



Information Sheet 1: The Demography of Pacific Islander Migrants in Colonial Queensland

Numbers

62,475 indenture contracts were issued for Pacific Islanders to work as labourers in Queensland between 1863 and 1904. Given the rate of re-enlistments from the islands it seems likely that there were about 50,000 individuals. The vast majority (95 per cent) were healthy adolescent and young adult males.

Mortality

Lack of Immunity

At home, Pacific Islanders lived in an isolated disease environment lacking many of the common diseases of large land masses. They were unused to regulated field work. The climate from which they came had no winter. Most were not used to wearing clothes which caused health problems when they continued to wear damp garments. The food they received was quite different from food in the islands. There were large conceptual differences between nineteenth-century European and Pacific Islanders views of causes of sickness and death.

Death Rates

Government records show that in excess of 14,564 Islander labourers died in Queensland between 1868 and 1906. There are some gaps in the statistics: the total figure is probably closer to 15,000. This is 24% of the total number of indentured contracts and an even higher percentage of the actual individuals involved. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, bronchitis, pleurisy, dysentery, measles and chicken pox were the major killers

The estimated death rate of Islanders in the first year of their indenture was 81 per 1,000, over three times the estimated crude death rate for the rest of the Islander population, which was 26 per 1,000. It was always the newcomers, the first-indenture labourers, who suffered worst in Queensland.

Comparison with European Death Rates

The death rate amongst Europeans in Queensland over similar years—of all ages—was 15 per 1,000. The death rate amongst European males in Queensland of similar age to the predominantly male Islander population, was closer to nine or ten in every 1,000. The general Queensland mortality rate was average for colonial Australia and acceptable by world standards. The Queensland Pacific Islander mortality rate, which at its height in 1884 was 147 per 1,000, was unacceptable by humane standards anywhere.

The Burden of Guilt

Exposure to the new disease environment was the fundamental cause of death. Neither employers nor government can be blamed for the initial high death rate, nor for failing to foresee it. But they can absolutely be blamed for persisting with the system for forty years when it had become clear that the death rate was the price. There is a heavy burden of guilt borne by the colonial Queensland Government and those it represented.

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Sincerely,



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