Title

Introduction for the Special Issue on the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS)

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This special edition of the *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* presents a selection of peer-reviewed papers from the conference, ‘Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes: Assessing Recent Evidence’. The conference was organised by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and held at the Shine Dome, the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra on 11 and 12 August 2005. The conference, which was attended by around 200 people from universities, the government sector, non-profit organisations and private corporations and citizens, aimed to present the latest evidence on Indigenous economic and social status, and family and community life, and discuss its implications for government policy.

After the preliminaries, the conference started with a recent history of the political economy of statistical collections and a brief introduction to NATSISS methodology and the quality of survey questions. While the main focus was on analysing the 2002 NATSISS outputs, many presentations provided an assessment of changes in Indigenous social conditions over time and examined how Indigenous people fared vis-à-vis other Australians in other statistical collections. All contributors were invited to reflect on how NATSISS might be improved when it is next undertaken in 2008.

This special issue collects together the conference papers that specifically address labour market issues. Matthew Gray teams up with Bruce Chapman to provide an evaluation and overview of the labour force issues addressed in the survey. The Jon Altman, Geoff Buchanan and Nicholas Biddle paper recognises and emphasises the important role for the customary or non-market economy in Indigenous employment and welfare more generally. Nicolas Biddle and I then outline some selected methodological issues for users of the NATSISS, especially the sampling and non-sampling errors that might condition the interpretation of labour market variables.

Russell Ross’s supplemented his conference analysis of Indigenous health with a timely regression study of the potential factors underlying mainstream Indigenous employment. My paper on the issues at the heart of the poverty wars argues that technical details do matter in poverty measurement. The choice of an appropriate equivalence scale(s) for Indigenous Australians needs to be scrutinised and researched so that Indigenous poverty and disadvantage can be addressed adequately. Appropriately, the final paper in this Special Issue is Bob Gregory’s paper that addresses the right questions to ask in the context of Indigenous labour market policy.
Given the growing range of statistics on Indigenous Australians collected and reported in Australia (e.g., see the Productivity Commission biannual Report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*), it is more important than ever to provide critical scrutiny of the data and related analysis. This special issue attempts to do this by providing readers with the capacity to critically engage with the evidence presented in public forums.

One important aspect of holding analysts accountable is to provide estimates of reliability that take into account sampling errors. CAEPR provides a do-it-yourself spreadsheet for customised hypothesis tests on NATSISS data on its web site; which can be used to validate most significance tests conducted in this issue. However, the spreadsheet usually provides a conservative approximation, and hence it is preferable that analysts use the replicate weights that the ABS have now made available on their Remote Access Data Laboratory (RADL). These weights are relatively easy to use and allow more sophisticated analysts to reproduce relatively accurate estimates of reliability using a ‘jackknife’ methodology.

Perhaps the most common sentiments expressed by the authors, both from the conference and in this special issue, were: hopes for enhancements to the data through greater comparability (particularly between the 2002 NATSISS and future national surveys), merging or supplementing the survey data with administrative data collections, and collection of true longitudinal or panel data. While strong arguments can be made for all of these propositions, it is important to acknowledge that all such strategies are not without cost. Matching with departmental records over time or establishing a ‘true’ longitudinal data set may not be an optimal use of scarce resources—both approaches are expensive and the resulting data introduce their own sets of limitations for researchers. However tracking individuals across time can potentially offer insights into causal relationships and dynamics of social interactions, both of which are almost impossible to examine in cross sectional data such as that provided in the NATSISS.