

Secret life of city blacks

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The success of a small band of urban Aborigines masks the depressing reality for most indigenous city-dwellers, reports George Megalogenis

THERE are almost twice as many Aboriginal men in prison as there are at universities or other tertiary institutions. Count them: 4075 incarcerated vs 2482 on campus last year.

Fortunately, Aboriginal women are smarter than the blackfellas. There are 370 behind bars against 4646 with their noses in books. In other words, for every one outcast, there are 12 with a ticket to the middle class. But even this is a poor return compared with non-indigenous men (one to 20) and women (one to 35).

It is easy to become morose about the divide between black and white in Australia, and easier still to switch off and pretend the problem doesn't exist. So let's try a different numbers game. Let's look at where the data is most encouraging, at the 29.8 per cent of Aborigines who live in the cities.

This is where a young black middle class is emerging to match the white. The place to find them on the income ladder is on \$600-\$999 a week (\$31,200-\$51,948 a year).

One in eight, or 13.7 per cent of the 76,263 working-age urban Aborigines, is in this comfort zone. The proportion of non-indigenous city slickers on the same incomes is 19.5 per cent, based on calculations by The Weekend Australian using unpublished Australian Bureau of Statistics Census material for last year.

The casting of Deborah Mailman as the black chick in the *The Secret Life of Us* got it almost right. The characters she hangs out with define Australia's new macchiato middle class -- inner city-dwelling generation Xers with decent incomes but without the suburban mortgages and the marriage certificates of the Cold War middle class before them.

However, the black middle class isn't flitting from dead-end job to dead-end job, as Mailman's character did in the first series. They are in the professional or the political class. Mailman should have been playing the lawyer or the media consultant from the outset, which is the real life of the black middle class. This is the group John Howard says has been accepted as part of mainstream Western society.

"There are plenty of indigenous Australians who are fully integrated," the Prime Minister told this newspaper in April. "But there are still quite a lot who aren't ... we still sort of have this physical separation, that is part of the problem. It is interesting that one of the accepted cornerstones of our immigration policy has always been that you shouldn't allow ghettos or enclaves to develop, yet in a way -- you never call them ghettos or enclaves because they are Aboriginal communities -- but in a way that is exactly what has happened and it is one of the difficulties we have."

Right-wing polemicist Keith Windschuttle goes further, arguing that Aborigines should be taken from their dysfunctional communities and relocated in towns or cities -- a position the Howard Government has rejected.

Either way, implicit in both views is the idea that urban Aborigines are better off than their sisters and brothers in the bush -- an extension of the city-country divide that white voters have been complaining about since the nation began its march to globalisation in the 1980s.

At first sight, the 2001 Census appears to vindicate Howard's assumption. The city is the only area to boast more than 10 per cent of Aborigines on middle-class incomes. In large towns (where another 41.7 per cent of Aborigines live) the result is 9 per cent vs 16 per cent for all other residents. In small towns, it's 3.8 per cent against 14.5 per cent; and in the bush, it's 5.6 per cent compared with 16.1 per cent.

But this is where the good news stops. In the cities, significantly more blacks than whites are at the bottom -- 50 per cent of them are on \$1-\$399 a week. The urban white battlers add up to 40.5 per cent, but many of them are on part-time incomes or are self-funded retirees, so they can't be called poor.

And on the top rung, there is another chasm between black and white.

The black elite of the city -- those with incomes of more than \$1000 a week -- amount to a mere 5.1 per cent of urban Aborigines. Among white city dwellers, 12.7 per cent enjoy these high incomes.

Dig a bit deeper and the city black begins to look more like the bush black than the integrationists appear to realise.

Only 2.5 per cent of urban Aborigines are 65 years or older; and a further 11.6 per cent are 45 to 64. City whites, as we know, are an ageing -- but healthy -- demographic (13.9 per cent are 65 years plus and another 26 per cent are in the 45-64 bracket).

It had been assumed that shockingly early death was the lot of Aborigines in the bush. But the 2001 Census shows city blacks dying young too -- although this might change if middle-class success can be consolidated.

Another crack in the city-equals-black-progress mantra is education. Barely half the urban Aborigines aged 15-19 are still at school -- 51 per cent for boys and 55.4 per cent for girls. The retention rate for the white youth in the cities is 73.4 per cent and 77.2 per cent respectively.

So the next generation of city blacks will be substantially less qualified than the whites. Also, they are only marginally ahead of those in country towns, where 46.1 per cent of Aboriginal boys and 50.1 per cent of girls are staying on after Year 10.

Another angle on city black poverty is the number of children growing up with one parent. Almost one in three, 30.7 per cent, of urban Aboriginal families are single-parent households -- almost double the rate for white city families (15.6 per cent).

Lester-Irabinna Rigney, director of indigenous studies at Flinders University in Adelaide, says the divide can be blamed on the failure of the present generation of black and white politicians to think beyond the indigenous rights debate.

"The economic concerns over the [past] 30 years have been subordinated to the political concerns," he says. "There needs to be a shift in mind-set in Australia policy to treat indigenous rights and interests as co-equal to those of the national interest."

The Howard Government's Tony Abbott agrees. "As a society, we have been guilty of a collective failure of imaginative sympathy towards some of our own," the Employment Minister said in a speech this week. "For much of our post-contact history, we have been more conscious of the wrongs of Ireland and the passions of the Middle East than the pain of Australian indigenous people."

On being told of the new Census information, Abbott replied: "Indigenous people generally on all the disadvantage indicators rank dramatically worse than the rest of the community, no doubt about that."

"I am not surprised that urban Aborigines rank somewhat better than non-urban Aborigines -- although equally behind both whitefellas in both urban and non-urban areas -- because urban areas have higher educational attainments, higher incomes [and so forth] than non-urban areas."

The income distribution for the urban Aborigine is more akin to the small-town white, living in a settlement of 200 to 999 people. Yet if you're white and chose to stay in an economically disadvantaged region, you can expect generous taxpayer subsidies, with no fear of a backlash from Pauline Hanson's supporters.

Sugarcane growers, for instance, are about to receive another \$150 million, their third bailout in a decade. No one says they should move to the cities.

Cash and career but doing it tough

SHE lives in Sydney's eastern suburbs wealth belt after growing up in the Queensland battler town of Gladstone. She earns a decent income and is completing her second university degree while running an indigenous media and arts organisation.

Nancia Guivarra, 35, could be a prototype for the upwardly mobile urban black middle-class woman. But, she says, the label doesn't fit, even if the income does.

"I know of non-indigenous people of my age group whose mum and dad have given them a deposit for a house," Guivarra says.

"That's a major hurdle for us, particularly in a city like Sydney. Even though your salary is quite good on paper, it doesn't necessarily translate into wealth for our people."

Guivarra's story sounds like that of a new migrant from a war-torn or impoverished nation who sends a share of their income back home.

"We, as a people, don't have the generations of accumulated wealth that mainstream populations have. We have only recently entered the mainstream workforce. I don't know of an Aboriginal millionaire.

"What you find is that a lot of our people are concentrated in positions that are funded by government and in community organisations. On top of that, as younger people many of us have obligations to family -- for example, we may help out mum and dad who don't live in the city. We don't necessarily use that income in the same way that a mainstream population would."

This, however, is not the angry voice of an old-school indigenous activist. Guivarra is a confident city slicker. But her identity is black, not white.

"I wouldn't say that we are integrated. We are never going to be the same as non-indigenous people because our histories are different, and that's what informs our lives."