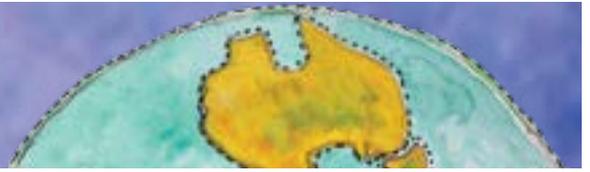


## 7.1 Profile of Indigenous Australians



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Indigenous Australians) are the Indigenous people of Australia. They live in all parts of the nation, from major cities to remote tropical coasts and the fringes of the central deserts. They are not 1 group, but comprise hundreds of groups that have their own distinct set of languages, histories and cultural traditions.

Indigenous Australians can be of Aboriginal origin, Torres Strait Islander origin, or both. The Australian Government defines Indigenous Australians as people who are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin and who are accepted as such in the communities in which they live, or have lived. In most data collections, a person's Indigenous status is based on the first 2 parts of the definition.

### How many Indigenous Australians are there?

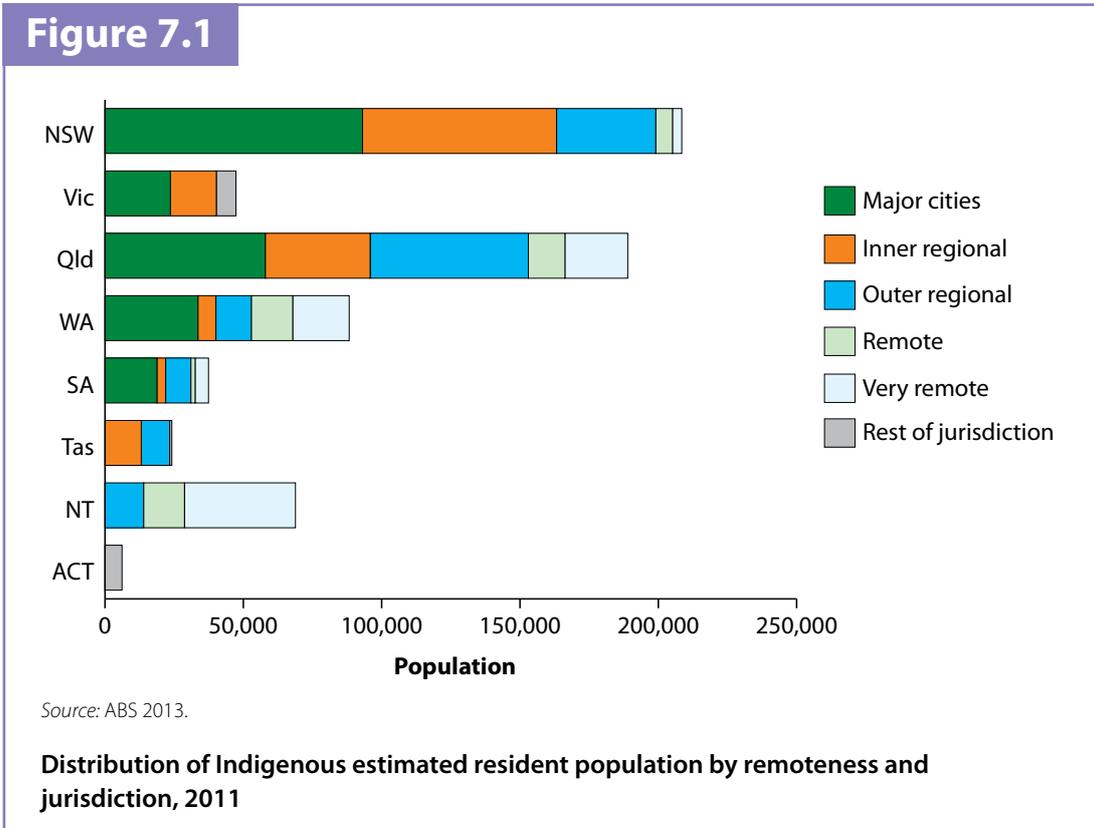
- Australia's Indigenous population was estimated to be 669,900 people in 2011, which was 3% of the total population (ABS 2013).
- In 2011, 90% of Indigenous Australians identified as being of Aboriginal origin only, 6% as Torres Strait Islander origin only, and 4% as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.

### What is the age profile of Indigenous Australians?

- The Indigenous population is much younger than the non-Indigenous population. In 2011, half of the Indigenous population was aged 22 or under compared with 38 or under for the non-Indigenous population.
- Only 3% of the Indigenous population was aged 65 and over.
- The younger age profile of Indigenous Australians is mainly due to their higher fertility rates and higher mortality rates at all ages compared with non-Indigenous Australians. The fertility rate for Indigenous women in 2011 was 2.74 babies per woman compared with 1.92 for all Australian women (ABS 2011).

### Where do Indigenous Australians live?

- The majority (79%) of Indigenous Australians live in metropolitan or regional areas. More than one-third live in *Major cities* (35% or 233,100 people); 22% in *Inner regional* areas (147,700 people); 22% in *Outer regional* areas (146,100 people); 8% in *Remote* areas (51,300 people) and around 14% in *Very remote* areas (91,600 people).
- In 2011, most (82%) lived in 4 jurisdictions: New South Wales (31% or 208,500 people); Queensland (28% or 189,000 people); Western Australia (13% or 88,300 people); and the Northern Territory (10% or 68,850 people) (Figure 7.1).
- The Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Indigenous Australians, with 30% of its population identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin in 2011. In most other jurisdictions, Indigenous people made up less than 5% of the population, with the lowest proportion (less than 1%) in Victoria.



**What is missing from the picture?**

The Indigenous estimated resident population is determined using information from the Census, birth and death registrations, and migration data. These data collections rely on people identifying themselves and their family members as Indigenous. Changes in identification rates between Censuses can affect population counts and the statistics derived from them (see Box 7.1: Counting on the numbers).

Due to the small Indigenous population in some jurisdictions and remoteness areas, it is not always possible to produce specific, reliable statistics. In these cases, statistics are calculated for larger areas, but this might mask differences within the areas. As Indigenous data improves, it may be possible to use combined data from a number of years to analyse differences specific to areas with small Indigenous populations.

**Box 7.1****Counting on the numbers—the Indigenous estimated resident population**

Much of what we know about the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes relies on statistics calculated using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census, surveys and administrative data from service providers. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the ABS strive to collect and present accurate data, as well as ensure service providers are aware of the importance of collecting accurate Indigenous status information. However, they acknowledge that for various reasons not all Indigenous people are identified in the different data sets, which can lead to an undercount.

The Indigenous estimated resident population (ERP) is derived from the Census counts after adjustments for the undercount and for those records where Indigenous status was unknown. In 2011, the Indigenous undercount was estimated to be 17% (114,000 persons) and about 1 million Census records (5%) had an unknown Indigenous status (ABS 2012). The 2011 Indigenous ERP was 669,881 persons—an increase of 152,838 persons, or 30% from the 2006 ERP. The increase was due to a number of factors, including natural population growth, improved Census estimates and changes in Indigenous identification.

**How does Indigenous identification affect health statistics?**

The Indigenous ERP is important because it is used to calculate population rates for a feature of interest, for example, deaths rates in terms of number of deaths per 100,000 population. Equally as important are correct numbers from other data sources, which provide the frequency of a feature of interest. As the Indigenous ERP has been adjusted for undercount, data from other sources also need to be adjusted for undercount; otherwise calculated rates for the Indigenous population are likely to appear to be lower than the true rates, resulting in an underestimation of the gap or the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates.

Caution also needs to be exercised when comparing data from 2 different Censuses. For example, Census data show that in 2006, 4.6% of Indigenous Australians needed help with daily activities due to a disability or health condition compared with 5.7% in 2011. This could suggest that the proportion of Indigenous people who needed help increased since 2006. However, the change could be due to more people with a disability being identified as Indigenous in 2011 or due to the population having aged since 2006. While it is likely that all scenarios have contributed, further analysis is needed to separate these effects.

*continued*

**Box 7.1****Counting on the numbers—the Indigenous estimated resident population (continued)****What is the AIHW doing to improve Indigenous identification?**

To ensure that Indigenous status information is consistently and correctly recorded, the AIHW has produced national best practice guidelines for collecting Indigenous status in health data sets and has evaluated their implementation across various settings. The AIHW also continues to measure the proportion of Indigenous people who are correctly identified in the data sets and creates correction factors to adjust the data for under-identification.

The AIHW is also using data linkage to improve reporting on the Indigenous population. For example, its Enhanced Mortality Database project seeks to improve estimates of Indigenous mortality and life expectancy using data linkage. In this project, death registrations obtained from the Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages in each state and territory are linked to deaths in hospital, residential aged care and perinatal data in order to better estimate the likely Indigenous status of death registrations. This linkage has identified 10% more Indigenous deaths that were missing in the death registration data. Future work on the project will include linkage to other data sets, the use of different methods to derive Indigenous status and an assessment of the feasibility of validating AIHW estimates by comparing the Indigenous status in the Enhanced Mortality Dataset with data sets that contain verified Indigenous status information.

**Where do I go for more information?**

More information on the composition of the Indigenous population is on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website at [www.abs.gov.au/](http://www.abs.gov.au/).

More information on the quality of Indigenous data is available at [www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-data](http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-data). AIHW reports available for free download include [National best practice guidelines for collecting Indigenous status in health data sets](#), [Towards better Indigenous health data](#), [Indigenous identification in hospital separations data: quality report](#) and [An enhanced mortality database for estimating Indigenous life expectancy: a feasibility study](#).

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