

Supporting Indigenous mobility with services and infrastructure in remote communities



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 423: Indigenous people's mobility and its impact on remote infrastructural needs: an exploratory study

What this research is about

This research explores mobility patterns of Indigenous people both to and from remote communities and its impact on the planning of housing, infrastructure and services within these communities.

The context of this research

With Indigenous populations at risk of higher rates of infection and more serious disease than non-Indigenous populations, a policy of returning to remote communities (i.e. Return to Country) was encouraged during the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy led to high expectations for remote communities to meet the often diverse and complex needs of returnees, placing further strain on existing remote community infrastructure and services.

The key findings

Indigenous populations growing in remote communities

Australia's Indigenous population is growing rapidly, with very high growth rates in the major cities of Australia and inner regional Australia. In outer regional and remote areas, the growth rates slow somewhat and become more concentrated in the older cohorts from age 45–49 years and older. This will have implications for the type of housing, infrastructure and services that will be needed in remote communities.

Critically, the population in small communities in very remote Australia (with total populations of 200 persons or less in 2016) is predicted to increase by 11.9 per cent by 2026, reversing a strong decline seen between 2016 and 2021.

Young males most likely to move

Gender and age are the main demographic characteristics determining who is most likely to be away from home. Young people, especially young men, are the most mobile demographic categories. Older women and men are among the least mobile groups, although older men travel away more than older women.

The Census data shows that while migration is predominantly from smaller communities to larger, urbanised population centres, there are also movements back to remote areas, primarily amongst older age groups.

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Mobility can be long-term and short term

Long-term population change in remote communities is accompanied by shorter-term population fluctuation, as people temporarily move both to and from remote communities, regional centres and major cities for family visits, entertainment, access to services and shops, and to meet cultural obligations.

Short-term influxes of people into remote communities can cause considerable strain on existing infrastructure and services. Many remote communities have been subject to long-term underinvestment and do not have adequate infrastructure and social services to meet the needs of existing populations. Any increase in population, whether temporary or longer-term, has the potential to increase pressure on existing infrastructure and services.

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Indigenous mobility is caused by a wide range of factors

The term ‘temporary mobility’ describes geographical movements that are short-term and do not involve a change of usual residence. Some of this movement is predictable, such as that related to seasonal flooding and excessive heat, while some is irregular and unpredictable such as travel away from communities experiencing conflict or to visit relatives. Levels of temporary mobility are influenced by people’s 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 services and goods outside the community.

The limited services available in remote communities also influence longer-term population mobility. Factors affecting more permanent population mobility include access to housing, infrastructure, healthcare, services and employment; family conflict and violence; and community unrest.

Mobility patterns in case studies of three remote communities

In-depth case studies were undertaken of three remote Indigenous communities with interviews conducted with key stakeholders and community members in each selected community.

Similar drivers of temporary mobility were identified across all three communities and were considered to be either seasonal (i.e. occurring at similar times each year) or unanticipated in nature. It was also noted that not all families were mobile; some tended to remain in community all year round, whilst others moved around to different communities during the year.

Lack of access to adequate housing, essential infrastructure, healthcare and social services contributed to both temporary and permanent mobility in all three communities.

Overcrowding and a lack of available accommodation was considered to deter people from returning to live in remote communities and to act as a driver for community members to move elsewhere. Overcrowding could adversely impact upon household members with regard to health, employment, education, child protection issues and domestic violence, all of which then affected local service provision.

Challenges with essential infrastructure, such as water, power and telecommunications, were reported in all three communities. These challenges were considered to constrain the ability of each community to meet current population need and to potentially expand in the future. Relatively poor telecommunications connectivity was also reported. Access to a reliable and fast internet service could be challenging and this issue was felt to contribute to younger people wanting to leave the community.

Limited on-the-ground healthcare services acted as a key driver of mobility away from remote communities. Many specialist services were only available in urban and regional centres, meaning that people with serious health issues were forced to relocate to receive necessary care.

The lack of residential aged care services in all three communities meant that some older people requiring more intensive support were forced to move to facilities in urban centres.

Employment was identified as a further factor influencing mobility on a more permanent basis within remote communities. A lack of work opportunities for local residents was perceived to sometimes force people to leave their home community in order to obtain employment elsewhere.

Family conflict and violence was also considered to lead to both short-term and long-term mobility. Respondents suggested that some people were forced to move between communities after being sent away from their home community due to antisocial behaviour; or that people may choose to leave a remote community in order to escape situations of family violence or community unrest.

Public transportation options were very limited in all three communities, and often a car was the only means of transport to and from the community. At times this meant that visitors remained in community or people were forced to stay away from community for longer periods than anticipated.

In addition, mobility affected **school attendance** in all three remote communities. If away from community, children often did not attend school at all; this had implications for educational outcomes with students falling behind with their schooling and unable to subsequently catch up. School funding in each of the communities was allocated according to attendance levels during a set time period at the start of the year. If children were absent (such as for family visits or ceremonies) this had a detrimental effect on funding for the rest of the year.

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Incomplete information is shaping government policies and resourcing decisions

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. 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. This results in governments resourcing communities based on incomplete information.

Two-way relationship exists between Indigenous mobility and remote community infrastructure and services

Population movement was found to have an impact on the funding and provision of vital housing, infrastructure and services in remote communities. Long-term mobility away from communities 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, education and community services—enables people to remain living on Country if they wish.

Understanding Indigenous people’s mobility patterns can lead to better outcomes

Limitations are present in the use of Census data to estimate Indigenous resident populations and their mobility. Accurate and more detailed information about population mobility is essential for evidence-based infrastructure and service provision in remote communities, including the collection of data that can capture shorter-term mobility patterns.

What this research means for policy makers

The research findings have several implications for provisioning of remote community infrastructure and services.

Increased and improved housing is required for many remote communities. In addition to reducing existing levels of crowding, communities experiencing population growth need to be more clearly identified so as to allow for proper resourcing in the future. Essential infrastructure, such as power and water, must also be improved - to support the development of new community housing.

Supporting ageing Indigenous populations in remote communities is a critical area of need.

Improved access to healthcare is vital within remote communities. Skills development for non-Indigenous workers is necessary in the area of cultural appropriateness and safety. Skills development and training is also required to develop a local Indigenous workforce and to reduce dependence on Fly-In-Fly Out (FIFO) staff and locums.

Educational outcomes need to be supported. Enhanced collaboration between schools could enable students to continue with their education even when they are away from their home community. Due to high levels of student mobility, schools in remote communities are often adversely affected by current attendance-based funding models.

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 work requirements to support job training and provide additional incentive to remain in community.

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Enhanced community facilities and services such as recreational activities, art centres and youth programs could provide greater engagement, employment opportunities and incentives for people to remain in community.

Safe, culturally appropriate **temporary accommodation facilities** are needed to address both long- and short-term mobility. Short-stay accommodation is also needed for FIFO workers to support health and social service delivery.

Improvement in public transport services is a critical need for remote communities. To support travel back to remote communities, there is a need for greater and more consistent funding of Return to Country programs.

Government agencies and services need to work together to better address community issues and support transient people. Since substantial cross-border geographical movement occurs, 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.

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.

Evidence-based policy that draws on quality research which prioritises local experience is also key for the future planning and provision of remote community infrastructure and services. The collection and use of data must be undertaken in keeping with principles of Indigenous data sovereignty.

Methodology

This research consulted key stakeholders; undertook a literature review; used ABS Census data to model population changes and projections for all remote Indigenous communities across Australia; and conducted in-depth case studies of three remote communities to understand mobility patterns, demographic shifts and associated housing, service delivery and infrastructure needs.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

Moskos, M., Isherwood, L., Dockery, A.M., Habibis, D., Grealy, L., Benedict, R., Harris, M., Singh, R. and Lea, T. (2024) *Indigenous mobility and its impact on remote infrastructural needs: an exploratory study*, AHURI Final Report No. 423, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/423>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri3129601

Available from the AHURI website at ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/423