

Some Basic International Comparisons: A Short Backgrounder on First Nations Demography and Other Post Colonial Experiences to help frame discussions and engagement

Aboriginal Australians, African Americans, Indigenous Americans, Canadian Indigenous Peoples, and New Zealand Māori: Historical Experiences and Contemporary Socioeconomic Disparities/Commonalities

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Introduction

When people talk across the world it is useful to have some common basis of comparison.

This paper compares five populations affected by European colonization, dispossession, and assimilation policies: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Indigenous Australians), African Americans (Black Americans in the United States), American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN or Indigenous Americans in the United States), Canadian Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), and New Zealand Māori communities.

The comparison examines their demographic profiles and key historical experiences of oppression—including liberation from slavery (primarily African Americans), the Trail of Tears and forced removal (primarily Indigenous Americans), colonization, frontier violence, and assimilation policies toward Aboriginal Australians, parallel residential school policies in Canada, and the impacts of British colonization and land loss for Māori. It then analyzes current socioeconomic disparities across key indicators.

Data reflect the most recent available figures as of 2024–2026 from official statistical agencies. These groups show resilience through cultural revitalization, yet persistent gaps highlight the long-term effects of historical trauma, geographic challenges, and structural barriers. This backgrounder is offered in support of Victoria's Treaty process, providing international comparisons to inform meaningful relationships and self-determination for First Nations Victorians.

Population Profiles

- Indigenous Australians: Approximately 984,000 people (2021), representing about 3.8% of Australia's population (~27 million).
- African Americans: Approximately 49.2 million (2024), representing about 13.7–14.4% of the U.S. population (~341 million in 2025).
- Indigenous Americans (AIAN): About 3.7 million (AIAN alone, ~1.1–1.4%), or 7.7 million including multiracial (~2.3%).

- Canadian Indigenous Peoples: About 1.8 million (2021), representing roughly 5% of Canada's population (~41.5 million).
- New Zealand Māori: Approximately 932,300 as at 30 June 2025, representing about 17.5% of New Zealand's population.

Proportionally, Māori form the largest share (~17.5%), followed by African Americans (~14%), Canadian Indigenous (~5%), Indigenous Australians (~3.8%), and AIAN (~1.1% alone). All groups experienced major population declines after European contact, followed by recovery in modern times.

Historical Experiences of Oppression and Resolution

- **African Americans: Chattel Slavery and Liberation** Enslaved Africans and their descendants arrived from 1619. By 1860, nearly 4 million were held as legal property. Liberation came via the Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation (1863), and 13th Amendment (1865), followed by Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Acts (1964–1965). The experience centered on labor exploitation.
- **Indigenous Americans: Trail of Tears and Forced Removal** The Indian Removal Act (1830) forced tens of thousands from southeastern homelands. The Cherokee Trail of Tears (1838–1839) caused thousands of deaths. This was part of broader policies of reservations, land allotment, and boarding schools. Citizenship was granted in 1924.
- **Aboriginal Australians: Colonization, Frontier Violence, and Assimilation** British settlement began in 1788 under terra nullius. Population declines resulted from diseases, frontier massacres, and displacement. The Stolen Generations (early 20th century–1970s) involved forced removal of thousands of children for cultural assimilation. Key milestones: 1967 referendum, 1992 Mabo decision, and 2008 national apology.
- **Canadian Indigenous Peoples: Residential Schools and Assimilation** Policies included reserves and residential schools (late 19th century–1990s), where ~150,000 children were removed. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission described this as cultural genocide. The last school closed in 1996, with a 2008 apology and ongoing reconciliation efforts.
- **New Zealand Māori: Colonization, Land Loss, and Assimilation** British colonization and the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) led to massive land loss through wars, confiscations, and legislative measures. Māori population declined sharply in the 19th century due to disease and conflict. Assimilation policies included suppression of language and culture. Modern redress includes Treaty settlements, the Waitangi Tribunal, and growing recognition of Māori rights and self-determination.

Parallels and Differences: All involved dispossession, high mortality, forced assimilation, and intergenerational trauma. African American history emphasized chattel slavery. The Indigenous groups experienced severe violence, land removal, reservations, and cultural suppression. “Resolution” came through war/amendments (U.S. slavery), court decisions/referendums/apologies (Australia and Canada), and Treaty settlements (New Zealand).

The Victorian Treaty Process: Meaningful International Relationships and First Nations Self-Determination

In Victoria, Australia, the Treaty process represents a landmark contemporary step toward self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians. As the first Australian state to legislate for Treaty negotiations, Victoria established the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria (2019), the independent Treaty Authority, and the Yoorrook Justice Commission for truth-telling. The Statewide Treaty Act (passed late 2025) and the establishment of Gellung Warl (the Treaty negotiation body) in 2026 mark the transition from preparation to formal negotiations.

This Victorian Treaty journey draws direct lessons from the international experiences compared in this paper — particularly the Treaty of Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand, Canadian modern treaties and reconciliation frameworks, and U.S. tribal sovereignty models. It offers Aboriginal Victorians a pathway to shared decision-making, reparations, cultural recognition, and economic inclusion, aiming to address the legacies of dispossession and assimilation while building sustainable, prosperous communities grounded in First Nations self-determination.

Socioeconomic Disparities Today (2023–2025)

Table 1: Population Comparison

Population Group	Taxonomy	Approximate Population	Percentage of National Population
Indigenous Australians	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	984,000	3.8%
African Americans	Black / African American	49–51.6 million	13.7–15.2%
Indigenous Americans (AIAN)	American Indian and Alaska Native alone	3.7 million	1.1%
Indigenous Americans (AIAN)	AIAN alone or in combination	7.7–9.7 million	2–2.9%
Canadian Indigenous Peoples	First Nations, Métis, Inuit	1.8 million	5%

Table 2: Socioeconomic Indicators

Indicator	Indigenous Australians	African Americans	AIAN (US)	Canadian Indigenous	National/Majority Benchmark
Median / Household Income	Equivalised weekly ~\$830 (2021); personal median ~\$540/wk	Household ~\$56,000 (2023)	Household ~\$56k-\$62k	Working-age median \$32k-\$49k (Métis higher)	Aus non-Indig. higher; US ~\$80k+; Can ~\$50k+
Poverty / Low-Income Rate	~30% (older); 40% lack basics (vs 11% non-Indig.)	~18.4% (2024)	~19.3% (2024)	~17.5% off-reserve; higher on-reserve (up to 28-47%)	Aus non-Indig. ~11%; US White ~7.6%; Can ~10%
Unemployment Rate	12-16% (higher in remote areas)	~5.5% (2023)	~6.6% (2023)	Higher than non-Indig.; employment rate 50-70%	Aus non-Indig. lower; US White ~3.3%; Can non-Indig. lower
Educational Attainment (~Bachelor's or post-secondary)	~46% any non-school qualification; Year 12 ~39%	~27% Bachelor's + (2023)	~16% (alone)	Gaps persist but narrowing	Aus/US/Can non-Indig. higher
Life Expectancy (at birth)	Males 71.9 yrs; Females 75.6 yrs (gap ~8-9 yrs)	~74 yrs (2023)	~70.1 yrs (2023)	Overall ~77 yrs; First Nations/Inuit lower (gaps 7+ yrs)	Aus non-Indig. M80.6/F83.8; US White ~78.4; Can ~81-84
Incarceration / Overrepresentation	~2,500 per 100k (15+x non-Indig.; ~37% of prisoners)	~1,000+ (~5x White)	High (~4x White)	~10x higher (up to 19x in some provinces)	Much lower for non-Indig. in each country

Key Observations on Socioeconomic Disparities

- Income, poverty, and employment gaps of 20-50%+ below national averages persist across all groups, worsened by remoteness, reserves, or rural locations.
- Educational attainment lags but improves in urban settings and with targeted programs.

- Life expectancy gaps of 5–10+ years remain, driven by chronic disease, injury, substance use, and access barriers. Māori life expectancy has shown strong recent gains but still trails non-Māori.
- Justice system overrepresentation is extreme for Indigenous Australians, Canadian Indigenous peoples, and Māori (who make up over half of New Zealand’s prison population).
- Māori face disparities affecting a large proportional share of New Zealand’s population. African Americans experience the largest absolute numbers affected. Urban/off-reserve outcomes are generally better.

Gaps have narrowed modestly in some areas (e.g., education and life expectancy for Māori), but remain significant and can widen during economic or health shocks.

Conclusion

These five national communities share legacies of colonization, dispossession, forced assimilation, and intergenerational trauma, which continue to shape socioeconomic outcomes today. Historical mechanisms differed—slavery for African Americans, land removal for North American Indigenous peoples, assimilation on the land for Aboriginal Australians and Canadian Indigenous, and Treaty-related land loss plus cultural suppression for Māori—yet patterns of disadvantage are strikingly consistent.

The Victorian Treaty process offers a historic opportunity to apply these international lessons in real time. By drawing on successful elements of the Treaty of Waitangi, Canadian reconciliation frameworks, and U.S. tribal sovereignty models, Victoria can build meaningful, nation-to-nation relationships that deliver truth, justice, reparations, and shared prosperity for Aboriginal Victorians.

Progress stems from community resilience, cultural revival, advocacy, and policies such as Australia’s Closing the Gap, Canada’s reconciliation efforts, U.S. tribal sovereignty, and New Zealand’s Treaty settlements and Māori development initiatives. Closing remaining gaps requires addressing geographic isolation, discrimination, and investment in health, housing, education, and justice reform. These histories and realities highlight the value of truth-telling, equity, and recognition of cultural strength.

A further paper will add to this mix and compare the South Pacific small nations and perhaps other groups that are part of the global diaspora known as “the South” in some dialogues.

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