

**Research Brief 201209**

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# **Temporary Indigenous mobility in the Northern Territory**

*What has changed between 2006 and 2011?*

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# 1. BACKGROUND

Temporary mobility of Indigenous people in remote parts of the Northern Territory is documented as frequent and widespread (for example, Carson, 2011). Temporary mobility incorporates trips away from home where a change of residence is not enacted. Understanding the drivers and compositions of movements to, from and between small and remote communities is an important task since even small demographic changes may result in rapid, significant and long lasting impacts on service demand (Biddle and Prout, 2009; Taylor 2012).

One measure of temporary mobility is to look at Census data which is collected each five years for the whole Australian population to compare the actual location on census night where people were 'found' and filled out their Census form to their stated place of 'usual residence' (that is, the place they consider as 'home'). Although this indicator is at a point in time only (the Census is conducted in August), it provides a suitable snapshot and has been used in research to assess the size and nature of service populations and workforce mobility (Bell and Ward, 1998).

The analysis in this research brief compares and contrasts the temporary mobility of Indigenous people in 15 of the larger remote communities in the Northern Territory (formerly known as 'Territory Growth Towns' under the *Working Futures* policy of the previous Henderson Labour Government) between 2006 and 2011. For comparison, we also analyse changes from 2006 to 2011 in the rates of Indigenous people who were visiting these communities as well as those who were away on Census night.

## 2. METHODS

Data were drawn from both the 2006 and 2011 census using the ABS custom software tool 'Table Builder'. Data used were age, sex, Indigenous status, place of enumeration and place of usual residence. Age classifications used were:

- Children (0–9 years old)
- Teenagers (10–19 years old)
- Young adults in their twenties (20–29 years old)
- Young adults in their thirties (30–39 years old)
- Middle-aged adults in their forties (40–49 years old)
- Middle-aged adults in their fifties (50–59 years old)
- Older people (60 years and over)

Data was obtained for 15 'discrete Indigenous communities' in the Northern Territory. There are about 80 discrete Indigenous communities with a population of 200 or more across the Northern Territory, as defined by Northern Territory. All 15 communities were previously identified as 'priority centres' and service hubs under the Northern Territory Government policy *Working Futures* (all were formerly 'Territory Growth Towns'). These were: Angurugu (Groote Eylandt), Galiwinku (Elcho Island), Gapuwiyak, Gunbalanya, Hermannsburg, Lajamanu, Maningrida, Milingimbi (Crocodile Islands), Nguiu (Tiwi Islands), Ngukurr, Numbulwar, Umbakumba (Groote Eylandt), Wadeye, Yirrkala and Yuendumu (see Figure 1).

As with all investigations of the Northern Territory's Indigenous population using Census data, some caution must be exercised in interpreting findings. The concept of 'usual residence' remains a problematic one, changes in Census geographies make temporal comparisons difficult, and the 2011 Census was subject to under-enumeration: estimated at around 20% for remote dwelling Indigenous people in the Northern Territory for 2006 but with no estimate available for 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Nevertheless, these data provide a consistent basis on which to make broad conclusions about the size and composition of Indigenous temporary mobility at different points in time.

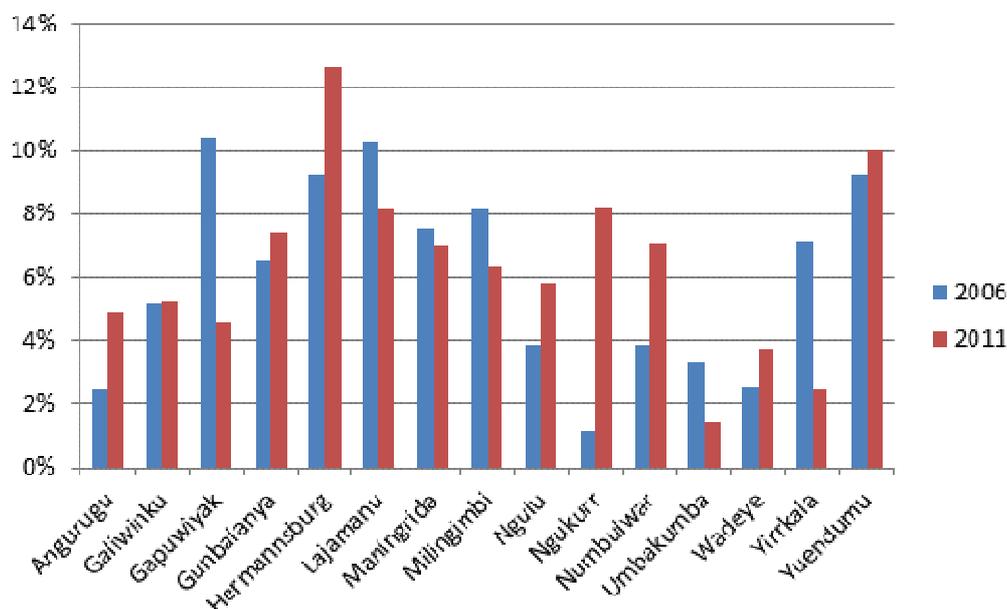
### 3. ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. Temporary mobility on census night 2011

Across the 15 communities, 6.1% of Indigenous people were absent from home on census night 2011, compared to 5.8% in 2006.

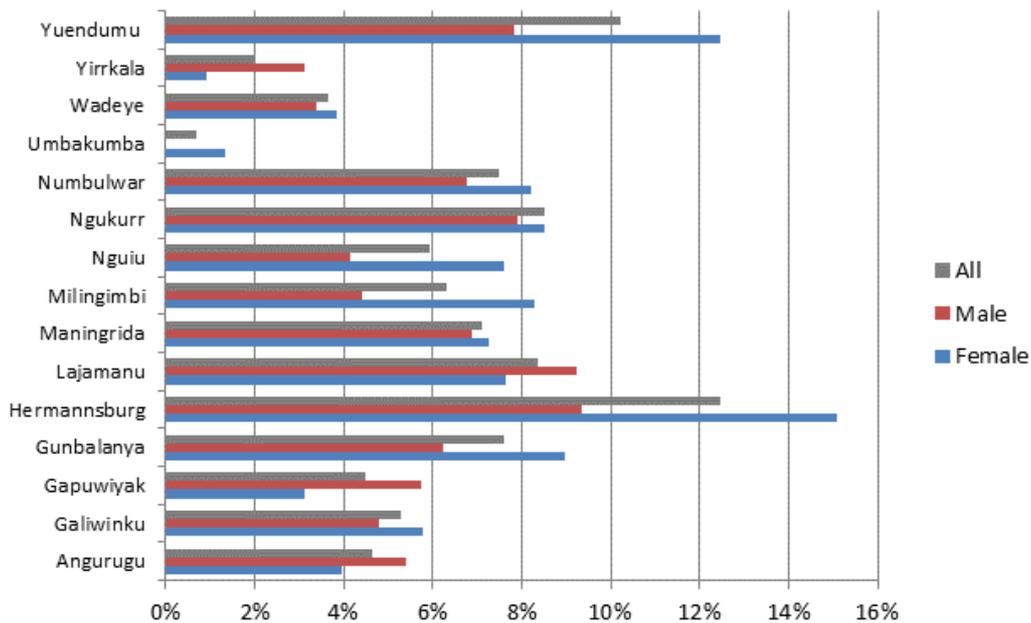
The largest proportion of people absent from home on census night 2011 was in Hermannsburg (12.5%) and the lowest proportion in Umbakumba (1%; Figure 1). Compared to 2006 the greatest increase in people absent on census night was at Ngukurr (88%). Angurugu, Nguiu, Numbulwar and Wadeye also experienced high (around 50%) increases compared to 2006. Yirrkala (-61%) and Gapuwiyak (-56%) experienced large declines in the percentage of people absent on census night while there were more moderate declines in Umbakumba, Milingimbi, Lajamanu and rates were stable in Galiwinku, Maningrida and Yuendumu.

**Figure 1: Proportions of Indigenous people absent from home on census night, 2006 and 2011**



In six of the communities the proportion of men and women absent from home on 2011 census night was about equal (Gapuwiyak, Lajamanu, Maningrida, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Yirrkala). For Umbakumba no men were absent. Significantly more woman than men were also absent from home on census night 2011 in Gunbalanya, Milingimbi, Wadeye and Yuendumu (Figure 2). Hermannsburg had the largest proportion of men absent and Angurugu and Galiwinku (both around 5%) also had significantly more men than women absent from home on census night 2011.

**Figure 2: Proportions of Indigenous people absent from home on census night by gender, 2011**

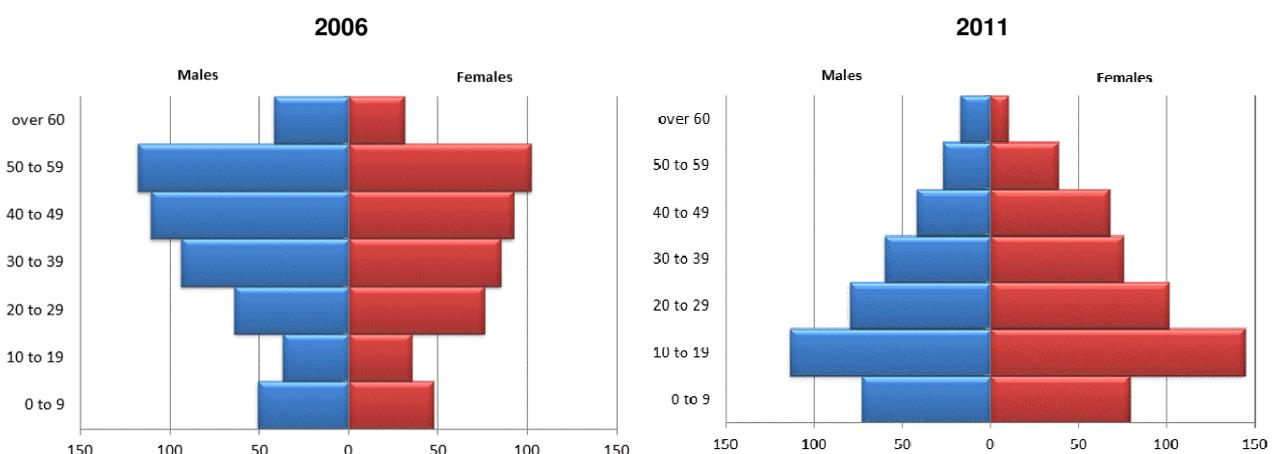


### 3.2. Changes in the age-sex structure between 2006 and 2011

In 2011, 56% of those absent on census night were women while in 2006 this was 48%. Young people were most mobile in 2011 (especially teenagers between 10 and 19 years; Figure 3 – right hand column). There were 53% more women away from home in 2011 compared to 2006 and 49% more men. Increases were greatest for teenagers with a 64% increase in male teenagers away on census night 2011 and a 69% increase in female teenagers. Conversely, between 2006 and 2011, mobility increased more for older men than for older women with a 70% increase in men in their fifties and a 65% increase of men over 60, compared 55% and 30% respectively for women.

There was a significant shift in the age composition of the mobile population between 2006 and 2011 (Figure 3). Whereas in 2006 the number of people away from home increased with age, in 2011 this general pattern reversed.

**Figure 3: Age-sex structure of Indigenous people absent from home, 2006 and 2011**

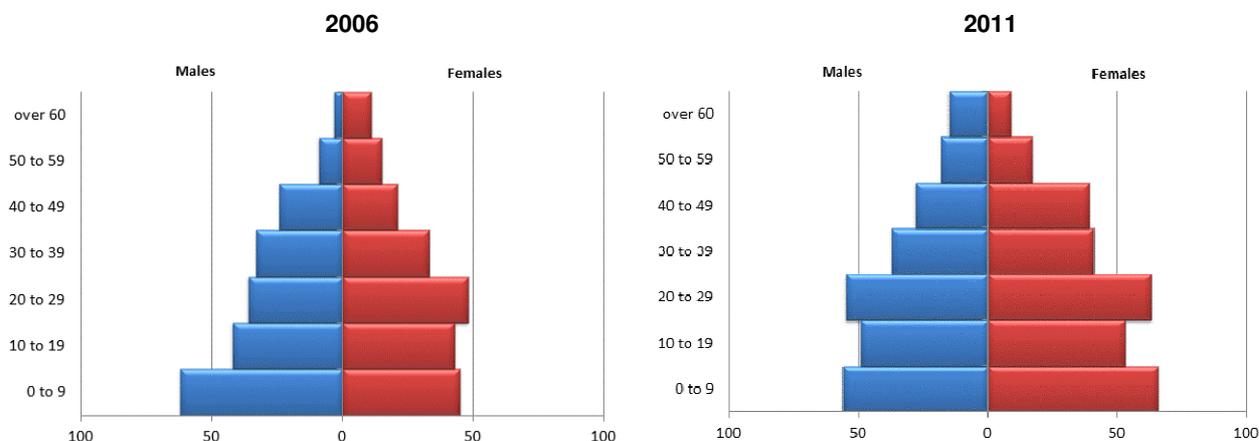


### 3.3. Indigenous visitors

In 2006, 3.1% (or 425 out of 13,703) of Indigenous people present on census night at the 15 communities were visiting. In 2011 this increased slightly to 3.8% (or 546 out of 14,305). Figure 4 shows that visitors were concentrated in young and middle-ages. For female children (0 to 9 years) the change in absolute numbers between 2006 and 2011 was 32% (from 45 to 66 visitors) while the number of male children

visiting decreased slightly (from 62 to 56 visitors). There was a relatively high increase in the number of 20 to 29 year old men (up from 36 to 55 visitors), and older men visiting. The number of visiting women, on the other hand, did not change significantly in the higher age groups. The biggest change for visiting women was in the age group 40 to 49 years; increasing by 46% from 21 to 39 visitors.

**Figure 4: Age-sex structure of Indigenous visitors, 2006 and 2011**



The numbers of visitors to communities (425), which was significantly less than those who were away (836), indicates that around half of the mobile Indigenous population were at other settlements on census night, such as in the urban centres of Darwin and Alice Springs, regional towns like Tenant Creek, or indeed interstate. As an indication, about 12% of Indigenous people who were in Darwin and 16% of Indigenous people in Alice Springs on census night stated that they lived somewhere else in Australia. Until the publication of second-release census data it is not possible to determine what proportion of these were residents at one of the 15 remote communities in this study.

## 4. SUMMARY

We investigated Indigenous mobility patterns in 15 communities in the Northern Territory and found that temporary mobility across these had increased from 5.8% to 6.1% of the total Indigenous population between 2006 and 2011. Our analysis confirms findings by some researchers in remote parts of developed nations of increasing female mobility over time (for example, Rasmussen, 2007; Taylor, 2012). While on census night 2006 slightly more men than women were absent, in 2011 it was more women (56% of all people absent were female). The age structure of mobile people has also changed between 2006 and 2011. In 2006 temporary mobility was highest for people aged 50 and 59 years and also high for people between 30 to 39 years and 40 to 49 years. By contrast in 2011 temporary mobility was highest for young people (10 to 19 years) and then decreased with age.

In terms of longer term implications those communities with a high proportion of mobile women, such as Hermannsburg and Yuendumu might anticipate impacts from the permanent out-migration of at least some of these, particularly where mobility is related to pull factors like education and employment. We have commenced modelling (using 2011 Census data) to identify the individual factors (age, gender and so on) which are significantly related to high rates of residential migration (a permanent change of address rather than a temporary moves which are analysed here) and an update on these issues will be forthcoming through research briefs to be published during 2012 and 2013 (stay tuned to: <http://www.cdu.edu.au/the-northern-institute/research-brief-series>).

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