

Mobility of Aboriginal people in rural and remote Australia

ABORIGINAL HOUSEHOLDS IN DAJARRA, ALPURRURULAM AND MT ISA, WHILE EXCEPTIONALLY MOBILE BY AUSTRALIAN MAINSTREAM STANDARDS, ARE RELATIVELY STABLE IN THEIR CUSTOMARY ATTACHMENT TO THEIR HOME COMMUNITY, LOCAL BUSH COUNTRY, CULTURAL REGION, AND REGIONAL CENTRE. THERE IS A NEED TO BALANCE THE LOCAL PROVISION OF HOUSING AND OTHER SERVICES TO OUTLYING REMOTE AND RURAL COMMUNITIES AND TO RATIONALISE SERVICE PROVISION IN REGIONAL CENTRES.

KEY POINTS

- The lives of Aboriginal people in rural and remote Australia are characterised by marked inter- and intra-community mobility, with circular movements within a 'mobility region', and a high rate of travel to places (including regional centres) within the region for relatively short periods of time.
- The most common period of a visit was two to three days or less and most visits were for less than one month. The highest frequency of visits to one place was an average of 39 trips per year per visitor by Alpururulam men to Mt Isa.
- Kinship is the main driving force of Aboriginal mobility. Kinship is maintained through mobility, kinship makes mobility possible, and kinship contributes to the definition of mobility regions. The distribution of an individual's kin generates for an individual a 'beat' – a set of places, which he or she can visit and expect to obtain hospitality and economic support if necessary.
- Other drivers of spatial mobility patterns in the study area include sporting events, recreation, hunting, collecting bush resources, and shopping.
- There were some differences in the spatial patterns of the mobility of the male and female participants in both Alpururulam and Dajarra, with Dajarra female participants travelling to a less diverse number of settlements.
- Visits lead to additional wear and tear on houses, with small houses accommodating high household numbers likely to require more frequent maintenance than would otherwise be the case. This is simply due to the natural wear and tear associated with high use by a large household.

Research by Professor Paul Memmott, Dr Stephen Long and Linda Thomson of the AHURI Queensland Research Centre, examines the mobility of the North-west Queensland Aboriginal peoples of Dajarra, Alpururulam and Mt Isa.

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- There is a high frequency of visits to regional centres, such as Mt Isa, to access services. This suggests an ongoing need to ensure adequate availability of temporary forms of accommodation, such as hostels or community-owned houses.

CONTEXT

This project quantifies and contextualises Aboriginal mobility using case study findings to develop a better understanding of Aboriginal perspectives, experiences of, and aspirations for mobility. Aboriginal people in remote and rural Australia are frequently moving between places. Movement was and still is the key to the maintenance of both relationships to places and to kin in Aboriginal Australia. Given the widespread reporting of high mobility in the ethnographic and housing literature of Aboriginal Australia, and the recent political call to reconsider small-scale remote Aboriginal settlements, there is a need to understand both the depth of attachment of Aboriginal people to their settlement places and the impact of any such changes on their mobility and service needs.

METHOD

This research using a regional case study approach, focused on the settlements of Dajarra (Queensland) and Alpururulam (Northern Territory) – see figure 1. Dajarra is a small remote town with a predominantly Aboriginal population (estimated at 190 in 2001) and Alpururulam is an Aboriginal community (estimated Aboriginal population of 355 in 2001) established on a land excision in a pastoral lease.

Survey-based interviews were held with household heads within each community. Twenty-seven Dajarra householders were interviewed (eighteen women and nine men). The participants ranged in age from the late teens to the late 70s. Twenty Alpururulam householders were interviewed (nine women and eleven men). The participants ranged in age from the early 20s to the late 70s. In addition to the householders, thirteen young single men and twelve women were interviewed from Dajarra and Alpururulam to see how similar or dissimilar their mobility patterns were in relation to householders. In addition, relatives of participants (ten householders) from Dajarra and Alpururulam who were living in the regional centre of Mt Isa and the east coast centre of Townsville were interviewed. The purpose was to obtain information about community residents travelling to

regional centres and the perspectives of Aboriginal people in regional centres who receive visitors from outlying communities.

FINDINGS

Contemporary Aboriginal demography is characterised by marked inter- and intra-community mobility with circular movements within a 'mobility region'. Most of the Aboriginal population in the study region remained within the area they were reared and where their traditional country is situated. While people regularly moved, their movements were for the most part confined to within this mobility or cultural region. There was evidence of a pattern of migration to the regional centre of Mt Isa, being a generation or two in depth. There was also a minor pattern of migration outside of the region to more distant places (specifically Townsville).

Frequency of Visits

The most common period of visits was two to three days or less and most were less than one month. The highest frequency of visits reported to one place was an average of 39 trips per year per visitor by Alpururulam men to Mt Isa. For Alpururulam, at any point in time it is likely that around one third or more of households will have household members away and under a quarter of households will have visitors. For Dajarra, a number of participants (36 per cent of respondents) lived in households, which had a member of the household temporarily away at the time of the survey, and 41 per cent of respondents had visitors staying with them at the time of the survey.

Destination of Visits

The research shows that Mt Isa is an important socio-economic centre for the mobility region. It is the place most commonly and frequently visited by Dajarra and Alpururulam householders, with households from both areas making a total of approximately 1000 visits to Mt Isa during the year. See figure 2. Most visits to Mt Isa were of short duration, often attending to business such as: shopping, visiting family and friends (in the case of Dajarra people), sports and funerals (in the case of Alpururulam people), and then returned home. Housing need is a product of mobility (i.e. visitors require a house in Mt Isa for shorter periods of time) and is not a trigger for mobility (i.e. people are not leaving outlying areas on a permanent basis). Some Aboriginal households play a critical regional role, acting as a base for relatives from outlying communities (particularly given the lengthy waiting times for rental housing).

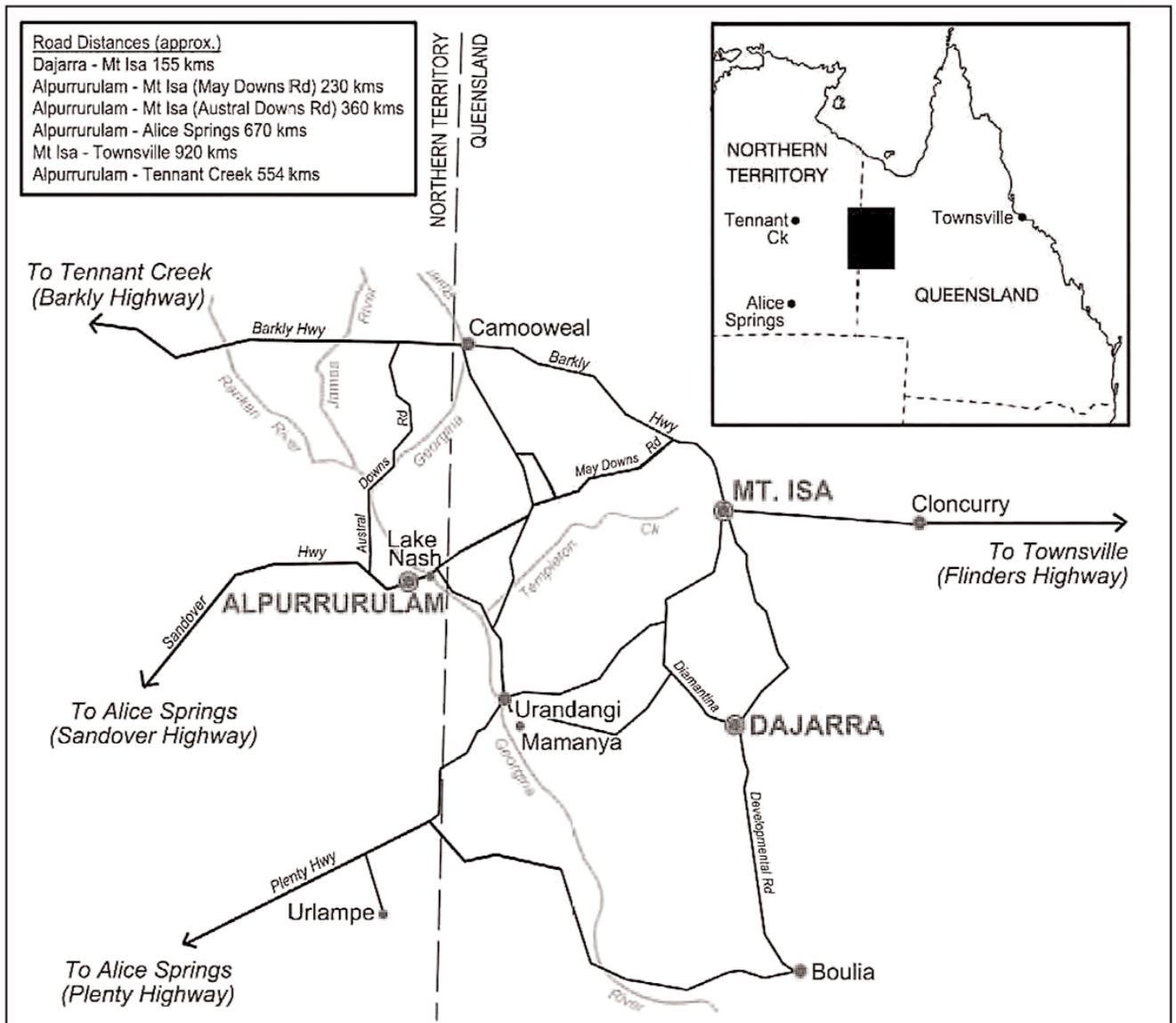


Figure 1: Schematic map showing study region in north-west Queensland and central-east Northern Territory for the AHURI study on Indigenous Mobility in Remote and Rural Australia. Fieldwork was carried out at Dajarra, Alpururulam and Mt Isa.

Key Drivers of Mobility

Kinship is the driving force of Aboriginal mobility in many parts of Australia. Blood ties and marriage principally define Aboriginal kinship and a classificatory system of relationships extends the range of kin to many others in the wider society. Much mobility can be defined as a social process geared simultaneously towards the enjoyment of social interaction, the maintenance of social relationships and the maintenance of social identity. The most common reason for movement by Dajarra and Alpururulam householders was to visit family and friends; and when visiting, people mostly relied on kin for accommodation or they camped. When householders travelled away from Dajarra and Alpururulam during the year prior to the survey, it was found the respondents often stayed with family members (44 per cent and 42 per cent of responses respectively).

Other drivers of spatial mobility pattern in the study area include sporting events and recreation, hunting and collecting bush resources, and shopping. The pattern of mobility is associated with a calendar of annual Aboriginal social, economic and regional events. In particular the calendar of regional sporting events triggers mobility and provides significant social events and times of recreation, which also contribute to regional economy. Mobility patterns are also influenced by the timing of work, school and holidays. An example of this is seasonal cattle station work. Mobility patterns are influenced by seasonal climatic events, which determines the availability of bush resources and thus the movement of people to hunt and collect bush foods. The seasonal event of rain also prohibits or restricts mobility. For example, the Alpururulam community, due to poor roads, has to plan

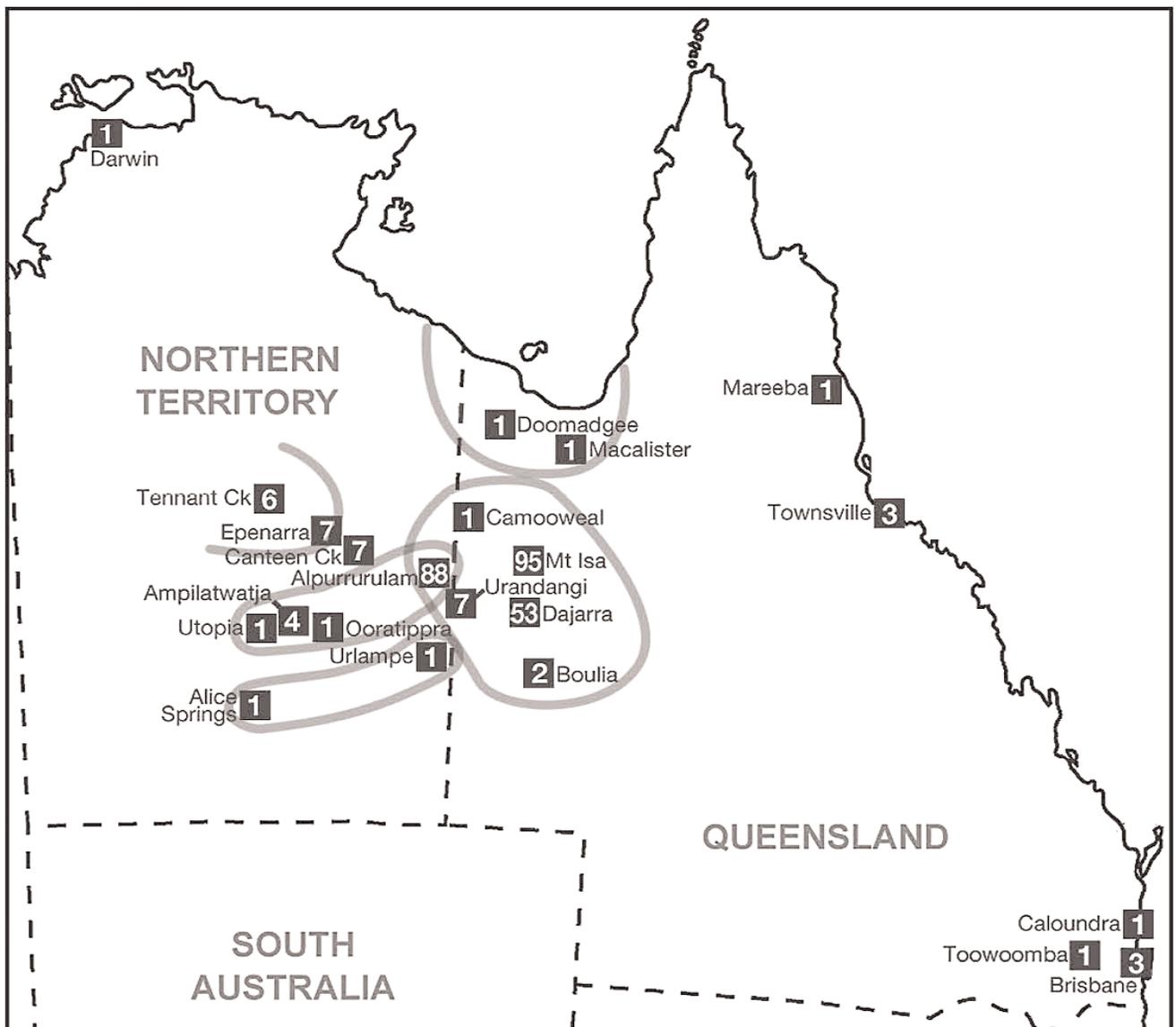


Figure 2: Destinations of travel by householders in Dajarra, Alpururulam and Mt Isa to visit their closest relatives (defined as the householder's ten closest cognatic living adult relatives). Numbers indicate how many visits were made by all of the household survey participants to each destination in the year previous to the survey.

access to services during 'the wet' season, a matter made critical by the absence of a sealed surface to the local airstrip.

Household Differences in Mobility

There were some differences in the spatial pattern of the mobility of male and female participants in both Alpururulam and Dajarra. The most pronounced difference in spatial patterns between male and female participants was amongst the Dajarra participants. The female Dajarra participants had a spatial pattern that was more tightly focussed on the settlements within the Georgina river region than their male counterparts. In other words, they travelled to a less diverse number of settlements. There was a less significant difference between the places visited by the male and the female Alpururulam participants as compared to those in

Dajarra. The Alpururulam men and women visited the same range of places with the exception of a few women who made trips to a small number of settlements in the Gulf region.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Housing design

To facilitate visits by kin, the design of new houses in remote centres would benefit from well-sized, positioned and perhaps screened verandah spaces, adequately sized living spaces that can be used to accommodate temporary campers, detached shade structures that can accommodate visitors, well designed wet areas, additional showers and toilets (in a house with 15 occupants and one shower it can take 2.5 hours or longer for the whole

household to shower), appropriately sized rainwater tanks, and well-designed external living environments to accommodate externally-oriented patterns of domiciliary behaviour (including outdoor sleeping). An increase in household size, due to visitors, can also contribute to higher energy consumption; thus greater consideration of alternative energy sources and the design of houses that maximise passive heating and cooling are recommended.

Due to the reliance on some Aboriginal households to provide a base for relatives from outlying communities, new house designs and renovations in the regional centres should be created to accommodate such semi-permanent migration of relatives.

Other services

To accommodate patterns of Aboriginal mobility, there is a need to balance the local provision of housing and other services to outlying remote and rural communities and rationalising the appropriate aspects of service provision in the regional centre. Aboriginal mobility regions can usefully be the basis for service delivery, reflecting the localised movements within a region and a strong relationship between regional centres and outlying communities. Accordingly, service maintenance and development is required in the regional centres and outlying communities, albeit in both centralised and decentralised forms.

As people are regularly on the move within the region, local community agencies provide a significant proportion of their services to non-permanent residents. For example, both the Dajarra and Alpururulam health clinics experience annual consultation loads of over 5,500 persons, mostly Aboriginal. The workload due to non-residents, visitors and other irregular users may be as high as that arising from local residents. A critical health policy issue was the strategic balance of transporting specialists to small communities for regular consultation sessions, versus the logistic problems of moving needy patients to Mt Isa for specialist appointments there.

While some services will only be viable if they are operated from a regional centre there may be others, or elements of services, that could be decentralised, or that will be most effective if they remain decentralised. There is a need to balance the local provision of services to outlying communities and rationalizing the appropriate aspects of service provision in the regional centre. For example, comparatively recent regional expansion and electronic sophistication of Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) administration provides

more flexibility for mobile workers across this study region (eg by allowing transfers of CDEP positions between communities, increased incomes and travel for CDEP work).

The significance of transport and improved road services

Without the decentralisation of services, Aboriginal people are likely to continue to travel to access services. Both the Dajarra and Alpururulam residents make regular visits to Mt Isa as their regional service centre. Such mobility has implications for the safety and economy of vehicular travel and the condition of roads. In the wet season, Alpururulam experience major difficulties with the transportation of both medical patients and bio samples due to the unsealed access roads and airstrip. This in turn places increased pressure and cost on the Mt Isa (and Townsville) hospital due to patients waiting longer than necessary to return home.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI Project 20260 *Aboriginal Mobility in Rural and Remote Australia*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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