

POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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RESEARCHING MOBILITY OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE TERRITORY

KEY FINDINGS

- Longitudinal research enables a greater understanding than a cross-sectional approach of the change or stability of factors affecting population mobility.
- In-depth interviews which enable the construction of residential mobility histories provide greater complexity of data than that available through the five-yearly census.
- An appropriate method of data collection which matches the phenomenon being studied should be used. In studying mobility of young adults, data collection using ICT which does not rely on locational or temporal fixity would be appropriate.
- Young adults value research as a means of initiating change in the community and can be encouraged to participate by a respected person.
- As young adults aged 20 to 24 years form an important current and future cohort of the Northern Territory population, research methods which adequately represent the complexity of their mobility should be developed.

RESEARCH AIM

To identify suitable research methods for effectively tracking residency patterns of young adults into, within and out of the Northern Territory

This Research Brief draws on experience gained from conducting the Territory Mobility Survey (telephone survey) and the Northern Territory Mobility Project (in-depth interviews).

This Research Brief was prepared by Elizabeth Creed.

What is the most effective approach to use in mobility research targeting young adults?

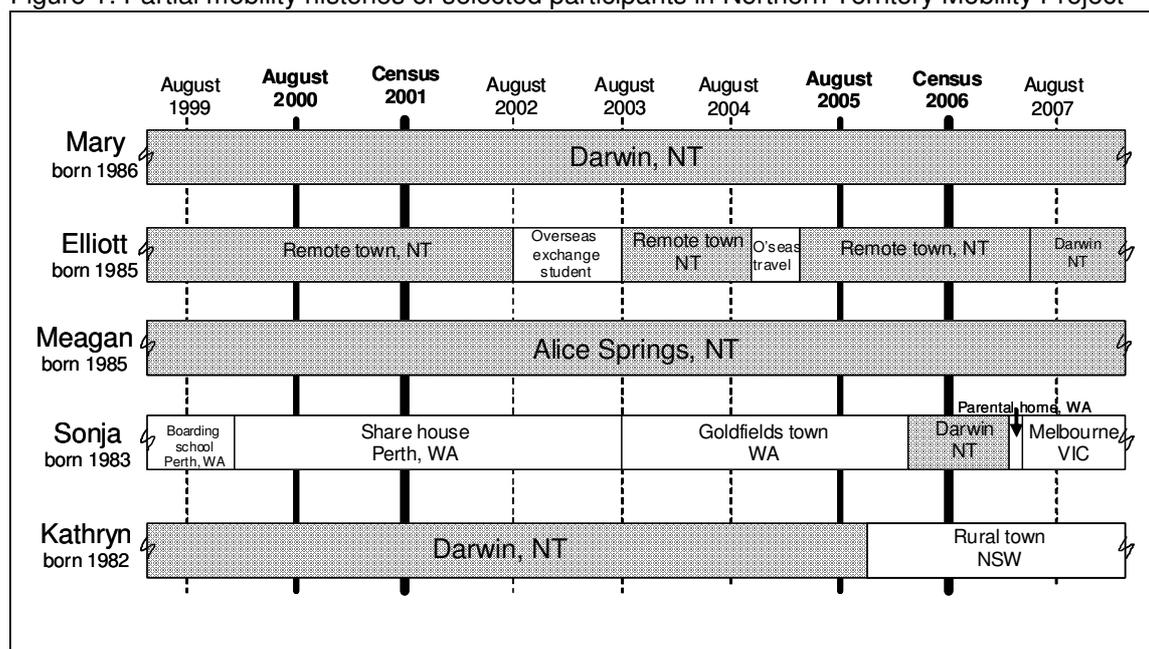
Cross-sectional vs longitudinal research

Research using a cross-sectional approach allows a snapshot of a cohort (i.e. a generational group sharing demographic characteristics) which can be compared with snapshots of other cohorts. However, in mobility research, this approach results in a static representation of a dynamic process. Longitudinal research, which follows the same cohort across a set period of time, enables a greater understanding of how the degree of influence exerted by factors which affect mobility may change or remain stable through comparison with an individual's own earlier motivations and influences.

Census data vs mobility history

Census collection methods employ a cross-sectional approach and the resulting data are inadequate to fully describe the mobility patterns of many young adults. Details of the place of usual residence on census night in early August, 12 months before census night and at the previous census five years before are available but details of any mobility occurring in the periods of up to four years between these points in time are lost. For example, the census may completely miss a period of three years residency interstate to complete an undergraduate degree as well as any mobility which occurs during the November to March university break. While the census is adequate to capture long-term stability or infrequent mobility interspersed with residential periods of long duration, it may be inadequate to capture short-term mobility (i.e. up to 6 months) or medium-term residential stability (i.e. up to 4 years).

Figure 1: Partial mobility histories of selected participants in Northern Territory Mobility Project



In-depth interviews which establish life course biographies allow the construction of an individual's mobility history and the inclusion of shorter periods of stability which are not evident from census data. To illustrate this, Figure 1 compares residential information available from the 2001 and 2006 censuses with information from five in-depth interviews with participants aged from 20 to 24 years. Mary and Meagan did not move residence during the intercensal period while Kathryn's move from Darwin to a rural town in New South Wales in the 12 months prior to the 2006 census is identified in census data. Sonja's internal WA move from Perth to the Goldfields is identified as is her move to Darwin but information on length of residency is not available from census data. For Elliott, census data indicate that he was residentially stable in a remote Northern Territory town between August 2000 and August 2006. However, his year spent overseas as an exchange student, subsequent return to the remote town for more than 12 months and six months travelling overseas are completely missed by census data.

How can data be collected?

An appropriate method of data collection which matches the phenomenon being studied should be used. Young adults are highly mobile so traditional methods of social inquiry such as questionnaires, telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews which require the participant to be in a predetermined location in time and space may not be the most effective to use.

Many young adults communicate through local, national and international networks (e.g. social networking sites such as MySpace and Bebo) and, while they may be loosely attached to a geographical location such as a parental home, they exhibit high rates of residential mobility. ABS data shows that around 90% of 18 to 24 year old Australians used the Internet at any location in 2006-2007 with close to 80% of Northern Territory residents of all ages using the Internet (ABS 2007). High rates of Internet use exist in regional and remote areas of Australia. In addition, there is almost universal ownership of mobile phones for 16 to 29 year-old Australians (O'Doherty et al 2007).

Using information and communication technology (ICT) to collect data may allow access to greater numbers of young people than traditional survey sampling methods which rely on household location or random dialling to telephones with a landline connection. Such a method also overcomes temporal and spatial restrictions while allowing direct communication with a research participant.

What motivates young people to participate in research?

Young adults participating in the Northern Territory Mobility Project valued research as a way of initiating change, often due to their own or a friend's involvement in conducting research as part of their tertiary education or employment. They also wanted their voice to be heard and felt that they had worthwhile opinions to contribute.

"I think it's important [to participate], especially with studies where it's actually going to benefit the community. "

Meagan, aged 22, Alice Springs resident for nine years

“Any information that I can give you guys to perhaps make [the Northern Territory] more attractive to younger people because I think it’s a really fantastic place for young people to go – even if it is for six months.”

Jacinta, aged 24, worked in Central Australia for 9 months

Six of the participants had previously responded to either the Territory Mobility Survey (telephone survey) or completed the Australia Post Relocation Survey (self-completed questionnaire). The other six participants in the 20 to 24 year old cohort had responded to emails sent either through university or government mailing lists. Three of these participants had also received encouragement from a respected friend or relative to take part in the interviews.

“I received an email from a close friend that I mentioned in a government department. I’ve known her for a number of years from when she was working in the town I come from... She only gets involved in things that are of a high calibre and actually mean something. ... when she wrote the email, I thought, “This is interesting. It’s not a big commitment on my time and resources. I can do it”, and I thought that I could probably have something interesting and a bit different to offer.”

Elliott, aged 21, born in the Northern Territory

Comments

As young people aged 20 to 24 years are a highly mobile population, an adequate method of mobility research must be able to track their movements through both geographical and temporal space while maintaining direct contact with them. Longitudinal research using interviews to construct a history of residential mobility could employ contemporary information and communication technology such as emails, blogs and social networking sites to engage the interest of young adults. As this cohort forms an important current and future section of the Northern Territory population, appropriate research methods should be developed to capture an accurate representation of their residential mobility.

References

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