

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT...?

Remote employment programs

Close the Gap Research







Proposition

Aboriginal Australians are less likely to be employed than non-Aboriginal Australians. Employment varies with geography, and remote communities have the lowest Aboriginal employment levels. Do we know what types of policies and programs work best at increasing employment for Aboriginal Australians in remote communities?

Have we considered all possible policy options?

Background

Nationally in 2021, 56 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 64 years were employed. This is an increase from 51 per cent in 2016. However, this is considerably lower than the 78 per cent of working age non-Aboriginal Australians who were employed in 2021.

Employment levels vary across jurisdictions. In 2021, employment was highest for Aboriginal Australians living in the Australian Capital Territory (73 per cent) and lowest for individuals living in the Northern Territory (34 per cent).

The gap in employment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians increases with geographic remoteness. Aboriginal employment decreases with remoteness, whereas non-Aboriginal employment increases slightly **(See figure 1 overleaf)**.


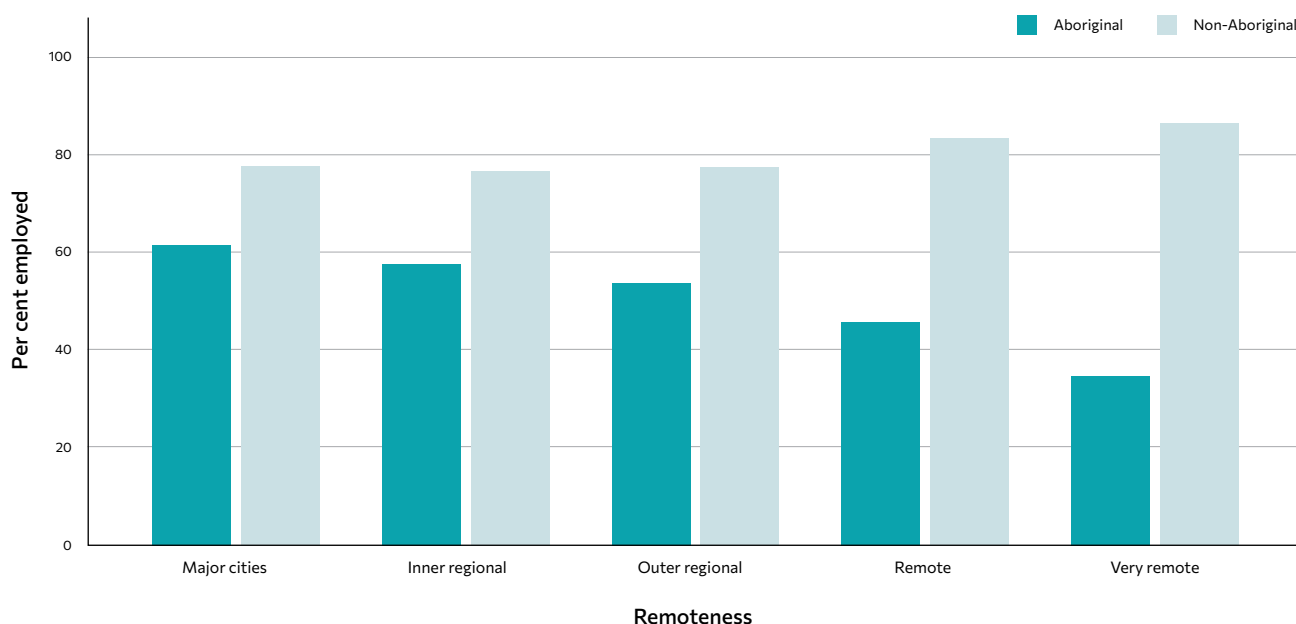


Figure 1: Per cent of individuals employed, by Aboriginality and geographic remoteness



Source: Productivity Commission. (2023). Closing the Gap information repository

What factors contribute to low employment in remote locations?

Remote locations typically have limited labour markets, and a low (or no) economic base to create employment opportunities.

Also, remote locations generally have lower access to services that can affect an individual's employability, such as healthcare and education.

Aboriginal Australians – particularly those who live in remote locations/designated Aboriginal communities – are disproportionately affected by factors such as low literacy and numeracy, not speaking English as a first language, chronic health issues and disability, intergenerational unemployment and income support dependence, drug and alcohol dependence, contact with the criminal justice system, and entrenched social and community problems.

Cultural factors (such as challenges balancing family, community, and spiritual obligations with work) and attitudes and decisions of influential members of the community can also play a role in employment. Logistical factors, such as lack of transport or difficulty obtaining access to premises or permits/licences, can further limit employment prospects.

How have governments attempted to address low Aboriginal employment in remote locations?

Since the late 1970s, the Australian Government has funded programs intended to increase employment for Aboriginal Australians.

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP, running from 1977 to 2015) was Aboriginal-specific and operated in remote and

non-remote locations. More recent programs, such as the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) (2013 to 2015) and Community Development Program (CDP) (2015 to 2024) have not been Aboriginal-specific, but focussed on remote and very remote locations where a greater proportion of Aboriginal Australians live relative to non-Aboriginal Australians. Most program participants are Aboriginal.

Broadly, these programs seek to provide 'work-like' opportunities, usually in contexts where there are no, or limited, mainstream employment opportunities.

Despite some administrative differences between these programs (such as their degree of alignment with mainstream social security policies like Work for the Dole), all reflect the short-term objective of having working age individuals participate in work-like activities to improve their employment prospects while also improving their communities.

All have the long-term goal of supporting transitions to stable, ongoing employment – or 'real jobs' – thereby reducing welfare dependence. All share the underlying assumption that community development and economic development are closely related, and that developing local communities develops the local economy, which in turn creates jobs.

Do we know what works to increase Aboriginal employment in remote locations?

There have been numerous reviews and evaluations of remote employment programs. While some positive outcomes have been identified, these are typically negligible. A consistent finding is that programs have had

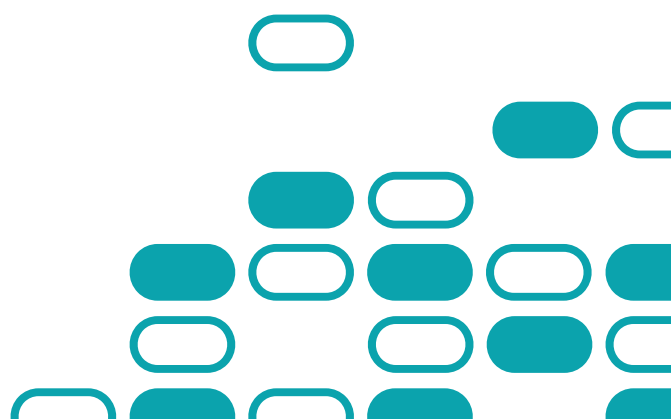
little impact on improving long-term employment for Aboriginal Australians living in remote communities.

Some program participants succeed in obtaining casual or short-term positions, but this does not generally translate to ongoing, full-time employment. It has been noted that many program participants are long-term income support recipients who have moderate to extreme barriers to employment (such as poor literacy or significant health issues), which often remain unaddressed.

In some instances, negative program impacts have been reported, such as community members believing that their local labour market and community have become worse since a program was implemented.

Programs may be unsuccessful due to adopting a 'one size fits all approach' that does not take into account the low availability of employment in most remote communities, and/or different community needs across different locations.

It has also been suggested that poor employment outcomes for Aboriginal people living in remote areas are the result of not integrating Aboriginal Australians into mainstream society and the mainstream economy, and that government-led efforts to boost remote economies have often had little effect.



What do we need to know?

There are key gaps in our knowledge about remote employment programs.

Existing reviews and evaluations point to a range of methodological issues. The same data is not consistently available over time. This makes it difficult (and in some instances impossible) to compare different programs across a spectrum of outcome measures. Baseline data is not always gathered, particularly for community development measures. This leads to a lack of before and after comparisons.

Also, 'counterfactual' scenarios are not often considered (that is, what would have happened if the program was not operating). In many cases, programs operate in all remote communities, meaning that a 'comparison' community without the program may not be available.

Many evaluations focus on a relatively narrow range of measures, which may be process- or output-oriented (such as whether service was delivered in line with its funding agreement, or whether a participant completed all program requirements). Reports often present relatively superficial measures that shift between various program objectives (jobs, economic development or community development) and highlight 'positive' findings, rather than providing in-depth analysis of each separate objective.

Whether different objectives are additive, or whether they may compete with one another, is generally not examined.

Outcomes are often captured using very broad indicators, such as whether an individual obtained employment of any kind (regardless of what that employment was, how suitable it was to an individual, or whether it led to long-term employment). Whether programs bring about sustained improvements in local labour markets is rarely considered.

Comparatively little attention has been given to evaluating program impacts on community development (such as whether there were reductions in antisocial behaviour or other indicators of community wellbeing).

Clear definitions and measures of community development are seldom provided. The value created by activities relative to their cost, and whether that value interacts with 'real' economies within or outside communities, is not routinely assessed. There is scant appraisal of relationships between community development and labour market development.

Employment programs intersect with a range of other justice, health and economic systems that can vary between communities. This makes it difficult to determine program impacts or assess



whether employment programs are only suitable for a subsection of the community (such as those who have relatively less disadvantage and lower support needs). Few evaluations consider possible impacts of other programs that may have been operating in the same locations at the same time, that may indirectly affect employment (such as programs to improve health or education).

Many reviews and evaluations of remote employment programs identify 'non-program' factors that may affect outcomes, such as young people moving to areas with higher employment prospects or local labour markets that are simply non-viable.

They suggest taking these factors into consideration. However, it is unclear whether these suggestions have been incorporated into policy deliberations.

What are we going to do?

The first step in improving Aboriginal employment in remote areas is to have a clear understanding of why existing programs have not been successful and what other options may be available.

To help with this, we will draw on program reviews and evaluations to develop a comprehensive overview of what program measures were used, what data was examined, and what factors were (and were not) taken into account.

We will develop minimum standards of data collection to assist with future evaluations. We will also collate suggestions that have been made about additional or alternative policy responses, assess whether they have been implemented, and identify any potential policy options that have not been considered.





Close the Gap Research

Close the Gap Research (CtGR) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making a positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal people facing adversity. Our mission is to alleviate poverty, suffering, and hardship among Aboriginal communities in need.

Need. Not race.

CtGR will assess the efficacy of existing and proposed models for addressing the needs of Aboriginal people and work with partners to provide direct, impactful relief to those who really need it. We want to partner with program providers willing to publish proof of success in the following areas:

- School scholarships
- Employment in remote communities
- Prisoner rehabilitation





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