Summary: Ross & Taylor (2000), *The relative social and economic status of Indigenous people in Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett*
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Title of Research:
The relative social and economic status of Indigenous people in Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett

Research Publication:

Name of Researcher(s):
K. Ross. and J. Taylor

Time period:
1991 – 1996, with population projections through to 2011

Geographic location:
Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett (far west New South Wales)

Methodology:
A statistical analysis of 1991 and 1996 ABS Census of Population and Housing, together with statistical analyses of NSW State government departmental information as well as administrative data sets held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Commonwealth and locally-based Aboriginal organisations. This process was assisted by consultations with key informants in each of the three towns and with relevant agencies in Sydney and Canberra.

Aims:
This study aimed to provide a set of social indicators to assist in the development of policy solutions to pressing social and economic problems facing Indigenous communities in these three towns. Since planning for social and economic change is determined by the size, growth and socioeconomic composition of populations, social indicators were limited to those aspects of social and economic life in the region that form the basis of policy interest and intervention. These include the demographic structure and residence patterns of the regional population, labour force status, education, income, welfare, housing, and health status. For each of these categories, the aim was to identify and describe the main characteristics of the population and highlight outstanding features in the data. A further aim was to compare the socioeconomic status of Indigenous residents of the region with that of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Selected findings and insights:
Across the three towns there was a growing Indigenous population, and a fall in the non-Indigenous populations. By 2011 the projected Indigenous population was expected to increase by 40 per cent across the entire Bourke ATSIC region (which includes these three towns) to reach 11,183 persons, using the 1996 Census as a base and adopting a conservative projection methodology.

- the median age of Indigenous people across the three towns ranged from 19 to 23 years (compared to between 33 and 34 years for non-Indigenous people).

For every employed Indigenous person there were 3-4 unemployed Indigenous persons (in contrast there were more employed non-Indigenous persons than unemployed non-Indigenous persons).
• Many of the social and economic issues facing the region focused on the problems of youth. Examples included the need for extra job opportunities to absorb the growing number of new entrants to the labour force as well as for additional housing and community services to accommodate and support the formation of new households.

The overwhelming feature that distinguished Indigenous school attendance from that of the rest of the school-age population was a steady fall-off in participation from as early as age 14, culminating in very low levels of attendance among 16, 17 and 18 year olds – only 30 per cent of Indigenous youth aged 16 and 17 years attended an educational institution compared to 65 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Indigenous people in the three towns were nearly five times less likely to have a post-school qualification than non-Indigenous people:

• the largest disparity was for the youngest age group, aged 15–24 years, with only 4% of Indigenous people holding a post-school qualification compared to 32 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

• in the prime working ages, years when formal education could be expected to have been completed, only 10 per cent of Indigenous adults had a qualification compared to 42 per cent of non-Indigenous adults.

In 1996, some 45 per cent of all Indigenous persons aged 15 years or more in Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett were either working or looking for work. In contrast, around 70 per cent of non-Indigenous people were in the same situation.

• amongst the Indigenous unemployed, quite different patterns emerged for the three towns. Unemployment was highest in Walgett at 32 per cent and lowest in Bourke at 22 per cent with rates among males higher than for females. In contrast, unemployment among non-Indigenous persons was very low across all three towns.

• employed Indigenous persons tended to be employed in health and community services and in government administration, whereas non-Indigenous persons were employed across a wider range of industries.

• the CDEP scheme was by far the major employer of Indigenous people in all three towns. This is most striking in Walgett, where nearly all (92%) Indigenous employment was estimated to be through the CDEP scheme. In Brewarrina, the CDEP scheme accounted for half of all Indigenous people in employment and in Bourke, nearly one in three (31%).

Options for private sector expansion in the region were primarily through the development of irrigated agriculture and tourism with their multiplier effects on employment in retailing, wholesaling, rural services, transport services and accommodation – all industries where Indigenous people were under-represented.

The study also identified overcrowding as an issue to be addressed, with the numbers of Indigenous persons per bedroom being 50% more than for non-Indigenous persons.

In the area of health, the study concluded that:

• the persistence of high mortality among Indigenous adults in the region and the much higher rates of morbidity reported for Indigenous residents of the three towns placed severe physical constraints on the capacity of individuals to make prolonged and active contributions to family and community life, and on their ability to beneficially participate in the regional economy; and
although the causes of low health status are increasingly recognised as socioeconomic in origin, Indigenous people were often prevented from fully overcoming their disadvantage in areas such as education, training, the labour market and the accumulation of material wealth due to poor health and low life expectancy.

Educational implications:
The strength of such a study is that it highlights the importance for educational authorities of considering the most appropriate pathways development in terms of not only education and training provision but also a careful examination of future employment demand, potential growth industries and overall regional development. Part of such considerations needs to be quantitative analyses underpinning each of these aspects of pathways development, incorporating population projections. Furthermore the effects of changes to CDEP policy will require careful monitoring. [policy]

The immediate implications are the same as those that have been identified from many similar regional analyses undertaken by CAEPR. Priority needs to be given to pathways development such that greater proportions of Indigenous young people complete post-compulsory schooling and attain a post-school qualification so that they are able to compete with non-Indigenous job seekers in industries such as agriculture, general rural industries, tourism, hospitality and wholesaling. [training] [pathways]

Relevance:
Additional Topic: Demographics of the Indigenous Population

Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education
Participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory education, training and higher education

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