

POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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INFLUENCES ON MOBILITY OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE TERRITORY

KEY FINDINGS

- According to census data from 1976 to 2006, young adults have shown consistently high rates of movement into and out of the Northern Territory.
- International and Australian research on the mobility of young adults has focussed on rural and regional areas but the Northern Territory Mobility Project appears to be the first such research to focus on remote areas.
- The Northern Territory is perceived as a place in which young adults can develop their stocks of human capital through career options unavailable in more populated regions of Australia.
- Important influences on mobility are the need to develop identity while retaining connection to family and friends. In the Territory, this can occur in a remote and challenging environment.
- As young adults aged 20 to 24 years form an important current and future cohort of the Northern Territory population, further research is warranted to understand the complex influences on their mobility decisions.

RESEARCH AIM

To identify the influences on mobility decisions of young adults aged 20 to 24 years in the Northern Territory

This Research Brief draws on ABS census data prepared by Megan Brown and qualitative data from in-depth interviews conducted as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project.

This Research Brief was prepared by Elizabeth Creed.



Background

Young people aged 15 to 24 years are easy to overlook as a population of interest in Northern Territory mobility studies as many in this age group would be dependent students moving with their families. However, from 1976 to 2006, ABS census data show that 15 to 24 year olds have consistently had the highest rate of in-migration to the Northern Territory of any age group. In addition, from 2001 to 2006, they were the only age group with a positive rate of net migration. On the other hand, this group also has high rates of out-migration. Together, these factors signify the important impact the mobility of young adults has on population turnover in the Northern Territory.

This Research Brief investigates a specific subset of the Northern Territory youth population (i.e. young adults aged 20 to 24 years as they are less likely than younger people to be dependent students) to understand through a conceptual and thematic analysis the influences on their decisions to move within the Territory, move into and out of the Territory, or remain in place.

What do we already know?

International studies of youth migration which highlight issues relevant to the geographic and social situation of remote areas in the Northern Territory include:

- A study of Icelandic communities which relied on primary industries found that, although young adults with a strong community-based social identity were less inclined to migrate, a strong predictor of out-migration was the perception of limited employment opportunities (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson 2006);
- An investigation in rural areas of Scandinavia found that the lack of economic and recreational opportunities for young women in a male-dominated geographic periphery operated as a motivator for migration to larger population centres (Dahlstrom 1996);
- Two studies of out-migration of young people from rural Scotland investigated the role of family and social networks (Stockdale 2002) and the influence of parents, who were either in-migrants themselves or locals, on their children's decisions to stay or leave (Jones 1999);
- Using Canadian census data, Molgat (2002) found that youth from areas outside major urban centres were more likely to leave home than their urban counterparts but the reasons for leaving home (i.e. study, work and achieving independence) did not differ much according to gender; and
- A European study which found that young people without the accumulated location-specific insider advantages of older workers were more likely to be mobile than older people (Tassinopoulos et al 1998).

Three recent Australian studies, two from Victoria and one from Tasmania, have focused on motivations for migration of young people from rural locations. In addition to the more obvious factors of seeking employment and education opportunities, Eacott and Sonn (2006) addressed the role of place attachment and community satisfaction as motivating factors in decisions to migrate from small Victorian towns. While many young people would like to stay in rural Victoria, Geldens' (2007) research found that the fear of being seen as a failure was a powerful force

encouraging them to move, irrespective of their personal wishes. In contrast, Easthope's (2007) study of return migration of young Tasmanian's found that their recognition of the existence of networks between Tasmania and the rest of the world enabled them to contemplate mobility (leaving and returning) while dominant community perceptions of Tasmania as a physically isolated and unique place stigmatised young adults for returning.

Who were the research participants?

This Research Brief presents insights gained from qualitative research undertaken as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 young adults aged 20 to 24 years. Two of the participants had been born in the Territory while five others had moved into the Territory with their families as children or teenagers; these long-term residents had lived in the Territory for periods ranging from 8 to 20 years. The remainder had lived in the Territory for periods of 4 months to just over two years. Five participants were out-migrants residing in other Australian states.

Figure 1: Sociodemographic information about participants at time of interview

Name	Age	Place of birth	Status	Occupation
Imogen ^(a)	20	Melbourne, VIC	Single	Admin clerk
Mary ^(a)	20	Darwin, NT	Partnered	Admin clerk
Elliott ^(a)	21	Remote town, NT	Single	Uni student (law)
Meagan ^(a)	22	Rural town, NSW	Single	Library clerk
Mark ^{(a)(c)}	22	Adelaide, SA	Partnered	Uni student (medicine)
Leonie ^(b)	23	Brisbane, QLD	Single	University researcher
Sonja ^{(b)(c)}	23	Rural town, WA	Single	Nurse (post-grad student)
Robina ^(a)	24	Sydney, NSW	Partnered, 2 chn	Uni student (nursing)
Cameron ^{(b)(c)}	24	Adelaide, SA	Single	Truck driver
Deborah ^(b)	24	Rural town, NSW	Partnered	NT govt public servant
Jacinta ^{(b)(c)}	24	Sydney, NSW	Single	Fashion designer
Kathryn ^{(a)(c)}	24	Melbourne, VIC	Single, one child	Parent

Note: (a) Long-term resident; (b) Short-term resident; (c) Out-migrant

What influences mobility of young adults in the Northern Territory?

Employment

Young adults perceive the Northern Territory as a place where they can develop their human capital by being given opportunities and responsibilities not available to them in areas of larger population where competition for employment is fiercer. While yet to develop a strong career commitment, the occupational flexibility this allows young adults enables them to try out different occupations and different modes of employment (e.g. short-term, fly-in-fly-out). This flexibility can work to the advantage of employers and organizations which require staff mobility. Some interview participants deliberately chose careers such as nursing and journalism to enable them to move around Australia.

Education

None of the young adults interviewed had moved to the Northern Territory for education. However, one interview participant from a small rural town had moved to Darwin to commence tertiary education and another is currently studying in Alice Springs. Although a third participant considers the Territory as 'home' and plans to return here once qualified, he currently lives and studies at a regional campus in New South Wales as it is the only institution in Australia which offers the double degree he is undertaking.

Social norms

Young adults add to their own concept of the world through the opinions of their peer group, family and community. Several short-term in-movers said "all their friends had moved away" from their place of origin, thus loosening the friendship ties which might have encouraged them to stay in those places. Many long-term residents had siblings who had also travelled or lived away from the family's home state. Parents who had been in-movers to the Northern Territory had established a family norm of mobility. The reality of population turnover as an established community norm creates a culture where 'moving on' is acceptable.

Connectivity

Information and communication technologies allow young adults to remain emotionally connected to family and friends despite lack of geographic proximity. Social networking sites are also used by an increasing number of young adults to remain connected to existing networks of friends with whom they may not often have face-to-face contact. Security through connectivity means that moving on does not necessarily result in the fracture of social relationships.

Developing identity

Personal and social identities of young adults are shaped in part by their life experiences; three of the participants had already developed strong self-identities through living overseas temporarily during their teenage years. The different experiences available to young adults in the Northern Territory are a strong 'pull' on mobility. Being removed from the constraints of one's usual life, young adults perceive the Territory as a place where they can "find themselves" and gain the independence essential to an adult identity.

Remoteness

The remoteness of small towns necessitates movement within the Northern Territory to larger population centres for education or employment while the remoteness of Territory destinations from the rest of Australia is an attractive factor for some young in-migrants. Young adults are attracted to the Territory by a sense of adventure engendered by the opportunity of challenging themselves in an unknown and sometimes difficult environment. As Sonja said: "Moving to Darwin was a place that was about 4,000 k's away from anyone I knew. I had no backup support. I had no

network or anything like that so it was just a big challenge to try and be able to prove to myself that I was adaptable enough to be able to cope.”

Conclusions

Using this small and non-representative sample does not allow a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors influencing mobility of young adults in the Northern Territory. However, given the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the research participants, this study is valuable in indicating areas of future research. While employment opportunities figure largely as an obvious structural factor in motivating the mobility of young adults within, into and out of the Territory, social networks and connectivity to people and place are also important factors underlying the mobile lifestyles of young adults. This occurs in a framework where young people are open to new experiences while developing their adult identity. While much Australian research on young people's mobility has centred on rural and regional areas, it appears that the mobility of young adults within, into and out of remote areas has been neglected.

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