



CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH

**Reproducing exclusion or inclusion?
Implications for the wellbeing of
Indigenous Australian children**

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ANU	The Australian National University
ARIA	accessibility/remoteness index of Australia
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CD	Collection District
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
NTDE	Northern Territory Department of Education
PPS	Parenting Payment Single
RCIADIC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Abstract

This paper is exploratory. It examines the analytic usefulness and practical implications of the concepts of 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' in a cross-cultural context. The focus is on the socioeconomic wellbeing of Indigenous children, in the context of the families and households in which they live. First, the current dimensions and trends of Indigenous children's socioeconomic status are analysed using key indicators from the 2001 Census. Interpretive depth is given to that quantitative analysis by reference to the long-term ethnographic fieldwork and survey research conducted by the authors with Indigenous families in different communities. The paper demonstrates that, in terms of a 'deficit model' which emphasises exclusion, Indigenous children continue to be among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged children in Australia.

The paper then proceeds to consider an alternative perspective which focuses on an 'asset model', emphasising Indigenous children's inclusion and participation within their own culturally-based family, social and economic systems. Again, reference is made to qualitative and survey information.

The paper concludes by exploring the implications for children of exclusion from one sphere of life (i.e. the mainstream economy), for their inclusion in the other (i.e. the Indigenous sphere). It suggests, perhaps somewhat provocatively, that contrary to commonly held assumptions which emphasise assimilatory outcomes, exclusion from mainstream economic participation may be actively undermining Indigenous families' own capacity to reproduce culturally valued relationships and roles. If that is the case, then key aspects of Indigenous cultural wellbeing and social reproduction may be directly linked to breaking the cycle of inter-generational welfare dependency and economic exclusion that is being transmitted to Indigenous children.

Cultural inclusion in the Indigenous domain may be intimately linked to economic inclusion in another. If this is the case, choice about the form that economic participation should take, and the need for equitable access to economic opportunities, become critical factors for Indigenous children and their parents, families and households.

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Introduction

There are many variables in life that shape a child's future—how well adult family members are able to look after their children, the basic social and economic conditions of families, and their connections to the world of economic activity, education and health care. All these play a major part in the wellbeing and development of children. But concepts of wellbeing and of socioeconomic 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are themselves cultural constructs, sometimes involving very different values, meanings and behaviours. What might constitute social or economic exclusion from one perspective may constitute inclusion from another. Within a cross-cultural framework, the 'assumption of a set of normative standards for aspirations and achievements' needs to be questioned, as does the issue of exactly what it is people are being excluded from, or included in (Peace 2001: 31–2).

This exploratory paper examines, in a cross-cultural context, some of the definitional permutations, underlying assumptions and practical implications of the related concepts of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. The focus throughout is on the socioeconomic wellbeing of Indigenous children, in the households in which they live.

We first present an analysis of the current dimensions of Indigenous children's socioeconomic status as reported by key indicators from the 2001 Census. But data alone build just a part of the story. The quantitative analysis is given interpretive depth by reference to the long-term ethnographic fieldwork and survey research conducted by the authors with Indigenous families in different communities.

The picture that emerges is largely one of a 'deficit model' and emphasises the fact of children's socioeconomic exclusion (see also Goodluck & Willetto 2000). The analysis demonstrates that Indigenous children continue to be among the most economically disadvantaged in Australia. There is every indication that the transmission of reliance on welfare and high levels of unemployment are inter-generational, placing some Indigenous children at risk of future economic marginalisation and poverty.

We then consider an alternative perspective of Indigenous children's wellbeing; one based more on an 'asset model'. That picture emphasises their positive inclusion and participation within Indigenous culturally-based social and economic systems. Again, ethnographic and survey research information are presented to give qualitative depth to the dynamic aspects of inclusion.

Such seemingly different perspectives are important for gaining a fuller understanding of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, and for the formulation of relevant policies and service delivery aimed at facilitating the former and alleviating the latter for Indigenous children. The two perspectives pose important questions about the underlying assumptions and proposed objectives of policy and programs. The paper then proceeds to argue that in fact 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are not separate lived realities or analytic domains.

The paper concludes by exploring some of the implications for Indigenous children of the complex dialectical relationship between inclusion and exclusion. In particular, it examines the implications for children of their exclusion from one sphere of life (the mainstream economy and its benefits), for their inclusion in the other sphere of life (the Indigenous).

Indigenous families and households: the definitional and demographic context

Since 1971, Australians have been given the option in the national census of identifying themselves as 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander', and since 1996 they have been able to choose the option of 'both'. While the census has the advantage of enabling comparisons at a national level between Indigenous and other Australians, it is important to recognise that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classification structure (e.g. for such terms as 'household', 'family', 'parent', 'sole parent' and 'spouse') has been developed around non-Indigenous concepts and values. As a consequence it only partially reflects the Indigenous reality on the ground. Previous research by Daly and Smith (see e.g. Daly & Smith 1996, 1997, 1998) does indicate, however, that when ethnographic, survey and census data are used in combination, a fuller and more accurate picture of Indigenous social and economic life can be developed.

A key trend in the census since 1971 has been a dramatic increase in the size of the Indigenous population over this period. This can partly be explained by an increased willingness of people of Indigenous background to identify themselves as such, and by the use of improved collection methods by the ABS for the census in remote Australia. However it makes comparisons of changes over time very difficult as the characteristics of the underlying population may well have changed (Kinfu & Taylor 2002).

The ABS defines a 'household' in the census as:

[a] group of two or more related or unrelated people who usually reside in the same dwelling, who regard themselves as a household, and who make common provision for food or other essentials for living; or a person living in a dwelling who makes provision for his/her own food and other essentials for living, without combining with any other person (ABS 2001b: 209).

In the context of Indigenous households, this definition can be difficult to apply where people are living in improvised dwellings, are sharing resources across dwellings and are highly mobile. The mobility of many Indigenous people makes the ABS definitions of 'usual resident' and 'visitor' hard to apply to Indigenous households (Daly & Smith 1996; Martin et al. 2002).

The ABS defines a 'family' as 'two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household' (ABS 2001b: 202). This definition of family takes as its basis the concept of a nuclear family of parents and children, and other individuals in a household are located

in relation to this primary unit. An extended family living in a household is therefore thought of as a number of different families rather than one large extended family. It is now well recognised that this definition of family cannot be easily applied to the living arrangements of many Indigenous Australians (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002; Daly & Smith 1996; Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000; Martin et al. 2002; Musharbash 2000). Several researchers have highlighted some of the significant difficulties faced in applying the ABS definitions of 'household', 'family' and 'parent' in different locational contexts; especially for that part of the Indigenous population residing in very remote communities (Daly & Smith 1996; Morphy 2002).

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, many of the nationally aggregate comparisons based on census data have been shown to be consistent with local case study evidence produced by survey and ethnographic research (see e.g. Daly & Smith 1996, 1997a; Smith 2001) and therefore provide useful insights. In this paper, household data are considered to be far more reliable than family data in elucidating the social and economic significance of extended family structures. The household is also the unit that provides the more valid measure of income levels and childhood dependency burdens.

The demographic characteristics of the Indigenous Australian population are important variables when considering indicators for risk of exclusion. Children aged 15 years or under accounted for 39 per cent of the Indigenous population of Australia in the 2001 Census, but for only 20 per cent of the non-Indigenous population. The Indigenous population profile is youthful, and growing at almost double the national average, so that the number of people moving into the working-age population, and forming young families, is increasing rapidly. Household overcrowding has been an extensively documented phenomenon. By comparison, the remaining Australian population is an aging one, engendering different policy imperatives.

Indigenous households are typically larger than other Australian households, with higher than average numbers of dependent children. According to the 2001 Census, the median Indigenous household (defined as a household containing an Indigenous adult) had 3.4 persons compared to 2.6 persons for other Australian households. These Indigenous households were more likely to contain more than one family (in the ABS definition), reflecting the importance of extended, multi-generational families that has been highlighted in the ethnographic literature (see Table 1). The 2001 Census data also show 10 per cent of children in Indigenous households living in households containing more than one family compared with 2 per cent of other children.

Case study surveys conducted by the authors and others at the community level report a stark picture—with between 50 and 60 per cent of households having three or more generations present (Henry & Smith 2002: 4; Smith 2000), and with the average household having 6.5 members compared with the Australian average of 2.7 persons (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002: 4). In the two surveyed communities,

43 and 48 per cent respectively of residents were under the age of 16 years (Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000; Musharbash 2000).

Table 1. Percentage of multi-family households among all Indigenous and non-Indigenous households, 1991–2001

Census year	Indigenous households (%)	Other households (%)
1991	6.0	0.9
1996	7.2	1.4
2001	6.1	1.3

Sources: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001; Daly & Smith (1999).

There were also important differences between Indigenous and other Australian households in their type of tenure. Indigenous households were much less likely to be in owner-occupied dwellings than were other households.¹ The very high proportion of Indigenous households in rented dwellings in part reflects the importance of community housing in regional and remote Australia (see Appendix Table A1). However it implies that Indigenous households are unlikely to have benefited from the wealth effects of home ownership to the extent that other Australians have.

Table 2. Indigenous and non-Indigenous households by tenure type, 2001

Tenure type	Indigenous households (%)	Other households (%)
Fully owned	13.0	43.4
Being purchased	20.2	28.9
Rented	63.5	25.1
Other tenure type	3.3	2.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Indicators of risk of exclusion for Indigenous children

There are many different kinds of social and economic exclusion, and there have been varied research approaches taken to the related matters of cause, effect, choice and agency (see Hunter 2000; Peace 2001). Exclusion can be broadly defined as ‘multiple deprivations resulting from a lack of personal, social, political or financial opportunities’, resulting in the breakup of family ties and relationships and loss of identity and purpose (Hunter 2000: 2; see also Silver 1995). ‘Economic exclusion’ is taken as referring to the relative difference in income and standard of living of marginalised groups in a given society compared to the income of dominant groups in the same society (Archer & Mohamedou 2000: 5).

For the purposes of this paper's focus on children, we define being at risk of exclusion as 'growing up in circumstances that limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self' (US National Research Council, cited in Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003), and generally restrict children's opportunities for future economic success and social participation.

As indicators of exclusion from mainstream social and economic opportunities, we have adopted a small set of key statistical variables which are well documented internationally as correlating strongly with outcomes for children, and as being indicative of high risk of exclusion and ongoing disadvantage into adult life (see Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; Moore et al. 2002; Webster 1998). These variables are:

- absence of a parent;
- parental and other adult employment status;
- income level;
- welfare reliance;
- parental and other adult educational status; and
- health status.

The absence of a parent

It is frequently cited that one attribute of strong families—that of time spent together—is likely to be diminished when a child grows up with only a single parent or no parent present. Research also shows that many mainstream Australian single parent households have little immediate back-up—social or financial—to support them in the care and socialisation of their children (Pech & McCoull 1998; Travers & Richardson 1993). There is little research available which explores the consequences of the absence of a biological parent in multi-generational households.

As Table 3 demonstrates, Indigenous children are much less likely to be living with both their biological parents than are other Australian children. Only 43 per cent of children living in Indigenous households are natural or adopted children in couple families, compared with three-quarters of other children.² A much larger proportion of children in Indigenous households fall into the categories of 'foster and related' or 'unrelated' than do children in other households.

Appendix Table A2 shows that a much larger proportion of children in Indigenous families were living in sole parent families in all geographical locations, from major cities to very remote areas. There were no substantial differences according to location. The incidence of children who were 'otherwise related' to the adult or adults with whom they lived was much higher in remote and very remote locations than in more urbanised settings.

Table 3. Relationships in household for children, by family type, Indigenous and non-Indigenous households, 2001

	Couple family	One parent family	Total
Indigenous			
Natural, or adopted child	0.43	0.36	0.79
Step-child	0.09	0.00	0.09
Foster child	0.01	0.00	0.01
Otherwise related child	0.05	0.05	0.10
Unrelated child	0.00	0.01	0.01
Total	0.58	0.42	1.00
Other			
Natural, or adopted child	0.76	0.17	0.93
Step-child	0.05	0.00	0.05
Foster child	0.00	0.00	0.00
Otherwise related child	0.01	0.01	0.01
Unrelated child	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	0.82	0.18	1.00

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The 2001 Census reports that 42 per cent of Indigenous children are growing up in households with a single parent, compared with 18 per cent of other Australian children. In local surveys with households in two Indigenous communities, 82 per cent had either a sole parent and their children in residence, or children in residence without any parent present. In one community, one out of every two children lived with a sole parent (Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000).

The ethnographic literature reports that for Indigenous Australians sole parenthood is a social status that can re-occur over the life of women. For example, mature and widowed women effectively become aged 'sole parent' aunts and 'sole parent' grannies when they are called upon to look after the children of their female relatives, often for long periods of time. In such circumstances children may not receive reliable care, and they may become highly mobile as they 'do the rounds', 'hunting' for food and care from different carers (Henry & Daly 2001; Henry & Smith 2002: 10; Smith 1980).

The adverse impacts of this situation on the economic wellbeing of children, and the creation of significant childhood dependency burdens within families have been reported by Daly and Smith (1997a), and documented through qualitative community surveys with Indigenous families (Henry & Daly 2001; Henry & Smith 2002; Smith 2000). Sole parenthood is closely associated with poverty for all Australians, but this is particularly so for Indigenous Australians (Daly & Smith

1997; Ross & Mikalauskas 1996). Indigenous sole parents are also far less likely to receive child support from the non-custodial parent (Daly & Smith 1997; Smith 2000).

Income levels

Virtually every study of the wellbeing of families shows that children who spend their lives in households that are poor are more likely to lack adequate nutrition, quality housing, residential stability and other critical resources (see e.g. Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; Moore et al. 2002). This has significant consequences for children's later lives.

The income disadvantage of Indigenous households is entrenched. The households in which children live have substantially lower incomes than other Australian households (see Table 4). This result holds true across each of the locational groups identified in the accessibility/remoteness index of Australia (ARIA) index constructed by the ABS (see Appendix Table A3). Median household incomes were particularly low relative to other households in the major cities and in remote areas.

Table 4. Income distribution, Indigenous and non-Indigenous households with children, 2001

Households in:	Indigenous (A) 2001\$	Other (B) 2001\$	Ratio (A/B)
First quartile	428	623	0.69
Median	659	989	0.67
Third quartile	1022	1490	0.69

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

In 2001, the median weekly Indigenous household income was 81 per cent of that of other Australian households. However, once the larger number of residents in Indigenous households was taken into account the ratio of income per person in an Indigenous household to that of other Australian households fell to 62 per cent (see Table 5). Of children living in Indigenous households, 50 per cent were in households that had incomes below \$659 per week. This was 67 per cent of the median child's household income in other Australian households. And one-quarter of those Indigenous children were in households with incomes below \$428 per week.

In other words, the households in which Indigenous children live have substantially lower incomes than other Australian households. A recent study by Percival and Harding (2003) has used the Household Expenditure Survey to estimate the expenditure on children in families with varying levels of income. Among low income families (defined as those with incomes in the bottom fifth of families with children), they estimate that a child aged 0–4 years costs \$55 per week, one aged 5–9 years costs \$98 per week and one aged 10–14 years costs

\$130 per week. The expenditure on children in higher income families was above these figures.

Table 5. Median weekly income (2001 dollars) of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian households

	Indigenous (A) (2001\$)	Other (B) (2001\$)	Ratio (A/B)
1991	591	710	0.83
1996	603	706	0.85
2001	629	780	0.81
Median household income/median no. in household, 2001	185	300	0.62

Sources: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001; Daly & Smith (1999).

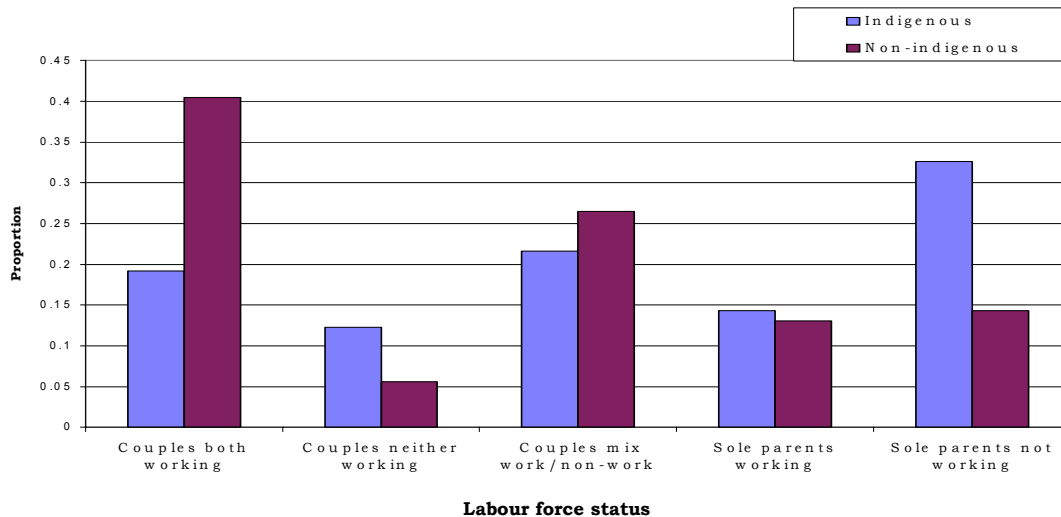
Given the higher Indigenous childhood dependency burdens, and even allowing for possible mitigating factors such as the higher rate of Indigenous occupation of low-cost housing, these estimates suggest that children in Indigenous households are likely to be putting considerable pressure on their households' limited budgets, with concomitant adverse impacts on children's wellbeing. In the context of household overcrowding, these financial impacts may become even more burdensome for low-income adults within the same households. At this stage of the project it has not been possible to compare these figures against an Indigenous poverty line—an important question for future research. Nevertheless, the data strongly suggest high relative levels of Indigenous childhood poverty.

Parental and other adult employment status

Economically active or working parents serve not only as a source of financial stability for children, but also as influential role models. Unemployment has been linked to social and economic exclusion because it reduces individual choice and motivation, and undermines the financial independence of families. Evidence from the wider Australian community shows a close correlation between a lack of paid employment and low family incomes (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell 2002).

The relatively low Indigenous household incomes reported in the 2001 Census reflect, in part, the poor employment records of their adult members. Fig. 1 presents 2001 Census data on the labour force status of parents. The proportion of Indigenous families with dependents and with no parent working was 45 per cent. This was over twice the rate for other Australian families with dependents, where the figure was 20 per cent. The most common group among Indigenous parents were sole parents who were not working, while among other Australians it was couples with both partners working. The proportion of children in Indigenous households who had no employed adult living with them was 42 per cent, compared with 16 per cent in other Australian households.

Fig. 1. Labour force status in Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with dependents, 2001



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The data on the employment status of parents in each of the ARIA locations are presented in the Appendix in Figs A1–A5. They show that in remote and very remote areas the share of children in Indigenous households who were living with a couple who were both working was 20 per cent, whereas between 35 and 45 per cent of other children were living with employed couples. Children in Indigenous households in these areas were much more likely to be living with non-working parents than were other children. In the major cities and inner regional centres over one-third of children in Indigenous households were living with single parents who were not working.

The community case study information presents an even more graphic picture. Indigenous children are growing up not only in households where the majority of adults are unemployed, but also in communities where few adults have full-time or part-time paid employment. Of particular concern is the lack of any transition for young adults leaving school into paid employment (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002; Henry & Daly 2001; Henry & Smith 2002: 14–15).

The ethnographic and survey data also suggest that in households containing jobless people, particularly when they are embedded in social networks consisting of other jobless households, the adults have reduced expectations for the economic future of the children, and that this attitude is entrenched. Concentration of unemployment in particular households, lengthy periods of unemployment and restricted access to the labour market also appear to be resulting in reduced expectations amongst the children themselves about their economic future (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002: 8–9).

Reliance on welfare

Another standard indicator of exclusion is the ongoing dependence of families on welfare income. Welfare dependency is reported as making parents and families more vulnerable to unexpected change. Chronic dependence on public assistance has also been generally shown to undermine parental self-esteem in mainstream families. It is associated with a diminished sense of control over parents' own lives, a diminished family capacity to deal with stress, and the expectation of dependence among family members (Gottschalk 1992; Moore et al. 2002; Pech & McCoull 1998). Moreover, children in families whose financial circumstances decline or fluctuate are more at risk of behavioural problems and are more likely to experience difficulties with reading, and to fail at school (Moore et al. 2002).

We have made estimates, based on combining 2001 Census data with Centrelink administrative data, of the proportion of families receiving Parenting Payment Single (PPS) (see Table 6). According to these estimates, about one-third of Indigenous families with dependents were receiving PPS, over twice the proportion of other Australian families. These results show the continuing economic importance of income support for Indigenous families, but also the extent of their financial vulnerability.

Table 6. Share of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with dependents receiving Parenting Payment Single, 2000–2001

	Indigenous	Other
Families with dependents ^a	69,843	2,364,248
Families on PPS ^b	23,145	387,544
Percentage of families with dependents on PPS	33.1	16.4

Notes: a. Dependents include children under 15 years of age and dependent students aged 15–24 years.
 b. These figures relate to 2000. When applying for income support, people are given the option of identifying as Indigenous. The numbers recorded as Indigenous income support recipients will therefore depend on people's choice to identify as Indigenous, and the inclusion of this information in administrative data. People may make different choices about identifying themselves as Indigenous when applying for income support and when filling in the census.

Sources: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001; Daly & Smith (2002).

At the Indigenous community level, the extent of household reliance on welfare is often substantial. From research conducted in two communities where particular families were surveyed over a period of three years, it was found that welfare payments constituted the core component of income in the households surveyed. In one north Queensland community, 71 per cent of all adults received income from a welfare payment, 19 per cent received an income from the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, and only 10 per cent received a wages income (primarily from part-time employment). In one Central Australian community, 77 per cent received income from a welfare payment, 20 per cent from CDEP and 3 per cent from wages. Critically, 100 per cent of the surveyed

households in both communities had at least one adult receiving a welfare payment; the majority have several adults receiving a number of different welfare payments (see Smith 2000, 2001).

Furthermore, many adults' working lives were characterised by significant fluctuations in their financial status. This was largely the result of recycling through short periods of part-time employment or participation in CDEP work, between ongoing longer spells of unemployment and receipt of welfare payments.

Thus many Indigenous children grow up in households where the majority of adults provide no role model for stable engagement in paid employment, and are reliant on low and sometimes erratic levels of welfare income. Many children live in households that rely on forms of bookdown, or micro-credit advances against welfare payments. Such households live constantly on the edge of financial crisis, reeling through a 'feast and famine' cycle where children and the aged are vulnerable to fluctuations in income and care.

Dependency on welfare has clearly become inter-generational for many Indigenous households (see Daly, Henry & Smith 2002; Smith 2000). In some communities, Indigenous parents themselves associate this with a perceived lack of motivation and community economic engagement among younger people:

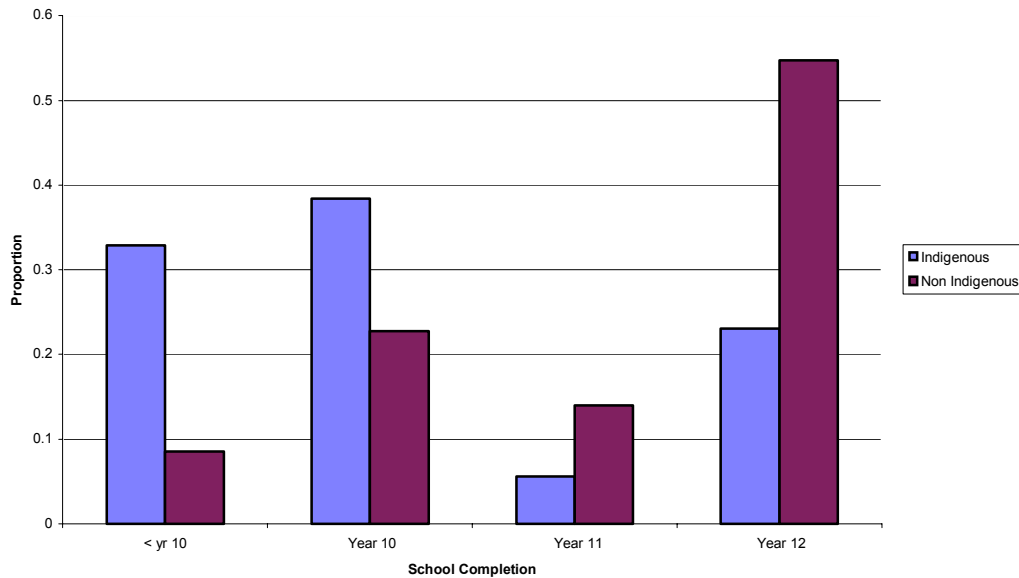
Sit-down money is killing our young people. When the welfare money come in it really killed the work; started slacking off. Now young ones don't know work, they welfare trained. No more sit down money, cut it out. Level-im up, everyone gotta work (Anangu parent quoted in Smith 2001: 16).

Parental and other adult educational status

Educational attainment is a determinant of employment status and occupational skills levels. There is also a well-documented correlation between parental level of education and a child's learning pace, especially in the early years. The educational levels attained by parents, especially the mother, have a significant influence on children's educational outcomes. The less education a parent has, the less likely it is that their children will be read to at home, will be fully ready for school, or will stay at school (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; Zill et al. 1991). Furthermore, research also suggests that instability in levels of poverty and welfare receipt are associated with lower reading scores for children (Moore et al. 2002: 221).

According to 2001 Census data, children in Indigenous households are more likely to have parents who left school early. Fig. 2 shows that while over half of other Australian children were living with at least one parent who had completed Year 12, only 23 per cent of children in Indigenous households were in this position. Thirty-three per cent of children in Indigenous households were living with parents who had not completed Year 10 compared with 9 per cent of other children. A similar story of educational disadvantage is presented by the data on post-secondary qualifications.

Fig. 2. Indigenous and non-Indigenous children living with at least one parent who had completed school year 10, 11 or 12, 2001



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The educational attainment of Indigenous parents was particularly low relative to other Australian parents in very remote locations (see Appendix, Table A4). The relatively well-educated Indigenous parents lived in the major cities.

This is not simply a story about the impacts on children of low levels of parental education. The extent of impacts must also be understood from a whole-of-community perspective. For example, in one central Australian community, 86 per cent of the adult population have no educational qualifications at all, and staff at the nearby regional Indigenous high school report the average educational skills of incoming Indigenous high-school students as being at Grade 3 primary school level (Smith 2001; see also Northern Territory Department of Education (NTDE) 1999). Many adults in the community simply do not have the education levels and life-skills needed for full-time employment in the local labour force (Smith 2001).

The *Learning Lessons* review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NTDE 1999) judged that English literacy and numeracy at the level of Year 7 are necessary for any person to function effectively in the wider Australia community, and that literacy and numeracy at the level of Year 10 are required for employment in any management or administrative role in most communities. The review committee reported that 11–16 year-old Indigenous students in remote communities were averaging only around Year 2 to Year 3 levels of literacy and numeracy; that is, the ability of a 6–7 year-old mainstream child. It is likely that

in such circumstances Indigenous children's educational attainment is significantly reduced as a result of the widespread economic exclusion and educational disadvantage of their parents.

Health status

Australian health data demonstrate the ongoing health problems afflicting Indigenous families. Indigenous babies are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday than other Australian babies, and those who survive are twice as likely to have low birth weight, and to also experience the debilitating effects of foetal alcohol syndrome; both of which will affect their subsequent development and wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2003). Infant mortality is declining, but is still four times the national rate, and age-specific death rates for other Indigenous people are between two and seven times those of the total population. A recent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory reported that misdiagnosed or untreated health conditions presented a major obstacle to children's ability to attend school regularly or to participate in recreational and other social activities (NTDE 1999).

Children's experience of family life is affected significantly by the fact that the highest mortality rates for Indigenous people are in middle age, with particularly high adult male death rates (Gray 1987, 1998). In other words, Indigenous children are living with parents who are more likely to have more frequent admissions to hospital (twice the rate of other Australians), and hospitalisation for acute episodes of illness is more likely to occur. Recent research by the AIHW (2003) documents the continuing impacts of adult morbidity: death rates for 25 to 54 year-old Aborigines are up to five times higher than for the total Australian population. Indigenous children are more likely to experience the death of their parents at an earlier age, on average, than other Australian children.

The exclusion of Indigenous children: an overview

For most Australian children, their first 'inclusion' is their birth into a family (Stretton 2003). Early childhood experience and parental characteristics are powerful determinants of children's wellbeing and later outcomes. The overall statistical picture for many Indigenous children is that they are born to, and are growing up in, families and households that are at high risk of exclusion from opportunities to participate in the mainstream economy. Other key indicators of risk, now being documented with increasing frequency, are high levels of sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, and the impacts on family life of incarceration of parents and racial discrimination (Gordon 2002; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) 1991).

National and international research suggests that where a person is exposed simultaneously to many risk factors the damage caused by each is compounded. The effects are seen in later life, in ill-health, behavioural problems and continuing disadvantage (Zill et al. 1991). Many Indigenous children are

experiencing multiple risk factors, and are growing up in multi-generational households where intergenerational welfare dependence and poverty have become entrenched.

Such children also experience the added effects of exclusion arising from discrimination, from the history of state interventions in family life, and from their residence in locations and neighbourhoods with poor access to services, higher crime and arrest rates, and low employment opportunities (Daly & Smith 1996; Hunter 2000). But this picture of entrenched exclusion from mainstream socioeconomic opportunities is only one side of the story. There is another perspective that emphasises inclusion—into the world of Indigenous values, relationships and networks.

Forms of Indigenous inclusion

The central importance of family and kin in everyday life is a valued form of social and cultural capital in many Indigenous families and communities. If family is the fundamental source of social capital (Newton 1997: 579), then for Indigenous people it is the extended family formation, not the nuclear family, which serves that pivotal role.

Indigenous households are characteristically large and compositionally complex. They are multi-generational, and constituted on the basis of kinship. These co-residential extended families are linked to other similar households through wide-reaching economic and kinship networks. Our ethnographic and survey evidence also shows that both adults and children can be highly mobile, travelling between a set of 'usual' home bases. Children are regarded as independent operators; they may move alone or as a part of a family group to other households within their extended family network (Henry & Daly 2001; Smith 2000). These networks act as crucial mechanisms for cushioning against financial hardship, and enable the sharing and redistribution of cash and other resources across households.

Parenting and childcare

The complexity of Indigenous extended family formations is matched by equally complex cultural practices surrounding parenting and childcare. Parenting responsibilities are socially and economically distributed beyond biological parents to a wide range of relatives. The primary care group for many Indigenous children lies in the wider extended family located across several different households. The care and financial support of a child may be shared out on a daily basis, with different people assuming different responsibilities. The kin referred to by the English terms 'aunty' and 'granny' are particularly influential as primary carers and socialisers of children.

In one community surveyed, three-quarters of households had children in residence who were not the biological children of the adult members, and 40 per cent of female respondents said they were also currently looking after children living in other households. Approximately 60 per cent of respondents in the two

communities stated that they sometimes stayed at other places with family and friends, and a similar proportion had done so at some point in the four weeks before the interview. These networks of kin living in different households provide a valued Indigenous 'safety net' for many children. For example, over half of respondents in one surveyed community said that a close relation regularly helped them pay for food and clothing for their children (Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000; Henry & Daly 2001; Smith 2000).

These extended networks of kin can be characterised as a key form of 'social capital'. They represent precisely the kind of social participation and economic support which proponents of welfare reform in the mainstream context currently put forward as the basis for strong families and communities.

'Sole' parents?

Statistically, there are high numbers of sole parents in Indigenous communities. But our community-based research makes it clear that they are very different from their mainstream counterparts. Indigenous sole parents live primarily in extended family households, whereas other Australian sole parents commonly live by themselves with their children. Moreover, in Indigenous households there are often several generations of related sole parents living together.

In other words, while the term 'sole' might describe their separated parental status, it does not adequately describe their residential or domestic arrangements. Senior women, who have often been sole parents themselves, play an influential role in household structures and economies. Sole parents are not isolated from family support and assistance and, perhaps more importantly, their extended kin networks act as an important reservoir of support, socialisation and care for their children.

Welfare dependent?

There is also another view of welfare that can be adopted which emphasises Indigenous inclusion. It is commonly asserted today that Indigenous dependence on welfare is increasing, and that rather than being a valued citizenship entitlement, welfare dependence, is a passive and debilitating state. However, the receipt of welfare income is not always perceived by Indigenous recipients in this way.

The rate of welfare dependence being experienced by Indigenous families is quantitatively higher than that of other Australian families. And the higher dependency burdens within Indigenous families and households also means that welfare-dependent adults are often supporting a large numbers of children and other adults without their own source of income. But there is also a qualitative difference because family members can rely upon culturally-based values that generate a pattern of shared childcare, and a network of economic support characterised by demand sharing. This helps to keep many families financially afloat. Furthermore, in some Indigenous communities, the receipt of welfare income enables people to continue residing on and managing their traditional

homelands. It also supports some residents (including children) of remote communities to engage in valued activities in the customary or subsistence economy. In the face of continuing discrimination, and given the underdeveloped labour markets in many remote and rural communities, welfare payments provide a valued base-level income without which many families and their children could not survive (see Altman & Sanders 1995; Arthur 2001).

In this context, there is also another possible view of participation in the labour force. Not having any employment in the mainstream labour market may actually facilitate more extensive participation in culturally valued activities such as ceremonies, subsistence production, art and craft work, and the care and socialisation of children. It may thereby help strengthen family relationships and networks, and increase the formation of Indigenous social and cultural capital (Hunter 2000; Smith 2000).

Two perspectives, but the same lived experience

The question remains: are these simply two contradictory perspectives on the wellbeing of Indigenous children, adopted from two very separate domains? One that reports deficit, and the other that emphasises assets and strengths? Or are these aspects of one dynamic, interrelated process?

Arguably, 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are not separate lived realities or mutually exclusive analytic domains. The effects of inclusion and exclusion are multi-dimensional and interpenetrating. For Indigenous children and their households, the resulting experiences are interwoven, and there is no straightforward unidirectional causal chain (see also Hunter 2000). That fact has far-reaching consequences.

The exclusion from one sphere of life (the mainstream economy and its benefits), has consequences for children's inclusion in the other sphere of life (the Indigenous). From our work in communities with families and households, it appears that Indigenous forms of family, social and cultural capital are under enormous pressure as a result of poverty and exclusion from the economic mainstream. The problem is compounded by the age structure of the Indigenous population, which is youthful and rapidly expanding. For example, female and aged family members are vulnerable to excessive demands on their incomes. They are also called upon to support numbers of economically dependent, unemployed young adults, and to care for ever larger numbers of the children of their younger relatives.

While reciprocal obligations to kin still provide the context in which financial decisions are made and social relations reproduced, the considerable benefits to Indigenous families of their culturally-based networks of social and cultural capital are being distorted and undermined by the extent of 'whole-of-community' welfare dependence, the erratic flows of cash, and the unrestrained and sometimes physically intimidating demands by some family members for cash and resources (see Finlayson & Auld 1999; Smith 2001).

Parents list a number of matters of related concern: the use of alcohol and drugs by youth and adults, the incidence of crime, the decrease in parental authority over younger children, parents neglecting their children, the lack of parenting skills among young mothers and fathers, and the growing numbers of young women becoming 'single mothers' and placing excessive demands upon other family members for financial support. As one parent commented:

No Murriss [Aboriginal people] would turn any children away ... Children from homes where there is alcohol and abuse, scary for kids ... They come to houses where they feel secure. Better to look after them safe than regret it after something happens. Can blame parents, but have to help the children (cited in Henry & Daly 2001: 9).

People think we want hand-outs all the time but they don't know the real story behind it. Families are growing every year—you can see how many children are in my house. It's hard to keep clean. They have to sleep on the floor. It's supposed to be getting better not worse. This is our struggle—people are not aware of it (cited in Henry & Daly 2001: 12).

In one community, when asked what kind of future they thought their children would have, over 50 per cent of respondents gave a pessimistic response (Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000: 40–1). The ethic of demand sharing and the sense of obligation to family that are central to Indigenous social and economic capital are under severe strain in many communities (see Finlayson & Auld 1999; Finlayson, Daly & Smith 2000; Smith 2001). In circumstances where entire households have low and erratic levels of income, the high rates of Indigenous mobility can have a dramatic impact on the economic viability of households, leading to overcrowding, faster depreciation of housing stock, and faster depletion of cash and foodstuffs.

Welfare dependence, economic exclusion and family breakdown are viewed as related by many Indigenous people, and the failure to address these problems adequately is seen as directly contributing to a noticeable deterioration in the wellbeing of children, their families and communities at large (Pearson 2000; Smith 2001).

The price of economic exclusion

The view in which inclusion and exclusion are contradictory and mutually exclusive domains leads to the often heard assertion that the inclusion of Indigenous people in the mainstream economy leads inevitably to their cultural assimilation and integration. Participation in mainstream employment and adoption of the economic behaviours that are required are seen to weaken or undermine Indigenous culturally-based values and behaviours. But on the basis of the evidence reported here—both quantitative and qualitative—there is another possible view of the current dynamic between exclusion and inclusion.

The marked lack of Indigenous access to mainstream economic benefits and opportunities appears to be undermining the capacity of Indigenous families to reproduce valued relationships and roles. The pressures of entrenched poverty,

chronic welfare dependence, poor health, low levels of education and high levels of unemployment are having adverse impacts that compound one another. Their effects are permeating back into Indigenous family relationships and networks. They are producing forms of cultural exclusion for some children, and diminishing the robustness of Indigenous forms of family social capital. It may be, increasingly, that it is the entrenched exclusion of Indigenous people from the mainstream economy which is actively undermining Indigenous culture and the wellbeing of Indigenous children—more so than if they were actively included in it and experiencing its supposedly assimilationist influences.

There may be significant cultural costs then, for children and their families, of economic exclusion. Many Indigenous children are facing a double jeopardy. First, they are at high risk of entrenched exclusion from the benefits and opportunities of mainstream economic participation. Secondly, as a direct spillover from that, they are experiencing barriers in actively participating in areas of their own Indigenous social and cultural institutions. Entrenched exclusion from the mainstream economy is arguably reproducing a form of exclusion in another domain—the Indigenous.

In other words, the force of exclusion is not simply uni-directional (see also Hunter 2000). There is a two-way dynamic, where causal factors that are generating exclusion in one domain interact with factors in other overlapping domains. These, in turn, act to compound and generate consequences which rebound within and across domains. This dialectic is especially the case for Indigenous people who are engaged in a hybrid economy where Indigenous and non-Indigenous components and behaviours are now tightly interlocked (see Altman 2002; Daly, Henry & Smith 2001).

If this is the case, then the issues of Indigenous choice and equitable access to economic opportunities become paramount. Participation in mainstream economic opportunities, all its assimilatory undertones notwithstanding, might actually afford a mechanism to support Indigenous families. Whatever cultural options Indigenous families might want to choose for their children's future, their capacity to make and exercise those choices will continue to be seriously restricted if the cycle of inter-generational welfare dependency and economic exclusion is not broken.

Conclusion

The Annie E. Casey Foundation which coordinates the annual assessment of American children at risk across all US states, has concluded that if children are growing up in families with four or more family risk factors this is a cause for exceptional alarm, and merits special attention and intervention. The economic exclusion of Indigenous children in Australia is a cause for such alarm.

We have argued that inclusion and exclusion are not separate analytic domains or lived realities. For Indigenous children and their households, the experiences of exclusion and inclusion are interwoven and there is no straightforward direction

of causality or consequence. Greater access to (and economic choice about) the benefits of local employment, and decent levels of income, education and health are crucial to breaking the cycle of their double-edged exclusion. The creation of locally viable and sustainable economies in the communities in which Indigenous children are living requires focused and urgent attention.

By implication, under the banner of welfare reform, there is a need for ongoing investment in program support that focuses on early and middle childhood. Beleaguered systems of Indigenous family and social capital, and burdened childcare networks in particular, need greater support through policy recognition and identified government program funding.

The Department of Family and Community Services is proposing to conduct a longitudinal study of Indigenous children, to provide a nationally representative picture of their wellbeing. It is anticipated that the survey will provide much-needed detailed information on the nature of cultural resilience and loss, and their effects on Indigenous child-rearing strategies, and on family and social capital. These data should enable more targeted policy and program initiatives aimed at redressing Indigenous children's bleak economic future. The preliminary conclusions presented here indicate there is an urgent need, now, for a 'whole-of-government' investment in early childhood intervention, and program support to lift Indigenous parents out of poverty and unemployment.

The question of choice is fundamental in the design of social and economic policy that aims to better the lot of marginalised people. Economic inclusion and participation will need to be built upon giving Indigenous people the power to determine the kind of economic developments that might be desirable, viable and sustainable in remote and rural communities. But sustained economic engagement and benefit, whatever the form, is an imperative. The creation of robust local economies in the communities where Indigenous families reside will require locally effective forms of Indigenous governance which enable parents and families, and their communities, to determine their own economic and social futures (see Dodson & Smith 2003).

Notes

1. It is interesting to note, however, that the differences between Indigenous and other Australians in the share of households currently purchasing their dwellings was much smaller than among the fully owned households. This suggests there may be some catching up in home ownership taking place among Indigenous households.
2. The data combine both natural and adopted children in one category so it was not possible to separate these two groups. The figures reported here therefore represent a maximum proportion of children living with their natural parents.

Appendix: Child indicators by degree of remoteness

The following tables (A1–A4) are based on the ABS accessibility/remoteness index of Australia (ARIA). The index is based on the Census collection districts (CD) and calculates for each location the shortest road distance between a population locality and service centres of various sizes providing different levels of access to goods and services. These are combined into one index number ranging from 0 to 15 in value. Localities are then classified into the five categories: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. In the first of these categories geographical distance is argued to impose minimal restrictions upon accessibility to goods, services and social interaction. In the last of these categories geographical restrictions on the accessibility to these things is extreme (ABS 2001a). The results reported in the tables and figures below are based on special tabulations undertaken by ABS for CAEPR from the 2001 Census.

Table A1. Household tenure type by remoteness indicator, Indigenous and non-Indigenous households, 2001

Tenure type	Major cities		Inner regional		Outer regional		Remote		Very remote	
	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other
Fully owned	0.13	0.42	0.15	0.45	0.15	0.47	0.12	0.42	0.05	0.36
Being purchased	0.26	0.30	0.23	0.29	0.19	0.25	0.13	0.21	0.03	0.15
Rented	0.59	0.26	0.58	0.23	0.63	0.24	0.71	0.29	0.84	0.35
Other tenure type	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.08	0.14
Total (%)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Table A2. Relationships in households for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, by family type and remoteness indicator, 2001

Family type	Major Cities		Inner Regional		Outer regional		Remote		Very remote	
	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other
Couple family										
Natural or adopted child	0.50	0.77	0.52	0.73	0.49	0.75	0.50	0.80	0.47	0.82
Step-child	0.08	0.04	0.09	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.09	0.06
Foster child	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Otherwise related	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.13	0.01
Unrelated child	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total couples	0.60	0.87	0.64	0.80	0.62	0.82	0.65	0.87	0.69	0.89
One parent family										
Natural or adopted child	0.35	0.17	0.32	0.19	0.32	0.17	0.27	0.12	0.21	0.10
Step-child	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Foster child	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Otherwise related	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.07	0.00	0.09	0.01
Unrelated child	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
Total one parent	0.38	0.18	0.35	0.20	0.37	0.18	0.35	0.12	0.31	0.11
Total (all family types)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Table A3. Indigenous and non-Indigenous median family and household incomes by remoteness indicator, 2001

	Family income (2001\$)			Household income (2001\$)		
	Indig. (1)	Other (2)	Ratio (1/2)	Indig. (4)	Other (5)	Ratio (4/5)
Major cities	808	1029	0.79	706	1059	0.66
Inner regional	611	833	0.73	643	882	0.73
Outer regional	612	834	0.73	656	849	0.77
Remote	631	960	0.65	606	975	0.62
Very remote	512	1027	0.50	817	1063	0.77

Table A4. Indigenous and non-Indigenous households containing at least one parent who had completed school year 10, 11 or 12, by remoteness indicator, 2001

Household type	Major city	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote
Indigenous household					
>Year 10	0.56	0.57	0.53	0.53	0.68
Year 10	0.18	0.23	0.21	0.21	0.11
Year 11	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.12	0.08
Year 12	0.19	0.12	0.16	0.14	0.12
Total (Indigenous households)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Non-Indigenous household					
>Year 10	0.24	0.26	0.24	0.19	0.19
Year 10	0.13	0.21	0.22	0.19	0.19
Year 11	0.10	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.14
Year 12	0.53	0.40	0.40	0.47	0.48
Total (non-Indigenous households)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Source: Special tabulations Census 2001.

Fig A1. Labour force status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with dependents in major cities, 2001

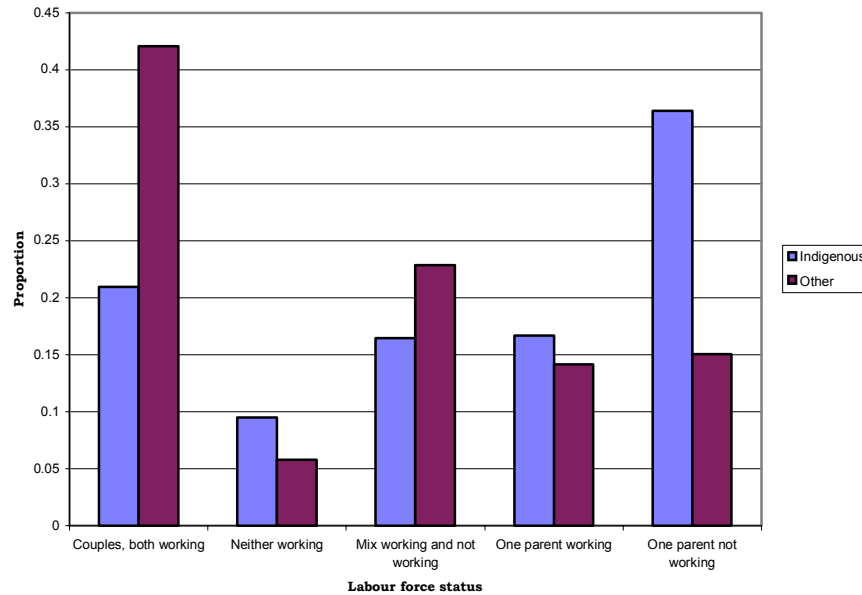


Fig A2. Labour force status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with dependents, inner regional areas, 2001

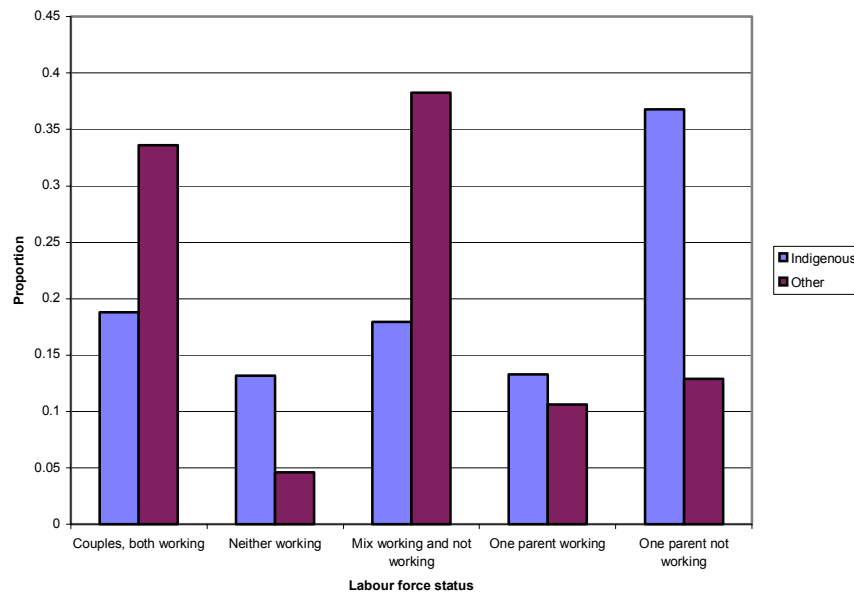


Fig A3. Labour force status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with dependents, outer regional areas, 2001

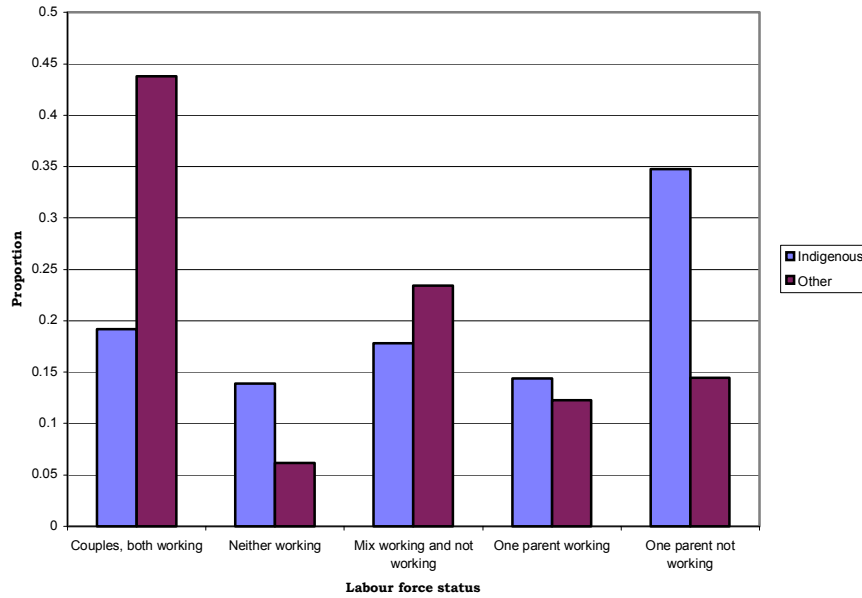


Fig A4. Labour force status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with dependents in remote areas, 2001

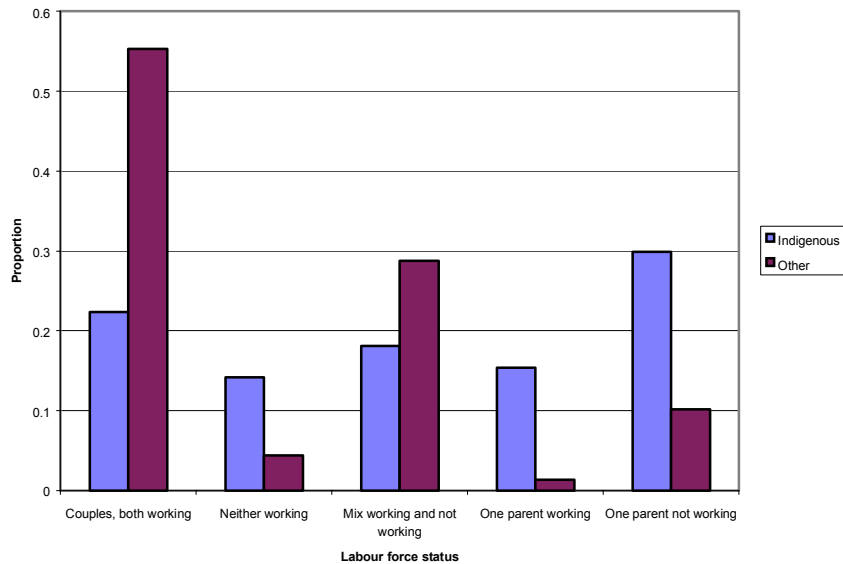
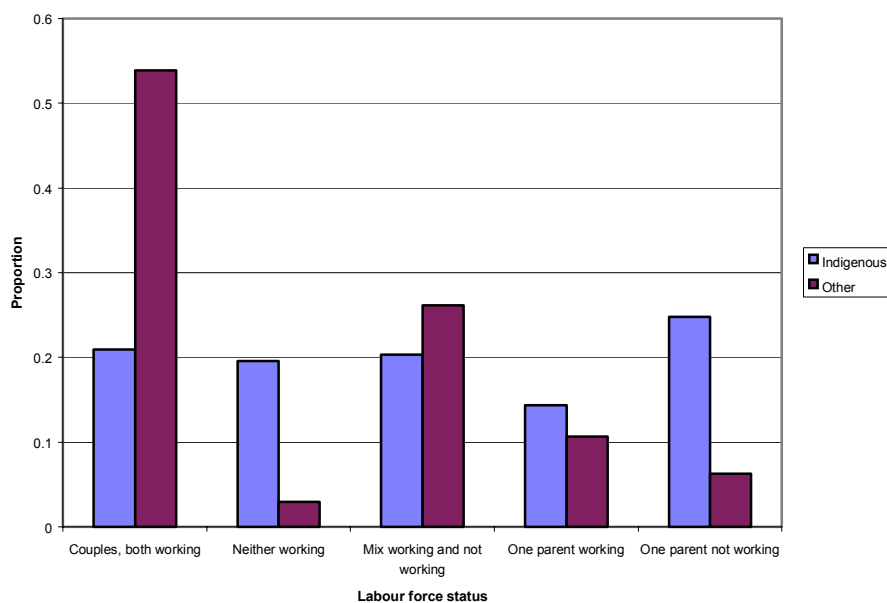


Fig A5. Labour force status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with dependents in very remote areas, 2001



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