

3.09 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the health workforce

Number and proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the health workforce

Data sources

The ABS Census of Population and Housing is conducted by the ABS at five-yearly intervals with 2006 the most recent and is designed to include all Australian households. The Census uses the ABS standard Indigenous status question and it is asked for each household member.

While the Census data are adjusted for undercounts at the person level to arrive at the Estimated Resident Population, no such adjustment is done at the household level. This affects the accuracy of the person counts at the household level to provide adjusted household estimates.

The 1996 and 2001 Census used the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations however, this was replaced by the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations for the 2006 Census.

Analyses

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce

Data on the number and proportion of Indigenous Australians employed in health-related occupations in 2001 are presented in the tables and figures below.

- In 2001, there were approximately 3,260 Indigenous Australians employed in health-related occupations, which represented 0.9% of the total health workforce.

Health workforce by age and sex

- In 2001, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in the health workforce were aged 35–44 years (1,047 people). The proportion of health workers who were Indigenous was highest among those aged 15–24 years (1.3%) and lowest among those aged 55–64 years (0.5%) (Table 3.09.1; Figure 3.09.1).
- Indigenous females represented a higher proportion of the health workforce than Indigenous males across all age groups.
- In the total health workforce, the majority of people employed in the health workforce were also aged 35–44 years. Females represented over three-quarters (76%) of the total health workforce (Table 3.09.2).

Table 3.09.1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce,^(a) by age and sex, 2001

	Age group					Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	
Number						
Male	83	255	250	160	49	797
Female	268	628	797	611	148	2,452
Total	351	883	1,047	771	197	3,249
Proportion of total health workforce (%)						
Male	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2
Female	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.7
Total	1.3	1.0	0.9	0.7	0.5	0.9

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

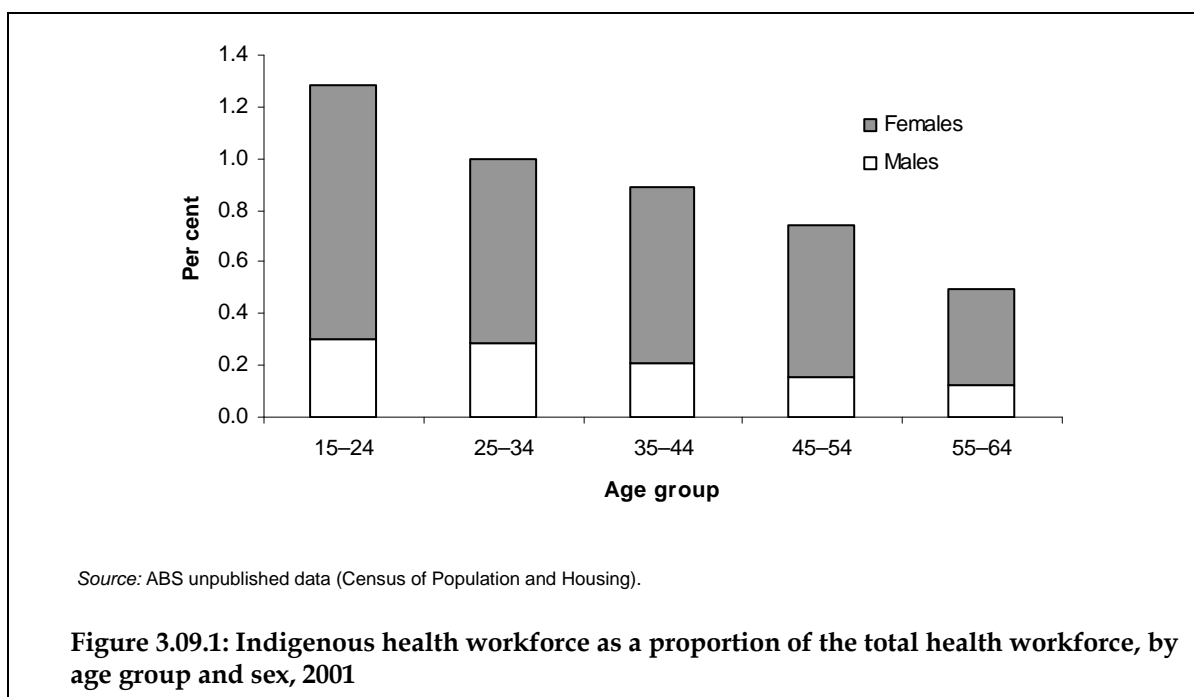
Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Table 3.09.2: Total health workforce,^(a) by age and sex, 2001

	Age group					Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	
Number						
Male	4,573	21,342	27,233	23,814	12,318	89,280
Female	22,767	67,127	90,468	79,857	27,244	287,463
Total	27,340	88,469	117,701	103,671	39,562	376,743
Proportion of total health workforce (%)						
Male	16.7	24.1	23.1	23.0	31.1	23.7
Female	83.3	75.9	76.9	77.0	68.9	76.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).



Indigenous health workforce by state/territory

- In 2001, the Northern Territory had the highest proportion of health workers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin (9%), and Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory had the lowest (0.3%) (Table 3.09.3; Figure 3.09.2). This was well below the proportion of the state/territory population that was Indigenous in 2001.
- The proportion of Indigenous Australians who were employed in health-related occupations in 2001 ranged from 0.5% in the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, to 0.9% in Victoria (Figure 3.09.3).

Table 3.09.3: Indigenous health workforce,^(a) by state/territory, 2001

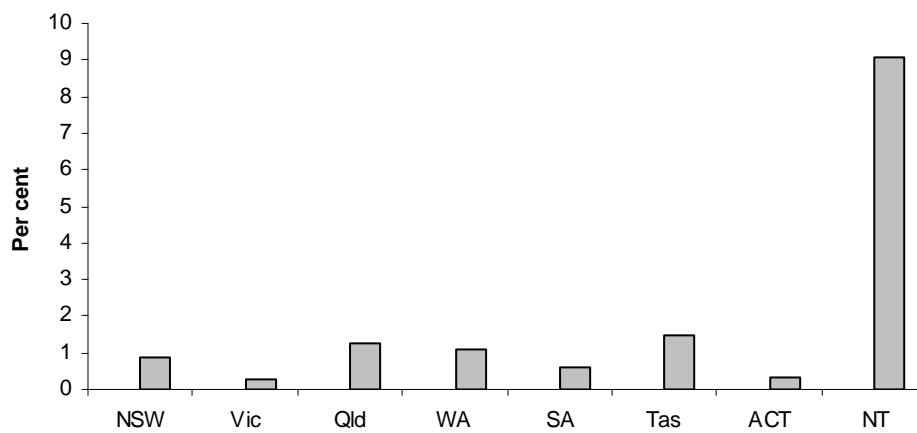
	NSW ^(b)	Vic	Qld	WA ^(c)	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
Number of Indigenous health workers	1,070	263	863	393	206	139	20	306	3,260
Indigenous health workers as a proportion of total health workforce	0.9	0.3	1.2	1.1	0.6	1.5	0.3	9.1	0.9
Indigenous health workers as a proportion of the Indigenous population	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.7
Proportion of state/territory population that is Indigenous	2.1	0.6	3.5	3.5	1.7	3.7	1.2	28.8	2.4

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

(b) Includes Territory of Jervis Bay.

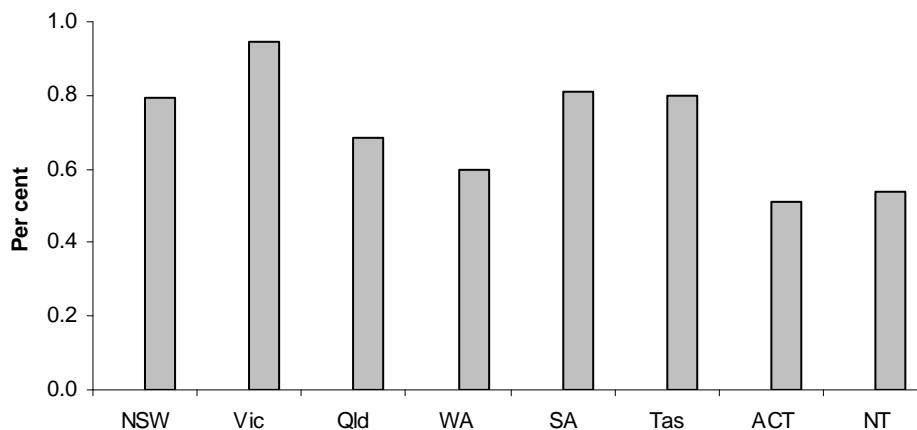
(c) Includes Territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Islands.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).



Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Figure 3.09.2: Indigenous health workforce as a proportion of total health workforce, by state/territory, 2001



Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Figure 3.09.3: Indigenous health workforce as a proportion of the Indigenous population, by state/territory, 2001

Health workforce by occupation

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 93% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers, 0.8% of all nurses, 0.6% of all dental workers, 0.5% of all allied health professionals, 0.3% of all medical workers and 0.1% of all pharmacists (Table 3.09.4).
- In 2001, there were 87 Indigenous people working as medical practitioners and 1,899 Indigenous people working as nurses, 982 of whom were registered or enrolled nurses.

After nursing, Indigenous people were most commonly employed as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers (844 people). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers may be employed as specialists in areas such as alcohol, mental health, diabetes, eye and ear health, sexual health, or they may work as generalist members of primary care teams, or as hospital liaison officers.

Table 3.09.4: Employment in health-related occupations (health workforce), 2001^(a)

	Indigenous	All persons	Proportion who were Indigenous
	No.	No.	%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers	844	906	93.2
Medical workers			
Health service managers	72	6,456	1.1
Medical practitioners	87	45,079	0.2
Medical imaging professionals	17	8,279	0.2
Total	176	59,814	0.3
Dental workers			
Dental practitioners	14	7,811	0.2
Dental associate professionals	17	4,475	0.4
Dental assistants	124	13,053	0.9
Total	155	25,339	0.6
Nursing workers			
Nurse managers	29	7,328	0.4
Registered nurses	782	140,781	0.6
Personal care and nursing assistants	795	50,533	1.6
Enrolled nurses	200	19,405	1.0
Other nurses ^(b)	93	21,877	0.4
Total	1,899	239,924	0.8
Pharmacists	12	13,130	0.1
Allied health professionals			
Ambulance officers and paramedics	82	6,689	1.2
Physiotherapists	29	10,119	0.3
Psychologists	23	9,105	0.3
Dieticians	18	1,982	0.9
Other ^(c)	22	9,735	0.2
Total	174	37,630	0.5
Total	3,260	376,743	0.9

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

(b) Includes nursing not further defined, educators and researchers, midwives, mental health, developmental disability.

(c) Includes optometrists, speech pathologists, chiropractors and osteopaths, podiatrists.

Note: Small numbers may be rounded in order to protect the confidentiality of individuals; this may affect proportions.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Time series analyses

The number and proportion of Indigenous Australians in the health workforce from the 1996 Census are presented below to enable comparisons over time with the 2001 data presented earlier.

- In 1996, there were approximately 2,831 Indigenous Australians employed in health-related occupations, which represented 0.8% of the total health workforce. This was slightly lower than that reported in 2001 (0.9%).
- The proportion of the health workforce who were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin was similar in 1996 and 2001 for most health-related occupations with the exception of enrolled nurses which had a higher representation in 1996 (2.3%) than in 2001 (1.0%) and dietitians which had a lower representation in 1996 (0.2%) than in 2001 (0.9%) (Table 3.09.5).
- The age and sex structure of the Indigenous and total health workforce was similar in 1996 and 2001 (Tables 3.09.6 and 3.09.7).

Table 3.09.5: Employment in health-related occupations (health workforce), 1996^(a)

	Indigenous	All persons	Proportion who were Indigenous
	No.	No.	%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers	667	704	94.7
Medical workers			
Health service managers	28	4,994	0.6
Medical practitioners	60	41,169	0.1
Medical imaging professionals	8	6,718	0.1
Total	96	52,881	0.2
Dental workers			
Dental practitioners	12	7,153	0.2
Dental associate professionals	17	4,322	0.4
Dental assistants	117	11,239	1.0
Total	146	22,714	0.6
Nursing workers			
Nurse managers	13	6,148	0.2
Registered nurses	608	133,199	0.5
Personal care and nursing assistants	570	42,549	1.3
Enrolled nurses	560	24,493	2.3
Other nurses ^(b)	70	21,391	0.3
Total	1,821	227,780	0.8
Pharmacists	5	11,775	0.0
Allied health professionals			
Ambulance officers and paramedics	48	5,952	0.8
Physiotherapists	16	8,789	0.2
Psychologists	14	6,784	0.2
Dieticians	4	1,695	0.2
Other ^(c)	14	7,782	0.2
Total	96	31,002	0.3
Total	2,831	346,856	0.8

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

(b) Includes nursing not further defined, educators and researchers, midwives, mental health, developmental disability.

(c) Includes optometrists, speech pathologists, chiropractors and osteopaths, podiatrists.

Note: Small numbers may be rounded in order to protect the confidentiality of individuals; this may affect proportions.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Table 3.09.6: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce,^(a) by age and sex, 1996

	Age group					Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	
	Number					
Male	119	227	230	90	30	696
Female	283	585	736	422	109	2,135
Total	33,510	93,045	115,400	77,613	27,288	346,856
	Proportion of total health workforce (%)					
Male	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2
Female	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.6
Total	1.2	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.8

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Table 3.09.7: Total health workforce,^(a) by age and sex, 1996

	Age group					Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	
	Number					
Male	5,436	21,874	27,102	18,964	9,771	83,147
Female	28,074	71,171	88,298	58,649	17,517	263,709
Total	33,510	93,045	115,400	77,613	27,288	346,856
	Proportion of total health workforce (%)					
Male	16.2	23.5	23.5	24.4	35.8	24.0
Female	83.8	76.5	76.5	75.6	64.2	76.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(a) Occupation as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation.

Source: ABS unpublished data (Census of Population and Housing).

Data quality issues

Census of population and housing

The Census uses the National health data dictionary standard Indigenous status question and it is asked for each household member. Measures that are drawn from Census data are subject to broad data concerns relating to the unexplainable growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population since the 1991 Census, and limitations of self-identification. Other Census data issues relate to the accuracy of the Census count itself, for example, whether people are counted more than once, or are undercounted (ABS 1996).

For the 2002 NATSISS it was estimated that there were 165,700 Indigenous households compared with 144,700 enumerated in the 2001 Census. While the Census data are adjusted for undercounts at the person level to arrive at the Estimated Resident Population, no such adjustment is done at the household level. This affects the accuracy of the person counts at the household level to provide adjusted household estimates.

Occupation data

Census data for health labour force are the counts of people as recorded in the Census (raw counts), without adjustment for non-response or under-enumeration.

The ABS routinely rounds up small numbers in its Census data in order to protect the confidentiality of individuals. This leads to small discrepancies in total values between tables. Unfortunately, this process may have altered the accuracy of data regarding Indigenous participation in health and community services occupations – where participation is low, the small estimates reported for many occupations might actually seem to increase participation.

The Census is a point in time measure. The health workforce is subject to reductions through retention problems and increases in numbers through training. These changes will need to be considered in any interpretation of changes over time.

Error due to the recording (for example, difficult to read) or inaccurate coding (misinterpretation of role) of occupation may also affect results.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 1996. Occasional paper: Population issues: Indigenous Australians. ABS cat. no. 4708.0. Canberra: ABS.