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

| Box 12.1 Key messages |
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| * Torres Strait Islander people are ethnically and culturally distinct from mainland Aboriginal people, and there is also great diversity in Torres Strait Islander communities, languages and traditions.
* Torres Strait Islander people live in the Torres Strait, but also on mainland Australia. While the majority of Torres Strait Islander people now live on the mainland, they often retain close ties with families and communities in the Torres Strait.
* Torres Strait Islander people are about one in ten of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, with the majority living in Queensland. Torres Strait Islander people include people who identify as Torres Strait Islander only, and people who identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
* Torres Strait Islander people have higher levels of Year 12 or equivalent attainment and comparable levels of post‑secondary attainment compared to Aboriginal people. For Torres Strait Islander people, rates in very remote areas are comparable to those in regional areas while those for Aboriginal people decrease as remoteness increases.
* Rates of post‑secondary attainment have increased over time for Torres Strait Islander people, with much of the growth in qualifications from Certificate III to Diploma level.
* However, this growth in Year 12 and post‑secondary attainment does not appear to translate into better employment outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people, and the engagement of Torres Strait Islander people in the workforce has declined.
* Rates of home ownership are similar for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people nationally, but the rates of home ownership are lower for those in the Torres Strait Region.
* But for selected health indicators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the Torres Strait Region appear to have a better quality of life than their peers on the mainland, with lower rates of substance use, long-term health conditions and psychological distress.
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Torres Strait Islander people are a culturally distinct group with different histories, languages and colonial experiences from Aboriginal people. They are a separate people in origin, history and way of life, with many cultural connections to New Guinea and nearby islands (Pascoe 2018; AIATSIS 2008; Shnukal 2001). There is also great diversity in Torres Strait Islander communities, their languages and traditions.

However, there are also similarities between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Similarities include connection to specific lands and waters, and clear principles and values that determine cultural and social responsibilities (Garvey 2007).

Torres Strait Islander people live in the Torres Strait, but also on mainland Australia. Torres Strait Islander people living on the mainland retain close ties with families and communities in the Torres Strait (Watkin Lui 2012; Watkin Lui et al. 2016).

This chapter compares results for Torres Strait Islander people on a national basis and considers their education, employment, home ownership and selected health outcomes relative to Aboriginal people. It also considers the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the Torres Strait, and how these compare to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living on mainland Australia.

For those living in the Torres Strait there are some issues unique to such remote sea‑locked islands, which are not considered in detail here but may affect the outcomes reported. For example, the:

* high costs associated with complex transportation arrangements for the region and the effect they have on the development of infrastructure and service delivery (TSRA 2019). This extra logistical expense is also passed on to the consumer, where the cost of necessities may exceed that on the mainland. When this issue is compounded by relatively low incomes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live on the Torres Strait Islands may have a higher cost of living and less disposable income
* level of reliance on resources and industries, such as fishing that are at risk from environmental degradation and climate change (Johnson and Welch 2016).

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 (ABS 2018). Hence, the majority of data in this chapter is drawn from the Census of Population and Housing (with the most recent data for 2016).

In this chapter, data reported for Torres Strait Islander people include 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 people in this chapter have been limited to people who identified as Aboriginal only.

### Torres Strait Islander people are about one in ten of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, with the majority living in Queensland

Of the estimated 650 000 people identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin in 2016, nearly 10 per cent identified as being of Torres Strait Islander origin.

In 2016, most Torres Strait Islander people lived outside of the Torres Strait Region (90 per cent); the majority lived in Queensland (63 per cent). The regions with the largest numbers of Torres Strait Islander people were Cairns‑Atherton (15 per cent of all Torres Strait Islander people lived here), Brisbane (13 per cent) and Townsville‑Mackay (12 per cent) (ABS 2016).

In 2016, about 17 per cent of the Torres Strait Islander population in Queensland lived in the Torres Strait Region (6489 people), representing 80 per cent of the population of the region[[2]](#footnote-2). An additional 2 per cent of the population in the Torres Strait Region is of Aboriginal origin only (ABS 2018).

### Rates of Year 12 or equivalent attainment and post‑secondary educational attainment are increasing for Torres Strait Islander people

Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates have increased for Torres Strait Islander people from the 2011 Census to the 2016 Census. In 2016, 74 per cent of Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years had Year 12 or an equivalent qualification, representing an increase of about five percentage points since 2011 (table 12A.1.12). In the Torres Strait Region, this level of attainment increased to 85 per cent (table 12A.1.12), despite the fact that the reduced availability of secondary‑level education means that many students need to leave their community to attend secondary school (ABS 2018). Aboriginal people (aged 20–24 years) also had an increase in levels of attainment from 2011 to 2016, but the proportion remains lower at 64 per cent, and decreases as remoteness increases (table 12A.1.12).

Post‑secondary education attainment rates have also increased for Torres Strait Islander people (aged 20–64 years), and are comparable nationally with rates for Aboriginal people (aged 20–64 years). In 2016, 39 per cent of Torres Strait Islander people and 38 per cent of Aboriginal people reported having qualifications at Certificate III level or above (figure 12.1). This followed increases in the attainment rates from 2011, though the increases came from different geographic areas. For Torres Strait Islander people, the largest proportional increase was for people in very remote areas (8 percentage points), while for Aboriginal people the largest increase was in major cities (9 percentage points) (figure 12.1).

| Figure 12.1 People aged 20–64 years with non‑school qualifications at Certificate III level or above, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, 2011 and 2016**a** |
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| Figure 12.1 People aged 20–64 years with non-school qualifications at Certificate III level or above, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, 2011 and 2016  Aboriginal people  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | Figure 12.1 People aged 20–64 years with non-school qualifications at Certificate III level or above, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, 2011 and 2016  Torres Strait Islander people  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. |
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| TSR = Torres Strait Region |
| a See tables 12A.1.14‑15 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) 2016 and 2011 Census of Population and Housing; tables 12A.1.14‑15. |
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### Most of the growth in post‑secondary educational attainment for Torres Strait Islander people can be attributed to growth in Certificate III to Diploma level qualifications

Most of the growth in post‑secondary educational attainment for Torres Strait Islander people nationally can be attributed to growth in Certificate III to Diploma level qualifications (tables 12A.1.14‑15). From 2011 to 2016 the growth was 6 percentage points (compared to less than 1 percentage point growth in the proportion with a Bachelor degree or above, and negative growth in remote areas). In 2016, Torres Strait Islander people had the highest rates of Certificate III to Diploma level attainment nationally (figure 12.2).

| Figure 12.2 People aged 20–64 years with Certificate III to diploma qualifications, by Indigenous status, 2016**a**  |
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| Figure 12.2 People aged 20–64 years with Certificate III to diploma qualifications, by Indigenous status, 2016  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. |
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| aSee table 12A.1.14 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) 2016 Census of Population and Housing; table 12A.1.14. |
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### Despite growth in Year 12 and post‑secondary education attainment, this does not appear to have translated into better employment outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people…

Increased attainment of Year 12 or equivalent and post‑secondary qualifications does not appear to have translated into improved employment outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people (ABS 2018). In the same period as the attainment rate increased for Torres Strait Islander people (2011 to 2016), the employment rate decreased by 4 percentage points nationally, and by 19 percentage points in the Torres Strait Region (figure 12.3).

For Aboriginal people and non‑Indigenous people, employment rates remained relatively unchanged from 2011 to 2016 (table 12A.1.17).

Employment data are affected by the replacement of the Community Development Employment Projects scheme (in operation in 2011) with the Community Development Program (in operation in 2016), and the associated change in classification of participants from employed to not employed (ABS 2018). This had a particular impact in remote areas where the schemes operated. A greater proportion of Torres Strait Islander people live in remote areas compared to Aboriginal and non‑Indigenous people (ABS 2016). Therefore, a greater proportion of Torres Strait Islander people are likely to have been reclassified from employed in the 2011 Census to unemployed in the 2016 Census.

| Figure 12.3 Employment rate for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, aged 15–64 years, 2011 and 2016**a** |
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| Figure 12.3 Employment rate for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, aged 15–64 years, 2011 and 2016  Aboriginal people  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | Figure 12.3 Employment rate for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, aged 15–64 years, 2011 and 2016  Torres Strait Islander people  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. |
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| aSee table 12A.1.17 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) 2016 and 2011 Census of Population and Housing; table 12A.1.17. |
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### …and the engagement of Torres Strait Islander people in the workforce is also declining

Not only is the proportion of employed Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–64 years decreasing, but the proportion engaging with the workforce is also declining. The labour force participation rate[[3]](#footnote-3) of Torres Strait Islander people decreased by 3 percentage points on a national basis and by 16 percentage points in the Torres Strait Region between 2011 and 2016 (table 12A.1.17).

Decreases in participation in the labour force can occur when discouraged job seekers drop out of the workforce when there are limited opportunities available or when caring responsibilities limit their ability to participate in the workforce. This has been identified as a challenge for the Torres Strait Region, where a lack of opportunity (particularly in employment) can interfere with maintaining viable communities, as it can force people to move away from the region (TSRA 2009).

### Rates of home ownership are similar for Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal people nationally, but are lower for those in the Torres Strait Region

On a national basis, Torres Strait Islander people have comparable rates of home ownership to Aboriginal people, both at about 30 per cent. However, in the Torres Strait Region homeownership for Torres Strait Islander people was estimated to be 13 per cent in 2018‑19 (table 12A.1.9). According to the Torres Strait Regional Authority, complex land tenure arrangements in the region and a lack of freehold land and long‑tenure leasehold land remain challenges to increasing home ownership (TSRA 2019). Further, in the Torres Strait Region in 2016, around two in five Torres Strait Islander people were living in overcrowded housing (more than double the proportions for Aboriginal and non‑Indigenous people) (table 12A.1.10).

### But for selected health indicators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the Torres Strait Region appear to have better outcomes than their peers on the mainland

While comparatively lower employment and home ownership rates persist as issues for Torres Strait Islander people in the Torres Strait Region, some health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be better in the Torres Strait Region than on the Australian mainland.

An analysis of 2018‑19 survey data indicates that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Torres Strait Region, compared with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (as a proxy for the mainland Australia):

* the rate of substance use was lower (20 per cent compared with 29 per cent)
* the proportion with a self‑assessed health status of fair or poor was lower (13 per cent compared to the 24 per cent) (see section 8.1 *Access to Primary Health Care*)
* the proportion reported as having high/very high levels of psychological distress was lower (24 per cent compared with 32 per cent)
* the proportion with a long-term health condition was lower (53 per cent compared with 67 per cent)
* rates of obesity, disability and smoker status were not statistically different (figure 12.4).

However, data were not available on access to primary health care, and access issues can result in undiagnosed and untreated conditions, especially if conditions are not well understood. Research indicates that there may be barriers to people in the Torres Strait Region in understanding and accessing treatment for chronic diseases, such as chronic hepatitis B and diabetes (Anderson, Ellard and Wallace 2016; Taylor, Thompson and McDermott 2016).

| Figure 12.4 Selected survey responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the Torres Strait Region and all of Australia, 2018‑19**a,b**  |
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| Figure 12.4 Selected survey responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the Torres Strait Region and all of Australia, 2018-19  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. |
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| **a**Error bars are 95 per cent confidence intervals. b See table 12A.1.20 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (2020) *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2018‑19*, for small area estimates (Torres Strait Region) and ABS TableBuilder for national estimates; table 12A.1.20. |
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The effect of trauma on the members and descendants of the Stolen Generations is an important consideration for the health outcomes of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people. For example, descendants of the Stolen Generations have a higher likelihood to; experience violence, make contact with the criminal justice system, have a low level of trust in the general community and generally poorer health outcomes (AIHW 2018). In 2018‑19, 35 per cent of Torres Strait Islander people and 46 percent of Aboriginal people reported that they, or a relative, had been removed from their family at some point (table 12A.1.21). In the Torres Strait Region, 9 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported an incident of removal, while on a national basis, this was closer to 45 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (table 12A.1.21).

### Future directions in data

Data collected on Torres Strait Islander people are generally grouped with data for Aboriginal people, despite the fact that Torres Strait Islander people are a culturally unique group. The disaggregation of data for Torres Strait Islander people in data collections would support further analysis on understanding why outcomes between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people may differ, particularly those observed between the Torres Strait Region and mainland Australia.

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1. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Associate Professor Felecia Watkin Lui, James Cook University, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Includes those employed plus those who are not employed but actively looking for work. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)