

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Indigenous people's mobility and its impact on remote infrastructural needs: an exploratory study



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Executive summary

Key points

- The Indigenous population is predicted to grow by 10.4 per cent between 2021 and 2026 in outer regional, remote and very remote Australia.
- Drivers influencing temporary mobility include participation in cultural business or attendance at funerals, travel due to school holidays and seasonal weather patterns, participation in sport and leisure activities or to access alcohol outside the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, border closures and lockdowns contributed to increased temporary mobility back to remote communities.
- Factors affecting longer-term mobility include access to housing, infrastructure, services and employment; family conflict and violence; and community unrest.
- The frequency and length of mobility is strongly influenced by policy changes enacted by government.
- Long-term mobility away from remote communities has implications for the future availability of vital housing, infrastructure and services and, ultimately, the sustainability of remote communities. Likewise, the availability of key infrastructure and services in these communities influences population movement.
- Improvements to housing, essential infrastructure, education, healthcare, aged care and employment are required to accommodate anticipated population growth.
- Increased self-determination, greater joint working, place-based approaches and needs-based funding are essential in the future development and operation of remote infrastructure and services.

Key findings

The research generates enhanced understanding of current and changing mobility patterns of Indigenous people living on Country, and improved policy strategies for Indigenous organisations, government agencies, non-government organisations, and other stakeholders in relation to housing, social services delivery and infrastructural needs in remote communities.

The findings are based on a detailed literature review, population trends and projections of ABS Census data, stakeholder consultations and qualitative evidence arising from detailed case studies of three remote communities.

Indigenous population trends and projections

Australia's Indigenous population is growing rapidly, with very high growth rates in the major cities of Australia and inner regional Australia, but with rates declining with remoteness. In outer regional and remote areas, the growth rates slow and become more concentrated in the older cohorts.

Our population projections to 2026 suggest the Indigenous population will continue to grow strongly in outer regional, remote and very remote Australia (by 10.4% between 2021 and 2026). The predicted growth in regional and remote Australia is concentrated in the older cohorts (from age 45—49 years and older), indicating a rapidly ageing Indigenous population.

Patterns and drivers of Indigenous people's mobility

Drivers influencing levels of temporary mobility include participation in cultural business or attendance at funerals, travel due to school holidays and seasonal weather patterns, participation in sport and leisure activities or to access alcohol outside the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, measures such as border closures and lockdowns also contributed to increased temporary mobility back to remote communities.

Factors affecting longer-term population mobility include access to housing, infrastructure, services and employment; family conflict and violence; and community unrest.

The frequency and length of mobility was found to be strongly influenced by policy changes enacted by the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

Infrastructure and service delivery needs of remote communities

A two-way relationship exists between Indigenous people's mobility and remote community infrastructure and service provision. Population movement has an impact on the funding and provision of vital housing, infrastructure and services in remote communities. Long-term mobility away from communities, therefore, has implications for the future availability of these and, ultimately, the sustainability of remote communities. Likewise, the availability of key infrastructure and services—such as sufficient housing, adequate supply of water and power, and access to healthcare, aged care and community services—influences population movement.

However, the relationship between population mobility and remote infrastructure and service delivery is made more complex due to the central role that governments play in the resourcing of remote communities and how they choose to exercise this role. Despite the pivotal role of policy in shaping mobility, the population data that supports decision-making about the funding and provision of infrastructure and services may not be accurate or reflective of short-term mobility patterns.

Policy development options

The findings from our research have several implications for the future provisioning of remote community infrastructure and services.

Increased housing

The first and most obvious area required for many remote communities is more and improved housing. Proposed measures include the construction of new dwellings and temporary accommodation, the expansion of existing homes and improvements to repair and maintenance programs. Consideration of housing design, the model for remote housing, and land tenure requirements is needed. Additional staff housing is also necessary to enable remote community services to operate at full capacity.

Essential infrastructure

Improvements to the supply of power, water and telecommunications are required to support new housing development and enable people to remain in community.

Supporting ageing populations

As the population projections show, the ageing of the Indigenous population in remote communities is a critical area of need. Improvements to aged care provision and funding would support older residents to continue living in community as they age. Infrastructure should include housing provision that accords with principles of universal design, as well as provision for both respite care and residential aged care for those that are no longer able to be supported in their home.

Improved access to healthcare

It is vital to address the limited healthcare provision available within remote communities. This means improved access to chronic disease programs, maternal and child health and mental health programs. Skills development for non-Indigenous workers is necessary in the areas of cultural appropriateness and safety. Skills development and training is also required within communities to develop a local Indigenous workforce and to reduce dependence on Fly-In Fly-Out (FIFO) staff and locums. Health services in communities undertake a large amount of emergency care, but are only funded for primary care. As such, there is a need to review the funding model of healthcare provision in remote communities.

Supporting educational outcomes

Children's schooling can be interrupted by periods of mobility away from their home community. Enhanced collaboration between schools could enable students to continue with their education even when they are away from their home community. Moreover, due to high levels of student mobility, schools in remote communities are often adversely affected by current attendance-based funding models and revisions to these funding models are needed.

Employment opportunities and support

Work opportunities for remote community residents are currently limited and access to employment is a key driver of permanent mobility away from community. The development of employment and training programs would support local Indigenous people to upskill, take on employment and enable them to remain living in community if desired. Consideration is also needed regarding the reinstatement of Community Development Program (CDP) work requirements to support job training and provide additional incentive to remain in community.

Enhanced community facilities and services

Improvements to community facilities and services such as recreational activities and youth programs could provide greater engagement and incentives for people to remain in community, especially young people. Ensuring that the funding and infrastructure is available to allow for the operation of such services is an important factor for durable impact.

Temporary accommodation facilities

Both residential and temporary mobility generate a need for temporary accommodation that is safe, culturally appropriate, and which can meet the needs of diverse Indigenous groups. Short-stay accommodation is also needed for FIFO workers to support health and social service delivery.

Transport

Improvement in transport services is a critical need for remote communities. The lack of appropriate transport has implications for health and safety, affecting access to health services and transport-related morbidity and mortality. Access to transport to return to community is especially important because of its implications for urban homelessness for Indigenous populations when visitors to towns and cities lack the means to return home.

Resourcing and governance of remote community infrastructure and services

Our research highlighted the underlying resourcing and governance arrangements that are necessary to support the development and provision of appropriate housing, infrastructure and services within remote communities.

Self-determination

Greater self-determination would support the implementation of more appropriate infrastructure and services in remote communities. However, the most appropriate model for self-determination will need to be determined by each individual community and capacity building provided.

Joint working

The relationship between communities and government requires strengthening. Government agencies and services need to work in a less siloed manner to better address community issues and support transient people. Some of the difficulties are structural in the sense that different legislative frameworks make cooperation challenging, while others relate to political or funding conflicts. The range of government agencies involved in service provision, as well as efforts to provide holistic responses, make this especially relevant to the provision of infrastructure and services to remote Indigenous communities.

As well as inter-agency coordination there are cross-jurisdictional issues that need to be addressed, since substantial cross-border geographical movement occurs. Different legislative, funding, management and service delivery frameworks can create challenges, for example, in relation to information sharing. It is important to develop strategies to improve cooperation and coordination between government agencies, both within and between jurisdictions and also across different levels of government.

Strength-based approach and use of culturally appropriate language

In order to better recognise the differing needs of remote communities, a flexible and individualised approach to the planning of infrastructure and services is needed that includes active on-the-ground engagement and focuses on community strengths. It is also essential to ensure communication with Indigenous individuals and communities is undertaken in a culturally appropriate way.

Adequate funding of infrastructure and services

Future remote community funding needs to be allocated according to assessments of local need and with the extensive participation and empowerment of the Indigenous community-controlled organisation sector. In addition, longer-term approaches to the funding of remote infrastructure and services are required to ensure sustainability and improved outcomes.

Evidence-based policy that prioritises local experience

Evidence-based policy is key for the future planning and provision of remote community infrastructure and services. Policy development and implementation in this sphere must be accompanied by strong accountability and this requires systematic evaluation. Without a solid evidence base to assess progress against goals, there is a risk that inappropriate solutions will be adopted and resulting issues will become entrenched and difficult to reverse.

Data requirements and sovereignty

Accurate and more detailed information about population mobility is an essential requirement for evidence-based infrastructure and service provision in remote communities. This includes the collection of data that can capture shorter-term mobility patterns. Achieving appropriate levels of service integration within community also requires a degree of information sharing between agencies. However, the collection and use of data must be undertaken in keeping with principles of Indigenous data sovereignty. This includes ensuring data collection and use is conducted according to national standards of ethical practice for Indigenous research.

The study

This research was conducted as a standalone project: Indigenous mobility and its impact on remote infrastructural needs: an exploratory study. The research aimed to explore changes to Indigenous mobility and its impact on the planning of housing, infrastructure and services within remote communities. This work was motivated by an acknowledgement that current and future housing, infrastructure and service delivery needs of Indigenous communities are greatly affected by settlement and geographical mobility patterns.

Utilising both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this research explored changes to Indigenous people's mobility (both to and from remote communities) and the implications of this for the provision of infrastructure and services within these communities.

The research was undertaken in two sequential stages and utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Stage one comprised:

- a literature review
- quantitative population projections based on ABS Census data
- consultations with key stakeholders.

The literature review focused on patterns of Indigenous mobility and associated infrastructure needs, including a review of 'Return to Country' initiatives to contextualise recent changes to remote community populations.

Australian Census data from 2011, 2016 and 2021 was used to model population changes and generate projections for all remote Indigenous communities across Australia to 2026. We also consulted with key stakeholders to identify demographic shifts that have occurred in remote communities and the associated impacts on infrastructure needs.

In the stage two research, the findings from stage one were used to select three remote communities for detailed case study analysis of mobility patterns and demographic shifts and associated housing, service delivery and infrastructure needs. The case study approach involved interviews with key stakeholders including Australian Government and state and territory government representatives, service providers, Traditional Owners and community members. A total of 55 respondents informed this element of the research.



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