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The city and the bush:  
Indigenous wellbeing across  
remoteness areas

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# The city and the bush: Indigenous wellbeing across remoteness areas

In 2010, Indigenous Australians were projected to number just over 560,000, or 3% of Australia's total population. In 2008, close to one third of Indigenous people lived in Major Cities while just under one quarter lived in Remote Areas. The total population, in contrast, is much more concentrated with over two-thirds of people living in the Major Cities and only 2% in the Remote Areas.

This article looks at the differences in circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in major cities, regional areas and remote areas.

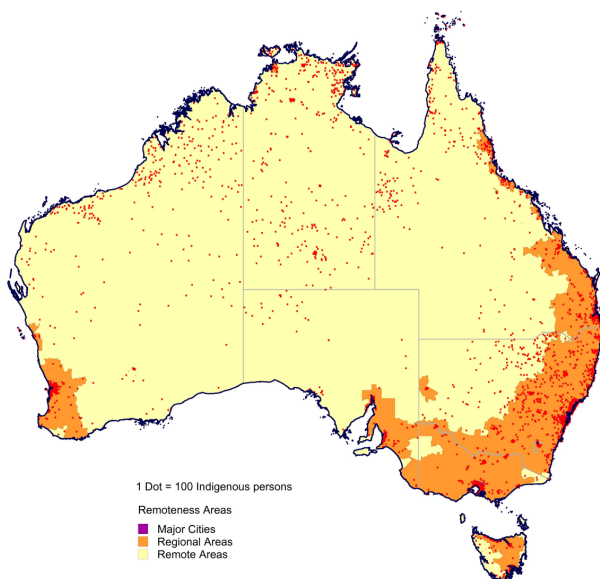
## Demographic characteristics

### ...age profile

The Indigenous population overall has a very young age profile with around half being aged less than twenty years in 2008. In contrast, only around one quarter of the total Australian population was aged under twenty in 2008.

Across Remoteness Areas, there were slight differences in the age structure of the Indigenous population. Remote Areas had a lower proportion aged under 20 years (45%) than either the Regional Areas (50%) or the Major Cities (49%). This difference may be in part attributable to out-migration of younger people from Remote Areas.

## Indigenous population distribution(a) and Remoteness Areas – 2006



(a) Final estimated resident population based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

Source: ABS [Experimental Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Jun 2006](#) (cat. no. 3238.0.55.001)

## Data sources and definitions

This article draws on a range of ABS sources including the ABS 2002 and 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Surveys (NATSISS). It also uses data from the 2006 Census and population projections which are based on Census data.

**Remoteness Area** is a structure of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC). It classifies areas sharing common characteristics of remoteness into six broad geographical regions (Remoteness Areas). The remoteness of a point is measured by its physical distance by road to the nearest urban centre. As remoteness is measured nationally, not all Remoteness Areas are represented in each state or territory. The six Remoteness Areas are: Major Cities of Australia; Inner Regional Australia; Outer Regional Australia; Remote Australia; Very Remote Australia; and Migratory. In this article Remoteness Areas (apart from Migratory, which is not in the scope of ABS surveys) are collapsed to three levels:

- Major Cities
- Regional Areas ( Inner Regional plus Outer Regional)
- Remote Areas (Remote plus Very Remote)

For further information about Remoteness Areas see Chapter 8 of ABS [Australian Standard Geographical Classification \(ASGC\), July 2007](#) (cat. no. 1216.0).

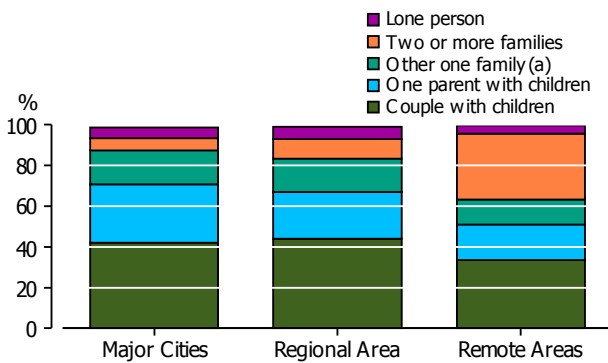
## Living arrangements and families

Overall in 2006, 80% of Indigenous people lived in a household with just one family, and this was significantly more common among those in Major Cities (88%) than in Remote Areas (63%). Nearly one-third (32%) of Indigenous people in Remote Areas were living in multi-family households, compared with 6% of Indigenous people from Major Cities and 10% in Regional Areas.

### ...partnering

In the Major Cities and Regional Areas, Indigenous people in couple relationships were more often than not partnered with a non-Indigenous person. In almost nine out of ten couples (88%) in Major Cities where at least one partner was Indigenous, the other did not identify as Indigenous in the 2006 Census. In Regional Areas, the proportion was 77%. In contrast, in Remote Areas only around one-quarter (24%) of couples where one partner was Indigenous, the other was non-Indigenous.

## Type of family/household lived in, Indigenous persons – 2008



(a) Includes couple only households and one family households (such as sibling households).

Source: ABS 2008 NATSISS

### ...number of children

Indigenous households in Remote Areas were more likely to contain children than other areas, and of those who did have children, they tended to have a greater number. In 2008, 57% of Indigenous households in Remote Areas had children aged less than 15 years living in them with an average of 2.5 children per household. This compares with Regional Areas where the average number of children was 2.1 (out of 51% of households with children), and 2.0 children on average in Major Cities (out of 48% of households with children).

***In nine out of ten couples involving an Indigenous person in Major Cities, the other partner was non-Indigenous.***

Indigenous women in Remote Areas tend to have more babies than those in other areas. According to the 2006 Census, around one-quarter (24%) of Indigenous women aged in their 40s who lived in the Remote Areas had five or more children. This compares with 13% of Indigenous women in Major Cities in their 40s having five or more children. Higher fertility in the Remote Areas is particularly evident among teenagers, with one in five 15–19 year old Indigenous females being a mother in 2006, compared with 8% of those in Major Cities.

### Cultural differences

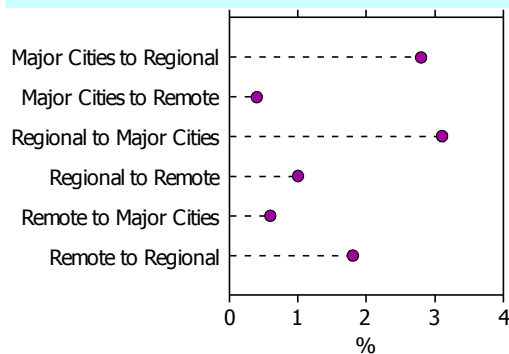
Indigenous people living in Remote Areas are more likely to report higher levels of attachment to their culture as measured by their language spoken, participation in cultural events and identification with clan, tribe or language group.

## Mobility across Remoteness Areas

Between 2001 and 2006, around 10% of Indigenous people aged over five years had moved to an area with a different level of remoteness. Just over half of these (5.5% of the Indigenous population) moved to a less remote region. The largest flows were between Major Cities and Regional Areas with around 3% moving in each direction. Over 2% moved out of Remote Areas, while just 1% moved into a Remote Area.

The largest net movement of Indigenous people between 2001 and 2006 was from Remote to Regional Areas, and the rate was highest among people aged 5–19 years, with around 5% moving to a Regional Area.

## Migration between 2001 and 2006 across Remoteness Areas



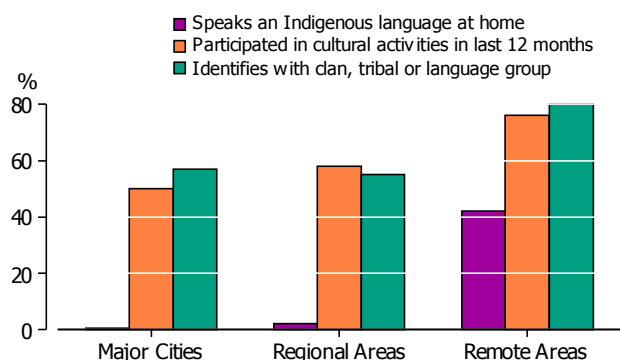
Source: ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing

In 2008, 42% of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over in Remote Areas spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home. This was much higher than for Indigenous people in Major Cities and Regional areas, where less than 1% and 2% respectively spoke an Indigenous language at home.

Around three-quarters (76%) of Indigenous people in Remote Areas participated in cultural activities in the previous year, higher than both those living in Regional Areas (58%) and Major Cities (50%). The most commonly attended cultural activities among people in Remote Areas were funerals/sorry business (62% attended), followed by sports carnivals (42%). The most commonly attended events for Indigenous people in Major Cities and Regional Areas were NAIDOC week activities (36% and 37% respectively).

Identification with a clan, tribal or language group is important to the majority of Indigenous people, but is more common among those in Remote Areas (80%) than either Major Cities (57%) or Regional Areas (55%). In each Remoteness Area, tribal groups were more commonly identified with than language groups, clans, missions or regional groups.

## Indicators of Indigenous cultural attachment – 2008



Source: ABS 2008 NATSISS

### Disadvantage and remoteness

The widespread disadvantage of Indigenous peoples results from a complex legacy of historical, social and economic factors and extends across all aspects of wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Over the last decade there have been some improvements in a number of key outcome measures, yet inequalities are also evident between Remoteness Areas in areas such as education, work, health and housing.

### ...engagement in education and work of young people

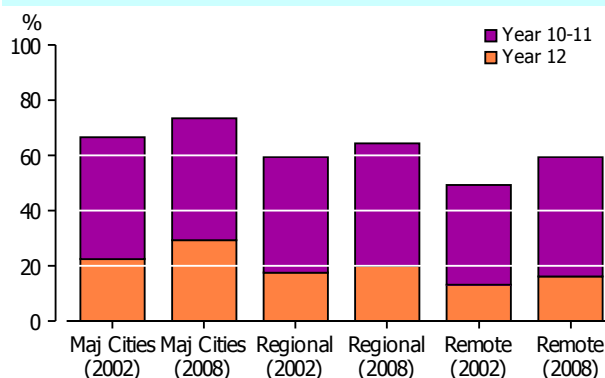
The proportion of young Indigenous people (aged 15–24 years) fully engaged in work or study has increased between 2002 and 2008. However, the increase in participation was only evident in the Major Cities and Remote Areas.

Overall, the proportion of Indigenous youth (aged 15–24 years) who were either studying full time, working full time (or doing a part time combination of both) increased from 47% to 54% over the period, with full-time study occupying 35% and full-time work 18% in the latter period.

In Major Cities, the increase in full engagement in education or work in the six years to 2008 was from 51% to 63%, while in Remote Areas the increase was from 33% to 41%. This means six out of ten young people in Remote Areas were not fully engaged in 2009. In Regional Areas, the overall engagement level was virtually unchanged at 53%, as a small rise in full-time employment was offset by a decline in the proportion who were in full time study.

Over the 2002–08 period, measures of the highest level of school completed by Indigenous people (of those aged 15 years and over who had left school) increased across all Remoteness Areas. In 2008, 73% of Indigenous people in Major Cities had completed year 10 or higher (up from 67% in 2002) and included 29% who had finished year 12 (up from 23% in

## Highest school completion, Remoteness Areas, Indigenous people(a) – 2002 and 2008



(a) Aged 15 years and over, excludes those attending school.

Source: ABS 2002 and 2008 NATSISS

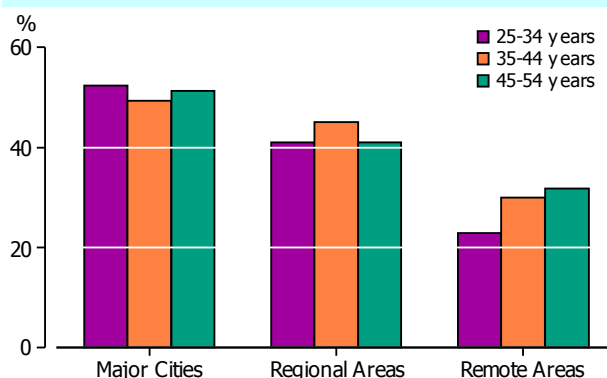
2002). In Regional Areas, the proportion who had completed year 10 or higher increased from 60% to 64% over the period, while in Remote Areas the level increased from 49% to 59%.

### ...non-school qualifications

Between 2002 and 2008 the proportion of Indigenous adults (aged 25–64 years) with a non-school qualification increased from 32% to 40%. The greatest increases occurred in Major Cities and Regional Areas, and in 2008, half of all Indigenous adults living in Major Cities had a non-school qualification compared with 41% of those in Regional Areas and 26% of those in Remote Areas.

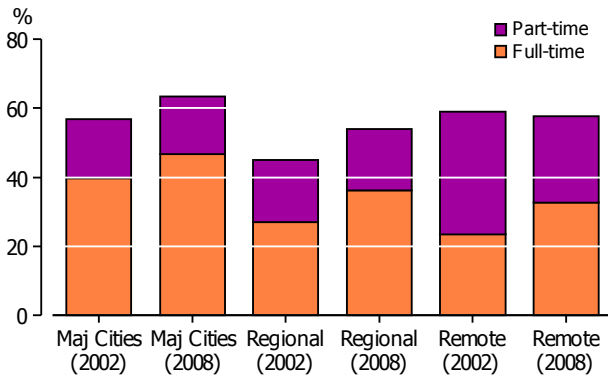
In 2008, Indigenous people aged 25–34 years in Remote Areas were the least likely (23%) of any group (aged between 25 and 54 years) to have a non-school qualification. This may be in part due to young people having to move out of Remote Areas to study, or to use their qualification in employment.

## Indigenous people with a non-school qualification – 2008



Source: ABS 2008 NATSISS

## Employment of Indigenous people aged 25-64 – 2002 and 2008



Source: ABS 2002 and 2008 NATSISS

### ...employment of adults

The overall level of employment among Indigenous people aged 25–64 years rose from 52% to 58% in the six years to 2008. While the improvements were mainly seen in Major Cities (up seven points to 64%) and Regional Areas (up nine point to 54%), Remote Areas (at 58% in 2008) still had higher employment than Regional Areas. However, in Remote Areas employed Indigenous people were more often in part-time work (43%) than those in Major Cities (26%) or Regional Areas (33%). The high proportion of part-time work in Remote Areas is mainly due to the Community Development Employment Program, which in 2008 was assisting 35% of employed Indigenous people in Remote Areas, 71% of whom were employed part time.

### Income

Indigenous households are over represented at the lower end of the income distribution (based on the income of all Australian households). In 2008, 49% of Indigenous households were in the bottom quintile (twenty percent) of all households based on their equivalised gross income (that is, more than twice the 20% that

would be expected if there were no differences on average between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians). This disparity has grown from 2002 when 40% of Indigenous households were in the bottom quintile.

At the high end of the income distribution, Indigenous households were under represented with 6% in the top quintile.

The income disparity between Indigenous people and all Australians highlighted by the distribution of household income was most apparent in Regional Areas and Remote Areas, where over half of households were in the bottom quintile, and just 4% in the top quintile. Indigenous households in Major Cities were somewhat better off, although there were still 42% in the bottom quintile (twice as many as the average for total Australia) and just 8% in the top quintile, compared with the 20% that would be expected if income was not distributed differently among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

### Housing

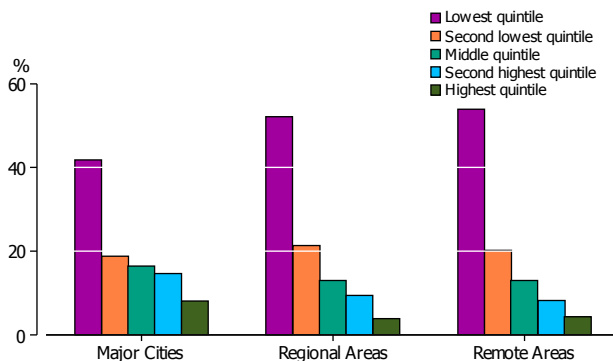
As well as providing basic shelter, adequate housing should facilitate good health and education outcomes. However, a high proportion of Indigenous households live with overcrowding or sub-standard housing.

### ...overcrowding

Overcrowded housing presents a number of risks such as increasing the chances of spreading infectious diseases and interpersonal conflict. In addition, overcrowding may impair children's education through decreased opportunities to study or get sufficient sleep.<sup>1</sup>

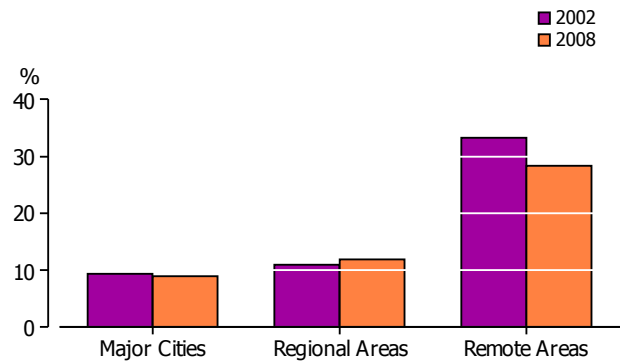
In 2008, over half (52%) of Indigenous people living in Remote Areas (almost 66,000 people) were living in households without a sufficient number of bedrooms,<sup>2</sup> and most of these were in multiple family households. In contrast, 16%

## Indigenous households' income distribution by quintiles of equivalised gross income – 2008



Source: ABS 2008 NATSISS

## Indigenous households with insufficient number of bedrooms – 2002 and 2008



Source: ABS 2002 and 2008 NATSISS

of Indigenous people living in Major Cities were in overcrowded conditions, while in Regional Areas the figure was 23%.

While Indigenous people in Remote Areas were more likely to be living in overcrowded households, there was a small but significant decline in the proportion of overcrowded households between 2002 and 2008 (from 33% to 28%).

Overcrowding occurred for all types of housing tenure or landlord types, but in Remote Areas it was most common in houses managed by Indigenous Housing Organisations (IHOs). IHOs made up one-third of all Indigenous dwellings in Remote Areas in 2008, and 41% of these dwellings (housing 34,200 people) were overcrowded.

### ...structural problems and other deficiencies

Closely associated with overcrowding are structural problems and non-existent or non-functioning basic facilities. At best, such inadequacies may make conditions uncomfortable, but they may also pose significant risks to health or safety.

In 2008, 26% of dwellings occupied by Indigenous people had some kind of structural problem. This compares with 18% across all Australian households. The Indigenous households with structural problems were most frequent in Remote Areas (34%), but still relatively common in Regional Areas and Major Cities (25% each).

The most common types of structural problems for Indigenous occupied houses were major cracks in walls or floors (affecting 12% of all households), followed by walls or windows that were not straight (7%), problems with foundations, rot or termite damage and major plumbing problems (6% each).

Since 2002, the proportion of Indigenous households reporting structural problems has declined by 25% overall, with the reductions occurring across all Remoteness Areas.

In 2008, 27% of Indigenous people (in 7,300 households) in Remote Areas lacked some kind of basic household amenity. This compared with 8% in Major Cities and 9% in the Regional Areas. The most common deficiency was a lack of cooking facilities which affected 15% of the population in Remote Areas, while 11% didn't have a washing machine and 6% didn't have a fridge.

### Health

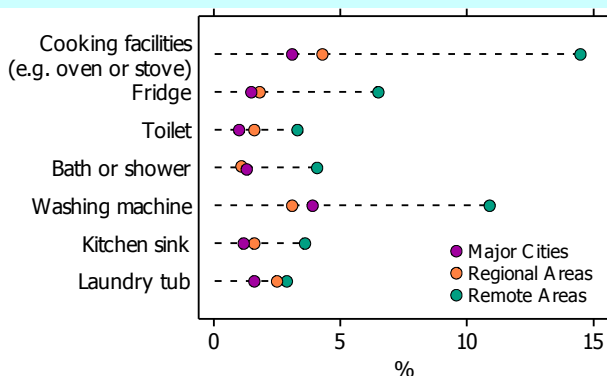
The poor health outcomes of Australia's Indigenous people (highlighted by the gap in life expectancy) are associated with a number of negative factors including those to do with lifestyle, living environment and access to health services.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, self-reported health shows that Indigenous people in Regional Areas and Major Cities were less likely to report their health as good or better (76% and 77% respectively) than those in Remote Australia (81%).

### ...risk factors

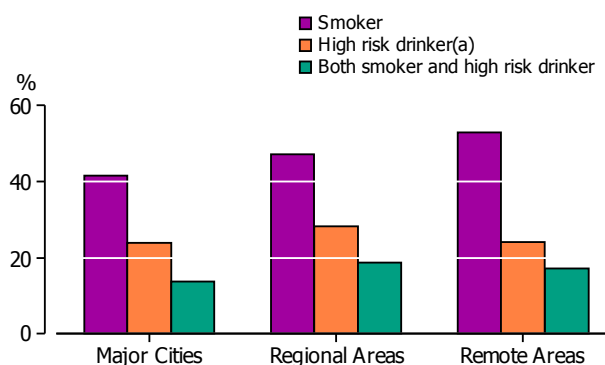
Smoking and alcohol consumption are two major health risk factors that contribute to premature death and ill health among Indigenous people. In 2008, 47% of Indigenous people (aged 15 years and over) were current smokers, down from 51% in 2002. Smoking was most prevalent among those in Remote Areas (53%) compared with 42% in Major Cities and 47% in Regional Areas.

#### Indigenous households - type of unavailable facility – 2008



Source: ABS 2008 NATSISS

#### Smoking and high risk drinking – 2008



(a) In the two weeks prior to interview.

Source: ABS 2002 and 2008 NATSISS



In the two weeks prior to being interviewed in 2008, half of all Indigenous people aged 15 years and over had consumed some alcohol, and around half (51%) of these drinkers consumed at levels considered to be high risk to health. This means that one-quarter of all Indigenous people had consumed at high risk levels. Across Remoteness Areas, the rate varied from 24% in Major Cities and Remote Areas to 28% in Regional Areas. In Remote Areas, fewer people drink at all (40% compared with 54% in non-Remote Areas) which means a high proportion (61%) of those who did drink, drank at high risk levels.

Overall, the level of high risk drinking in 2008 (26%) was not statistically different to the level in 2002 (23%).

### Positive wellbeing

Indigenous people in the 2008 NATSISS were asked about positive as well as negative feelings of wellbeing. In Remote Areas, 79% of people aged 15 years and over reported feeling happy, some or most of the time. This was considerably higher than Major Cities where 68% were happy and Regional Areas where 73% were happy.

In Remote Areas, feeling happy was associated with cultural activities such as making or performing Indigenous arts. Of the people who were involved in art, craft, dance, music or story-telling, 83% reported feeling happy some or most of the time. Similarly, of those who attended cultural activities at least once per week, 81% were happy some or most of the time compared with 71% among those who rarely or never attended cultural events.

### Crime and safety

Indigenous people in Major Cities were more likely (29%) to report feeling unsafe in their local area after dark than those in Regional (26%) and Remote Areas (22%). This difference in feeling safe is associated with differences in experiences of personal crime. People in Major Cities were slightly more likely than people in Remote Areas to have been victims of physical or threatened violence (26% compared with 22%). Among 95% of violent assaults in Remote Areas, the perpetrator was known to the victim, compared with 73% in Major Cities.

## Conclusion

The Indigenous population is a much less concentrated population than the overall Australian population, being only half as likely to live in Major Cities and 12 times more likely to live in Remote Australia. In some characteristics, such as household and family type, employment and education, Indigenous people in Major Cities appear less disadvantaged than their remote counterparts. Other indicators such as self-reported health and happiness, and experience of crime, show Indigenous people in Major Cities are not doing better (and in some cases slightly worse) than those in Remote Areas.

## Endnotes

- 1 Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009, [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009](#), Productivity Commission, Canberra, viewed 7 September 2010, <[www.pc.gov.au](http://www.pc.gov.au)>.
- 2 According to the Canadian National Occupancy Standard for housing appropriateness. See paragraphs 24 to 26 of the Explanatory Notes in ABS [Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2007-08](#), cat. no. 4130.0, Canberra, <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)>