



Research Brief

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A Snapshot of Current Population Issues in the Northern Territory

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RESEARCH AIM

We aim to do a fastrack through what we see as the current and main population issues in the Northern Territory in 2016-2017. This features the latest available data and short commentary on each of the nine issues identified.

The Territory (NT) is at a critical juncture; facing low rates of population growth fuelled by large net interstate migration losses. In the longer term, some major demographic shifts are occurring, with implications for policy and planning. Our findings in this brief were presented at the 'Northern Population Matters' symposium, held in Darwin in August 2016. Presentations from the symposium can be viewed on our [demographyNorthⁱ](#) blog page with charts and graphs available for use with appropriate attribution.

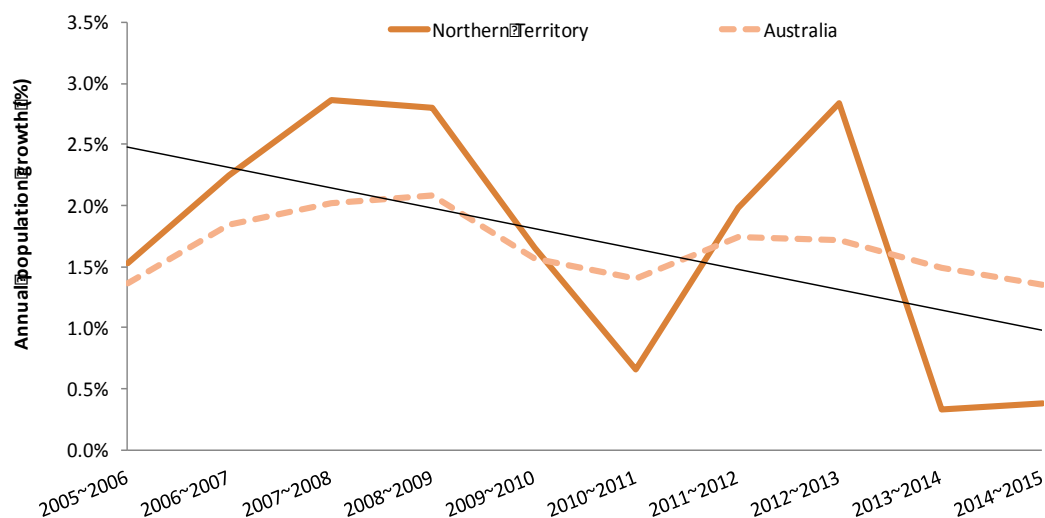
KEY FINDINGS

- The Territory is currently in a period of relatively low population growth which is diminishing our share of the national population.
- A persisting deficit of women is evident across all age groups above 15 years, and particularly amongst those aged 60 years and over.
- Low growth is being driven by sustained net negative interstate migration which is a result of the following factors:
 - the 'non-arrivals' of women and young families with children;
 - declines in the arrivals of those aged 20-39 years;
 - smaller increases to departures in many age groups, especially 40-59 years; and
 - migration losses are most evident from the Darwin Suburbs, Alice Springs and East Arnhem regions.
- We are no longer competing well enough to attract the same proportions of out-migrants from most States and Territories, with South Australia and Victoria standing out in terms of the loss of 'market share'.
- Our population is ageing through large growth in the 65 years and over population, however, the proportion of the population aged 65 plus remains below Australia;
- Indigenous population growth continues at a steady pace, while non-Indigenous growth rates are far more volatile.
- Population immobility is relatively low in the Territory, and lowest in Darwin City and Darwin's northern suburbs.
- Opportunities exist to address current population issues through reducing the gender imbalance and understanding how we can be more competitive in the interstate migration 'market' through research.



1. Relatively low population growth

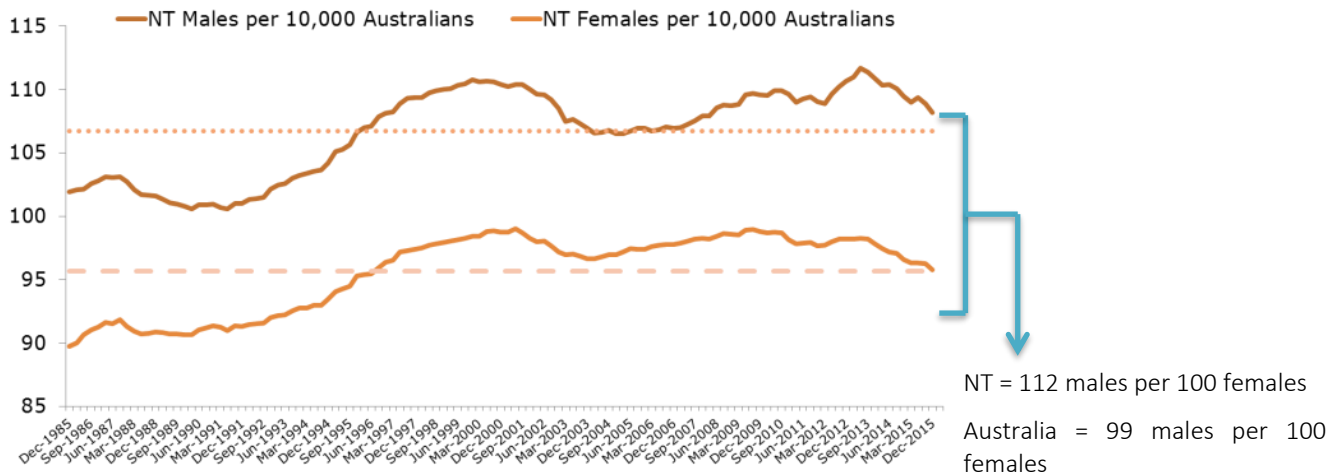
Recently, there has been much discourse on rates of population growth in the Territory. This chart shows data for the 10 years to 2015. For much of the past decade our growth rate has been above the national rate, however, since the halcyon years of 2007 to 2009 the growth rate has steadily declined, culminating in close to zero growth in the past two years. As the linear trend line in the chart below (the thin black line) shows, growth has trended downwards since 2007-2008 when we had near 3% growth estimated. The dip in growth in 2011 may be associated with estimation issues for that year. The second peak in 2012-2013 is likely to be associated with the initial site works on the INPEX gas plant but was short lived.



Source: Author calculations from ABS 3218.0 Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2015

2. A declining national share

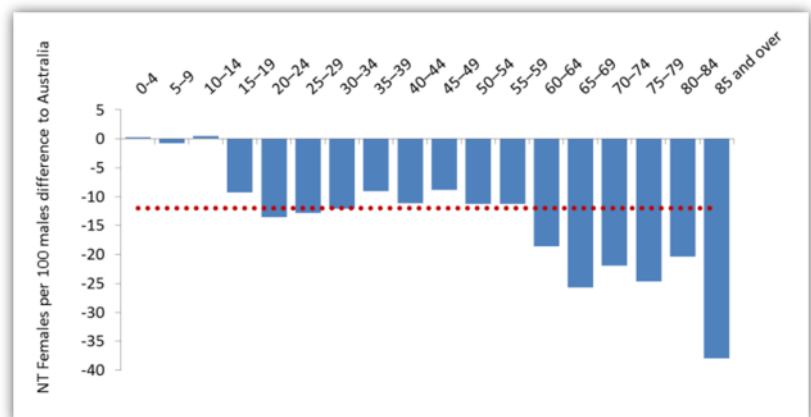
Population growth at or below the national average diminishes our share of the national population relatively rapidly. The chart below shows 30 years of data on the number of Territorians per 10,000 Australians. Importantly, even though our growth RATE has been above that of Australia for much of the past 10 years, mathematics means we continue to lose share because of the relativities of absolute numbers. When we fall below the national growth rate it means our share is eroded even more quickly. Note the big differences between our male and female share. In 2015 there were around 107 Territory men per 10,000 Australian men, but only 95 Territory women per 10,000 Australian women. This equates to a difference of 13 extra males per 100 females in the NT compared to Australia.



Source: Author calculations from 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Dec 2015

3. A deficit of women

Overall, there were 13 less women per 100 men in the NT in 2015 than for Australia – this is the red dotted line in the chart here. A gender imbalance is evident at all age groups after 14 years of age, particularly after 60 years since only small numbers of women retire in the Territory. The ‘jump-up’ in gender imbalance from age 15 onwards is similar to other northern developed jurisdictions, as teenage girls are far more likely to go away to finish school or start university. Boys are more likely to stay and work while girls are more likely to plan their education and careers and pursue them elsewhere. Obtaining greater gender balance is a key factor in reducing the out migration of certain groups – particularly women with children, and grandparents or retirees – and arresting decline from out migration to other jurisdictions.



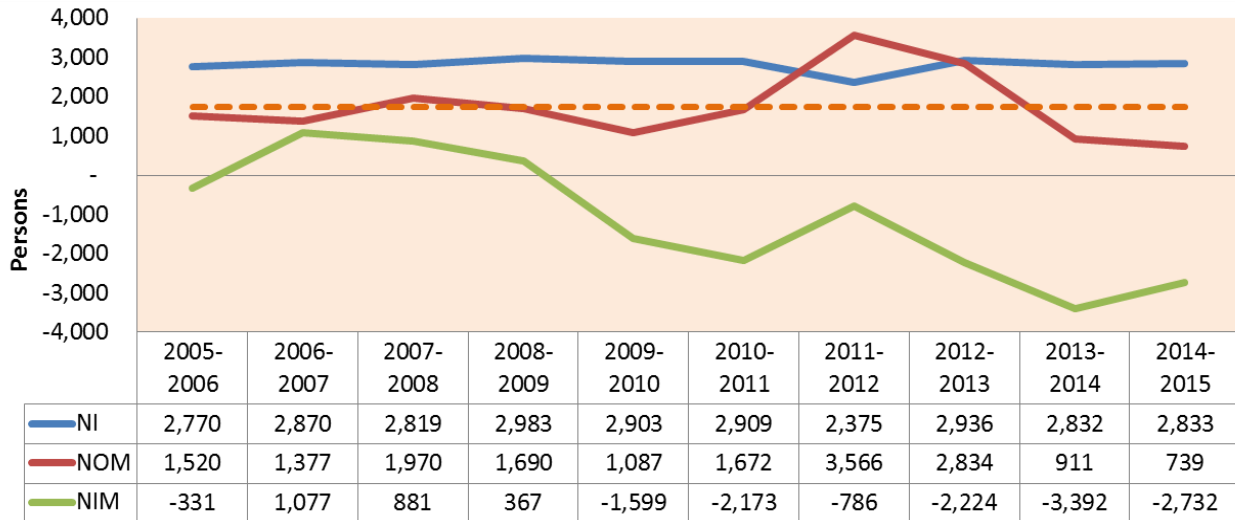
4. Net interstate migration losses

This chart shows the components of population change for ten years to 2015. NI is *Natural Increase*, the excess of births over deaths (the blue line); NOM is *Net Overseas Migration* (the red line) and NIM is *Net Interstate Migration* (the green line). The Territory is in a sustained period of NIM loss which began in 2007-2008. To give a feel for the scale, the net loss in the past 3 years has been the equivalent to the entire population of Tenant Creek and the Barkly region combined or the suburbs of Nightcliff and Coconut Grove combined. You can see that, without relatively high NOM during 2011 to 2013, our overall growth would have been well into the negative. With NOM now in decline we are edging close to zero population growth.

The last time we had zero or negative growth was in 2002 when we famously lost one of our House of Representatives seats, only to recover it through the statistical slight of a hand.



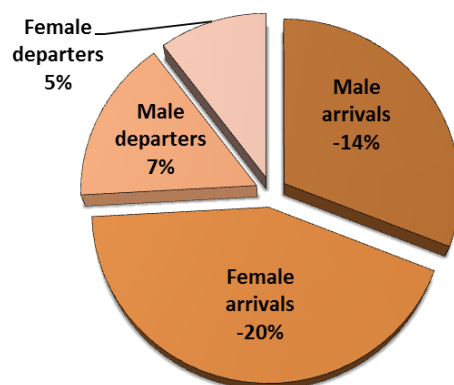
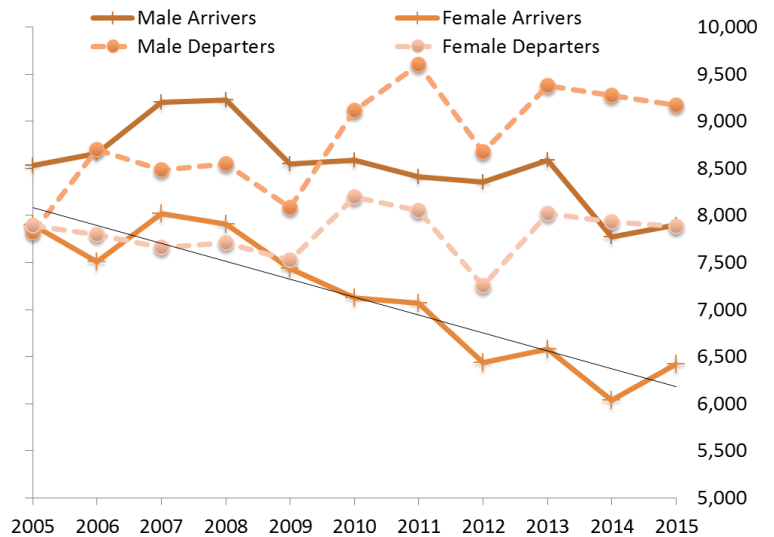
After Marina Strocchi



Source: Author calculations from 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Dec 2015

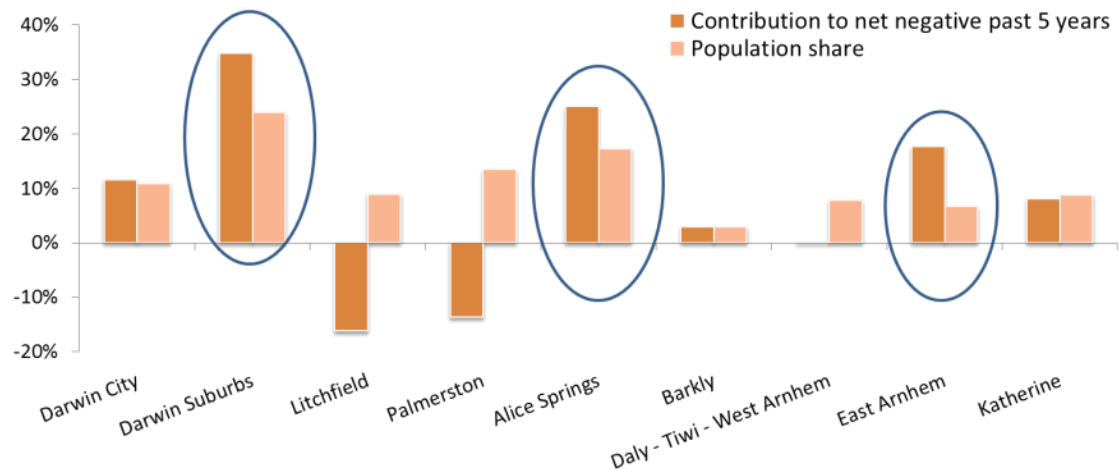
4.1 NT arrivers and departers

It is useful when examining net interstate migration to look at arrivers and departers for their contributions to the net figures. This chart shows us the main contribution to our current high negative net interstate migration is that we no longer receive a portion of people who used to arrive in larger numbers to take up residence in the NT. In particular, arrivals of women are down 20% since 2007. So with departers (people leaving the NT) also increasing since 2007, by 7% for males and 5% for females, the net position is a 25% turnaround in females and 21% for males on a net basis since 2007 (shown in the pie-chart to the right).





4.2 Hotspots for NT NIM losses

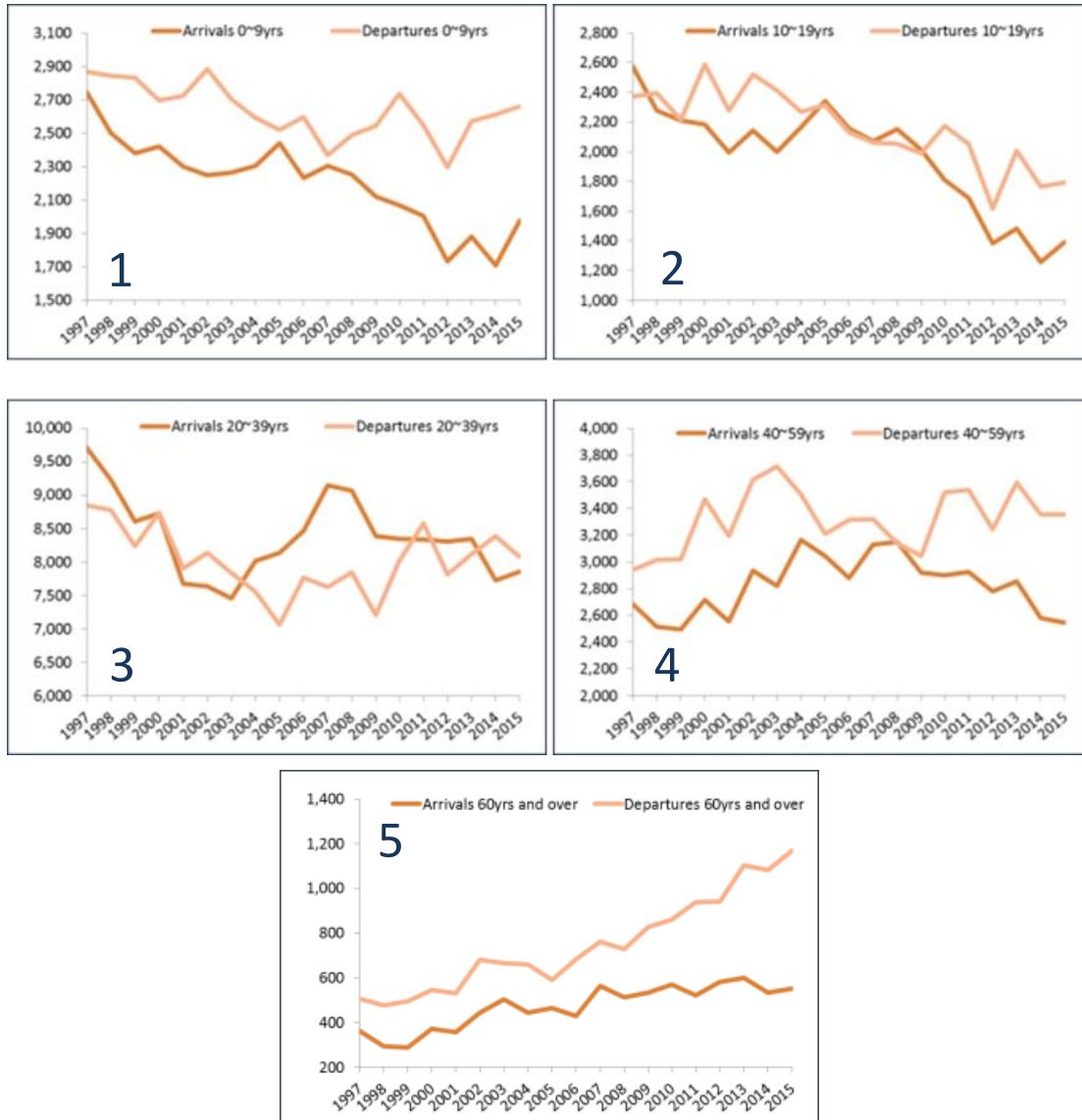


Sources: ABS: Dataset: ERP by SA2 and above (ASGS 2011), 1991 to 2015. Data extracted from ABS.Stat

The chart above provides an indication of the regional contributions, or 'hotspots', for net interstate migration losses during the past five years. It compares the proportional contribution to net interstate migration loss in the NT which was made by the individual region (the darker bar) to the share of the NT population in the region (the lighter bar). Thus, while Darwin Suburbs accounted for 24% of the NT mid-point population for the period 2010 to 2015, they contributed 35% of the net negative migration loss; suggesting families have been a significant part of the net loss over the past five years. Meanwhile, both Litchfield and Palmerston made net positive contributions to the NT population via migration and, indeed have been the fastest growing parts of the NT in the past 5 years. Note the one-off effect for Nhulunbuy (East Arnhem) due to the closure of the Rio Tinto Alumina Refinery, with the greatest impact from this event felt in 2015 when around 50% of residents left.



4.3 Which age groups?



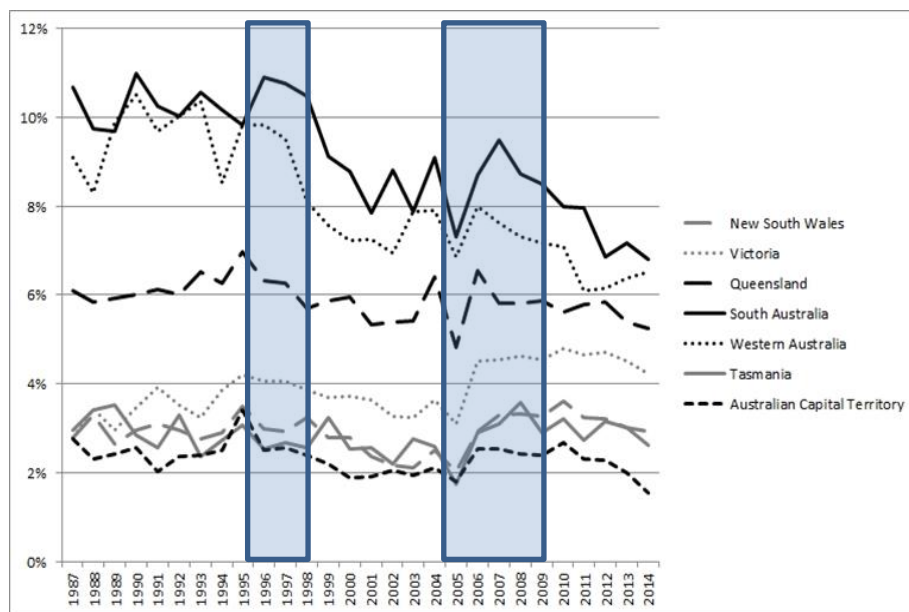
Sources: ABS: Dataset: ERP by SA2 and above (ASGS 2011), 1991 to 2015. Data extracted from ABS.Stat

The charts above indicate the age groups which are shaping the decline in our interstate migration position. They are particularly telling in terms of the decline in arrivals for children (Chart 1) and, even though departures have declined for kids under 19 (Charts 1 and 2), a big gap has emerged between the two for these age groups. For example, arrivals for 10-19 year olds fell by a third since 2007 when, for most age groups, arrivals broadly matched departures. Our biggest absolute numbers (or flows) for NIM are in the working age group 20-39 years (Chart 3), where we see arrivals have reduced substantially since 2007, while departures have increased. Arrivals for females in this age group fell by 20% since 2007. Meanwhile, departures of pre and post-retirees continue to rise rapidly in absolute numbers. Nevertheless, increasing absolute numbers of seniors will remain in the Territory because of the flow-on from a relatively large pre-retirement age cohort.



5. Our declining competitiveness in the national ‘migration market’

This chart shows the percentage of each State and Territory’s out-migrants who moved to the NT from 1987 to 2014. The blue areas are two time periods (or ‘eras’) where positive NIM in the NT saw spikes in the proportion of out-migrants from each State and the ACT coming to the NT, but the post-positive-era declines were sharpest for South Australia and Western Australia. For example, around 10% of all out-migrants from SA used to move to the NT, however, this figure was down to 7% in 2014. This emphasises the national and competitive nature of NIM, and that attracting people as well as retaining them is equally important to our population position. Data suggests lower or stable housing costs elsewhere induce higher NIM to NT while lower youth unemployment elsewhere induces higher NIM to NT. Hence, when conditions are favourable ‘down south’, the risk of moving to the NT is decreased and NIM figures improve.

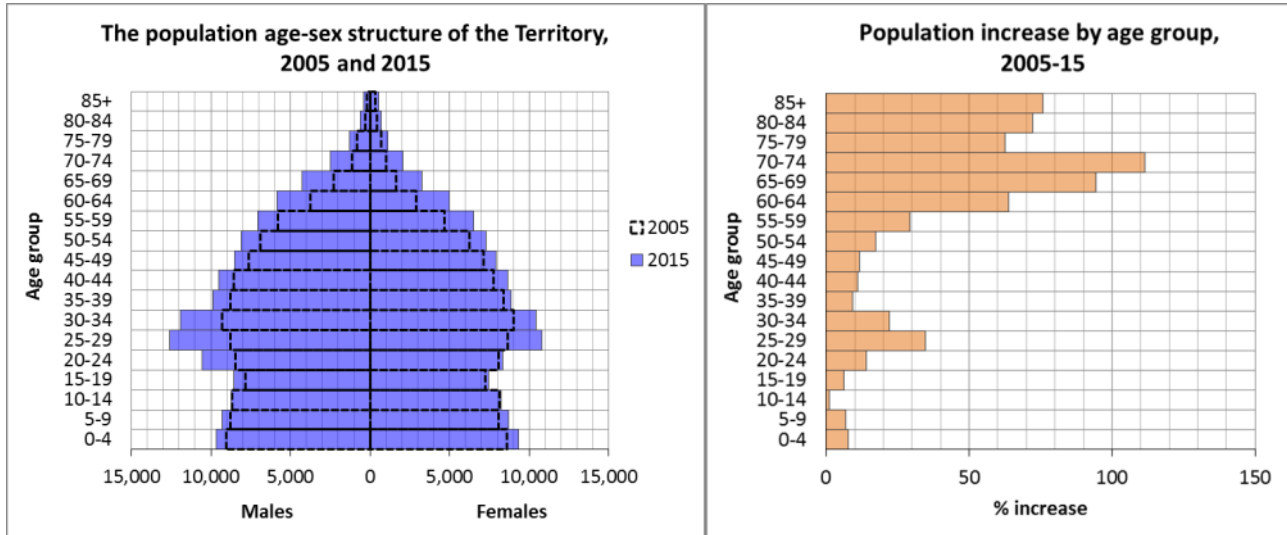


Source: Carson (2016, p. 8).

6. Population age structure change

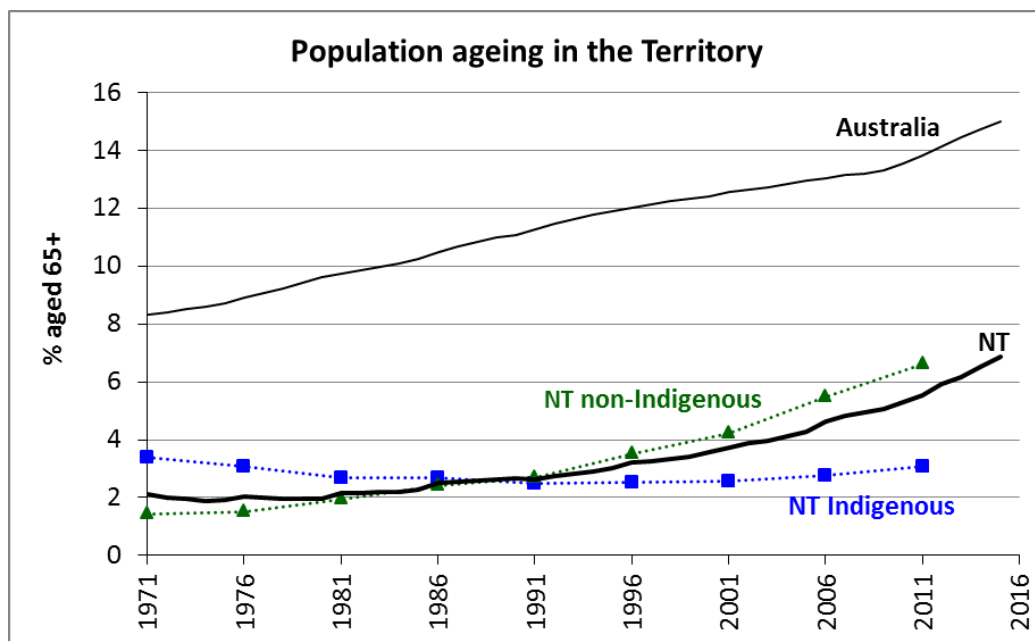
The graphs below show how the Territory’s population age structure has changed over the decade from 2005 to 2015. It can be seen that there was significant growth in the absolute numbers in the younger working age groups (20 to 34 years, as shown in the population pyramid on the left). This growth was the result of large increases in employment in defence, mining, construction, education, public administration, and health.

However, in proportional terms, the largest growth occurred in the older age groups (right chart). During the decade to 2015, the population aged 65 years and over increased from 4.3% to 6.9%. Population ageing, defined as increase in the proportion aged 65 and above, is a recent but significant population change occurring in the NT, and it has been proceeding at a faster pace in recent years (as the graph below shows). However, despite our current and forecast growth in seniors’ numbers and proportions, our seniors as a proportion of the total population remain well below that for Australia.



Source: Author calculations from ABS data.

If the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are examined separately, there little ageing evident in the Indigenous population at the moment, although this is forecast to change in the coming decades. Although there is growth in the absolute numbers of people aged 65 and over in the Indigenous population, the population aged 0-64 years is growing at the same rate, resulting in little change to the proportion aged 65 and over.



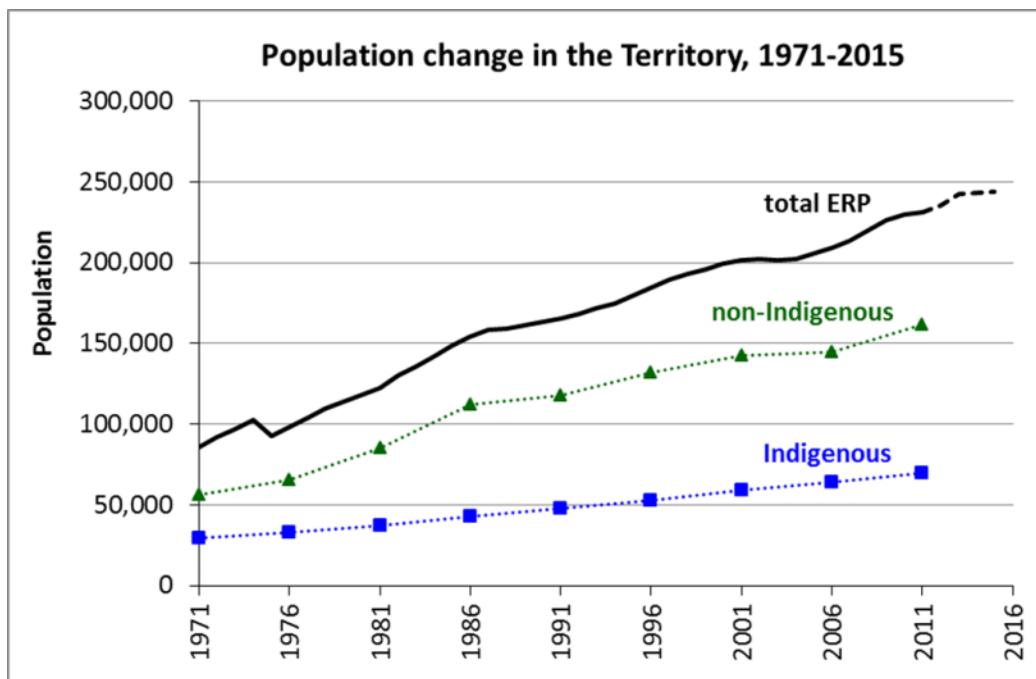
Source: ABS and Wilson (2014)

7. Steady Indigenous population growth

Over the last 40 years, there has been a steady growth of the Indigenous population, as the graph below shows. In 2011, it was estimated to be about 70,000, representing about 30% of the NT's population overall. If growth has continued at the same pace in the last 5 years, the Indigenous population in the Territory today is probably about 75,000. However, the NT's share of the national Indigenous population is declining. In 1981, 18% of Australia's



Indigenous population lived in the NT; by 2011 that had declined to just above 10% (Taylor & Bell, 2013). Growth rates of Indigenous populations outside the NT have been higher. This is because in the major cities of Australia more and more people are reporting themselves as Indigenous in the census who did not report themselves as Indigenous before, and the majority of Indigenous people in the big cities have non-Indigenous partners. When these couples have children, they tend to identify them as Indigenous in the census. By comparison, growth rates for non-Indigenous Territorians continue to fluctuate based on economic cycles and other factors.

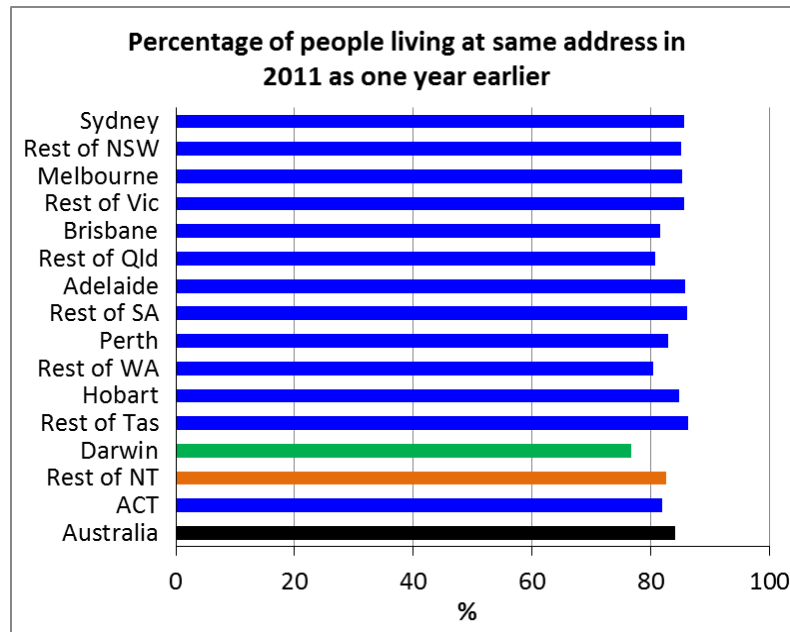


Source: ABS and Wilson (2014)

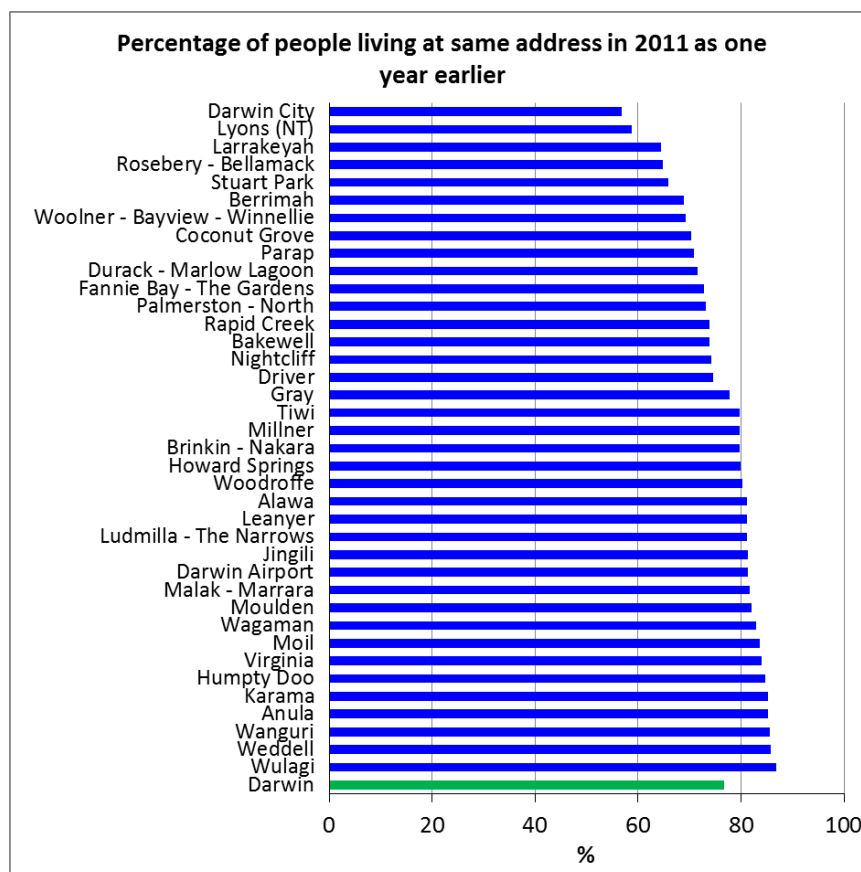
8. Below average population immobility

While a lot of research on migration is about people who have moved, it can be useful to look at the phenomenon from a different perspective, and to focus on people who *haven't* moved. People who stay long-term in a place are likely to have the greatest local knowledge and integration into the local community.

Census data allows us to calculate what proportion of the population on census night 2011 was living at the same address as 1 year earlier. The graph below shows that population immobility in 2010-2011 in the Territory, and especially for Darwin, was lower than for other jurisdictions in Australia. Australia-wide, 84% of people were living at the same address as 1 year ago. In Darwin, however, it was 77%. In Outback NT it was 83%, close to the national average.



Source: calculated from ABS Census data



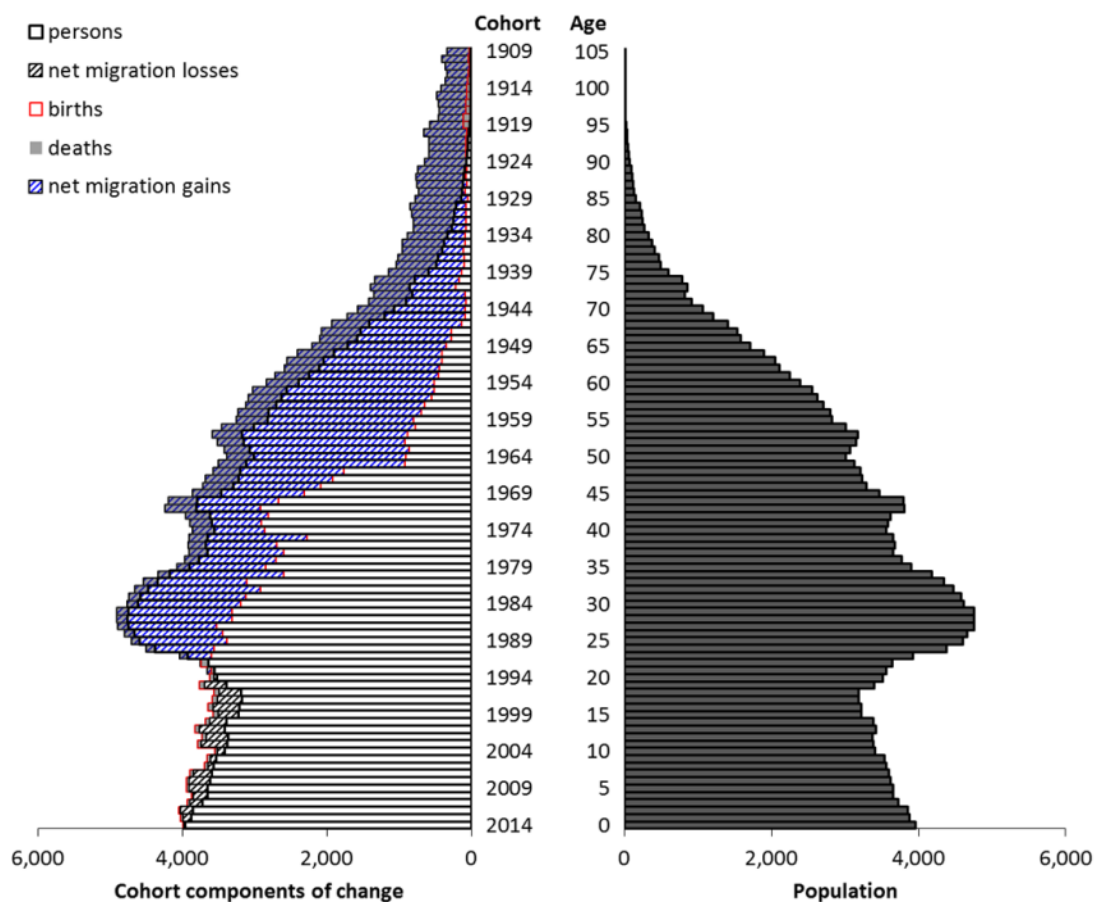
Source: calculated from ABS Census data



Examining immobility within Greater Darwin shows the City (or CBD) to be less immobile (57%) followed by Lyons (59%) and Larrakeyah (64%). The City contains lots of rental accommodation, which is associated with high mobility; Lyons is a new suburb so there has been considerable in-migration in recent years; and Larrakeyah is home to highly mobile defence force employees. Meanwhile, immobility is higher by comparison to the Darwin average (the green bar) in the suburbs with relatively few people in the most mobile age groups of 20-34.

9. An age structure shaped by migration

The graph below is a population pyramid for the Northern Territory at 31st December 2014. The right-hand side displays the number of people in each age group. It can be seen that the largest age groups are in the late 20s, and the smallest in the very oldest ages.



Source: Wilson (2016); calculated from ABS data

The demographic reasons why the Territory's age structure takes the shape that it does are shown on the left of the graph. It illustrates the extent to which the size of each age group is due to the three factors of births, deaths and net migration. The thick black line represents population, and mirrors the graph on the right. The red lines represent the number of births which have occurred in the NT for each year over the last century. For example, people born in 2014 are aged 0 at 31st December 2014; people born in 2013 are aged 1 at 31st December 2014; people born in 1964 are aged 50. The number of births is fairly similar to the population numbers over the childhood age groups, but not at higher ages. Net migration gains are shown by the blue stripes while net migration losses are depicted by black stripes; deaths are shown by the transparent grey shading. The key point arising from



the left-hand graph is that the age structure of the NT over all adult age groups is shaped primarily by large net migration gains.

Summary & Conclusions

In this research brief we have identified nine current population issues for the Northern Territory featuring:

- A current period of low population growth which is diminishing our national share;
- A persisting deficit of women across all age groups above 15 years, and particularly amongst those aged 60 years and over;
- Low growth which is being driven by sustained net negative interstate migration resulting from:
 - The 'non-arrivals' of women and young families with children;
 - declines in the arrivals of those aged 20-39 years;
 - smaller increases to departures in many age groups, especially 40-59 years; and
 - migration losses are most evident from the Darwin Suburbs, Alice Springs and East Arnhem regions;
- We are no longer competing well enough to attract the same proportions of out-migrants from most States and Territories, with South Australia and Victoria standing out in terms of the loss of 'market share';
- Our population is ageing through large growth in the 65 years and over population, however, the proportion of the population aged 65 plus remains far below Australia;
- Indigenous population growth continues at a steady pace, while non-Indigenous growth rates are far more volatile; and
- Population immobility is relatively low in the Territory, and lowest in Darwin City and Darwin's northern suburbs.

Opportunities to reverse the current trends of low growth, gender imbalance and net interstate migration losses exist in the areas of:

1. **Addressing our female deficit and obtaining population balance and maturity by:**
 - a. Pursuing lifestyle, amenity and population balance (versus large growth);
 - b. Doing everything we can to keep seniors (grandparents); and
 - c. Delivering quality education, housing, retail and transport facilities.
2. **Diversifying the economy by:**
 - a. Stimulating the cultural, creative and innovative sectors;
 - b. Moving away from 'chasing' big projects which entrench volatility, gender imbalance and population turnover; and
 - c. Negotiating an increased international migration intake to offset interstate losses.
3. **Conducting ongoing research into:**
 - a. The reasons that certain women and families with children are no longer arriving in the numbers that they used to;
 - b. Continue to improve population projections and their adoption into planning processes;
 - c. Understanding why coming to the NT is a risk and how we can better 'compete' for potential new migrants; and
 - d. We also must understand factors which are 'repelling' 'would-be' migrants and consequently encourage residents to leave. We know a lot more about the latter – family, cost of living and careers.



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ⁱ <http://demographynorth.blogspot.com.au/>