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Newcomers, 'Leavers' and 'Stayers' in Alice Springs 2001-2006

KEY FINDINGS

- The 2006 Census recorded nearly 5000 people moving from other parts of Australia to take up residence in Alice Springs between 2001 and 2006. During the same period, around 6000 people left Alice Springs to live elsewhere.
- Newcomers were generally younger than departing residents, but slightly older than people who were in Alice Springs for the entire period. Newcomers were more likely to be female than leavers and stayers.
- More Aboriginal people moved into town than left, but the proportion of Aboriginal newcomers was less than the proportion of Aboriginal stayers.
- Newcomers were more likely to be working in the public sector than both leavers and stayers, and were more likely than stayers to be employed in tourism or the arts.
- The research reveals some challenges and opportunities facing Alice Springs in managing the demographic change brought about by population turnover, and the differences particularly between newcomers and longer term residents.

RESEARCH AIM

To look at the differences in age, sex, Aboriginal status, and labour force engagement between people who moved in to Alice Springs between 2001 and 2006, people who moved out during that time, and people who were resident in Alice Springs for the period.

This research brief draws on data from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The study is part of a program of demographic research funded in part by the Northern Territory Treasury.

The research has been conducted by Associate Professor Dean Carson.

Background

Some places within the Northern Territory have among the higher rates of residential mobility recorded anywhere in Australia (see Research Brief 2008, No 25). Alice Springs is one of those places. Every five years, a volume of people equivalent to over half of the population moves in to or out of Alice Springs. Between 2001 and 2005, nearly 5 000 people moved in to Alice Springs from other parts of Australia (including within the Northern Territory) and nearly 6 000 people moved out. Around 10 000 people were resident in Alice Springs for the entire period (called 'stayers' in this research brief).

Less than 20% of newcomers (those who moved in) and leavers moved from or to other places in the Northern Territory, meaning that their arrival in Alice Springs not only affects the demographic profile of that town, but of the NT as a whole. As a point of comparison, over 80% of moves made in to or out of Sydney or Melbourne involved other places in New South Wales and Victoria respectively.

The purpose of this research brief is to examine how the demographic (and some economic) characteristics of newcomers differed from that of leavers and stayers. Such an analysis provides insights into how the population of Alice Springs is changing, and what challenges and opportunities confront the town as a result of that change.

Methods

The Census asks people where they had their 'usual residence' (defined as where they expected to live for most of the year) as of Census night 2006, and where their usual residence was on the same night five years previously (2001). People whose usual residence was outside of Alice Springs in 2001 but in Alice Springs in 2006 were considered 'newcomers'. People whose usual residence was in Alice Springs in 2001 but outside Alice Springs in 2006 were considered 'leavers' and those whose usual residence was in Alice Springs at both times were considered 'stayers' (even though they conceivably may have left Alice Springs after 2001 but returned before 2006).

The research examines the characteristics of these people as recorded in the 2006 Census. Characteristics included age, sex, Indigenous status, labour force status, sector of employment, and level of education. In discussing apparent differences between the three groups, it is important to recognise that, while age, sex and (to a lesser extent) Indigenous status are inherited variables (their value in 2001 can be reasonably estimated from their value in 2006), the other variables can change over time. Some caution must be exercised, therefore, in interpreting the results of that part of the analysis.

The research uses chi square tests of significance of the differences between groups. In this test, we assume that each group will have a similar distribution of values for a variable (similar age ranges, for example), and the test alerts us when that is not the case.

Results

The largest proportion (37%) of leavers were aged 30-44 years, while the largest proportion of newcomers were aged 15-29 years (33%). In addition, 29% of leavers were aged 45 years and over. Newcomers, therefore, were significantly younger than leavers. However, because relatively few newcomers (15%) and leavers (16%) were aged less than 15 years, both these groups were older on average than stayers.

The anomaly in the ageing pattern was that people aged 65 years and over were more likely to be stayers than newcomers or leavers. This indicates that retirement emigration (the major reason for residential moves for older people) occurred with people in their 50s and early 60s rather than with those who had already reached the 'normal' retirement age.

While a similar proportion of males and females left Alice Springs in the period, substantially more females than males (around 12% more) arrived. Newcomers were also significantly more likely to be females (a ratio of just 89 males to every 100 females) than stayers (a ratio of 99 males to every 100 females).

Just over 22% of stayers identified as Aboriginal (there were very few Torres Strait Islanders) at the 2006 Census. This was a significantly higher proportion than within the newcomer population (13% Aboriginal) and the leaver population (9% Aboriginal). Newcomers, however, were significantly more likely to be Aboriginal than were leavers.

An interesting finding was that leavers were far less likely to be in the labour force in 2006 (70% of the working age population) than were newcomers and stayers (both around 80%). This could be because of drop out from the labour force after leaving Alice Springs (perhaps women leaving the labour force to have children, for example), or it might indicate a departure of non-labour force engaged people from Alice Springs (non-working spouses in departing family groups, for example). The data are not sufficient to provide an explanation. Newcomers were more likely to be single (not in a relationship) than leavers and stayers, but the volatility of this variable makes it difficult to draw conclusions.

Just over 20% of leavers were employed in the public sector in 2006 (they may have been employed in the private sector in Alice Springs and moved to the public sector after they left). In contrast, 26% of stayers and 28% of newcomers were employed in the public sector. This corresponded with a decrease in overall employment in the private sector in Alice Springs perhaps by as much as 5 or 6% during the period. This indicates that a proportion of stayers moved from employment in the private sector to employment in the public sector during that time.

Leavers were over-represented as employees in agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. Other declining private sectors were accommodation/ hospitality, wholesale trade and arts and recreation services, and it is likely that change in sector of employment of stayers accounts for these declines. Interestingly, newcomers were

over-represented in employment in both accommodation/ hospitality and arts and recreation services (but not in wholesale trade). They were under-represented in construction and retail trade.

Finally, both newcomers and leavers of working age were more likely to have finished secondary school (around 70% had done so) than were stayers of working age (60%).

Discussion

Population turnover helped temper the natural ageing of the Alice Springs population by replacing older working age people with younger working age people. Population turnover also helped contribute to a decline in sex ratios (number of males per 100 females) in Alice Springs between 2001 and 2006. Population turnover occurred largely within the non-Aboriginal population, but in migration did contribute in a small way to an increase in the total proportion of Aboriginal people in the population.

On this point, it is important to note that the data here concerns relatively long term moves where people feel that they have changed their usual place of residence. Often, groups who move (or think they have moved) temporarily – seasonal workers, contract workers, people visiting friends and relatives, people moving to complete education – do not register that move as a change of usual residence. The data in this research is likely to be particularly weak when considering moves from communities around Alice Springs in to Alice Springs, even if those moves essentially become permanent. We have hypothesised elsewhere (see Taylor and Carson, 2009) that a lot of these short distance, unacknowledged moves are undertaken by Aboriginal people.

In an economic sense, population turnover has contributed to declines in private sector employment, but does not explain all of that decline. There are interesting observations about the accommodation and arts sectors, where overall employment decline has not been reflected in the employment profile of newcomers. This might mean either that stayers are opting out of those sectors, or are being excluded from those sectors (as large hotel chains import replacement workers from other properties, for example), or a combination of these trends.

The differences between newcomers, leavers and stayers presents some challenges and opportunities so far as the link between demography and regional development in Alice Springs is concerned. The challenges include managing the apparent outflow of older, presumably experienced and knowledgeable workers. There is also a challenge emerging from a 'bi modal' age structure – growth in the number of very young and (relatively) very old people, and decline in the number of working age people (particularly those in mid career – 30-45 years old). The Aboriginal population appears to be undergoing a 'split' with an influx of well educated, labour force engaged, Aboriginal people merging with resident, low educated, low labour force engaged people. This might be even more stark if, as suspected, undocumented movers in from the surrounding region are also low educated and low labour force

engaged.

The changing demography also brings about opportunities. The injection of new young working age people can re-vitalise economies as these 'key workers' are often more entrepreneurial and innovative than older workers. That group of well educated and labour force engaged Aboriginal people may also serve as role models for resident Aboriginal children whose own parents and grandparents did not finish school or have not had regular paid employment.

Finally, the transition from a private sector to public sector economy does not have to be bad news for Alice Springs. Public sector activities like education, health, and defence, are 'knowledge industries' which should not only be viewed in terms of costs of providing services but in terms of the value of the knowledge generated and (potentially) traded to other jurisdictions. The demography suggests that these services are going to be more in demand over time (more old people, continuing high numbers of Aboriginal children, continuing demand for education services), and that provision of the services will fall at least in part to young newcomers who can play an active role in knowledge retention, sharing, and trade.

References

Taylor, A., & Carson, D. (2009). Indigenous mobility and the Northern Territory Emergency Response. *People and Place*, 17(1), 29-38.