

Some Labour Market Measurement Issues for Indigenous Australians

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Abstract

The collection of the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) in 2002 provides a valuable new source of data on Indigenous labour force status. Apart from the 1994 NATSIS until now the only useful data available to assess the labour market circumstances of Indigenous Australians are the five yearly Census collections. NATSISS improves on the Census in three ways: one, it identifies CDEP scheme employment; two, for the first time, analysis of labour market issues is possible in very remote areas of Australia; and three, it contains information on a wide range of somewhat unusual social, demographic, cultural and economic variables, such as health status, speaking an Aboriginal language, having used an employment service and access to transport. Even so, no data set is perfect and NATSISS suffers from not having any information on a very important variable for an understanding of economic success or failure, the length of labour market experience. By comparing wage and employment econometric estimations with those available in a more complete data set, HILDA, we are able to illustrate the significance of this omission.

1. Introduction

The continuing low employment rates and general labour market disadvantage of Indigenous Australians have been well documented (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen, 1979; Daly, 1995; Hunter, 2004). However, our understanding of the reasons for this labour market disadvantage is constrained by the limited data available with respect to the Indigenous population. This lack of understanding hampers the development of labour market and related policies to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

The collection of the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) in 2002 provides a valuable new source of data on Indigenous labour force status (see other articles in this edition). Before the collection of the 2002 NATSISS, the main sources of data on Indigenous labour force status—and the only

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sources that could be used to reliably measure change—have been the five-yearly censuses from 1971 to 2001.¹ While the census data provide valuable information on trends in labour force status, working hours, occupation and industry, there is very limited information on other important labour market topics such as the duration of unemployment, difficulties experienced in finding employment, and the identification of discouraged workers. Furthermore, the census has very limited or no data on a range of economic, demographic, social and cultural factors which are likely to be important in explaining labour market outcomes.

The only other nationally representative data on Indigenous Australians is the 1994 NATSIS.² Although the 1994 NATSIS provides data on a much wider range of topics than the census, the information is now over a decade old, and the 2002 NATSISS provides a valuable *new* source of information on labour market issues.

The 2002 NATSISS collects similar information to the 1994 NATSIS on labour market issues, and thus represents a valuable and timely addition to data sets with information on Indigenous labour market outcomes. In broad terms, the information on key labour market variables is comparable between the 1994 NATSIS and 2002 NATSISS, which allows some changes over time to be assessed.³

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the labour market information available in the 2002 NATSISS and to describe some of the key strengths and limitations of the data. In order to illustrate the value of the 2002 NATSISS, three examples are offered of highly useful types of data that are available.

But no data set is ideal, and we consider in some detail an important limitation of the 2002 NATSISS data. This relates to the omission of key variables from the data set, specifically labour market experience and the length of time spent with the current employer. We use an alternative data set with information on actual labour market experience to illustrate the potential significance of its omission for statistical analyses of both wages and joblessness. The value of our method is that it can be applied to illustrate the significance or otherwise of the omission of other variables from the 2002 NATSISS. A detailed overview of the 2002 NATSISS, including sampling, exclusions issues and non-sampling matters is provided by Biddle and Hunter (2006) and Webster, Rogers and Black (2006).

2. Strengths of the 2002 NATSISS

There are three main areas in which the 2002 NATSISS data has advantages over the census for the analysis of labour market issues.

First, the 2002 NATSISS accurately identifies Community Development

¹ However, it should be noted that the ABS has recently released some experimental estimates from the LFS (ABS, 2006).

² There are a number of data sets which contain limited information on labour market issues and which have a sufficient Indigenous sample to allow meaningful analysis. Examples are the 1995 and 2002 National Health Surveys collected by the ABS. There are also surveys of specific groups of Indigenous people, such as the longitudinal survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job-seekers collected by the then Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

³ There are issues relating to the sampling which need to be taken into account when making comparisons between these two surveys. They are discussed in detail by Biddle and Hunter in this issue.

Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme employment, which is not the case in the census.⁴ This is a major limitation of the latter because the CDEP scheme represents a crucial difference between Indigenous and mainstream labour market experiences. Under the scheme funding is allocated to CDEP organisations for remuneration at a level similar to, or a little higher than, income support payments, with the finances being enhanced with administrative and capital support. It is thus used as a means to provide employment, training and enterprise support to Indigenous participants (see, Altman, Gray and Levitus, 2005 for a detailed discussion of the CDEP scheme). To illustrate how important the scheme is, we note that in 2002 employment in CDEP accounted for over one-quarter of the total employment of Indigenous Australians, with around 13 per cent of the Indigenous working-age population being employed in the scheme.

The importance of identifying CDEP employment for different areas of Australia is illustrated in Table 1, which shows Indigenous labour force status by region using the 2002 NATSISS.⁵ In non-remote areas, just 4.7 per cent of the Indigenous working-age population was employed in the CDEP scheme, implying that in these areas failure to take account of CDEP employment is likely to be relatively unimportant. But in remote and very remote areas, 16.9 per cent and 42.2 per cent respectively of the working age population was employed in the scheme (see, Table 1).

Table 1 - Indigenous Labour Force Status by Region, 2002

	<i>Non-remote</i>	<i>Remote</i>	<i>Very Remote</i>
	<i>Per cent</i>		
Employed			
CDEP employed	4.7	16.9	42.2
Mainstream employed	41.2	31.7	14.9
Total in the labour force	63.3	58.7	61.6
Population (no.) ^a	196 300	23 100	49 850

Note: Table population is Indigenous persons aged 15–64 years.

Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 (derived from Altman, Gray and Levitus, 2005, table 1)

⁴ CDEP employment is not reliably identified by the census because the census form does not include CDEP employment as a separate category, although in the 1996 and 2001 censuses a different census form (the Special Indigenous Form, or SIF) was used in some discrete Indigenous communities. The SIF has a separate category for CDEP employment. Although this has improved identification of CDEP employment, many Indigenous people participating in the CDEP scheme are not enumerated using the SIF. Administrative data on CDEP participants for the time of the 2001 Census indicates that 30 474 Indigenous people worked in the scheme, whereas the census identifies only 17 800 participants (Hunter, 2004, p. 5). The CDEP scheme was first introduced in 1977 in a small number of remote Aboriginal communities in response to concerns that the introduction of unemployment payments would result in social problems. The scheme has expanded into regional and urban areas. Funding is allocated to CDEP organisations for wages for participants at a level similar to or a little higher than income support payments, enhanced with administrative and capital support. CDEP organizations provide employment, training, activity, enterprise support or income support to Indigenous participants.

⁵ It is possible to analyse labour force status for the following geographic categories: non-remote, remote and very remote. In table 10.1, we have aggregated areas into the categories of 'non-remote', 'remote' and 'very remote' in order to simplify the analysis and allow us to highlight the major issues.

Using the 2002 NATSISS it is possible to estimate the effects of CDEP employment on a range of important outcomes, such as income and working hours. Combined with the 1994 NATSIS, we are able to analyse trends in labour force status (including non-CDEP employment) with more confidence than has been previously possible (using census data combined with administrative data). It is also possible to analyse changes in the determinants of mainstream employment at an individual level (although not for the same individual, which would require longitudinal data).

Further, the 2002 NATSISS can also be used to estimate the associations between CDEP employment and a range of social, health and cultural variables.

The second major advantage of the 2002 NATSISS is that, for the first time, analysis of labour market issues is possible in very remote areas of Australia. The ability to do this is highly valuable because the labour market context of very remote areas (and, to a lesser extent, remote areas) is very different from those in the rest of Australia, for reasons now discussed.

One is that Indigenous people in very remote areas are often living in communities in which the vast majority of the population is Indigenous. Two, these communities are in sparsely populated regions of Australia which are extremely distant from markets, both geographically and culturally. Third, these regions were colonised relatively late, with some parts of Arnhem Land and central Australia as recently as during the last 50 years. This has meant that customary (kin-based) systems and practices remain robust and there is ongoing contestation between mainstream Australian and Indigenous world views.

Furthermore, according to conventional economic and social indicators, there is a growing disparity between Indigenous people living in remote areas and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians living in non-remote areas (ABS, 2004a; 2004b). And the evidence is that some discrete Indigenous communities in remote Australia are in economic and social crisis.

The different labour market context in respective regions is illustrated clearly by the fact that in non-remote areas the mainstream employment rate is 41.2 per cent, in remote areas 31.7 per cent, and in very remote areas just 14.9 per cent (see table 1). Human capital and demographic characteristics also differ dramatically across regions. For example, education levels are much lower in remote and very remote areas than they are in non-remote areas, and the proportion of the population speaking an Indigenous language is much higher in remote areas than in non-remote areas. These factors are bound to influence the nature, variance and quality of Indigenous labour market experiences and it is a real bonus that the information is part of the 2002 NATSISS.

A third advantage of the 2002 NATSISS is that it contains information on a wide range of somewhat unusual social, demographic, cultural, and economic variables, many of which are potentially important for understanding labour market outcomes. Examples include health status, speaking an Aboriginal language, having used an employment service, access to transport, and having been arrested. Note that many of these variables are not available from the census.

In general, it appears that questions relating to labour market topics are very similar (virtually identical) in the community and non-community questionnaires (see, ABS, (2005) and the list of variables in table 2). While there may be some effects generated by differences in the data collection method Computer Assisted Personal

Interviewing (CAPI) versus paper-based questionnaire, we do not anticipate that this will have introduced major biases. While those analysing the data will need to carefully consider the extent to which the remote and non-remote data are comparable for specific applications, our reading of the questionnaires suggests that there is no particular reason for expecting there to be comparability issues.

The questions are also, in large part, standard ABS questions. This allows comparative studies of labour market outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians using the 2002 NATSISS and other data sets, such as the General Social Survey (GSS).

Table 2 - Labour Market Data Collected in the 2002 NATSISS

<i>Labour force status</i>	<i>Employment support</i>
Duration of unemployment	Whether used employment support services
Hours usually worked in all jobs	Whether needed employment support services
Full-time/part-time status	Reasons did not use employment support services
Employment sector	Income
Whether work allows for cultural responsibilities	Level of income
	Personal gross weekly income
Precariousness – job security in next 12 months	Household gross weekly income
CDEP:	Source of income
Whether CDEP participant	All sources of personal income
Duration on CDEP	Main source of personal income
Considers CDEP participation to be a job	Government pension/allowance
Barriers to employment	Type of government pension/allowance (primary)
Whether had difficulties finding work	Type of government pension/allowance (auxiliary)
All difficulties finding work	Government support
Main difficulty finding work	Time on government support in last two years
Discouraged jobseekers	
Whether would like a job	
All reasons not looking for a job	

Source: Derived from ABS

3. An Illustration of New Information Available from the 2002 NATSISS

The 2002 NATSISS, for the first time, provides information on how long CDEP participants have been participating in the CDEP scheme. Information of this type is important in assessing whether CDEP employment is a destination or a stepping stone to mainstream employment. While there are some ambiguities in the NATSISS question, ‘How long have you been on CDEP’, it does provide valuable data. One difficulty with the question is that it is unclear whether participants who had multiple spells of CDEP would give the duration of CDEP participation from when they first participated in the scheme or whether it would be from when they most recently started again on the scheme.

The length of time that participants spend on the CDEP scheme varies across regions. In very remote areas, 40.6 per cent of participants had been on the CDEP scheme for five years or more and 21.8 per cent had been on the CDEP scheme for less than one year (see table 3). Similarly, in remote areas, many participants had been on the scheme for a number of years, although the average duration was shorter. In non-remote areas, only a minority of participants (15.2 per cent) had been on the scheme

for five years or more and 38.0 per cent had been on the scheme for less than one year.

When interpreting these figures it should be kept in mind that the length of time that a person can be on the CDEP scheme is constrained by the length of time a CDEP scheme place has been available to them and, on average, places have been available for longer in remote and very remote areas. It will also depend on the age of the participant, although this could be taken into account in a sophisticated analysis of the data.

Table 3 - Duration on CDEP by Region of Residence, 2002

<i>Length of Time on Scheme</i>	<i>Non-remote</i>	<i>Remote</i>	<i>Very Remote</i>
	<i>per cent</i>		
Less than 1 year	38.0	29.7	21.8
1 to less than 2 years	17.4	10.8	14.7
2 to less than 3 years	14.1	13.5	12.2
3 to less than 4 years	8.7	10.8	7.1
4 to less than 5 years	6.5	10.8	3.6
5 years or more	15.2	24.3	40.6
Population (no.)	9 200	3 900	21 100

Note: Table population is CDEP participants.

Source: The 2002 NATSISS, derived from Altman, Gray and Levitus (2005, table 5)

Another important topic on which the 2002 NATSISS provides new information is participation in vocational education and training (VET). Participation in VET is an important way in which those with low education can increase their skill level and improve their labour market outcomes. Of particular interest is the extent to which CDEP scheme participants receive VET and hence are improving skill levels and their chances of finding mainstream employment, an important policy objective of the scheme.

Table 4 presents information on participation in the VET sector by labour force status and region in the previous 12 months. There are relatively high rates of participation in VET in the last 12 months in all areas, although rates in very remote areas are half those in major cities. The CDEP employed overall have lower rates of undertaking VET than the mainstream employed. The only exception is in major cities where 54.8 per cent of the CDEP employed undertook VET, compared to 46.9 per cent of the mainstream employed.

Table 4 - Participation in VET in the Last 12 Months, by Labour Force Status and Region, 2002

	<i>Major Cities</i>	<i>Inner Regional</i>	<i>Outer Regional</i>	<i>Remote</i>	<i>Very Remote</i>
	<i>Per cent</i>				
CDEP	54.8	45.8	45.9	30.8	18.0
Mainstream	46.9	51.7	52.8	57.5	43.2
Unemployed	27.5	21.2	25.5	26.1	13.6
NILF	2.8	2.1	7.1	3.7	1.6
Total	31.0	28.5	30.5	29.0	15.9

Note: Table population is Indigenous persons aged 15–64 years.

Source: The 2002 NATSISS, derived from Altman, Gray and Levitus (2005, table 10)

4. A Limitation of the Survey

All surveys have both strengths and weaknesses, and the above discussion has highlighted aspects of the former with respect to the 2002 NATSISS. What now follows considers some deficiencies of these data, in particular the lack of useful information concerning labour market experience. Specifically, the data set has no measures of either the length of time individuals have spent in paid employment (general labour market experience) or how long employed individuals have been in their current place of work (tenure). The discussion now examines the potential significance of the omission from the data of measures of general labour market experience.

An important focus of modern labour economics concerns the role of skills or, to use the accepted parlance, human capital. Human capital is seen to be a major—even *the* major—contributor to individuals' success or otherwise in the labour market. There are two important aspects of human capital: formal education and the skills acquired by individuals from on-the-job training. In both areas, there are significant issues associated with measurement, since the pure human capital aspects of both education and training are not directly observed.

Labour market experience is typically represented in surveys such as the 2002 NATSISS by the length of time spent in paid employment. Unfortunately, this variable is unavailable in the survey, and this raises the possibility that labour market statistical analyses of the 2002 NATSISS will provide inadequate, even misleading, results concerning the true determinants of Indigenous labour market success or failure.

Not having information on labour market employment history can be seen to be a major weakness of the 2002 NATSISS. The omission is particularly important because Indigenous Australians have much higher rates of movement between labour force states than non-Indigenous Australians (Gray and Hunter, 2005) and are much more likely to have interrupted labour market histories. For example, using a longitudinal sample of Indigenous job-seekers, Hunter, Gray and Jones (2000) find that 33.6 per cent of Indigenous males and 37.6 per cent of Indigenous females had been employed for less than 25 per cent of the time since leaving school. Only 16.5 per cent and 18.0 per cent of Indigenous males and females respectively had been employed for more than 75 per cent of the time since leaving school.

In order to illustrate the extent of the potential problem associated with the omission of measures of labour market experience from the 2002 NATSISS, we have examined econometric modelling in two areas: wages and the probability of being in employment. Our aim is to demonstrate the likely empirical importance of having to use the wrong variable, the approach being to use an alternative data set that contains both a poor and a better measure of labour market experience. The poor measure is the length of time individuals could have spent in the labour force after finishing formal education (which can be derived in NATSISS 2002), and the better measure is the number of years an individual has actually spent in paid employment. The models are estimated using both labour market experience measures and the results compared. For these illustrations we use the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia (HILDA) survey.

We have chosen the female sample, since the potential significance of not having the more correct experience measure will be greater for groups with less

attachment to the paid labour force, such as women (and Indigenous individuals). The econometric models are now briefly described.

Wage determination exercises take many forms, with the most basic human capital approach being represented by the following equation:

$$\text{Wage} = a + b\text{EXP} + c\text{EXP}^2 + d\text{YOS} + e$$

Where wage is the log of the hourly wage received by the individual, EXP is the proxy or truer measure of the number of years of paid employment, and YOS is the number of years of formal education. EXP² is the square of the experience term, which is included because it is believed that the wage-experience term is non-linear. Table 5 compares the coefficients from the estimation of this wage equation (with the log of wages as the dependent variable) for both the poor and improved experience variables, in each case estimated using HILDA data.

Table 5 - OLS Wage Regressions^a

<i>Explanatory variables</i>	<i>Poor experience measure</i>	<i>Improved experience measure</i>
EXP	.0203	.0287
EXP ²	-.000383	-.000758
YOS	.0572	.0525
Constant	1.618	1.689
R ²	0.11	0.12

Note: All coefficients are significant at the 1 per cent level.

Source: Authors calculations.

While the results are apparently similar for the two specifications (certainly the coefficients on years of schooling are very close), closer inspection suggests that at low levels of measured experience there are significant differences in the wage relationships. This is illustrated in Table 6, which shows the percentage change in individuals' hourly wages for additional years of experience at different levels of experience for both the poor and improved experience measures.

Table 6 - Effect of Experience on Wage (percentage)

<i>Measured experience (in years)</i>	<i>Poor experience measure</i>	<i>Improved experience measure</i>	<i>Percentage Difference</i>
1	1.95	2.72	39
5	1.65	2.11	28
10	1.26	1.35	7

Source: Authors calculations.

The results of table 6 suggest the following:

- At one year of experience, the effect of an additional year of experience on wages is estimated to be 1.95 per cent using the (poor) measure of experience, compared to about 2.7 per cent using the (better) measure of experience

available from HILDA. This difference is 39 per cent, which is large.

- At moderate levels of experience (e.g. five years), the better measure of experience still results in a higher wage-experience relationship than that found for the poor experience measure, but the difference has been reduced to about 28 per cent.
- At high levels of experience (10 years), there is effectively no difference found between the wage-experience estimates.

We then repeated the above exercise with respect to estimating the determinants of whether or not a person is employed. The typical econometric approach used in this area takes an equation of the following form:

$$EP = a + bEXP + cEXP^2 + dEDUC + eDEMOGRAPHY + e$$

Where EP is the probability that an individual is employed, EDUC are measures of education, and DEMOGRAPHY reflects demographic factors, including in our exercise measures of marital status, immigrant status, and the presence and age of children. The major relationship sizes for both experience specifications are available from the authors, the estimated experience effects being shown in table 7.

Table 7 - Effect of Experience on Probability of Employment (percentage)

<i>Measured experience (in years)</i>	<i>Poor experience measure</i>	<i>Improved experience measure</i>	<i>Percentage Difference</i>
1	2.30	5.10	222
10	0.97	2.56	263
25	-0.71	-0.47	66

Source: Authors calculations

The data of table 7 suggest strongly that the poor measure of labour market experience available from the 2002 NATSISS has a significant potential to be misleading with respect to the effects of labour market experience on employment. The following results can be highlighted:

At one year of experience, the poor measure suggests an additional year of measured experience increases the probability of employment by 2.3 percentage points, but the (more accurate) experience measure suggests that the relationship is more than double this, at over five percentage points.

At 10 years of experience, the estimated differences between the two data sets in the role played by labour market experience is even higher: about one per cent for the poor measure, and nearly three percentage points for the improved measure, a difference of over 250 per cent.

At very high levels of labour market experience, 25 years, the apparent problem with using the experience measure available from NATSISS has been reduced considerably, to the extent that the poor experience measure now apparently overstates the effect of experience on employment probabilities (-0.71 compared to -0.47 using the improved measure available in HILDA).

These comparative exercises make it apparent that the statistical problem associated with the omission in the 2002 NATSISS of a good measure of labour market experience are potentially very important. By comparing the same modelling with results found with a data set with a better measure of experience, it is clear that estimations using the poor measure results in an apparent understatement of the value of experience for wages, and that this understatement becomes less as the experience measure increases. Similarly, results on the determinants of employment using the 2002 NATSISS seem to get the story quite wrong with respect to the true role of experience. And, as with wages, the extent of the problem seems to be greater at the lower levels of measured experience.

It is important to record that the interpretation difficulties associated with the 2002 NATSISS not having an accurate measure for labour market experience seem to be confined to estimation of the true role of experience for wages and employment status. In other words, the modelling and data problem has not affected estimates of the role of variables such as education with respect to wages, and education and demography with respect to the determinants of employment. This suggests that even though researchers are unlikely to be able to show with accuracy the effect of experience on labour market success, there are no obvious associated difficulties for determining the true role for Indigenous labour market performance of other critical variables.

5. Concluding Comments

The 2002 NATSISS provides a valuable new source of data on labour market issues for Indigenous Australians providing information that has not previously been available. It also repeats much of the labour market content of the 1994 NATSISS and thus allows the 1994 NATSISS estimates to be updated. The information provided by NATSISS 2002 should prove to be valuable for the development of policy aimed at improving the labour market outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The opportunity is provided to analyse the determinants of labour market outcomes and how they vary between very remote, remote and non-remote areas of Australia.

The information provided by the NATSISS 2002 Survey is clearly of relevance to the current policy debates concerning Indigenous labour market policies and, in particular, with respect to which policies will be most effective in increasing the mainstream employment rates of Indigenous Australians (e.g. see *Achieving Indigenous Economic Independence: Indigenous Economic Development Strategy*). The preliminary analysis of the NATSISS 2002 presented in this paper highlights the challenges faced in increasing employment rates in the short to medium term in remote and very remote areas of Australia and the role of the current reliance on employment in the CDEP scheme.

As discussed, the fact that (unlike the census) the NATSISS 2002 reliably identifies CDEP participants provides the opportunity to focus on this group, and this is of particular policy interest at present (e.g. see DEWR (2005), *Building on Success CDEP – Future Directions*, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra). The information concerning length of time spent on the CDEP scheme is new and particularly valuable and allows insight into the extent to which participation in the CDEP scheme provides a stepping-stone to mainstream employment.

However, while NATSISS 2002 is a very valuable new data source it does have several limitations. In particular, there is no direct information on critical variables such as labour market experience and tenure in the current job. These are important variables for understanding many labour market relationships, and their absence will likely restrict the value of some types of analysis. We have been able to illustrate the extent to which this is an issue with respect to the determinants of wages and employment status.

The 2002 NATSISS survey will certainly advance our understanding of labour market outcomes, but the cross-sectional nature of the survey will make the identification of some causal relationships quite difficult and, in some cases, impossible. A longitudinal labour market study for the Indigenous population needs to be considered seriously.

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