

POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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DEFENCE FORCE COMMUNITY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

KEY FINDINGS

- Since 2000, the Defence community (Defence personnel, partners and children) has comprised around 6% of the Northern Territory population and currently numbers over 13,000 individuals.
- Defence personnel generally move into the Northern Territory on a two to three year posting, thus substantially contributing to regular population turnover in the Territory.
- Partners moving with Defence personnel may contribute economically to the Territory by adding to the pool of available employees.
- Subsidised housing for defence personnel in the community may affect availability and expense of rental housing for the broader community.
- The Defence community is strongly bonded but this may be to the detriment of forming relationship with other social groups.
- Policies could be directed towards making the Northern Territory an attractive destination for Defence personnel on discharge from service.

RESEARCH AIM

To use case studies of members of the Defence community in the Northern Territory to identify opportunities to mitigate the effects of population turnover

This Research Brief draws on qualitative data from in-depth interviews conducted as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project, as well as publicly available information from the Australian Defence Force.

This Research Brief was prepared by Elizabeth Creed.

Defence community in the Northern Territory

The Army Presence in the North (APIN) program commenced in 1992 and is responsible for a substantial component of the population turnover experienced in the Northern Territory. In the early years of APIN, the Defence community (i.e. Defence force personnel, their spouses or partners, and children) numbered around 5,000. By 2000, this number had doubled. Since then, the Defence community has averaged around 6% of the Northern Territory population while forming around 13% of the Darwin/Palmerston population. In June 2008, the Defence community in the NT was estimated to number 13,155 individuals¹.

Major Defence locations in the Northern Territory include several in Darwin as well as near Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs. Although some housing is supplied on-base, many personnel choose to live off-base so Defence personnel and their dependants are spread widely throughout the community. Given the substantial Defence commitment to the development of some of the newer suburbs of Darwin, the infrastructure which is already in place, and the continuing perception of a 'threat from the north', the Defence community will continue to be a part of the broader Northern Territory community for some time to come.

The aim of this paper is to understand some of the particular features of Defence life which are relevant to issues of population turnover and growth in the Northern Territory and to identify opportunities to mitigate the effects of this population turnover.

How was the research conducted?

Defence force personnel were not particularly targeted as a population of interest during the Northern Territory Mobility Project. However, analysis of the qualitative data showed that, of the 70 in-depth interviews, eight were conducted with participants who had either a direct or indirect (through their spouse or partner), current or past involvement with the Defence force that was instrumental in bringing them to the Northern Territory. The case studies available from the interviews demonstrate themes which, while also relevant to other sections of the population, are particularly relevant to the contribution of the Defence community to the Territory's population.

Mobility into and out of the Northern Territory

Generally, Defence personnel are moved into the Territory on two or three year postings and are then deployed elsewhere but this does not necessarily mean that these people are lost to the Territory forever. In line with recognised theories of population mobility, people do return to places where they have previously lived.

Howard initially came to Darwin on a three-month posting. On discharge from Defence, he remained in Darwin and has lived there for nine years.

Because I'm ex-defence force, I've got a lot of friends who are still there and so we see them coming and going. It works in cycles. Someone will be here for 2 years and then they'll move out...Old friends move back in. A lot of people who have spent time in Darwin before usually come back.

Debbie and Sam's story illustrates that ex-Defence personnel may return to the Northern Territory on retirement while still at relatively young ages.

We first moved to the Northern Territory in 1988 from Melbourne, because my husband was in the Defence force. We moved down south again in 1990 and moved back up to the Territory in 1993 from NSW when my husband retired [aged 36] from the Defence force.

For Deborah, a 24-year-old public servant whose partner is in Defence, a two-year posting to Darwin suits their life at this stage.

At the moment I'm happy with the prospect of moving around a lot but I imagine when we start to have kids or when they need to start going to school that I'd be looking for some more permanency. Probably in 5 to 10 years, I'd be looking not to move around quite so much.

However, when Deborah and her partner feel ready to 'settle down', the Northern Territory is a place they would consider.

I've asked my partner...if he got out of the Defence force, would he consider moving back to Darwin in a civilian role. He's a civil engineer so it would be very easy to get work up here. We both agreed that we would like to come back up here if and when the time comes around that he's in Civvy Street.

Employment

The Defence community in the Northern Territory brings with it skilled and employable dependants. The Defence Census conducted in 2003 found that, Australia-wide, over half the partners of Defence personnel worked full-time. Almost half had formal qualifications while just over 20% were undertaking some form of study.

Len's wife is a civilian employee within Defence and the family moved to Alice Springs for a three-year posting in late 2001. On leave without pay from his government position, Len undertook child care, home duties and casual employment in Alice Springs. On moving to Darwin on a two-year extension to his wife's contract, Len was able to return to full-time employment with his government employer.

Theresa and her husband were both in Defence and moved to the Northern Territory in 1997.

If they hadn't posted me, I would have got out [of Defence] and we probably wouldn't have moved to Darwin because of the expense of moving up here. We probably would have gone to Queensland.

Theresa expected to be living in Darwin for the three years of her posting but decided she did not want to take the subsequent posting offered to her so resigned from Defence.

My husband had a great job and I wanted to go to uni and I got into uni here [in Darwin] and so we stayed and re-trained...While he retrained, I kept working and then when we got up here, we bought a house and he was working and established in his career and then I quit and went to uni.

Housing

Although some housing is supplied on-base, many personnel choose to live off-base in Defence or private housing. Heavily subsidized rentals for eligible personnel make this an attractive option while having the potential to inflate rental housing costs for the rest of the community.

Defence personnel and their dependants are spread widely throughout the community and this is preferable for people, such as Deborah, who do not come from a Defence background.

All the Defence houses are down Palmerston way. We specifically chose not to live down there. We wanted to live somewhere nicer. We've got ocean views. ...It's a bit more normal I guess. In all of the Defence houses, you literally have Defence personnel, Defence personnel, Defence personnel.
When you say 'normal' you mean there's a range of different people there?
Yeah. Not everyone in the one street is all Defence.

Deborah's comment shows the importance of integrating Defence housing into the broader available housing stock to avoid the ghettoization of the defence community.

Community

Both bonding social capital (i.e. within groups) and bridging social capital (i.e. across groups) are important to the formation of strong communities. The Defence community is a strongly bonded community but, at times, this can be to the detriment of forming relationships across social groups.

Howard found it easy to settle into the Defence community in Darwin but:

I found it more difficult to fit into a non-military community because I was a southerner and because I had nothing to do with the Territory.

Deborah also experienced the ease of forming groups within the Defence community and the benefits of this network.

Especially if [the partners] go on deployment, then it's a good support network because everyone understands what the others are going through. Yeah, I think it's just an easy group to form. You don't have to make too much effort to have a network already set up.

Comments

For operational reasons, population turnover is an inherent component of life as a member of the Defence force community. Selected quotes from the case studies presented in this Research Brief have indicated some of the ways in which the effect of this turnover could be mitigated.

Policies and programs could be directed towards making the Northern Territory an attractive destination for Defence personnel during their service and on discharge or retirement from service. Often leaving the Defence force at a relatively young age, these individuals may possess trade skills, computer and communication skills, management and leadership qualities in combination with discipline and a work ethic of community service. In addition, they may have the financial assets to start their own businesses taking advantage of networks of ex-Defence personnel as potential clients or customers. Incentives could also be provided for the partners of Defence personnel to contribute to the Northern Territory economically through employment or study.

Many Defence force personnel move to the Northern Territory with partners and children. Considering that 79% of the total permanent Australian Defence Force is aged 20 to 39 years², children accompanying Defence personnel would most likely to be of pre-school, primary and early secondary school age. Children are often a conduit through which parents form friendships so opportunities for family leisure activities involving Defence and non-Defence personnel may strengthen social networks across these sometimes diverse sections of the community.

An evaluation of the Army Presence in the North (APIN) program, not merely in terms of its contribution to the Northern Territory population count but its effect on and implications for the wider community, may highlight the benefits and opportunities which the Defence community brings to the Northern Territory while identifying and addressing shortcomings.

References

Defence Census 2003, accessed 15 August 2008 from
http://www.defence.gov.au/DPE/defencecensus2007/public_report_2003.pdf

Northern Territory Treasury Budget Papers, accessed 15 August 2008 from
<http://www.budget.nt.gov.au/index.shtml>

¹ These figures were compiled from Northern Territory Treasury Budget Papers.

² According to Defence Census 2003 – results of Defence Census 2007 were expected in September 2008.