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Australian Indigenous Employment Disadvantage: What, why and where to from here?

Rae Norris*

*University of the Sunshine Coast

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Australian Indigenous Employment Disadvantage: What, why and where to from here? ¹

Rae Norris
University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

This paper outlines the extent of current Indigenous employment disadvantage in Australia, compares this to the situation that has been evident over the past three decades, critiques the nature of current understanding of the problem and identifies issues which urgently require further research.

There is an implicit assumption in much that has been written on this issue that Indigenous disadvantage is in some way attributable to characteristics inherent in Indigenous people rather than to factors outside their control. In fact, current economic disadvantage of Indigenous Australians follows on from almost two hundred years of discriminatory law and practice. This paper explores the nature and extent of the on-going effects of this past unequal treatment, in order to establish the extent of the issues, to identify inadequacies in current attempts to explain this situation and to define the larger research problem which needs to be addressed. It concludes that any explanation based almost exclusively on quantitative data cannot explain the qualitative reasons why such a situation of inequity developed and has been maintained over a long period.

Introduction

Indigenous Australians have a continuing history of disadvantage in relation to employment which dates back over two centuries. Since the 1960s, there has been a growing realisation that Indigenous social and economic disadvantage needs to be addressed. In 1965, a major industrial relations case gave Indigenous Australians equal pay, commencing from December 1968 (Norris 2001). The 1967 referendum gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate on Indigenous issues²; prior to this time Aboriginal affairs were a matter for individual states and territories (Chesterman & Galligan 1997). Efforts to redress the issues arising from the inequities under which Indigenous people had suffered up to that time have been made since the early 1970s.

Also since the 1960s and 1970s, considerable work has been done, largely by economists, to identify the extent of Indigenous employment disadvantage. However, the focus of this work has not been on why this disadvantage continues to exist and in

¹ This paper represents a part of a larger research project which the author is currently undertaking, in order to determine the root causes of the intransigent economic disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians and outlined in this paper. Parts of this research have been published elsewhere; see for instance Norris 1999 and Norris 2001. The larger study will focus on continuities in law and policy in relation to Indigenous employment throughout white Australia's history.

² The Commonwealth in fact had this power for a period of five years from 1945, after the end of the Second World War, as a result of *Commonwealth Powers Acts* passed in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia giving certain State powers, including those relating to Indigenous affairs, to the Commonwealth (McCorquodale 1987).

some ways to get worse. Those explanations which have been attempted appear to be based on a belief, albeit not conscious, that the source of the problem is the Indigenous people themselves, not the white society which dominates the institutions of the country in which they live.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss the limitations of a quantitative approach to examining the issue of Indigenous employment disadvantage. Although valuable information is provided using this approach, it falls short in its attempts to offer explanations of this disadvantage and its intransigence. Statistical evidence is used to establish the inequities but the conclusions drawn are not always fully supported by the evidence. A new approach, seeking more historical and qualitative information, is recommended, to stand beside the undoubtedly rich resource provided by quantitative researchers and thereby to provide a more complete picture of the issue which could then usefully inform policy. This purpose is reflected throughout the paper, which reviews the evidence from the early 1970s to recent times to determine the extent of disadvantage; examines the extent to which and the ways in which the authors of major research papers on the issue of Indigenous employment disadvantage have attempted to explain this disadvantage³; critiques the explanations which have been put forward; and proposes directions for further research to identify reasons for ongoing disadvantage.

Indigenous Employment Disadvantage in the 1970s

The federal referendum held in 1967 gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Indigenous Australians for the first time (Chesterman & Galligan, p. 182). Subsequently, greater efforts than before were made to quantify the Indigenous population⁴, as a consequence of which from the 1971 Census reasonably reliable statistical information indicating the extent of Indigenous disadvantage has been available.

However, before this information was widely available, studies were carried out as part of the largest inquiry into poverty ever held in Australia, the Henderson Poverty Inquiry, the report of which was handed down in 1975. Prior to this, it was assumed that Indigenous poverty was largely an issue for remote and rural Aborigines. The Henderson Inquiry 'demonstrated that indigenous poverty was also prevalent in metropolitan Australia... It highlighted the historical legacy of the exclusion of indigenous people from the mainstream provisions of the Australian welfare state' (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 238). Three studies of Aboriginal poverty in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth were commissioned, and the findings were illuminating.

³ The author acknowledges that there are other papers written on Indigenous employment disadvantage which have not been included here, however, the selection used is considered sufficient to support the argument put forward. Papers on aspects of Indigenous disadvantage other than employment are beyond the scope of this research.

⁴ Prior to 1961, information on Aboriginal populations was only available from the records of State administrations, whose definitions of Aboriginality varied considerably (see Chesterman & Galligan 1997, p. 183). In 1961 and 1966 the national Censuses of Population and Housing had included an Aboriginal identifier, but the definitions of Aboriginality were so restrictive as to make any information from these Censuses highly unreliable. In 1971, the definition used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics changed and for the first time self-identification became the key to Aboriginality, making subsequent information of a higher quality.

In terms of income, in 1973/74 more than half the Indigenous population of the three cities studied – 55 percent in Brisbane, 55.4 percent in Adelaide and 76.7 percent in Perth - were ‘very poor’ or ‘rather poor’, that is, living on incomes of no more than 20 percent above the Henderson poverty line. This compares with 20.6 percent of the total Australian population (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 240). The reasons for this high level of poverty in the Aboriginal community were, in Henderson’s view, geographical location in areas where few jobs were available, lack of skills and experience to enable competition for the available jobs, and prejudice from employers who saw all Aborigines as lazy and unreliable. ‘He concluded that poor employment prospects is the primary factor underlying indigenous poverty’ (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 244).

Henderson, in common with many before and since, deduced the lack of skill from the type of work most Indigenous people were employed in: ‘The 1971 Census showed that the majority of Aboriginals were employed as farm or unskilled workers. Indeed, the Brisbane study found that 90 percent of males were in unskilled jobs’ (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 245). The Report’s recommendations called for more affirmative action in regard to employment and recommended culturally appropriate vocational training with mentoring. However, Altman and Hunter believe that ‘there are hints in Henderson’s recommendations that the only way to ameliorate indigenous poverty was via incorporation into the mainstream economy’ and that:

he did not appear to appreciate the extent of the social costs of decades of exclusion and the infrastructural backlogs and human capital shortfalls that indigenous Australians faced... Henderson did not appear to appreciate the poor competitive advantage of indigenous job-seekers, even in those urban situations where (in the mid-1970s) vibrant labour markets existed. (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 254)

Thus, despite their reservations, Altman and Hunter, too, attribute Indigenous employment disadvantage to lack of skill or ‘human capital’, without fully investigating this assumption. This concentration on the deficit of Indigenous people rather than possible systemic problems faced by Indigenous people, is a theme which runs through much that has been written on Indigenous employment disadvantage, as will be shown below.

The first comprehensive study of the economic status of Indigenous Australians was conducted by Jon Altman and John Nieuwenhuysen and published in 1979. It depended mainly on 1971 Census results due to the unreliability of earlier data. In summary, they showed from 1971 Census data that only 45.6 percent of the adult Aboriginal population were in the labour force, compared with 60.7 percent of all Australians. Over 20 percent of Aboriginal males from 15-19 were neither in the workforce nor in school compared with almost all male Australians who were in one or the other. In the 35-44 age group, Aboriginal labour force participation was 76.3 percent compared with 97.8 percent for the total Australian population in this age group, and those over 60 were half as likely to be in the workforce, according to the authors probably due to poor health (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979, pp. 10-12 and Table 7, p. 12).

The Aboriginal unemployment rate in 1971 was 9.3 percent compared with 1.7 percent for all Australians. Estimates for 1976/7 indicated unemployment rates around 30 percent for Aborigines compared with 4.5 percent for other Australians

(Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979, pp. 13-14). Altman and Nieuwenhuysen attribute these high unemployment rates to location in rural and remote areas, geographical immobility, lack of education and work skills, and also 'lack of social experience and motivation, as well as employer attitudes' (1979, p. 14). These latter reasons, which may point to systemic issues in the employment of Indigenous Australians, are not explored further; nor is the effect of the 1965 equal pay decision in removing large numbers of Aboriginal people from employment on pastoral stations in the north after 1968.⁵

Employed Aboriginal males were concentrated in farming, labouring and mining while women were concentrated in recreation and service work, that is, in low skilled occupations (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979, pp. 14-15). This occupational concentration appears not to warrant comment by the authors, perhaps because it fits with the predominant perception of skill deficit as the cause of Indigenous employment inequity. In regard to income, in the absence of income estimates for the Aboriginal population, Altman and Nieuwenhuysen use proxy statistics (low labour force participation, low occupational status, high unemployment, high dependency rates, ie, ratio of those supported to those earning) and conclude that there must be 'extreme income differences... between the Aborigines and the rest of the Australian community' (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979, p. 17).

This then is the basic situation in regard to employment faced by the Indigenous people of Australia, as understood in the 1970s, using quantitative techniques to identify the issues and providing speculative reasons for the disadvantage so clearly demonstrated. Considerable further statistical analysis, based on increasingly reliable information, has been conducted in subsequent decades, indicating that these inequities have not been significantly reduced. However, little advance has been made in identifying causes for this continuing disadvantage.

Disadvantage Continues into the 1980s and 1990s

Unemployment Rates

Although different figures are cited in different sources, all agree that, for as long as statistics have been available, the unemployment rate of Indigenous Australians has been consistently many times greater than the rate for all Australians. Figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicate that this has been most pronounced at times for Indigenous males who, according to ABS estimates, in 1971 had an unemployment rate six times that of all Australian males (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 9). Although the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous male unemployment rates has not remained so high, the numbers and percentages of unemployed Indigenous Australians have consistently risen. The data show a continuously worsening situation from an Indigenous unemployment rate of over 9 percent in 1971 (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979; ABS 1999, Cat No 6253 Table 1.3 and 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 9). Tesfaghiorghis and Altman (1991) estimated from 1986 data an Aboriginal unemployment rate of 35.2 percent, almost four times that of the total population at 9.2 percent. Estimates since that time are even higher: a rate

⁵ See Norris 2001 for an analysis of the equal pay decision and its effects on Indigenous employment disadvantage.

estimated at 38 percent by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) conducted by ABS in 1994, and 39 percent in 1996 based on projections carried out by Taylor and Altman.⁶ The most recent data, taken from labour force surveys in February each year from 1994 to 2000, indicate an unemployment level of 17.6 percent for Indigenous Australians in February 2000, compared with a rate of 7.3 percent, both the lowest for the period from 1994 (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, pp. 8-9). In short, Indigenous unemployment rates although decreasing recently have been consistently considerably higher than the rate for all Australians since the 1970s (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Table 1.3; ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 Table 1.1; Taylor & Altman 1997).

If the skill deficit argument holds, education should redress this disadvantage, but evidence from the 1996 Census shows otherwise. This Census provides an interesting breakdown of unemployment rates by educational levels of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Over eight percent of Indigenous Australians with a degree or diploma were unemployed compared with approximately half that for non-Indigenous graduates and diplomates; similarly, twice as high a proportion of Indigenous than non-Indigenous people with vocational qualifications or without qualifications were unemployed (ABS 1998 Cat No 2034, p. 37 and Table 4.7 p. 46). Thus, although unemployment rates were much lower the higher the level of qualifications for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, qualifications alone do not redress the employment disadvantage of Indigenous Australians.

If locational disadvantage is the main contributing factor, Indigenous unemployment should be comparatively lower in urban areas where most employment is located. But the problem of high Indigenous unemployment is not confined to rural and remote areas where employment opportunities are likely to be limited. Table 1 below shows unemployment rates from 1981, 1991 and 1994 by section of state.⁷ In major urban areas in 1981, 13.8 percent of Indigenous working age people were unemployed and by 1991 this had risen to 17.7 percent; this compares with 13.3 percent and 12.8 percent, respectively, in other urban areas and 9.1 percent and 11.2 percent, respectively, in rural areas (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Table 1.4). It is clear from this information that unemployment was in fact worse for Aborigines in urban centres than in rural areas, although the generally lower participation rates of rural dwellers must also be taken into account (see below). At the same time there had been a substantial increase of over 40 percent between 1981 and 1991 in the number of Aborigines in major urban centres; the apparent rising unemployment rate in these centres seems to have been accompanied by a rise in population (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Table 1.4). Tesfaghiorghis and Altman also note a change in population distribution: 'the proportion of the Aboriginal population living in rural areas declined from 56 percent in 1971 to 34 percent in 1986, whereas the percentage residing in major urban areas increased from 15 to 24 percent and those residing in other urban areas rose from 29 to 42 percent over the same period' (Tesfaghiorghis & Altman

⁶ The figure provided by the 1996 Census was 22.7 percent; however, ABS cautioned that this was based on a steep rise in people identifying as Indigenous in the 1996 Census compared with the 1991 Census. The Taylor and Altman projection is used here as being likely to be more accurate, given the large differences between 1996 Census figures and the 1994 NATSIS.

⁷ The ABS defines sections of state as follows: major urban areas have a population of 100,000 or more; other urban areas are those with a population of between 1,000 and 99,999; and rural areas are those with a population of less than 1000 (ABS Cat No 6253, p. 9). This information is not available from the 1996 Census.

1991, p. 2). Some of this rise in urban population, though, may have been as a result of under-counting of Aboriginal people in these areas in the earlier Censuses.

Table 1: Aboriginal Unemployment Rates 1981, 1991 and 1994 by Section of State and Gender

Section of State	Major Urban			Other Urban			Rural			Total		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Unemployed 1981	19.5	8.7	13.8	19.4	7.8	13.3	12.5	5.5	9.1	16.4	7.1	11.6
percent 1991	23.6	12.4	17.7	11.3	14.0	12.8	13.9	8.3	11.2	21.4	11.8	16.5
1994 ⁸	35.4	37.1	36.1	44.9	47.1	45.8	30.2	27.3	29.2	37.7	39.0	38.2

Source: ABS 1996, Cat No 4190.0 Table 39; ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Tables 1.3 and 1.4

The unemployment figures for 1994 are substantially higher than those recorded in earlier and later Censuses. This is largely due the different questions asked and the different methods of collecting data used in the NATSIS compared with the Censuses conducted earlier and in 1996. Unemployment rates in 1994 were highest in other urban areas, due, according to the ABS, to the lack of access to both Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) jobs which were mainly available in rural areas, and to the mainstream job opportunities available in major urban areas (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 2). Although the 1996 Census publication on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not report on unemployment rates by section of state, the information which is available appears to support the earlier finding that urban unemployment rates are high for Indigenous Australians. For instance, the highest unemployment rate was found for NSW, where about 85 percent of the Indigenous population lived in major or other urban areas (ABS 1998, Cat No 2034.0, Table 1.4 and Table 4.1). Data from the estimates of labour force characteristics of Indigenous Australians for February 2000 support this: the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in major capital cities was estimated at 16.7 percent, with a very cautious estimate of 9.4 percent for those living in sparsely settled areas and 19.7 percent for the balance (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287.0, Table A1).

The NATSIS asked Indigenous respondents what factors affected their ability to find work. The three main reasons cited were:

- lack of jobs altogether or in the local area, particularly in rural areas and country towns;
- insufficient education, training and skills, most notably in major urban areas; and
- transport problems, particularly in capital cities (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 50).

On the first point, this is not a sufficient reason for high Indigenous unemployment, as other Australians living in similar localities would be equally affected by this and would have similar rates of unemployment as Indigenous Australians; that this is not the case has been shown above. On the latter reason, the authors speculate that this is due to ‘the same sorts of locational disadvantage in metropolitan areas as found in other studies, whereby residential areas in outlying suburbs are increasingly separated from places of work’ (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 50). Leaving aside the unsubstantiated assumption that Indigenous urban dwellers live in outlying areas of

⁸ ABS notes in Cat No 4199 that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) estimates of unemployment and participation rates are higher than those of the 1991 Census due to differences in the way in which the information was collected (p. 13). Therefore, any conclusions drawn from comparing the two sets of data can only be tentative.

cities, a further factor likely to affect access to transport is lack of income. Low income, of course, affects access to owning vehicles, buying petrol and paying public transport fares, a factor which does not appear to have been considered but is likely to be crucial in this context and to influence both the first and third reasons listed above. Thus, issues related to skills and training and to income levels appear to contribute to high levels of Indigenous unemployment.

However, to state this is in no way to explain why this should be the case. Lack of education and training affects mainly urban Aborigines according to the NATSIS, but it is precisely this group who would appear to have greatest access to education and training institutions. To fail to investigate or even speculate why this inequity in education and training exists, or even to cite the results of others' research on these issues, is to once again imply that the problem lies in the Aboriginal people themselves. This is one particular area where the limitations of the research conducted to date are most apparent; despite evidence covering a long period which has been assumed to indicate that the Indigenous people's lack of skill *inter alia* causes high rates of unemployment, no effort appears to have been made to study this issue in depth, nor to further investigate the anomalous situation that, irrespective of location, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are subject to poorer labour market outcomes in comparison with the broader Australian population.

Participation Rates

While unemployment rates are higher, participation rates are much lower for Indigenous than non-Indigenous Australians. Tesfaghiorghis and Altman's estimates based on Census data from 1971 to 1986 show that overall the Aboriginal labour force participation rate was lower than for the population as a whole, despite having grown from 45.6 percent in 1971 to 48.3 percent in 1986. Comparable figures for the total population were 58.7 percent in 1971 rising to 60 percent in 1986. An apparent five percent increase between 1986 and 1991 brought the Indigenous participation rate to over 50 percent for the first time, but at 53.5 percent it was still more than 9 percent lower than for non-Indigenous Australians. In 1996 it had dropped to 50.4 percent compared with 60.4 percent for all Australians, indicating an increase in the gap between Indigenous and all Australians' labour force participation rates at the same time as a decreasing labour force participation rate for Indigenous and all Australians.

Most of the increase between 1971 and 1991 was in female participation which rose from a low of 23.6 percent in 1971 to 41.3 percent in 1991, although it had dropped slightly by 1996 to 41 percent. Indigenous male participation rates fluctuated between 1976 and 1996, with a high of 68.8 percent in 1976, falling to 63.1 percent in 1986, rising again to 66.4 percent in 1991 and falling again to 60.6 percent in 1996 (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Table 1.3; ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 4.1). These fluctuations raise the question of the extent to which Indigenous Australians are differently affected by economic vicissitudes than other Australians and if they are why, a matter worthy of more detailed investigation.

In contrast to the declining participation rates apparent from the 1996 Census cited above, estimates from the 1994 NATSIS showed higher participation across the board, with male rates up to 72.3 percent in 1994, female rates up to 44.4 percent and overall rates up to 58 percent, as shown in Table 2 below. This table also indicates

that participation rates were higher in urban than in rural areas, and significantly higher for males in all areas than for females, with the largest gender difference being for rural females compared with rural males. The most recent information available does not provide a gender breakdown, and the section of state categories are different from those used in previous ABS publications. These estimates show a different picture again; participation rates were highest in areas neither capital cities nor sparsely settled, and lower than any other previous estimates in sparsely settled regions.

Table 2: Aboriginal Participation Rates 1981, 1991 and 1994 by Section of State and Gender

Section of State		Major Urban			Other Urban			Rural			Total		
		M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Participation Rate (percent)	1981	69.9	36.8	52.4	64.0	31.8	47.0	59.8	29.4	45.1	63.4	31.9	47.3
	1991	71.8	47.7	59.0	59.6	40.4	48.5	62.2	36.7	49.8	66.4	41.3	53.5
	1994 ^s	75.2	49.1	61.6	73.0	45.4	58.5	68.9	38.6	54.2	72.3	44.4	58.0
	2000	Capital City		57.8	Balance of State		58.4	Sparsely settled		29.3	Total		52.9

Source: ABS 1996 Cat No 4190.0 Table 39; ABS 1995 Cat No 6253 Tables 1.3 and 1.4; ABS Cat No 6287.0, Table 3.1

Again a caution must be sounded: the evidence appears to show an increase in Aboriginal participation up to 1994, but once again these figures may indicate an increase in the numbers of those most likely to be integrated into the mainstream labour force, urban Aborigines, identifying as Aboriginal in later Censuses and in NATSIS than was possible at earlier times. Information available for 1981 and 1991 shows a 40.9 percent increase in major urban population and a 20.1 percent decrease in rural population between these two years (ABS 1995 Cat No 6253, Table 1.4); that is, an increase twice as large in major urban centres than the decrease in rural population, lending further weight to the possibility that more urban Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were prepared to identify in urban areas in later Censuses and the NATSIS, as noted for instance by Altman and Hunter (1998, p. 256). However, this does not explain the substantially lower male Aboriginal participation rate of 50.4 percent found in the 1996 Census. An indication of the ongoing situation is available from the February 1994-2000 labour force estimates produced by ABS, which report the Indigenous participation rates shown in Table 3 below. Although these figures must be used with caution due to small sample size and other problems, they do appear to indicate a higher overall Indigenous participation rate but a growing gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Table 3: Indigenous and Other Participation Rates 1994-2000 by Section of State and Gender

Section of State		Capital Cities		Sparsely Settled		Balance of State		Total	
		Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other	Indig.	Other
Participation Rate (percent)	1994	63.9	64.5	30.5	82.4	54.7	61.0	53.1	63.4
	1995	60.1	64.8	52.6	82.8	55.7	62.0	56.5	64.0
	1996	54.4	64.9	49.3	80.0	57.7	62.2	55.2	64.1
	1997	51.3	65.0	46.4	80.6	51.9	61.9	50.7	64.1
	1998	61.0	64.1	31.5	84.6	54.2	61.8	52.2	63.5
	1999	57.8	64.1	34.7	79.8	52.6	61.8	50.9	63.4
	2000	57.8	64.3	29.3	76.9	58.4	62.3	52.9	63.7

Source: ABS 2000, Cat No 6287.0, Table A1

The Labour Force Survey data are particularly useful in indicating one point of substantial difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. For non-Indigenous people in sparsely settled regions, their participation rates have been over 80 percent in all but two years from 1994 to 2000; for men this was even more pronounced, with rates of over 91 percent in three of those years, much higher than for residents of other localities. In contrast, notwithstanding large fluctuations year by year,⁹ Indigenous participation rates in sparsely populated areas have been consistently substantially lower than in urban and other areas. Other evidence indicates high employment rates for non-Indigenous people living in sparsely populated areas; for instance the estimate for employment to population ratios for non-Indigenous people in sparsely settled areas was 76.4 percent compared with 26.5 percent for Indigenous residents (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, Table A1). One question this raises is why employment should apparently be easy to obtain for non-Indigenous people in remote areas when it is in these very areas that Indigenous people are seen to suffer most from locational disadvantage, especially given that the non-Indigenous population is approximately twice the size of the Indigenous population in these areas (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, Table A1). It is clearly not simply that jobs do not exist in these regions; sufficient jobs appear to be available for non-Indigenous Australians to support high participation and low unemployment.¹⁰ This provides another glaring example of how urgently further research needs to be done to probe the issues raised, a necessary precursor to identifying the exact nature of the problems and finding culturally appropriate solutions which will work in the long term.

More generally, Tesfaghiorghis and Altman (1991) point out overall disparities between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in regard to employment. They found that, between 1971 and 1986, there was declining employment for Aborigines and for the total population, but 'the magnitude of the decline has been substantial for Aborigines and moderate for the total population' (p. 13), declining for the latter from 98.3 percent in 1971 to 90.8 percent in 1986 and for Aborigines from 90.7 percent to 64.7 percent over the same period. In 1986, Aborigines had 0.7 percent of total employment and 3.5 percent of total unemployment but

⁹ As these fluctuations appear significantly to affect only Indigenous people in sparsely populated areas where the base population was relatively small, it is likely that the large swings apparent are a product of the unreliability of the figures rather than any real changes in Indigenous participation rates.

¹⁰ Unfortunately the numbers unemployed in both populations in sparsely populated areas are too small to produce reliable statistics; therefore they are not cited here. It should also be noted that breakdowns of the type of employment held by each group are not available, leaving open the possibility that much of non-Indigenous employment may be self-employment.

constituted 1.5 percent of the total population (1991, p. 13). In 1996, Indigenous Australians had 1.1 percent of employment, or 0.9 percent if CDEP employment is not included and 3.1 percent of unemployment while still constituting 1.5 percent of the total population (ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 4.1). Thus, although the overall situation has improved for Indigenous Australians, it is still worse than for non-Indigenous Australian workers, and no explanation has so far been provided which fully explains the differences between the two populations.

Policy Responses to High Indigenous Unemployment

The issue of lack of job opportunities has been broached by government policy since the mid-1980s when the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) was introduced. At that time, it was estimated based on 1986 Census figures that, to reach equality with the overall Australian population by the year 2000, the number of Aborigines of workforce age who were employed would need to increase from 37 percent to 60 percent and dependence on unemployment benefit would need to decrease from 30 percent of the Aboriginal working age population to five percent (Taylor 1993). An increase of 1,600 jobs per year would need to be achieved for Aborigines living in 'cities, large towns and small country towns' and 2,000 per year for those in 'remote areas, small multi-racial townships and town camps' (Altman & Sanders 1990, p. 8).

After a decade or more of operation of programs intended to reduce Indigenous employment disadvantage, the picture has actually worsened. Taylor and Altman estimated in 1997 that it would take 2000 jobs a year for the foreseeable future to *maintain* the current level of unemployment and 7000 jobs a year until 2007 to reach employment equality for Indigenous Australians. In addition, the Indigenous population has grown at a faster rate than average for Australia's population, leading to an absolute increase in numbers of unemployed Indigenous people even larger than the percentage figures imply (Taylor & Altman 1997). Most of the increase in employment that occurred between the 1991 Census and the NATSIS of 1994 appears to have occurred in rural areas, and to be due to the increase in jobs for males employed on CDEP projects. In his review of the AEDP based largely on 1991 Census data, Taylor concludes that targeted growth in the private and public sectors had not been achieved, despite some apparent evidence to the contrary which it was difficult to conclude was due to anything other than CDEP (Taylor 1993, p. 32). ABS notes that: 'Given the level of CDEP scheme employment growth since 1991..., it would appear that recent employment growth outside of the CDEP scheme has been negligible' (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 p. 16). A specific question was asked about CDEP employment in the 1996 Census for the first time, but with a total figure of 12,259 - a little more than half the 22,200 found in the NATSIS two years earlier - this is of dubious reliability (ABS 1998, Cat No 2034.0, Table 4.1). In 1996, CDEP employment accounted for 14.9 percent of Indigenous employment compared with 26 percent in 1994, but again these figures must be interpreted cautiously (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199, p. 16; ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 4.1).

A point to note here is the interesting contrast between the notion, implicit in much that has been cited here, that the problem of high unemployment and low participation lies with Indigenous people themselves, but that the solution lies with the mainstream

system through job creation and subsidised employment programs, particularly the CDEP.

Occupation and Industry

Further light is thrown on Indigenous employment disadvantage by examining what kinds of jobs Indigenous people occupy. Taylor's analysis of 1991 Census data indicate that there was a reduction in the degree of occupational segregation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers. The growth of skilled employment in 1991 noted by Taylor (1993) occurred irrespective of settlement size, while labouring jobs were mostly created in rural areas, probably due to CDEP, with fewer labouring jobs in urban areas for Aborigines as for the workforce generally. Growth in rural management and administration and trades jobs is also probably due to CDEP. 'As it stands, the data suggest that overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are now more skilled than in the past, although they still lag behind the general skill level of other workers' (1993, p. 29); but, he cautions, more detailed occupational data show 'indigenous workers occupy only a limited range of skilled positions and often at lower levels of seniority' (1993, p. 29). It is concerning firstly, that the improved situation is assumed without evidence to be due to an improvement in skills of Indigenous people while skill levels are still assumed to be lower than for other Australians; and secondly, that Taylor does not pursue further the narrower range and lower seniority of positions occupied by Indigenous workers. More detailed qualitative analysis may show quite a different picture; until the *actual* skill level rather than the *assumed* skill level of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is fully investigated, any speculation about the connection between lack of skills and lack of employment or skilled employment of Indigenous Australians is unsound.

Table 4: Indigenous and All Australians by Occupation, 1996

Occupation	Indigenous		Total	
	No	Percent	No	Percent
Managers and Administrators	3063	3.7	709925	9.3
Professionals	8381	10.2	1309468	17.1
Technicians and Associate Professionals	6711	8.1	861170	11.3
Tradespersons and Related Workers	9113	11.1	997011	13.1
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers	1851	2.2	329842	4.3
Intermediate Clerical, Sales & Service Workers	14007	17.0	1222733	16.0
Intermediate Production and Transport Workers	7948	9.7	661424	8.7
Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	6258	7.6	677250	8.9
Labourers and Related Workers	20036	24.3	667250	8.7
Inadequately Described/Not Stated	4979	6.0	200099	2.6
Total	82347	100.0	7636319	100.0

Source: ABS 1998 Cat No 2034.0 Table 4.6

Data from the 1996 Census shown in Table 4 above indicate that in many occupational categories the representation of Indigenous Australians is not vastly different from that of all Australians. Indigenous rates of representation in these occupations is sufficiently high to suggest that Indigenous Australians are no less capable of doing these jobs than other Australians, contrary to the implied assumptions about Indigenous Australians' lack of skill. If the clerical, sales and services area is looked at specifically, it can be seen that there is higher representation

of Indigenous workers at an intermediate level than for all Australians, but lower representation at elementary and advanced levels. If skill level were the only or major barrier to Indigenous people gaining employment, then once the entry point has been breached, there should be little difference between the distribution of Indigenous and other skilled workers in the organisational hierarchy. That this is not so at least in this case, appears to indicate that there are other factors operating here that need further investigation.

In general Aborigines have consistently been more likely than other Australians to be employed in the public sector. Tesfaghiorghis and Altman found that the public sector was the major employer of Aborigines, with Federal, State and local governments employing 31 percent of Aborigines in 1971 and 40 percent in 1986. The private sector employed 68 percent of Aborigines in 1971 and 55 percent in 1986 (Tefaghiorghis & Altman 1991, pp. 19-20). More recent data from ABS show that, in 1991, 34.9 percent of employed Indigenous Australians were in the public sector compared with 22.3 percent of all employed Australians, with a rise of 11.9 percent between 1976 and 1991, compared with a drop of 9.4 percent for the population as a whole (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253 Table 1.5). This does not include employment in all those Indigenous organisations which are funded by government, so the extent of public sector employment was probably even greater. In 1996, the Census indicated that the Commonwealth, State and Territory and local governments employed 27.6 percent of Indigenous employees, with CDEP employing a further 14.9 percent. At the same time, 17.8 percent of all Australians were employed by the three levels of government (ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 4.2), indicating a continuing dominance of the public sector in the employment of Indigenous Australians. Why this should be so is a further area requiring more extensive investigation, particularly in relation to why there is simultaneously a comparatively low rate of Indigenous employment in the private sector.

In 1971 over half of employed Aborigines were in the agricultural and community services sectors, but by 1991 the major employers were public administration and wholesale and retail trade as well as community services, with the number employed in agriculture only about one fifth of its former level (ABS 1995, Cat No 6253, Table 1.6). Tesfaghiorghis and Altman found that Aboriginal employment in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting declined substantially from 24.3 percent in 1971 to 7.0 percent in 1986 (1991, p. 16). Although the Australian workforce generally followed a similar pattern, Taylor has shown that Aboriginal concentration in particular industries is greater than for the population as a whole (Taylor 1992), a situation that has changed little. The 1996 Census showed that Indigenous and all Australians continued to be concentrated in particular industries, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Employment of Indigenous and All Australians in Selected Industries, 1996

Industry	Indigenous		Total	
	No	Percent	No	Percent
Manufacturing	5806	7.05	965038	12.64
Wholesale Trade	2071	2.51	446545	5.85
Retail Trade	6264	7.61	1036648	13.58
Finance and Insurance	805	0.98	296457	3.88
Property and Business Services	4988	6.06	750193	9.82
Government & Administration & Defence	12653	15.37	373425	4.89

Health and Community Services	16124	19.58	725178	9.50
Total	82346	100.00	7636313	100.00

Source: ABS 1998 Cat No 2034.0 Table 4.5

Over 35 percent of Indigenous Australian workers were employed in government, administration and defence and health and community services sectors while these two sectors employed only 14.4 percent of all Australian workers. Indigenous workers were under-represented in the major industries employing Australian labour, the retail and manufacturing sectors. The latter areas are ones which employ many unskilled workers; and the retail industry is represented in most communities, calling into question either skill lack or locational disadvantage as sufficient reasons for under-representation of Indigenous employees in these industries. This, too, is a matter which deserves more detailed investigation.

Income

Income is a further important measure of economic status. Taylor states that: 'Given the relative improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labour force status, as well as the apparent upgrading of occupational status, there would appear to be statistical grounds for expecting that the income gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians may have narrowed' (1993, p. 38). But in fact he found very little change from 1986 to 1991, unsurprisingly given that most of the jobs generated were CDEP-related. The problem here is that CDEP remuneration is based on unemployment benefit rates rather than on awards and also that jobs are part-time not full-time.

In the NATSIS, respondents were asked about their income, but the detailed findings of the survey, published by ABS (1996, Cat No 4190), give very limited information, and do not allow an analysis of levels of earned income compared with other Australians. Nor did the NATSIS provide any information about occupational segregation or any detailed industry breakdown, beyond separating into government and non-government sectors. This is an illuminating omission which appears to indicate that these aspects of employment were not considered sufficiently important by the designers to be included in the survey.

Some information is included on the relationship between qualifications and income in the detailed findings of the NATSIS (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199). Qualifications were found to be significant in improving employment opportunities, in terms of having a job (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199 pp. 70-71), but no analysis appears to have been done of this information in respect of location of respondents. Therefore, the relationship between employment and location, in terms of access to educational institutions, the availability of jobs and level of qualifications, is a matter of speculation.

Training was also found in the NATSIS to be positively related to employment, but it is noted that 'some people may have been attending a training course *as a consequence of being in a job* and not the other way around' (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199, p. 70, emphasis added). It is disappointing that the survey has not been able to throw light on some of the possibly important relationships between employment, qualifications and earnings, but it is a further indication of the narrow perspective from which the issue of Indigenous disadvantage is commonly addressed.

Altman and Hunter's re-examination of Indigenous poverty, conducted after the NATSIS information was available, found that there has been a reduction in Indigenous poverty compared with the rest of the population but this is more a result of increasing poverty among non-Indigenous Australians than improvement in the economic position of Indigenous Australians (Altman & Hunter 1998, p. 255). They also point out that the size of Aboriginal families and their disproportionate location in areas where the price of goods is high, affects, to a degree as yet unknown, the distribution of poverty among Indigenous families.

The 1996 Census for the first time provided relatively comprehensive data on the comparative income of Indigenous Australians on a wide range of dimensions, as summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Indigenous Median Income as Percentage of All Individual Median Weekly Income from All Sources, Persons Aged 15 Years and Over, 1996

Category	ATSI Income (percent of All in category)	Category	ATSI Income (percent of All in category)
Age		Qualification	
15-24	88.2	Degree/Diploma	85.4
25-44	60.6	Vocational Qualification	85.1
45 and over	84.4	Not Qualified	84.5
Sector of State		Occupation	
Major Urban	79.9	Managers/Administrators	80.7
Other Urban	81.7	Professionals	73.1
Bounded Locality*	72.7	Technicians/Associate Professionals	87.3
Rural Balance	66.5	Tradespersons and Related Workers	82.7
Employment Type		Advanced Clerical/Service	
CDEP [†]	(62.2)	Intermediate Clerical/Sales/Service	90.0
Other Employed	82.7	Intermediate Production/Transport	93.2
Employed Including CDEP	74.4	Elementary Clerical/Sales/Service	71.7
Total Population	74.1		

Source: ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Tables 5.1-5.6)

* Rural community with between 200 and 999 population.

[†] As CDEP is not applicable to all but a few non-Indigenous Australians, the figure used for comparison here is the average income for all Australians aged over fifteen years.

Indigenous Australians have far lower incomes than average except in the case of lower level clerical, sales and service workers, the largest difference being for workers in the prime income earning years from 25 to 44 whose incomes were only 60 percent of those of all workers in the same age group. Indigenous people who live in communities of less than 1000 population or in rural areas and Indigenous labourers are also notable for their comparatively low incomes. What is of particular interest is that there is little variation in the differential between Indigenous and all Australian workers when qualifications are taken into account (ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 5.6).¹¹ A closer look at only those with incomes over \$400 a week shows that a smaller proportion of Indigenous people with qualifications receives incomes at this level compared with all Australians. This is even more noticeable if only those with incomes over \$160 a week, to crudely control for those on pensions and benefits, are included, as shown in Table 7.

¹¹ This can partly be explained by the fact that all persons aged 15 years and over, not only those who are employed, are included in this comparison.

Table 7: Comparison of Weekly Incomes Over \$400 by Qualification Level

Qualification	Employees with income over \$400/wk as percent of all employees		Employees with income over \$400/wk as percent of those with incomes of \$160/wk+	
	Indigenous	All employees	Indigenous	All employees
Degree/diploma	60.8	67.0	69.4	77.1
Vocational	46.4	55.4	56.8	66.0
None	14.9	26.9	24.1	40.8

Source: ABS 1998, Cat No 2034, Table 5.6

A later ABS publication using 1996 Census data summarises the income status of employed Indigenous people thus:

Even among those employed, however, the median income was lower for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people. This difference is not explained by the differences in occupations held... or in the level of qualifications... Indigenous people had a lower median income than non-Indigenous people in every occupation group except 'elementary clerical, sales and service workers' (for which median incomes were similar). Indigenous people also had a lower median weekly income than non-Indigenous people for every level of qualification... These differences are not explained by differences in age. (ABS 1999, Cat No 4704.0, p. 22)

But, although the 1996 Census has added greatly to knowledge on Indigenous income levels, as long as there is no Indigenous identifier on most major income surveys, the information to determine accurately levels of Indigenous income and poverty on an on-going basis will not be available. ABS is considering appropriate methods and timeframes for collecting better data on issues including labour force characteristics¹² and income (ABS 1999). The information collected would also need to allow analysis of actual earnings from employment by occupation and industry, if proper comparison is to be done of Indigenous with non-Indigenous earnings. Lack of data makes it impossible to draw firm conclusions about whether increased education leads to greater earnings; whether it improves career as well as employment prospects; or even whether it is location in major centres where access to both education and employment is greater, that leads to any correlation between the possession of qualifications and employment. Improved data would go a long way towards closing the gap in knowledge of the true extent and nature of Indigenous disadvantage. For example, if qualifications did in fact redress employment disadvantage for Indigenous Australians, one way this would become apparent would be in reducing the gap between Indigenous and all Australians' income, employment rates and other indicators. That the available statistics do not fully support the argument that lack of skills is at the root of Indigenous economic disadvantage leads to a recognition once again that the issues need to be more fully researched. However unless such research is designed to focus on reasons for disadvantage, and not just the figures which show its extent, it would only provide quantitative information and would not address the vexed issue of why this disadvantage developed and why it remains so intransigent despite decades of government policy intervention.

¹² Information from the first of the experimental estimates of Indigenous labour force characteristics produced by the ABS in December 2000 is used above, and ABS plans to conduct further surveys from 2002 to provide additional, more accurate information on labour force and other social characteristics of Indigenous Australians. (ABS Cat 6287.0, p. 2)

A study of Indigenous income using 1991 Census data conducted by Anne Daly (1994) attempts to analyse income inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Daly found that full-time employed Indigenous workers were paid on average less than their non-Indigenous counterparts, with Indigenous males earning an average 70 percent of non-Indigenous male earnings and Indigenous women earning on average 83 percent of other women's earnings (Daly 1994, p. 1). These findings are interesting and deserving of further investigation but unfortunately Daly has chosen to interpret them beyond the limits of the data. She concluded that lower Indigenous earnings were due to lower education and experience and the choice of Indigenous people to work in areas or with organisations, such as Indigenous organisations, where lower salaries were paid, and not due to discriminatory practices. Daly's conclusions are questionable, both because she has drawn conclusions without supporting evidence as in the latter case, and because of the degree of manipulation of indirect Census data that had to be carried out to derive the variables on which her findings are based. For instance 'there is no direct information on any individual's earnings from employment' in the Census but if hours of work were controlled, the Census figures 'were probably an adequate indicator of earnings' (Daly 1994, p. 4), despite the fact that the Census only asked for hours worked in broad categories, the one used here being 35 hours and over, and it only asked if the respondent was working full-time in the Census week, necessitating further complex manipulation of data (see Daly 1994, pp. 2-3). The possibility that the quality of education received by Indigenous Australians may be a factor, as had been found in American studies cited by Daly, is dismissed: 'The results presented here do not support the hypothesis that the schooling received by indigenous Australians has been of inferior quality' (1994, p. 11). This conclusion must be considered unsound given that the data on which Daly based this conclusion in no way sought to determine the quality of education received by Indigenous people; and that evidence abounds of Indigenous Australians who have been excluded from education or discouraged from pursuing their education (see for instance Huggins in Scutt 1994; and the stories of Dudgeon, Johnson, Winch, Roberts, Oodgeroo and Langton in Sykes 1993).

Even accepting her complex data manipulations, it is hard to comprehend Daly's finding of no discrimination in the remuneration of Indigenous workers when Daly herself notes:

The results... for males show a significant negative effect of Aboriginality on the income of males working full time. According to these estimates, holding everything else constant, indigenous males could expect to have incomes which were 9 percent below those of their non-indigenous counterparts. This difference may reflect discrimination against indigenous males, or their choice of employment with smaller monetary compensation offset by non-pecuniary benefits (for example working in an indigenous organisation). It does, however, suggest that indigenous males suffer from an income disadvantage associated with their race. (1994, p. 6)

Leaving aside the question of whether lower salaries are in fact paid in Indigenous organisations, one is led to question why Daly finally concludes without corroborating evidence: 'that the main source of lower incomes for indigenous males compared with their non-indigenous counterparts was their lower level of human capital endowments rather than the rewards they received for these endowments' (1994, p. 13). It is concerning that a scholar of Daly's repute could draw unsupported conclusions from inadequate data rather than drawing attention to gaps in the data which if pursued may

provide possible alternative explanations not able to be tested using the available data; one such gap is the dearth of detailed information about earnings from employment as opposed to all income, a gap which ABS's impending survey of social indicators will address. But even if better quantitative data become available, there are still a number of issues requiring further examination before any firm conclusions can be drawn about the reasons for apparent lower incomes for even full-time employed Indigenous Australians.

Daly's research referred to above suffers from a problem noted by Gray and Hunter, that such studies are a cross-sectional analysis, with no time dimension (1999, p. 1). Gray and Hunter carried out the first longitudinal analysis of the probability of Indigenous employment and labour force participation using Census figures from 1986, 1991 and 1996; their definition of employment included wage and salary earners, self-employment and employers but excluded CDEP employment to be consistent with the exclusion from the definition of employment of other labour market programs for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people.¹³ They found that:

- living in a major urban area increased employment opportunity and labour force participation for non-Indigenous males and females, but that region of residence did not affect Indigenous males' and females' non-CDEP employment or labour force participation probabilities;
- having difficulty speaking English decreased employment probability and labour force participation for non-Indigenous males and females, but it had no effect for Indigenous males while for Indigenous females difficulty with English affected their employment probability but not their labour force participation;
- having a degree or diploma had no significant effect on the probability of employment or labour force participation for Indigenous males; Indigenous females with degrees were no more likely to be employed or to participate in the workforce while a diploma reduced their probability of being in the workforce but did not affect their probability of employment. (Gray & Hunter 1999, pp. 6-7)

These results indicate that school quality, discrimination and other causes not able to be determined through using the available quantitative data 'will need to be addressed if significant inroads into Indigenous employment and participation are to be achieved' (Gray & Hunter, p. 10). However, although their analysis casts doubt on the efficacy of policy initiatives aimed at improving education and increasing geographical mobility in addressing Indigenous employment disadvantage, they are unable to discern the precise policy required. To do this, data allowing longitudinal analysis of individuals would be necessary. Nevertheless they suggest that:

formal education needs to be combined with a series of other policies aimed at combating indigenous labour market disadvantage.. A holistic approach to *increasing indigenous attachment to the labour market and employment outcomes* is likely to be required... more attention needs to be paid to the quality of education received. (Gray & Hunter, p. 11, emphasis added)

¹³ But note that ABS does include CDEP as employment because of the employer-employee relationship that exists between CDEP employees and Indigenous organisations (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, p. 4).

Once again, the focus is on dealing with the deficit of Indigenous people, with some recognition that there may be problems in the education and employment arenas, but with the implication that these can readily be addressed. A deeper questioning of the reasons for disadvantage, reasons that may not be able to be dealt with within the current employment and education systems, is again avoided.

It is clear then that, as far as can be ascertained from the available statistical data, Indigenous Australians' situation in regard to employment has consistently been significantly poorer than that of other Australians, but that the data on which these conclusions are based are somewhat inadequate and that the reasons for this disadvantage have not been adequately examined.

Summary of Issues

It has been established above that Indigenous Australians are disadvantaged in employment in a range of ways including in terms of unemployment rates, participation in the workforce, occupational status, industry segregation and income. Workforce participation for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is much lower than for non-Indigenous Australians. The range of positions occupied by Indigenous Australians, in terms of both occupation and industry, is far narrower than that enjoyed by the wider community. The income received is considerably lower as a result of more limited employment opportunities and greater dependence on the welfare system. A much higher proportion of Indigenous than other Australians is unemployed, and this inequity cannot be fully explained by the location of Indigenous Australians in remote and rural localities with limited employment opportunities: it applies also in urban areas.

This situation has not improved significantly despite years of special programs to improve Indigenous people's employment opportunities. Employment programs and the increasing amounts spent by governments on programs designed to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment opportunities have been of limited benefit, resulting largely in public sector jobs and having minimal impact on opportunities in private industry. Many of the public sector positions occupied by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people are funded under the CDEP program, and are of dubious value in terms of the income they provide and the skills they utilise or develop in their occupants.

The Unanswered (Unasked?) Questions

In a sense the facts outlined above speak for themselves: employment disadvantage for Indigenous Australians is significant and on-going. But why this is so remains unexplained. Reference is made by some to the lower educational levels of Indigenous Australians, resulting in lower skill levels and therefore reduced employment opportunities. But the same question, why is this the case, can be asked here too. Others refer to the low health status of Indigenous Australians as a factor in limiting employment opportunities, particularly for older and rural and remote Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Again, the question of why this problem continues to exist is not raised though its impact on employment is noted.

A crucial factor in all these areas of inequity is low income: opportunities for education, for good health, and all the other benefits of our society are severely curtailed if there is not enough money to ensure adequate housing, healthy diet, and access to goods and services which in many cases are remote from the localities in which Aboriginal people live. It is important to note that the most successful job creation scheme for Indigenous Australians, the CDEP scheme, is in effect largely a scheme for enabling Indigenous Australians to work in part-time positions in order to earn the equivalent of unemployment benefit; it is a *de facto* 'work-for-the-dole' scheme. As such, it does little to improve the income status of Indigenous Australians, although it does *appear* to reduce their critically high unemployment rates.

The facts outlined above may point to deep systemic problems which the employment programs aimed at reducing disadvantage have not effectively addressed and may even have worsened, but the approaches used to date have not been able to identify the root causes of Indigenous employment disadvantage. Research is urgently needed to detect any systemic problems in relation to employment, to trace their origins and development, and to propose possible new approaches to resolving the seemingly entrenched employment disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. But quantitative approaches alone will not provide the information needed to resolve these issues. Quantitative approaches use numerical measures to estimate levels of Indigenous disadvantage in comparison with other Australians. In doing so, rarely do they ask whether such a direct comparison is valid. Jon Altman is an exception in that he questions the definitions of work or productive economic activity used by the ABS and other government agencies (Altman 1985; see also Altman & Sanders 1991, pp. 9-10). His point is that Aborigines in remote areas, and particularly on outstations, engage in some traditional economic activities and that these activities are overlooked in the process of counting people as employed or unemployed. Therefore, purely quantitative data may be misleading in that users of this data fail to take account of some important facets of the economic life of Indigenous groups and communities. The ABS's most recent publication on Indigenous employment also acknowledges this issue: the use of internationally recognised definitions of paid and unpaid work 'may not always give adequate recognition to the 'unpaid' activities which some Indigenous people undertake, for example as part of social and cultural obligations within communities in remote and rural areas' (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, p. 3).

This raises a related issue, that of the silence of the Aboriginal voice in the studies which enumerate Aboriginal disadvantage but fail to ask why this situation persists. The problem is seen almost exclusively from a white point of view. Questions are asked in terms of how Indigenous people measure up against the yardsticks used for the mainstream community. Undoubtedly it is important to be aware of the extent of the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's economic status in a society which prides itself on a belief in equality for all. However, whether and to what extent it is this difference which is an issue for Indigenous people themselves is rarely raised. There is an underlying assumption that Indigenous Australians will, or should, aspire to economic status comparable to, if not exactly the same as, that enjoyed by other Australians. There are many problems with this, not least of which is the assimilationist tone of this assumption. The possibility that Indigenous Australians may aspire to something other than the 'Australian dream' is not generally acknowledged, except to some extent by Altman and ABS as noted above. But even there, their willingness to acknowledge another reality is confined to a consideration

of those Indigenous people who clearly continue to engage in some aspects of traditional economic activity. That there may be other aspects of Indigenous culture which urban and other rural Aboriginal people may wish to pursue and may not fit neatly into the mainstream way of life of most Australians is either not acknowledged or dismissed. For example:

Even in the urban and rural areas, the question of the cultural appropriateness of employment for many Aborigines may still arise, although in these instances it may have as much to do with how regular employment fits with *a pervasive community culture of poverty and unemployment*, as with a tradition-oriented culture. (Altman & Sanders 1991, p. 10, emphasis added)

It appears that there is a somewhat disturbing tendency to blame the victims, and not to turn the spotlight onto a social and economic system which, on the evidence of the statistics, continues to effectively exclude many Aboriginal Australians from many of the benefits of Australian society.

This tendency to avoid seeking answers in the way white society treats Indigenous people is apparent in the focus on remote and rural Aborigines. More than a third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population now lives in major urban areas. However, the explanations tendered for continuing disadvantage generally point to issues such as the lack of education and lack of access to mainstream labour market opportunities of Indigenous Australians because of their location in rural and remote areas (see for instance Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979; Altman 1991b; Daly 1994; Altman & Hunter 1998). If the explanation for disadvantage was as simple as this, it could be expected that there would be little or no disadvantage for urban Indigenous people. But as shown above, the problems are shared by urban Aborigines. In reverse, it could be expected that rural non-Indigenous people would also suffer from locational disadvantage and therefore have higher rates of unemployment than other Australians, but that this is not the case has been shown above.

There are here and there some tantalising hints that there may be other issues, for instance Altman and Nieuwenhuysen's reference to 'lack of social experience and motivation, as well as employer attitudes' (1979, p. 14) cited above. But again the absence of any further discussion of these issues implies that the problem lies with the Aboriginal people themselves, not with a society which has failed to provide Aboriginal people with the opportunity to acquire relevant skills, experience and role models which may lead to greater motivation. The issue of employer attitudes, which may be crucial in widening opportunities for employment for Indigenous people, is left up in the air or dismissed without adequate examination as in the case of Daly (1994).

The possibility that other workers who are given opportunities by employers may start their working life without fully developed skills is not drawn into the comparison with Indigenous Australians; but this could bear careful examination. If Aboriginal people have few skills and work disproportionately in unskilled jobs, is this because they are not given opportunities to work in the occupations and industries which lead to the acquisition of greater levels of skill? Is it logical to conclude that, because Aboriginal people are not employed in jobs which require higher levels of skill while many non-Indigenous Australians are employed in such jobs, the reason for the lack of employment is the lack of skill? Could it not equally be the case that lack of

opportunity to acquire skills through job experience and on-the-job training is the reason for lack of skill, and the lack of skill is a symptom of deeper systemic discrimination in employment? Alternatively, could there be failure to recognise those skills that Indigenous people may possess, leading to an untested assumption that Indigenous people are unskilled and therefore ineligible for employment in higher level jobs?

A further issue not examined in any depth, though it is here and there referred to, is the derivation of current disadvantage. Quantitative analysis shows us where disadvantage exists, but it does not tell us where it originated, and there is a dearth of other research which broaches this crucial issue. To get to the bottom of all these issues, some detailed and comprehensive qualitative research is urgently needed, starting with research to identify the historical background to the problems currently experienced and to examine the effects of this history on current thinking about the issues. Without a better understanding of history as it specifically relates to Indigenous employment and the ongoing effects of that history, there can be little hope for improvement in the intractable disadvantage of the descendants of Australia's original inhabitants.

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