

The Annual Censuses of Aborigines, 1925-1944: Technical Imperative, Social Demography, or Social Control?

Introduction

In 1925, the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics issued a press release announcing an annual census of Aborigines throughout the states and territories of Australia based on the recommendations of the Conference of Commonwealth Statisticians held in Sydney earlier in the year. This census program built on earlier initiatives between the Commonwealth Bureau and the States to estimate the size of the Aboriginal population at the time of the decennial census of the Australian population. Over the next two decades, aggregate data on Aboriginal persons, classified as ‘full-blood’ and ‘half caste’ Aborigines, were collected annually by various administrators of Aboriginal affairs, largely patrolmen and police officers. The census was discontinued in 1945, again as a result of the recommendation of the Conference of Commonwealth and State Statisticians.

This paper documents the origins and characteristics of this program of data collection regarding the Australian Aboriginal population with the goal of revealing the objectives of the program and the use made of the data by Commonwealth statisticians and demographers. We will also seek to determine the relationship, if any, of the population data system and national, state or territorial policy-making and administration of Aboriginal affairs. The paper is composed of five sections beginning with an (i) an overview of the role of the Commonwealth government in Aboriginal affairs in Australia during the first decades of federation; (ii) description of the place of Aboriginal persons

in Australian census-taking; (iii) documentation of the origins of the annual censuses of Aborigines; (iv) consideration of the intersections between Commonwealth census programs and State and regional policies and programs concerning Aborigines and Aboriginal issues. We reflect briefly on census-taking within context of regional Aboriginal affairs and then turn to three illustrations of the intersections between census taking at the commonwealth level and the administration of Aboriginal policy operating at the regional level, revealing differences in statistical operations at governmental and relatedly, geographic scales. The paper concludes (v) by reflecting on the role of this population data system in social and demographic analysis of the Aboriginal population within Australian population and society.

This project seeks to contribute to a deepened understanding of first, the theory and practice of national census operations regarding Indigenous Australians, and second, the relationship between census operations concerning Aboriginal people undertaken at different geographic scales. The era in which the annual Aboriginal censuses were initially authorized by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics was critical in terms of both the evolution of Commonwealth census programs as well as development of State and national perspectives on Aboriginal persons, communities and populations in Australia. There are also implications of this study for the emerging international comparative literature on the role of population data systems in human rights abuses and violations (see Seltzer 2000, 2003; Seltzer and Anderson 2001). William Seltzer has written, “Forthrightness about the past is an important element in both strengthening ethical awareness and in building a network of other defenses against possible future misuses” (2000,13).

(i) Commonwealth Policies regarding Aborigines during Late Colonial and Early Federation

During the Convention debates conducted during the 1890s, as colonial delegates met to draft a constitution for the new Commonwealth, Indigenous matters were almost incidental. One lone delegate believed that the new Commonwealth should have the power to control the Indigenous populations of northern Australia, not because the Commonwealth could provide a better policy framework from a national perspective, but because the Indigenous people of the north were 'more resolute' than their peers in the 'more settled' parts of the country. (McMillan in Debates 1891, 1, 66). He had no support. Policy relating to Aborigines would rest with the states.

The Aborigines also surfaced in the endless debates surrounding the population quota that would govern the distribution of seats for the House of Representatives and the proposed Commonwealth's rights to make laws that would guarantee a White Australia. As Edmund Barton rather patiently explained to Isaac Isaacs at the Melbourne Convention in 1898, the quota for each electorate was established after the number of Indigenous people (along with 'aliens not naturalised') had been subtracted from the total population. (Debates 1898, 4, 713-4). Finally, it was decided to exclude Indigenous Australians from any population count used for either the financial or electoral purposes included in the constitution. And to handle the rather vexed question of the Commonwealth's power to legislate on matters of race and immigration, the Aborigines were excluded from the proposed section. These decisions were enshrined in Section 51 and Section 127 of the new constitution.

Although the Commonwealth had left Indigenous matters to the states, federal interests did occasionally overlap with state control over Indigenous matters. The first came with war. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Indigenous Australians were excluded from enlisting in the First AIF. The ban was lifted in 1916. This reflected a fall in the number of volunteers. But it also reflected the differences evident at state level in how the Indigenous population was defined. Queensland and Western Australia had the most complex regulations aimed at defining the Indigenous population which in turn governed the methods of social control governments exerted over their Aboriginal population. The outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941 also saw the conscription of Indigenous Australians, especially in northern Australia. There they worked under the same awards governing white conscripts, a far cry from their working conditions before the war (Jackomos, 1993, Hall 1997, Read in McGrath, 1995, 281-3). Their service in the war against Japan brought into sharper focus the rights of Indigenous Australians as citizens. Although writing specifically about New South Wales, the New South Wales Protection Board had succinctly summarised these issues in July 1938. Australians defined as ‘Aborigines’ by state legislation could not vote in federal elections, purchase alcohol, nor receive social security benefits like the maternity allowance or the old-age pension. The distribution of the limited benefits that were available to Aboriginal people was subject to state control and definitions of caste and race often meant that benefits were distributed in kind rather than money (McGrath, 1995, 6; Stone, 1974, 180).

Although the Commonwealth government had participated in the 1939 federal conference concerning Aboriginal affairs, it was only after 1945 that the federal government began to assume clear national authority in Aboriginal matters. Paul

Hasluck, as Minister of Territories, was an energetic advocate of full citizens rights for Aborigines although he never questioned the assimilationist assumptions that underpinned policy. Aboriginal people gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1962 although the mechanism for enforcing the provision was weak. The referendum in 1967 gave the Commonwealth the power to enact legislation affecting Aborigines, and allowed Aborigines to be counted in the census (Fletcher 1992, Griffiths 1995, 71-6, La Nauze, 1972). At a meeting of state and federal ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs, Prime Minister John Gorton urged them to ‘gather information regarding Aboriginal matters (Fletcher 1992, 10).

Fletcher argues that the Commonwealth in the post 1945 decades was inclined to take the moral high ground and to blame the states for the appalling conditions evident in Aboriginal settlements (Fletcher 1992, 11). Yet its own record in Aboriginal affairs was hardly exemplary. In 1911, the Northern Territory was transferred from South Australia to the Commonwealth and the federal government had direct responsibility for the Indigenous population. It is impossible to distinguish Commonwealth policy from that pursued by the states, especially Queensland and Western Australia. The first act passed by the Commonwealth to regulate Indigenous matters in the Territory drew directly from legislation passed in Queensland in 1897 and Western Australia in 1905. Commonwealth administration was marked by increasing interference in, and regulation of, the lives of Indigenous Territorians. It removed ‘half-caste’ children from Aboriginal communities as part of the policy of assimilation, imposed curfews on Indigenous people living in the towns and regulated marriages. By 1933, the powers of the Territory’s Administrator were broad enough to allow him to bring anyone deemed to have Aboriginal blood under

his legal control. But the Commonwealth did little to regulate wages and conditions for Aboriginal stockmen. The pastoral industry was the economic backbone of the Territory and it demanded cheap labour. Nor did the government create an institutional environment discouraging to the punitive expedition in May 1928 that led to the Coniston Massacre, although it did bow to public pressure when a punitive expedition was planned for Caledon Bay in 1933 (Franklin 1976, Griffiths 1995, McGregor 1997, McGrath 1995, Read in McGrath, 1995, Reynolds 1998). As Peter Read wrote, ‘White Australian ideology and its economic motivations took precedence over Aboriginal community or individual rights’ (Read in McGrath 1995, 289).

It is clear from this brief overview that numbers mattered. Governments needed numbers to implement policies ranging from who could be counted for political representation to who were entitled to receive benefits. Even in war time numbers mattered although the emphasis, ironically, was not on exclusion or control, but on inclusion.

(ii) The Place of Aboriginal Persons in Early Australian Census-taking

The history of Australian policies towards Indigenous persons and populations can be traced through public, private and parochial practices of government officials, police and patrolmen, missionaries and station managers operating within a range of government authorities. As colonies were established throughout Australia, census enumeration became part of the public administration, initially by colonial secretaries or treasurers, and then moving to specialized statistical units, usually Registrar Generals. Jack Camm has summarized the details of colonial census-taking as shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The colonies varied widely in scheduling and frequency of census enumeration, population coverage, and items of inquiry. Simultaneity of census year and date did not occur among the Australian colonies until the census of 1881. While census procedures varied among the colonies, the perspective on the population to be enumerated generally did not vary. Camm states:

Census-taking in Australia during the 19th century was in the main a story of the enumeration of the British and European population. The Aborigines were largely a forgotten people, and were ignored in the colonial population counts. Although the negative opinions and the reason for the minimal efforts to count the Aboriginal population varied from colony to colony, it can be said that no colony earnestly attempted to enumerate them (1988, 18).

Figure 2, again adapted from Camm (1988) summarizes the policies concerning the enumeration of Aborigines in each of the colonial censuses.

[Figure 2 about here]

The 1901 census of the British Empire was undertaken after federation but before the Commonwealth had established its own statistical agency, and was thus the last enumeration conducted separately by the six colonial (now State) governments. Federation occurred in 1901; colonies became states; territories became the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government; Aboriginal policy remained in the domain of State authorities, and Commonwealth authority in the Northern Territory.

Section 127 of the Commonwealth Constitution Act addressed population and Aborigines.

In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted (quoted in Chesterman and Galligan 1997, 58).

Smith (1980) provides detailed historical analysis of the origins, rationale, as well as the ‘irrationale’ of Section 127. The justification for the section was in large part the calculation of quotas for determining state representatives in the federal government; financial issues and federal revenue-sharing. Many constitutional scholars agree that section 127 did not restrict census power, but as Smith states, “the census authorities immediately claimed 127 as their own” (Smith 1980, 23). Sawyer refers to this as an “exaggerated negative interpretation” of Section 127 (Sawyer 1966, 18).

In preparation for Federation, at the second Australasian Conference on Statisticians held in 1900, colonial statisticians reached agreement on the following thirteen items which were to be common among the individual census schedules.

...name, sex, age, conjugal condition, relationship to head of household, occupation, sickness and infirmity, birthplace, length of residence in the colony, religion, education materials of house, and number of rooms in house (quoted in Camm 1988, 46).

The 1900 Conference of Statisticians had also agreed upon common tabulations of census data relating to Aborigines which would include the total population of the geographic unit, including Aborigines and all others, and those tabulations that would show Aborigines and other races separately (including ‘half-castes’) in order that the latter could be deducted if required (Smith 1980, 24). However, only Victoria and Tasmania actually produced tabulations in the agreed upon format, and perhaps more importantly, states defined Aborigine in different ways.

Because, the results of 1901 census were not available for the establishment of quotas for first federal election, the results of the 1891 census were used instead. Aborigines and other disqualified nonwhite races, notably the Chinese, were excluded from the calculations to determine Federal representation. The results of the 1901 census

were available at the Conference of Commonwealth Statisticians of 1902 held in Hobart, by which time according to Smith “the precise effect of section 127 on the quota had at last become crystal clear” (1980, 28). Note the following except from the minutes of the conference for 21 January 1902:

Mr. Hughes moved: That, as the number of inhabitants of Queensland, including such half-castes as were enumerated in the census of 1901, but exclusive of full-blooded Aborigines, was 498,129, that State, as the present time, on the basis of census, 31st March, 1901, would be entitled, under 24th Section of the Constitution Act, to send ten to the Federal House of Representatives. – Negatived.

Mr. Hughes moved: That, as the 5137 Aborigines, included in the Queensland Census, are engaged in Industrial Pursuits, or attending schools subsidized by the Government, they should be included in the general population for all purposes, except those relating to Commonwealth. – Postponed. (NAA Series PP131/1 Item 1902/322 (Conference of Statisticians, 10))

The narrow view of Section 127 is conveyed in the vote on Hughes’s first motion on behalf of Queensland: both full-blooded Aborigines and half-castes were to be excluded for calculation of quota. Statistical exclusion, however, was required only for purposes of federal governance. The postponed motion led to a special recommendation by the conference to provide more inclusive data for analysis of society and economy, although the issue of tabulation was left unspecified.

1. That the Conference recognizes the necessity for recording all persons engaged in industrial pursuits or attending school in Census enumeration, including aborigines.
2. That, as the 5137 aborigines included in the Queensland Census are engaged in industrial pursuits, or attending schools subsidized by the Government, they should be included in the general population for all purposes except those relating to the Commonwealth. (NAA Series PP131/1 Item 1902/322 (Conference of Statisticians 1902 8))

Soon thereafter, the Commonwealth Attorney-General ruled that “in reckoning the population of the Commonwealth half-castes are not aboriginal natives within the meaning of section 127 of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, and should

be therefore be included” (Smith 1980, 30). Without specificity of the definition of either ‘half-caste’ Aboriginals or Aboriginal natives as meant by Section 127 of the Constitution, the Attorney General negated the first resolution of the Conference of Statisticians. Queensland thus increased its number of seats from nine to ten (Smith 1980 XX).

The 1905 Census and Statistics Act established the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. It is critical to note that the definition of race was not embedded within the Bureau’s Act, but rather has been historically determined by Bureau regulations. In the 1908 Bureau Yearbook, the Bureau expressed a determination to enumerate the Aboriginal population as part of conduct of the Commonwealth census:

It is proposed to make an attempt to enumerate the aboriginal population of the Australia in connection with the first Commonwealth Census to be taken in 1911. ...as ‘half-castes’ living in the nomadic state, are practically indistinguishable from aborigines, it has not always been found practical to make the distinction, and further, that no authoritative definition of ‘half-caste’ has yet been given. Australian Yearbook, 1908, 145).

Smith comments that in spite of his personal non-acceptance of terms such as full-blood and half-caste, “...given the existence of 127, [this statement] probably amounts to the most sensible statement concerning Aborigines and the census that the Bureau made until 1967” (1980, 30). The goal for greater coverage and precision in the enumeration of Aborigines in the 1911 census faded away, however, with subsequent reports stating:

...the full blooded Australian aboriginals included ... represent only those who were in the employ of whites at the date of the Census or were living in a civilized or semi-civilized condition in the vicinity of the settlements of whites at that date. An enumeration of aboriginals living in a purely wild state was not undertaken (quoted in Smith 1980, 30).

Thus the number, and likely the proportion, of Aborigines enumerated in the 1911 Commonwealth census decreased over the state census programs in 1901. Moreover, the

‘exaggerated negative’ interpretation of Section 127 restricted tabulation of census for Aboriginal population:

“...for all general tabulations, including those relating to Non-European races, the cards relating to full-blooded Australian Aboriginals were eliminated, owing to the provision of section 127 of the Commonwealth Constitution.”
(Statistician’s Report quoted in Smith 1980, 32).

Smith’s interpretation was that the Bureau interpreted Section 127 such that ‘Aboriginal natives *may* be excluded from enumeration, but *must* be excluded from tabulation; The Attorney General had determined that half-caste persons were not Aboriginal natives although the operational definition of race and mixed race was left to the Bureau. Full-blooded Aborigines were to be excluded from tabulations while half-caste persons were to be included, and identified in race categories. Importantly, the practices of Western Australia in 1901 became the model for subsequent Commonwealth censuses and tabulation: “Aborigines were enumerated if there were accessible to the ordinary enumeration procedures; it was assumed that all those not enumerated were ‘full-bloods’; the general census population included ‘half-castes’ but excluded ‘full-bloods’; and both ‘full-bloods’ and ‘half-castes’ were tabulated separately as well’ (Smith 1980, 27).

Correspondence on Census Bureau and State files indicates that the Bureau was not happy with the poor enumeration of Aborigines in 1911. An adequate count of the Aboriginal population was considered important both in its own right, and because without it, the total population of the nation could not be known. The state Aboriginal administrations had established their own procedures for estimating the size of the Aboriginal populations under their control, and in preparation for the 1921 census, the Commonwealth Statistician requested the assistance of the state authorities in compiling estimates of total number of Aborigines in each state, caste and sex, at time of census.

This statistical program continued at each census until full enumeration in 1966. The data were aggregate data for small geographic units, constituting ‘meso-data’ within Seltzer’s conceptual framework. The original form for submitting these data by local ‘protectors’ is shown in Figure 3 with the summary for Victoria shown in Figure 4.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

In 1933, the personal census forms for those presumably settled and/or employed full-blooded Aborigines who had been fully enumerated were tabulated and published in a summary report, illustrated in

[Figure 5a-d about here]

Figure 5. Change in enumeration principles and national census procedures was implemented following the enactment by Queensland of the Torres Strait Islander Act of 1939, which declared Torres Strait Islanders not to be Aborigines and shifted them from the Aboriginal population to the general population. Specification of Aboriginal race followed in 1947 when census authorities stated that:

The term “half-caste” includes persons of mixed blood living with aboriginals. The term “full-blood” includes persons whose predominant strain is aboriginal (NAA).

Finally, and to conclude this section, in 1962, in response to the recommendations of a Select Committee on Aboriginal Voting Rights, the Commonwealth government took action to extend voting rights to all persons of Aboriginal descent. Through a national referendum in 1967 two sections of the Commonwealth Constitution were amended: Section 127 which “excluded Aborigines from being counted in the national census” was repealed; section 51(26), which constrained the federal government from enacting laws pertaining to Aboriginal people within states, was amended.

(iii) The Origins and Implementation of the Annual Censuses of Aborigines

We now turn to consider the special censuses (cf. Seltzer 1999) of Aborigines which were conducted annually between 1924 and 1944. The Aboriginal censuses were officially authorized by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics through a resolution at the 1925 Conference of Commonwealth Statisticians held in Sydney in October of that year. While a partial count of Aborigines was conducted in 1924 no documentation of that program was included in either the 1923 or 1924 statistical conferences. Different scholars have speculated as to the rationale for the censuses with varying interpretations . For example, Smith has implied a ‘technical imperative’ underlying the collection of data for Aboriginal populations in order to produce more demographically grounded population estimates for Australia. Haebich has referred to the implementation of the censuses for the purpose of distributing federal grants and resources (2000,). While our original goal was to reveal more precisely the justification for the census program, we are able to lay out the historical record we have constructed to date. Referring to available conference reports, minutes, and memoranda, we have yet to find ‘the smoking gun. We do conclude evidence that the annual censuses were connected to statistical programs concerning post-censal evaluation and intercensal estimation for states, regions and local areas throughout Australia.

The process of developing the agenda for the 1925 Conference included the exchange of memoranda between state and Commonwealth statisticians. In late April 1925, Charles H. Wickens, the Commonwealth Statistician, wrote the Government Statisticians in the Australian states (except New South Wales) and New Zealand

requesting suggestions for both agenda topics and proposed resolutions to be considered the Sydney Conference of Statisticians to be held later in that year. The memo, a copy of which is shown in Figure 6, asks for the statisticians to consider issues of duplication,

[Figure 6 about here]

uniformity, classification, data collection, new studies, etc. From these suggestions, Wickens proposed to develop the tentative agenda for subsequent review by state officials. This memo was followed by a communication from Wickens to the Secretary of the Department of Home and Territories, shown in Figure 7, in which he includes a copy of the 24th April

[Figure 7 about here]

memorandum as well as his own preliminary ideas for agenda topics for the conference. ‘Aboriginal population’ is listed as item VII, with no further description; ‘intercensal population estimates for towns or Local Government Areas’ is item VIII.

By the end of August, Wickens had developed the tentative agenda and distributed it to the Government Statisticians in the states, as well as communicating again with the Home Secretary (27 August 1925). A draft of this communication and the tentative agenda is shown in Figure 8. The placement of the agenda item concerning the Aboriginal population within the general heading of ‘Population and Vital Statistics’ as opposed to Local Government or Labour Statistics, for example, may be noteworthy.

[Figure 8 about here]

Show in Figure 9 is the recommendation of the 1925 Conference of Statisticians held in Sydney that addressed the annual collection of data for Aborigines and those persons of mixed Aboriginal race living among full-blooded Aborigines. The ‘number

and [geographic] distribution' of the Aboriginal population was the statistical goal.

Unfortunately, we have yet to locate the notes on the discussion during the conference of agenda items for the 1925 that do exist for several of the previous statistical conferences.

[Figure 9 about here]

Recommendations regarding the program were expanded in subsequent Conferences. It is interesting to see that the first draft of the tentative agenda for the 1926 statistical conference (8 July 1926) sent to the Government statisticians in each of the states, did not

[Figures 10 and 11 about here]

include the topic of the Aboriginal population (see Figure 10) within the subheading of Population and Vital Statistics. The archival folio includes two pieces of correspondence, each from the Registrar General of Queensland, responding to the agenda. For example, the Registrar General of Queensland requested discussion of the 'green weight' or 'sale weight' in production statistics. The final agenda, shown in Figure 11, does include an item for the discussion of the Aboriginal Population. The cover memo from the Commonwealth Statistician (6th August 1926) distributed with the agenda does state that "[i]n one or two cases notifications of items for the Agenda have been received too late for inclusion in the notes, though the items appear in the Agenda" (NAA Series A 9590 Item 63). Neither correspondence regarding the addition of the item concerning the Aboriginal population nor the "notes" for the agenda are available in this Series.

However, important clues are provided in the 'Notes on Agenda' prepared for the 1926 Conference by (also shown in Figure 12):

7. Aboriginal Population

This matter was the subject of the Resolution 5. at the 1925 Sydney Conference, and since then action has been taken in several of the States. The reports concerning such ...disclose the fact that certain of the Protectors require

particulars outside the range suggested in the Resolution. This should be certainly a matter of local arrangement, but it would be a great advantage if there could be a common basis in respect of the data mentioned in the resolution.

The form issue by the Government Statistician of Queensland appears to meet the case admirably and I would suggest its general adoption with the addition in such case of such further inquiries as may be locally required. The definition of the term “half-caste Aboriginal” requires some consideration, especially in view of the fact that in some sense and descriptions as “quadroons” and “Octoroons” are used. I would suggest that for the purpose of these returns – (i) persons of mixed blood living with aboriginals should be classed as “half-caste aboriginal”, whatever might be the degree of the white strain; (ii) persons of mixed blood not living with aboriginal should included as “half-caste” if the strains are approximately equal – as “full-blood” if the predominate strain is aboriginal and not included at all if the predominant strain is white. (NAA Series PP95/1 Item 1926/57)

The first paragraph of this discussion clearly suggests that the data were to be used, and hence, were intended to be useful to local state authorities concerning Aboriginal affairs and administration. Statistical coordination was also an issue – the states had been collecting some of this information since the early 1900s, but not consistently or according to uniform statistical concepts.

The premium based on common data specified in the 1925 resolution is also evident. The expressed recognition of the role of the annual population data in state and local Aboriginal administration is not captured, however, in the official report from the Conference. The prose of the memorandum concerning racial definition is virtually replicated in the final resolution of the Conference, shown in Figure 13.

[Figures 12, 13, 14 and 15 about here]

These themes continued in the deliberations of the 1928 Conference of Statisticians held in Hobart. The tentative agenda proposed for the conference listed the Aboriginal population as item 2 again under Population and Vital Statistics (see Figure 14) to consider issues of classification by ‘(i) Domicile; (ii) Age; and (iii) Caste’

(Conference of Statisticians, 1928, 13). The final resolutions of the Conference (see Figure 15) focused on race, caste and employment, themes which received increased emphasis from this period forward. Critically, local and regional statistical needs are recognized as being valid, within the context of acceptance of a common core of items to be collected and common statistical definitions, which as we will see in a case within Western Australia, was a source of contention between Commonwealth statisticians and state and local authorities. The Conference of Statistician held in 1932 (Sydney) included a formal resolution to continue the annual censuses of Aborigines (Conference of Statisticians, 1932, 5).

The annual censuses were administered by protectors of Aborigines and police throughout states and territories during the twenty year period. Examples of the mesodata for the annual censuses of Aborigines are shown in Figure 16. Rowse (1998) has analyzed these data available for selected regions in the Northern Territory within

[Figure 16 about here]

the context of his study of Aboriginal affairs in central Australia during the 1930s. Well within two decades of operation of the annual censuses of Aborigines, Commonwealth statisticians began questioning the enterprise. Shown in Figure 17 is the draft resolution for discontinuing the census of Aborigines, introduced by

[Figures 17 about here]

South Australia, to be considered at the 1945 Conference of Statisticians in Canberra.

The argument for cessation of the program appears to reflect the cost of resources relative to the benefit of the collected data, although the “importance of such a census” for whom is not specified. The quality of the data for measuring changes in population,

furthermore, is questioned, suggesting the value of the data in measuring the components of annual population change. The full resolution to discontinue the annual census of Aborigines was passed by the 13th Conference of Statisticians and embodies the strains between demographic and political uses of census data:

5. *Census of Aborigines.* – Conference considers that an annual census of aborigines is unnecessary and recommends:

(a) The particulars of settled aboriginal population (any caste and full blood) be obtained as part of each general population Census.

(b) That the nomadic Aboriginal population be estimated in Census years in conjunction with appropriate State or Territorial authorities.

(c) That all published Census tables shall fully include all aboriginal with sufficient white or Asiatic blood to entitle them to vote as Commonwealth electors.

(d) That where desired by any State or Territory table be prepared showing in respect of settled full bloods or settled half or other castes not entitled to vote as Commonwealth electors ages by sex, and occupations by sex, for each Local Government area (or administrative areas within Territories).

(e) That in respect of nomads, the data prepared should embrace estimated

numbers in each State or Territory with a general indication of the areas they inhabit.

(Conference of Statisticians 1945, 5-6). One also wonders whether the census results were also inconvenient, conflicting as they did with the hoped for outcome of native administration embodied in the resolutions of the 1939 conference – that full bloods would die out, and mixed race people would become assimilated and also disappear.

(iv) Intersections between Commonwealth Census Programs and State and Regional Aboriginal Affairs

As anticipated above, archival research has yet to reveal a clear articulation of the purposes for which the annual census data for Aborigines were directed. Implicit in the available records is both the use of the data for demographic and geographic analysis by Commonwealth statisticians, hence, a technical imperative for national (and subnational)

demographic analysis. But the recognition of the need to customize data items and collection procedures at the regional and local levels suggests the possibility for this national statistical program to serve State and local purposes regarding Aboriginal policy and programs (hence, social control). The cessation of the Commonwealth program in 1945 suggests failure to accomplish each of these ends.

At the regional level, population data had long been part and parcel of the institutionalization of Aboriginal children and control over the lives of adults. ‘Census-taking,’ ‘returns,’ and ‘statistics’ continued to be integral, seemingly increasing in importance, to programs of rationing and education and training on government settlements throughout the Australian colonies and states. But since policies and administration varied among the regions, so did the nature and use of statistical initiatives by administrators. For example, in 1877, the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines undertook a census of Aborigines which preceded the implementation of the ‘merging half-caste’ policy (see Kraly and McQuilton 2005). Within the Northern Territory, the operative context for special censuses, as with most statistical activities regarding the Indigenous population, was effort by government officials, notably Protectors, to develop policy concerning the increasing half-caste population in the Northern Territory (see Kraly 2005). Shown in its entirety in Figure 19 is a memorandum from within the department of the Chief Protector advocated for a census of Aboriginal half-castes

[Figures 19a-b and 20 about here]

(see page (2) of the memo). This recommendation is made as part of an argument for progress to be made concerning Aborigines in the Territory through both education and

control (see page (3)). The memo was written in 1925 and the recommendation for a census was quickly considered and approved (see Figure 20). One year later the census was conducted and the data tabulated (see Figure 21). Once again, the relationship

[Figures 21a-d, 22, and 23 about here]

between the collection of population data and operational policy emerges as the handwritten note, shown in Figure 22, illustrates:

Submitted for the
information of the Minister.

When a Government Resident for North Australia is appointed and takes up duty at Darwin, the question of transferring the half-castes now in the Darwin home to Oenpelli or some other Mission Station might be re-opened.

Ultimately, the data were published in administrative reports for the Territory, as shown in Figure 23.

Many more illustrations can be offered of special censuses which were initiated throughout states and territories in administrative support of policies and programs concerning the population control and regulation of Aboriginal populations, and also the responsiveness of population data systems to changing policy goals. For example, in Victoria the initial aim of the Board was to prevent the killing of Aborigines by settlers, and the first censuses served this aim; soon the aim became to reduce expenditure by excluding half castes, and again the censuses served that end (see Kraly and McQuiltion 2005). Population data also served efforts to separate out persons, specifically children, of part-Indigenous descent for removal to schools and other training facilities, particularly in Northern Territory and Western Australia (see Kraly 2006; Haebich 2000). The historical evidence underscores the synchronicity between the Commonwealth Aboriginal censuses and local statistical initiatives.

What then were the relationships between Commonwealth statistical programs regarding Aboriginal populations and regional and local government programs concerning Aboriginal affairs during the general era of the annual censuses of Aborigines? We offer three illustrations of national and regional intersections, which may serve to reveal further evidence of about the use, value and meaning of Aboriginal census data to statisticians, administrators, and Aboriginal persons.

(a) Estimates of the Aboriginal Population of Western Australia for the 1921 Commonwealth Census

The first example draws from contention between national and state interests concerning Aboriginal issues and illustrates Smith's point about Australian census-taking and Aborigines:

The confusion, inadequacy, and lack of comparability of the early Aboriginal census data did not arise by chance, nor was it a result of incompetence of the census officials or of more practical difficulties in enumerating tribal people. It represented a translation by the Colonial and State authorities of their native policies into census terms (1980, 28).

This observation is clearly illustrated in the case of Western Australia and the steps taken by A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, to respond to the request by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics to provide estimates of the Aboriginal population within the state to coincide with the 1921 national census. The issue is that of the definition of Aborigines within the context of, and for purposes of, population measurement versus population control.

Figure 24 displays the request by the Commonwealth Statistician to state census officials to discuss with state Protectors of Aborigines of the need for estimates at the time of the national census in 1921 of the numbers of Aborigines (males and females,

adults and children) living remotely. The memorandum indicates that directives to enumerate settled Aborigines ('residing in or adjacent to white settlements') using personal census slips had been previously communicated. Figure 25 shows the response

[Figures 24, 25, and 26a-b about here]

from the Deputy Supervisor of Census for South Australia concerning his discussion with the Protector, noting that the Protector had already authorized the 'taking of a rough census of the aboriginal population' in the remote part of the state by Dr. Basedow.

Figure 26a displays the response in early August from the Deputy Supervisor for Western Australia on the same matter, noting that the Aborigines Department collects annual reports, submitted in July, from all Police Stations in the state concerning the (number?) of Aborigines in the district. The Deputy Supervisor suggests that these figures 'be accepted for the purpose of the census' by subtracting the number of Aboriginal persons for whom personal census slips were completed for the 1921 census. Included with the letter is an example of the data submitted for each Police Station, which is shown in Figure 26b.

Six weeks later, in September, the Commonwealth office requested (see Figure 27) that the (independent) estimates of both settled and remote Aborigines should be further disaggregated by full-blood versus half-caste, and also introduced the new form No. 39, discussed above. These estimates should include all Aboriginal persons regardless of whether they had completed a personal census form ('slip'). One month later, A.O. Neville responded to the Deputy Supervisor of Census in Perth on matters of both procedure and definition by stating:

It will, I think, be impracticable to furnish personal slips and with regard to form 39, I would point out that the estimated number of "full-blooded

aboriginals” will also include half-castes deemed to be aboriginals within the meaning of Section 3 of the [Western Australia] Aborigines Act, 1905. The estimated number of ‘half-case aboriginals’ will therefore, only include those not deemed to be aboriginals within the meaning of Section 3 of the Act. To the total number of aboriginals it will be necessary to add an approximate estimate of the numbers outside the confines of civilization, and therefore not included in the preceding figures.

The copy of the letter, shown in Figure 28, reveals the initial response from the Commonwealth office to Neville’s plan: “Estimate should be made.” Figure 29 gives the Commonwealth response implying the priority of statistical concepts over statutory concepts operating at the state level. It is worth noting the definition of an Aborigine within the law of Western Australia. The Aborigines Act 1905 applied to:

Aborigines of full-descent (referred to as ‘Aboriginal natives’); ‘half-castes’ (defined as persons with an Aboriginal parent on either side or children of such persons) who lived with an Aboriginal as wife or husband; other ‘half-castes’ who lived or regularly associated with ‘Aboriginal natives’; and ‘half-caste’ children under that age of sixteen, irrespective how they lived; clause included to allow Aborigines of a ‘suitable degree of civilisation’ to apply for exemption from the provision of the Act (Haebich, 2000, 220).

In conforming to Western Australian law, Chief Protector Neville was proposing to classify all Aboriginals as full-blood, with only those half-castes being awarded exemption from the Act as being classified as half-caste Aboriginals; the Commonwealth Statistician was requesting for an estimate of the number of half-caste Aborigines, both settled and remote, regardless of status under the state law. Evidently, a subsequent conversation between the Deputy Supervisor of Census and Mr. Neville resulted in agreement to produce estimates consistent with Commonwealth criteria, as the memorandum in Figure 30 reveals.

[Figures 27, 28, 29, and 30 about here]

Differences between Commonwealth and state statistical philosophies and census practices re-emerged, however, as the results of the 1921 census began to be processed. The following sequence of communications illustrate the friction between and among government units. We begin with the telegram (3 August 1921, shown in Figure 31) issued by Commonwealth Statistician Knibbs inquiring about the possibility that half-caste Aborigines had been intentionally excluded from census enumeration using the personal census slips. The immediate response¹ from Perth (Figure 32) reveals that police in Western Australia had been enumerating Aborigines and half-castes; census collectors had distributed and collected slips only from those half-castes living ‘under same conditions as whites’; the majority of half-castes were living on missions and reservations, and thus, presumably, beyond white civilization. From this logic, one might conclude that no full-blood Aborigines were enumerated using personal census slips, or perhaps more accurately, only Aboriginal persons of any heritage who were living in a manner consistent with white society were included in census enumeration. This latter procedure would thus be consistent with Neville’s original stance on the relationship between Commonwealth census operations and State Aboriginal policy.

The next day, 4 August 1921, Knibbs made his views clear on the matter (see Figure 33):

IN VIEW COLLECTOR’S INSTRUCTION THIRTEEN ACTION IN
IGNORING HALF CASTE ABORIGINALS INEXCUSABLE STOP EFFORT
MUST BE MADE OBTAIN SLIPS ALL HALF CASTE ABORIGINALS
OMISSION SERIOUSLY AFFECT CENSUS RESULTS LETTER
FOLLOWING KNIBBS

¹ The date on the telegram appears to have been misstated (3/9) given the stamped date (3 AU 21) in the upper right hand corner of the telegram.

A lengthy letter, shown in Figure 34, was indeed sent the following day, expressing Commonwealth concerns about the implications of the procedures followed in Western Australia for large proportions of the population falling within the ‘unspecified’ category for sex. The Commonwealth Statistician also focuses on obtaining additional information solely for half-caste Aboriginals living beyond white Australian settlements, stating that no attempt need be made to enumerate (with personal slips) full-blood Aboriginals, presumably regardless of lifestyle. The collection of minimal information for unenumerated half-caste persons – sex, birthplace and race – was directed, as a matter of ‘urgency,’ for use by the Commonwealth government.

Less than a week later, the Deputy Supervisor of Census for Western Australia submits estimates of Aboriginal populations by the required characteristics for cities in the state (see Figure 35). The Supervisor states that the misunderstanding was his, referring to his understanding that the data supplied on Form 39 submitted at the date of the Commonwealth census (April) would be sufficiently appropriate (the Supervisor does not address the issue of what definition of Aboriginal represented in the data). One month later, A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines for the North-West, sends a short letter (see Figure 36) to the Commonwealth Statistician indicating that the information contained in his annual reports should include the information needed by the Commonwealth Bureau. End of story.

[Figures 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36 about here]

(b) The Occupational Context of Commonwealth Census Enumeration

A second, briefer, illustration of the intersections between Commonwealth statistical programs and regional and local Aboriginal administration places census taking within the occupational responsibilities and rhythms of persons responsible for census enumeration in remote geographies such as regions throughout the Northern Territory. In this regard, we consider the duties and responsibilities of the person and persons from whom data and data collection were requested, ultimately, from Melbourne during this era, in relationship to Commonwealth statistical procedures and protocol. Unlike Commonwealth statisticians, protectors, police and patrol officers, even educators in the Northern Territory in the first few decades of Federation were not in the vocation of social statistics and statistical analysis, but rather were more broadly engaged in the control and protection of Aborigines, a phrase embedded in the administrative narrative for the Northern Territory as well as throughout Australia.

In the case of Aboriginal affairs, the collection of data – ‘censuses’ and ‘returns’ regarding Aboriginal persons as well as other residents of the Territory was only one piece of the diverse set of duties extending over long days and weeks of occupation as police and patrol officers. Consider a selection of the daily entries of the Station Journal, shown in Figure 31 for the Timber Creek Police Station for 1932-1933 and what is

[Figure 37a-p about here]

revealed about the place of ‘population data systems’ in the working rhythms of the officers. Population data collection was one of myriad dimensions of the work of Aboriginal administration and administrators, police and patrol officers. The 1952 Commonwealth Report on statistics for the Northern Territory says as much:

The Commissioner of Police in the Northern Territory acted as Deputy Supervisor of Censuses for the Aboriginal Censuses which were conducted before the war.

The census information was collected by Police patrols and there was a considerable degree of estimation. Mr. Wilcox of the Census Office in Canberra, with whom the matter was discussed, expressed the opinion that the Police and Patrol Officers working in co-operation could carry out the collection of statistics of aboriginal population. The main qualification required was not so much a statistical training as a knowledge of the Territory and the habits and movements of aboriginal groups (NAA A 452/54 Item 55/754).

(c) The Interpretation of Census-taking and Nominal Lists among Aboriginal Communities in Central Australia

Throughout the twentieth century, there were two central issues in collecting statistics about aboriginal people. The first was about getting information on people not living in settled communities or without documented civil status. The second was the 'half caste problem'. Aborigines were interpreted to the world by anthropologists, who were at best indifferent and at worst hostile to quantitative methods. But officials who collected statistics were blind to their meaning because of the racial politics which clouded their vision. Aborigines were a footnote in the statistical record, lost in the filing cabinets of the bureaucracy and the academy.

(v) Conclusions: Interpretations of the Annual Censuses of Aborigines in History, Demography and Statistics

During the period of the native censuses, between the two world wars and spanning the depression, white Australian civilization went through its final stage of consolidation. The federal system became bedded down, administrative control and land settlement were extended across the entire continent, the last 'wild blacks' were brought under control, and the stage was set for the eventual disappearance of the Australian native people as an identifiable population. In the process we see reflected in the censuses and the administrations which sustained them the paradoxical combination of lofty humanitarianism and ruthless exploitation which characterized the colonial enterprise. On

the one hand, enormous reserves were being proposed to protect tribal people during their terminal decline. At the same time, people of mixed descent made destitute by the depression, were caught in a terrible trap. Told by the welfare boards that they were not aborigines, yet discriminated against by white Australians and local officials because they were, they found themselves confined to shanty settlements but denied access to welfare payments which would sustain them.

The native censuses began with a focus on documenting not just the numbers, but also the people's sociocultural, economic and political status – whether they were nomadic, in regular employment, or in 'camps' under the control of church or state. As recession loomed, the classification was changed to document the extent to which people in controlled camps were also in employment. As in the 1890s, when economic hard times arrived and aboriginal people previously in the workforce found themselves in need of assistance, the aboriginal protectorates continued a tradition grounded in the English poor laws and honed in the Indian famines, that saw the solution to both poverty and fiscal imperatives in requiring that people in receipt of assistance should be seen to be working for it. In this as in other matters, however, the church and state administrations were simply not up to the task. In a more determined and better resourced environment the information from the censuses might have been used to impose tighter controls. But the reality was that native administrations and protection boards, never adequately resourced, were fatally weakened by the fiscal constraints of the recession, and were never able to regain effective control of the population. The adoption of the twin policies of protection and absorption in 1939 represented a last attempt at a final solution to the aboriginal 'problem', but it was an historicist solution based on the assumption of inexorable trends,

requiring of the authorities the maintenance of an appropriate environment rather than active management of race relations. The abandonment of the censuses was a sign that this too was doomed to failure in the post-war era.

This history and the highlighted examples of census-taking regarding Indigenous peoples in Australia underscore the importance of institutions, organizations, and occupations for the implementation of safeguards against human rights violations. Census taking at the national level was a distinct enterprise with technical goals – data on Aborigines were needed for population estimation and for external validity of the census. Census-taking at the regional and local levels was a component of population control. The mandates for data collection were different and the administrative apparatus for statistical operations were separate. As a result, the possibility for developing human subjects safeguards regarding Aborigines rested within state authorities regarding Aboriginal affairs – whose missions were both “protection” but most certainly “control” during the period under review. Where this argument does not hold well, however, is in the Northern Territory for which the Commonwealth was responsible since 1911. That the census and statistical practices inherent in the creation of the Register of Wards could proceed in rather close institutional proximity of the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics seems significant, and worthy of further pursuit.

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