



Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
The Australian National University

Education, Training and Indigenous Futures
CAEPR Policy Research: 1990-2007

Research Summaries

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Reference No. 17

Summarising: Arthur (2003), *Torres Strait Islanders in the 2001 Census*

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990-2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

The MCEETYA report and associated research summaries are available at <www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php>.

Title of Research:

Torres Strait Islanders in the 2001 Census

Research Publication:

CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 255/2003

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2003_DP255.pdf>

Name of Researcher(s):

W.S. Arthur

Time period:

2001

Geographic location:

Torres Strait Islands

Methodology:

This paper is a statistical analysis of information about Torres Strait Islanders collected in the 2001 Census as well as analysis of trends between the 1996–2001 intercensal period. Information is reported at Torres Strait Island Region and State levels.

Aims:

The purpose of this research was to determine the extent to which Torres Strait Islanders are approaching parity with non-Indigenous Australians in terms of several important socio-economic indicators.

Selected findings and insights:

There were 43,574 Torres Strait Islanders¹ as at the 2001 Census, mostly residing in mainland Queensland (18,716) and New South Wales (7,677).

- 6,734 or 15.5% of all Torres Strait Islanders resided in the Torres Strait Island Region.
- Torres Strait Islanders represented 10.6% of Australia's total Indigenous population and 17.7% of mainland Queensland's Indigenous population.

Whilst the total number of Indigenous Australians increased by 16.7% between 1996 and 2001, the increase in Torres Strait Islanders was less at some 12.1%.²

1. These trends are complicated by the extent to which TSIs tended to also identify as Aboriginal people, with an increased proportion of TSIs self identifying also as Aboriginal across the two Census, especially on mainland Australia – possibly due to intermarriage between TSIs and Aboriginal people.

2. These include Torres Strait Islanders and those who identify as both TSI and Aboriginal.

In terms of **income parity** between Torres Strait islanders and non-Indigenous Australians:

- Nationally, the median weekly income of Islanders was 70% that of non-Indigenous Australians: and
- In the Torres Strait median incomes were only half that of non-Indigenous people residing there whereas for those residing in mainland Queensland they were about 80% of non-Indigenous incomes.

Generally the median incomes of Islanders were higher than for other Indigenous Australians.

The proportion of all **dwellings owned or being purchased** for Islanders was very low—at the national level it was 20% of the home ownership of non-Indigenous Australians, and significantly lower than for other Indigenous Australians. **Labour force participation** rates were lower for Islanders than non-Indigenous Australians (parity about 0.9) and **rates of employment** of the adult population similarly lower (parity about 0.8). Mainland Queensland and the Torres Strait followed this trend.

- **Private sector employment** (that is, excluding participation in the CDEP scheme or the government sector) for Islanders was much less than that for non-Indigenous Australians. This especially applied to those residing in the Torres Strait where 9.6% of the adult population worked in the private sector compared to 32.7% of non-Indigenous adults.

Compared to the **occupations** of working non-Indigenous Australians, Islanders were much more likely to be working as labourers and related workers (almost three times) and have parity with non-Indigenous Australians in terms of working in trade-related occupations. However Islanders were much less likely to be working in professional occupations, as managers or administrators or in advanced clerical and service positions.

Completion of Year 12 as an important educational benchmark showed that Islander completion rates were well below that of non-Indigenous Australians but greater than the completion rates for other Indigenous Australians:

- Nationally, 23% of the Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 and over had completed Year 12 compared to 39.5% of non-Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over;
- Similar parity existed for those residing in the Torres Strait and Queensland but in the case of NSW, WA and Tasmania there were much greater differences in parity. For example, in NSW the difference was 17.9% for Islanders compared to 39.9% for non-Indigenous Australians.

The proportion of Islanders either holding a **degree or attending a university or other tertiary institution** was about the same as for other Indigenous Australians but much lower than for non-Indigenous Australians:

- 2.1% of Islanders were university graduates compared to 10.2% of non-Indigenous Australians; and 2.9% of Islander adults attended university compared to 5.1% of non-Indigenous adult Australians;
- There was significant under-representation on both measures for those Islanders living in the Torres Straits compared to those living on mainland Australia. The largest number of Islanders attending university or other tertiary institution appeared to be residing in Queensland.

Nationally, Islanders attended **TAFE** at about the same rate as other Indigenous Australians and at a greater rate than do non-Indigenous Australians:

- Some 5% of adult Islanders attended TAFE (compared to 3.4% of non-Indigenous Australians), and
- This generalisation applied across almost all States and Territories, including the Torres Strait.

Computer usage is becoming increasingly important. In the Torres Strait, computer access was particularly low, with only 4.5% of Islanders having used a computer compared to 32% of non-Indigenous people. Across Australia, the comparative proportions were 17.3% of Islanders compared to 44.1% of non-Indigenous Australians using a computer.

Educational implications:

The challenges facing educational authorities in regard to Islander young people are similar to those for Indigenous people in general. Further improving **Year 12 completion** rates and **retaining tertiary educated young people** on the Islands are two areas of concern. The lack of parity with non-Indigenous people in higher occupational levels and employment in the private sector is a related concern. Whilst the former may be addressed through the school curriculum and more focused career counselling, creating employment opportunities for tertiary graduates is dependent upon concerted efforts by government agencies represented on the Islands to actively engage those people, and to encourage and support those seeking to enter the private sector. [pathways]

Whilst recognising that the **private sector** is extremely small on the Islands, if there is to be an increase in the level of private sector employment, closer examination of the types of training courses being undertaken by Islander young people is required. For example, small business operations and financial skills training would appear valuable as VET offerings either in TAFE or senior secondary schooling. Furthermore the high level of TAFE participation does not necessarily indicate skills training or vocational qualifications consistent with private (or public) sector need. Any expansion of the private sector in the Torres Strait could only be achieved as part of an overall regional planning and development strategy involving educational providers, Community Councils and government agencies. [private sector employment] [training]

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: The Changing Demography of Indigenous Australia

Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education

Participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory schooling, training and higher education

Related papers:

W.S. Arthur, 'Careers, aspirations and the meaning of work in remote Torres Strait' *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 190*, 1999.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/1999_DP190.pdf>

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Job-searching and careers: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 205*, 2000.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000_DP205.pdf>

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Education, training and careers: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 207*, 2000.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000_DP207.pdf>

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Careers and Aspirations: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999-2003', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 259*, 2004.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004_DP259.pdf>