

## Depopulation, disappearance and resurgence: the population history of the Aboriginal people of Victoria

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The native population of Victoria was fully enumerated in the censuses from the 1850s, while colonial dispossession was still proceeding. In the 1860s the colonial authorities established a number of reservations to protect the native people from the excesses of the settlers, and on the reserves the death rate fell and the birth rate rose. Many of the babies were of mixed race, and after only a few years a policy of forced assimilation was adopted, requiring people of mixed descent to leave the reserves and 'merge with the general population of the colony'. For the next hundred years official policy was dedicated to the eventual disappearance of the Aboriginal race through assimilation and intermarriage. Children were routinely removed from their mothers and raised in institutions or adopted by white families. Most people of Aboriginal descent became statistically invisible, and the census numbers reached very low levels in the 1930s. But since the 1970s these invisible Aborigines have re-identified in large numbers, resulting in extraordinary growth rates in the census population.

Following a national inquiry into the stolen generations, Aboriginal people searching for lost relatives have been reconstructing their family histories. We have used these genealogies to reconstruct the population of Aboriginal descent back to the early 1800s. By combining these reconstructions with the census data we have been uniquely able to document both the colonial population decline, and the dynamics of the population hidden for so long by the policies of forced assimilation.