The Indigenous population
Key points

Population demographics
- There were about 713,600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia in 2014, accounting for 3.0% of the total population.
- In 2011, 10% of the Indigenous population identified as being of Torres Strait Islander origin (63,700 people). Almost two-thirds (63%) of the Torres Strait Islander population lived in Queensland.
- The Indigenous population has a relatively young age structure—in 2011, the median age was 21.8 years compared with 37.6 years for the non-Indigenous population, while over one-third (36%) were aged under 15 compared with 18% of non-Indigenous people.
- The birth rate for Indigenous women is relatively high—in 2013, the total fertility rate for Indigenous women was 2.3 babies per woman, compared with 1.9 for all women.

Geographical distribution
- Most Indigenous Australians live in non-remote areas—79% in 2011—rather than remote areas (21%). By comparison, 98% of non-Indigenous Australians lived in non-remote areas, and 2% in remote areas.
- Of all people living in remote areas, the proportion who are Indigenous is relatively high—in 2011, 45% of people living in Very remote areas and 16% of people living in Remote areas were Indigenous.
- Almost one-third (30%) of people living in the Northern Territory were Indigenous in 2014, compared with 5% or less in other jurisdictions.

Household composition
- In 2011, 2.7% of all households were Indigenous households (an estimated 209,000 households). Indigenous households comprised an average of 3.3 people compared with 2.6 people in other households.
- About 1 in 5 Indigenous households (21%) were a one-parent family with dependent children in 2011 compared with 6% of other households.

Culture and language
- Of the more than 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, about 120 were still spoken in 2012. In 2005, 145 Indigenous languages were spoken.
- According to the 2011 Census, 11% of Indigenous people spoke an Indigenous language at home; this was the same proportion as recorded in the 2006 Census.
- Almost 2 in 3 Indigenous adults (63%) identified with a regional group, tribal group, language group, clan or mission in 2012–13. Rates of identification were higher with increasing remoteness.
- In 2012–13, almost 3 in 4 Indigenous adults (73%) recognised an area as their homelands or traditional country; the proportion who did so was highest in Very remote areas (91%).
- One in 4 Indigenous adults (25%) lived on their homelands or traditional country in 2012–13, with those in remote areas most likely to do so (36% in Remote areas and 52% in Very remote areas).
2.1 Population size

There were an estimated 713,600 Indigenous people in Australia in June 2014 (Table S2.1), with slightly more females (357,000) than males (356,600). Indigenous people accounted for 3.0% of the total Australian population of 23.5 million (ABS 2014h). The Indigenous proportion of the Australian population has increased since 2001, when Indigenous people made up 2.8% of the total population (Figure 2.1).

Projections by the ABS suggest that by 2026, the Indigenous population will be around 925,000 and will account for 3.2% of the Australian population (Table S2.1). This suggests an average growth rate of 2.2% per year between 2011 and 2026 (ABS 2014h); the comparable growth rate for the non-Indigenous population is 1.6% (AIHW analysis of ABS 2013m, 2014h).

The Indigenous population is projected to increase across all age groups between 2011 and 2026, although at different rates. The number of Indigenous children aged 0 to 14 is projected to increase by 25%, the number aged 15 to 54 by 35%, and the number aged 55 and over is projected to more than double (114%) (AIHW analysis of ABS 2014h).

In terms of geographical distribution, the largest projected population growth between 2011 and 2026 is expected to occur among Indigenous people who:

- live in the Australian Capital Territory (54% increase), Victoria (47% increase), Queensland (44% increase) and Tasmania (41% increase)
- live in Inner and outer regional areas (46% increase) and Major cities (44% increase).

In contrast, the smallest population growth is projected to occur in the Northern Territory (25% increase), and Remote and very remote areas (13% increase) (ABS 2014h).
2.2 Age distribution

The Indigenous population has a much younger age structure than the non-Indigenous population, with this difference being due to higher rates of fertility among the Indigenous population, as well as deaths occurring at younger ages. In June 2011:

- the median age of the Indigenous population (the age at which half the population is older and half is younger) was 21.8 years, compared with 37.6 years for the non-Indigenous population
- over one-third (36%) of Indigenous people were aged under 15 compared with 18% of non-Indigenous people
- people aged 65 and over comprised 3.4% of the Indigenous population compared with 14% of the non-Indigenous population (Figure 2.2).

Similar to the non-Indigenous population, the Indigenous population is ageing. In 1996, 2.8% of the Indigenous population were aged 65 and over. By 2026, this proportion is predicted to more than double to 6.4% (Figure 2.3). In contrast, the proportion of the Indigenous population aged under 15 is expected to fall from 40% in 1996 to 32% in 2026.
2.3 Components of population growth

Changes in population size are determined by the level of births, deaths and migration. Since the level of international migration for the Australian Indigenous population is negligible, most of the population increase of Indigenous Australians is due to a larger number of births than deaths (ABS 2013f). Births are considered in this section, while information on deaths is presented in Chapter 6. The propensity of people to identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin also affects the size of the Indigenous population, as detailed in Box 1.2.

Fertility

In 2013, there were 18,368 births registered in Australia where at least 1 parent identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin—6.0% of all births in that year (ABS 2014f). In comparison, in 2001, the number of births to at least 1 Indigenous parent was 11,405, accounting for 4.6% of all registered births (ABS 2002a). In 2013, 52% of Indigenous births were male babies—the same proportion as for all births.

Across Australia, the highest numbers of Indigenous births in 2013 were in:

- New South Wales (5,961 births)
- Queensland (5,206)
- Western Australia (2,735) (ABS 2014f).
The birth rate for Indigenous women is higher than for all Australian women. In 2013, the total fertility rate for Indigenous women was 2.3 babies per woman, compared with 1.9 for all women (ABS 2014f).

Indigenous mothers tend to be younger than other mothers, and Indigenous women have higher fertility rates in the younger age groups (Figure 2.4). In 2013:

- the median age of Indigenous women who registered a birth was 24.9 years—nearly 6 years lower than the median age for all mothers (30.8)
- 50% of births to Indigenous women and 17% of births to all women were to mothers aged under 25
- the teenage fertility rate of Indigenous women (63 births per 1,000 women) was over 4 times the teenage fertility rate of all women (15 births per 1,000 women) (ABS 2014f).

Over recent decades, there has been a decline in Indigenous fertility. Based on data from the Census, the average number of children ever born to Indigenous women aged 40–44 (a measure regarded to indicate completed fertility) was 4.55 children in 1981. This was down to an average of 3.10 children in the 1996 Census, and 2.63 children in the 2011 Census (ABS 2014h).
Indigenous Australians are more likely to live in urban and regional areas than remote areas. In June 2011:

- about four-fifths (79%) lived in *Major cities, Inner regional areas or Outer regional areas*
- about one-fifth (21%) lived in *Remote or Very remote areas* (Table 2.1).

For an explanation of these categories and how they are used in this report, see Box 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Indigenous and non-Indigenous population, by remoteness, 30 June 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remoteness area</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major cities</td>
<td>233,146</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner regional</td>
<td>147,683</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer regional</td>
<td>146,129</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>51,275</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very remote</td>
<td>91,648</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>669,881</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 2013i.

**Box 2.1: Geographical distribution based on remoteness**

Australia can be divided into several regions based on their distance from urban centres, where the population size of the urban centre is considered to determine the range and types of services available.

In the ABS Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), populated localities are classified in each Census year into 1 of 5 ‘remoteness areas’: *Major cities, Inner regional, Outer regional, Remote or Very remote* (ABS 2013e). Examples of localities in each remoteness area are:

- **Major cities**: Sydney, Geelong, Gold Coast
- **Inner regional**: Hobart, Ballarat, Coffs Harbour
- **Outer regional**: Darwin, Cairns, Cooabarabran
- **Remote**: Alice Springs, Broome, Katherine
- **Very remote**: Coober Pedy, Longreach, Exmouth.

Unless otherwise indicated, the ASGS remoteness areas are used in this report. At times, some of these 5 areas are grouped together:

- when *Remote* and *Very remote* areas are considered together, the term ‘remote’ is used with the balance referred to as ‘non-remote’
- when *Inner regional* and *Outer regional* are grouped together, the term ‘regional’ is used.

The geographic distribution of the Indigenous population differs from that of the non-Indigenous population (Table 2.1). In 2011, nearly all non-Indigenous people (98%) lived in non-remote areas, with 2% living in remote areas (compared with 79% and 21% of Indigenous people, respectively).

The distribution of the Indigenous population by remoteness remained relatively stable over the decade to 2011. In 2001, 35% of the Indigenous population lived in *Major cities*, 43% in regional areas and 23% in remote areas (ABS 2014h).
Although, in absolute numbers, Indigenous people are more likely to live in non-remote than remote areas, they comprise a high proportion of the total population within remote areas. In 2011, Indigenous Australians comprised:

- almost half (45%) of people living in Very remote areas
- 16% of people in Remote areas (ABS 2013i).

Figure 2.5 shows that, as is the case for the total Australian population, the distribution of the Indigenous population is more heavily concentrated along the eastern seaboard and that the largest clusters of the Indigenous population are found in Australia’s cities.

**Figure 2.5: Indigenous population clusters, 2011**
Table 2.2 shows the proportion of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations living in each state and territory. In June 2014:

- New South Wales was home to the largest proportion of Indigenous people (31%), just as it is for non-Indigenous people (32%)
- A relatively high proportion of Indigenous Australians lived in Queensland and the Northern Territory, while a relatively low proportion lived in Victoria.

Meanwhile, the proportion of people within each jurisdiction who were Indigenous varied widely:

- 30% in the Northern Territory
- 5% or less in each of the other jurisdictions, with the lowest proportion (less than 1%) in Victoria (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Australian population, by jurisdiction and Indigenous status, 30 June 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or territory</th>
<th>Number Indigenous</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Indigenous proportion of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>220,902</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>203,045</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>93,778</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>72,251</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>50,983</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>39,800</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>25,845</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>6,707</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia (b)</td>
<td>713,589</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Data are projections based on ABS medium-level growth assumptions (Series B).
(b) Includes ‘Other territories’ of Australia.
Sources: ABS 2013m, 2014h.

The geographical distribution of Indigenous Australians differs markedly between jurisdictions. As shown in Figure 2.6, in 2011:

- The majority of the Indigenous population resided in either Major cities or Inner regional areas in 5 jurisdictions—the Australian Capital Territory (100%), Victoria (85%), New South Wales (78%), South Australia (59%) and Queensland (51%)
- Just over half (55%) of the Indigenous population in Western Australia lived in Outer regional, Remote or Very remote areas
- Most (97%) of the Indigenous population in Tasmania lived in Inner regional or Outer regional areas
- 4 out of 5 (80%) Indigenous people in the Northern Territory lived in either Remote or Very remote areas.
### 2.5 Household and family composition

According to the 2011 Census, an estimated 209,000 households were Indigenous households—that is, at least 1 Indigenous person lived in 2.7% of Australian households. Indigenous households comprised an average of 3.3 people compared with 2.6 people in other households (ABS 2012b).

As shown in Figure 2.7, a comparison of the composition of Indigenous and other households indicates that in 2011:

- a similar proportion of Indigenous and other households consisted of a couple family with dependent children (27% and 26%, respectively)
- a larger proportion of Indigenous households were a one-parent family with dependent children (21% compared with 6% of other households) and a smaller proportion were a family without dependent children (27% compared with 38%)
- Indigenous households were more than 3 times as likely to be composed of multiple families (5.5% compared with 1.5%)
- a smaller proportion of Indigenous households were one-person households (14% compared with 25%).

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**Notes**

1. Remoteness areas in some of the smaller jurisdictions were combined by the ABS for confidentiality reasons—see Table S2.5 for details.
2. Data for this figure are shown in Table S2.5.

Source: ABS 2013i.
In 2011, there were 140,708 Indigenous families with dependent children. Of these families:

- 38% had 1 child in the family
- 32% had 2 children
- 25% had 3 or 4
- 4% had 5 or more (AIHW analysis of ABS 2012b; Table S2.7).

Indigenous families tended to have a larger number of dependent children than other families—for example, 30% of Indigenous families with dependent children had 3 or more dependent children compared with 20% of other families (Table S2.7).

### 2.6 Torres Strait Islander people

In Australia at 30 June 2011, Torres Strait Islander people comprised:

- 10% (63,700 people) of the total Indigenous population—6% were of Torres Strait Islander origin only (38,100 people) and 4% were of both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal origin (25,600 people)
- 0.3% of the total Australian population (ABS 2013i).

In 2011, Torres Strait Islander people were distributed across Australia as follows:

- 11% (6,700 people) resided in the Torres Strait Indigenous Region—this region consists of the following 3 areas of Queensland: the Torres Strait Islands, numerous small islands located in the waterway separating Cape York Peninsula and Papua New Guinea, and a small area of the mainland at the tip of Cape York (ABS 2011a)
• 63% lived in Queensland (including those living in the Torres Strait Indigenous Region)
• 37% lived in jurisdictions other than Queensland (Figure 2.8).

The age distribution of Torres Strait Islander people was fairly similar to that of the overall Indigenous population. In June 2011:
• 57% were aged under 25 (compared with 56% of all Indigenous Australians)
• 11% were aged 55 and over (compared with 9% of all Indigenous Australians) (Table S2.8; AIHW analysis of ABS 2013i).
2.7 Cultural identification and language

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a linguistically and culturally diverse population. They comprise hundreds of cultural groups that have their own languages, histories and traditions.

Language

Of the more than 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, about 120 were still spoken in 2012 according to the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey (Marmion et al. 2014). Of these, 13 were considered strong in the sense that they were spoken by all age groups. By comparison, in 2005, around 145 Australian Indigenous languages were spoken and 18 were considered strong.

According to the ABS 2012–13 Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, and excluding children who were not yet speaking:

• 1 in 10 Indigenous Australians spoke either an Aboriginal language (8%) or a Torres Strait Islander language (2%) as their main language at home
• the remainder (90%) spoke mainly English at home (AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS).

Compared with the national data, the picture is quite different in the Northern Territory, where 60% of Indigenous people spoke mainly an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home (AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS).

People who identified as being of Torres Strait Islander origin were more likely to speak an Indigenous language at home than people of Aboriginal origin only. Among Torres Strait Islander people in 2012–13:

• 23% mainly spoke a Torres Strait Islander language at home
• 1.9% mainly spoke an Aboriginal language
• 76% mainly spoke English.

In comparison, among people of Aboriginal origin only, 8.6% mainly spoke an Aboriginal language at home and 91% mainly spoke English (AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS).

According to Census data:

• the proportion of Indigenous people who spoke an Indigenous language at home was the same in 2006 and 2011 (11%)
• among those who spoke an Indigenous language at home, the proportion who reported that they did not speak English well or at all fell from 19% in 2006 to 17% in 2011 (ABS 2012b).

Cultural identity

Almost 2 in 3 Indigenous people aged 18 and over (63%) identified with a regional group, tribal group, language group, clan or mission in 2012–13. Rates of identification were higher with increasing remoteness: 56% in Major cities, 57% in Inner regional areas, 62% in Outer regional areas, 71% in Remote areas and 86% in Very remote areas (AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS).

As shown in Figure 2.9, among Indigenous adults in 2012–13:

• nearly 3 in 4 (73%; an estimated 262,200 adults) recognised an area as their homelands or traditional country, with the proportion who did so highest in Very remote areas (91%) and lowest in Inner regional areas (66%) and Major cities (68%)
• one-quarter (25%) lived on their homelands or traditional country, with those living in remote areas most likely to do so (36% in Remote areas and 52% in Very remote areas).
Among Indigenous adults who did not live in an area recognised as their homelands or traditional country:

- the majority (95%) were allowed to visit them
- 1.6% were not allowed to visit them
- 3.1% did not know if they were allowed.

Of those who were allowed to visit, half (50%) visited their homelands or traditional country at least once a year (AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS).