

Indicators of risk to the wellbeing of Australian Indigenous children

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a range of indicators established in the literature to examine the risk of exclusion from mainstream Australian society for Indigenous Australian children. Most of the indicators have been taken from the Population Census of 2001, enabling us to break down our results according to the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The results show that Indigenous children continue to be among the most socially disadvantaged in Australia, and this is particularly the case for those living in remote and very remote areas. The conclusion raises the possibility that this exclusion may also have a negative effect on the ability of these children to participate in Indigenous culture in the long run.

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Introduction

The economic and social disadvantage of Indigenous Australians is well documented (Altman, Biddle & Hunter 2004).¹ This paper examines selected indicators of disadvantage from the viewpoint of Indigenous children. There is an extensive literature on indicators of potential long-term disadvantage for children in a wider context; this paper compares these indicators for children in Indigenous households with those in other Australian households. This makes the critical assumption that what is a relevant indicator in the broader community is also relevant in an Indigenous context.

The status of Indigenous children is important for obvious reasons, but also because they represent a large proportion of Australia's Indigenous population. Children aged 15 years and under accounted for 39 per cent of the Indigenous population of Australia in the 2001 Census, but only 20 per cent of the non-Indigenous population. The Indigenous population profile is youthful, and growing at almost double the national average, so the number of people moving into the working-age population, and forming young families, is increasing rapidly. In contrast, the remaining Australian population is an ageing one, engendering different policy imperatives.

The Indigenous population is also differently distributed geographically compared with the rest of the Australian population. Indigenous people are more likely to live in remote areas of the country, with the advantages and disadvantages that this entails for access to goods and services. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recently developed the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). This index is based on Census collection districts (CDs) and calculates 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 a single index number between 0 and 15. Localities are then classified into five categories: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. In the first of these categories geographical distance is considered to impose minimal restrictions upon accessibility of goods, services and social interaction. In the last of these categories geographical restrictions on access to these things is extreme (ABS 2001a). The indicators presented here have therefore been broken down, where possible, by ARIA categories to see whether there are any systematic differences in results between categories. The results reported in the tables and figures below are based on special tabulations from the 2001 Census undertaken by the ABS for the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University.

The following section presents the results for key indicators of the wellbeing of children. They show that on a standard interpretation, children in Indigenous

¹ We use the term 'Indigenous Australians' to describe the two officially recognised groups of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

households are at a substantial disadvantage compared with those in other Australian households on all the indicators. However, there may also be benefits for members of these households (compared with other Australians) arising from the social and economic organisation of Indigenous communities. We conclude with the hypothesis that exclusion from the mainstream of Australian society may work against the ability of communities to sustain and develop Indigenous social and cultural institutions.

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 to the related matters of cause, effect, choice and agency (see Hunter 2000; Peace 2001). Exclusion can be defined broadly as ‘multiple deprivations resulting from a lack of personal, social, political or financial opportunities’, which may result in the breakdown of families and relationships and the loss of identity and purpose (Hunter 2000, p. 2; Silver 1995). ‘Economic exclusion’ is taken to mean the relative difference in income and standard of living of marginalised groups in a society compared with dominant groups in the same society (Archer & Mohamedou 2000, p. 5).

For the purpose of this paper, which focuses 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 adopt a small set of key statistical variables which are well documented internationally as correlating strongly with outcomes for children, and as indicating a high risk of exclusion and ongoing disadvantage into adult life (see Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; Goodluck & Willetto 2000; Moore et al. 2002; Webster 1998). These indicators are:

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

Most of these indicators have been taken from the Population Census conducted in 2001. An advantage of using Census data is that it allows us to make comparisons between Indigenous and other Australian children by type of geographical location for many of these indicators. Where relevant, we will also present case study evidence from selected communities to provide some validation of the Census data, however these case studies do not cover the full range of ARIA categories.

The absence of a parent

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

Table 1. Relationships in households for children, by family type, Indigenous and non-Indigenous households, 2001

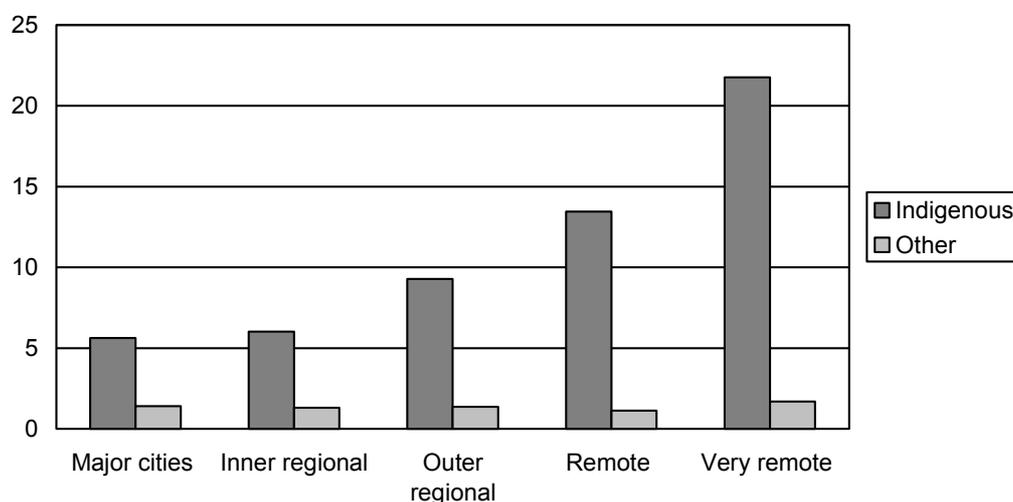
	Couple family %	One-parent family %	Total %
Indigenous			
Natural, adopted child or step-child	52	36	88
Foster child or unrelated child	1	1	1
Otherwise related child	5	5	10
Total	58	42	100
Other			
Natural, adopted child or step-child	81	17	98
Foster child or unrelated child	0	0	0
Otherwise related child	1	1	1
Total	82	18	100

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Table 1 shows that children in Indigenous households (defined as households including an Indigenous adult) are much less likely to be living with their parents than are other Australian children. Only 52 per cent of children living in Indigenous households are natural, adopted or step-children in couple families, compared with 81 per cent of other children.² A much larger proportion of children in Indigenous households fall into the category of ‘otherwise related child’: 10 per cent in Indigenous households compared with only 1 per cent in other Australian households. The implications of these results are unclear as there is little research which explores the consequences of the absence of a biological parent in multi-generational households; this suggests an important area for research for Indigenous children.

² The data combines natural and adopted children into one category, so it is not possible to separate these two groups. The figures reported here therefore represent the maximum proportion of children living with their natural parents.

Figure 1. Share of children reported as 'otherwise related' to the family, 2001 (%)



Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Figure 1 presents data broken down by ARIA category for the indicator of disadvantage that we are most interested in: the proportion of children who are living with neither parent but with another relation. (The proportion of children who were fostered or unrelated children in households was very small for all children.) This proportion increases as we move from the areas of greatest access to goods and services (the major cities) to very remote areas. About 6 per cent of Indigenous children living in major cities were living with relatives who were not their parents; this rose to 22 per cent in remote areas. In contrast, there was little variation by area in the proportion of other Australian children in this category.

Part of this variation may result from the difficulties of applying mainstream concepts of families and households to Indigenous household arrangements,³ especially for that

³ 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—many people live in improvised dwellings, share 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 their households as well (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, p. 202). This takes as its basis the concept of a nuclear family of parents and children; other individuals in a household are located in relation to this primary unit.

part of the Indigenous population residing in very remote communities, where more traditional modes of household formation based on the extended family are more prevalent (Daly & Smith 1996; Daly, Henry & Smith 2002; Martin et al. 2002). Despite these reservations, many of the aggregate comparisons based on Census data are consistent with local case study evidence from survey and ethnographic research (for example, Daly & Smith 1996, 1997a; Smith 2001). This evidence shows the importance of kin and the extended family in traditional childcare practices. Parenting responsibilities are socially and economically distributed beyond biological parents to a wide range of relatives. The primary care group for many Indigenous children is 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 'auntie' and 'grannie' are particularly influential as primary carers and socialisers of children.

In a survey of one North Queensland community, 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. These networks of kin living in different households provide a valued Indigenous 'safety net' for many children. For example, over half of the respondents in one community said that a close relation regularly helped them pay for food and clothing for their children (Henry & Daly 2001; Smith 2000).

Income levels

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

We focus here on household rather than family income, as this seems more appropriate to the circumstances of the extended families found in Indigenous households. Results using family income are presented in Daly and Smith (2003); they show a similar pattern to those reported here.

Table 2. Distribution of weekly income, Indigenous and non-Indigenous households with children, 2001

	Indigenous (A) \$	Other (B) \$	Ratio (A/B) %
First quartile	428	623	69
Median	659	989	67
Third quartile	1022	1490	69

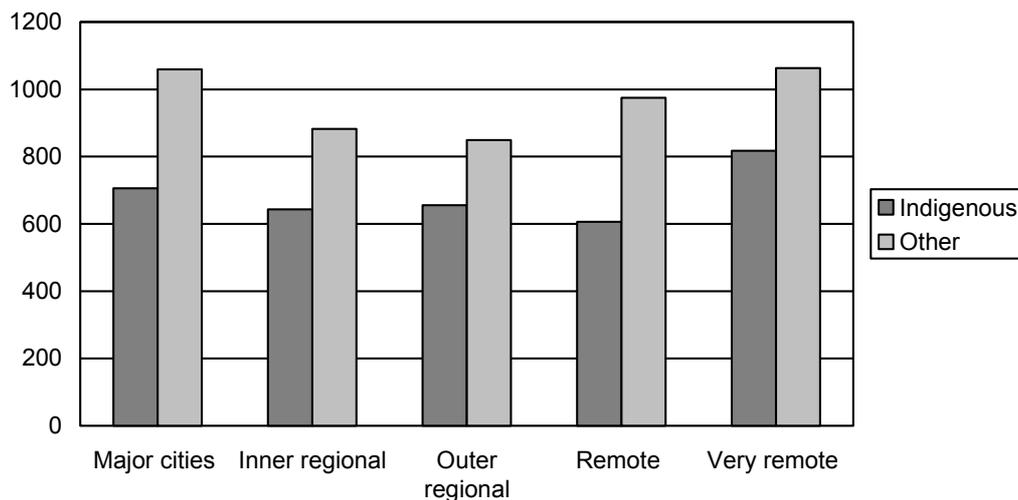
Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The income disadvantage of Indigenous households is entrenched. The households in which Indigenous children live have substantially lower weekly incomes than other Australian households (see Table 2). Of children living in Indigenous households in 2001, 50 per cent were in households that had incomes below AUD \$659 per week. This was 67 per cent of the median child's household income in other Australian households. One-quarter of Indigenous children were in households with incomes below \$428 per week. Income per household member is even lower in Indigenous households once allowance is made for the fact that there are on average more people in Indigenous households than in other Australian households. According to the 2001 Census, the median Indigenous household had 3.4 persons; other Australian households had 2.6 persons.

A recent study by Percival and Harding (2003) used the Household Expenditure Survey to estimate the expenditure on children in families with varying levels of income. Among low-income families (those with incomes in the bottom quintile 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 greater than these figures.

Given the higher Indigenous childhood dependency burdens—and even allowing for possible mitigating factors such as the higher Indigenous rate of occupation of low-cost housing—these estimates suggest that Indigenous households with children are likely to be under considerable budgetary pressure, with accompanying adverse impacts on the wellbeing of children and other residents.

Figure 2. Median household weekly income by ARIA category, 2001 (\$)



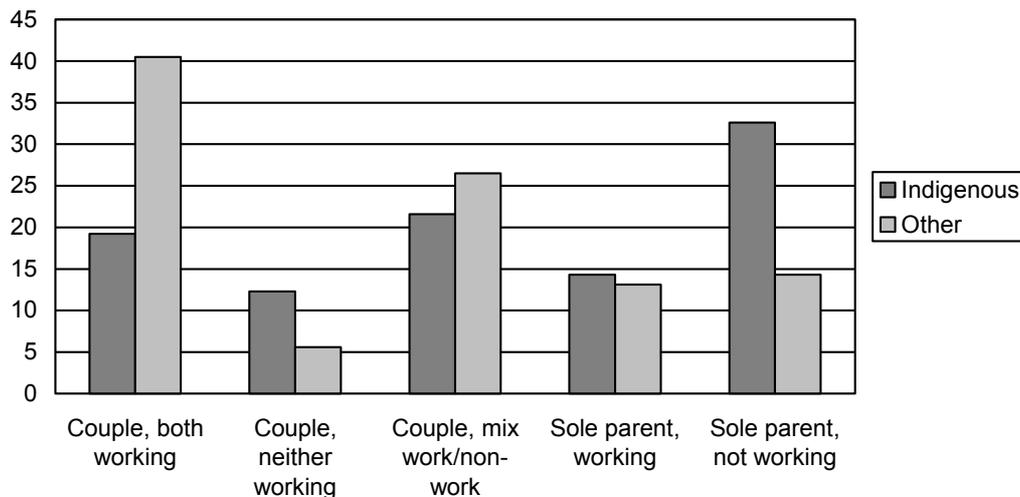
Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Figure 2 presents household weekly income by ARIA category for households with dependent children under the age of 15. In each of the categories, household income was lower in Indigenous households: between 62 per cent of the median weekly income of other households (in remote areas) and 77 per cent (in outer regional and very remote areas). The relatively high median Indigenous household income in very remote areas reflects the large number of people in each household.

Parental and other adult employment status

Working parents are not only a source of financial stability for children; they are also 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).

Figure 3. Labour force status of parents with dependent children, 2001 (%)

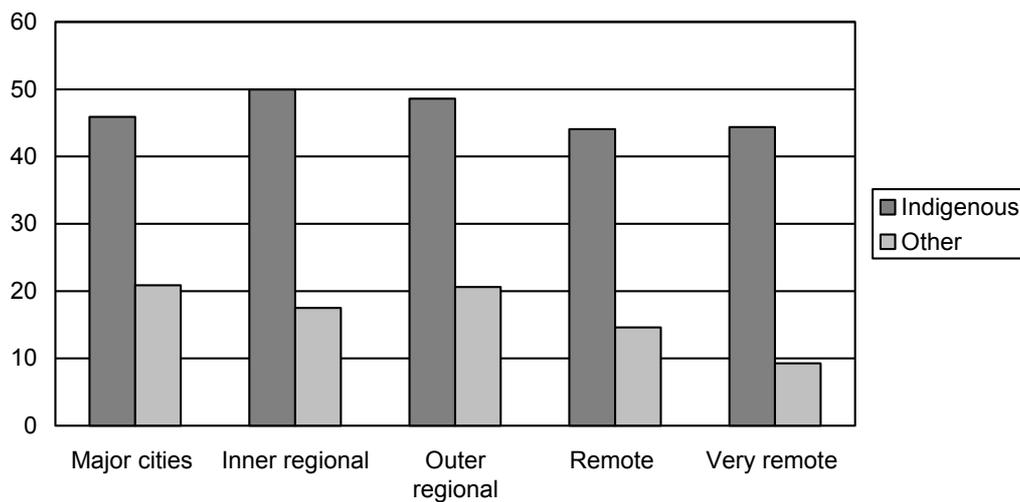


Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The relatively low Indigenous household incomes reported in the 2001 Census reflect, in part, the poor employment record of their adult members. Figure 3 presents 2001 Census data on the labour force status of parents with dependent children. Among Indigenous families (couple and sole parent) with dependents, 47 per cent had no parent working—more than twice the rate for other Australian families with dependents (for whom the figure was 20 per cent). The most common group among Indigenous families was 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. Figure 4 shows that the proportion of Indigenous families with no adult working was high—over 40 per cent—in each of the ARIA categories. For those in remote and very remote communities, this may reflect the absence of a viable labour market, but for those in less remote locations other factors are likely to be more important, for example a lack of relevant skills among the Indigenous population or racial discrimination. The employment levels recorded in remote and very remote areas probably overstate the level of employment in standard work, as participants in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme are counted among the employed. Participants in this scheme are essentially working on community schemes for their income support payments.

Figure 4. Indigenous and other families with dependents and no parent working, 2001 (%)



Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The community case study evidence presents an even more graphic picture. Indigenous children are not only growing up 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 & Smith 2002, pp. 14–15).

The ethnographic and survey evidence also suggests that in households containing jobless people—particularly when these are embedded in social networks consisting of other jobless households—the adults have reduced expectations for the economic future of their children, and these attitudes are entrenched. Concentration of unem-

ployment in particular households, plus lengthy periods of unemployment and restricted access to the labour market, may also result in reduced expectations among the children themselves for their economic future (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002, pp. 8–9).

Reliance on welfare

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

We have made estimates, by combining 2001 Census data with Australian government administrative data, of the proportion of families receiving income support for sole parents through the Parenting Payment Single (PPS). According to these estimates (see Table 3), about one-third of Indigenous families with dependants were receiving PPS, more than twice the proportion in other Australian families. These results show both the continuing economic importance of income support for Indigenous families, and the extent of their financial vulnerability. This is a minimum estimate of welfare dependence for Indigenous families, as it only takes one welfare payment, PPS, into account. Other welfare payments, including NEWSTART and Parenting Payment Partnered, were also important income sources for Indigenous families in the community case studies we conducted (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002).

Table 3. Proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with dependants receiving Parenting Payment Single, 2000–2001

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

a. Dependents include children under 15 years of age and dependent students aged 15–24.

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 2003.

There was no data available to allow us to present this indicator in terms of the ARIA categories. However, case studies show that 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, welfare payments were found to be the core component of income in these households. In one North Queensland community, only 10 per cent of all adults received wages income, primarily from part-time employment. In one Central Australian community, only 3 per cent of adults received income from wages. All the households surveyed in both communities had at least one adult receiving a welfare payment; the majority had several adults receiving a number of different welfare payments (see Smith 2000, 2001).

Thus many Indigenous children grow up in households where the majority of adults are not engaged in stable paid employment, and are instead 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, p. 16).

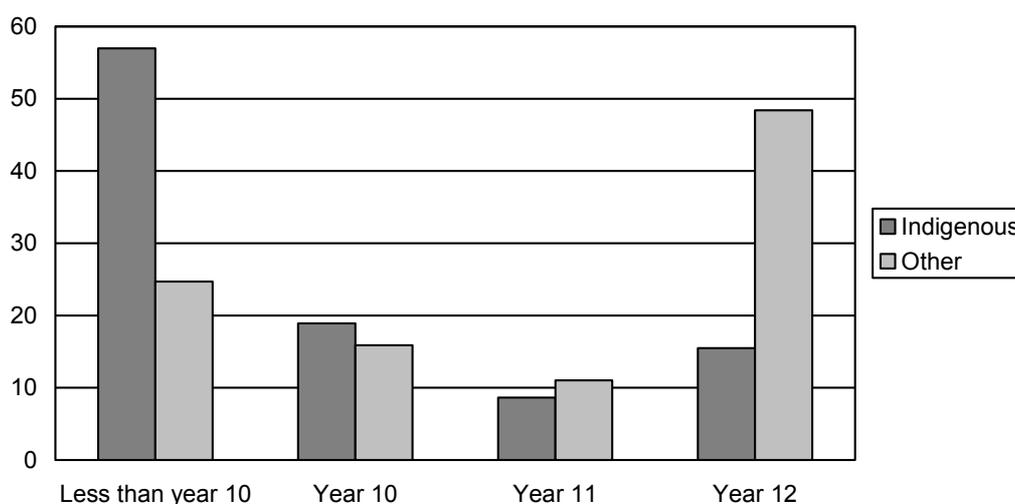
Parental and other adult educational status

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

According to 2001 Census data, children in Indigenous households are more likely to have parents who left school early. Figure 5 shows that while almost half of other Australian children were living with at least one parent who had completed Year 12,

only 15 per cent of children in Indigenous households were in this position; 57 per cent of children in Indigenous households were living with parents who had not completed Year 10, compared with 25 per cent of children in other Australian households. A similar story of educational disadvantage is seen in the data on post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 5. Children by highest level of schooling of at least one parent, 2001 (%)



Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Table 4 presents data on the schooling level of parents broken down according to the ARIA classification. These show that in each of the ARIA categories, over half of the children in Indigenous households were not living with a parent who had completed schooling to Year 10 or above. In very remote areas this proportion rose to 68 per cent. The largest difference between children in Indigenous households and those in other Australian households was in the proportion living with at least one parent who had completed Year 12 in the very remote ARIA category. Only 12 per cent of children in Indigenous households in the very remote category were living with parents who had completed Year 12, compared with almost half of the children in non-Indigenous households. According to this indicator, children living in Indigenous households in very remote areas were at a particular disadvantage.

This is not simply a story about the impact on children of low levels of parental education: the extent of this impact must also be understood at a whole-of-community level. For example, in one Central Australian community, 86 per cent of the adult population had no educational qualifications at all, and staff at the nearby regional Indigenous high school reported the average educational skills of incoming Indigenous high-school students as being at Year 3 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).

Table 4. Children in Indigenous and other households by highest level of schooling completed by at least one parent, by remoteness indicator, 2001

	Major city %	Inner regional %	Outer regional %	Remote %	Very remote %
Indigenous					
Less than Year 10	56	57	53	53	68
Year 10	18	23	21	21	11
Year 11	8	8	9	12	8
Year 12	19	12	16	14	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Non-Indigenous					
Less than Year 10	24	26	24	19	19
Year 10	13	21	22	19	19
Year 11	10	13	14	15	14
Year 12	53	40	40	47	48
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Special tabulations, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

The *Learning Lessons* review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NTDE 1999) judged that English literacy and numeracy at Year 7 level are necessary for any person to function effectively in the wider Australia community, and that literacy and numeracy at Year 10 level 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 Year 2 to Year 3 levels of literacy and numeracy; that is, the level expected of 6–7-year-old mainstream children. It is likely in such circumstances that 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 demonstrates the health problems afflicting Indigenous families. Indigenous babies are twice as likely to have low birth weight and to experience the debilitating effects of foetal alcohol syndrome, both of which will

affect their development. They are also more than twice as likely as other Australian babies to die before their first birthday (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2003). Their infant mortality rate is declining, but it is still four times the national rate, and age-specific death rates for Indigenous people are between two to 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 and to participate in recreational and other social activities (NTDE 1999).

Children's experience of family life is significantly affected 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). Indigenous children live with parents who are twice as likely to be admitted to hospital as other Australians, and also more likely to be hospitalised for acute episodes of illness. Recent research by the AIHW (2003) documents the continuing impact of adult morbidity: death rates for 25–54-year-old Aborigines are up to five times higher than for the total Australian population. Indigenous children experience the death of their parents at an earlier age, on average, than other Australian children. It is not possible to disaggregate health indicators by ARIA categories, but foetal and neonatal death rates of children with Indigenous mothers are higher in the Northern Territory than in other states (AIHW 2003).

The exclusion of Indigenous children: An overview

Early childhood experience and parental characteristics are powerful determinants of children's wellbeing and later outcomes. The statistical picture for many Indigenous children is that they are born to, and grow 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 the incarceration of parents and of racial discrimination (Gordon 2002; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody [RCIADIC] 1991).

National and international research suggests that where a person is simultaneously exposed to many risk factors, the damage caused by each factor individually 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. 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.

The evidence presented in this paper shows that children living in Indigenous households are less likely to be living with a parent than other children, have lower weekly household income, are more reliant on income support, and have parents

who are less likely to be in paid employment. The schooling level of their parents is likely to be lower, and the health status of Indigenous adults and children remains below that of other Australians. However, there are also a number of positive features of Indigenous social structures that may help to protect children.

The central importance of family and kin 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, p. 579), then for Indigenous people it is the extended family formation, not the nuclear family, which serves this pivotal role.

Indigenous households are characteristically large and compositionally complex. They are multi-generational, and are constituted on the basis of kinship. These co-residential extended families are linked to other 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 (Smith 2000). These networks are crucial mechanisms for cushioning against financial hardship, and enable the sharing and redistribution of cash and other resources across households.

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. This means that the primary care group for many Indigenous children is the wider extended family, located across several different households. These extended networks of kin represent precisely the kind of social participation and economic support currently put forward by proponents of welfare reform in the mainstream context as the basis for strong families and communities.

Statistically, there are high numbers of sole parents in Indigenous communities. But evidence from the Census and our community-based research makes it clear that they are very different from their mainstream counterparts (Daly & Smith 1998). 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 and care for their children.

There has been considerable discussion of the debilitating effects of dependence on income support, and significant policy initiatives introduced to address these issues (Pearson 2000). While not wishing to understate the potential negative effects of reliance on income support for individuals and communities, there has also been a positive side to the inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the welfare state. The receipt of welfare income enables people in some Indigenous communities to continue residing on and managing their traditional homelands. It also supports some residents (including children) of remote communities who 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).

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper shows that on the standard indicators of risk of exclusion from mainstream society, children living in Indigenous households fare badly. This holds across all of the ARIA categories for each of the indicators we have data for. On several of the indicators, notably children not living with their parents and the schooling levels of parents, Indigenous children in very remote areas face particular disadvantages. However there are features of Indigenous social organisation that mitigate some of the negative effects.

An important question raised by this research is whether the exclusion documented here for Indigenous children has long-term implications for the ability of Indigenous communities to provide the social safety net associated with more traditional social and economic structures. While Indigenous social structures may help to mitigate the negative effects of some of the indicators identified here, exclusion from the Australian mainstream may also undermine the sustainability of these structures in the long term. If this is the case, the issues of Indigenous choice and equitable access to economic opportunities become paramount.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which coordinates the annual assessment of American children at risk across all US states, has concluded that where children grow up in families with four or more family risk factors, there is cause for exceptional alarm and special attention and intervention is merited. On the basis of the indicators presented here, the position of children in Indigenous households in Australia is a cause for such alarm.

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