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# 1 About this report

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## **In this report we use the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’**

This report generally uses the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ to describe First Peoples of Australia and ‘non-Indigenous people’ to refer to Australians of other backgrounds.

This is the eighth report in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) series. The information in this report provides a high level view of the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It identifies where progress is being made and draws attention to where more work is needed.

Section 1.1 outlines what is in this edition of the OID report. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 provide context for the material in this report: section 1.2 provides a brief historical narrative from colonisation to the current day and section 1.3 provides a short profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population today.

## **1.1 About this edition of the OID report**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the OID report in 2002<sup>1</sup>, and nominated two core objectives for the report:

- to inform Australian governments about whether policy programs and interventions are achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- to be meaningful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The report therefore aims to be more than a collection of data: it aims to be a practical tool for both government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

This edition of the report seeks to identify the significant strengths of, and sources of wellbeing for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — and to illustrate the nature of the disadvantage they experience, focusing on the key structural and systemic barriers that contribute to this disadvantage. The framework of indicators focuses on some of the factors that contributed to their wellbeing or that cause the disadvantage they experience, these factors were selected based on evidence, logic and where experience suggests that targeted policies will have the greatest impact. The indicators are supplemented by additional

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the origins of the OID report is available in the 2016 edition (chapter 1).

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research on structural and systemic barriers that contribute to, or maintain, the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and where governments may have a role in removing barriers.

This report concentrates on outcomes at the national, state and territory level. While a focus on what is happening at the aggregate level is important, to help ensure that the underlying foundations of wellbeing and causes of disadvantage are being addressed at a broader policy level, it has some limitations.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and experiences are diverse — and outcomes can vary markedly by readily measured factors such as geography, age, sex and employment status, and other less easily measured factors such as connection to Country. Throughout this Report, outcomes are presented by remoteness and other measured characteristics wherever possible.
- The strengths and needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population differ across sub-groups and regions; this means that there are significant differences within and between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. The relatively small number of Torres Strait Islander people makes it difficult to report about them separately, but available data are summarised in chapter 12 *Outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people*.

Given these limitations, access to reliable data at the local level is needed to ensure that good decisions can be made across regions and local levels.<sup>2</sup> Reliable data that are easy to access and understand can empower communities to advocate for the local needs of their communities and assist governments in making more informed decisions and improving their efficiency and accountability (PC 2017, 2020). Developing data sets that can be used by regions and local communities to identify local needs and make decisions is key to reporting on what contributes to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

But data alone cannot tell the full story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's wellbeing. From 2005 to 2016, case studies on 'Things that work', which highlight programs or services making a difference, were included in the Report. For this edition, the case studies are focused on governance, with a specific focus on identifying arrangements that support shared decision-making between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Australian governments in areas that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and contribute to their overall wellbeing. This focus on shared decision-making recognises that it critically underpins improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the limitations of current data sets and the benefits of regional data is included in appendix A.

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## 1.2 The historical context

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thrived for thousands of years before colonisation**

Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for some 40 000 to 60 000 years, with the Torres Strait Islands settled about 10 000 years ago (AIATSIS 2008). It is estimated that, prior to European settlement, there were some 250 distinct nations, with different languages and social systems.

Before colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thrived and their cultures were strong and well developed (AIATSIS 2008; VPSC 2020). They had: complex kinship structures; rules for community interactions; defined roles relating to law, education, spiritual development and resource management; languages, ceremonies, customs and traditions; and extensive knowledge of their environment (AIATSIS 2008; VPSC 2020).

### **The history since colonisation, and the effect it has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, needs to be acknowledged**

Many readers will be familiar with Australian history since European settlement, and will be conscious of the importance of seeing the current wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this Report in the context of that history. For other readers, the following material provides a very brief introduction to a complex and sometimes contentious subject. For readers interested in exploring the historical context further, the reference list in this chapter provides a range of views on the impact of past events on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living now.

### **Initially, colonisation brought dispossession of lands, and resistance could result in death**

Attachment to the land was, and still is, a central element of traditional (and ongoing) Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures, customs and laws. Yet, when the British established the penal colony of New South Wales in January 1788, the legal system operated as if the land belonged to no one, and denied that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had sovereignty or property rights over the land.

The colonisation period saw many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people dispossessed of their traditional lands. Aboriginal people did not accept their dispossession without resistance. This period of conflict between Aboriginal people and European settlers is sometimes referred to as ‘the frontier wars’. There were over 300 massacres<sup>3</sup>, with more

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<sup>3</sup> Counted as six or more people killed.

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than 8 000 Aboriginal people and about 170 colonists killed. One of the last documented massacres of Aboriginal people was the Coniston massacre, which occurred over several weeks in 1928 in the Northern Territory (Egan 1996; Elder 2003; FaHCSIA 2012, p. 23; Read 2007; Reynolds 2006; Ryan et al. 2017).

Dispossession, violence and the introduction of new diseases had a devastating effect on local populations. Although it is difficult to estimate the size of pre-settlement populations, researchers suggest that, in different locations across mainland Australia, the number of Aboriginal people declined by between 30 and 80 per cent from the time of European settlement to the early 1900s (Briscoe and Smith 2002; Butlin 1983, pp. 119–148; Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981; Diamond 1998, p. 320; Madden and Pulver 2009; Smith 1980, pp. 119–148).

### **From the late 1800s, many Aboriginal people were required to live on reserves with limited freedoms**

From 1860, ‘protective’ legislation (known as the ‘Aborigines Acts’) required many Aboriginal people to live on reserves. In practice, these laws placed almost unlimited discretion in the hands of reserve superintendents and police protectors — lives on the reserves were highly regulated and basic human rights were denied (Chesterman and Galligan 1997, p. 41; Cunneen 2001, pp. 57–58; Morris 1988, p. 50). Aboriginal people living outside reserves were spared the worst of the reserve regime, but their rights were still limited (AIATSIS 2008; Blake 1998, p. 53). The first peoples of the Torres Strait Islands also faced special laws — including segregated cinemas, schools, churches and housing, travel restrictions, and poorer health and educational opportunities (AIATSIS 2008).

From the late 1800s through much of the twentieth century, governments in several jurisdictions controlled many Aboriginal people’s wages, pensions and endowments, with much of the money mismanaged or taken — and now known as ‘stolen wages’ (AIATSIS 2008, p. 122; Thornton and Luker 2009, p. 647). Some governments have since put in place reparation schemes, although the passage of time and lack of records have made it very difficult to determine the full impact of ‘stolen wages’ or the true value of any compensation (Western Australia Stolen Wages Taskforce 2008). In 2019, Queensland became the first jurisdiction to settle (in principle) a class action suit, which also makes it the first to recognise that the claims have legal merit (Queensland Government 2019).

### **In the 1900s an assimilationist approach resulted in the forcible removal of many children from their families, traditional lands and cultures...**

In the 1900s, governments adopted a more assimilationist approach, with the explicit goal of integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into ‘mainstream’ society — initially focused on ‘the natives of Aboriginal origin but not of the full blood’, and later

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extended to all Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) people (Rowley 1978, pp. 320–321). The policy was defined at the 1961 Native Welfare Conference of Federal and State Ministers in these terms:

The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines [sic] and part-Aborigines [sic] are expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs as other Australians. (Reynolds 1972, p. 175)

Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and traditional lands became common. Between 10 and 30 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970, and are now referred to as ‘the Stolen Generations’ (HREOC 1997, p. 31). The impact of these removals on the Stolen Generations and their descendants is ongoing (total number of people affected is estimated to be about 150 000<sup>4</sup> people aged 18 years or over), with their experience of disadvantage greater than for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AIHW 2018).

### **...but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not passively accept these experiences...**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not passively accept these experiences. Some directly petitioned governments — in 1935 and 1937, petitions were presented to the Commonwealth Government seeking representation in Parliament, the establishment of a national department of native affairs, and the creation of state advisory councils. In the absence of a response, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around Australia held a Day of Mourning in 1938, which led to the establishment of the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC).<sup>5</sup> In August 1963, the Yirrkala Bark Petitions (Yolngu People of Yirrkala 1963) were presented as a pair of bark paintings, written in both Yolngu Matha and English they were signed by 131 clan leaders of the Yolngu region of the Northern Territory. The bark petitions are considered founding documents of Australia’s democracy.

Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people took more direct action — such as the ‘Gurindji Walk-Off’ in 1966, when about 250 Aboriginal pastoral workers and their families walked off the Wave Hill Station in response to the low rates of pay and poor living conditions. The action developed as a wholesale rejection of the governmental and industrial framework applying to Aboriginal pastoral populations and included a demand for the return of traditional lands (National Archives of Australia 1966).

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<sup>4</sup> Estimate is based on the Stolen Generations proxy population of 17 150 surviving members plus the number of descendants (133 400) (in 2018). Descendants are defined as people aged 18 years or over who reported having elder relatives (great/grandparents, parents, or uncles and aunts) removed (AIHW 2018).

<sup>5</sup> NADOC later became NAIDOC to include Torres Strait Islander people.

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## **...and activism led to increasing community concern and ultimately constitutional change in 1967**

This activism led to increasing community concern about Indigenous policy. By 1967, there was widespread support across the Australian population for making two amendments to the Australian constitution — to allow the Commonwealth Government to legislate with respect to Aboriginal people, and to include Aboriginal people in the Census.<sup>6</sup> The referendum, commonly regarded as a watershed in relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people, was supported by over 90 per cent of voters — the largest majority for any Australian referendum (FaHCSIA 2012, p. 32).

Legal rights to vote varied across states and territories, and there were often differences between legal entitlements and the practical exercise of those entitlements. The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1962 gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the right to register and vote in federal elections, but voting was not made compulsory from them until 1984.

## **Ongoing activism for land and other rights also prompted new legislation, policies and actions — sometimes with unintended consequences**

Land rights were, and continue to be, a prominent focus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the 1970s, their efforts led governments to pass various forms of land rights legislation. In the 1992 Mabo case, the High Court recognised native title, overturning the previous legal fiction that the land had belonged to no one at the time of European settlement (FaHCSIA 2012, p. 35). This decision led to the Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993, which provides a court process for determining native title claims. However, in many circumstances, native title is found to have been extinguished.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, overtly paternalistic policies (including the Aboriginal Acts) were formally abandoned and a new policy aimed at facilitating greater levels of self-determination was introduced. The Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act was introduced in 1975, after Australia signed the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

However, policies and actions that sought to establish equal rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sometimes had perverse and/or unintended consequences.

- The successful 1966 equal pay case for Aboriginal pastoral workers led to many workers and their families being forced off the land and, over time, onto welfare (Chaney 2013, p. 54; Flood 2006, p. 215).

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<sup>6</sup> In all censuses up until 1966, the Bureau of Census and Statistics (now the ABS) included ‘aboriginal natives’ in the Census count but published them in attachments to the official population count (FaHCSIA 2012, p. 21).

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- Extensive lobbying by the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (later the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) led to different groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receiving access to social security benefits at different times (Chesterman 2005). In 1959, legislation was amended to provide access to social security benefits to Aboriginal people who were not at that time characterised as ‘nomadic’ (Chesterman 2005), with the legislation further amended in 1966 so that all Aboriginal people were eligible. However, in practice, many Aboriginal people living on government and mission stations were excluded from some welfare payments (particularly unemployment benefits) until 1976 (HREOC 1997).
  - In 1977, the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program was introduced, pooling unemployment benefits to create local employment opportunities in remote communities where the labour market might not otherwise offer employment. The program was later extended to all areas (including non-remote areas), and then again restructured in 2007 when it was again restricted to remote areas only. From 1 July 2013, CDEP was rolled into the Commonwealth Government’s Remote Jobs and Communities Program, which was reformed to create the Community Development Programme (CDP) on 1 July 2015.<sup>7</sup> A compilation of qualitative research on job creation and income support in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities indicates that the change from CDEP to CDP shifted the focus of support from providing employment and development opportunities that enabled people to earn an income, to welfare reliance that was accompanied by strict compliance requirements (Jordan and Fowkes 2016).

### **In the 1970s and 1980s, calls for greater self-determination grew, leading to the establishment of community controlled services**

During the 1970s and 1980s, an increasing desire for self-determination saw the establishment of many community controlled services (particularly primary health and legal services), many of which continue to operate today. These services were established in response to widespread concerns about the lack of provision of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In 1990, concerns also led to the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Its purpose was to provide advice to Australian governments and to deliver some services (although it did not have responsibility for mainstream services delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and its level of responsibility for Indigenous-specific services declined over time) (Hannaford, Huggins and Collins 2003).

A 2003 review of ATSIC found that it was in need of structural change. While the regional council structure was considered to be working well, major changes to the governing body were recommended. The review recommended that any changes to ATSIC’s program delivery role be considered as part of a Commonwealth/State examination of the most effective ways to deliver services and programs of significance to Aboriginal and Torres

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 4, section 4.7 *Employment* for further information on employment programs over time.

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Strait Islander people (Hannaford, Huggins and Collins 2003, pp. 5–6). Subsequently, ATSIC was abolished with bipartisan support in 2004 (AIATSIS 2008)<sup>8</sup>, and responsibility for services delivered by ATSIC returned to line departments. At the time, it was emphasised that ‘mainstreaming’ was not intended to reduce funding of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Howard 2004).

The emphasis placed on Indigenous-specific services versus mainstream services has varied over time and across jurisdictions; for example, the majority of clients of many ‘mainstream’ services in the NT are Aboriginal. Post-ATSIC, widespread concerns around the provision of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (by both mainstream and Indigenous-controlled service providers) continued. In many circumstances, successive governments appeared to tolerate a lack of services or poorer quality services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Chaney 2013). These concerns increased the focus on monitoring expenditure on services provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- In 2001, the Commonwealth Grants Commission was asked to conduct an inquiry into Indigenous funding, to assist the Commonwealth Government in targeting resources to areas of greatest need (CGC 2001).
- For many years the AIHW has produced a report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health expenditure (AIHW 2013).
- In 2008, COAG commissioned the Indigenous Expenditure Report, to estimate government expenditures on both Indigenous-specific and mainstream services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SCRGSP 2017). Indigenous-specific expenditure accounted for 18 per cent of direct government expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2015-16 (SCRGSP 2017).

### **From the late 1980s, a number of inquiries and reports drew attention to the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, leading to the Closing the Gap agenda**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, two major inquiries helped to promote a deeper understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and led to the establishment of some of the current institutional arrangements.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody reported on the complex effects of dispossession, colonisation and institutional racism on Aboriginal people (RCADIC 1991). Partly in response to the findings of the Royal Commission, the position of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner was created

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<sup>8</sup> Following the abolition of ATSIC in 2004, there was no national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body until the establishment in 2010 of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. Made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and organisations, it provided independent advocacy on behalf of First Nations peoples in Australia (National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples nd). It was originally funded by the Commonwealth Government, but this support was withdrawn in the May 2014 budget. The National Congress entered voluntary administration in 2019.



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(AHRC 2013) as was the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. One of the final recommendations of the Council was the establishment of a regular report on outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — which became the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report (CAR 2000). In 2001, Reconciliation Australia was established to continue the national focus on reconciliation.

A national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families resulted in the 1997 ‘Bringing them Home’ report on the Stolen Generations (HREOC 1997). In 2008, the then Prime Minister of Australia, with bipartisan support, made a formal apology to the Stolen Generations (Nelson 2008; Rudd 2008).

Another key report in 2007 ‘Little Children are Sacred’, focused on Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory and protecting them from sexual abuse (Wild and Anderson 2007). At this time, the Commonwealth Government assumed a greater responsibility for Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory, under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (also known as the ‘Intervention’). This response — particularly the (temporary) suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, the initial involvement of the military, and mandatory income management for those on welfare payments — has been the subject of controversy (AHRC 2007; FaHCSIA 2011, p. 3; Shaw and d’Abbs 2011, p. 4). In late 2007, a change of government maintained a modified Northern Territory Emergency Response; in 2012, a modified policy (‘Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory’) was introduced under a 10 year funding agreement, and it retains many features of the Northern Territory Emergency Response.

The ‘Close the Gap Campaign’ for Indigenous Health Equality commenced in 2006 with the goal of closing the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people within a generation (by 2030) (AHRC 2020). In 2008, COAG agreed to, and implemented, the ‘Closing the Gap’ policy. COAG identified Indigenous issues as one of seven priority areas of national reform, set six targets for closing the gaps in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people, and identified seven ‘building blocks’ that underpinned a National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA). At its May 2014 meeting, COAG agreed to a new target — to close the gap in school attendance within five years (COAG 2014). The OID report framework is aligned with this NIRA, but has a much broader focus, with the indicator framework extending beyond the NIRA indicators and targets.

In 2016, a refresh of the ‘Closing the Gap’ policy commenced. Significantly, in 2018 COAG agreed to a formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to finalise the Closing the Gap refresh and provide a forum for ongoing engagement while the new agenda was being implemented. In March 2019, Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations signed a Partnership Agreement leading to the establishment of a Ministerial Council on Closing the Gap (the Joint Council). The work of the Joint Council is ongoing and a new Agreement (the National Agreement on Closing the Gap) was agreed by all Parties on 30 July 2020.

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## **Over the past decade, there has been an increasing focus on recognising the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

In 2009, Australia adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognises Indigenous peoples' rights to the full enjoyment of all human rights, plus non-discrimination, self-determination and autonomy, maintenance of Indigenous institutions, and the right to a nationality (AHRC 2010).

There have also been calls for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Constitution. Over the past decade this process has progressed as follows:

- In December 2010, the Commonwealth Government appointed an Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (the Expert Panel) to consult on options for a constitutional amendment on recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Expert Panel found that 88 per cent of non-Indigenous people and 80 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people supported constitutional recognition (FaHCSIA 2012, p. 264).
- The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Act 2013* formalised the Commonwealth Parliament's recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and established a review of support for a referendum to amend the Constitution.
  - The Review Panel was tasked with assessing levels of public awareness and support for amending the Constitution to recognise Indigenous people and levels of community support for different proposals for constitutional change. The Final Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act of Recognition Review Panel (Anderson Review) was released in 2014.
- In 2013, a parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples was also appointed; it recommended in 2015 that a referendum be held to make changes to the Australian Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (JSCCRATSIP 2015).
- In December 2015, the Commonwealth Government appointed a Referendum Council to consult on the best way to achieve constitutional recognition and the Council provided the final report on how this could be achieved in 2017 (Commonwealth of Australia 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have sought recognition in the Constitution, along with a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament, a Makarrata (truth telling commission) and treaties. The 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart (Uluru Statement from the Heart 2017) developed a position on Indigenous constitutional recognition through a nationwide process culminating in consensus at a constitutional convention of 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates. The statement articulates the position as follows:

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two

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worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country. We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution (Uluru Statement from the Heart 2017).

Drawing on the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the Referendum Council's 2017 report recommended that a referendum be held to provide in the Australian Constitution for a representative body that gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament. In 2018, the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples delivered its final report. This report also drew on the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Uluru Statement from the Heart and called for the Voice to Parliament to become a reality, recommending that it be developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together with the Commonwealth Government (Commonwealth of Australia 2017).

In late 2019, the Commonwealth Government responded to these calls and began a co-design process to 'develop options for a model that will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are heard at all levels of government' (Wyatt 2019)

Alongside these developments, a number of State and Territory governments (starting with Victoria) have begun treaty negotiations with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 2018, the Victorian Government passed a legal framework for Indigenous treaty negotiations (Graham and Petrie 2018). In 2019, the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly was formed and members elected by eligible Aboriginal people (including those within Victoria and traditional owners elsewhere).

### **1.3 Profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population today**

Recent years have seen significant and continuing growth in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 2016, there were estimated to be about 800 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (table A.1). Within a decade, the population is expected to be over one million people (ABS 2019).

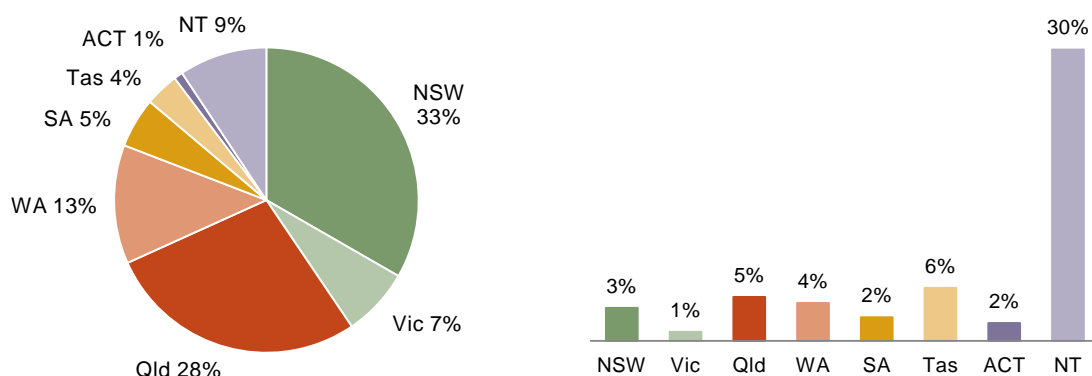
The population has two broadly-defined cultural groups. Aboriginal people are the large majority, making up around 90 per cent of the population, with the remainder identifying as being of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' origin or 'Torres Strait Islander' origin only (ABS 2018).

Within these two broad cultural groups there are many diverse nations, clans and skin groups. Most have their own distinct cultures, languages, histories and perspectives. For example, there are over 250 different language groups spread across Australia, of which 145 are still spoken today (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014).

Six out of every ten people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live in NSW or Queensland (figure 1.1). However, the NT has the largest proportion of their

population who are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, followed by Tasmania and then Queensland.

**Figure 1.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, by State or Territory, 2016**



**Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in each State or Territory**

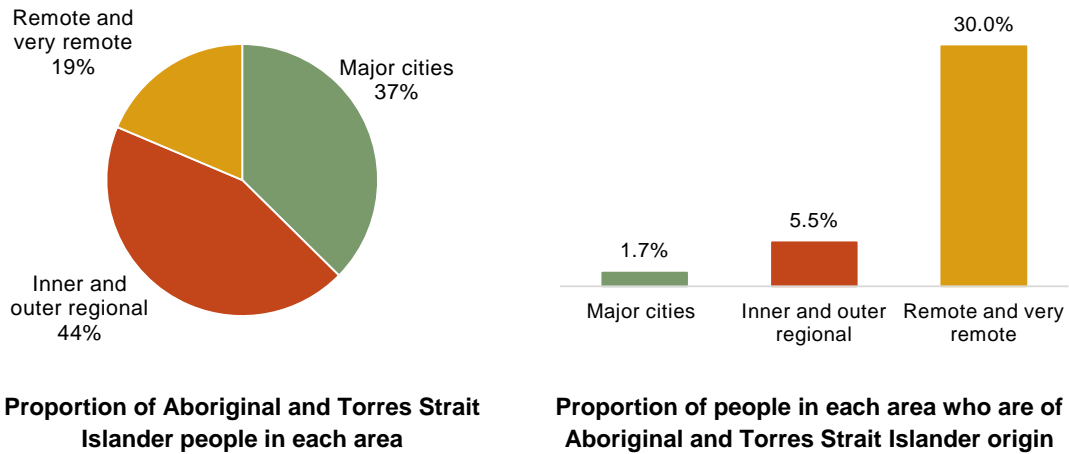
**Proportion of population in State or Territory who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

Source: ABS (2019) *Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 to 2031*, Cat. no. 3238.0, Canberra; ABS (2018) *Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2018*, Cat. no. 3101.0, Canberra; Appendix A, table A.1.

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in major cities or regional areas (figure 1.2). However, they are significantly overrepresented among the population who live in remote and very remote areas (making up 30 per cent of the population in these areas, compared with three per cent overall).

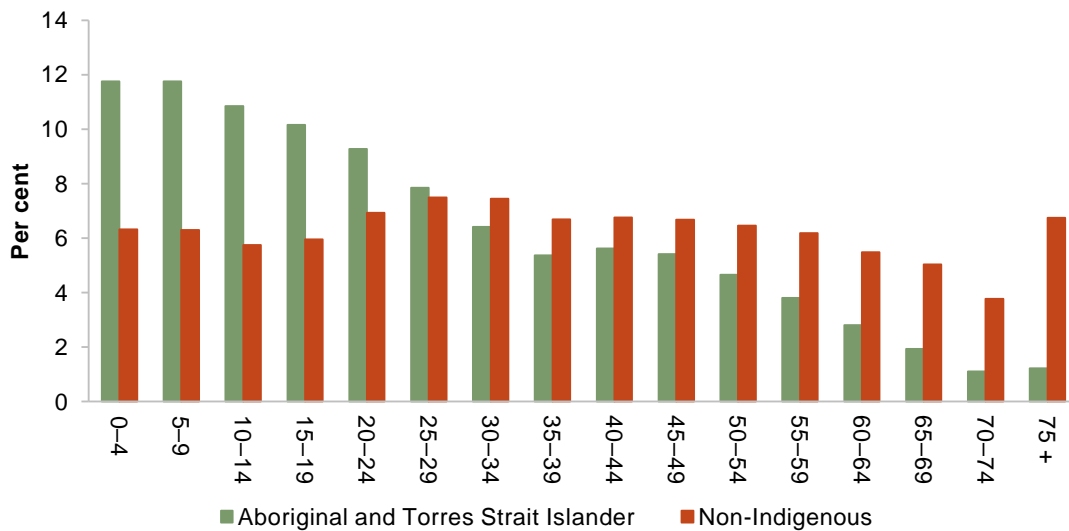
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is relatively young compared with the non-Indigenous population (figure 1.3). In 2016, over half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was aged under 25 years, compared with around 30 per cent of the non-Indigenous population (appendix A, table A.1). Although life expectancy appears to be increasing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (see chapter 4, section 4.1 *Life expectancy*), only one per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was aged 75 years or over in 2016, compared with six per cent of the non-Indigenous population (figure 1.3).

**Figure 1.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, by remoteness area, 2016**



Source: ABS (2019) *Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 to 2031*, Cat. no. 3238.0, Canberra; ABS (2017) *Regional Population Growth, Australia, Population Estimates by Remoteness Area, 2006 to 2016*, Cat. no. 3218.0; Appendix A, table A.3.

**Figure 1.3 Population distribution, Australia, by age, 30 June 2016**



Source: ABS (2019) *Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 to 2031*, Cat. no. 3238.0, Canberra; ABS (2018) *Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2018*, Cat. no. 3101.0, Canberra; Appendix A, table A.1.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often more mobile than non-Indigenous people. Like other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may choose to

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move between locations to access health, housing, employment and education services and for a range of family reasons.

However, the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is also affected by a range of other factors. Temporary mobility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must also be considered in light of its importance in maintaining their connection with lands, cultures and identities — and so more information is required about the reasons for temporary mobility, how it contributes to wellbeing and how it can be accommodated within models of service delivery (Dockery 2014).

Analysis drawing on the Australian Census Longitudinal Database found, after controlling for a limited set of characteristics (including age and previous patterns of mobility), that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were actually less likely to change usual residence than non-Indigenous people (Biddle and Crawford 2015). This analysis indicates that it is not being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person that predicts mobility, but rather other characteristics.

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