

# POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

ISSUE Number 2008004

© School for Social and Policy Research 2008

Population Studies Group  
School for Social and Policy Research  
Charles Darwin University  
Northern Territory 0909  
[popmob@cdu.edu.au](mailto:popmob@cdu.edu.au)

## RETURNING TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

### KEY FINDINGS

- Although some out-migrants may be lost to the Northern Territory altogether, the telephone survey showed that 30% of respondents had left and returned to the Territory at least once.
- Return migration is often planned from the outset and can occur, for example, at the completion of fixed-term employment, medical treatment, study, travel or undertaking family commitments elsewhere.
- Return migration may be for a limited time with 23% of telephone survey respondents saying they planned to leave again with two or three years.
- Retaining a family home in the Territory provides an emotional connection which may encourage return migration.
- Climate, suitable housing and existing social networks may encourage return migration of older ex-Territory residents.
- For many years, the Northern Territory has been a destination to which people return. What can be done to encourage people to return and to extend the period of time they plan to spend in the Territory?

### RESEARCH AIM

To identify the characteristics of people who return to the Northern Territory after a period of absence and the reasons for their return

This Research Brief draws on data from the Territory Mobility Survey and in-depth interviews conducted as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project. Funding for the research was provided by an ARC Linkage Grant.

This Research Brief was prepared by Elizabeth Creed.



## **Background**

Consistently high rates of population turnover in the Northern Territory result in annual gains and losses of significant numbers of residents. Although some residents who leave may be lost to the Territory altogether, some may return; a proportion of those moving into the Territory may actually be returning to a place of previous residence. Therefore, return migration cannot be understood in isolation but should be conceptualized as part of the general cycle of mobility which characterizes a modern society.

Considering the remoteness of the Northern Territory in relation to southern destinations as well as the Territory's relatively small population, and unique demographic, economic and social conditions, it is important that Northern Territory data about population movement are available rather than assume that conclusions drawn about return migration within Australia are applicable to the Territory.

### ***Overview of migration theories***

A brief overview of some of the main theories of population movement is essential in understanding the context of return migration. Traditionally, many migration theories took a macro-level approach and suggested that population movement was driven by broad economic, political and social conditions. An enduring theory involves push and pull factors, which are seen to either 'push' an individual or household away from one location, often due to dissatisfaction with some aspect of that location, or 'pull' them towards another location: for example, one which is perceived to provide better opportunities for employment or housing (e.g. Golledge & Stimson 1997). The perception of better employment opportunities is also central to the 'escalator region hypothesis' (Fielding 1992), which suggests that career advancement is more readily achievable in certain regions. Networks of employment or social contacts can also facilitate migration while micro-level theories have considered the role of human capital in a cost-benefit analysis of the advantages or otherwise of moving, migration in response to life course events, decision-making processes and factors such as place attachment. As these theories are used to explain migration in general, they provide a context for understanding return migration.

## **Data**

This Research Brief presents selected results drawn from a sample of 1,469 telephone interviews and 73 in-depth interviews which were conducted as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project. The focus is on the characteristics of people who return to live in the Northern Territory after a period of absence (i.e. three months or more) and what has been learned about their motivations for doing so.

## **Who returns to the Territory?**

The telephone interviews showed that 30% of respondents had left and returned to the Territory at least once. The majority of people returning to the Northern Territory do so with their families. They also come back to stay with two-thirds of respondents planning to stay longer than ten years from the time of the survey. It also appears that one in five returners stay longer than they had originally intended.

### ***1 Young adults***

The reason for returning home may also be the natural consequence of the reason for initially leaving. Young Australians may return to the family home after the completion of secondary or tertiary education at an interstate institution, in response to disintegration of a personal relationship or independent living arrangements, after an extended period of recreational travel or in response to a parental request for assistance during a crisis (Newbold & Bell 2001; Young 1996).

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with people aged 20 to 24 years (3 men and 9 women) and this pattern of mobility was clear, as was return to the family home after periods of employment interstate. The telephone survey showed that 14% of return residents were aged 20 to 29 years. The return may be temporary, as was the leaving, and reflects a new level of mobility of young adults (Young 1996) which occurs in a cyclical pattern rather than a linear one.

### ***2 Dual career households***

In the case of dual-career households, the availability of suitable employment for both partners is essential. Negotiating a return to the Northern Territory can be problematic without the support of the 'trailing spouse' (i.e. the one who puts their career on hold to benefit their partner's career) and, to some extent, the wider family network. The in-depth interviews provided several instances where advancement of the woman's career had been paramount, especially in the public sector areas of health and education.

"I initially came up for three months and then I went back to Brisbane for three months just to finish writing up my research. Then I came back with my husband. In the meantime, I found him a job to apply for because he wasn't so keen."

Sharon, 35-y-o, resident of remote town for 6½ years

### ***3 Home owners***

In 2003-04, the Northern Territory had a home-ownership rate of 59%, which was the lowest in Australia (ABS 2007). For out-migrants, owning property in the Northern Territory can act as an incentive to return but it also provides an economic base from which to finance out-migration from the Territory. The telephone survey showed that 70% of returners were home owners but it is not clear whether the home they owned was located in the Northern Territory or elsewhere.

For Tracey, retaining a home in Darwin serves two main purposes. Firstly, it provides an emotional connection to Darwin and, secondly, is used as a 'bargaining chip' in agreeing to live elsewhere for the benefit of her partner's career.

"Part of the proviso of us leaving Darwin this time is that we never sell [the house] and, if we do, we buy something else in Darwin so that I always have somewhere in Darwin I can call home."

Tracey, 34-y-o, partnered with young child, currently living in ACT

Sam and Debbie envisage using the family home in Darwin as the base from which to begin retirement travel and also as economic capital to provide their children with accommodation while they save towards buying their own homes.

"Yeah, we're keeping that [house]. I reckon when I finally retire, get the RV, travel around Australia, the kids can use the house until we get back. It gives them time to save up money to buy their own."

Sam, 49-y-o, father of five, currently living in ACT

#### **4 Reluctant out-migrants**

Reluctant out-migrants may have had to leave the Northern Territory as a result of their partner's employment elsewhere or perhaps as a young person who moved with their family. One would imagine that the potential for reluctant out-migrants to return to the Northern Territory would be high but negotiating a return to the Northern Territory can be constrained by a range of factors; family and business commitments elsewhere are only two such factors.

Tamara is currently a reluctant out-migrant. The strong attraction for her in Queensland is proximity to family. Although she initially said that this was the only reason she was living in Queensland, she qualified this by saying that her husband had his own business and:

"...it would be hard for me to drag him away. If he said to me, "I hate it, let's go back", I'd move back, I'd move back today."

Tamara, 31-y-o, living in Queensland after 10 years in the NT

#### **5 Older adults**

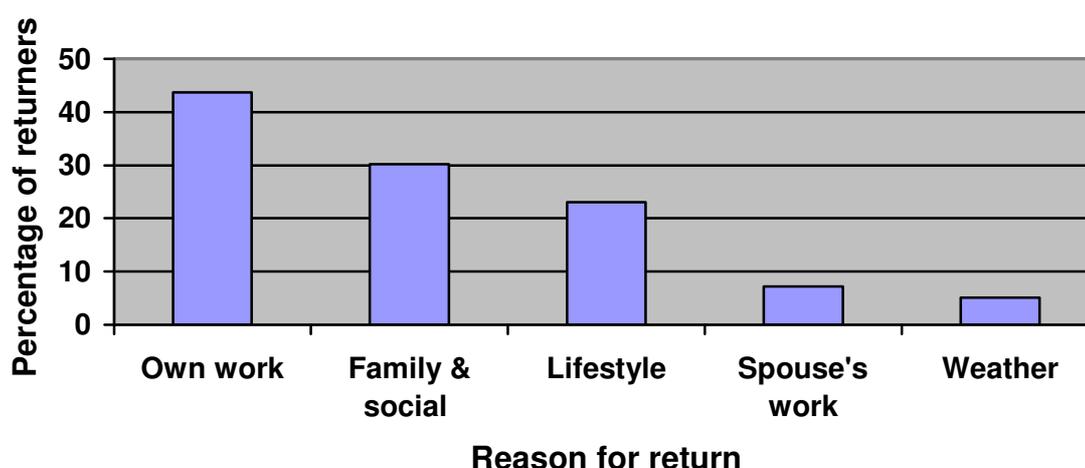
Around the time of retirement, older adults may make what is termed an 'amenity move' (Wiseman 1980) to a location with better climate or housing or where they have existing social networks. This is frequently a long-distance move. Later, if emotional or practical assistance is required after widowhood or illness, an 'assistance move' (Wiseman 1980) closer to family may result.

Both these kinds of moves could result in either return migration to or out-migration from the Northern Territory. The telephone survey showed that 31% of returners were aged 50 years or older although 43% of those aged 50 years or older were first time Territory residents.

## Why do people return to the Territory?

The telephone interviews showed that just over half the return residents had moved back to the Northern Territory for either their own (43.7%) or their spouse's (7.2%) employment. Almost one-third (30.2%) had returned for family or social reasons while almost one-quarter (23.0) had been mainly influenced by lifestyle considerations in their return. The Northern Territory weather was an important factor for 5.1% of respondents who had returned to the Northern Territory.

Figure 1: Reasons for return migration to the Northern Territory



Source: Territory Mobility Survey

### **1 Return planned from outset**

As Newbold and Bell (2001) suggest, some Northern Territory returners may simply be concluding a temporary (or prolonged) absence for paid employment or volunteering, study, travel, accessing medical treatment, providing care to or receiving care from a family member.

### **2 Short-term return**

On the other hand, some returners may have a definite time limit in mind when they return to the Northern Territory before, once again, becoming out-migrants. The telephone surveys showed that 23% of returners were planning to leave again within two or three years. When people leave or return to the Northern Territory with a specific time frame in mind, there appears to be little that can be done to change this situation.

### **3 'Pull' factors**

Prior experience of a region can be a factor in the decision-making process associated with return migration. Many people may be pulled to the Northern

Territory simply because it is 'home'. Short-term employees, fly-in-fly-out, employees, defence force personnel, students and tourists may all have had limited exposure to the Northern Territory, which can operate as a factor to attract them back to the Territory. 'Pull' factors which may encourage an individual to return to the Northern Territory can be classified as various forms of capital.

- ***Economic capital***

Economic capital refers to the material wealth held by an individual. People returning to live in the Northern Territory may not be 'better off' than in their previous location if this measure is based purely on disposable income. However, many people felt that their economic capital was dependent on their stage in the life course rather than on the location in which they were living. For example, a couple may have returned to the Northern Territory in order to begin a family which entailed a move from a dual-income family to a single income family.

- ***Human capital***

Human capital is concerned with an individual's knowledge and experience, such as that gained through educational or vocational qualifications or employment. For many returners, the Northern Territory offers the opportunity to undertake employment which increases their stock of human capital.

- ***Social capital***

Social capital is inherent in the relationships which an individual has with their family and community where goals, attitudes or values are held in common. Such factors feature strongly in many of the reasons people gave for returning. A typical example comes from Estella.

"I feel very at home here and very familiar with everything here so it's been good. A lot of my friends that have left previously, there was a good group of us and then a lot of us all left, and have all returned. So I've got a good friend network there."

Estella, 33-y-o, single, seasonal returner

- ***Location-specific capital***

Location-specific capital refers to factors such as leisure opportunities, possibility of working with Indigenous people, climate and place attachment.

English-born Owen returned to live in Darwin after spending 3 months there while travelling in Australia.

"I just really liked the outside environment and the people here. It just seemed hard to compare to what I was used to. Relaxed and really nice. Obviously the climate is beautiful. The climate is great all year around. I don't mind it at all – I work in it so I don't really mind it. Obviously the climate in the dry season when we came up here was great."

Owen, 33-y-o, self-employed

## Conclusions

The Northern Territory Mobility Project has provided much needed empirical data about the characteristics of people who return to live in the Northern Territory after a period of absence and their motivations for doing so. The historical perspective provided by some of the long-term residents has been useful in showing that the Territory has, for many years, been a destination to which people return.

Return migration to the Northern Territory occurs in people of all ages and for a variety of reasons. Young adults may return to a home base in the Northern Territory after periods of travel or short-term employment in the style of cyclical mobility identified by Young (1996). Those in middle age ranges may return to the Territory to build or rebuild their social and economic capital while older people may return after an absence prompted by retirement. Much return to the Northern Territory is planned from the outset as a result of limited-term employment or commitments elsewhere or occurs as the natural consequence of leaving.

Returning to the Northern Territory should be understood in the context of population mobility within Australia and not considered as an isolated element in a complex process. Whereas the results of the Northern Territory Mobility Project in general agree with current migration literature, the remoteness of destinations in the Northern Territory from other cities and regions in Australia adds an extra dimension through distance and expense to the decision to return.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007, *Year Book Australia 2007*, Cat. no. 1301.0, Commonwealth of Australia
- Easthope, H 2007, *Unique isolation vs networks of opportunity: re-turn migration by young people to Tasmania*, Paper no. 9, Housing and Community Research Unit, School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania.
- Fielding, AJ 1992, 'Migration and social mobility: South East England as an escalator region', *Regional Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 1-15.
- Golledge, RG & Stimson, RJ 1997, *Spatial behaviour: a geographic perspective*, New York, The Guilford Press.
- Newbold, KB & Bell, M 2001, 'Return and onwards migration in Canada and Australia: evidence from fixed interval data', *The International Migration Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 1157-84.
- Wiseman, RF 1980, 'Why older people move', *Research on Aging*, vol. 2, pp. 141-54.
- Young, C 1996, 'Are young people leaving home earlier or later?' *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 125-52.