

# Chapter 2

## Setting the scene

### Scope

2.1 Given the wide scope of its terms of reference the committee has aimed, in its first report, to provide a survey of the breadth of issues that have been raised with it so far and to provide some direction for the focus of future reports over the course of its inquiry to 2010.

### Distribution and composition of the Indigenous population

#### *Australia's Indigenous population*

2.2 As noted in Chapter 1 this report uses the most widely accepted definition of remoteness—the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+). After the 2006 census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates the Indigenous population of Australia as at 30 June 2006 to be 517 000 people, or 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population. In terms of absolute numbers, New South Wales and Queensland have the highest number of Indigenous residents, with 148 200 and 146 400 respectively. Western Australia has an Indigenous population of 77 900 and the Northern Territory 66 600.<sup>1</sup>

2.3 The committee notes that although major cities are home to the largest single proportion of Indigenous people, a comparatively higher proportion of Indigenous people live in regional and remote areas of Australia. In 2006, an estimated 43 per cent of the Indigenous population were living in regional areas and an additional 25 per cent in remote areas,<sup>2</sup> thus the scope of the committee's inquiry covers almost 70 per cent of the Indigenous population.

#### *Location of Indigenous communities*

2.4 According to ABS data, in 2006 almost one-fifth, or 93 000 of Australia's estimated 517 000 Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders lived in a discrete Indigenous community. The term 'discrete Indigenous community' refers to a geographic location that is bounded by physical or legal boundaries, is inhabited or

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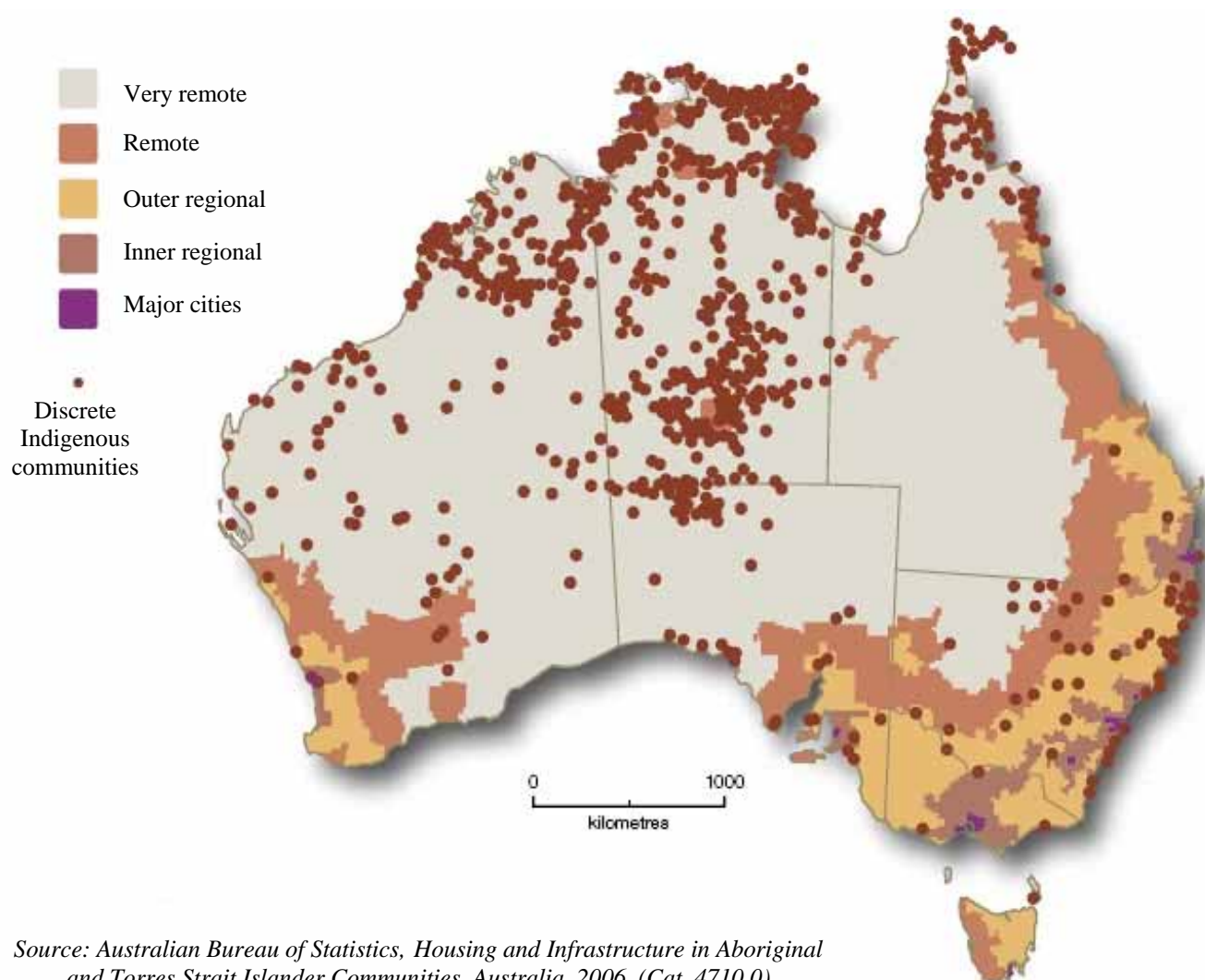
1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population and distribution: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, 2006 (cat. 4705.0), p. 4.

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, 2008 (cat. 4704.0), p. 14.

intended to be inhabited predominantly by Indigenous people, and with housing or infrastructure managed on a community basis.<sup>3</sup>

2.5 As can be seen from Figure 1 below, showing discrete Indigenous communities by remoteness, the majority of discrete Indigenous communities, approximately 85 per cent, are located in remote or very remote locations. The remaining 15 per cent of discrete Indigenous communities are located in either major cities or the inner/outer regional areas, in communities such as Redfern in Sydney and Framlingham in western Victoria.<sup>4</sup>

**Fig. 1 – Discrete Indigenous communities and remoteness locations**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia, 2006 (Cat. 4710.0)*  
(ABS data used with permission from the Australian Bureau of Statistics )

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia, 2006 (cat. 4710.0)*, p. 109.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Housing and Services in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', *Australian Social Trends*, 2008, (cat. 4102.0), p. 1.

2.6 There is also a great diversity in the distribution of Indigenous communities between the states and territories. The Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Indigenous people living in discrete communities, approximately 45 per cent, with 81 per cent of its Indigenous population living in remote or very remote areas. In Western Australia 15 per cent of Indigenous people live in discrete communities with 41 per cent living in remote or very remote areas. In contrast, in states like South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales almost half of the Indigenous population live in major cities.<sup>5</sup>

2.7 John Taylor states:

Reference to remote Australia draws attention to the vast two-thirds of the continent where economic development and access to goods and services are severely impeded by small numbers and long distances. Fully one-quarter of the Indigenous population lives scattered across this landscape in places that are either close to, or on, lands they have owned via descent or other kin-based succession for millennia. Overall Indigenous people account for almost half of the resident population of very remote Australia; although away from the main service and mining towns dotted across this vast area, they are by far the majority...this means that Indigenous people and their institutions predominate over the bulk of the continental land mass.<sup>6</sup>

2.8 The committee notes that although the ABS data is the most comprehensive statistical analysis of the Indigenous population, according to the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), there has been a substantial undercounting of the Indigenous population in the 2006 Census. CAEPR estimates this undercount to be around 11.5 per cent nationally, but of greater interest to the committee is that the extent of the undercount is most significant in Western Australia (with a projected 24 per cent undercount) and the Northern Territory (with a projected undercount of 19 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

### *Size of Indigenous communities*

2.9 ABS data indicates that out of 1 187 discrete Indigenous communities a total of 865 communities, or 73 per cent, reported a usual population of less than 50. Of these 1 187 discrete remote communities 17 had a population of 1 000 or more.<sup>8</sup> This is depicted over the page in Figure 2.

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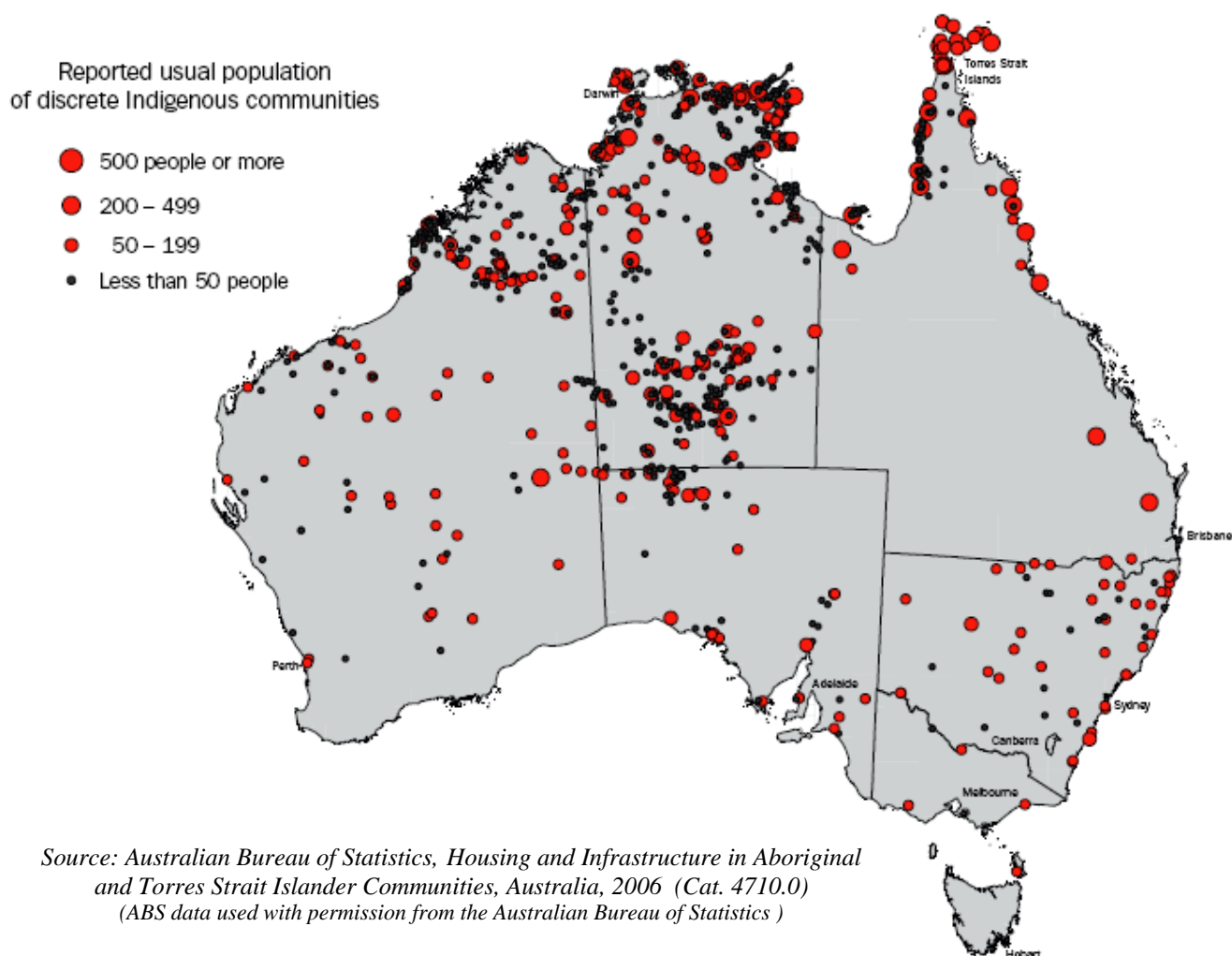
5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia*, 2006 (cat. 4710.0), p. 18.

6 John Taylor, *Population and Diversity: Policy Implications of Emerging Indigenous Demographic Trends*, (CAEPR Discussion Paper no. 283/2006) Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, p. 5.

7 J. Taylor and N. Biddle, *Locations of Indigenous Population Change: What Can We Say?*, (CAEPR Working Paper no. 43/2008) Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, p. v.

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia*, 2006 (cat. 4710.0), p. 17.

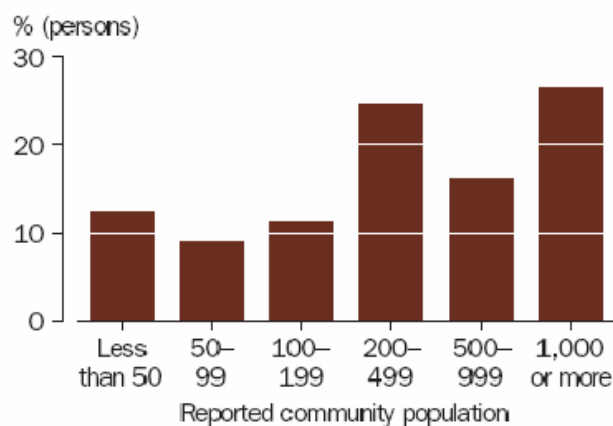
**Figure 2 – Population distribution and location by size of community**



2.10 In 2006, 26 per cent 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 per cent of people living in discrete Indigenous communities lived in communities with between 200 and 1 000 residents and 20 per cent were in communities with between 50 and 199 residents. Nearly 13 per cent of people lived in communities with a population of less than 50 people.<sup>9</sup> See figure 3 over the page.

9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Housing and Services in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', *Australian Social Trends*, 2008 (cat. 4102.0), p. 2.

**Figure 3 – Population distribution, remote communities, by size of community – 2006.**



Source: 'Housing and Services in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', *Australian Social Trends*, 2008 (cat. 4102.0)  
(ABS data used with permission from the Australian Bureau of Statistic)

2.11 The size and geographic location of Indigenous communities has an obvious relevance for policy makers when contemplating service delivery to Indigenous people in regional and remote communities. However there are other factors that impact on service delivery and Indigenous community wellbeing. It is well known that the Indigenous population is relatively youthful in comparison to the non-Indigenous population. Research indicates that this is due to a combination of higher fertility rates as well as higher mortality rates. While much of the non-Indigenous Australian population contemplates how to fund their retirement, many Indigenous people are unlikely to reach retirement age. The needs and concerns of Indigenous people are therefore focused at the other end of the social policy spectrum—on raising families, child health, education, criminal justice, family housing, and jobs.<sup>10</sup>

2.12 Another factor relevant to regional and remote Indigenous communities is the rate at which Indigenous people move between their home and other communities. While on average Indigenous residential relocation rates are the same as the rates for the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous people relocate far more often in and around major cities but far less often in remote areas. In remote areas Indigenous people are far more likely to move temporarily between communities within a region, with high rates of travel within the region for relatively short periods of time.<sup>11</sup>

10 John Taylor, *Population and Diversity: Policy Implications of Emerging Indigenous Demographic Trends*, (CAEPR Discussion Paper no. 283/2006) Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, pp 7-8; 62.

11 John Taylor, *Population and Diversity: Policy Implications of Emerging Indigenous Demographic Trends*, (CAEPR Discussion Paper no. 283/2006) Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, p. 62; Paul Memmot, Stephen Long and Linda Thomson, *Mobility of Aboriginal people in rural and remote Australia*, AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin, Issue 69, May 2006, p. 1.

## **Range of issues and emerging themes**

2.13 As discussed in Chapter 1, the committee notes the breadth and depth of issues raised with it both in submissions and during its inspection visit in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. These issues are discussed in detail under chapters 2-6 under each term of reference. While many of the issues are complex and will require further consideration during the committee's inquiry to 2010, the following themes have emerged during the inquiry process thus far:

- A perceived need for a greater investment in people, resources and infrastructure to meet the needs and aspirations of regional and remote communities;
- A commitment from state and territory and Commonwealth governments to long term relationships and partnerships with Indigenous people and communities as way of solving entrenched problems;
- Ability of government programs to be tailored to the needs and strengths of communities, not the other way around;
- Increased accountability of bureaucracies to Indigenous people and communities; and
- A perceived lack of awareness of the serious nature of the issues confronting people living in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

2.14 The committee considers that it has an important role in bringing these issues to the attention of not only the Senate but also to increasing awareness amongst the Australian public more generally.