



# **Australian Social Trends**

**2008**

## **Article: Housing and services in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS

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# Housing and services in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

**In 2006, 74% of people living in remote Indigenous communities had a primary school located in their community, 57% had access to a child care centre and 21% had access to a swimming pool.**

**H**ousing that provides adequate shelter and essential services (such as functional sewerage and water connections) is a fundamental expectation of most Australians. Not having access to housing that meets these basic standards poses risks to the health of the individuals and communities affected. Compared with other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have higher rates of illness associated with poor housing conditions and overcrowding.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to housing, access to a range of services (such as health and educational facilities) is important for building and maintaining long term health and wellbeing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may experience more difficulty than other Australians in accessing these services, particularly in remote areas.

## Community location and size

In 2006, almost one-fifth (18%) or 93,000 of Australia's estimated 517,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders lived in a discrete Indigenous community. Housing in these communities is mostly provided by Indigenous Housing Organisations, which manage these dwellings on behalf of the people living in the community. For more information on the whole Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, see *Australian Social Trends 2008*, Population distribution, pp. 9–12.

The majority (80,500) of people living in discrete Indigenous communities lived in either Remote or Very Remote area communities. This population accounted for around 61% of all Indigenous people in Remote and Very Remote areas. Discrete Indigenous communities in Remote and Very Remote areas are the focus of this article and are referred to as *remote Indigenous communities*.

## Discrete Indigenous communities, selected characteristics — 2006

|  | Units | Remote communities | Non-remote communities | Total |
|--|-------|--------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Discrete Indigenous communities                | no.   | 1 112              | 75                     | 1 187 |
| Total IHO managed permanent dwellings          | '000  | 13.4               | 2.2                    | 15.7  |
| Total persons                                  | '000  | 80.5               | 12.5                   | 93.0  |
| Proportion of persons living in community type | %     | 86.6               | 13.4                   | 100.0 |

Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

## Data sources and definitions

This article uses information from the 2001 and 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Surveys (CHINS). CHINS was conducted by the ABS on behalf of the then Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in 2006, and on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2001. The surveys collected information from discrete Indigenous communities and Indigenous Housing Organisations across Australia. Data for overcrowding are from the 2001 and 2006 Censuses of Population and Housing.

The term *discrete* Indigenous community is used to describe a geographic location, contained within physical or legal boundaries, which is inhabited or intended to be inhabited predominantly by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

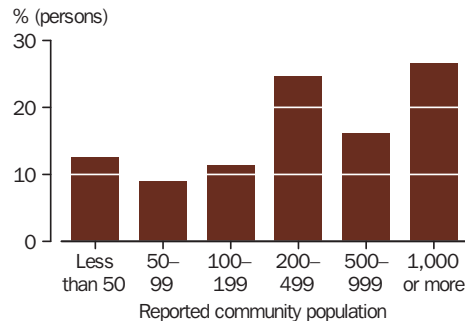
An *Indigenous Housing Organisation* (IHO) is any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisation which is responsible for managing housing for Indigenous people, and includes community organisations such as Resource Agencies and Land Councils. In 2006, there were 264 IHOs managing 14,800 permanent dwellings in Remote and Very Remote areas, with 91% (13,400) in discrete Indigenous communities.

An *Indigenous household* is a household that includes at least one person who identifies as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin.

The remoteness of discrete Indigenous communities has been defined using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification for *Remoteness Area* (RA). It classifies areas sharing common characteristics of remoteness into six broad geographical regions (Remoteness Areas). The remoteness of a point is measured by its physical distance by road to the nearest urban centre. The six Remoteness Areas are: Major Cities of Australia; Inner Regional Australia; Outer Regional Australia; Remote Australia; Very Remote Australia; and Migratory. The Remoteness Area names used in this article are abbreviated versions of these names with 'Australia' omitted. For the purposes of this article *remote Indigenous communities* comprise discrete Indigenous communities located in *Remote Australia* and *Very Remote Australia*. Together these remoteness categories accounted for 94% of discrete Indigenous communities in 2006. For more information see *Statistical Geography Volume 1 – Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), 2006* (ABS cat. no. 1216.0).

The remaining 12,500 Indigenous people in non-remote discrete communities lived in either Major Cities or the Inner/Outer Regional areas, in communities such as Redfern in Sydney and Framlingham in western Victoria.

### Population distribution, remote communities, by size of community — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

In 2006, 26% of people in remote Indigenous communities lived in one of the fourteen communities with 1,000 or more people such as Yuendumu in the Northern Territory and Hope Vale in Queensland. A further 41% lived in communities with between 200 and 1,000 residents and 20% were in communities with between 50 and 199 residents. Nearly 13% of people lived in the 838 communities with a population of less than 50 people.

### Physical condition of housing

Not all people in remote Indigenous communities in 2006 had a permanent dwelling as a home – 3,400 people were living in temporary dwellings such as sheds or humpies. This amounted to 4% of the total population in these communities.

A significant number of those who lived in a permanent dwelling experienced problems with the condition of their home. In 2006, one-third (33%) of dwellings managed by Indigenous Housing Organisations in remote communities needed either major repairs

### Dwellings and their condition

*Permanent dwellings* are buildings designed for people to live in, with fixed walls, a roof and doors.

*Temporary dwellings* are caravans, tin sheds without internal dividing walls, humpies, dongas, or other makeshift shelters.

Housing conditions refer to the condition of permanent dwellings owned or managed by an Indigenous Housing Organisation, as assessed and categorised by community housing officers, in terms of the costs of repairs needed.

- ◆ *Minor or no repairs*: repairs of less than \$20,000;
- ◆ *Major repairs*: repairs of \$20,000 to less than \$60,000;
- ◆ *Replacement*: repairs of \$60,000 or more.

These ranges were higher in medium and high-cost areas.

### Overcrowding

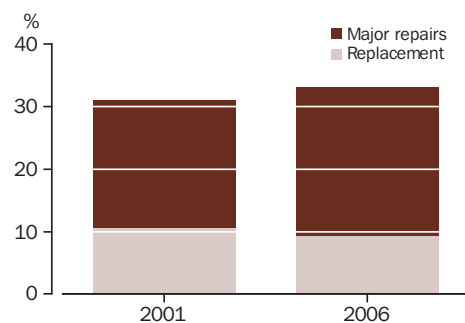
The *Canadian National Occupancy Standard* for overcrowding is sensitive to both household size and composition. It measures the bedroom requirements of a household by specifying that:

- ◆ there should be no more than two persons per bedroom;
- ◆ children less than 5 years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom;
- ◆ children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom; and
- ◆ single household members aged 18 years and over should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples.

Households living in dwellings where this standard cannot be met are considered to be overcrowded.

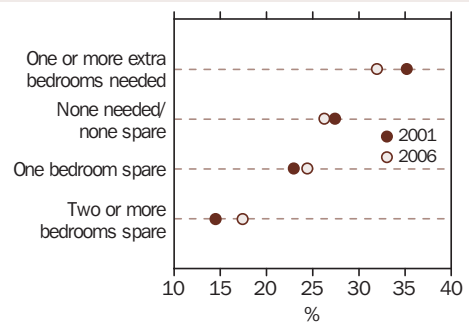
(24%) or replacement (9%). This was similar to 2001 when a total of 31% of dwellings were in need of either major repairs or replacement.

### Need for repair: permanent dwellings, remote Indigenous communities



Source: ABS 2001 and 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Surveys.

### Overcrowding for Indigenous households in remote Australia



Source: ABS 2001 and 2006 Censuses of Population and Housing.

### ...overcrowding

Overcrowded conditions can put stress on household amenities such as cooking equipment and sewerage systems, potentially affecting safety, and may also contribute to higher transmission rates of infectious diseases. At the time of the 2006 Census, 32% of all Indigenous households in Remote and Very Remote areas (including those in discrete Indigenous communities and other locations) needed one or more extra bedrooms to adequately accommodate all residents. This represented a small decrease from 35% in 2001. Just over one-quarter (26%) were occupied to capacity and 42% had one or more bedrooms to spare.

### Supply of essential services

For most of the Australian population, improvements in housing conditions, drinking water quality, sanitation and disease control in the early 20th century led to significant improvements in public health including large declines in infant mortality. While the standard of infrastructure in remote Indigenous communities generally remains below that enjoyed by Australians in most other locations, there were improvements in the availability and quality of infrastructure services in the five years to 2006. In particular, there were improvements in water and electricity supply and sewerage disposal. Overall, people in large communities had better access than those in smaller communities to more reliable types of services.

Proportionally more people used a town supply as their main source of water in 2006 than in 2001 (28% compared with 12%) and this was the result of more communities using a town supply as their main source of water (up 15% to 152 in 2006). Nevertheless, in 2006, more than half (54%) of all people in remote Indigenous communities relied on bore water. Very few people lived in communities where there was no organised supply of water (less than 0.1%).

In 2006, a greater proportion of people had access to the state grid for their electricity supply than in 2001 (28% compared with 24%), as more communities accessed this type of electricity connection (up 10%, to 204 in 2006). Community generators remained the main source of electricity supply for the majority of people (62%) in remote Indigenous communities in 2006. Very few people lived in communities with no organised supply of electricity (less than 1%).

### Essential services in remote Indigenous communities(a)

|                            | <i>Proportion of persons with access to supply</i> |      |
|----------------------------|--|------|
|                            | 2001   | 2006 |
|                            | %  | %    |
| Service supply             |  |      |
| Main source of water       |  |      |
| Town supply                | 12.0   | 28.3 |
| Bore water                 | 66.2   | 54.0 |
| Rain water tank            | 4.0  | 2.9  |
| River/reservoir            | 16.0   | 12.0 |
| No organised supply        | 0.1  | —    |
| Main source of electricity |  |      |
| State grid                 | 23.5   | 28.5 |
| Community generators       | 69.1   | 62.3 |
| Domestic generators        | 2.3  | 2.5  |
| Solar/solar hybrid         | 3.9  | 4.5  |
| No organised supply        | 0.7  | 0.4  |
| Main sewerage system       |  |      |
| Town system                | 8.4  | 30.0 |
| Water-borne system         | 50.4   | 37.7 |
| Septic tanks               | 35.9   | 28.3 |
| Pit toilets                | 3.8  | 3.2  |
| No organised system        | 1.2  | 0.3  |

(a) Data are presented for selected essential services only and therefore components do not add to 100%.

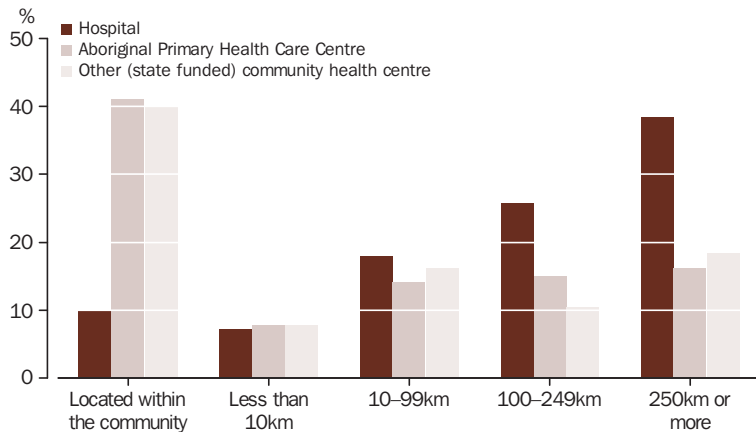
Source: ABS 2001 and 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Surveys.

Between 2001 and 2006, there was a 55% increase in the number of communities connected to a town sewerage system as their main form of waste disposal. This resulted in the proportion of people whose community had town sewerage increasing from 8% to 30%. As a consequence, a lower proportion of people relied on water-borne systems and septic tanks (38% and 28% respectively) in 2006 than in 2001 (50% and 36%). Virtually all people in remote Indigenous communities had access to some kind of organised sewerage system.

### ...reliability of services

In 2006, 59% of people living in remote Indigenous communities with a population of 50 or more had experienced an interruption to their water supply in the previous 12 months, with half of these people experiencing five or more interruptions.

## Proportion of population in remote Indigenous communities with access to health services — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

A smaller proportion of people in larger communities experienced an interruption to their electricity supply in 2006 (81%) than in 2001 (90%). Around one in five people (19% or 13,000 people) experienced 20 or more interruptions in 2006.

The reliability of sewerage systems in larger remote Indigenous communities has improved, with a decrease in the proportion of people affected by sewerage system overflows or leakages, down to 40% (or 28,000) in 2006 from 56% in 2001.

### Health services

Indigenous people in remote areas may face particular difficulty in accessing health services due to the travel involved to reach

### Persons in larger remote communities(a) affected by service interruptions(b)(c)

|   | 2001          |              | 2006          |              |
|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
|   | '000          | %            | '000          | %            |
| Experienced water interruptions                                     | n.a.          | n.a.         | 41 500        | 59.0         |
| Experienced water interruption five times or more                   | n.a.          | n.a.         | 20 600        | 29.4         |
| Experienced electricity interruptions                               | 71 800        | 89.7         | 56 900        | 80.9         |
| Experienced electricity interruption 20 times or more               | 13 500        | 16.8         | 13 100        | 18.6         |
| Experienced sewerage system overflows or leakages                   | 44 500        | 55.6         | 27 900        | 39.7         |
| <b>Total persons living in larger remote Indigenous communities</b> | <b>80 000</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>70 300</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

(a) Larger communities are defined as those with a total population of 50 or more.

(b) In the 12 months prior to the survey.

(c) Data not collected in 'administered' communities with a population of less than 50.

Source: ABS 2001 and 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Surveys.

those services. In 2006, just one in ten people were in a community which had a hospital. However, three-quarters (75%) of people in remote Indigenous communities had an Aboriginal Health Care Centre or other community health centre located in their community. Access to health facilities was influenced by the size of the community. All people in communities with a population of 1,000 or more had either an Aboriginal Health Care Centre or community health centre located in their community, and 34% had a hospital. In contrast, 32% of people in communities of less than 200 people had either an Aboriginal Health Care Centre or community health centre located in their community and less than 1% had a hospital.

While most people in Indigenous communities have access to Aboriginal Health Care Centres or community health centres, not all centres have full-time trained medical staff able to provide treatment services. Instead, health professionals such as nurses and doctors are required to visit communities on a regular basis.

Most people living in communities (of at least 50 people) located 10 kilometres or more away from the nearest hospital had access to a nurse on a daily basis (77%). Only one in five (20%) had access to a doctor this frequently, however a further 41% had access to a doctor weekly or fortnightly. About 3% of people were able to access a doctor in their own community less than once every three months.

### Education services

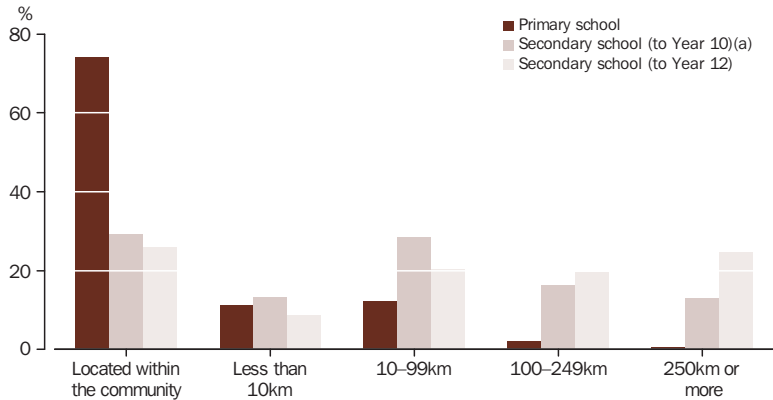
Increasingly, researchers and governments are realising the importance of early childhood learning for improved educational and social outcomes in later life.<sup>2,3</sup> In 2006, 54% of people in communities with more than 50 residents had pre-primary schooling services located in their community.

The majority (74%) of all people in remote Indigenous communities had a primary school within their community. A further 11% had a primary school located within 10 kilometres of their community and less than 1% of people were 250 kilometres or more away from their nearest primary school. Access was associated with community size – 95% of people living in communities of 1,000 or more people had a primary school located in their community compared with just 15% of those in communities with less than 50 residents.

While the majority of people in remote Indigenous communities in 2006 had relatively close access to primary schools, secondary school education was less readily



### Proportion of population in remote Indigenous communities with access to education services — 2006



(a) Excludes not stated.

Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

accessible. Around 29% of people in remote Indigenous communities had a secondary school that went up to Year 10 level located within their community, whereas slightly less (26%) had a school that went to Year 12 level. A Year 10 school was located up to 10 kilometres away for a further 13% of people, while 9% had a school that went to Year 12 within 10 kilometres.

### Access to other community facilities

In addition to adequate housing and the infrastructure required to support housing viability, a range of community facilities such as community halls, child care centres, libraries and sporting grounds contribute to the greater functioning of the community.

In 2006, 57% of people in remote communities with a population of 50 or more had access to a child care centre and 36% had access to a library. The vast majority of people in communities of this size had access to a community store (83%) and most had access to a public hall or meeting area (75%).

The population of a remote Indigenous community can fluctuate dramatically due to social, cultural and seasonal factors.<sup>1</sup> In addition to accommodation to alleviate overcrowding during times of peak visitor inflows, communities may require accommodation to meet the needs of particular groups of residents. In 2006, 65% of people had general visitor accommodation, 32% had accommodation for the aged and 32% had a women's refuge located within their community.

Nearly nine in ten (89%) people in remote communities with a population of 50 or more had access to some type of sporting facility within their community, with 81% of people having access to sports grounds, 74% having access to outdoor basketball or netball courts and 21% with access to a public swimming pool.

### Access to communication services

Increasingly, social participation is becoming more reliant on communication technology. Those without access to these services may experience difficulty maintaining cultural and social connections and be less able to access information and services that are available in the wider community. In 2006, 85% of people in all remote Indigenous communities had access to a public telephone and more than half (54%) had access to a public Internet connection.

Virtually all (99%) people living in remote Indigenous communities with a population of 50 or more in 2006 were able to receive television and radio broadcasts, with the most accessible resources being ABC

### Percentage of population with access to selected facilities(a) — 2006

| Communities with a population of 50 or more | %    |
|---|------|
| <b>Accommodation facilities</b>             |      |
| Visitor accommodation                       | 64.5 |
| Aged accommodation                          | 31.7 |
| Women's refuge                              | 32.5 |
| Accommodation for contract workers          | 61.7 |
| No accommodation facilities                 | 16.0 |
| <b>Public facilities</b>                    |      |
| Hall/meeting area                           | 74.7 |
| Store                                       | 83.4 |
| Administration building                     | 86.8 |
| Library                                     | 36.3 |
| Child care centre                           | 56.5 |
| No public facilities                        | 4.7  |
| <b>Sporting facilities</b>                  |      |
| Sports grounds                              | 80.7 |
| Swimming pool(s)                            | 20.8 |
| No sporting facilities                      | 10.0 |

(a) Data not collected in 'administered' communities with a population of less than 50.

Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

## Access to telecommunications, remote Indigenous communities — 2006

| Communities with a population of 50 or more | %    |
|---|------|
| <b>Broadcasts</b>                           |      |
| Radio broadcasts                            |      |
| ABC radio                                   | 92.4 |
| Commercial radio                            | 64.8 |
| Indigenous radio                            | 90.6 |
| Television broadcasts                       |      |
| ABC television                              | 95.5 |
| Commercial television                       | 91.1 |
| SBS television                              | 84.5 |
| Indigenous television                       | 82.8 |
| Did not receive broadcasts                  | 1.2  |
| <b>All remote Indigenous communities</b>    |      |
| Access to public telephone                  | 84.7 |
| Public Internet access                      | 54.0 |

Source: ABS 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey.

television (96%) and ABC radio (92%). Indigenous broadcasting services were also highly accessible, with a high proportion of people able to receive Indigenous radio broadcasts (91%) or television (83%).

## Looking ahead

Housing and related infrastructure are fundamentally important to achieving positive social and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Ongoing data collection from surveys and administrative sources will help provide the evidence base to inform future policy development and initiatives in this area, such as the joint policy commission proposed by the Australian Government to develop and implement housing solutions for Indigenous people in remote Australia.

## Endnotes

- 1 Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2007, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- 2 Office of Early Childhood Education 2008, *Universal Access to Early Childhood Education: Guidelines, 2007–08*, viewed 4 April 2008, <[http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/E6053E84-48A9-4F0C-A64A-DD48A09E8692/20838/Guidelines\\_UAECE\\_March2008.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/E6053E84-48A9-4F0C-A64A-DD48A09E8692/20838/Guidelines_UAECE_March2008.pdf)>.
- 3 Office of Early Childhood Education, 2008, *Literacy & Numeracy: a review of the literature*, viewed 4 April 2008, <[http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/04E9722A-8797-41D5-BBE4-38628FE60B78/18865/ecl\\_literaturereview.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/04E9722A-8797-41D5-BBE4-38628FE60B78/18865/ecl_literaturereview.pdf)>.





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