

Assessing the Social and Economic Impact of Indigenous Homelands in Australia: Towards a Reconceptualisation

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Indigenous Australians comprise two per cent of Australians with the largest population centres located in the major metropolitan areas, such as Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. While the single largest population centres are metropolitan based, Indigenous Australians are over-represented in rural and remote regions where they are confronted by poor quality housing, limited access to employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure and social dislocation. Beginning in the 1970s, some Indigenous households in rural and remote regions began to move away from the larger communities and established smaller settlements called Homelands. Over the past four decades Homelands have received varying levels of policy and financial support from governments but increasingly their relevance and contribution to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians has been called into question as governments have sought new policy solutions that advance the welfare of Indigenous Australians¹. This paper considers the present and future of Homelands in Australia and focuses on 10 Homelands in and around Ceduna on the Far West Coast of South Australia. The paper argues that conventional accounts of Homelands, their costs and benefits, are too narrowly constructed and that changes within Australia's economy and polity are creating new roles for these settlements. The paper suggests there is a need for greater awareness of the emerging contribution Homelands make to their regions and their communities and that government policy should seek to both sustain and expand Homelands in at least some regions.

Indigenous Australians have suffered significant dislocation since European colonisation began over 200 years ago. European invasion resulted in considerable mortality associated with the introduction of contagious diseases, dispossession from 'country', acts of violence, disruption to ecosystems and a loss of sovereignty. The emergence of Australia as a developed economy has co-incided with the return of some rights that were previously stripped from Indigenous Australians, including the citizenship in the mid 1960s and the return of limited land rights following the Mabo judgement. Despite progress, Indigenous Australians remain the most marginalised and disadvantaged group within Australian society: on average Indigenous Australians have a life expectancy at birth that is 17 years younger than non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2002), their housing tends to be crowded and of poor condition, whereas the housing stock for the remainder of the population is of high quality and under occupied; there is a high level of chronic disease – including diabetes; and, disproportionate rates of incarceration and homelessness. This paper considers the general position of Australia's Indigenous households and current policy settings, before moving on to consider the case of Homelands and their role in Australia's regional economies. The paper then briefly touches upon the case of Homelands on the West Coast of South Australia and the potential insights they offer towards the development of both new insights into Indigenous regional development, and the development of new policy.

¹ The term Indigenous Australians is used to encompass and recognise Australia's two recognised Indigenous groups: Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders.

Indigenous Wellbeing and Policy Across Australia

Indigenous Australians are confronted by a range of disadvantages that reflect their often marginalised position within Australian society. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007 (p. 4) noted

that in many areas of their lives, Indigenous Australians are very much disadvantaged compared with non-Indigenous Australians.

Life expectancy at birth as estimated by the ABS is about 17 years below that of non-Indigenous people. The prevalence of obesity is much higher for Indigenous males and females at all ages, increasing the risk of obesity-related diseases. Perinatal and infant mortality is also much higher, with rates 2–3 times as high as for non-Indigenous children. Similarly, the prevalence of chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, diabetes and kidney disease is considerably higher (ABS & AIHW 2005; ABS 2006e). The apparent retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (40%) was just over half that of non-Indigenous students (76%) in 2006, and Indigenous students were substantially less likely than the overall population of students to meet the national benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy. This may have contributed to the much lower labour force participation rate among the Indigenous population—59% compared with 78% for the non-Indigenous population after adjusting for age differences (see chapters 2 and 8).

The rates of Indigenous children and young people under the various forms of child protection are also considerably higher than those of other Australian children and young people (5–7 times as high) (AIHW 2007e). The rate of young Indigenous people under juvenile justice supervision is even higher, at 15 times that of non-Indigenous young people in 2005–06.

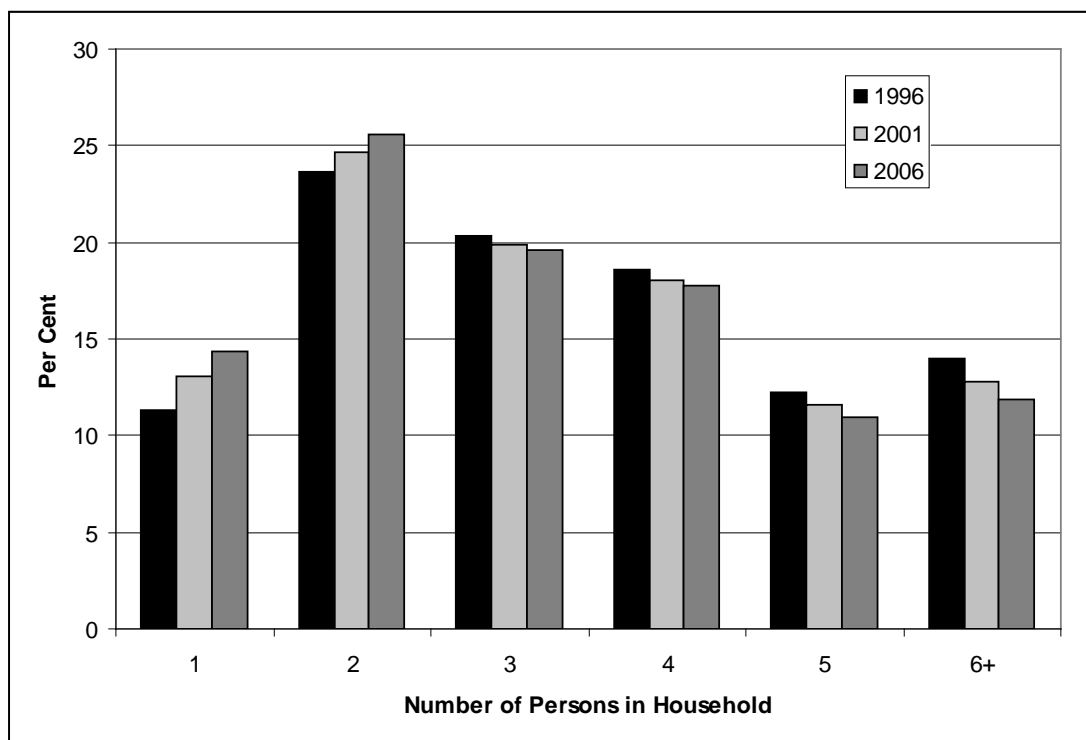
Indigenous Australians have much higher levels of dependency on government pensions and income support than non-Indigenous Australians and much lower rates of participation in the formal labour market. The parlous position of some parts of the Indigenous population has precipitated policy reform both within the Australian Government and amongst the State Governments, who are responsible for providing services. Key policies initiatives have included:

- A commitment by the Australian Government and State Governments to reduce the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians;
- Reform of income support measures, moving away from programs such as the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) that was seen to serve as a disincentive to participation in the mainstream workforce;
- Reform of welfare support, including the capacity to exclude some forms of expenditure within particular communities;
- The provision of new services and infrastructure – including housing – in Indigenous communities; and,
- Enhancement of policing and other security within some at risk communities.

In 2007 the Australian Government under Prime Minister Howard introduced the Northern Territory Intervention to address what it saw as some of the key problems within Indigenous communities. This policy reform included significant investment in many disadvantaged communities, measures to better co-ordinate State, local and Australian government programs, as well as strategies aimed at regulating behaviour. More recently the Australian Government under Prime Minister Rudd has maintained many of these measures but also invested significantly in new housing and services. However, as Figures One and Two show, the gap in the quality and level of crowding within the housing stock is significant. For example, at

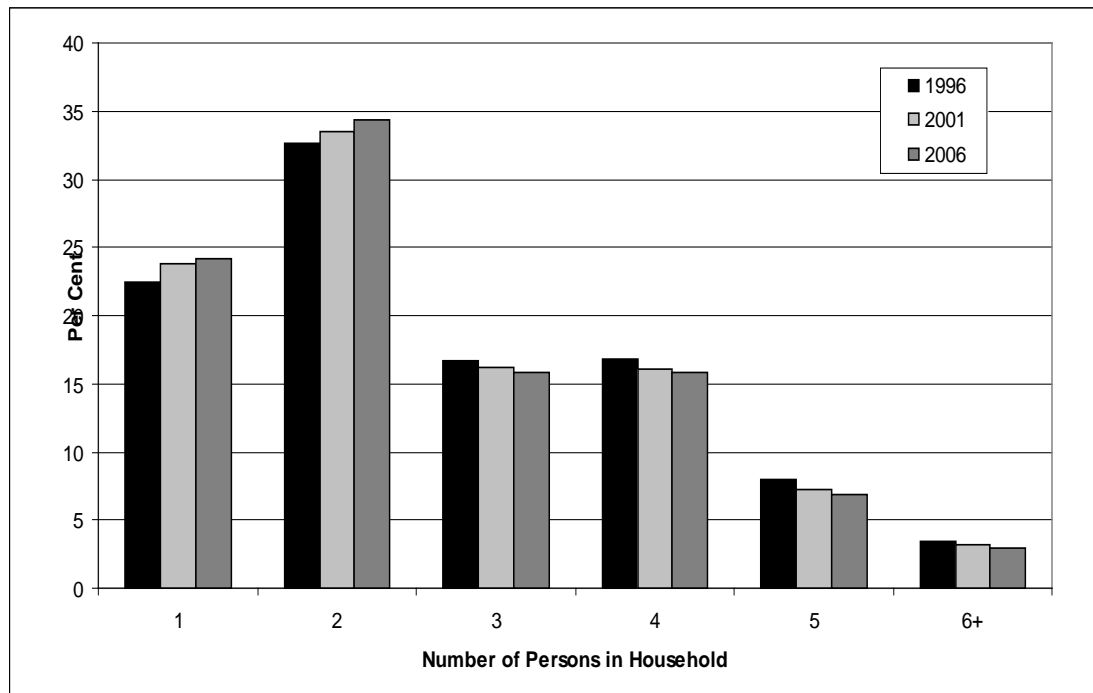
the 2006 Census fully 23.2 per cent of Indigenous households were comprised of five or more persons, compared with 10.1 per cent for the total population. Indigenous households also tend to live in smaller dwellings than the total population, with 28.1 per cent of the total population living in dwellings of four bedrooms or more, compared with 24.7 per cent of the Indigenous population. This trend to living in smaller dwellings is evident despite the larger average household size and contributes to the problem of poor space standards in many areas. . In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the Census data on place of usual residence does not fully reflect the impact of short term movements across and within regions. There is a considerable literature (see Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008) that emphasises the episodic nature of much overcrowding and it is likely that there is more overcrowding amongst Indigenous households than evident in the Census.

Figure 1. Number of Persons Per Household where One of More Persons Identify as an Indigenous Australian, 1996, 2001 and 2006, Australia



Source: ABS Census 2001 and 2006

Figure 2. Number of Persons Per Household where No Persons Identify as an Indigenous Australian, 1996, 2001 and 2006, Australia



Source: ABS Census 2001 and 2006

Remoteness is one of the key determinants of the social and economic position of Indigenous Australians because while the largest communities are found in the major metropolitan centres such as Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide, Indigenous Australians remain over-represented in rural and remote Australia. Remoteness reduces access to employment, adds to the cost of providing housing and other services, results in a reduced level of medical care and add to the general vulnerability of communities.

Indigenous Homelands

Beginning in the early 1970s, Indigenous communities across remote Australia began to establish Homelands on their traditional territories with the aid of grants from the Australian Government. The establishments of the Homelands movement represented one of the consequences of a seachange in government policy towards Indigenous Australians. From the 1930s to the 1960s official policy emphasised the assimilation of Indigenous Australians into mainstream culture, but the election of the Whitlam Labour Government in 1972 resulted in its replacement with a policy based on self determination (Australian Human Rights Commission 2009). Throughout the 1970s a raft of policy measures enabled the development of homelands across remote Australia – and especially the Northern Territory – with the Commonwealth Government retaining responsibility for 500 homelands/outstations. In addition, legal frameworks were established to hold community lands in trust, through either government entities or equivalent arrangements (Australian Human Rights Commission 2009 p.4).

The Return to Country (1987) report produced by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs noted Professor Stanner’s views on defining homelands;

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal Group and its homeland... A different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and difference (quoted in Australian Human Rights Commission 2009 p. 3).

The same report argued that a definition of homelands should include:

- An acknowledgement of the significance of Aboriginal people moving back to traditional country;
- A clear distinction between homelands and settlements, missions and reserves;
- An acknowledgement of the traditional connection to the land, and the ancestral spirits; and,
- A description of the permanency of homelands as traditional home territory

(quoted in Australian Human Rights Commission 2009 p. 3).

Gerritson (1995) noted at least three waves in the outstation/homeland movement in Australia. Homelands are a significant feature of many parts of remote Australia, and especially the Northern Territory. Many are small, are occupied only seasonally and have few – if any – services. It was estimated that in 2001 there were 991 discrete communities with less than 100 persons and an average size of 20 people. At the 2006 Census fully 81 per cent of the Northern Territory's Indigenous population lived in remote or very remote areas (Australian Human Rights Commission 2009). These characteristics have led to a demand for policy change at the national level, and especially in the Northern Territory (SoCom and Dodson Lane 2009) with a move to the consolidation of population and services in a limited number (12) major settlements. Hughes (2010) has been an acute critic of both homelands and outstations in northern Australia, arguing that the such settlements have deprived Indigenous Australians of the opportunity to find meaningful employment, that they have reinforced existing power structures within some communities, that they have contributed to reduced health, and they have been complicit in the lower levels of educational attainment amongst Indigenous children.

Clearly, views on the value and contribution of homelands to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians are diametrically opposed. Those in favour of such settlements often emphasise the less tangible benefits, while those who are critical highlight limited participation with the mainstream of Australian society and economy. However, it is important to note that such debates are often focussed on a limited number of the total population of homelands settlements across Australia. Australia is a large and diverse country, originally peopled by more than 200 nations and linguistic groups, rather than just two peoples. Local cultural and linguistic differences have been compounded by variation in the history of colonisation, the differing policies of State and Territory Governments, local economic structures and the history of past policies. This paper therefore seeks to make a contribution to this debate by focussing on the potential economic contribution homelands make to the Far West Coast of South Australia – both to the Indigenous and non Indigenous population. These homelands are, perhaps, atypical of the broader homeland movement but understanding their experience adds to our depth of knowledge on this important topic.

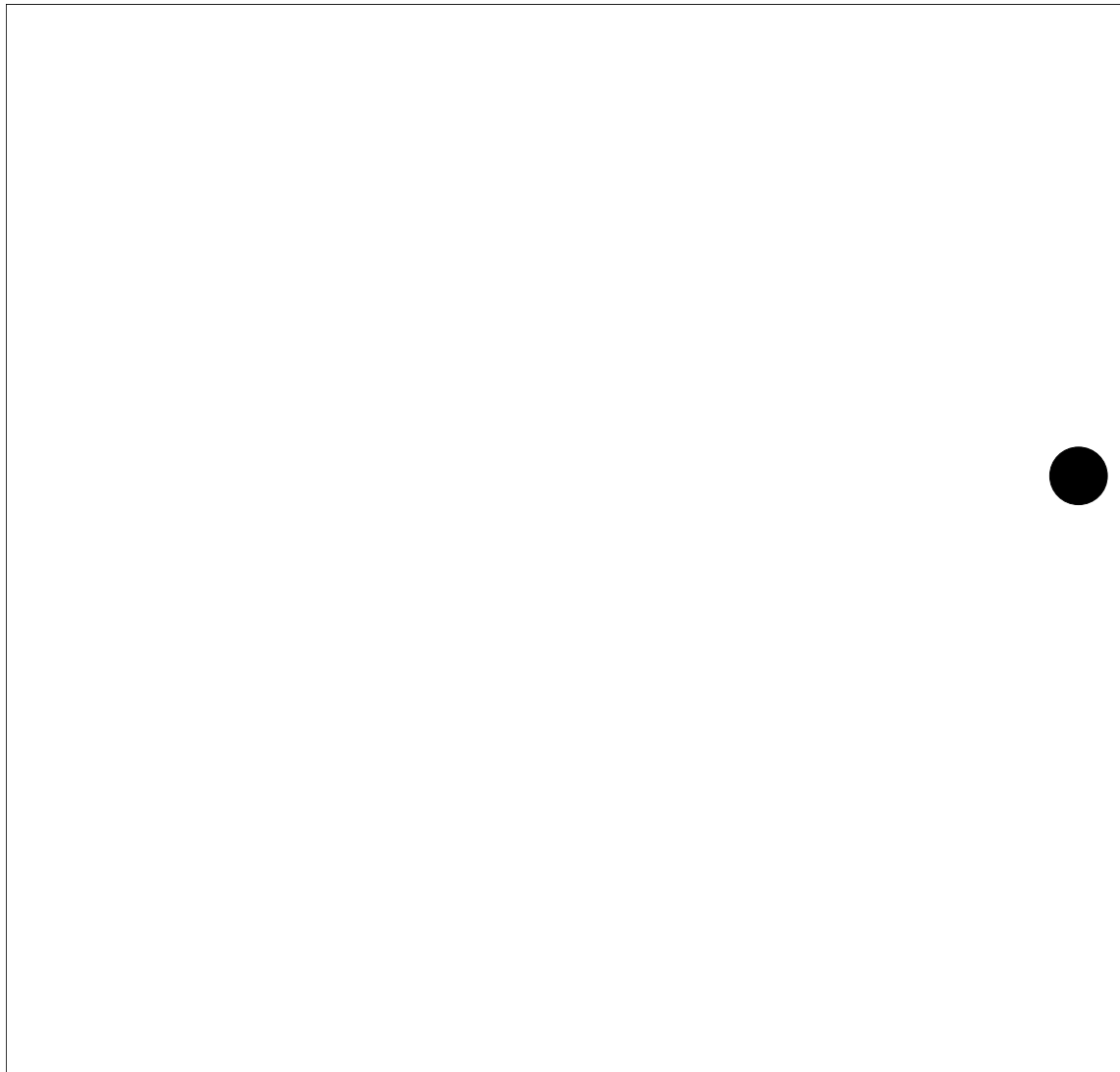
The West Coast Homelands.

The Far West Coast of South Australia is a relatively remote region on the edge of the ecumene. It is more than 900km from Adelaide, the state capital and has a population number just a few thousand. The region was originally settled by Europeans in the early part of the 20th Century and late 19th Century for wheat production, and the cereals industry remains a

mainstay of the economy. It is, however, marginal agricultural land. Over recent years aquaculture and mining have emerged as key industries, with tourism and transport playing supporting roles.

There are ten homelands in and around Ceduna, the largest town on the west coast (Figure 3) and each has a population ranging from 10 individuals to sixty or more. The homelands were established with special planning regulations that allowed the establishment of a limited number of multiple dwellings on relatively large sties.

Figure 3 West Coast Homelands, 2009



Homelands are generally permanently occupied by kin and much of the impetus for the development of homelands in the region can be traced to a desire to leave behind unattractive housing and social conditions in Ceduna and instead live in a more secure, family based environment. It is worth noting that not all residents of homelands live on their traditional lands, with some groups displaced by several thousand kilometres.

Discussions with the residents of the homelands indicate that they see several ways in which living on a homeland improves their wellbeing. More generally it is also possible to map out the wider ranging contributions homelands make to the regional economy and these issues are discussed below. For the Indigenous population,:

- homelands are seen to produce higher levels of social capital within the Indigenous community and result in reduced conflict.;
- they are associated with improved educational outcomes for children ;
- they are seen to contribute to greater levels of participation in further education and higher rates of employment for adults, partly as a consequence of the ‘bundling’ of services in and around the homelands;
- they result in more stable housing, with benefits in terms of quality of life and health. Though the quality of the housing stock on many homelands is very poor; and,
- they create – admittedly limited – opportunities for entrepreneurship and engagement with small business ventures.

For the broader community – Indigenous and non Indigenous – around Ceduna the benefits associated with the homelands are just as acute. Other authors (see Beer, Maude Pritchard 2003; Gerritson 2000) have noted the importance of the ‘black economy’ to the economies of rural and remote communities. The wider population – Indigenous and non Indigenous – benefits from expenditures associated with transfer payments and the development of Indigenous owned and controlled assets (tourism, pastoralism etc). In and around Ceduna the wider benefits include the fact that homelands:

- Help to maintain a relatively stable population that forms the basis for a concentration of services on the west coast;
- Persons living on the homelands make a valuable contribution to the development of the mining sector by providing workers in a labour-deficit region;
- The homelands provide an environment for the acquisition of practical, tacit skills, not available in non homeland settings;
- The homelands add to the positive image of the region – reputational benefit, and,
- The homelands contribute to reduced public sector outlays in areas such as health, policing, and, welfare services.

Importantly, many of these benefits are either not measured in conventional demographic and regional data sets or are not considered in current policy debates. What is needed is a systematic evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with this form of housing provision/settlement in order to better inform public policy. Currently there is considerable pressure to revise the homelands model in and around Ceduna, with concerns to harmonise practices in Indigenous housing provision at the state and national levels on the one hand, and a push to further develop the homelands locally. In part, the latter imperative seeks reform of land tenure arrangements, governance and housing in order to deliver improved economic and social outcomes.

Conclusion

Homelands have been an important feature of Indigenous settlement in Australia for more than 40 years. They have distinctive characteristics and their origins are mixed, with considerable variation in policy settings over time and by region. This paper has argued that the homelands on the west coast of South Australia are – in some respects – very different from those evident in the Northern Territory. Their structure, pattern of settlement and origins vary considerably from the trends evident in the remote and very remote north of the continent. The paper has highlighted the way in which homelands appear to contribute to both the wellbeing of their residents and the prosperity of their region. It is important that such tentative conclusions are now followed by more substantive data collection.

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