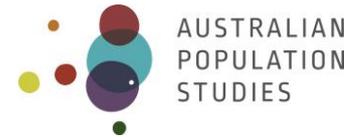


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# Recent changes to the Indigenous population geography of Australia: evidence from the 2016 Census



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## Abstract

### Background

The Indigenous population of Australia has grown very rapidly since the first tabulation of census statistics about Indigenous people in the 1971 ABS Census of Population and Housing (Census). Understanding the size and location of the Indigenous Australians is important to the State for service delivery and policy, and for Indigenous peoples themselves.

### Aims

This paper summarises changes to population geography of Indigenous Australians between 2011 and 2016. It describes the growth in the estimated population, and its changing geographic distribution. The paper derives a measure of ‘unexpected population change’: the spatial mismatch between demographic projections from the 2011 and 2016 Census counts.

### Data and methods

Census data and population projections are tabulated and mapped.

### Results

Indigenous people now comprise 3.3 per cent of the total Australian population, or 798,381 persons. This population grew by 3.5 per cent each year between 2011 and 2016, a rate of growth 34 per cent faster than that explained by natural increase alone. Both aspects of growth were concentrated in more urban parts of the country, especially coastal New South Wales and southeast Queensland. For the first time, fewer than 20 per cent of Indigenous people were recorded as living in remote areas.

### Conclusions

Indigenous population growth continues to be remarkably rapid. Future research is required to understand the correlates and causes of population growth beyond that explained by natural increase.

### Key words

Indigenous population growth; identification change; ABS Census; Indigenous population geography; Australia.

## 1. Introduction

A detailed understanding of the Indigenous population in Australia is a matter of great interest to policy makers and Indigenous peoples. For example, knowledge of the size, composition and characteristics of the Indigenous population are used to inform government policy (e.g. the 'Closing the Gap' strategy), service delivery (e.g. the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery), resource allocation (e.g. the state-based redistribution of revenue from the federally levied goods and services tax (GST)) and advocacy for social justice (e.g. Calma 2006). Tabulations and estimates derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing (Census) provide the best available information on the size and composition of the Indigenous population of Australia, albeit imperfectly. Consequently, a detailed understanding of Indigenous population change between 2011 and 2016 is of value to policy makers, service providers and Indigenous peoples.

The definition of the 'Indigenous population' is a contentious one, and the questions in the Census have arguably never met the needs of that population itself. Indeed, the notion of an 'Indigenous population' is a colonial construction which has been used to exclude Indigenous people and discriminate against them (Dodson 2003). For example, one primary imperative for counting the Indigenous people in federated Australia was the implementation of the nation's discriminatory constitution which necessitated that Indigenous persons be excluded from official population estimates produced for constitutional purposes (Arcioni 2012; Chesterman and Galligan 1997). In practice, this meant that all people who were reached by Census collectors were asked to complete a Census form that included a question on 'race' requiring respondents to state their 'proportion' of Aboriginal heritage. Those who stated that they were 'more than half' Aboriginal were excluded from most published population statistics (ABS 2011). While this constitutional requirement was removed by a federal referendum in 1967, the Census has continued to ask Australian residents about their Indigenous origin and is likely to do so for the foreseeable future.

Although questions designed to identify Indigenous people have been included in every Australian Census, it has only been since 1971 that Indigenous people have been included in the Census count. The purpose, wording and administration of Census questions designed to identify the Indigenous population have changed considerably over time. The 2011 and 2016 Census questionnaires asked about each person in the household: 'Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?' Respondents were offered the response options of 'No', 'Yes, Aboriginal' and 'Yes, Torres Strait Islander', and were advised 'For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both "Yes" boxes'.

It is important to note that this 'standard Indigenous question' does not perfectly capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander notions of indigeneity or many administrative definitions of the Indigenous population. However, as Walter and Andersen (2013) insist, recognition of the colonial nature of these categories need not entail the abandonment of statistics about Indigenous peoples. Rather, they argue for the reframing of statistical collections and their interpretations in a manner that reflects Indigenous standpoints. This paper adopts the ABS Census definition of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples to explore Indigenous population change in Australia.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the changing size and spatial distribution of the Indigenous population of Australia, comparing the results of the 2011 and 2016 censuses. The paper summarises three key aspects of the intercensal change:

- the growth in the estimated population of Indigenous Australians
- the changing geographic distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons
- ‘unexpected’ population change, or the spatial mismatch between demographic projections from the 2011 and 2016 Census counts.

## 2. Indigenous population increase

The Indigenous population increased rapidly between 2011 and 2016. In the 2016 Census, 590,056 people were counted as Aboriginal, 32,345 were counted as Torres Strait Islander and 26,767 were counted as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Combined, 649,171 people were counted as Indigenous, an increase of more than 100,000 people, or 18.4 per cent, since 2011. This count of the Indigenous population compares with 21,341,231 persons who identified as not being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, resulting in the Indigenous population making up 3.0 per cent of those who answered the Indigenous origin Census question, an increase from 2.7 per cent in 2011.

The Census count underestimates the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to a much greater degree than it underestimates the number of other Australians. The ABS Post-Enumeration Survey (PES), which re-interviews around 0.5 per cent of Australian households nationally, is used as the basis for producing population estimates (as distinct from population counts tabulated from the Census). In 2016, the PES sampled around 800 households from 33 discrete Indigenous communities.

The Indigenous population estimate from the PES attempts to correct for at least three types of Census undercount (ABS 2017a):

- *First*, a significant proportion of Census records do not have a response to the Indigenous status question (6.0% in 2016) and some of these individuals are likely to be of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. Records with Indigenous status not stated come about either because that particular question was skipped over on the Census form or because no Census form was received for a dwelling that Census collectors deemed to be occupied on Census night. In the latter case, Census collectors impute the existence of a certain number of residents, but do not answer the Indigenous status question for these individuals.
- *Second*, some individuals are missed by the Census – they simply do not appear on any household’s Census form. This could be because they were omitted from a completed Census form because Census collectors missed their dwelling, or because Census collectors mistakenly thought their dwelling was unoccupied.
- *Third*, a number of individuals who are listed as not being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin on the Census form later state that they are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin when asked in the PES several weeks later, a survey that is administered face-to-face to most participants.

After the PES is released, the ABS further adjusts the population estimate by backdating the Census-night estimate to 30 June and estimating the number of residents temporarily overseas and thus out-of-scope for the PES (ABS 2017b). Based on these adjustments, the ABS (2017b) estimate that there were 798,381 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians in August 2016. This population estimate is an increase of 128,000 persons from 2011, or 3.5 per cent per annum. Such rapid increase is not unusual for the Australian Indigenous population.

As Table 1 shows, both the Census count and the population estimate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons have increased considerably in almost every Census since the 1967 referendum. While the annualised growth of 3.5 per cent in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population between 2011 and 2016 is substantial, it is less than the mean annual growth from 1971 to 2011 of 4.1 per cent.

**Table 1:** Census count and population estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 1901–2016

Year	Census count			Population estimate			Under-count (%) <sup>d</sup>
	Indigenous persons	Percentage of total count <sup>a,b</sup>	Annual growth rate (%)	Indigenous persons <sup>c</sup>	Percentage of total population <sup>b</sup>	Annual growth rate (%)	
2016	649,171	2.8	3.4	786,689	3.3	3.5	17.5
2011	548,370	2.5	3.8	662,335	3.0	5.2	17.2
2006	455,030	2.3	2.1	513,977	2.5	2.2	11.5
2001	410,003	2.2	3.0	460,140	2.4	4.3	10.9
1996	352,970	2.0	5.9	372,052	2.0	5.6	5.1
1991	265,489	1.5	3.1	283,631	1.6	3.4	6.4
1986	227,645	1.4	7.3	240,152	1.4	–	5.2
1981	159,897	1.1	-0.1	–	–	–	–
1976	160,915	1.1	6.8	–	–	–	–
1971	115,953	0.9	7.5	150,076	1.1	2.6	22.7
1966 <sup>e</sup>	80,750	0.7	0.1	132,219	1.1	2.4	38.9
1961	80,526	0.8	3.8	117,495	1.1	2.3	31.5
1954	62,084	0.7	2.8	100,048	1.1	2.0	37.9
1947	51,048	0.7	0.9	87,000	1.1	1.2	41.3
1933	45,066	0.7	1.1	73,828	1.1	-0.2	39.0
1921	39,399	0.7	2.7	75,604	1.4	-1.0	47.9
1911	30,052	0.7	-4.6	83,588	1.8	-1.2	64.0
1901	48,248	1.3	–	94,564	2.4	–	49.0

*Sources:* Population estimates for 1901–1971 from ABS (1986) and ABS (2014a), for 1986 and 1991 from ABS (1994), for 1996 from ABS (1996) and for 2001–2016 from ABS (2017a). Census counts for 1911 from CBCS (1917), for 1921 from CBCS (1927), for 1933 from CBCS (1940), for 1947 from CBCS (1952), for 1954 from CBCS (1962), for 1961 from CBCS (1967), for 1966 from CBCS (1971), for 1901–1966 from ABS (2014a), for 1971–1991 from ABS (2004) and for 1996–2016 from ABS community profiles.

*Notes:* All PES-derived population estimates displayed above are based on the Census of that year. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the ABS did not produce estimates of the Indigenous population for censuses between 1966 and 1981. The 1996 PES-derived estimate is based on the estimated population at 30 June, while all other listed figures related to the population on Census night in early August.

<sup>a</sup> The denominator of this percentage includes those who did not state their Indigenous status in the Census.

<sup>b</sup> Census counts and population estimates from 1901 to 1966 are for what the ABS termed 'full blood Aborigines', who were counted in the Census and excluded from population statistics. Because of this exclusion, denominators for these percentages have been counted by adding the Indigenous Census counts and population estimates to the official non-Indigenous figures. Persons identified in the pre-1967 censuses as 'half-caste' were counted as non-Indigenous in these censuses and population estimates.

<sup>c</sup> This column uses PES population estimates where possible (i.e. excluding those residents temporarily absent from Australia on Census night) in order to consistently calculate the undercount rate.

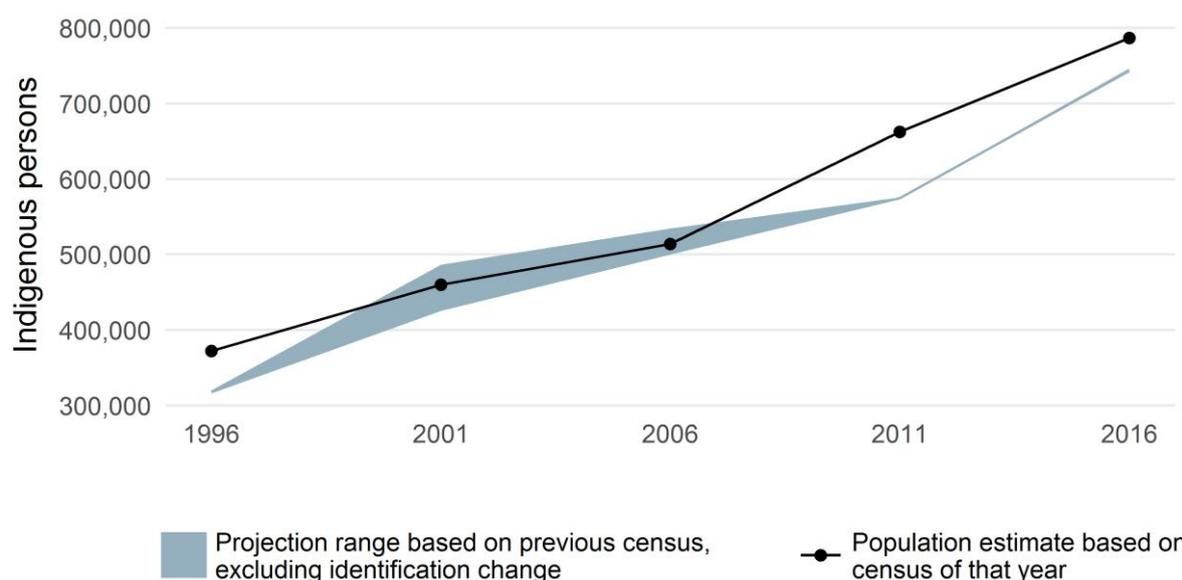
<sup>d</sup> These undercount rates are calculated consistently using the method from the 2016 PES, and so do not match the published undercount rates from previous years.

<sup>e</sup> Excludes Torres Strait Islanders.

The Indigenous Census count – that is, the number of people identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait origin in the Census itself, without adjustment for undercount – has also increased substantially, rising from 548,370 in 2011 to 649,171 in 2016. This is consistent with historical trends since the 1967 referendum, with the Indigenous Census count increasing in every Census during that

period, with the exception of the 1981 Census. Concerningly, the Indigenous undercount rate, or difference between the population estimate and Census count, is at the highest level recorded in censuses since the 1980s. The undercount rate has steadily increased from 5.2 per cent in 1986 to 17.5 per cent in 2016. While this partly reflects improvements to the population estimate, it also may indicate an increase in the number of households who have chosen not to participate in the Census.

The 3.5 per cent annual growth of the Indigenous population between 2011 and 2016 outstripped demographic projections of population growth based on the 2011 Census by a considerable degree. As Figure 1 shows, around 42,000 more Indigenous people were identified to be resident in Australia in 2016 than the ABS had predicted in projections based on the 2011 Census. In this figure, the black line represents the estimate of the Indigenous population based on the Census of that year (i.e. the ABS's Indigenous population estimates listed in Table 1); the shaded region indicates the range of population estimates for that year produced by the ABS based on the immediately previous Census. The 'unexplained growth' in the Indigenous population is illustrated by the gap between the black line and the shaded region.



**Figure 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population estimates compared with demographic population projections based on the previous Census, 1996–2016**

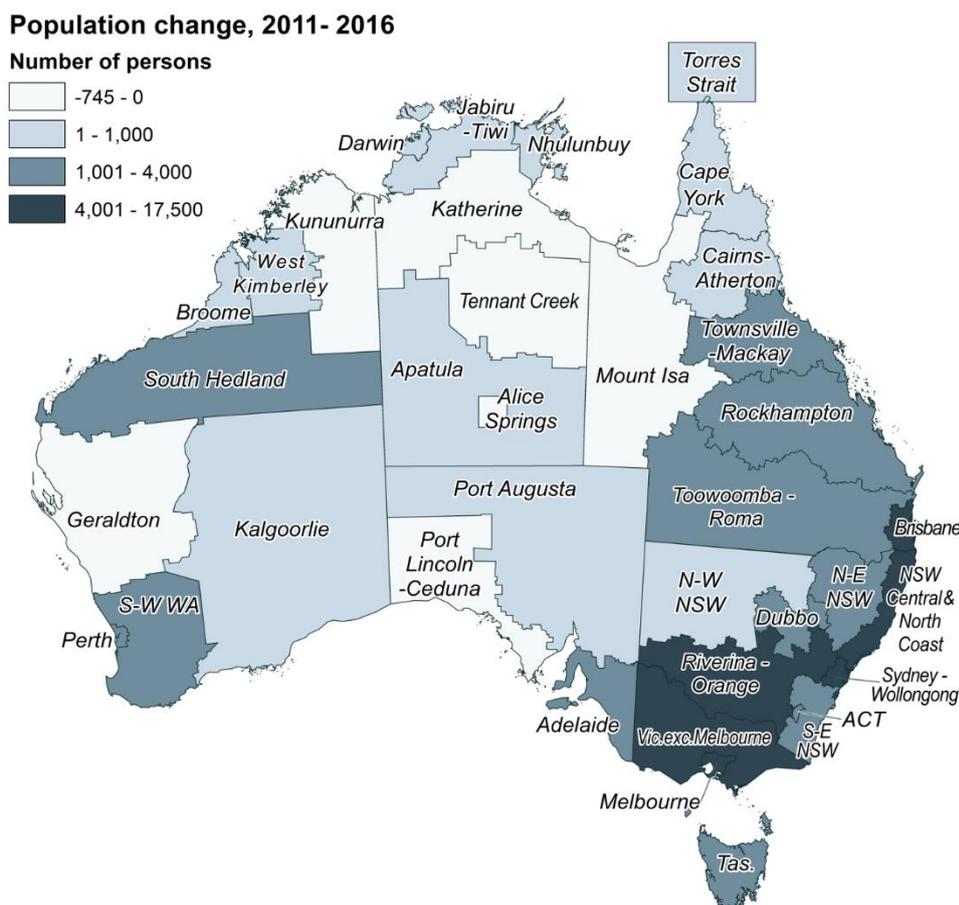
*Source:* ABS (2014b) for 2006, 2011 and 2016; ABS (1998) for 2001 and 1996. *Notes:* The population projections were produced by the ABS, based on the immediately previous Census (e.g. the 1996 projection is based on the 1991 Census, the 2001 projection is based on the 1996 Census counts, and so on). The upper bounds of the projections for 2006 and 2001 have been modified to remove predicted unexplained population growth, which was included as a component of those projections only.

Unexplained growth – estimated here as the difference between the 2011-based 2016 population projection and the 2016-based 2016 population estimate – accounted for around 34 per cent of intercensal population growth between 2011 and 2016. This unexplained growth is likely to result from the changing propensity of people to identify as Indigenous in the Census and PES, from changing rates of mixed partnering, and from changes to the methods used in administering the Census and PES. Figure 1 also demonstrates that the gap between the Indigenous population estimates and projections based on the previous Census has narrowed, compared with the growth in the Indigenous population between 2006 and 2011, during which around 59 per cent of growth was unexplained.

### 3. A changing spatial distribution

While the number of people counted in the censuses as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin increased by 100,801 between 2011 and 2016, this growth was not evenly distributed across Australia. Understanding the spatial distribution of the Indigenous population is important not only for local service delivery, but for resource distribution. For example, the distribution of the GST to the states and territories is influenced by the proportion of the population who are Indigenous. Given that the growth of the Indigenous population has been most rapid in urban areas (Taylor 2013), a continuation of existing trends is likely to result in a shift of the population away from parts of the country where the Indigenous population is more likely to live in discrete communities, and more likely to be experiencing extreme economic disadvantage.

When examined at the regional level, it is clear that growth in the Indigenous Census count between 2011 and 2016 is concentrated in the most heavily populated parts of New South Wales and Queensland. Figure 2 maps Indigenous population change using the 37 non-administrative Indigenous Regions defined by the ABS, a geography that maps approximately onto the regional geography used by governments to deliver services to Indigenous Australians.

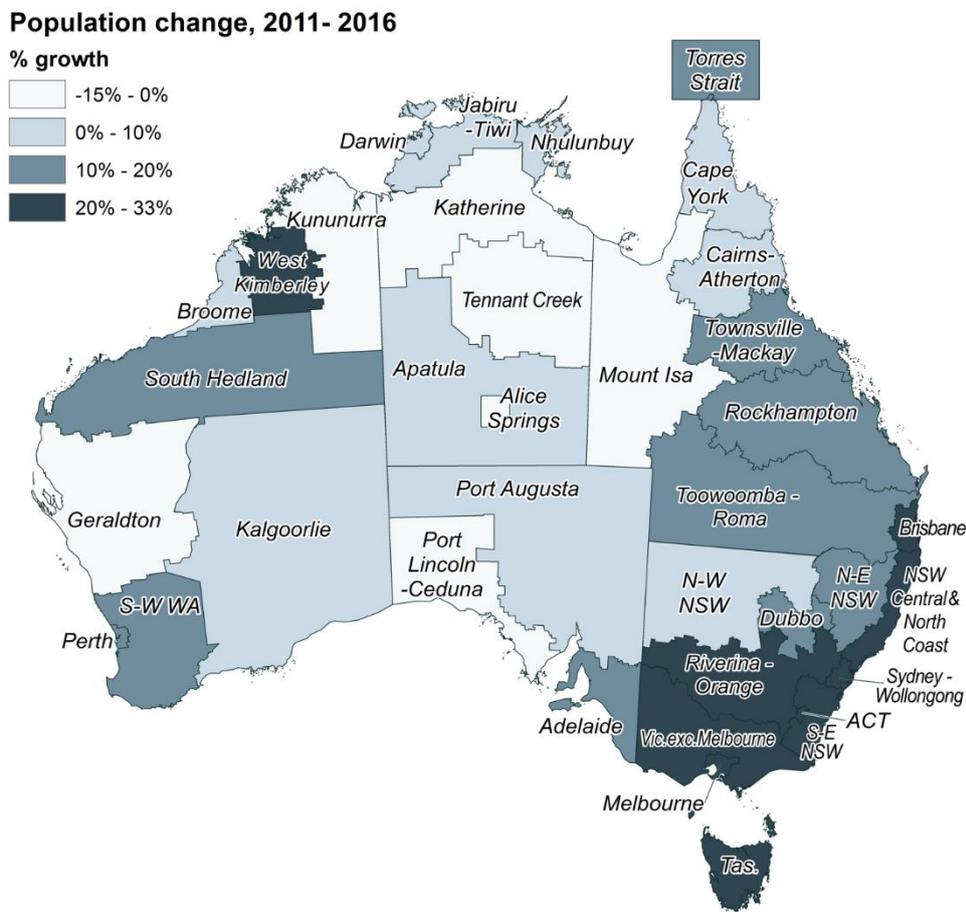


**Figure 2:** Change in the number of Indigenous people counted in the Census by Indigenous Region, 2011–2016  
 Source: ABS 2011 and 2016 censuses.

As Figure 2 above shows, counts increased the most in the Brisbane (17,463 persons), New South Wales Central and North Coast (17,452 persons) and Sydney–Wollongong (13,852 persons) Indigenous

Regions. These regions accounted for almost half of the recorded gross Indigenous population growth (47.9%). At the other end of the spectrum, several regions experienced a decline in the number of people counted as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin in the 2016 Census. Declining Census counts were of a much smaller magnitude than population growth, with Kununurra (745 persons) and Alice Springs (359 persons) experiencing the largest falls in the number of Indigenous people counted in the Census.

A similar but not identical geographic pattern of growth is apparent when Indigenous population change is mapped in terms of percentage growth rather than absolute growth. As Figure 3 shows, percentage population growth was high across much of southeastern Australia, with the Indigenous populations of Victoria, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory, southern and eastern New South Wales and southeast Queensland all growing by more than 20 per cent between 2011 and 2016. The fastest growing regions were the New South Wales Central and North Coast (33.4%), Brisbane (32.8%) and Melbourne (34.5%), while population decline was most rapid in Kununurra (13.5%) and Alice Springs (7.2%).



**Figure 3: Percentage change in the number of Indigenous people counted in the Census by Indigenous Region, 2011–2016**

Source: ABS 2011 and 2016 censuses.

While these results might be interpreted as suggesting that the distribution of the Indigenous population is becoming more similar to that of the non-Indigenous population, the Census figures do not tell a simple story of converging geographic distributions. Clearly, the less urbanised Indigenous population continues the long-term trend of becoming increasingly likely to live in cities.

As Table 2 shows, 36.8 per cent of the Indigenous population lived in what the ABS terms ‘major cities’ in 2016, an increase of 2.6 per cent from 34.2 per cent in 2011, using a consistent geographic classification. This increase consists of a combination of natural increase, migration and statistical ‘identification change’. Identification change occurs when an individual is classified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin in one Census but not the following Census, or vice versa (Biddle and Crawford 2015). However, during this same period, the non-Indigenous population also became increasingly urbanised, with 72.3 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians resident in major cities in 2016, an increase of 1.3 per cent from 71.0 per cent in 2011.

**Table 2:** The Indigenous and non-Indigenous population count distributions by geographical remoteness, 2016

Remoteness	Indigenous population count	Percentage of Indigenous count	Change in percentage of Indigenous count, 2011–2016	Non-Indigenous population count	Percentage of non-Indigenous population count	Change in percentage of non-Indigenous population count, 2011–2016
<b>Major cities</b>	235,527	36.8	2.6	15,409,691	72.3	1.3
<b>Inner regional</b>	154,087	24.1	1.7	3,858,090	18.1	-0.5
<b>Outer regional</b>	130,976	20.5	-1.5	1,738,227	8.2	-0.6
<b>Remote</b>	40,689	6.4	-1.0	224,485	1.1	-0.1
<b>Very remote</b>	79,041	12.3	-1.9	90,897	0.4	-0.1

*Source:* ABS 2011 and 2016 censuses. *Notes:* Not stated population excluded. Calculated on the basis of 2011 remoteness boundaries, using an area-based 2016 to 2011 Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1) concordance.

However, the starkest divergence in population dynamics lies in ‘inner regional’ areas, where 24.1 per cent of Indigenous people and 18.1 per cent of non-Indigenous people now live. While the proportion of the Indigenous population living in inner regional areas continues to grow (up 1.7% in 2016 from 2011), the proportion of the non-Indigenous population living in these locations fell by 0.5 per cent between 2011 and 2016.

Another difference between the two populations is that much of the growth of non-Indigenous Australians in urban areas is likely to be driven by international immigration. For the Indigenous population the impact of international migration is negligible, with the small percentage of Indigenous Australians who move overseas mostly balanced by the small percentage who return. Growth in urban areas is therefore likely to be made up of a combination of excess of births over deaths, changing patterns of identification and internal migration.

#### 4. The geography of unexpected population change

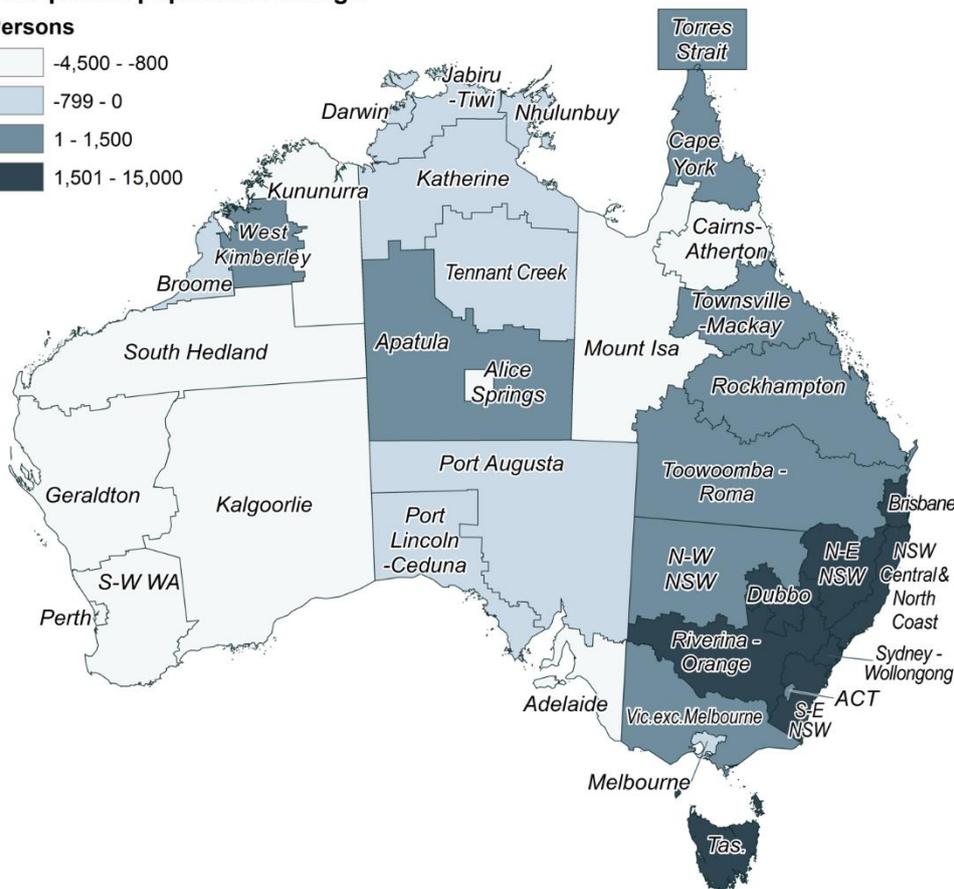
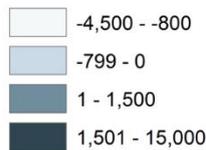
Indigenous population growth between 2011 and 2016 was well above what could be explained by natural increase alone. As described above, the Indigenous population in Australia on Census night, (9 August 2016) was estimated to be 786,689 on the basis of the PES, or 3.3 per cent of the total Australian population (Table 1). This was around 42,000 more than the upper range of the Indigenous population projections based on the 2011 Census. This unexplained population growth is likely to arise from identification change, and potentially also from changes to enumeration and processing methods between the 2011 and 2016 censuses.

There is little reason to expect that the unexplained population growth is distributed evenly across Australia. Although too little information has been published at present to construct detailed regional population estimates, including age–sex distributions, provisional estimates can be derived using a simple, three-step procedure, as described below.

- *First*, those records with no response to the Indigenous origin question had their Indigenous status imputed on the basis of the percentage of respondents who identified as Indigenous in their Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1). This increased the Indigenous population from a count of 643,136 (excluding those in migratory, shipping and offshore areas) to an estimate of 692,182.
- *Second*, a provisional population estimate for each region was derived by multiplying these regional, prorated Indigenous population estimates by 1.137. This multiplier was selected so that the sum of all regional population estimates equalled 786,689, the national estimate derived from the PES.
- *Third*, Indigenous population projections for each region for 2016, based on the 2011 Census, were subtracted from provisional population estimates for regions. The 2011-based projections were produced on the basis of natural increase and a repetition of 2006–2011 migration patterns. (For more detail, see Biddle 2013.) Consequently, the subtraction of the 2011-based projection from the 2016-based estimate gives a measure of unexpected population change for each region, or the spatial mismatch between projected and observed population increase. Because some of this population change will be explained by changing migration patterns between 2011 and 2016, we term this population change ‘unexpected’ rather than ‘unexplained’.

**Unexpected population change**

**Persons**



**Figure 4: Unexpected population change by Indigenous region, 2011–2016**

Source: Authors’ estimates based on ABS 2011 and 2016 censuses.

Estimates of unexpected population change by Indigenous Regions are displayed in Figure 4 (above). Put simply, the figure shows the difference between the estimated Indigenous population in 2016, and the expected 2016 Indigenous population, as projected on the basis of the 2011 Census by Biddle (2013). Because the total Indigenous population increased faster than projected, the unexpected population change in most regions was positive (i.e. the Indigenous population increased faster than anticipated). However, in 10 of the 37 regions, unexpected population change was negative, meaning that the Indigenous population increased less quickly than projected.

Much of the unexpected population increase occurred in south-eastern Australia. In particular, more than 75 per cent of the unexpected population increase occurred in just five regions: New South Wales Central and North Coast (14,844); Sydney–Wollongong (7,412); Brisbane (5,813); Riverina–Orange (4,713); and northeastern New South Wales (3,600). While these regions were projected to experience substantial population increase, the *actual* population increase substantially exceeded expectations. However, not all regions saw greater than expected population growth between 2011 and 2016. For example, the sixth most rapidly growing region, Townsville–Mackay, had an estimated Indigenous population increase of 4,800 persons, very close to the projected increase of 4,600. Other regions experienced population changes that were substantially less than projected. For example, the Indigenous population of Perth was projected to increase by 5,628 between 2011 and 2016, but instead grew by only 1,734 persons. Similarly, the Indigenous population of Alice Springs was projected to increase by 817 persons, but our estimates suggest that it decreased by 745 persons.

## 5. Conclusions

The quinquennial ABS Census remains the best source of information on Indigenous population change. The aim of this paper was to provide an overview of the changing size and spatial distribution of the Indigenous population of Australia between 2011 and 2016, with a focus on the geography of unexpected population change.

The first set of analyses focused on the growth in the estimated population of Indigenous Australians. We showed that the Indigenous population grew rapidly between 2011 and 2016, reaching around 3.3 per cent of the total population estimate, or 786,689 persons. It is more than just a historical footnote to reflect upon the fact that this is similar to the accepted population estimate of the Indigenous population at the time of European colonisation (Mulvaney 2002), up from a low of around 72,000 at the time of the 1921 Census (which is likely to have been a significant undercount). Like other Indigenous groups internationally (in particular, the United States, Canada and New Zealand), the Indigenous population has rebounded substantially from the destruction wrought by frontier violence, disease and other forms of colonial domination.

The geographic distribution of the Indigenous population is also changing. Between 2011 and 2016, the most rapid growth in the Indigenous population count occurred in more urban parts of the country, with three regions (Brisbane, the New South Wales Central and North Coast and Sydney–Wollongong) accounting for almost half of the recorded gross Indigenous population growth. There continues to be a policy focus on Indigenous Australians living in remote areas. The results of this paper suggest that a remote focus is becoming less justifiable on the basis of population geography alone, as the remote Indigenous population continues to shrink as a percentage of the total Australian Indigenous population.

As the economic circumstances of the remote and urban Indigenous population appear to be diverging, at least when measured in terms of income (Markham and Biddle 2018), the spatially uneven Indigenous population increase suggests that resource targeting within the Indigenous population may need to become a more prominent policy consideration. Indeed, while Indigenous disadvantage may be most concentrated in remote areas, in absolute terms there are more disadvantaged individuals living in urban areas. Consequently, it is important that regional approaches to policy do not ignore intra-regional Indigenous inequality.

Considerable uncertainty exists regarding the growth in the population that cannot be explained by the excess of births over deaths. By comparing the 2016 Census data with population projections based on 2011 data, we have shown that unexplained Indigenous population growth accounts for around 34 per cent of total intercensal population growth. While considerable, this proportion is less than the equivalent for the 2011 Census, for which around 59 per cent of intercensal growth was unexplained. Much of this excess or unexplained growth is likely to be caused by people changing their response in successive Censuses to the Indigenous 'origin' question, or by their Indigenous identification being given differently by those who respond to the Census on their behalf (see Biddle and Markham 2018).

Previous research has shown that many Indigenous Australians are selective about the contexts in which they reveal their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. This research suggests that the propensity for an individual to identify themselves as Aboriginal often depends on their assessment of the risks and benefits of doing so, particularly with respect to racism and discrimination and whether or not identification would lead to a challenge to prove Aboriginal identity (ABS 2013; Biddle and Crawford 2015; NSW Aboriginal Affairs 2015). While this contextualisation is crucial to understanding identification, further research is needed to understand the causes of spatial variation in identification change, and the likelihood of continued identification change into the future.

Indeed, our research demonstrates that the unexplained growth in Indigenous counts is neither spatially nor demographically consistent. While much of this growth occurred in three urban regions (Sydney–Wollongong, NSW North and Central Coast, and Brisbane), however there were also large urban regions like Perth where the population increased more slowly than expected from the population projections. Further research into the components of intercensal population growth would assist in understanding the social and demographic drivers of Indigenous population change.

## 6. Key messages

- 81.4 per cent of the Indigenous population now live in urban or regional areas.
- The Indigenous population grew between 2011 and 2016 at a rate of 3.5 per cent per year, to an estimated population of 798,381.
- The intercensal population increase of 128,000 persons is around 42,000 persons (or 34%) greater than can be accounted for by natural increase. This is likely to result from the changing propensity of individuals to identify as Indigenous in the Census or changes to the Census collection and processing methods.
- Indigenous population growth was highest in coastal regions between Melbourne and Brisbane, while the Indigenous population of several remote regions Australia fell modestly.
- Identification change is very spatially concentrated, and is most rapid in Tasmania, New South Wales and Brisbane.

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