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## **The Impact of Australian Policy Regimes on Indigenous Population Movement: Evidence from the 2001 Census**

John Taylor

### **Introduction**

Policy questions regarding the relationship between mobility and the structural position of Indigenous Australians have gained prominence since the election of the conservative Howard government in 1996. With hindsight, it can be seen that 1996 marked a watershed in Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. The new conservative government articulated a view that there had been too much emphasis on “symbolic” reconciliation (Indigenous rights) at the expense of practical outcomes. As a consequence, it set about redressing this imbalance by giving greater emphasis to “practical” reconciliation, or closing the socio-economic gap in the key areas of health, housing, education, and employment.

In line with this approach, and looking ahead to imagine the course of mobility and migration into the future, the current signal from the government to Indigenous Australians, and especially those in remote areas, is a growing requirement to embrace the institutions of mainstream Australian life with potential implications for migration decision-making. The government sees the means to influencing such decisions as via the policy process, and key changes to have emerged over the past ten years with such implications include: the privatization of employment services; the introduction of the Indigenous Employment Strategy with an emphasis on private sector engagement and enhanced labour mobility; revised welfare reform provisions including the universal imposition of work activity tests; incentives to move workers off workfare schemes and into mainstream employment; attempts to shift from communal to privatized land tenure; the abolition of national and regional representative structures; and a shift towards more individualized (as opposed to community) articulation with government services.

The aim of this paper is to examine recent patterns and trends in Indigenous population movement against this background of policy shift to see if there are any discernable impacts on mobility behaviour, though it may be too soon to say. If so (or if not), what does this mean for the likely future distribution of the

**Table 15.1: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Population Distribution by Remoteness Category, 2001**

	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Indigenous % of total
Major city	12,732,492	138,494	1.1
Inner regional	3,932,907	92,988	2.3
Outer regional	1,907,688	105,875	5.3
Remote	284,160	40,161	12.4
Very remote	97,473	81,002	45.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,954,720</b>	<b>458,520</b>	<b>2.4</b>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003, 22

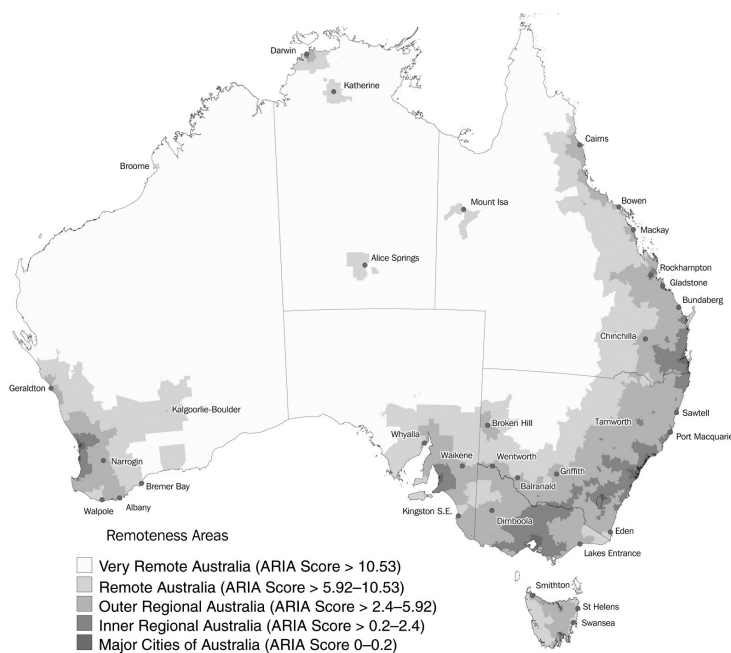
Indigenous population? In short, has the new policy regime achieved a literal mobilization of the Indigenous population?

To examine this, it is fortunate that (for once) Australian statistical and political cycles coincide. Basically, the last change in government occurred just before the 1996 Census which means that 1996 data reflect the high-water mark of the previous centre-left Labor government's 15 years of Indigenous affairs policy, and while various types of policy lags no doubt exist, the last inter-censal period (1996–2001) can be interpreted as the policy domain (and emergent legacy) of the current centre-right government. Before commencing, it is helpful to obtain a sense of the spatial distribution of the Indigenous population compared to the Australian population generally.

## Indigenous Population Distribution

Of all the transformations in the Australian Indigenous population since 1788, none has been more visible, nor more influential, than the geographic shift in distribution. From an original widespread occupation of the continent with numbers distributed in familial groupings at varying densities, residential arrangements are now focused mostly on the suburbs of towns and major cities. Over the long term, this reflects the impacts of colonization leading either to rural–urban migration, or to populations in situ being engulfed by expanding urban areas. Since 1971, it has also reflected a growing tendency for Indigenous people who were already urban-based to self-identify in census counts. Either way, the proportion of the Indigenous population resident in urban areas rose from 44% in 1971 to 74% in 2001. Almost one third of Indigenous Australians now reside in major cities (**Table 15.1**). While this number remains substantially less than that for the total population (67%), it nonetheless represents a marked increase from the figure of 15% recorded for major urban areas in 1971. As this process of rising Indigenous population counts in urban areas has unfolded, the rural share of the population has continued to decline—down from 56% in 1971 to almost one quarter in 2001.

A more structural interpretation of this shift would focus on the relative balance of remote/non-remote distribution. Reference to “remote” areas is long-standing

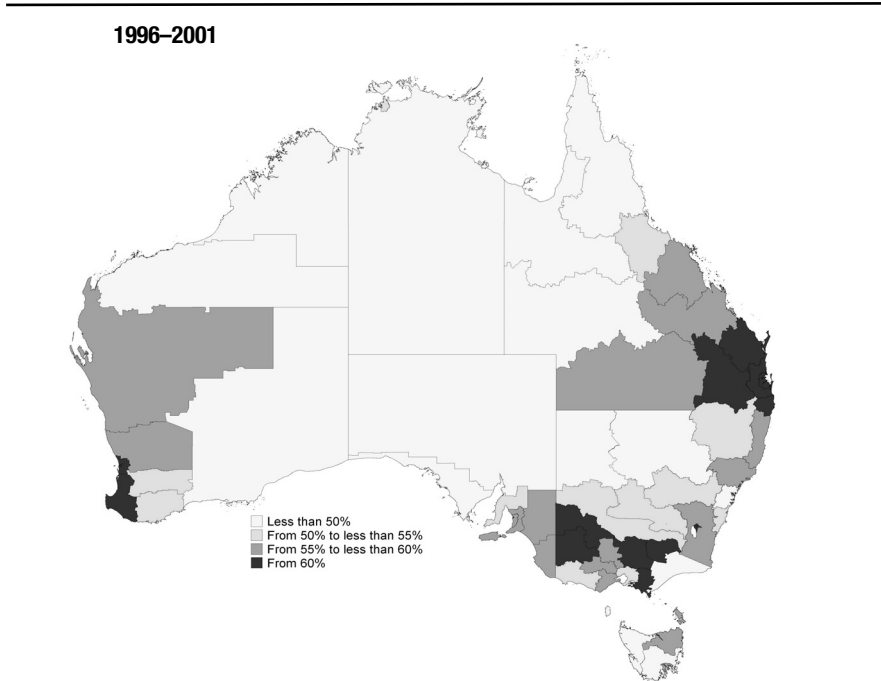
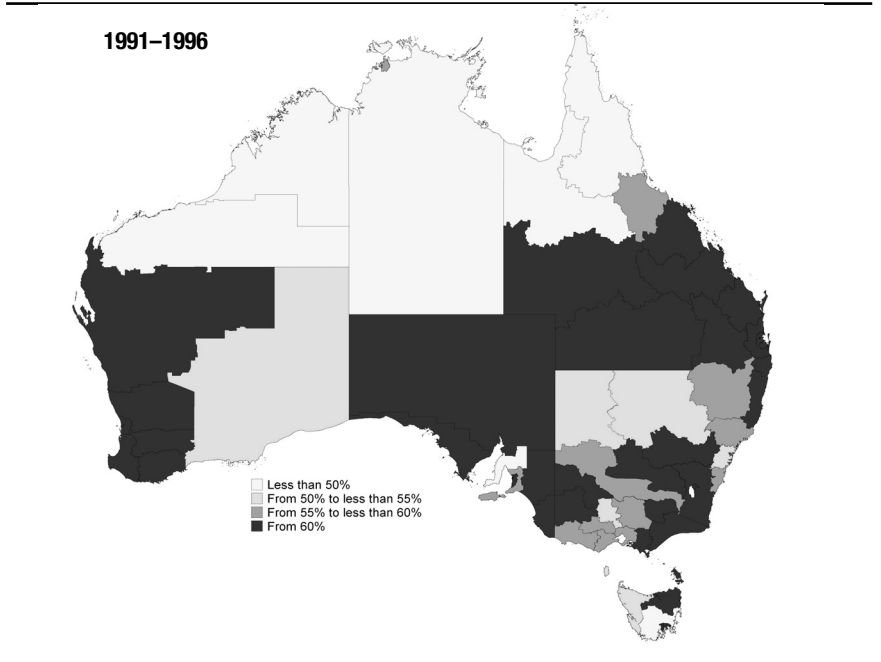
**Figure 15.1: ASGC Remoteness Regions**

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

in Australian regional analysis, and essentially draws attention to a distinction in social and economic geography between closely settled areas and sparsely settled areas, with economic development and service provision severely impeded in the latter by force of relative locational disadvantage, low accessibility, and a specialization of economic activity. Since 1996, the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) has attempted to capture this diversity by incorporating a continuum from those spatial units where geographic distance imposes minimal restriction on physical access to the widest range of goods, services, and opportunities for social interaction, to those where such restriction is maximized (**Figure 15.1**).

The salient point, then, from **Table 15.1**, is that Indigenous people remain far more likely than other Australians to reside away from cities, especially in remote areas covering the vast two thirds of the continent where economic development and access to goods and services are severely impeded by small numbers and long distances. Fully one quarter of the Indigenous population lives scattered across this landscape in places that are either close to, or on, lands over which they have owned via descent and other forms of kin-based succession for millennia. Overall, Indigenous people account for almost half (45%) of the resident population of very remote Australia. Although away from the main service and mining towns dotted across this vast area, they are by far the majority. As shown in **Figure 15.1**,

**Figure 15.2: Indigenous Propensities to Move by Statistical Division, 1991–1996 and 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

this means that Indigenous people and their institutions predominate over the bulk of the continental land mass. This dispersal of the contemporary Indigenous population from the suburbs of global cities to the remotest parts of the continent produces an unusually diverse range of residential circumstances and opportunities for social and economic participation.

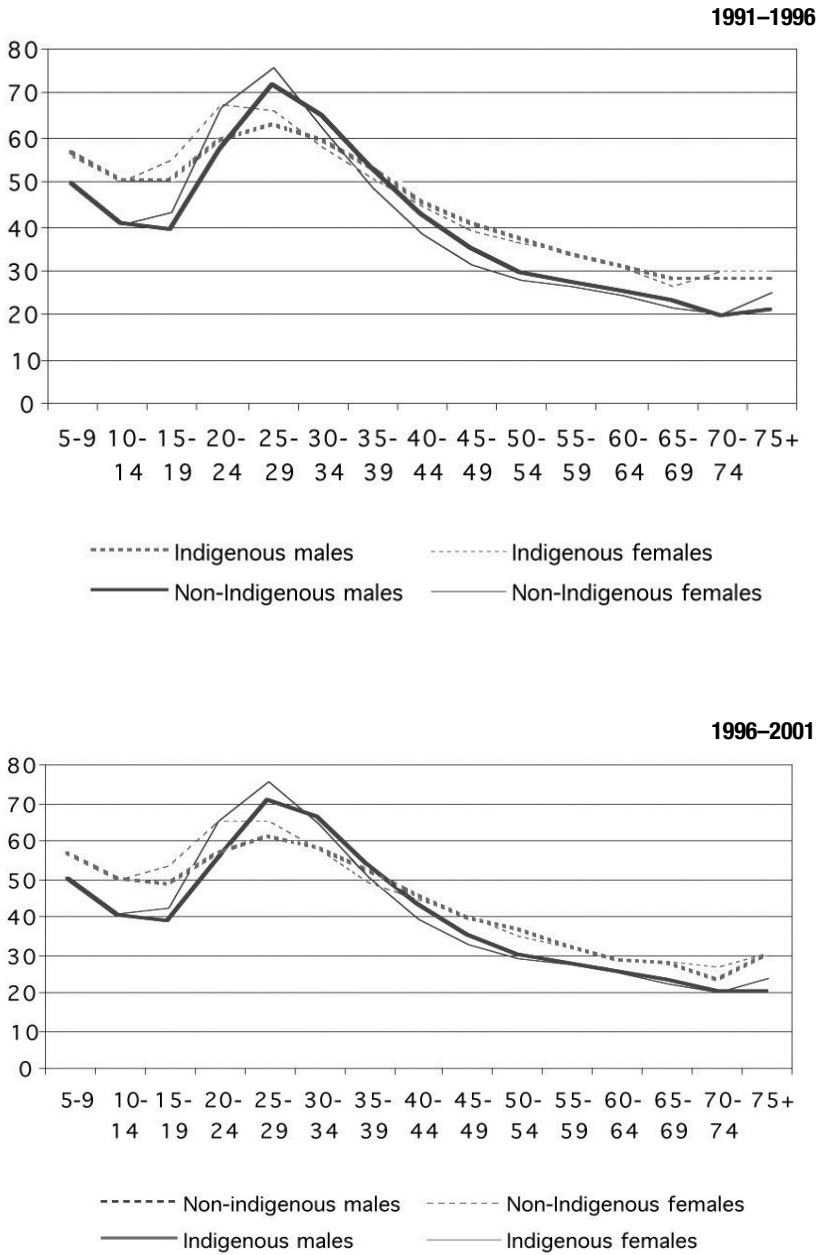
## Propensity to Move

Successive census results since 1971 have indicated that Indigenous people change their usual place of residence at consistently higher rates than the rest of the population. However, this gap is mostly accounted for by the fact that the Indigenous population includes a higher proportion of people in younger, more mobile age groups. Consequently, Indigenous age-standardized rates are only slightly higher than non-Indigenous rates (Taylor 2006). In 2001, 51% of the Indigenous population reported a change of residence over the previous five-year period. Surprisingly though, given the proposed likely influence of recent policy changes on mobility, this represented a reduction in the overall level of movement down from 52% recorded at the previous census—or did it? The fact is, a major constraint on the analysis of Indigenous mobility change over time exists because demographic factors are not solely responsible for intercensal population change.

Between 1991 and 1996, for example, as much as half (51%) of the increase in the Indigenous count could not be accounted for by demographic factors, while the equivalent figure for the last inter-censal period was 31%, with the balance due to increased self-identification of Indigenous status in census counts. Thus, it is difficult to unequivocally ascribe higher (or lower) mobility in a time series to actual changes in the propensity to move among Indigenous people. In effect, successive census data capture the characteristics, including mobility, of different populations. All that can be said then, is that the mobility rate among those who identified as Indigenous in 2001 was somewhat lower than the rate observed for those recorded as Indigenous in 1996, though substantially higher than for those who identified as Indigenous in 1991. While there is some scope for estimating the compositional impact of new identifiers in the population using fixed population characteristics, such as age left school (Eschbach, Supple, and Snipp 1998), for characteristics that are variable over time, such as mobility status, this is simply not possible.

These issues aside, **Figure 15.2** shows that while the intensity of movement was considerably lower in many regions for the 2001 Census-identified population, the regional pattern remained essentially the same with relatively high movement propensities in the east and southwest, and generally low propensities in the remote areas of the interior and across the north. The picture it paints of persistently low Indigenous population movement in remote areas is true in the sense that remote Indigenous populations are not migrant, but it is grossly misleading in the sense that they are highly mobile, and engaged in circular mobility over the short-term (Taylor 1998; Taylor and Bell 2004; Peterson 2004; Memmott et al 2006).

**Figure 15.3: Indigenous Age-specific Propensities to Move, 1991–1996 and 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

## Movement Propensities by Age and Sex

Overall, at the national level, the age profile of mobility for Indigenous people is very similar to that observed for all other Australians with movement rates peaking in the 20–29 age range followed by a sharp decline, but with a slight rise in retirement ages (**Figure 15.3**). For the population in general, the peak in the age profile of migration in the young-adult age range has been firmly linked to the combined influence of life cycle events, including departure from the parental home, the start of tertiary education and training, entry into the labour force, and the establishment of independent living arrangements. While broad agreement in this patterning of migration by age suggests that similar influences also bear on the Indigenous young adult population, the much flatter profile of Indigenous mobility also indicates that such drivers are weaker. To the extent that migration rates reflect these socio-economic pressures it is again significant in the context of recent policy changes that the diagrams show no change at all in the rates by age between the first and second half of the 1990s.

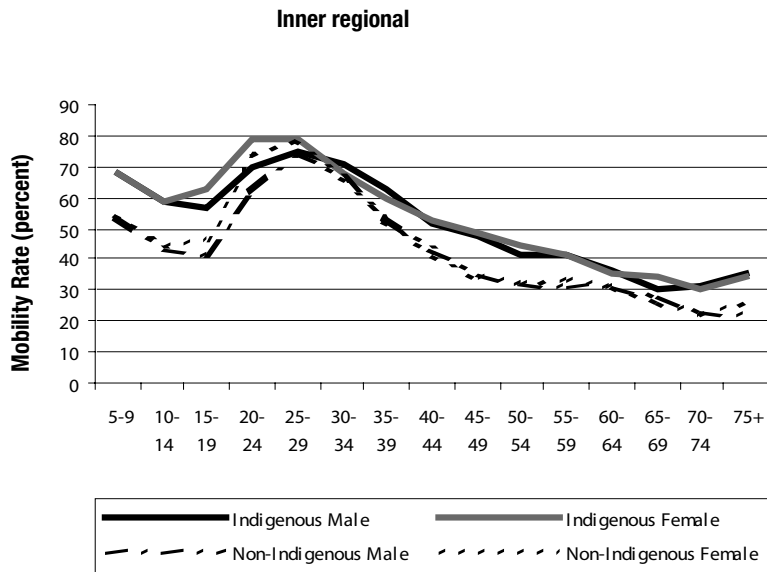
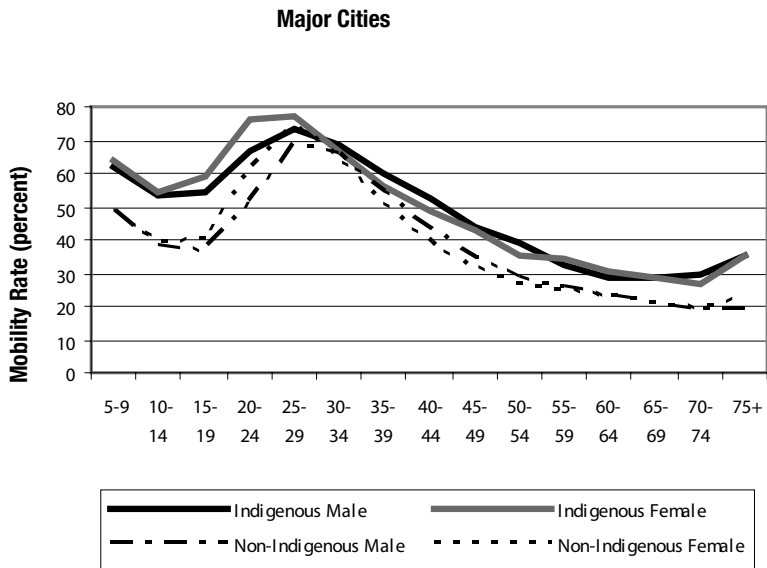
This is consistent with other research, which shows that despite the government's focus on practical reconciliation, the gap between Indigenous and other Australians actually widened during the 1990s for important markers such as labour force participation, unemployment, education participation, private sector employment, home ownership, and individual income (Altman and Hunter 2003).

## Mobility by Remoteness

At the broad regional scale, if the level of participation in mainstream institutions, such as tertiary education, labour markets, and housing markets, underpin the propensity to migrate, and if proximity to each of these is one factor that serves to facilitate or hinder such participation, then one would expect the age profile of mobility to vary according to remoteness. As indicated earlier, the capacity to explore mobility by a measure of remoteness is now provided for the first time by the inclusion of a remoteness index in the ASGC and **Figure 15.4** (page 288–90) shows a remarkably strong relationship between the age pattern of movement and remoteness.

Thus, in major cities, Indigenous people are more mobile than non-Indigenous people at all ages. However, as we progressively move away from major cities to very remote regions, the marked peaks among children and young adults in the age profile of Indigenous mobility are seen to progressively diminish to the point where age appears to have no effect at all on mobility in very remote areas, and the overall level is very low. In contrast, non-Indigenous mobility rates are largely unaffected by location, although especially high rates in the 20–34 age range are evident in remote and very remote areas mostly because of movement for employment.

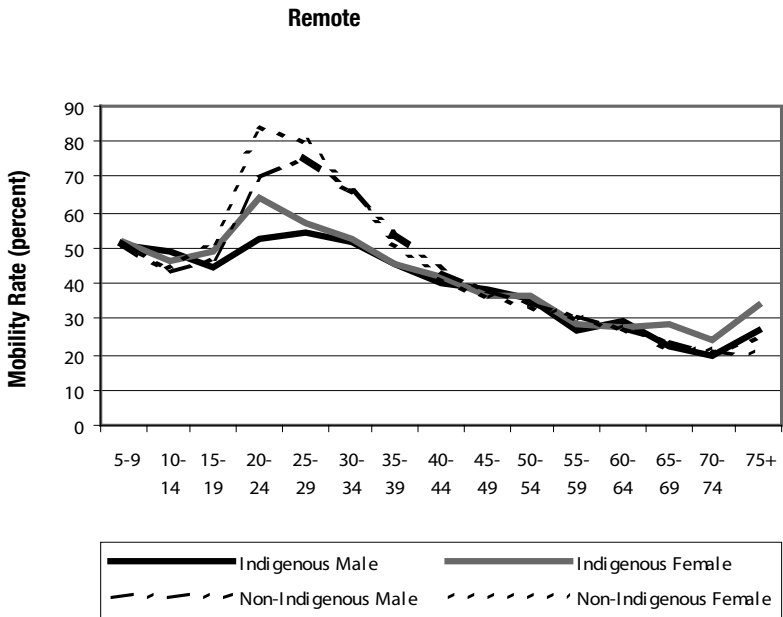
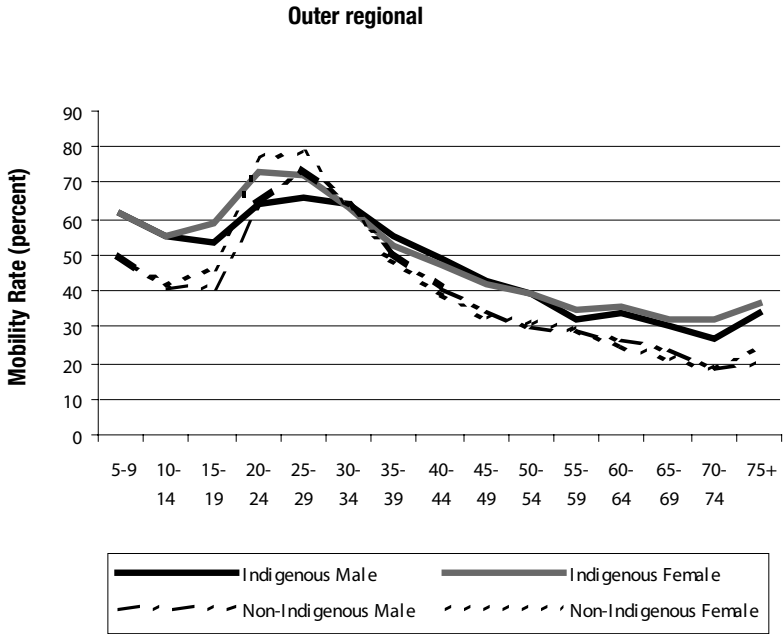
**Figure 15.4a: Age and Sex Profile of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Mobility Rates by Remoteness Category, 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

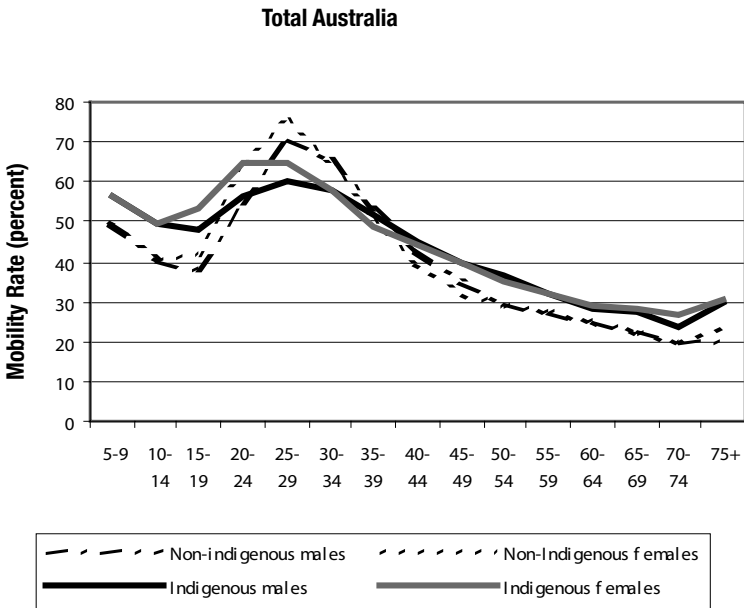
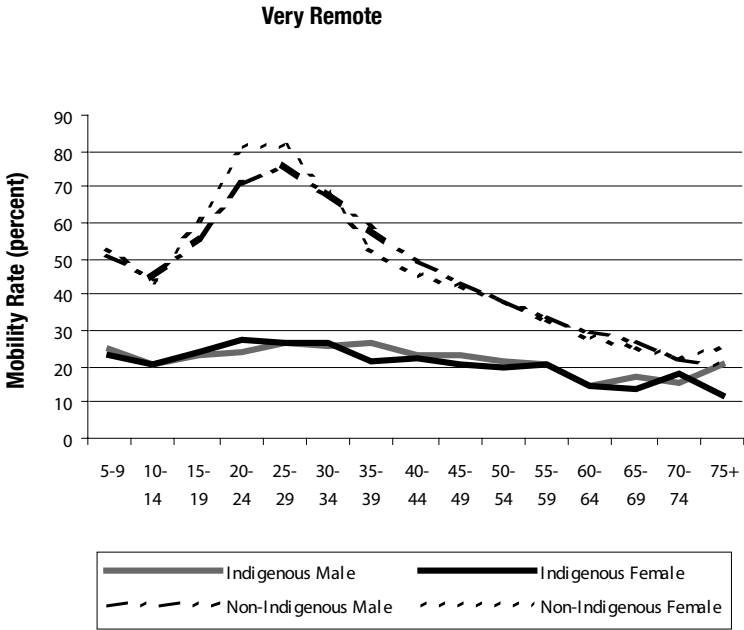


**Figure 15.4b: Age and Sex Profile of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Mobility Rates by Remoteness Category, 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

**Figure 15.4c: Age and Sex Profile of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Mobility Rates by Remoteness Category, 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

## **Spatial Redistribution: Are Indigenous People Moving to More Accessible Regions?**

Since these data suggest a steady decline in Indigenous social and economic mainstream participation away from major cities, a key question for policy is whether population redistribution is leading to more or less access to mainstream opportunity. Basically, what is the direction of net migration flows between regions according to their remoteness? Is net movement up or down the settlement hierarchy?

The first point of interest is the degree to which Indigenous people remain within or change their remoteness region of residence—in effect, to what extent do they move to a region with a different degree of relative access to goods, services, and labour markets? From **Table 15.2** (page 292) we can see that Indigenous residents of major cities in 2001 are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous residents to have been in a different remoteness region in the previous five years. The Indigenous population in regional areas is also more likely to have shifted remoteness region. By contrast, in remote areas (especially in very remote areas), Indigenous people are far more likely to be non-movers.

The numbers of people involved in these inter-regional shifts, and the consequent net and gross migration rates are shown in **Tables 15.3 and 15.4** (page 292). In major cities and regional areas, relatively large numbers of Indigenous people are involved in migration between remoteness regions. In major cities for example, population turnover with other remoteness regions involves almost one third of the Indigenous population (325 per thousand).

This compares to only 141 per thousand among non-Indigenous major city residents. However, the net gain to major cities from this movement is much lower in both cases at just 14 per thousand for the Indigenous population and almost zero for the non-Indigenous population. By far the greatest net gains for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are in the inner regional areas, although again the Indigenous gross migration rate associated with this is much higher. Outer regional areas provide an interesting contrast as these areas are net recipients of Indigenous population transfers from elsewhere, but net losers of non-Indigenous population. Finally, remote and very remote regions display net losses of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous population, although the rate of non-Indigenous loss is by far the greatest, as is the degree of non-Indigenous population turnover.

As for the direction of net migration flows, **Figure 15.5** (page 293) shows these to be broadly similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations with a clear overall shift in residence up the settlement hierarchy. However, significant differences are apparent in the intensity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous flows. Thus, Indigenous net losses from remote and very remote areas are most prominent to relatively adjacent outer regional areas. In turn, outer regional areas lose Indigenous population mostly to inner regional areas. This is suggestive of a step-wise

**Table 15.2: Percent of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Populations who Changed Their Remoteness Region of Residence Between 1996 and 2001**

	Indigenous (1)	Non-Indigenous (2)	Ratio (1/2)
Major Cities	16.3	7.1	2.29
Inner Regional	19.9	14.9	1.33
Outer Regional	19.4	17.3	1.12
Remote	22.2	25.7	0.86
Very Remote	8.2	33.9	0.24

Source: Taylor 2006

**Table 15.3: Migration Rates<sup>1</sup> of Indigenous Population Movement Between Remoteness Zones 1996–2000**

	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote	Very Remote
Movers out	12,566	13,448	13,632	5,845	8,123
Movers in	13,747	16,111	14,666	4,704	4,386
Net	1,181	2,663	1,034	-1,141	-3,737
Net rates	14.6	35.8	14.2	-48.1	-48.9
Gross rate	325.0	397.1	388.7	444.8	163.8

Source: Taylor 2006

1. Per thousand of the mean of the 1996 and 2001 populations

**Table 15.4: Migration Rates<sup>1</sup> of Non-Indigenous Population Movement Between Remoteness Zones 1996–2001**

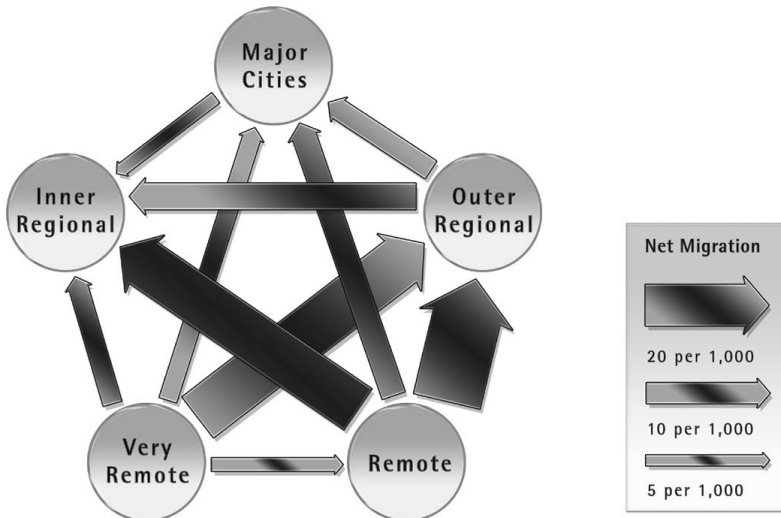
	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote	Very Remote
Movers out	627,920	582,573	341,958	78,300	64,290
Movers in	628,251	685,262	283,742	53,948	43,838
Net	331	102,689	-58,216	-24,352	-20,452
Net rates	0.04	24.1	-32.2	-94.7	-128.6
Gross rate	141.2	297.6	345.7	514.4	679.7

Source: Taylor 2006

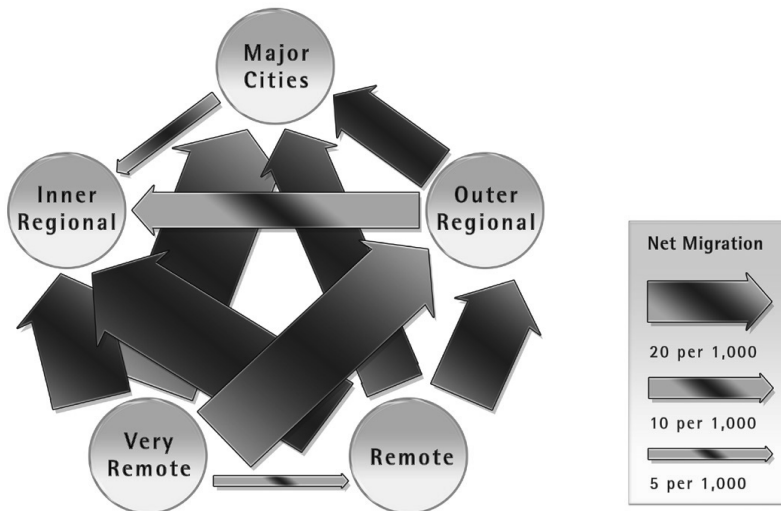
1. Per thousand of the mean of the 1996 and 2001 populations

**Figure 15.5: Rates of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Net Migration Loss by Remoteness Region, 1996–2001**

**Indigenous**



**Non-Indigenous**



Source: Taylor 2006

migration similar to that reported in the past for Indigenous migration to major cities such as Adelaide (Gale and Wundersitz 1982). By contrast, non-Indigenous movement out of remote and very remote areas is substantial to all regions, often bypassing outer regional areas, with the largest single flows occurring directly into inner regional areas and major cities suggestive of employment and housing-led mobility. The considerable difference in the intensity of net migration loss between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations reveals the key demographic reason why the Indigenous share of total population in remote areas continues to rise.

But wouldn't such a gradual shift up the settlement hierarchy represent a positive step along the government's path to practical reconciliation? The answer depends largely on the stability of such a residential shift. The fact is, Indigenous population turnover rates in metropolitan areas are relatively high, at times involving half or more of a region's population (Taylor and Bell 1999). Furthermore, this high turnover is attributed largely to movement between cities and their hinterlands, as opposed to involving inter- or intra-metropolitan movement. For some cities, it has been suggested that this tends to undermine the notion of an "urban Aboriginal population" as distinct from any other, and that Indigenous people in the city are not just similar to those in surrounding country areas—to a large extent they are the same people spatially displaced at different stages of their lives (Gray 1989). The basis for Gray's assertion stemmed from his analysis of the age-specific pattern of net flows in and out of cities in the 1980s with two overlapping patterns of urbanization observed.

The first was evident in the large metropolitan centers of Sydney and Melbourne, and involved a cycle of young single people moving to the city then returning to the country maybe ten years later taking their new families with them. The second pattern was focused on the smaller cities of Adelaide and Perth and involved more permanent migration, possibly owing to the existence of more active Aboriginal housing programs in those cities. In all states, net in-migration to cities was concentrated in the 15–24 age group, highlighting an economic imperative in the context of education, training, and job search, while out-migration at older ages reflects difficulties in securing family housing. The common socio-economic determinant here was the much greater reliance of Indigenous people on access to housing via the public sector (Gray 1989, 2004).

If we consider the more recent age profiles of Indigenous net migration to metropolitan areas as shown in **Figure 15.6** (page 297–299), it appears that not much has changed since Gray's analysis 20 years ago. Overall, movement into cities tends to peak in the young adult age groups and tapers off thereafter. In Sydney, all but the 15–24 age group display net migration loss; Melbourne is somewhat similar in having clear net gains up to middle ages, and clear net losses at older ages; Adelaide and Perth also experience net gains of youth and young adults, but tend to experience net migration balance at all other ages while Brisbane is the only capital city to record consistent net gains for almost all age groups.

## Reasons for Movement

Attempts to establish the proximate causes of population movement using census data have only recently been made (Kinfu 2005), while the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) provided the first survey data on Indigenous migrant motivations (Taylor and Kinfu 2006). In both cases a mix of social and economic factors were identified, though with more importance attached to the former. Thus, from census analysis, family rather than labour-related characteristics were found to be the primary factors underpinning mobility with low socio-economic status producing a need for frequent residential adjustment (Kinfu 2005). Significantly, a strong association was found between the size and probability of positive migration flows, and the strength of social networks.

As for NATSISS data, the results from a logistic regression point to marginal labour force status as the biggest predictor of mobility. However, when asked directly to indicate the most important reasons for moving, respondents overwhelmingly identified family and housing factors with the single largest category being a desire to be close to family and friends. This is consistent with repeated findings from case studies of Indigenous mobility that stress the importance of kin location and general reliance on public rental housing in shaping the frequency and pattern of mobility (Gale and Wundersitz 1982; Young and Doohan 1989; Taylor and Bell 2004; Peterson 2004; Gray 2004; Memmott, Long, and Thomson 2006).

## Conclusion

In summarizing the findings of a recent compendium of studies on population mobility and Indigenous peoples in the new world settings of Australasia and North America, Taylor and Bell (2004) argued the primacy of a political economy framework for understanding past and present Indigenous population movement. This is because in these particular settings, and especially (perhaps) in Australia, the movement and residential location of Indigenous peoples has been a key expression of colonial and post-colonial Indigenous-state relations reflecting the combined effects of government policy, and widespread and sustained social and economic marginalization. Although a significant shift in the Indigenous policy environment commenced in the mid-1990s, this appears not to have impacted on Indigenous mobility behaviour, at least not up until 2001. Thus, while the intent of government policy is to move towards a convergence in socio-demographic trends, there appears little evidence of this so far in Australia. This may all be in the timing of course, with a longer lead time necessary for policy impacts to take effect, and for this reason much interest will surround 2006 Census results.

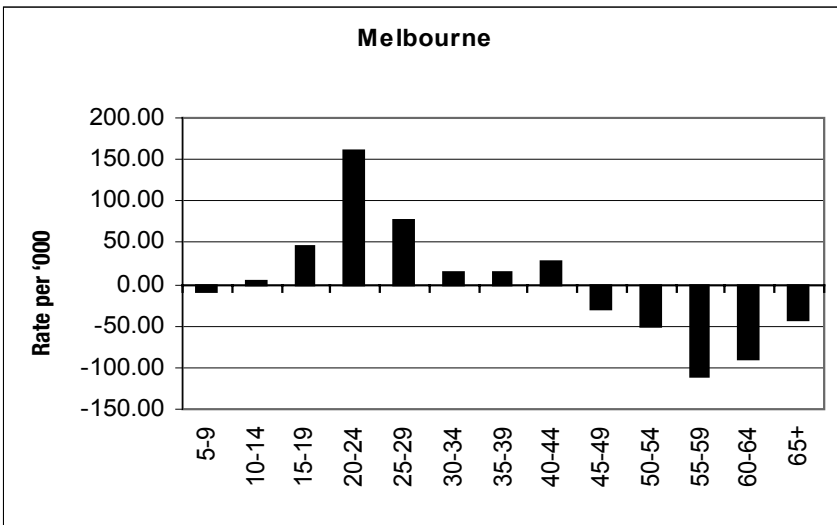
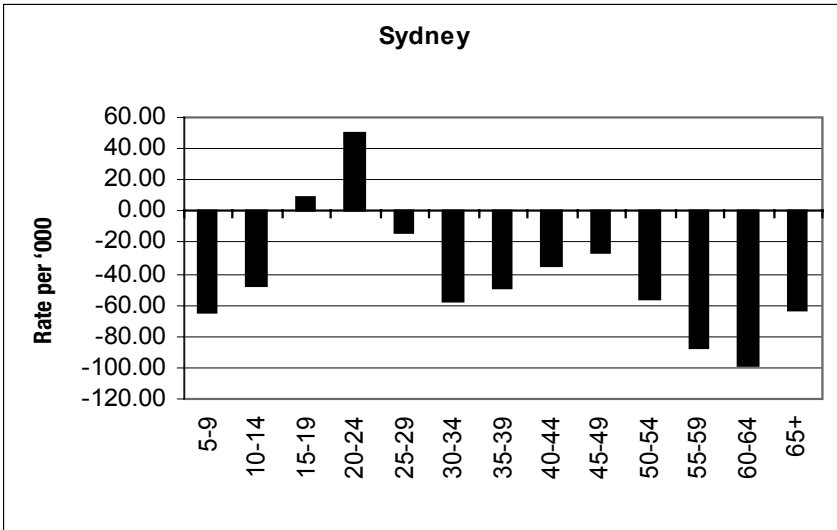
At the same time, any rigorous assessment of inter-censal mobility change is made difficult by shifts in census identity, by the inability of fixed period census data to record mobility in remote areas, and by high population turnover in cities. At the same time, it is true that the 2001 Census-identified Indigenous population displays a lower propensity for residential shift while no difference is observed

in age-specific movement rates compared to the 1996 Census-identified population. If convergence is evident at all it is found in the general pattern of net migration flow away from remote areas and up the settlement hierarchy towards areas of greater accessibility to services and labour markets. However, Indigenous net rates are much lower than non-Indigenous rates and this, combined with relatively high Indigenous fertility in remote areas, means that the only population growth across the vast expanse of the continent away from the settled urban and agricultural zone is Indigenous growth. As a consequence, Indigenous peoples constitute a growing share of the population in remote areas and the term “Indigenous domain” is increasingly applied here to signal the increasing prominence of Indigenous peoples and their institutions.

At one level, the lack of Indigenous responsiveness to market-led policy stimuli (notably in remote areas) can be seen as a measure of limited Indigenous integration with mainstream institutions; at another it can be seen as demonstrating an ongoing capacity and desire of Indigenous peoples to sustain difference. Accordingly, the idea of risk minimization as a strategy within highly segmented labour markets presents a realistic framework for understanding Indigenous population movement, as it highlights the distinctiveness of Indigenous economic participation (mostly in secondary labour markets), and lends prominence to the role of Indigenous social networks and social capital in both facilitating and constraining movement. Equally though, given the persistently low socio-economic status of Indigenous peoples across Australia, questions are increasingly raised regarding causality in the relationship between marginalization and mobility—does Indigenous mobility reflect socio-economic status, or does socio-economic status reflect mobility? As such, movement propensities and patterns of redistribution provide key indicators of social and economic transformation, marking individual and group responses to developmental and modernizing forces. They inform both social theory and policy debate.

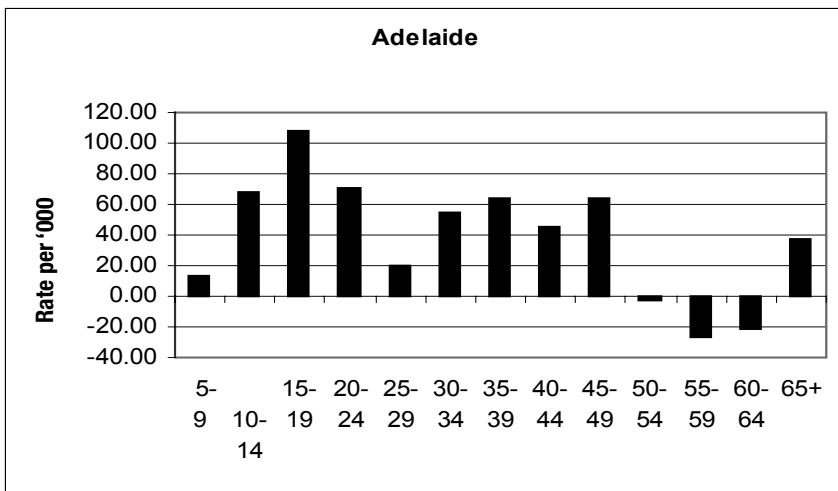
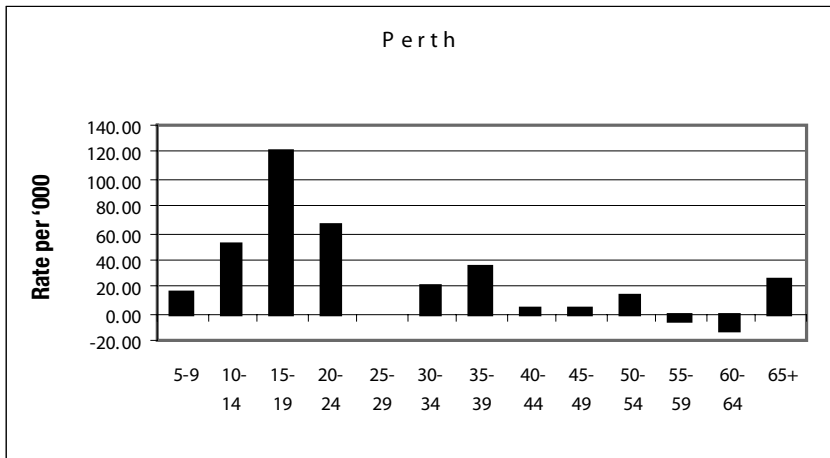


**Figure 15.6a: Age Profile of Indigenous Net Migration Rates in Australian Metropolitan Areas, 1996–2001**



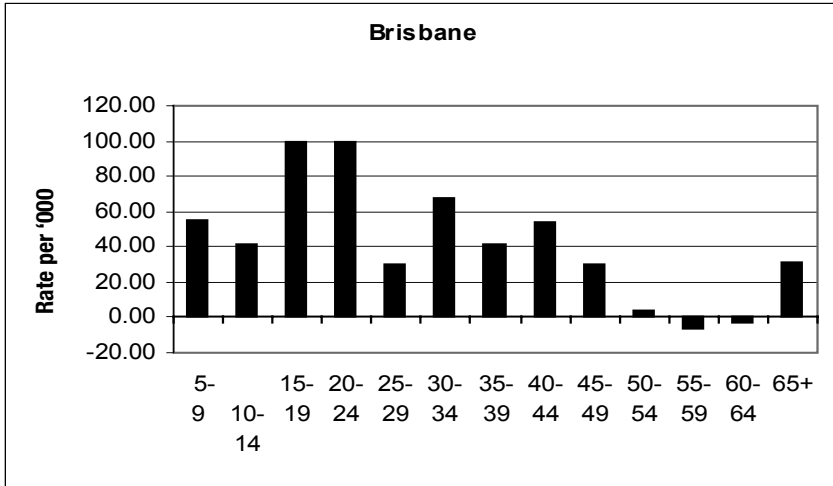
Source: Taylor 2006

**Figure 15.6b: Age Profile of Indigenous Net Migration Rates in Australian Metropolitan Areas, 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

**Figure 15.6c: Age Profile of Indigenous Net Migration Rates in Australian Metropolitan Areas, 1996–2001**



Source: Taylor 2006

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