Infographic: Aboriginal population

This companion accompanies the infographic "Aboriginal population" because some of the statistics used for the infographic need further explanation, and to add information that is not apparent from the graphics alone.

Where do they live in Australia?

This part of the infographic is an opportunity to bust the myth that most Aboriginal people live in the Northern Territory. It shows that in fact New South Wales and Queensland are the states where most of them choose to live.[2]

Places & migration

Contrary to common belief most Aboriginal people live in the cities and not remote areas. States with relatively high proportions living in capital cities in 2011 include South Australia (51%) and Victoria (47%). In contrast, 80% of the population in the Northern Territory lived outside the capital city area.[2]

The highest proportional increases between the 2006 and 2011 census for Aboriginal people were recorded in the Australian Capital Territory (34%), Victoria (26%) and New South Wales (25%).

About 12% of Aboriginal people have moved between areas. The overall movement trend is from more remote areas to less remote areas with very remote areas experiencing the greatest net loss and major cities having the greatest net gain.

The reasons for migration vary depending on age:[3]

- 5–19 year-olds are most likely to leave remote and very remote areas to attend school in inner regional areas, but also families wanting a bigger or better home. Worryingly, more than 10% have to move because their landlord asked them to leave.
- 20–39 year-olds move to major cities, presumably for work, but also into a bigger home or to be closer to family and friends.
- over 40 year-olds are least likely to change address, and if they do they move away from major cities.
Traditional life

The graphic shows how 25% of Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over are living in their homelands or traditional country. At the same time 62% of that age group identify with a clan, tribal or language group. 73% of Aboriginal children aged 4-14 years and 63% of Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over are involved in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations.[1]

Figures are for 2008, the latest available data as the underlying survey is published only every six years.

How many people?

This area was the most controversial when I was researching numbers. I learned that historical records are full of inconsistencies, coloured by the social and political views at the time or simply don't exist. Consequently, Aboriginal population estimates will never be precise.

Past estimates have also systematically been too low. There are several reasons for the undercount.[4]

From 1890 to 1944 annual censuses relied on estimates of State Protectors. A potential undercount was never addressed and exacerbated by classifying Aboriginal people with "less than 50% of Aboriginal blood" as 'Europeans'. Given the stigma at the time about Aboriginality, many Aboriginal people probably didn't reveal their heritage. For example, Aboriginal author Sally Morgan's mother told her to say at school she was 'Italian'. The Stolen Generations policies ravaged well into the 1970s, another incentive not to inform governments of the birth of a mixed race child. Lastly, some Aboriginal people were still beyond the reach of the invaders during this time.

From 1967 to 1990 the level of undercount of Aboriginal people reduces as the government phases out Stolen Generation policies. Aboriginal people can more readily identify as such without life threatening consequences, especially after the 1967 Referendum. National policies emerge targeted (in a positive way) specifically for Aboriginal people, such as the Northern Territory Land Rights Act 1976.

Unfortunately, Aboriginal population issues were not comprehensively addressed by the ABS until the late 1990s. Analyses support the hypothesis that the census, at various time periods, has systematically under-estimated the actual Aboriginal population, a finding the ABS acknowledges: "For the purposes of estimating the Indigenous
population it is assumed that the 2001 census is a better count of the Indigenous population [than the 1996 census]."\[5\]

For this infographic I have hence decided to use what researchers called a "plausible set" of data.\[6\] It is based on all available data, both contemporary and recent, and hopefully allows a better basis for discussion of the development of Aboriginal population, the effects of European settlement and the impact of various policies applied to Aboriginal people over the years.

Summary: Plausible Scenario\[6\]

- At the time of European settlement, there were over 750,000-800,000 Aboriginal people in Australia.
- Numbers fell during the following century, as a result of disease and dispossession, to some 200,000 in the 1890s.
- At Federation, Aboriginal numbers were hard to estimate accurately, but based on contemporary commentary, an estimate of 150,000 is plausible.
- The population continued to decline until about 1920. The published estimates are subject to a series of sources of undercount that cannot be allowed for in a precise way. A figure of 120,000 around 1920 is plausible.
- The population reached its minimum in 1933, estimated at 117,000.
- The population then began to increase, at first gradually (estimated at 132,000 in 1947) and then more quickly, to reach 226,000 in 1971 and 367,000 in 1991.
- In 2006, the population was estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to be 517,000, around 2.5% of the population. The time series from 1788 to 2006 is shown in the table below.
Identity

Among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in 2011, 90% of people identified as being of Aboriginal origin only, 6% were of Torres Strait Islander origin only, and 4% were of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.\(^2\)

Note that how identity is determined has changed over time. Today the most acknowledged method is if an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.
How old are they?

The Aboriginal population in 2011 has a younger age structure than the non-Aboriginal population and is typical for indigenous populations with larger proportions of young people and smaller proportions of older people.

The median age of Aboriginal people increased from 20.4 to 21.6 years in 2011 and is projected to increase to between 24.7 and 25.4 years in 2026. For the non-Aboriginal population the median age is 37.6 years.[2]

Death

From the 2011 census data the ABS estimates the life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal males to be 67.2 years, for Aboriginal females to be 72.9 years,[2] still more than 10 years behind the general population's life expectancy in Australia.

For non-Aboriginal male Australians the life expectancy is 79.9 years, for females 84.3 years.[7]

Sources


http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3238.0Main+Features11991%20to%202009


[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics: 4125.0 - Gender Indicators, Australia, Feb 2014,
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4125.0main+features3110Feb%202014

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