



Exploring the causes of and implications from rapid growth in Australia's Indigenous population

Andrew Taylor: WIC colloquium, 26 July 2023: Wittgenstein Centre, Wien



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The Northern Institute



- In Darwin (2 hours from Bali, 5 from Sydney)
- Part of a young but successful university (around 23,000 students)



Demography and Growth Planning @CDU



Through applied research we investigate the causes and consequences of population changes with emphasis on the Northern Territory and the north of Australia.

We are driven to make positive differences to communities, society and policy through robust and independent research.

Dr Sigurd Dyrting



Demographer

Dr Dávid Karácsonyi



Geographer

Ms Fiona Shalley



Demographer

Assoc. Prof Andrew Taylor



Demographer

The premiss of today's talk



“For those Indigenous people who are certain of their identities, the deluge of constructions and categories by non-Indigenous society do not threaten that which they know, despite the many negative ramifications that have ensued. Sometimes, for people who are not certain of their backgrounds and identities, the boundaries of cultural or ethnic identity are indistinct.”

Noble, F. (1996). *Who do we think we are: people who are learning about their Aboriginality*. Masters thesis, Griffith University. (Pg.1)

The structure of today's talk



Part I – Understanding spatial and demographic characteristics for, and the drivers of Indigenous population growth

Part II – Examining consequences and impacts now and into the future

Part III – What can we learn from this issue; as social scientists and specifically as demographers?

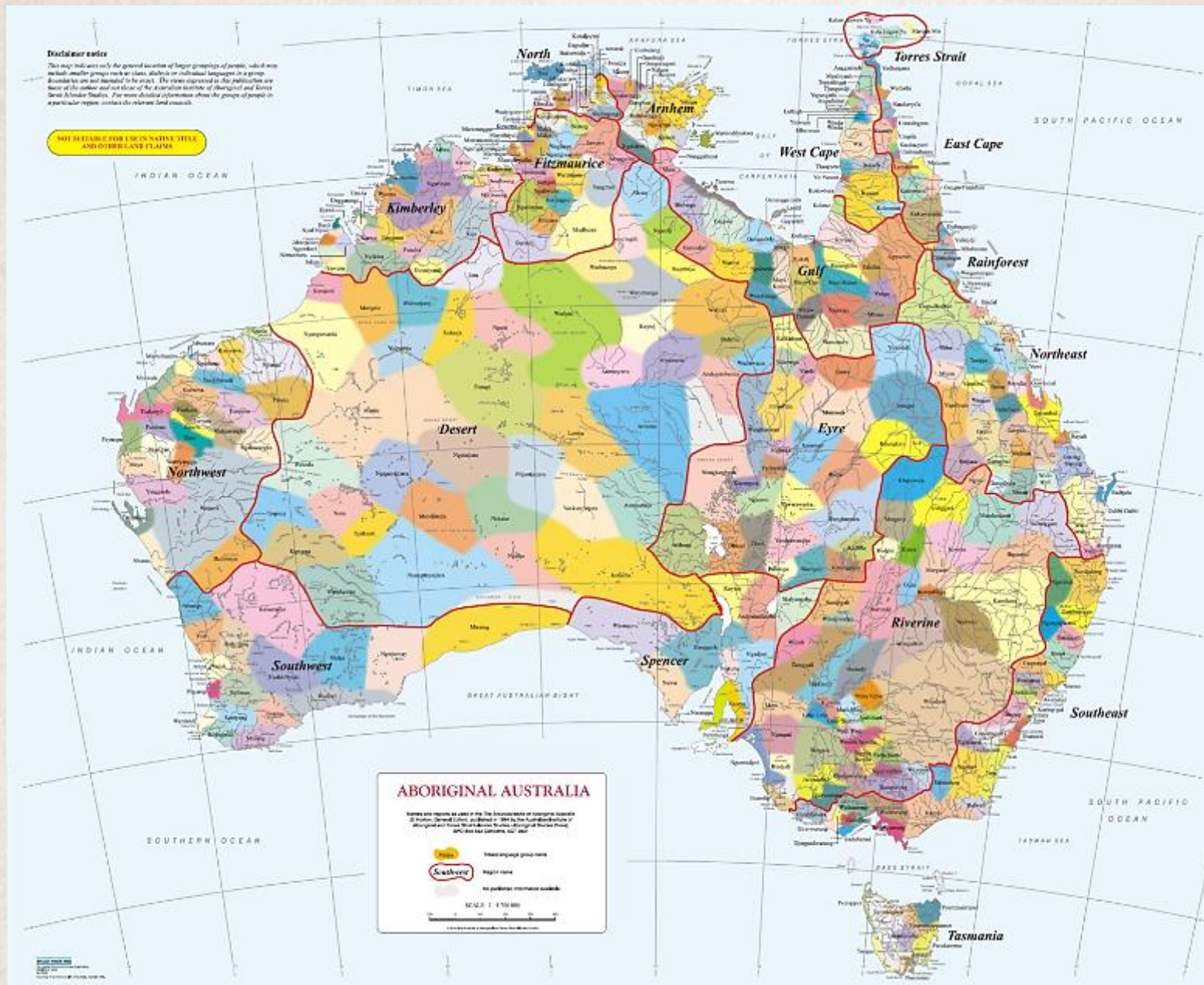


Recognition of my biases and limitations in
my thinking as a non-Indigenous researcher

Part I

Understanding spatial and demographic characteristics for, and the drivers of Indigenous population growth

First there was many First Nations



The tangled universe of Indigenous identity



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- Cultural continuity of more than 60,000 years – no lands ceded, and no treaty made
- History of deliberate fragmentation of families/clans with sanctioned oppression, especially for ‘part-Aboriginals’, even until very recently
- First Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) had no say in how they have been defined. Many historical horrific labels
- Statistically, the population is now defined using the Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) with three associated criteria

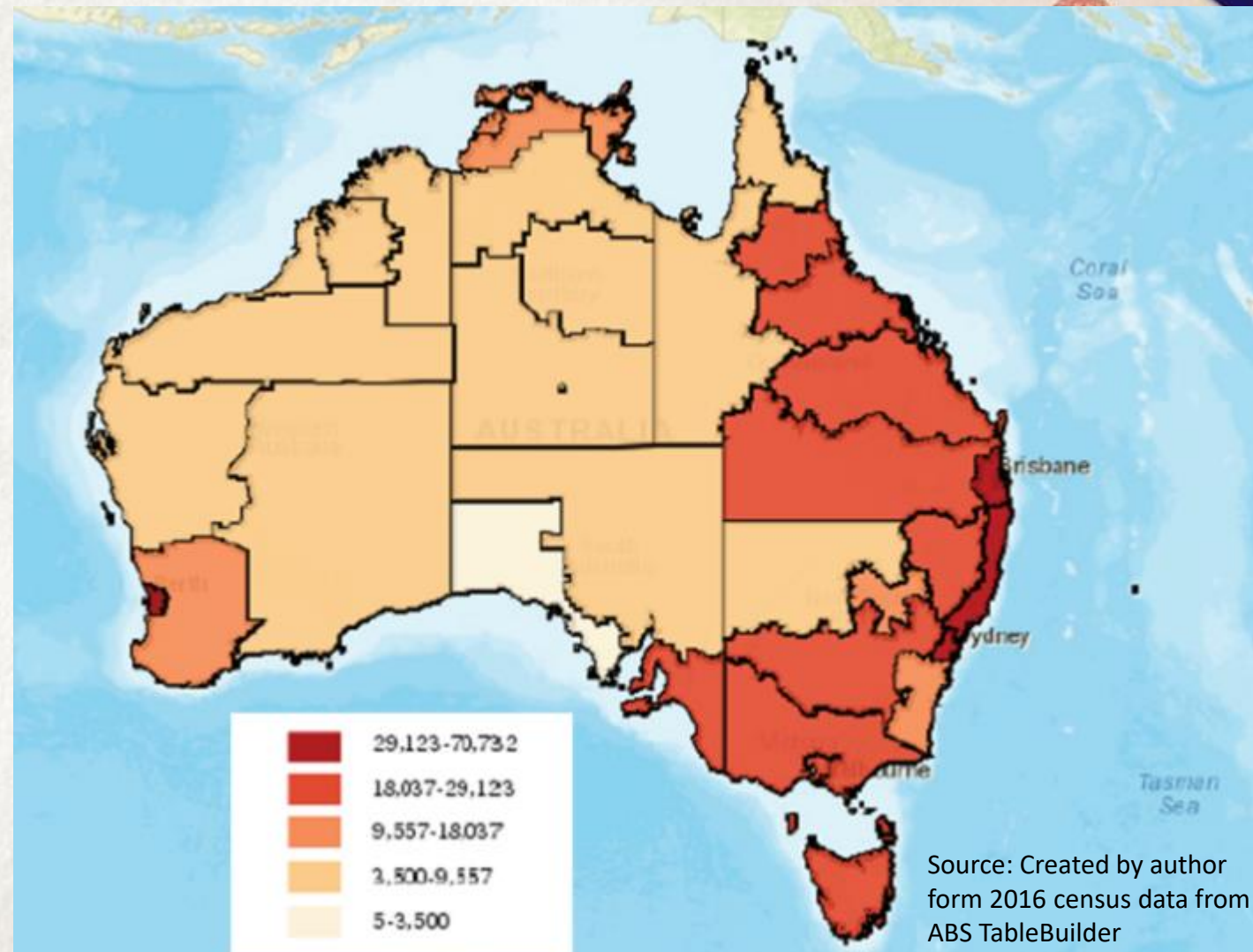
11 Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

- For people of **both** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both ‘Yes’ boxes.

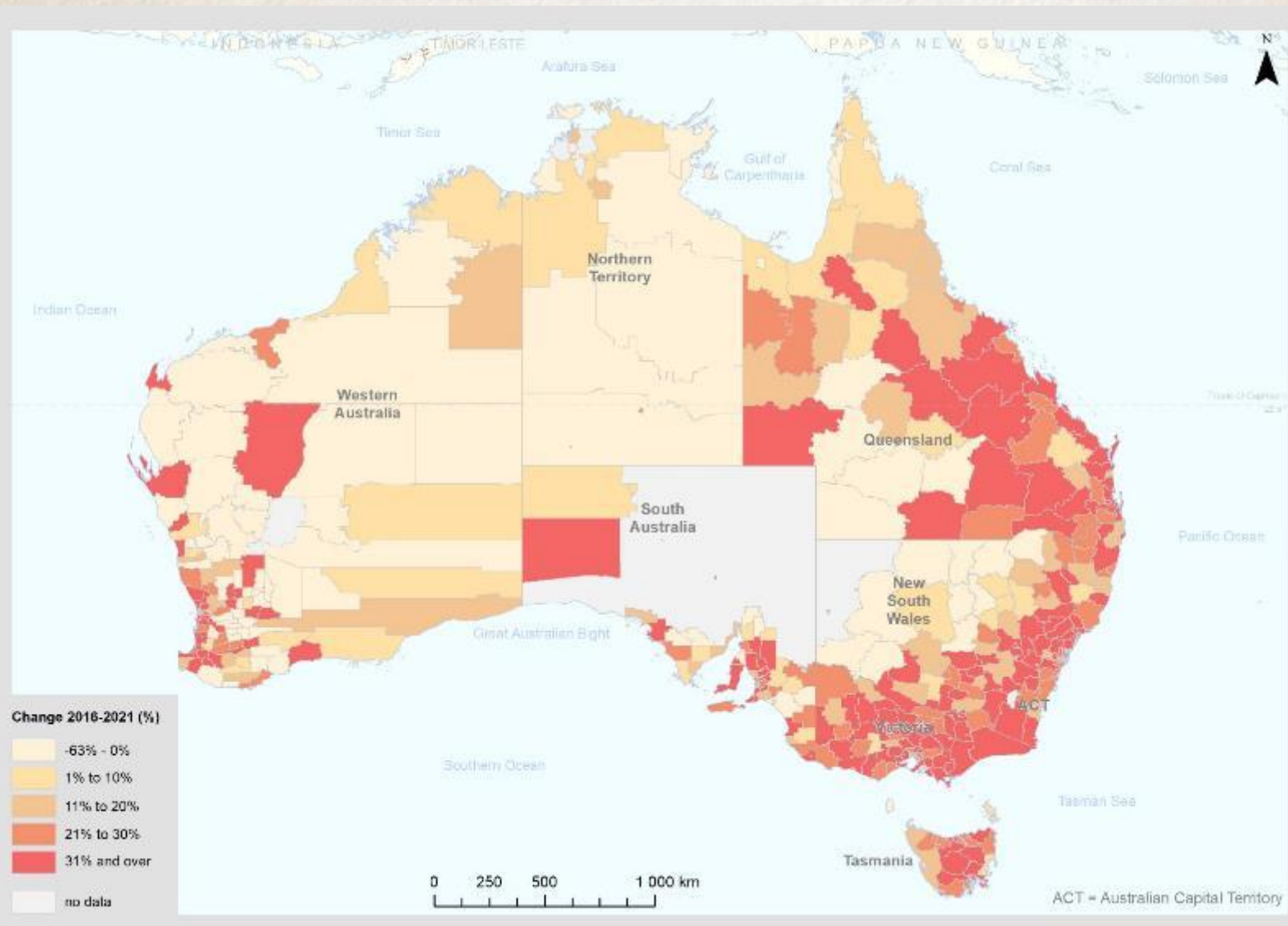
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander

Absolute Indigenous population distribution in 2016

- Highest numbers in big cities (35%) and their surrounds (22%)
- Proportion of total and numbers in big cities and surrounds increasing rapidly

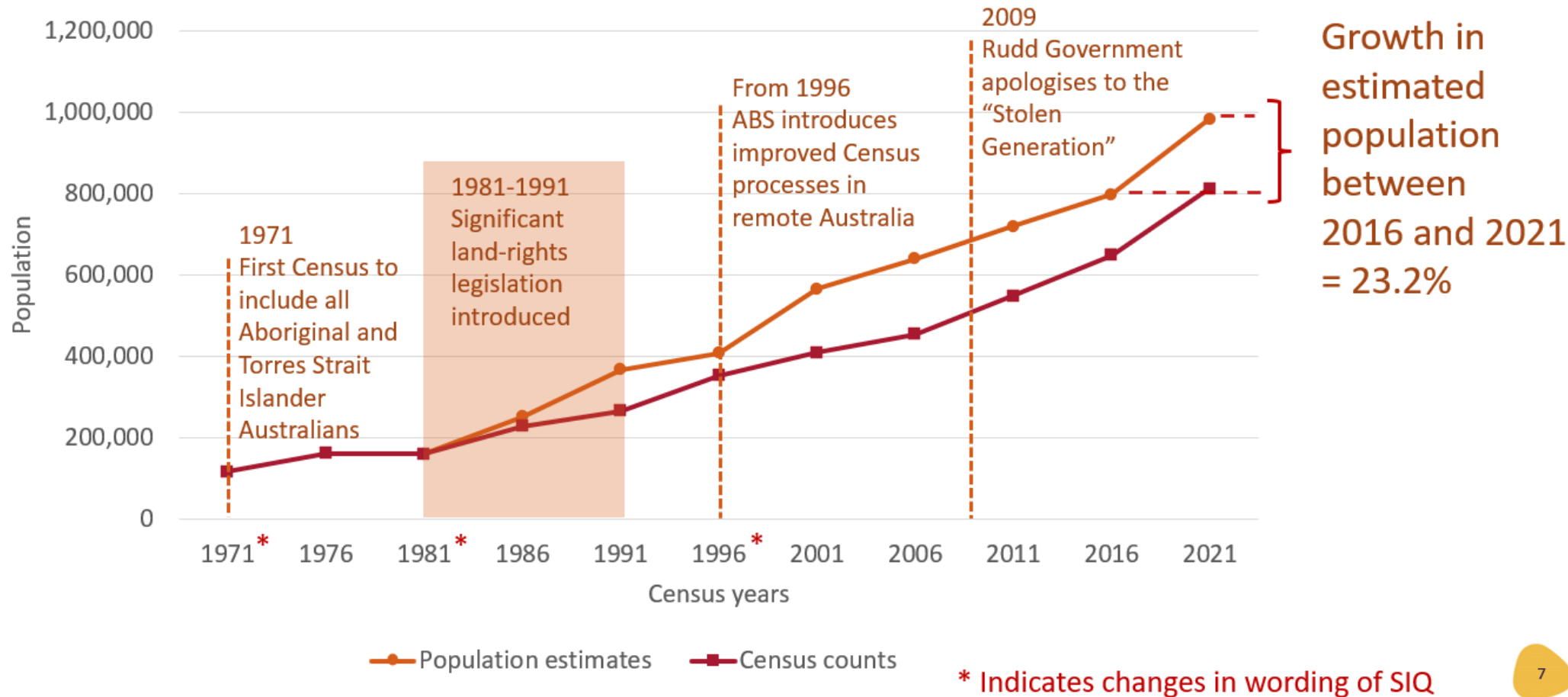


Spatial profile of growth, 2016 to 2021



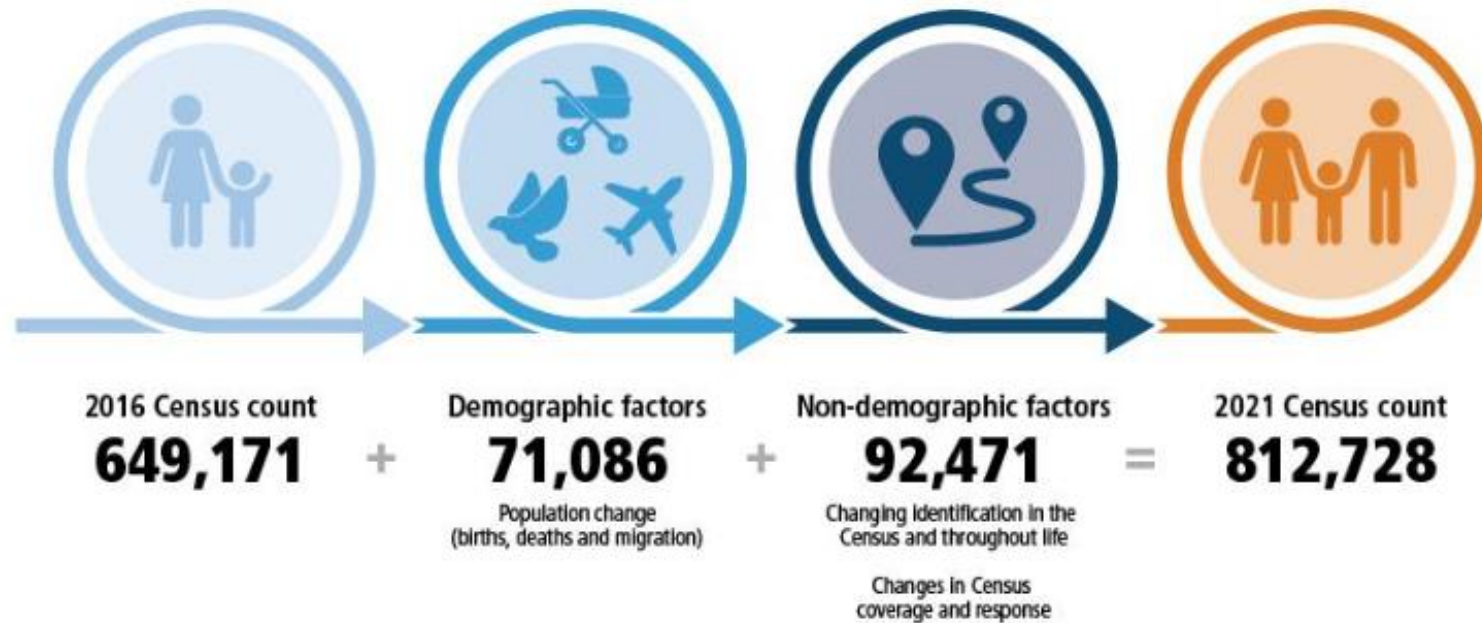
Source: Author calculations from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). Understanding change in counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Census. Map courtesy of David Karácsonyi, Darwin.

First Australian's population growth since 1971



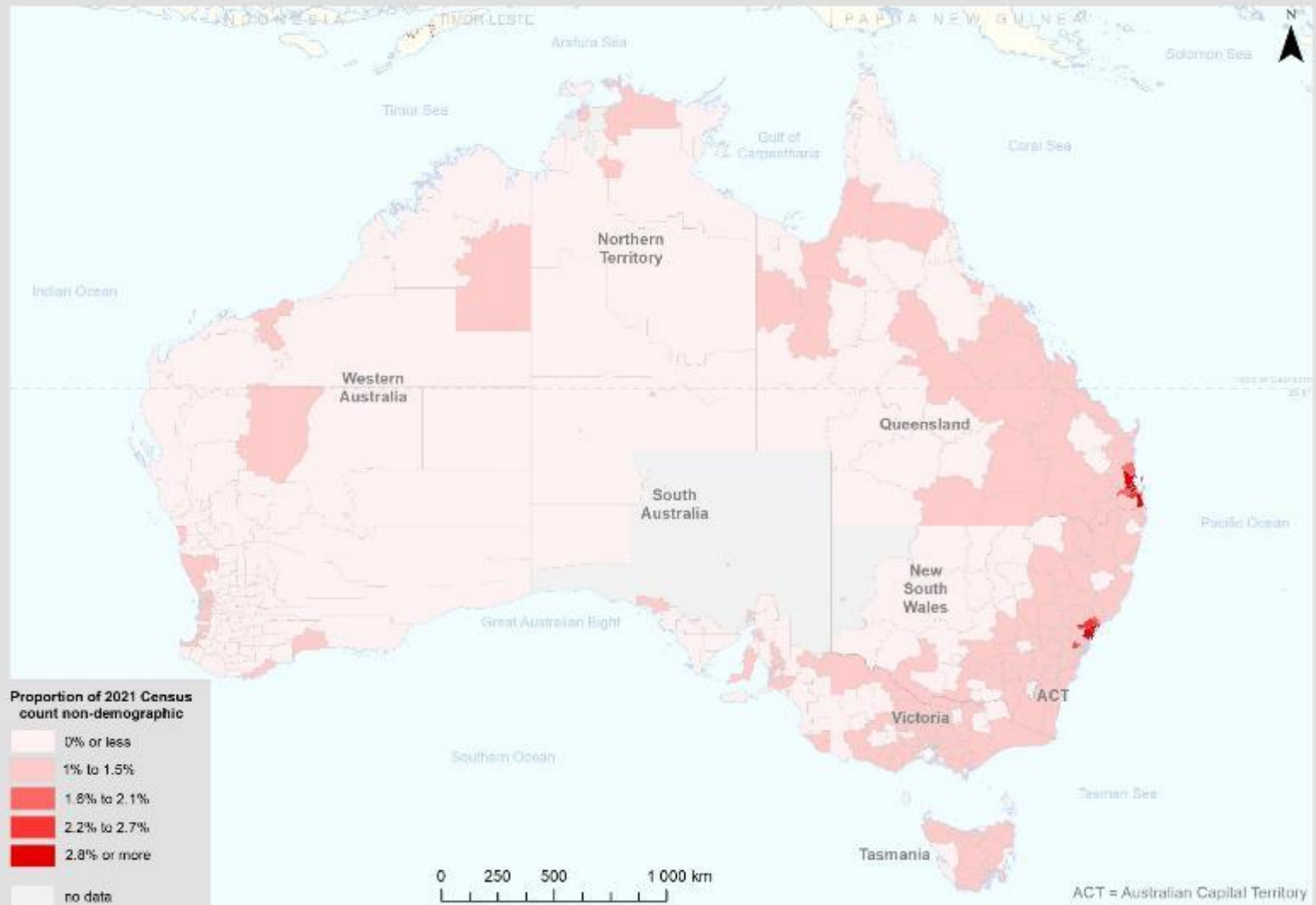
Recent growth and drivers

Figure 2: Census counts and demographic and non-demographic factors of change



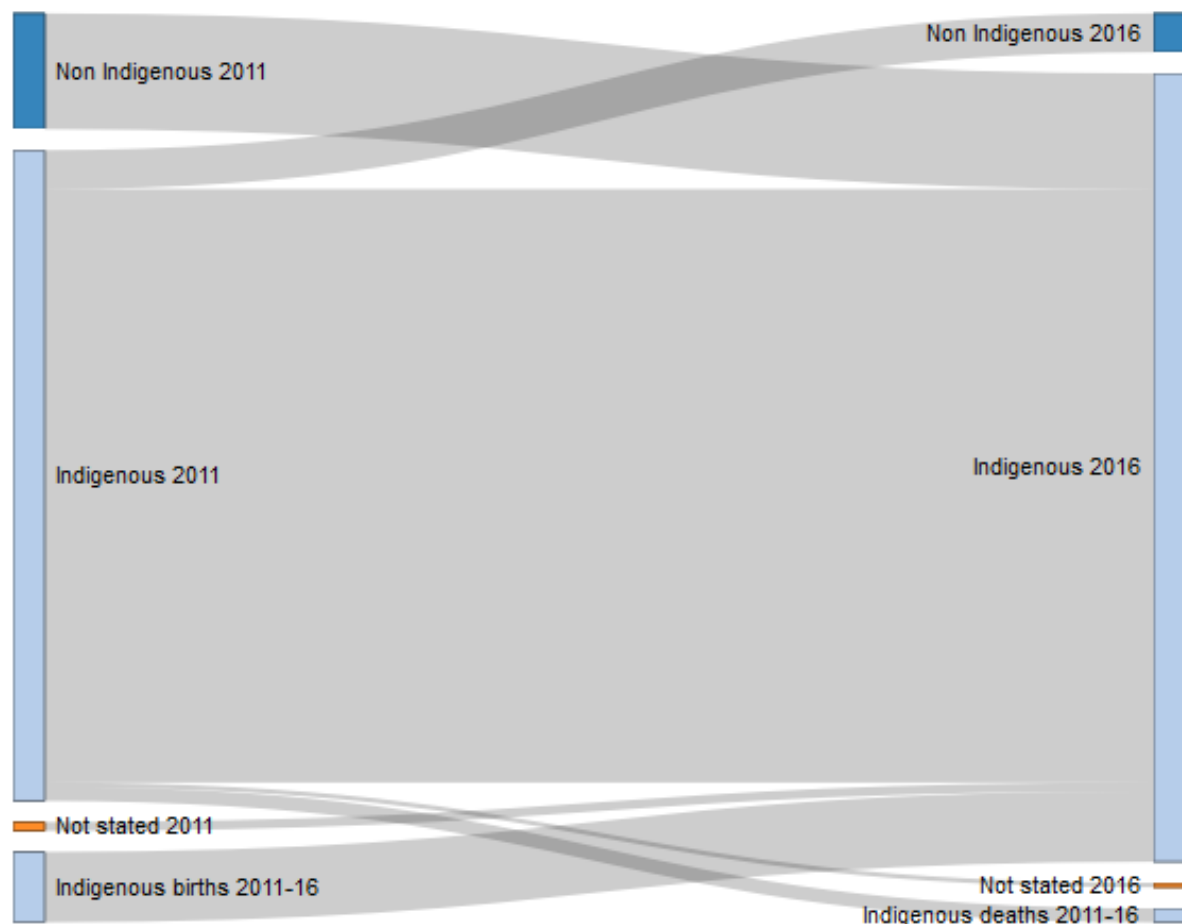
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). Understanding change in counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Census

Non-demographic growth – spatial profile



Source: Author calculations from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). Understanding change in counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Census. Courtesy of David Karácsonyi, Darwin.

Transitions, 2011 to 2016



No longer Indigenous
(45,070)

New identifiers
(129,619)

Consistently
Indigenous
(572,375)

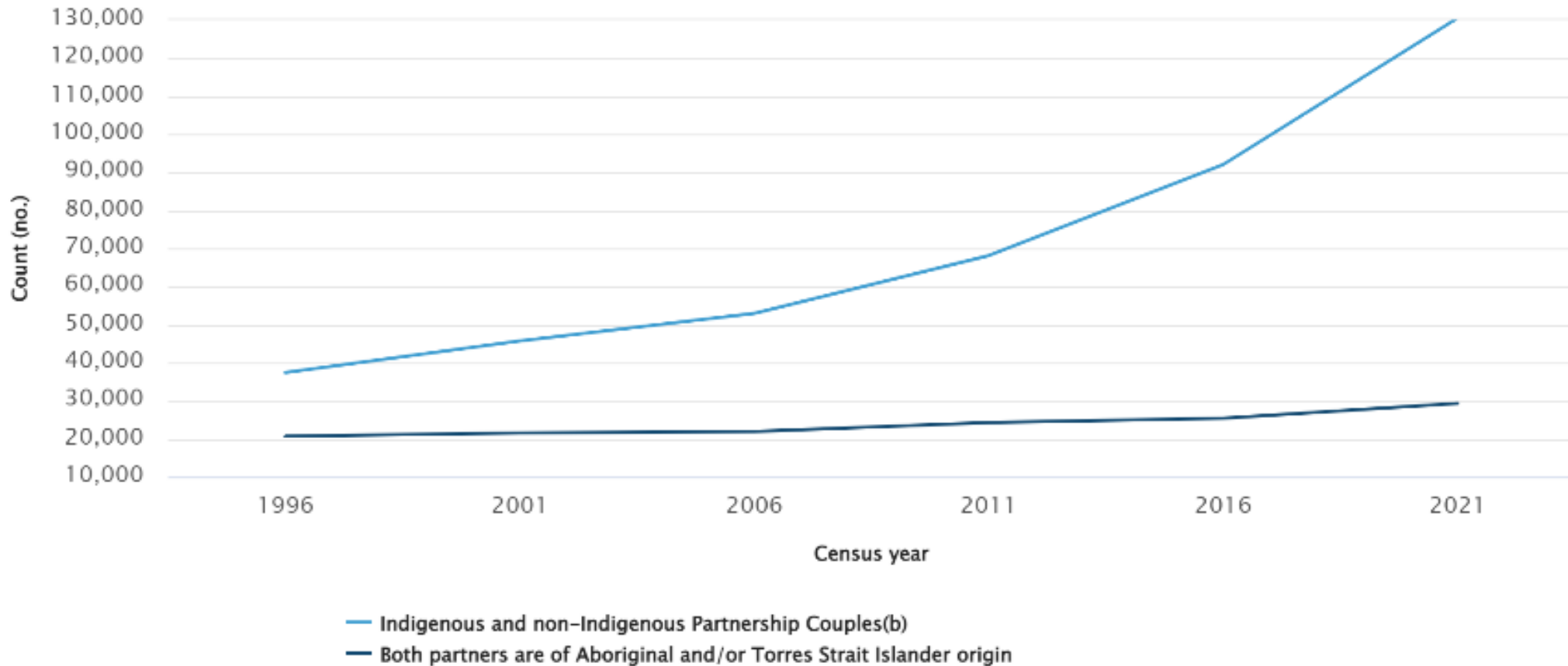
Indigenous to not-stated
(4,586 people)

Drivers for changing identification

- Very limited research to date (sensitive) but:
 - Land rights and changing societal views and laws
 - Reducing fear of retribution and negative consequences
 - Increased thirst for ancestral knowledge ('who I am')
 - Improved identification and data collection methods
 - General population growing interest in cultural heritage
 - Major reconciliation actions like the national apology in 2010
- Similar trends in other colonized nations like Canada, New Zealand and USA
- 'Mixed partnering' a fundamental demographic driver



Growth in families by couples composition



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). [Understanding change in counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Census](#)

A quick recap of the story so far

- Large growth in the population of Indigenous Australians over the past three decades.
- Non-demographic growth now largest factor
- Growth is spatially correlated: highest in big cities and surrounds, lowest in remote areas
- Reasons are complex and bring up the past and ongoing mistreatment, trauma and institutional racism carried forward from colonisation



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Part II

Examining consequences and impacts now
and into the future

What's the problem?



- Numbers formed from government apparatus: do not speak for the spectrum of First Australian's experiences, philosophies and identities
- Gives a platform for racist assertions and divisive practices - discourse of 'real' v 'not real' Aboriginal and 'just doing it for the money'
- Critical juncture of a national referendum for a 'Voice' to Parliament...

Wording of the upcoming referenda question

"A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

Do you approve this proposed alteration?"


The opportunity



Problem type 2 – Measuring gaps for targeted policy (life expectancy)



National Agreement on Closing the Gap



1 Everyone enjoys long and healthy lives Collapse ↑


Outcome

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.

Target

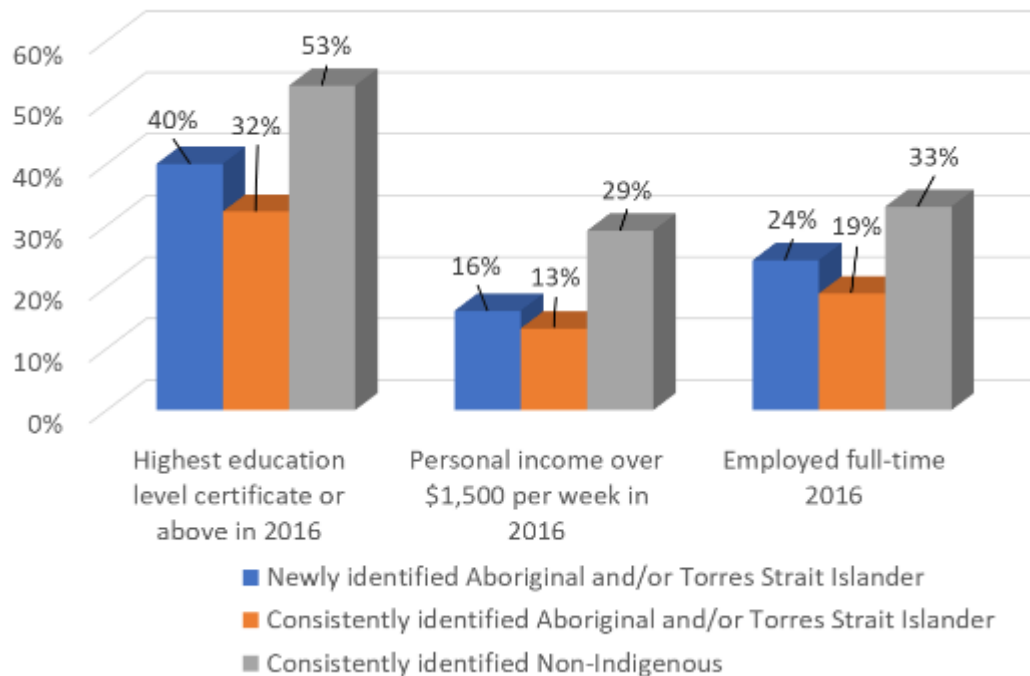
Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031.

Data

 See all the data →

- Measurement over time significantly impacted by identification change
- Methodological review – great debate and conjecture
- Knowledge on complexity of issue poor>> policy blind spot?
- No apparent solution which solves the complex issues

Problem 2a – Socio-economic gaps



Source: Author calculations from the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset



CLOSING THE GAP



6 Students reach their full potential through further education pathways

Collapse


Outcome

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.

Target

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent.

Data

 See all the data →

Future (projected) numbers and spatial distributions

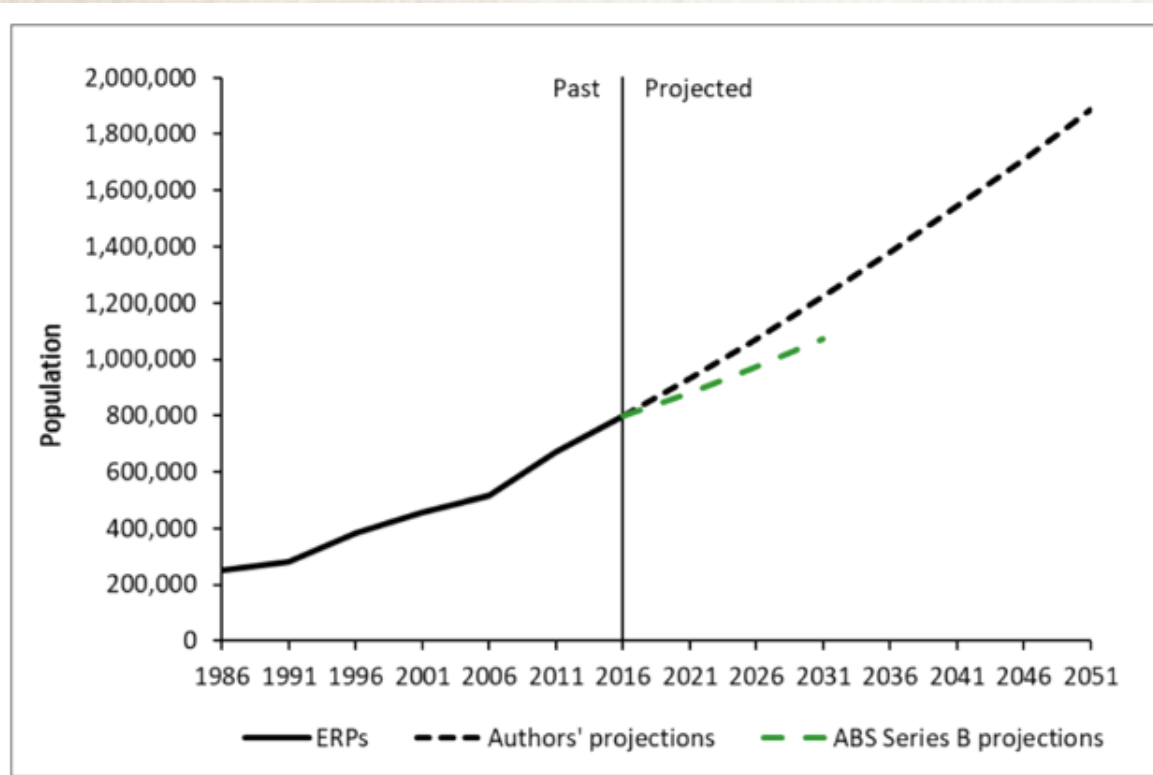
From: Taylor, A., Wilson, T., Temple, J., Kelaher, M. & Eades, S. (2020). The future growth and spatial shift of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population, 2016-2051. *Population, Space and Place*.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2401>

- Large growth in population from net identification change not factored into current official or other projections
- Indigenous projections perform quite poorly compared with others:
 - Wilson, T. & Taylor, A. (2016). How Reliable Are Indigenous Population Projections? *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, Vol 19 No 3. 39-57
- Cohort component model with scenarios aligning with:
 - How does including NICR and mother-baby identification alter population size, spatial distribution, composition and growth nationally and for regions?
 - What does decomposing growth by drivers tell us about future growth drivers?



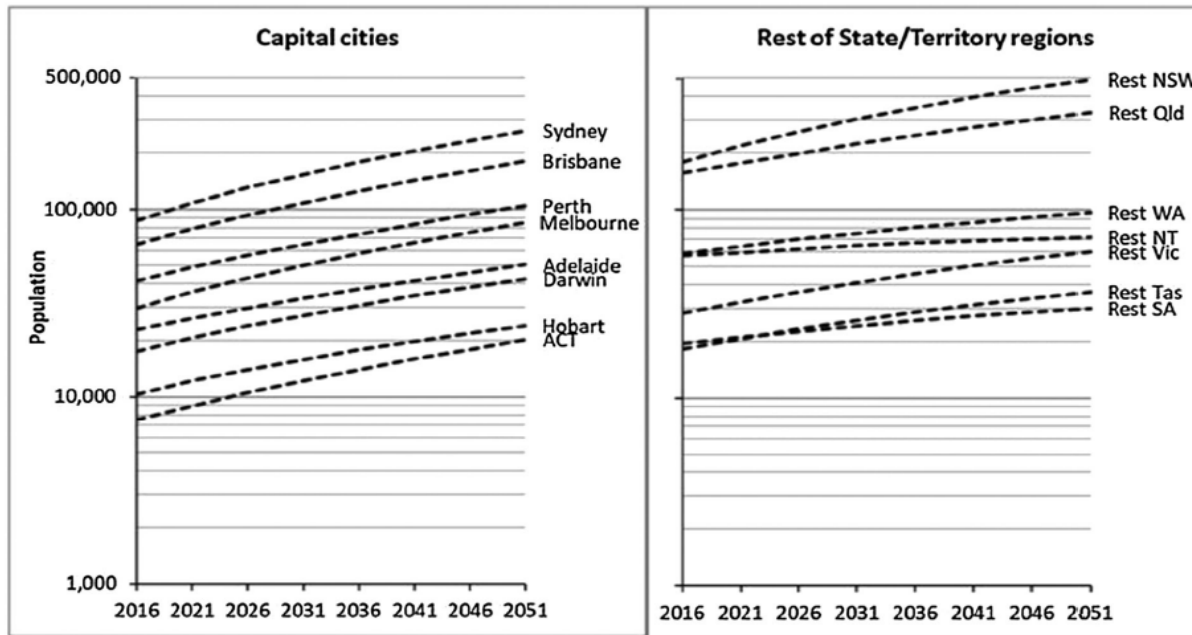
National results – size and growth



- Projected 2031 population = 1.22m (53% growth) v ABS 1.07m (34% growth)
- Numerical growth of 134,000 during 2016-2021, increasing to 175,000 during 2046-2051
- Projected 136% growth from 2016 to 2051 v 55% for non-Indigenous

Results for regions

Projected Aboriginal population by GCCSA: 2016-2051

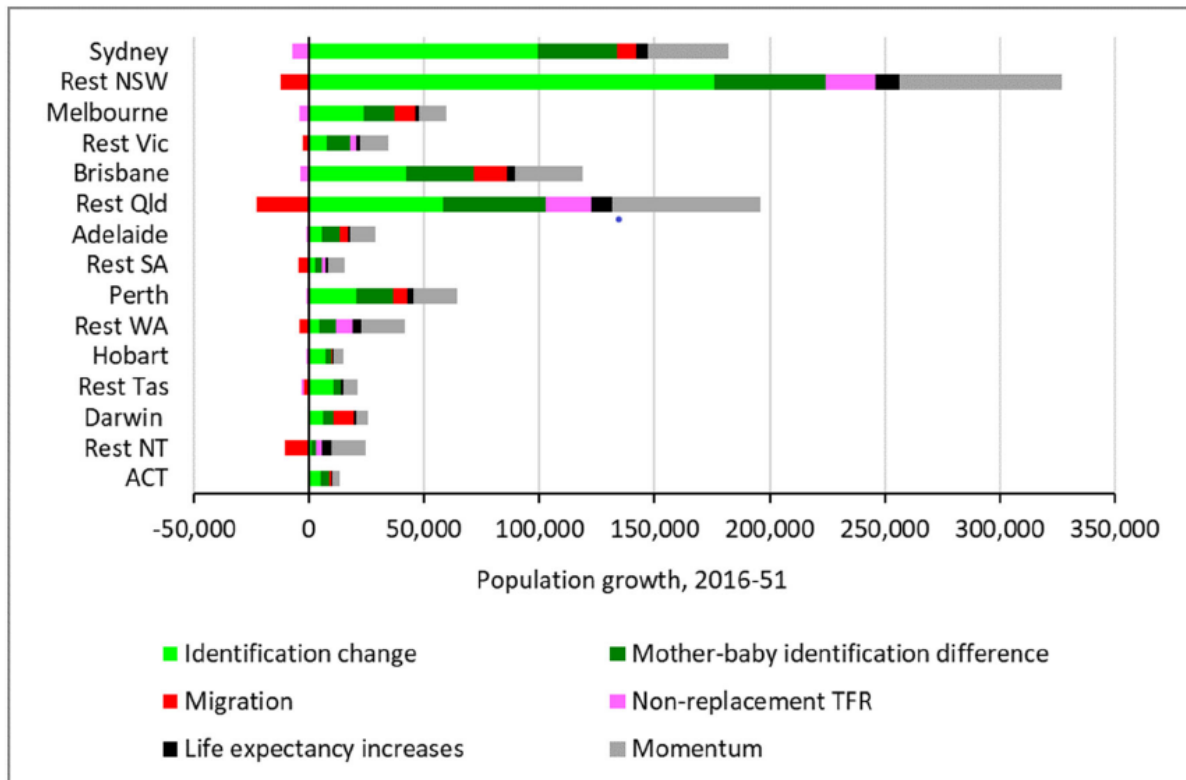


Note: Logarithmic scale on Y-axis

- High growth in cap. Cities and their hinterlands, lowest in remote areas
- Largest % increases in Sydney (201%), Melbourne (188%) and Brisbane (178%). Smallest for the Rest of the Northern Territory (25%) and Rest of South Australia (53%)
- 68% in cap cities in 2016, 41% in 2051. But rest NSW and rest QLD large in 2016 and largest by 2021 (primarily large cities – eg Wollongong, Cairns, Townsville)

Results of decomposition

Demographic factors contributing to projected Aboriginal population growth by GCCSA region, 2016–2051.



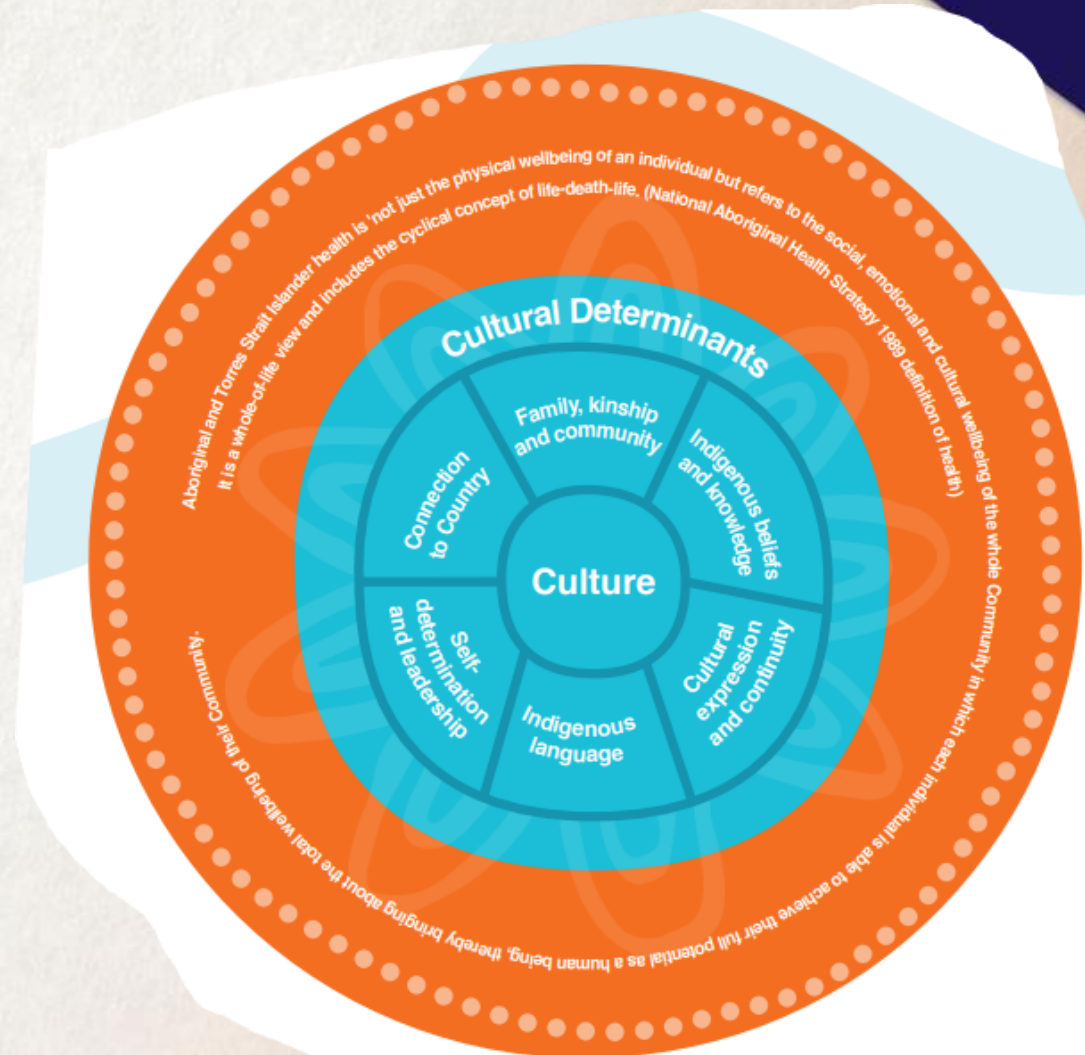
- Identification change contributes >50% of growth in Sydney, rest of NSW, Hobart and rest of Tas. Nationally 42%
- Life expectancy gains (black) , below replacement TFR (pink) make only modest contributions
- General migration to cap cities from rest of state regions (red)
- Population momentum (grey) and mother-baby identification differences (dark green) significantly contribute

Part III

What can we learn from this issue; as social scientists and specifically as demographers?

1. Something has to change

- Consistently identify?
- Ancestry, proof of one parent?
- Using multiple administrative linked datasets?
- Projections and life expectancy methods must include identification change assumptions
- All raise the difficult nexus of history, ongoing trauma, free choice and data sovereignty
- On the latter – the call for change is rightly getting much louder



2. Indigenous (and others) data sovereignty



*Maianayri
Wingara*

INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY

Right of Indigenous Peoples to govern the collection, management access, interpretation, dissemination and reuse of data related to them



Relates to all data about Indigenous Peoples, Country and resources or has significant impact on these



Reaffirms Indigenous Peoples' obligations to respect knowledge (data) and to recognise data as belonging to the collective



Premised on data accountability to Indigenous Peoples as per UNDRIP



Demands that data reflect Indigenous Peoples' priorities and be used to enhance Indigenous collective wellbeing

Definition derived from Kukutai & Taylor 2016; Snipp 2016;

3. Applied learnings

- Sometimes referred to as ethnic or cultural mobility, identification change is one of Australia's major demographic trends
- Will continue in foreseeable future. Reflects positive social change but further spotlights our dark past (not too distant)
- Brings into question targeted policies/targeted investments where Indigenous status is proxy for disadvantage
- Referendum for a voice to Parliament is hopefully a major crossroad for Indigenous enrichment of our country's future (date not set)



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4. Thoughts on learnings for demographers



- Emphasises our responsibility to apply demographic analysis and lenses to contribute to positive change
- The past always influences the present - our job is to work out how and why?
- We may be good with numbers, but must seek the truth on what is behind them (all Dēmos are heterogeneous)
- Digging into numbers can help us/ others redress stereotypes



Source: J. Ratelband & J. Bouwer - Series of school engravings by J. Ratelband & J. Bouwer first published in Amsterdam (1767 -1779).

For further reading...

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). *Understanding change in counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Census*.
- Shalley, F., Griffiths, K. & Wilson, T. No Longer Indigenous. *Popul Res Policy Rev* 42, 53 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-023-09801-2>
- Taylor, A., Wilson, T., Temple, J., Kelaher, M. & Eades, S. (2020). The future growth and spatial shift of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population, 2016-2051. *Population, Space and Place*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2401>
- Temple, J., Wilson, T. & Taylor, A., Kelaher, M. and Eades, S. (2020). Ageing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population: Numerical, Structural, Timing and Spatial Aspects. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13001>
- Wilson, T. & Taylor, A. (2016). How Reliable Are Indigenous Population Projections? *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, Vol 19 No 3. 39-57.



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The End