

Northern Territory demography by Regions, 1986-2016

Background

Understanding the demographic characteristics of the NT is an important component of policy development and improved service delivery. Changes in population also influence funding and resource allocations.

In 2018, the Northern Territory Government defined six regions (NT Regions) for service provision and reporting. These regions are: Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield; Top End; East Arnhem; Big Rivers; Central Australia; and Barkly (Figure 1).

The fact sheet summarises population changes from 1986 to 2016 overall and for each region. This analysis was developed from project work that determined region population estimates by 5 year age group, sex and Aboriginal status, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) data, see Method (p. 4). Key data is available in the Tables 1-6 below.

NT population

Between 1986 and 2016, the NT's population increased from 154,421 to 245,678. The NT's population has aged, with the total proportion of Territorians aged 65 and older increasing from 2.5% in 1986 to 6.9% in 2016. Over the same period, the proportion of Territorians aged under 20 decreased from 37.8% to 27.9%.

The sex ratio has narrowed, with an increase in the non-Aboriginal female population relative to the non-Aboriginal male population. In 1986, there were 112 males for every 100 females, compared to 108 males for every 100 females in 2016 (Figure 2 and 3). The national sex ratio is 98.5 (M:F).¹ Rebased 2021 data indicates that the sex ratio has continued to fall.

The NT's Aboriginal population grew at a faster rate than the non-Aboriginal population, increasing by 111.6%, from 35,523 persons to 74,542 persons, compared to a 43.6% increase in the non-Aboriginal population, from 119,186 persons in 1986 to 171,136 persons in 2016.

Figure 1: Map of NTG Service Regions

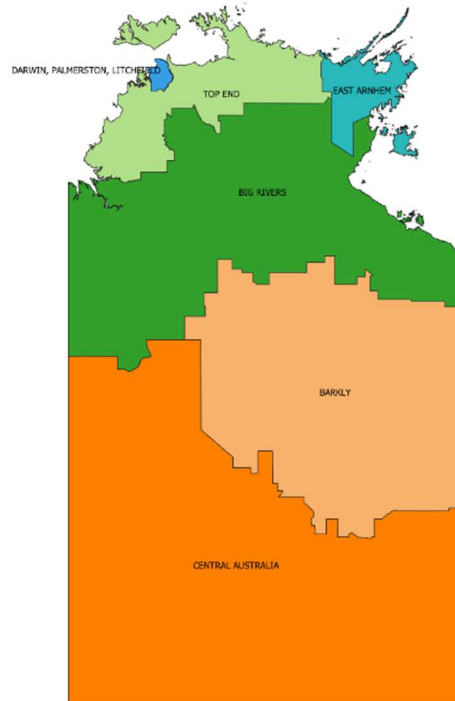


Figure 2: NT population distribution, 1986

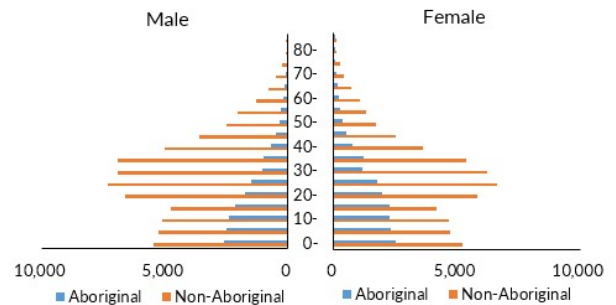
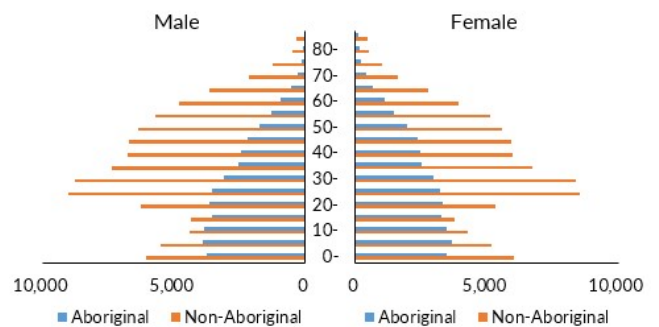


Figure 3: NT population distribution, 2016



In 2016, Aboriginal people accounted for 30.3% of the NT's population, and non-Aboriginal people 69.7%. This was an increase from 22.8% and 77.2% respectively in 1986. Aboriginal population increases over the time series in part reflect improvements in the ABS' Census net undercount in the NT, as well as a higher fertility rate in the Aboriginal population, particularly in the earlier years of the time series.

Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield

The population in Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield has grown at a faster rate than the other regions, increasing by 71.9% over the time series compared to a 43.2% increase for the rest of the NT. This reflects increasing urbanisation and the effects of increasing fly-in, fly-out work arrangements.

In 1986, 6.6% of the population were Aboriginal and 2.5% population were aged 65 and older, with 3.3% of those being Aboriginal. In 2016, 11.9% of the population were Aboriginal, and 9.5% were aged 65 and over (5.8% were older Aboriginal people) (Figure 5).

The sex ratio in 2016 concurs with 1986 ratio, at 112 males to 100 females. The lack of change is due to the short term effects of a major economic development project in 2016 which saw the influx of males to the region. According to recently released 2021 data, this fell to 106 males per 100 females.

Top End

The Top End includes the Daly region, West Arnhem including Jabiru, and the Tiwi Islands. As with many parts of the NT, the Top End population has become less masculine over time. In 1986 the sex ratio overall was 110, but in the non-Aboriginal population this rose to 150 males per 100 females (Figure 5 and 6).

By 2016 the sex ratio had narrowed to 106 males per 100 females, with the non-Aboriginal sex ratio falling to 117. In 2016, 74% of the Top End's population were Aboriginal compared to 63% in 1986. The population aged 65 and older increased from 2.1% in 1986 to 5.3% in 2016, with the largest increase observed in females of this age group.

Figure 4: NT Population 1986 to 2016

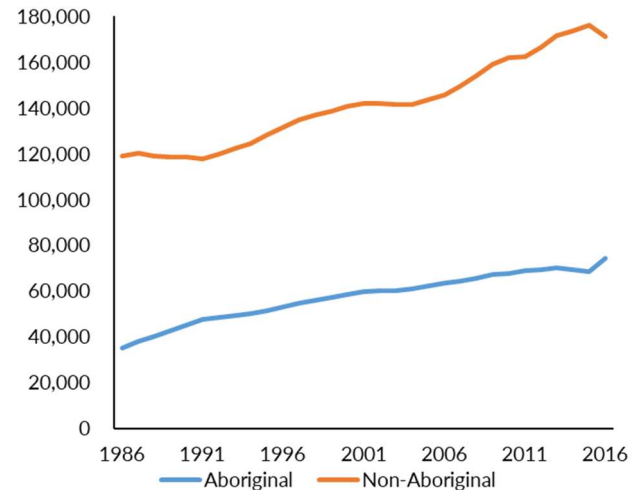


Figure 5: Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield population 1986 to 2016

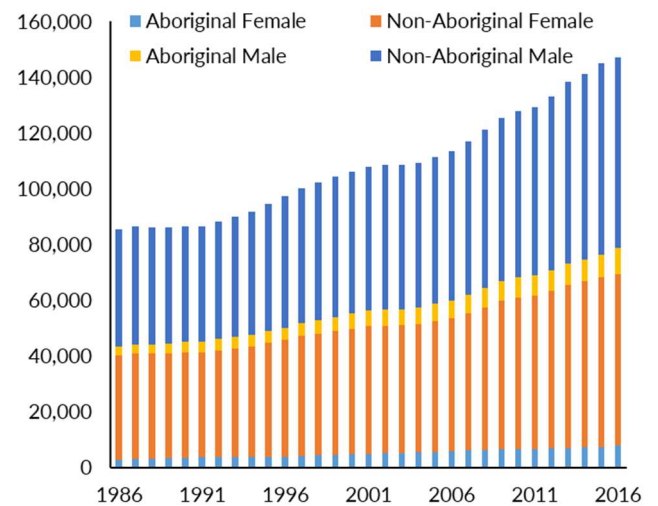


Figure 6: Top End population distribution 1986

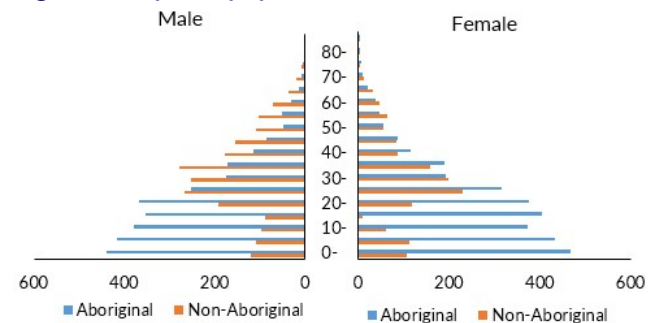
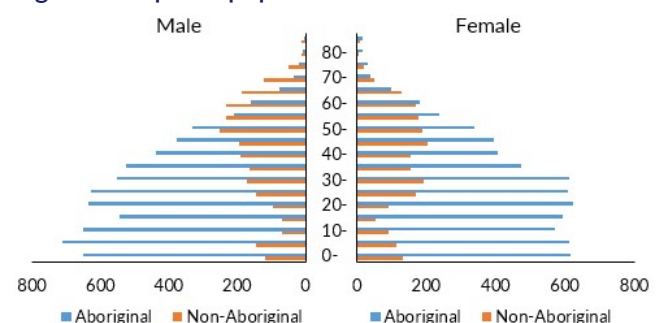


Figure 7: Top End population distribution 2016



East Arnhem

The demographics of the East Arnhem has changed significantly from 1986 to 2016, particularly following the closure of the Gove Alumina Refinery in 2014.

In 1986, 55% of the population was Aboriginal, compared to 72% in 2016. The total non-Aboriginal population in 2016 was 4,018 persons and was marginally lower than the population recorded in 1986 at 4,086 persons. Over the same time, the Aboriginal population more than doubled to 10,539 persons in 2016 (Figure 8).

While the total non-Aboriginal population of East Arnhem has been relatively stable between 1986 and 2016, the sex ratio has changed considerably. In 1986, the sex ratio was 142.1, whereas by 2016 this had fallen to 112.5. Although the decline in the mining and manufacturing industry has reduced the non-Aboriginal population in recent years, there is continued employment in many service provision industries, such as health, education and social services.

The population has aged slightly over time, increasing from 0.5% of the population aged 65 and older in 1986, to 2.7% in 2016 (Figure 9). At the same time, the proportion of people aged under 20 decreased from 46% to 37%. East Arnhem has the youngest age profile of the NTG Regions.

Big Rivers

Big Rivers includes productive agricultural land and mineral resources. In 1986, these industries overwhelmingly employed young, non-Aboriginal males, which is reflected in the high non-Aboriginal sex ratio in 1986, of 144.5 compared to 91.8 in the Aboriginal population.

In 1986, 60% of the Big Rivers population was non-Aboriginal. Changing employment patterns has seen a reduction in the proportion of non-Aboriginal men in the total population. In 2016, 43% of the total population was non-Aboriginal, and the non-Aboriginal sex ratio was 110.4.

The population is also no longer as dominated by early career workers. In 1986 people aged 20-29 comprised 23.1% of the Big Rivers population, compared to 17.9% in 2021 (Figure 10). In contrast, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over has increased from 2.9% to 6.8% over the same period.

Figure 8: East Arnhem population 1986 to 2016

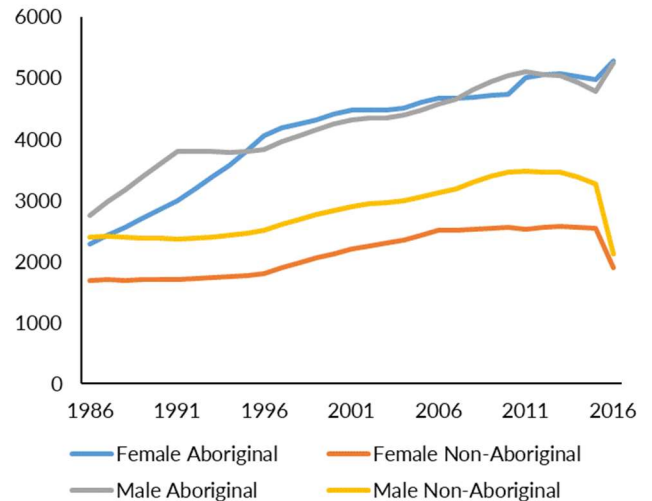


Figure 9: Non-Aboriginal men as a proportion of total non-Aboriginal population, East Arnhem, 1986 and 2016

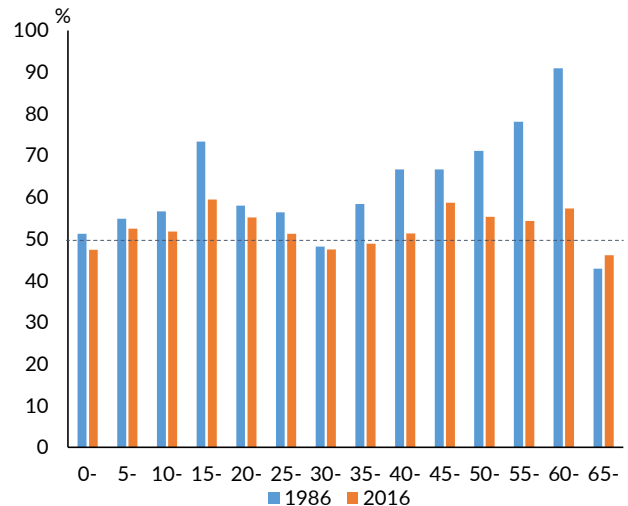
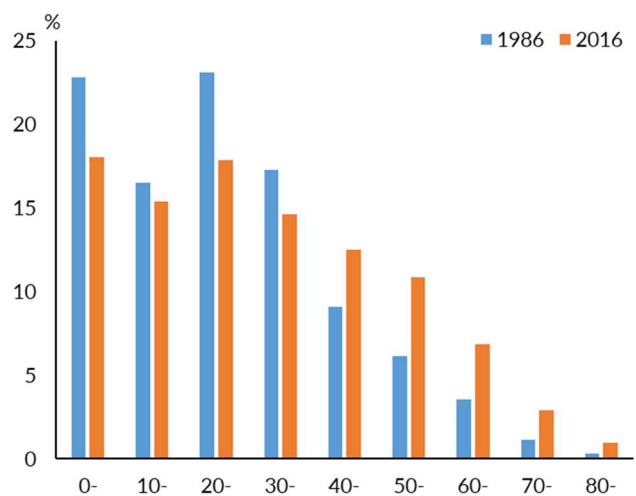


Figure 10: Proportional share of population in Big Rivers, 1986 and 2016



Barkly

Barkly has the smallest population of the six NTG regions, at 7315 persons in 2016. The Barkly region had the lowest population growth of the NTG regions between 1986 and 2016, increasing by 27.8%.

The region's population growth is affected by the 'boom and bust' nature of the local economy, driven by the mining industry. Barkly's population peak was in 1997, at 8102 persons. The population then declined, reaching a low of 7066 persons in 2006 before increasing to a recent peak of 7796 persons in 2013. Since 2017 the Barkly's population has been relatively stable, no longer declining following the end of the early 2000s mining boom.

In 2016, Barkly had the highest non-Aboriginal sex ratio of the NTG regions, at 119 males per 100 females, however this was much lower than in 1986, when the non-Aboriginal sex ratio was 145 (Figure 11). The proportion of the Aboriginal people increased from 55% in 1986 to 71% in 2016.

Central Australia

The Central Australian population increased between 1986 and 2001, but has remained stable from 2001 to 2016 at approximately 38,000 people. The majority of people live in Alice Springs. Central Australia has the second largest proportion of non-Aboriginal population, at 68% in 1986, and 57% in 2016. This population is largely concentrated in Alice Springs.

Central Australia is the only region to have a majority female population, with 99 men for every 100 women in 2016. The non-Aboriginal population was majority male in 1986, at 116 males per 100 women, which was the second lowest sex ratio of the regions (Figure 12 and 13).

Alice Springs has high employment in healthcare, social services and education, which are typically female dominated professions. In 2016, almost one quarter of Central Australia's population were women aged 25 to 59 (Figure 13).

Figure 11: Sex ratio (males per 100 females) of the Barkly region 1986-2016

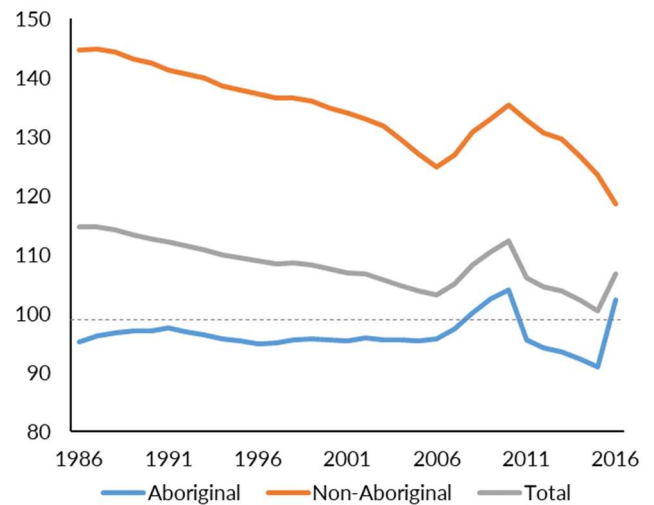


Figure 12: Central Australia population distribution 1986

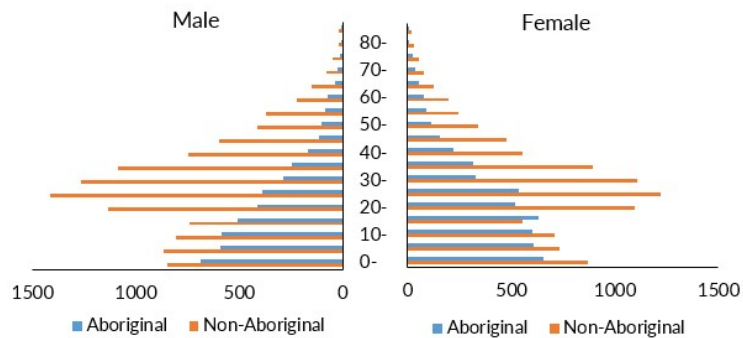
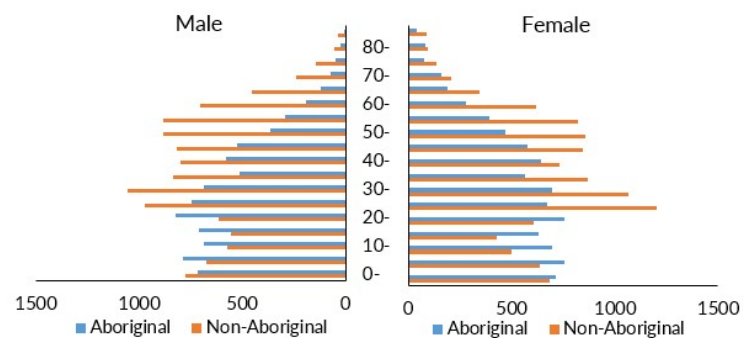


Figure 13: Central Australia population distribution 2016



Methods

Previous models to calculate populations by age, sex and Indigenous status on a regional level have used regional boundaries that match, or closely match, ABS geographical boundaries, which has allowed the extensive use of ABS Estimated Resident Population (ERP) to produce accurate estimates. The new NTG regions do not align with existing ABS boundaries, and therefore a new methodology was developed to estimate populations for each of the regions, which would sum to the NT's published ERP.

Multiple ABS data sources were used to create the NTG Regional population estimates. ERP by single year of age and sex at the Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1) was provided by the ABS, which was then organised into the NTG regions to give a baseline ERP by five year age groups and for each region. This matched published ERP for the whole of the NT.

This information was supplemented by ABS Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and Census data, both of which are released every five years. Aboriginal ERPs are available by single year of age and sex at the Territory level, and at a population total level for SA2 and SA3. Usual Resident Population (URP), which are separate population estimates based directly on Census data without the other adjustments was used to create population estimates by age, sex and Aboriginal status for each of the NTG regions. These detailed datasets were created using the ABS product TableBuilder.

The estimates were produced in 5 year blocks to coincide with the Census and Aboriginal data releases, starting with the most recent period (from 2016). The difference between the two data points was calculated based on the growth rates between each subcategory.

The Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield NTG region exactly matched the current ABS SA4 of Greater Darwin for the years 2011. This means that there is more information available than for the other five NTG regions. As such, for the period 2011 to 2021 the Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield NTG region was calculated first, followed by the rest of the NTG regions using the population balance. For the years prior to 2011, there was not an exact match and all regions were calculated concurrently. The total Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population split was determined using the mid-point ERP for the nearest SA3 and the region's URP, as their results appeared more accurate than using the URP splits. Once the total population split was established, the total Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population estimates by age and sex were calculated using the proportional split available in the URP.

The total population splits for each of the region were then summed, and compared to the total ERP by age and sex. The discrepancy was then distributed amongst the regions to balance the totals. The same process was then applied to check if the splits by Aboriginal status summed to the total populations by age, sex and Aboriginal status. The discrepancy was redistributed. These processes were repeated a number of times until the sum of all regions matched the total age, sex and Aboriginal status for the NT, and the regional age, sex and Aboriginal status breakdown matched the total

As work on the time series progressed backwards, there was progressively less data available, and the quality of the data also declined. TableBuilder is only available from 2006 onwards. For Census years 1996 and 2001, Community Profile data was used. Experimental estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations at the state/territory level was only available for 1991, 1996 and 2001, and was not published in conjunction with a non-Aboriginal ERP. The ABS revises total ERPs on a regular basis, as further information becomes available, meaning previously published estimates of one section of the population cannot be compared to more recently published ERPs. Historical ERP releases are available and these were used to establish the proportional split between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal level.

The age splits in these earlier releases was established using data available in the Census publications which was at broader age groups than required for the final estimates. The ABS did not publish an ERP by Indigenous status in 1986, although some URP data was available. Where data was unavailable, results from 1991 were back-cast to create the 1986 final estimates.

Table 1: Darwin, Palmerston, Litchfield population from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	2854 (3.3)	2821 (3.3)	42,297 (49.4)	37,598 (43.9)	85,570 (100)
1991	3896 (4.5)	3735 (4.3)	41,157 (47.6)	37,705 (43.6)	86,493 (100)
1996	4284 (4.4)	4010 (4.1)	47,171 (48.5)	41,790 (43)	97,255 (100)
2001	5569 (5.2)	5056 (4.7)	51,598 (47.8)	45,689 (42.3)	107,912 (100)
2006	6615 (5.8)	5939 (5.2)	53,425 (47.1)	47,482 (41.8)	113,461 (100)
2011	7277 (5.6)	6685 (5.2)	60,264 (46.7)	54,880 (42.5)	129,106 (100)
2016	9236 (6.3)	8221 (5.6)	68,423 (46.5)	61,222 (41.6)	147,102 (100)
2021 (projected)	9086 (6.1)	8429 (5.6)	68,168 (45.6)	63,776 (42.7)	149,459 (100)

Table 2: Top End population from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	2909 (30.5)	3140 (32.9)	2088 (21.9)	1393 (14.6)	9530 (100)
1991	4009 (34.4)	4154 (35.6)	2074 (17.8)	1417 (12.2)	11,654 (100)
1996	4554 (34.8)	4652 (35.5)	2318 (17.7)	1575 (12.0)	13,099 (100)
2001	5026 (34.8)	5047 (35.0)	2516 (17.4)	1835 (12.7)	14,424 (100)
2006	5227 (34.7)	5200 (34.5)	2589 (17.2)	2056 (13.6)	15,072 (100)
2011	6312 (36.2)	6090 (35.0)	3016 (17.3)	2005 (11.5)	17,423 (100)
2016	6567 (37.3)	6456 (36.7)	2463 (14.0)	2101 (11.9)	17,587 (100)
2021 (projected)	6436 (36.3)	6583 (37.1)	2510 (14.1)	2215 (12.5)	17,744 (100)

Table 3: East Arnhem from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	2745 (30.1)	2279 (25.0)	2398 (26.3)	1688 (18.5)	9110 (100)
1991	3802 (35.0)	2994 (27.5)	2365 (21.8)	1710 (15.7)	10,871 (100)
1996	3829 (31.4)	4059 (33.3)	2509 (20.6)	1806 (14.8)	12,203 (100)
2001	4312 (31.0)	4473 (32.2)	2900 (20.9)	2210 (15.9)	13,895 (100)
2006	4568 (30.7)	4664 (31.4)	3131 (21.1)	2509 (16.9)	14,872 (100)
2011	5098 (31.7)	5008 (31.1)	3470 (21.6)	2525 (15.7)	16,101 (100)
2016	5252 (36.1)	5287 (36.3)	2127 (14.6)	1891 (13.0)	14,557 (100)
2021 (projected)	5173 (35.4)	5402 (37.0)	2094 (14.3)	1943 (13.3)	14,612 (100)

Table 4: Big Rivers population from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	2884 (19.2)	3142 (20.9)	5332 (35.4)	3690 (24.5)	15,048 (100)
1991	3977 (23.3)	4191 (24.6)	5198 (30.5)	3695 (21.7)	17,061 (100)
1996	4403 (23.8)	4459 (24.1)	5711 (30.9)	3939 (21.3)	18,512 (100)
2001	4999 (25.4)	5167 (26.3)	5410 (27.5)	4083 (20.8)	19,659 (100)
2006	5332 (26.9)	5634 (28.4)	4777 (24.1)	4072 (20.6)	19,815 (100)
2011	5668 (26.9)	5890 (27.9)	5364 (25.5)	4153 (19.7)	21,075 (100)
2016	6083 (28.9)	5935 (28.2)	4805 (22.8)	4213 (20.0)	21,036 (100)
2021 (projected)	6000 (28.2)	6066 (28.5)	4844 (22.7)	4388 (20.6)	21,298 (100)

Table 5: Barkly population from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	1536 (26.8)	1613 (28.2)	1522 (26.6)	1052 (18.4)	5723 (100)
1991	2101 (30.7)	2152 (31.5)	1513 (22.1)	1071 (15.7)	6837 (100)
1996	2453 (30.4)	2584 (32.1)	1750 (21.7)	1275 (15.8)	8062 (100)
2001	2535 (32.4)	2658 (34.0)	1501 (19.2)	1120 (14.3)	7814 (100)
2006	2475 (34.9)	2587 (36.5)	1125 (15.9)	901 (12.7)	7088 (100)
2011	2573 (33.4)	2692 (34.9)	1392 (18.1)	1048 (13.6)	7705 (100)
2016	2639 (36.1)	2579 (35.3)	1138 (15.6)	959 (13.1)	7315 (100)
2021 (projected)	2601 (35.3)	2637 (35.8)	1141 (15.5)	994 (13.5)	7373 (100)

Table 6: Central Australia population from 1986 to 2021 n (%)

	Aboriginal Males	Aboriginal Females	Non-Aboriginal males	Non-Aboriginal Females	TOTAL
1986	4330 (14.7)	4982 (16.9)	10,825 (36.8)	9303 (31.6)	29,440 (100)
1991	5999 (18.4)	6666 (20.5)	10,538 (32.3)	9374 (28.8)	32,577 (100)
1996	6459 (18.3)	7137 (20.2)	11,630 (32.9)	10,159 (28.7)	35,385 (100)
2001	6973 (18.3)	7883 (20.7)	12,215 (32.1)	10,968 (28.8)	38,039 (100)
2006	7056 (18.2)	8214 (21.2)	12,182 (31.4)	11,297 (29.2)	38,749 (100)
2011	7549 (18.9)	8004 (20.1)	13,500 (33.8)	10,829 (27.2)	39,882 (100)
2016	7890 (20.7)	8397 (22.1)	11,053 (29.0)	10,741 (28.2)	38,081 (100)
2021 (projected)	7768 (20.1)	8696 (22.5)	11,030 (28.5)	11,220 (29.0)	38,714 (100)

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