

Reflecting a Nation
Stories from the Census

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Census after the 1967 Referendum

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For a brighter future

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The Australian Census of Population and Housing is a national source of statistical information that can answer questions at local levels about changes over time in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. It is one of the most widely used sources of information for the planning and funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.

For this reason, it is extremely important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate in the Census and to identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin on the form.

The 2011 Census marks the 40th anniversary of the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Census counts, and 100 years of the national Australian Census. Over this time there have been many changes in the way Census data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been collected. This article provides a brief overview of some of these changes.

The constitutional referendum (1967)

Between Federation in 1901 and 1967, the Commonwealth Constitution Act, Section 127, stated that:

“in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth [...], aboriginal natives shall not be counted”. (Endnote 1)

In the early part of the twentieth century, attempting a complete count of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would have been a difficult task, given that areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory were not then fully mapped.

During the lead up to the first national Census in 1911, the Commonwealth Attorney-General stated that persons of half or less Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent should be included in the population figures. (Endnote 2). Based on this advice, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people encountered were asked to complete the Census form, including a question on race, and the proportion of their Aboriginal heritage (Torres Strait Islander people tended to be included under the term ‘Aboriginal’ at the time). If people stated that they were more than ‘half Aboriginal’ in heritage they were excluded from published Census results.

At this time, estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were made by authorities responsible for native welfare. From the mid 1920s, the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics issued annual information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, based partly on estimates and partly on counts. In the early part of the twentieth century, attempting a complete count of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would have been a difficult task, given that areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory were not then fully mapped.

The history of counting Torres Strait Islander people differed from that of the Aboriginal population. Prior to the 1947 Census, Torres Strait Islander people were regarded as ‘aboriginal natives’, and were excluded from population figures if they were of more than 50 per cent Torres Strait Islander heritage. As the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act did not specifically identify them for exclusion, during the 1930s and 1940s, the Queensland government lobbied

for their inclusion and from 1947 onwards Torres Strait Islander people were included in the official population figures. They were classified as Polynesians in the 1947 Census, and then as Pacific Islanders in the 1954 and 1961 Censuses.

The successful 1967 Constitutional Referendum followed ten years of public campaigns and was seen as a way to ensure full civil rights for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The 1960s marked the beginning of an era that saw many social changes in Australia. The successful 1967 Constitutional Referendum followed ten years of public campaigns and was seen as a way to ensure full civil rights for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. By removing Section 51 of the Constitution, it gave the Australian government the power to make law regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, previously held by the States, and by removing Section 127, required that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be included in official population estimates.

The Census from 1971

The changes to the Constitution meant that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be counted in the Census. In the 1966 Census, an attempt had been made to achieve as full a coverage as possible. However, following the 1967 Referendum, a more concerted effort could be made within the new legal framework, starting from the 1971 Census. From 1986, these efforts have been organised through the Census Indigenous Enumeration Strategy. The purpose of the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy is to achieve the most accurate count of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in both remote Indigenous communities and elsewhere. Over time, the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy has developed and undergone continuous improvement to address issues related to distance, language and cultural barriers. The strategy also aims to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate effectively in the Census.

Evolution of the Census question

In 1971, the 'race' question was changed to allow people to identify according to what they felt their 'racial origin' to be, rather than referring to 'blood', 'race', or 'caste' as in the pre-1967 Censuses. In the 1971 Census the question became:

5. What is this person's racial origin ?
(If of mixed origin indicate the one to which he considers himself to belong)
(Tick **one** box only or give **one** origin only)

1 European origin
2 Aboriginal origin
3 Torres Strait Islander origin
4 Other origin (give **one** only)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification question used in the 1971 Census.

The 1976 Census suffered from criticism from the media and politicians over the issues of privacy and the amount of information sought. This had an impact on the general Census response rate, and implicitly impacted on the response rate to the racial origin question. There was also an adverse public reaction to the use of the word 'racial'.

In October 1978, the Federal Cabinet endorsed a Commonwealth working definition of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The definition stated:

“an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives” (Endnote 3).

Consequently, in the 1981 Census, the word ‘racial’ was dropped and a purely origin based question was used. The same question was used in the 1986 and 1991 Censuses.

In the 1996 Census, for the first time, people were given the choice to identify as of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. The accompanying instruction to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification question was changed, allowing people to mark both of the ‘yes’ boxes:

<p>Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For persons of both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.	<p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Aboriginal</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Torres Strait Islander</p>
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The standard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification question used from the 1996 Census onwards.

In recent Censuses, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recognised that collection timing needs to be flexible to take into account cultural and other significant activities that occur within communities.

In 1981, the question was positioned at the bottom of the page. Subsequent analysis showed that placement of a question at the top of a page could improve the response rate. The origin question was moved to the top of a page in the 1986 Census and remained at or near the top of a page until the 2006 Census. In 2006, the question was moved to be within the first eight questions asked on the form, and this positioning has been repeated for the 2011 Census.

Expansion of Census in remote areas: flexible timing

From 1971, the Census collection from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas of Australia has been improved. In 1971, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and pastoral properties with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, in remote areas of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, were included in the Census count for the first time. It was recognised that extra time would be required to reach and count these people and so collection started early in these areas. This strategy continues to the present day, and has been extended to the other states. In recent Censuses, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recognised that collection timing needs to be flexible to take into account cultural and other significant activities that occur within communities.

Special forms for use in remote areas

In 1976, in the Northern Territory, Census forms were simplified for use in communities where communication and literacy issues were identified. These were completed with the aid of interviewers. In 1981, this innovation was expanded, with Western Australia and South Australia as well as the Northern Territory using special forms and interviewers in communities. From 1991, they were used in Queensland as well. In 2006, a new Interviewer Household Form was designed, to simplify the collection of information from the large and complex households that are more common in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. From 2011, the Interviewer Household Form will have new features designed to take better account of people temporarily absent on Census night.

Improvements in collection methods

From 1971, special collectors began to be recruited to work in remote areas. As mentioned, from 1976, interviewers were used in remote areas to collect information from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and assist them in filling out the Census form. The ABS continues this approach in discrete communities, where there are significant language differences, and undertakes a longer Census enumeration period in these areas. In addition, in remote areas where English is not the main language spoken at home, translators are employed to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are counted in the Census.

In 1996, the ABS put greater effort into recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers for the Census at all levels. New positions were created including State Indigenous Managers, responsible for overseeing the enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within their state or territory and liaising with community groups.

In 1981, Census Field Officers were introduced in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. Their main role was to organise the collection of data from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote areas. In 1986, the ABS recognised the need to appoint Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in these positions in all Australian states and territories. From 1991 onwards, the role of the Census Field Officers expanded to include raising awareness of the Census within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, through media outlets, and contact with community leaders.

In 1996, the ABS put greater effort into recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers for the Census at all levels. New positions were created including State Indigenous Managers, responsible for overseeing the enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within their state or territory and liaising with community groups. Indigenous Assistants were also employed to help collectors in urban and regional areas with large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. The ABS focus on employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Census workers continues to the present day.

For the 2011 Census, following a significant review of the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy (i.e. collection strategy), a new field force structure has been put in place, replacing Census Field Officers and State Indigenous Managers. The structure includes:

- District Managers – now responsible for all collection in their district, and who may be supported by Assistant District Managers;
- Area Supervisors Discrete Community – created to ensure effective collection in discrete communities and their surrounding areas, and responsible on average for 5 discrete communities;
- Remote Area Mobile Teams – team leaders and members who will use a team approach to undertake collection, but with greater capacity to manage local situations, for example, being able to conduct interviews themselves if local staff cannot be recruited;
- Collector (Interview Workloads) – offer interviews to all dwellings in their collection area, as well as making more attempts to make contact, in urban and regional areas which have a higher than average proportion of Indigenous people; and
- Emergency response teams – established by most Census Management Units to assist where standard collection approaches need additional assistance.

Increased community engagement

In 2004, the ABS recognised a need to build on its relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and so implemented the Indigenous Community Engagement Strategy. This strategy is an ongoing program of

liaison, not limited to dates when Censuses and surveys are held. The specific goals of the strategy are to:

- engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through collaborative partnerships to increase understanding of and participation in ABS collections;
- return information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including the provision of statistical training to communities in order to increase their access to and usage of ABS information; and
- improve the quality and relevance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics for key stakeholders, including meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Indigenous Engagement Managers have been instrumental in facilitating ABS surveys such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey.

The strategy has involved the employment of Indigenous Engagement Managers whose role has been to build and maintain networks between the ABS and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. The Indigenous Engagement Managers have been instrumental in facilitating ABS surveys such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey. They were a significant part of the 2006 Census, with most also employed as State Indigenous Managers, and continue to be involved in the 2011 Census.

In particular, the Indigenous Engagement Managers' role includes assisting with:

- identifying remote communities where literacy and language difficulties make the Census self-enumeration procedure impractical;
- recruiting Census field staff and ensuring that they become familiar with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- providing a mentor in the ABS regional offices for entry level Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff such as cadets, people recruited to assist the ABS permanent household interviewer panel, or Census collectors;
- informing urban, regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and groups about the Census and eliciting their assistance and support;
- development of appropriate collection methodologies and contributing to the successful conduct of ABS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander surveys and of the ABS Monthly Population Survey in discrete communities;
- Census enumeration in specific areas; and
- returning data to communities after the Census.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the 2011 Census

The 2011 Indigenous Engagement Strategy incorporates improvements to the collection of data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in discrete communities and also in other areas, and includes a significantly increased level of community engagement.

In addition to the Indigenous Engagement Managers, 14 Local Engagement Managers were employed a year out from the Census, to undertake more focused and detailed engagement and to gather local knowledge to support field operations. The number of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in other roles, such as community facilitators or as part of the wider field staff has been increased.

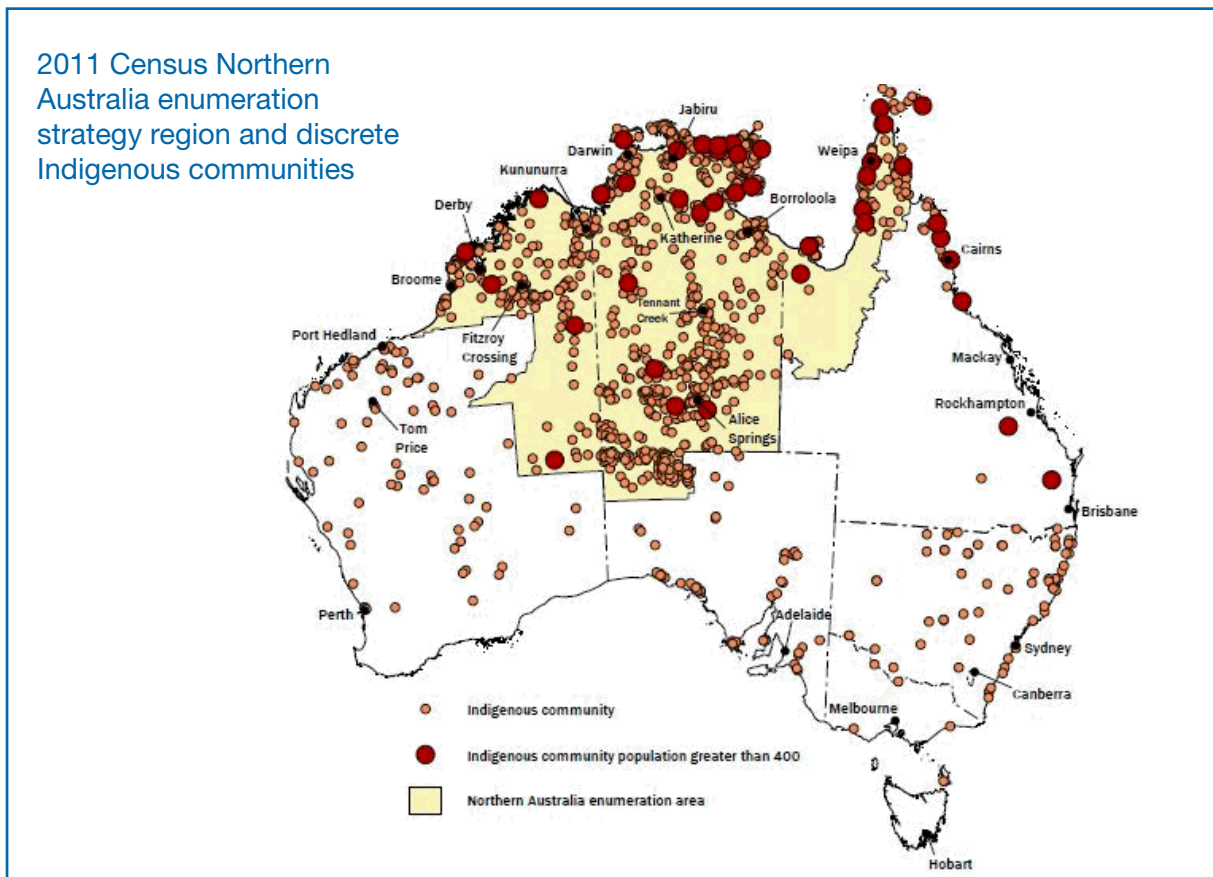
Data collection in remote areas of the Northern Territory and the northern parts of both Western Australia and Queensland are still a significant challenge for the ABS.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who do not live in discrete communities are enumerated on the standard Census household form. In 2011, Census collectors whose collection area has a greater than average proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as shown by the 2006 Census, will be offered additional resources to assist households to complete the Census through interview. This procedure aims to improve the quality of the data collected from the urban and regional populations.

Data collection in remote areas of the Northern Territory and the northern parts of both Western Australia and Queensland are still a significant challenge for the ABS. To address this, a special Northern Australia Enumeration Strategy has been implemented for the 2011 Census and is being coordinated from the ABS Northern Territory Office. The Strategy aims to significantly improve the accuracy of the count of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across the region and also addresses other issues of the region. These include:

- the dispersed and mobile population;
- the large number of people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- cross-border population flows;
- the large number of visitors and tourists that are in the area when the Census takes place; and
- the significant number of mining establishments and the associated fly-in/fly-out workforce in the region.

The areas covered by the Northern Australia Enumeration Strategy are shown in the following map.



Note: A discrete Indigenous community is a geographic location, bounded by physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries and inhabited or intended to be inhabited predominantly by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander residents (i.e. greater than 50% of usual residents), with housing or infrastructure that is managed on a community basis.

Endnotes

1. Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act (UK) 1900, Section 127 <<www.legislation.gov.uk>> [Back to article](#)
2. Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1908, Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, Containing Authoritative Statistics for the Period 1901–1907 and Corrected Statistics for the Period 1788 to 1900, No. 1, McCarron, B & Co. Printers, Collins St., Melbourne, p145. [Back to article](#)
3. Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981, Report on a review of the administration of the working definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Constitutional Section, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Canberra. [Back to article](#)

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