change also appears to vary considerably by geographic region. For example, in the 1971 Census, the Northern Territory and New South Wales accounted for 20 and 21 per cent of the total indigenous population respectively. By 1991, these proportions had changed to 15 and 26 per cent despite the fact that interstate migration flows effected only minor change in indigenous population distribution.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of population change in the most recent intercensal period suggests that growth due to changes in identification has receded with the 1991 census count close to expectation, given rates of natural increase from 1986, at least for the Aboriginal component of the indigenous population.<sup>6</sup>

Other difficulties are of a technical nature and relate to inconsistencies in enumeration. The ABS has regularly reported these but only recently have they attempted to adjust census population counts to overcome deficiencies in the enumeration of indigenous people. Three experimental adjustments were made to 1991 Census counts. The first involved a pro rata distribution of non-responses to the census question on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. The second corrected for errors in age reporting to smooth the age distribution, while the third tackled the problem of undercounting and involved a reconstitution of the population according to expected sex ratios.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of these adjustments, estimates of the resident indigenous population were derived for 1991 which produced a figure 6.4 per cent higher than the census count (282,268 compared to 265,459).

## POPULATION GROWTH

Projections of the indigenous population were constructed by Gray and Tesfaghiorghis<sup>8</sup> in preparing social indicators for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. These were subsequently revised on the basis of 1991 Census figures by Gray and Gaminiratne.<sup>9</sup> While some upward adjustment of projected numbers may be in order in the subsequent light of revised ABS estimates, the basic growth trends envisaged and the implications for shifting age structure remain intact. The Gray and Gaminiratne projection covers the period from 1991 to 2011, although they stress that only the first part of this period can be considered as a forecast. The second ten-year period of the projection is no more than a scenario drawn from possible trends.

Between 1986 and 1991, the average annual growth rate of the indigenous population was 3.0 per cent. The projection assumed a progressive reduction in this rate due to moderate declines in both mortality and fertility over the projection period (see Table 1).

The results of the projection are summarised in Table 2. This reveals an increase in the indigenous population from 268,012 in 1991 to 416,780 by the year 2011 – a total increase of 56.0 per cent or an average annual rate of 2.2 per cent. Using series A of the Australian population projections as a guide,<sup>10</sup> this would represent a rise in the proportion of the total population from 1.6 per cent in 1991 to 2.0 per cent in 2011. As indicated, the increase in population is not expected to be uniform over time with the most rapid gains currently under way and the population expected to pass the 300,000 mark in 1996. Beyond this date, the population will continue to increase but at progressively

**Table 1: Projected growth rates of indigenous Australian population, 1991-2011**

Projection period	Rate of growth per annum		
	Male	Female	Total
1991-1996	2.46	2.51	2.49
1996-2001	2.26	2.30	2.28
2001-2006	2.11	2.13	2.12
2006-2011	1.93	1.95	1.94

Source: Gray and Gaminiratne, 1993, p. 8

**Table 2: Projected indigenous Australian population and sex ratio, 1991-2011**

Year	Male	Female	Total	Sex ratio
1991	132,899	135,113	268,012	98.4
1996	150,268	153,214	303,452	98.1
2001	168,248	171,870	340,118	97.8
2006	186,964	191,227	378,191	97.7
2011	205,953	210,833	416,786	97.6

Source: adapted from Gray and Gaminiratne, 1993, p. 7

lower growth rates for the remainder of the projection period. Differential mortality rates in favour of females will ensure a slow but steady decline in the sex ratio.

#### Age structure

The most profound population shifts from a policy perspective derive from the expected change in age structure shown in Table 3. The striking feature here is the significant increase (67 per cent) in the population of working age (15-64 years) over the rest of this decade and on through the first decade of the new millennium. As a consequence, the proportion of the population in the working-age group is expected to rise from 59 per cent to 63 per cent with a concomitant decline in the proportion under 15 years of age from 39 per cent to 34 per cent. Although the rate of increase in the aged component of

the population will be greatest overall, the aged proportion of the indigenous population will remain very small rising to only three per cent. This presents a quite different scenario to the one developing for the Australian population as a whole, 14 per cent of which is expected to be over 65 years of age by 2011.<sup>11</sup>

#### Employment implications

One obvious policy issue directly affected by this change in age structure relates to employment prospects for indigenous people of working-age. Using the population projections to the year 2001 detailed above, Altman and Gaminiratne<sup>12</sup> have calculated the number of jobs that will be needed for indigenous people to meet various employment/population ratios. They examine three scenarios: a ratio of 37.0, the 1991 rate for indigenous Australians; a ratio of 60.0, the target rate of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP); and a ratio of 64.7, the rate for the non-indigenous population in 1991. Assuming that the base indigenous employment of 56,590 persons in 1991 is not eroded, estimates are provided of the numbers that will need to be employed to meet various employment/ population ratios. (See Table 4.) These vary from a need of 74,500 jobs for an employment/population ratio of 37.0 to 130,000 for an employment/ population ratio of 64.7.

These employment requirements are in turn translated to new job requirements and these needs vary from 1,800 new jobs per annum to maintain the indigenous status quo (owing to rapid population growth) to 7,400 new jobs per annum to achieve the 1991 non-indigenous status quo. Thus, to achieve employment equality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by the end of the decade under the above assumptions will require twice as many new jobs per annum as originally estimated by government in 1987. However, to achieve the parallel policy goal of income equalisation, there is need also to raise the quality of indigenous employment as indigenous

**Table 3: Distribution of projected indigenous Australian population by broad age group, 1991-2011**

Age group	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011
Numerical distribution					
<15	104,492	118,023	129,778	136,940	142,908
15-64	156,710	177,839	201,576	230,939	261,415
65+	6,810	7,620	8,764	10,312	12,464
Total	268,012	303,482	340,118	378,191	416,786
Index of growth (1991=100)					
<15	100	113	124	131	137
15-64	100	113	129	147	167
65+	100	112	129	151	183
Total	100	113	127	141	156
Per cent distribution					
<15	39.0	38.9	38.2	36.2	34.3
15-64	58.9	58.6	59.3	61.1	62.7
65+	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.7	3.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: adapted from Gray and Gaminiratne, 1993, p. 9

**Table 4: Required indigenous job growth 1991-2001  
under various employment scenarios**

Employment/ population ratio (people aged 15-64)	Base employment 1991 <sup>a</sup>	Required jobs 2001	New jobs required	New jobs per annum <sup>b</sup>
37.0	56,590	74,600	18,000	1,800
60.0	56,590	121,000	64,400	6,400
64.7 <sup>c</sup>	56,590	129,400	74,000	7,400

Source: Altman and Gaminiratne, 1994, p. 35

<sup>a</sup> Assuming that this base employment remains constant and does not decline.

<sup>b</sup> Over a ten-year period, that is to August 2001, not to 2000.

<sup>c</sup> Assuming that the employment/population ratio for the non-indigenous population remains static at the August 1991 level.

workers are currently over-represented in low status occupations.<sup>13</sup>

#### POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

A clear relationship has been established between location and the economic status of indigenous Australians.<sup>14</sup> Briefly, indigenous people in southern and eastern parts of the country have higher economic status than their counterparts in the north and west while an urban/rural gradient also exists. In this context, the markedly different spatial distribution of the indigenous population, compared to that of other Australians, makes an appreciation of population distribution essential to policy formulation.

One of the lasting impacts of European settlement has been a redistribution of the indigenous population into a wide variety of locational settings. This provides for quite different structural circumstances in regard to the nature of indigenous articulation with the wider economic system. Several categories of indigenous communities, though not mutually exclusive, reflect this varied pattern of settlement. These divide into a broad rural/urban classification with rural areas comprising:

- i) discrete townships mostly located in remote areas and likely to be responsible for their own municipal-type services;
  - ii) outstations and other small groups in remote areas linked to a resource organisation in a nearby township or other regional centre;
- and urban areas including:
- iii) indigenous people in State or Territory capital cities and major urban areas;
  - iv) indigenous people who are residents of country towns mixed in with a

predominantly non-indigenous population;

v) groups of indigenous people living in an identified location or camp site near or within an urban area and having different arrangements from the town for municipal services, or no such facilities at all.

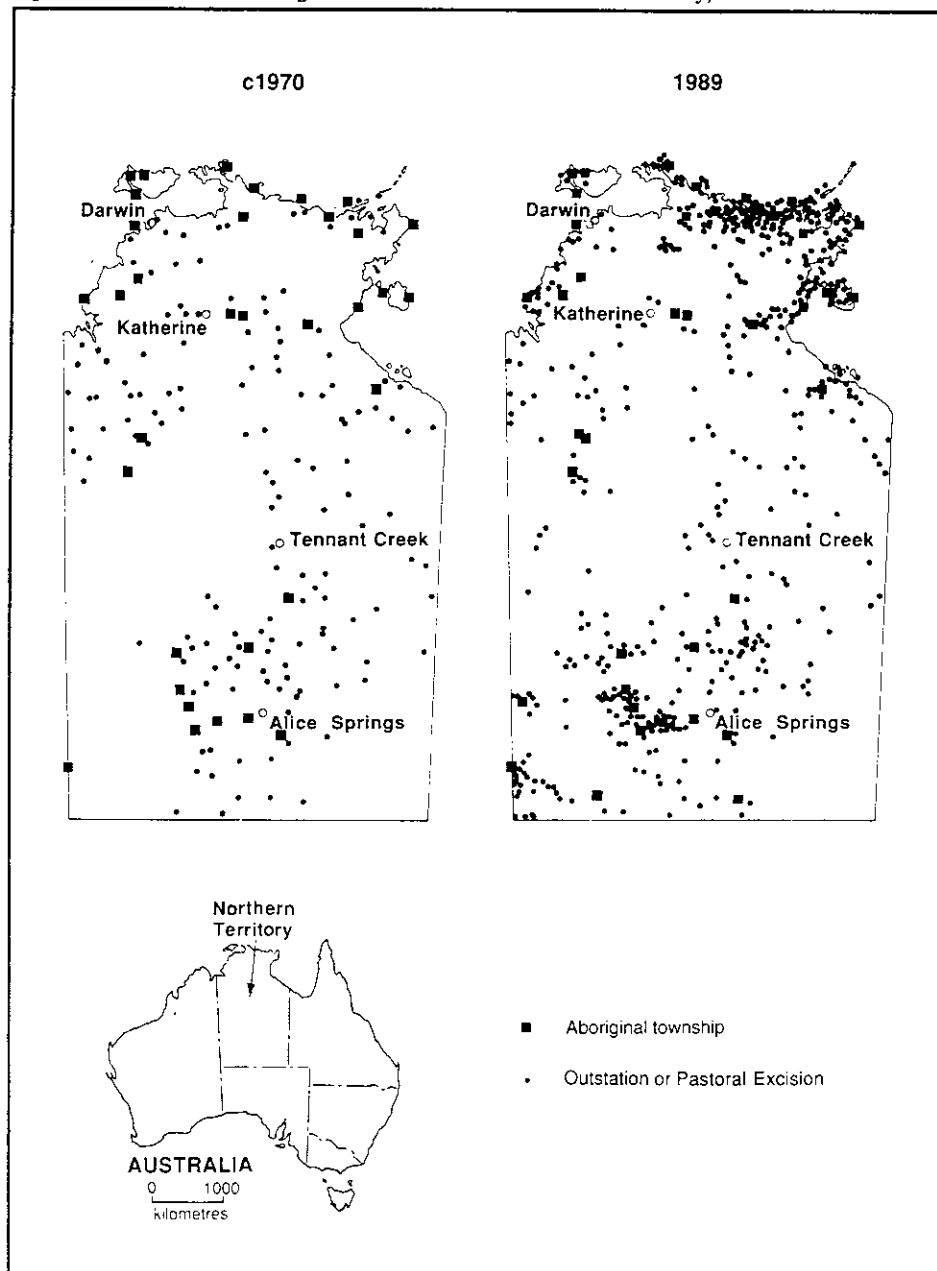
Currently, two-thirds of the indigenous population live in urban places reflecting a major shift in overall distribution, particularly in favour of major cities, in recent times. The proportion resident in the largest cities increased from an estimated five per cent of the total

population in 1961 to 28 per cent 30 years later. For the first half of this period, growth in metropolitan residence has been largely attributed to city-ward migration.<sup>15</sup> Since the mid-1970s, however, overall net flows of indigenous people between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas have been close to balance<sup>16</sup> and subsequent relative growth in the major urban population is likely to reflect an increased propensity of indigenous people based in such areas to self-identify in the census. As a consequence of this change in distribution, only one-third of indigenous people now reside in rural areas, although this is still far higher than the figure of 15 per cent recorded for the rest of the population.

In contrast with the increased concentration of population in metropolitan centres, population dispersion has been evident at the lower end of the settlement hierarchy since the 1970s. This is evidenced by a substantial expansion of settlement in remote localities as clearly illustrated in the Northern Territory (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> Collectively, this redistribution has been described as a 'return to country'<sup>18</sup> and reflects fundamental political, social and economic change occurring among certain sections of the indigenous population.

While a population presence has always been sustained in remote parts of the continent, this has been enhanced by a combination of factors including: the granting of land rights; increased pressure on traditional lands from miners and other resource developers; direct access to government funds for vehicles, capital equipment and infrastructure; and the desire to re-establish

Figure 1: Distribution of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, 1970 and 1989



living arrangements at more manageable residential scales away from the social pathologies, such as alcoholism, associated with daily life in centralised polyglot rural townships. These factors have stimulated a purposeful shift in population toward smaller scale, dispersed, clan-based settlements

referred to as 'outstations' or 'homeland centres'. In the Northern Territory, for example, something like 40 per cent of the indigenous population now resides, semi-permanently at least, in one of approximately 600 rural localities of less than 300 persons.<sup>19</sup> Recent developments in land acquisition and

an increasing willingness to provide remote area support services means that these trends are now also emerging in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and in Queensland's Cape York Peninsula.

#### POPULATION MOBILITY

The first comparative national parameters of indigenous internal migration have been developed by Taylor and Bell.<sup>20</sup> Indigenous Australians are at least as mobile as the general population although, unlike the general trend, there is no drift to the north and west of the continent. Common patterns of net migration loss are observed in western Queensland, western New South Wales and in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, while evidence of counter-urbanisation is also apparent for the indigenous population. Thus, in line with the general pattern, net migration gains for the indigenous population are concentrated in regions away from major cities particularly in south-east Queensland and along the New South Wales coast. Perth and Adelaide are exceptions to this as they continue to display a net inward flow of indigenous migrants. Notably absent from the overall pattern are the significant net gains in parts of north Australia observed among non-indigenous Australians due to employment-led migration.

It is difficult to describe patterns of net indigenous movement to outstations in north Australia as this occurs wholly within Statistical Local Areas and is therefore overlooked by the census. High levels of circular mobility between outstations and the townships to which they are linked also make the allocation of people to places difficult to achieve. The main indication of net movement has been provided by an expansion in the number of remote area settlements and the variable population growth rates observed between individual townships and their hinterlands.

As far as inter-regional patterns of migration flow are concerned, four common structures are evident. These include: state-based interchanges between capital cities and non-metropolitan regions; linkages between capital cities; long-distance migration flows; and very local flows forming regionalised networks. However, the degree to which these structures are manifest varies between the two populations with regionalised networks far more characteristic of indigenous flow patterns.<sup>21</sup>

From the ethnographic record, it is clear that indigenous people are highly mobile over the short-term.<sup>22</sup> This reflects, to varying degrees, activities associated with cultural maintenance, marginal attachment to the labour force and difficulties with access to services. Mobility is characterised by frequent movement between networks of places within areas which are familiar and defined spatially by a mix of social and economic considerations. These considerations include the location of kinfolk, traditional associations with the land, seasonal or short-term employment opportunities and the location of public and community services. In some areas, such as Arnhem Land, Central Australia, the Kimberley and Cape York Peninsula, high levels of circulation are also associated with foraging and ceremonial activities. As revealed in a number of contexts, this frequent, but short-term, movement has wide-ranging implications for the planning of adequate and appropriate services and programs in areas such as health, housing, employment, education and training.

#### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Demographic trends among indigenous Australians are quite distinct from those observed for the population as a whole. The direct policy implication to be drawn from this is the fact that indigenous population growth rates are already considerably higher than the Australian average and will be persistently so into the next millennium.

In practical terms, the projected shift in age structure of the population makes a reorientation in the emphasis of indigenous affairs program effort towards the needs of adults, particularly young adults, an urgent priority. One striking example of the policy crisis looming as a consequence of this demographic shift is illustrated by the projected doubling of the number of jobs required over the remainder of the decade to meet employment policy targets. By implication, this also means a doubling of education and training needs. Another major area of policy concern affected by this pattern of projected growth is the considerable backlog of indigenous housing need as the scale of need is determined partly by rates of household formation.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding significant intra-regional shifts of population in remote rural areas, notably from townships to satellite outstations, inter-regional migration is far more

significant in the redistribution of indigenous population in areas away from northern Australia and remote parts of western Australia. While most inter-regional moves in remote areas cancel each other out and turnover rates are generally low, elsewhere there is greater tendency for net gain or loss to occur and turnover rates are often high. This has implications for ATSIC regional councils in their estimation of global demand for services. For example, in most remote regions relative predictability in overall population levels and composition can be expected. In other regions, notably southern Queensland, central and south eastern New South Wales (including Australian Capital Territory), western and northern Victoria, and Adelaide and Perth and their respective hinterlands, the estimation of change in population numbers and composition is rendered more problematic.<sup>24</sup>

The structural circumstances facing indigenous communities and policy makers as they attempt to raise living standards are increasingly diverse and locationally dispersed. This, in turn, leads to variable constraints and opportunities for economic development. Given the growing emphasis on regionalism in Australian public policy generally, and particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs under the aegis of the ATSIC regional council structure, a demand is emerging for regional demographic profiles. As with many aspects of indigenous public policy, just when it seemed that research was responsive to requirements, greater needs are identified.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> G. Hugo, 'Australia's population growth, composition and distribution: emerging research needs', *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1994, pp. 55-83
- <sup>2</sup> J.G. Menham, 'ATSIC's requirements for social statistics in the 1990s', in J.C. Altman (ed.) *A National Survey of Indigenous Australians: Options and Implications*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, 1992, pp. 35-48
- <sup>3</sup> L.R. Smith, *The Aboriginal Population of Australia*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1980
- <sup>4</sup> J.C. Altman, 'Statistics about indigenous Australians: needs, problems, options and implications', in J.C. Altman (ed.) *A National Survey of Indigenous Australians: Options and Implications*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1992, pp. 1-16
- <sup>5</sup> A. Gray, 'Aboriginal migration to cities', *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1989, pp. 122-44
- <sup>6</sup> A. Gray, and H. Tesfaghiorghis, 'Aboriginal population prospects', *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1993, pp. 81-101.
- <sup>7</sup> D. Benham and A. Howe, 'Experimental estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population 1986-1991: States/Territories and Australia', *Demography Working Paper: 94/2*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1994
- <sup>8</sup> A. Gray and H. Tesfaghiorghis, 'Social indicators of the Aboriginal population of Australia', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 18*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1991
- <sup>9</sup> A. Gray and K.H.W. Gaminirratne, 'Indicative projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander indigenous population to 2011', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 52*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1993
- <sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Projections of the populations of Australia States and Territories 1993-2041*, Cat. no. 3222.0, Canberra, 1994
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> J.C. Altman and K.H.W. Gaminirratne, 'Employment implications of the growth of the indigenous Australian working-age population to 2001', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1994, pp. 29-45
- <sup>13</sup> J. Taylor, 'Measuring the occupational segregation of Australia's indigenous workforce: a census-based analysis', *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1994, pp. 175-204
- <sup>14</sup> J. Taylor, *Regional Change in the Economic Status of Indigenous Australians, 1986-91*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1993
- <sup>15</sup> F. Gale and J. Wundersitz, *Adelaide Aborigines: A Case Study of Urban Life 1966-1981*, Development Studies Centre, ANU, Canberra, 1982
- <sup>16</sup> A. Gray, 'Aboriginal migration to cities', *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1989, pp. 122-44
- <sup>17</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Aboriginal People in the Northern Territory*, Cat. no. 4107.7, Darwin, 1990, p. 12
- <sup>18</sup> C.A. Blanchard (Chairman), *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia*, Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987
- <sup>19</sup> Based on data supplied by the Northern Territory Department of Lands and Housing.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Taylor and M. Bell, 'The mobility status of indigenous Australians', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 78*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1994
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> J. Taylor and M. Bell, 'The relative mobility status of indigenous Australians: an agenda for research', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 77*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1994
- <sup>23</sup> R. Jones, *The Housing Need of Indigenous Australians, 1991*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1994
- <sup>24</sup> J. Taylor and M. Bell, 'The mobility status of indigenous Australians', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 78*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 1994