

POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

ISSUE Number 2008023

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Why some people stay longer than intended in the NT

KEY FINDINGS

- Just over half of all respondents to the Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey (TMS) had stayed, or were now planning to stay, longer than they intended when they first moved to the NT;
- The most common original intended lengths of stay for NT residents were less than two years. Most who decided to stay longer than originally intended had now decided to stay 'indefinitely', and the next largest group now intended to stay 3-5 years;
- Females were more likely than males to have decided to stay longer, as were people aged over 40 years and those who had arrived in the NT prior to 2003;
- Extending length of stay was more closely related to work than to family or lifestyle factors, and was more common among first time NT residents than among repeat residents;
- There is evidence of a generational change whereby younger people are less likely to change their original planned lengths of stay, indicating that increasing population transience is an inevitable part of the NT's future.

RESEARCH AIM

To identify differences in attitudes to the Northern Territory between those people who stayed longer than they had originally intended and those who did not.

This Research Brief draws on data from the Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey. Funding for the research was provided by an ARC Linkage Grant and the Northern Territory Treasury.

The research has been conducted by Associate Professor Dean Carson.

Background

The Northern Territory can appropriately be described as a region with high population turnover where people migrate predominantly for work reasons and with an expectation that they will stay a relatively short period of time. For example, the Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey (TMS) found that over 40% of Northern Territory residents had intended to stay less than two years when they initially arrived in the Territory. At the same time, there is the oft repeated tale of people who 'came for a month and stayed for twenty years', which provides a different view of a place that can encourage more permanent residence. The TMS tended to attract respondents with relatively long lengths of residence in the Northern Territory, and as such, offers an insight into those who stayed longer than they had originally planned. The purpose of this research brief is to analyse the demographic characteristics of NT residents who stayed longer than they intended, and to identify the motivational triggers for extended lengths of stay. Those triggers may provide insights for employers and policy makers into how to encourage longer lengths of stay.

Methods

The Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey (TMS) was a telephone survey of around 1 500 non-Indigenous residents of the Northern Territory conducted in late 2006. The survey asked about when people had come to the Northern Territory, why they had moved, how long they intended to stay, why they would leave, and levels of satisfaction with various aspects of life in the NT. Respondents were asked how long they had expected to stay when they arrived in the NT for the current period of residence. They were then asked whether they had changed their mind about how long they would stay, and how long they now expected to stay. This brief considers only those respondents who had moved to the NT from somewhere else and who had a set length of stay in mind when they initially arrived (N=794). Nearly 54% of respondents who had a set length of stay in mind when they arrived in the NT had subsequently decided to stay longer than originally intended. About 36% were still intending to stay the same length of time and 10% were planning to stay a shorter period of time. There is limited value in comparing the group who planned to stay longer than originally intended with the group who planned to stay a shorter period of time because a survey such as this one was unlikely to capture such people (see http://www.cdu.edu.au/sspr/documents/2006TerritoryMobilitySurvey_3__000.pdf for discussion of sample limitations in this regard). Rather, comparisons will be made with those who had not changed their intended length of stay.

Results

Nearly two thirds of all respondents who had decided to stay longer in the Northern Territory than originally intended claimed to now be staying 'indefinitely'. The longer the original intended length of stay, the more likely respondents were to change intention to stay 'indefinitely'. For example, only 40% those originally intending to stay less than one year now intended to stay indefinitely, compared with over 70% of those who had originally intended to stay for 3 to 5 years. When excluding those who now intended to stay 'indefinitely', the most common new length of stay was 3-5 years.

Just over one third of males now planned to stay longer than originally intended, compared with 41% of females ($p > 0.05$). People aged under forty years were significantly less likely to be staying longer than originally planned (33%) than those aged over forty years (41%). Following this, people who had arrived in the Northern Territory in the three years prior to the survey were significantly less likely to be planning to stay longer than originally intended (19%) compared to those who had arrived prior to that time. This either indicates that there is greater transience among more recent arrivals or that the decision to stay longer than planned happens after the first two or three years in the Northern Territory. The evidence leans towards the former, given that most changed lengths of stay were from initial intended periods of time less than three years.

There were some findings which appear counter-intuitive. For example, people who moved to the Northern Territory for family, social, or lifestyle reasons were less likely to have decided to stay longer than originally planned, whereas those who moved to the NT for work reasons were more likely to have decided to stay longer. Family and social ties are generally expected to increase the likelihood of extended lengths of stay, but this was not the case in the TMS. Work related migration is expected to involve greater transience, but this was not the case in the TMS, particularly for people working in the government sector who were more likely to have decided to stay longer than private sector workers. However, those who were expecting their next move to be work related were less likely to have decided to stay longer than originally planned, while those whose next move was expected to be for retirement were far more likely to have stayed longer than planned. The other work related variable of interest involved the motivation to move to the NT to work with Aboriginal people. People so motivated were significantly less likely to have extended their planned length of stay than those who had not come specifically because they wanted to work with Aboriginal people.

Familiarity with the location is also expected to increase lengths of stay, but those who had visited the NT for a holiday before moving here and those who had lived in the NT prior to this period of residence were both less likely to be staying longer than originally planned. The weather may play an important role in this regard, with those who cited the weather as an important consideration in their decision to move to the NT significantly less likely to have decided to stay longer.

There were no differences between those staying longer than planned and the rest of the TMS respondents in terms of the factors that would make them stay longer in the

NT. This is not surprising because there were very few factors cited at all in the TMS that would make them stay longer in the NT.

Those who had decided to stay longer than originally planned were less satisfied with access issues (back of clock flight schedules, lack of air transport services etc), with social behaviour issues, and with access to tradespeople and some health services. What this suggests is that these issues are less important for those people whose stay in the NT is expected to be temporary. Overall, however, those who decided to stay longer than planned were more satisfied with NT life than those who were leaving as planned.

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Discussion

A substantial proportion of movers to the Northern Territory have stayed, or are now planning to stay, longer than they originally intended. They tend to have been attracted here by work rather than family or lifestyle factors, and they tend to be planning their next move as a result of retirement from the labour force. There does not appear to be any specific aspects of NT life which particularly appeal to these people more than to those people who do not extend their length of stay. Rather, longer stayers were more critical of certain aspects of NT life, but not of life here as a whole. These patterns perhaps reflect what are more 'normal' attitudes of people about their places of residence – people are often concerned about transport and access issues, health services issues, and social behaviour and safety where they live. In contrast, people who are essentially visiting a place are less concerned about these issues.

The other important finding from the TMS is the apparent generational difference in the likelihood of people changing their intended length of stay. Those who arrived in the NT earlier and are now older were far more likely to have decided to extend their length of stay, even though original intended lengths of stay were very similar. If

these results hold up, we can expect the NT to become increasingly transient, with fewer people 'coming for a month and staying for twenty years'. There does not appear to be any NT specific factors that were revealed in the survey to explain this generational change – so few hints as to how the NT could appeal to younger and newer residents to stay longer. While more research in this regard is required, it may be that the NT needs to become even more adapted to inevitable temporariness of immigrants.