# 12 Outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people[[1]](#footnote-1)

| Box 12.1 Key messages |
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| * The most recent available data are from the ABS 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). As a sample survey, it is subject to sampling error, which makes it difficult to detect differences between results if the size of the standard errors are large compared to the size of the difference between the results. For this reason, although not as recent, supplementary data from the 2011 ABS Census are also reported in this section. * In 2014‑15, for many indicators, national outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people[[2]](#footnote-2) were similar to those for Aboriginal Australians, including for: post‑secondary education attainment (table 12A.1.2); personal income (table 12A.1.6); home ownership (table 12A.1.7); and psychological distress (table 12A.1.8). * However, the proportion of Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years with year 12 or above (79.7 per cent) was significantly higher than for Aboriginal Australians (59.8 per cent), and was similar to that for non‑Indigenous Australians (87.9 per cent) (tables 12A.1.1 and 4A.6.1). * Analysis of 2011 Census data compared outcomes for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal Australians, nationally and across remoteness areas. * The proportion of Torres Strait Islander people in the Torres Strait Region[[3]](#footnote-3) with year 12 or above, was similar to that for non‑Indigenous Australians nationally (86 per cent and 87 per cent respectively) and well above that for Aboriginal Australians across all remoteness areas (table 12A.1.9 and figure 12.1) * As remoteness increased, outcomes for Aboriginal people decreased (as reflected in reporting across many indicators in this report). However, this is not the situation for Torres Strait Islander people, where for employment and post-school education (and particularly for year 12 or above), outcomes are similar or better in very remote areas compared to non-remote areas (tables 12A.1.9–11). |
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Torres Strait Islander people continue to maintain a unique cultural identity. They are a separate people in origin, history and way of life, with many cultural connections to New Guinea and nearby islands (AIATSIS 2008; Shnukel 2001). There is great diversity in Torres Strait Islander communities, their languages and traditions. There is also regional variability across Torres Strait Islander communities, including differences between those living on the Torres Strait islands, in mainland Australia and in remote versus urban communities.

In the 2011 Census, there were 548 370 people identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. Of these people, 90 per cent were of Aboriginal origin only, 6 per cent were of Torres Strait Islander origin only and 4 per cent identified as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. People who identified as being of Torres Strait Islander origin only and as being both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander account for 9.5 per cent of the Indigenous population (52 616 people, hereafter referred to as Torres Strait Islander people). The majority of Torres Strait Islander people lived in Queensland (62.6 per cent) and 85 per cent live outside of the Torres Strait. The Indigenous regions with the largest count of Torres Strait Islander people were Cairns‑Atherton (15 per cent), Brisbane (12 per cent) and Townsville‑Mackay (12 per cent) (ABS 2012). Torres Strait Islander people living on the mainland retain close ties with families and communities in the Torres Strait (Lui 2012; Lui et al. 2016).

In 2014‑15, a greater proportion of the Torres Strait Islander only population aged 15 years and over spoke an Australian Indigenous language (34.8 per cent) and spoke an Australian Indigenous language as their main language at home (23.6 per cent) compared with 16.3 per cent and 9.0 per cent of Aboriginal only Australians respectively (ABS 2016).

## 12.1 Selected outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people

Torres Strait Islander people make up a very small proportion of the Australian population (0.3 per cent), making it difficult to report reliable data from sample surveys at a disaggregated level. In this chapter, data reported for ‘Torres Strait Islander’ people include both people who identified as ‘Torres Strait Islander only’ and people who identified as ‘Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’. For comparison purposes, data for ‘Aboriginal’ Australians in this chapter have been limited to people who identified as ‘Aboriginal only’.

This chapter presents a selection of results for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal only Australians from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2014‑15, with non‑Indigenous comparators from the ABS General Social Survey (GSS) 2014 and the ABS Survey of Education and Work (SEW) 2014. NATSISS data disaggregated into three geographical areas (Torres Strait Indigenous region, Queensland [including the Torres Strait Indigenous region] and the Balance of Australia [which comprises the remainder of Australia]) are available in the attachment tables (tables 12A.1.4–7).

This chapter also presents outcomes for the Torres Strait Islander population in the Torres Strait Region using Census data (which measures the total population and therefore does not have sampling error). Census data are reported under Torres Strait Region outcomes below.

### Year 12 or post‑secondary education

‘Halving the gap in year 12 or equivalent attainment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians aged 20–24 years by 2020’ is one of the COAG targets (see section 4.6 for further information on year 12 attainment). Nationally in 2014‑15:

* over three-quarters of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 20–24 years (79.7 per cent) had attained at least a year 12 or equivalent or Certificate level II or above, similar to the non‑Indigenous population (87.9 per cent[[4]](#footnote-4)) and significantly higher than the Aboriginal population (59.8 per cent) (tables 12A.1.1 and 4A.6.1).
* around half of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 20–64 years (51.2 per cent) had a non‑school qualification at Certificate level III or above or were currently studying, similar to the Aboriginal population (45.5 per cent), and both significantly lower than the non‑Indigenous population (70.0 per cent[[5]](#footnote-5)) (tables 12A.1.2 and 4A.8.7).

Further information on the population aged 18­ years and over who had completed year 12 or a post‑secondary qualification at Certificate level III or above as their highest level of education are available in table 12A.1.4, with results not significantly different between Torres Strait Islander adults across the three geographic areas or with Aboriginal adults.

Between 2004‑05 and 2014‑15, there were no statistically significant changes in the proportions of Torres Strait Islander adults who had completed year 12 as their highest level of education. Similar to Aboriginal adults and non‑Indigenous adults, there was an increase over this time period for Torres Strait Islander adults who had completed post‑secondary qualifications at Certificate level III or above (from 24.7 per cent in 2004‑05 to 41.2 per cent in 2014‑15) (table 12A.1.4).

### Employment to population ratio

‘Halving the gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non‑Indigenous Australians within a decade’ [by 2018] is one of the COAG targets (see section 4.7 for further information). Nationally in 2014‑15:

* around two‑thirds of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 15–64 years (68.7 per cent) participated in the labour force, higher than the Aboriginal labour force participation rate (60.2 per cent) but lower than the non‑Indigenous participation rate (79.8 per cent) (table 12A.1.3 and table 4A.7.12).
* around half of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 15–64 years (53.2 per cent) were employed, similar to the Aboriginal employment rate (47.8 per cent) but both significantly lower than the non‑Indigenous employment rate (74.8 per cent) (table 12A.1.3 and table 4A.7.1).
* around one-fifth of the Torres Strait Islander labour force aged 15–64 years (21.9 per cent) were unemployed, similar to the Aboriginal unemployment rate (20.6 per cent), both significantly higher than the non‑Indigenous unemployment rate (6.2 per cent) (table 12A.1.3 and table 4A.7.8).

From 2004‑05 to 2014‑15, there were no statistically significant changes in labour force participation rates for the Torres Strait Islander population aged 18–64 years and for the Aboriginal population aged 18–64 years. However, there was an increase in unemployment rates for Torres Strait Islander people (from 13.8 per cent to 23.7 per cent) and Aboriginal Australians (from 12.7 per cent to 18.3 per cent) (table 12A.1.5).

### Income

This section reports data based on individual weekly income of people aged 18 years and over. People are ranked from lowest to highest, with those with the lowest 20 per cent of incomes in quintile 1 (lowest quintile), to those with the highest 20 per cent of incomes in quintile 5 (highest quintile).

In 2014‑15, income distributions were similar for Torres Strait Islander adults and Aboriginal adults (lowest quintile — 27.0 and 22.2 per cent respectively; middle three quintiles — 65.9 and 69.9 per cent respectively; and highest quintile — 6.6 and 8.0 per cent respectively). There was a greater proportion of non‑Indigenous adults (21.2 per cent) at the highest income distribution quintile than for Torres Strait Islander adults and Aboriginal adults (table 12A.1.6).

From 2004‑05 to 2014‑15, there were no statistically significant changes in income distributions for Torres Strait Islander adults and Aboriginal adults. However, there was a change in income distributions for non‑Indigenous adults (an increase in the middle three quintiles and a decrease in the proportions in the lowest quintile) (table 12A.1.6).

### Home ownership

In 2014‑15, the proportion of Torres Strait Islander adults living in a home owned with or without a mortgage (28.9 per cent) was similar to that for Aboriginal adults (29.0 per cent), both significantly lower than for non‑Indigenous adults (69.0 per cent) (table 12A.1.7 and table 9A.3.2).

Between 2004‑05 and 2014‑15, there were no statistically significant changes in home ownership rates for Torres Strait Islander adults (32.6 per cent in 2004‑05 and 28.9 per cent in 2014-15). There was an increase for Aboriginal adults from 24.6 per cent in 2004‑05 to 28.8 per cent in 2008, with no significant change in 2014‑15. For non‑Indigenous adults, rates fluctuated over this period between 65.9 per cent and 71.8 per cent (tables 12A.1.7).

### Psychological distress

In 2014‑15, the proportion of Torres Strait Islander adults reporting high/very high levels of psychological distress (34.1 per cent) was similar to that of Aboriginal adults (32.6 per cent), with both rates higher than those for non‑Indigenous adults (12.3 per cent). This trend was similar to previous survey years (table 12A.1.8).

### Torres Strait Region outcomes

In 2011, around 17 per cent of the Torres Strait Islander population in Queensland lived in the Torres Strait Region (5787 people), representing 77 per cent of the population of the region[[6]](#footnote-6). An additional 2 per cent of the population in the Torres Strait Region is of Aboriginal origin only (ABS unpublished). This section focuses on the outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people by remoteness area (including the very remote area of the Torres Strait region) compared to the Aboriginal population.

Given the small size of the Torres Strait Islander population, results from sample surveys often have high sampling errors which make it difficult to determine real differences between other population groups and by remoteness area. The rest of this section focuses on Census data, with the most recent available for 2011 — data are reported nationally by remoteness area, including separately for the Torres Strait Region (tables 12A.1.9–11). Survey and Census data are not directly comparable.

Nationally in 2011, for people aged 20–24 years, 54 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians had completed year 12 or above compared with 86 per cent for non‑Indigenous Australians (section 4.6). In very remote areas, 77 per cent of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 20–24 years had attained year 12 or above compared with 25 per cent for Aboriginal Australians. In the Torres Strait Region, 86 per cent of Torres Strait Islander people had attained year 12 or above, greater than Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal Australians in all other remoteness areas nationally and similar to the national proportion for the non‑Indigenous population (table 12A.1.9).

In addition, the proportion of Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years with year 12 or above was greater across all geographic areas than for Aboriginal people aged 20–24 years (where year 12 attainment declined as remoteness increased) (figure 12.1).

| Figure 12.1 20–24 year olds with year 12 or equivalent or AQF Certificate II or above, 2011 |
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| | Figure 12.1 20–24 year olds with year 12 or equivalent or AQF Certificate II or above, 2011  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| *Source*: ABS Census 2011 tablebuilder; table 12A.1.9. |
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Nationally in 2011, for people aged 20–64 years, 30 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians had a Certificate level III or above compared with 56 per cent of non‑Indigenous Australians (section 4.8). For Torres Strait Islander people, the proportion remained fairly constant across remoteness areas, whereas for Aboriginal Australians it decreased as remoteness increased.

In very remote areas, 29 per cent of Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–64 years had a Certificate level III or above (similar to the proportion in the Torres Strait Region) compared with 12 per cent for Aboriginal people (figure 12.2), but still considerably below the proportion for the non‑Indigenous people in very remote areas (52 per cent) (table 12A.1.10).

| Figure 12.2 20–64 year olds with non‑school qualification (AQF Certificate III or above), 2011 |
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| | Figure 12.2 20–64 year olds with non school qualification (AQF Certificate III or above), 2011   More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| *Source*: ABS Census 2011 tablebuilder; table 12A.1.10. |
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| Figure 12.3 Employment-to-population ratio, 15–64 year olds, 2011 |
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| | Figure 12.3 Employment-to-population ratio, 15–64 year olds, 2011  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| *Source*: ABS Census 2011 tablebuilder; table 12A.1.11. |
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Nationally in 2011, for people aged 15–64 years, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment‑to‑population ratio was 46 per cent compared with the non‑Indigenous ratio of 72 per cent (section 4.7). In very remote areas, the ratio was higher for Torres Strait Islander people (60 per cent) than Aboriginal people (37 per cent). In the Torres Strait Region, the Torres Strait Islander employment-to-population ratio was 63 per cent, greater than the ratio for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in all other remoteness areas (figure 12.3), but around 20 percentage points below the non‑Indigenous ratios across all remoteness areas (table 12A.1.11).

### Things that work

Whilst there is a lack of publicly available research and evaluation of programs that may be contributing to the positive outcomes in the Torres Strait Region (for the year 12, post school education and employment indicators reported in this section), high-level principles and practices that underpin successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are outlined in chapter 3, case studies in good governance are outlined in section 5.4, and community functioning themes are discussed in section 11.5.

## 12.2 Attachment tables

Attachment tables for this chapter are identified in references throughout this chapter by an ‘A’ suffix (for example, table 12A.1.1). These tables can be found on the web page (www.pc.gov.au/oid2016).

## 12.3 References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2012, *Census of Population and Housing - Counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2011*, Cat. 2075.0, Canberra.

—— (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2016, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15*, Cat. 4714.0, Canberra.

AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) 2008, *The Little Red Yellow Black Book*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT.

Lui, F. 2012, ‘My island home: re-presenting identities for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 141–153.

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SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) forthcoming, *National Agreement Performance Information 2015-16: National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

Shnukel, A. 2001, ‘Torres Strait Islanders’, *Multicultural Queensland 2001: 100 Communities, A Century of Contributions*, Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet, Brisbane.

1. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Dr Felecia Watkin Lui, James Cook University, who reviewed a draft of this section of the report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this chapter, Torres Strait Islander people is used to refer to those people who identify as Torres Strait Islander only or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Torres Strait Region is classified as a very remote area, based on the ABS classification for remoteness used in this report. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NIRA reporting uses the ABS Survey of Education and Work (SEW) non-Indigenous population data. The 2014 SEW estimates 86.4 per cent for the non-Indigenous population aged 20–24 years (SCRGSP forthcoming) – compared to 87.9 per cent from the GSS (table 4A.6.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. NIRA reporting uses the ABS Survey of Education and Work (SEW) non-Indigenous population data. The 2014 SEW estimates 64.3 per cent for non-Indigenous population aged 20–64 years (SCRGSP forthcoming) – compared to 70.0 per cent from the GSS (table 4A.8.7). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Torres Strait Region (for Census purposes) includes the Torres Strait Islands, islands between Cape York and Papua New Guinea, and does not include Bamaga and Seisa (mainland Torres Strait Islander communities at the tip of Cape York), although this area is part of the Torres Strait Regional Authority’s area of responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)