DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

The Working Paper Series

Family empowerment towards sustainable desert settlements: the Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program in Alice Springs

Janya McCalman

Working Paper
68
2009

JCU James Cook University
CRC Australia
DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

Family empowerment towards sustainable desert settlements: the Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program in Alice Springs

Janya McCalman

JCU JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
CRC AUSTRALIA
DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

Contributing author information

Ms Janya McCalman is a Senior Research Officer in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University, Queensland.

Desert Knowledge CRC Working Paper #68

ISBN: 1 74158 132 X (Web copy)
ISSN: 1833-7309 (Web copy)

Citation

McCalman, J 2009. *Family empowerment towards sustainable desert settlements: the Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program in Alice Springs*. DKCRC Working Paper 68. Desert Knowledge CRC, Alice Springs.

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre is an unincorporated joint venture with 28 partners whose mission is to develop and disseminate an understanding of sustainable living in remote desert environments, deliver enduring regional economies and livelihoods based on Desert Knowledge, and create the networks to market this knowledge in other desert lands.

Acknowledgements

This Working Paper has been produced as part of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre Sustainable Desert Settlements project (Core Project 4).
The Desert Knowledge CRC receives funding through the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centres Programme; the views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Department or of the Desert Knowledge CRC or its Participants.

For additional information please contact

Desert Knowledge CRC
Publications Officer
PO Box 3971
Alice Springs NT 0871
Australia
Telephone +61 8 8959 6000 Fax +61 8 8959 6048
www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au

Contents

List of figures, tables and map

Family empowerment towards sustainable desert settlements: the Family Wellbeing Program in Alice Springs

Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced severe and systematic disempowerment with devastating health and social impacts. Despite Australia's world-class health system, the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men is 11 years lower than that for Australian males (67 years compared to 78) and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women it is 10 years less (73 compared 83 years) (SCRGSP 2009).[*] Concerted action can make a difference (as demonstrated by the reduction in the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in North America and New Zealand to around seven years) (SCRGSP 2009). But in Australia, in some important respects, the circumstances of Aboriginal people appear to have either deteriorated or regressed or health inequity has increased (Gary Banks, quoted in Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2005). In the Northern Territory, for example, all-cause mortality rates for Aboriginal people declined overall and for all age groups over a long period (1967–2000). Declines in Aboriginal mortality however 'did not keep pace with the relative decline for the total Australian population' (Wilson et al. 2007).

There is now an evidence base which indicates that interventions that empower socially excluded populations across psychological, organisational and community levels have achieved improved health outcomes and quality of life of disadvantaged groups (Wallerstein 2006). Empowerment is a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisations and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice (Wallerstein 1992). Increased control and mastery means that people are better able to deal with the forces that affect their lives, (Syme 2003) and have greater capacity to deal with day-to-day challenges of life without being overwhelmed by them (Syme 1998). Aboriginal people have described empowerment as 'Healing – coming to terms with the past and present situation, dealing with the pain; gaining control; becoming strong; finding your voice; participating in change; and working together for a strong community' (Haswell-Elkins et al. forthcoming).

Since 2001, James Cook University and the University of Queensland have worked in partnership with a range of Aboriginal and mainstream organisations to explore the role and contribution that concepts of empowerment and control can make towards a better understanding of, and addressing, the social determinants of health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people. Fundamental to any initiative that aims to enhance empowerment and control is that it is relevant to the needs of its participants, that it starts where people are 'at' and that it engages different people who have differing life experiences and opportunities and who may be at different levels of motivation and ability (McCashen 2005). One of the practical programs or tools we have used for studying empowerment and control and their relationships to Aboriginal health is the Family Wellbeing Program, an 'inside-out solution' that builds on Aboriginal strengths.

The Family Well Being (FWB) program is a nationally recognised program, originally developed in Adelaide in 1993, which aims to empower participants and their families to assume greater control and responsibility over the conditions which influence their lives. It attempts to explicitly address the emotional effects of colonisation among Aboriginal Australians by helping people explore the important issues affecting their daily lives, recognise their own strengths and resources, develop knowledge and take action to improve their situation. The program is based on the belief that all humans have basic physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs. If these needs aren't met, people may suffer personal or relationship problems and have difficulty coping with the everyday challenges of life. The James Cook University and University of Queensland research team has also developed and piloted a quantitative tool to address the need for appropriate methodologies to evaluate the effectiveness of empowerment interventions as strategies for addressing health and wellbeing

[*] Note: hereafter, 'Aboriginal' is used to describe all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and its islands.

(Haswell-Elkins et al. forthcoming). The ‘Growth and Empowerment Measure’ (GEM) is a quantitative instrument that complements an existing qualitative approach which has been used to evaluate the Family Wellbeing Program, thereby consolidating and enhancing the emerging evidence base in the relatively unexplored area of empowerment research.

FWB in Alice Springs

The FWB Program has been implemented in Alice Springs since 1998 by Tangentyere Council, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, and more recently, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. James Cook University has helped with evaluation and facilitator training. Delivery of the program has been funded in Central Australia by Australian Government family violence prevention and suicide prevention grants. Additional funding has been provided by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre Core Project 4, which is focused on sustainable settlements, to explore the relationship between family empowerment and sustainable settlements. The GEM tool has also been developed and piloted with participants of the FWB Program in Alice Springs (and other settings) to ensure that it truly captures changes in levels of empowerment that individuals, families/ groups and communities experience and value (based on substantial qualitative data from participants); reflects the cultural context and definition of empowerment for Aboriginal people (their own words and concepts); and is strengths-based and able to promote the empowerment process (promoting hope and guiding effort). The development of the GEM has been funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health.

This discussion paper is a starting point towards describing the demographic and socioeconomic context for Alice Springs Aboriginal people; that is, the context within which the FWB Program is being implemented. It may be read in conjunction with other papers that also address key issues related to the sustainability of Alice Springs as a desert settlement (Kennedy 2009, Long & Memmott 2007, Sanders 2004).

Alice Springs

Almost in the exact centre of Australia, Alice Springs is some 1200 kilometres from the nearest ocean and 1500 kilometres from Darwin and Adelaide, the nearest major cities. As well as the Central Arrernte people (the town area's traditional owners) many other non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples have settled in Alice Springs. European exploration of the central Australian region began in the 1860s and the town (originally named Stuart) was established as a frontier settlement for north–south travel, initially by camel trains and since 1929 by the Ghan railway from Adelaide. Frontier violence from the 1870s had a huge impact on local Aboriginal tribes and drastic enforced change has resulted in serious social and economic disruption.

In 2006, Alice Springs had a population of 23 888 (ABS 2006c), making it the second-largest settlement in the Northern Territory after Darwin. The 2006 Census counted 17 509 non-Aboriginal people, 4401 Aboriginal people, 28 Torres Strait Islanders and 65 people of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and a further 1885 people whose Aboriginal status was unknown. Within Alice Springs, Aboriginal residents live in the suburbs, established town camps and several informal camps. Alice Springs is the major service centre for some 260 communities in the central Australian region (approximately 11 000 to 12 000 people) that lack adequate access to a range of services. There are 19 legally established town camps in Alice Springs and two camps without leases. These town camps are small communities made up of family members or members of the same language groups or geographical origins. The camps themselves tend to be in locations which correspond to the direction closest to the residents' 'traditional country'. Town camp residents have a distinct identity within the Alice Springs community and despite the high level of alcohol misuse, family violence and other social pressures many people prefer to live on town camps among family who provide strong social support systems.

For the purposes of this research, the population of concern is the Aboriginal population of Alice Springs including people living in the town camps (defined in the 2006 Census as Anthelk-Ewlpaye/Hoppys camp, Nyewente/Akngwertnarre, Ewyenper/Atwatye, Larapinta, Stuart, Jeavitree, Charles and Ross) and the rest of Alice Springs. The following demographic and socioeconomic data

provides a cross-sectional picture of the differences and similarities between Aboriginal people living in the Alice Springs town camps with that of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs. While Aboriginal people move between the town camps and suburban residential housing, the analysis of the 2006 Census data indicates that sustainability of the settlement of Alice Springs is likely to mean different things for each of the key population groups. It is expected that some of the structural issues and challenges implicit in working towards the goal of settlement development ('to satisfy needs of happiness and security', Doxiadis 1968) will be different for the Alice Springs town campers compared to Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs, and that it would differ even more significantly from the issues facing non-Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs.

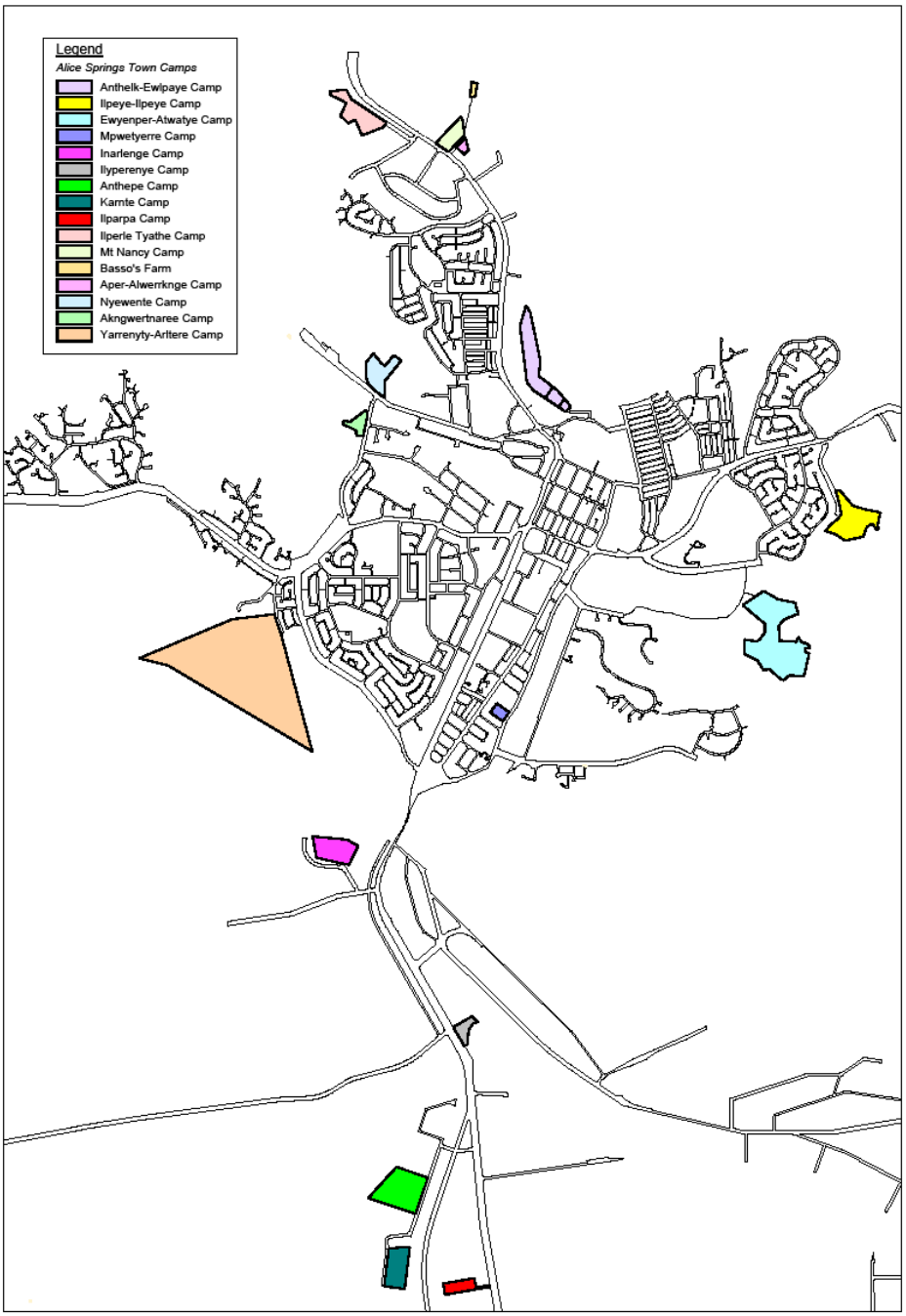
At the 2006 Census, 1127 Aboriginal people and 59 non-Aboriginal people were enumerated in the town camps. There were 3368 Aboriginal people counted in the rest of Alice Springs (ABS 2006 a,b). Hence, town campers comprise just 5 per cent of the Alice Springs population and Aboriginal people living in the rest of the town comprise 14 per cent. The overall population of Alice Springs increased by 4 per cent in 1996–2001, then decreased by 6 per cent from 2001–06. The Aboriginal population however increased by 9 per cent from 1996–2001, and again by 12 per cent 2001–06. From 2001–06 the suburban population increased by 3 per cent and the population of town camps increased by 20 per cent. However, this apparent increase in the town camp population may be related to changes in the methodology for census enumeration rather than a real increase.

Table 1: Alice Springs population change 1996–2006

Year	Total persons	Non-Aboriginal	Percentage of Alice Springs population	Aboriginal	Percentage of Alice Springs population	Aboriginal in town camps	Percentage of Alice Springs population	Aboriginal in rest of Alice Springs.	Percentage of Alice Springs population
2006	26 472	17 562	81	4765	19	1,127	5	3368	14
2001	28 178	20 820	83	4252	17	973	4	3279	12
1996	27 092			3911					

1. Where Aboriginal status was known.

2. It is difficult (if not impossible) to differentiate town camp residents from residents of the surrounding suburban areas from the 1996 Census data. There are some inconsistencies between time series data and specific Census data (ABS Census 2006a,b,c, 2001, 1996).



Map 1: Alice Springs, including town camp locations

Table 2 and the population pyramids (below) show that whereas only 21 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population of Alice Springs was under 15 years of age, 36 per cent of Aboriginal residents of the rest of Alice Springs were under 15. Interestingly, in the town camps the proportion of people under 15 years of age was 25.3 per cent, probably reflecting the fact that town camps are highly connected to outlying Aboriginal communities and that children often stay in those communities while parents and associated adults, for a variety of reasons, move quite frequently and in circular fashion between the communities and Alice Springs (Young & Doohan 1989, in Sanders 2004). Conversely, there is a higher proportion of adults aged 25–44 in town camps (34 per cent) compared to other Aboriginal town residents (28 per cent).

Table 2: Numbers and age distributions of people in Alice Springs, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal in town camps	Aboriginal in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal in Alice Springs
Number of people	1131	3367	17 509
Percentage of Alice Springs population	4.7	14.4	73.3
Age distribution (%)			
0–4	10.7	11.8	6.7
5–14	14.8	24.5	14.0
15–24	21.5	17.3	13.2
25–44	33.7	27.8	33.6
45–64	15.5	14.2	27.1
65+	3.8	4.3	5.4
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

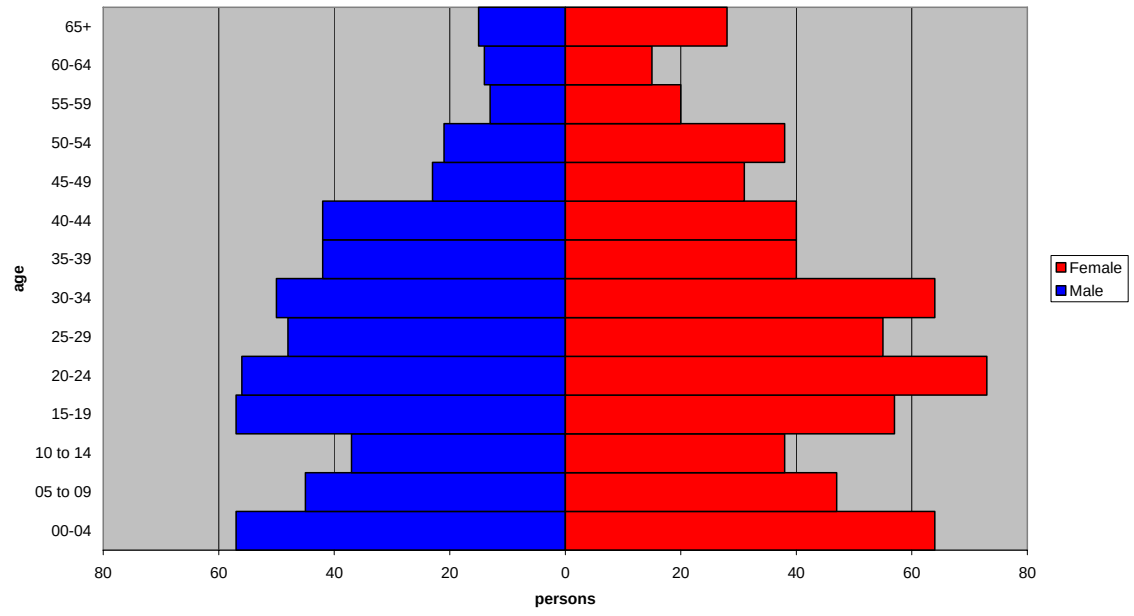


Figure 1: Alice Springs Aboriginal town camp residents: age by sex

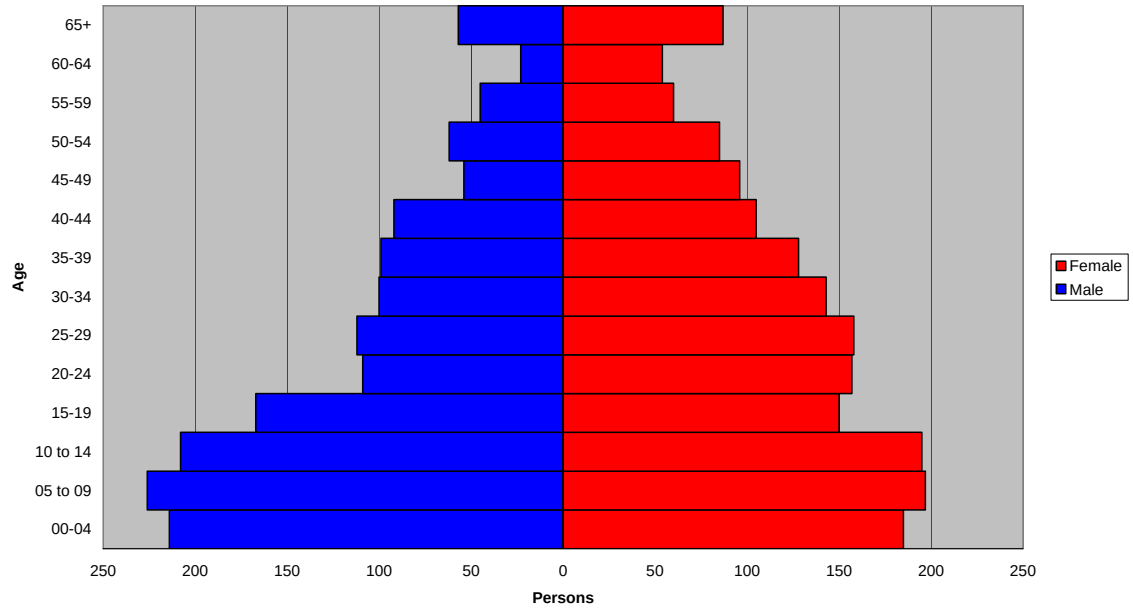


Figure 2: Alice Springs Aboriginal residents (excluding town camps)

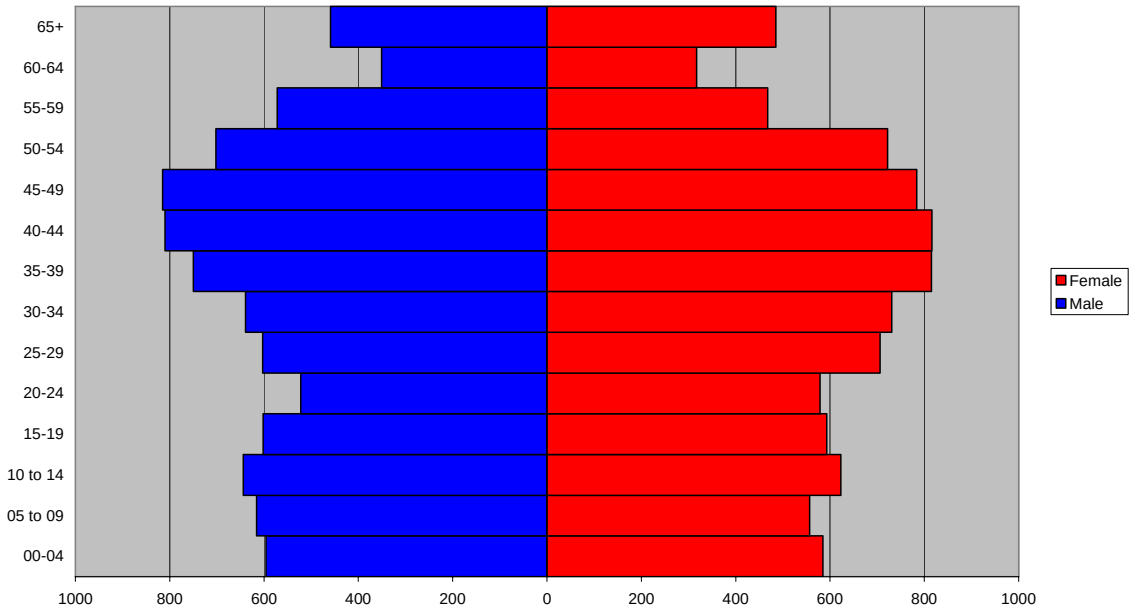


Figure 3: Alice Springs non-Aboriginal residents (excluding town camps)

Table 3 shows that 67 per cent of Aboriginal people living in town camps speak an Aboriginal language at home. This reflects the close ties that residents have with outlying communities. In contrast, only 18 per cent of Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs speak an Aboriginal language at home. Sadly, these proportions have changed considerably since 2001, when 85% town camp people and 14% Aboriginal people living in suburban Alice Springs spoke an Aboriginal language at home.

Table 3: Languages spoken at home by people in Alice Springs, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal persons in town camps	Aboriginal persons in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal persons in Alice Springs
Number of people	1131	3367	17 509
Speaks Australian Aboriginal language (percentage)	66.9	17.8	–
English only	20.6	73.7	–

Levels of schooling completed by town camp residents are significantly lower than those of Aboriginal people living in the suburbs of Alice Springs, and even more so than non-Aboriginal residents. Table 4 shows that in the town camps a huge 57 per cent of adult residents had either never attended school or left before completing grade 8. In contrast, 21 per cent of Aboriginal suburban residents and only 4.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal residents had either never attended school or left before completing grade 8. Conversely, only 5 per cent of town campers had completed years 11 or 12 compared to 32 per cent of Aboriginal suburban residents and 64 per cent of non-Aboriginal residents. Tsey (1997) argued that free and compulsory schooling is a necessary prerequisite for any improvements in Aboriginal social and health conditions, and that there can never be any meaningful Aboriginal self-determination and social and health improvements so long as Aboriginal children continue to miss out on effective primary and high school education.

Table 4: Highest level of schooling completed by people aged 15 years or more, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal persons in town camps	Aboriginal persons in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal persons in Alice Springs
Number of people	1131	3367	17 509
Level of schooling completed (percentage)			
Never attended school	14.4	6.2	0.3
Year 8 or below	42.5	14.6	3.8
Year 10 or below	20.2	32.4	28.3
Year 11 and 12	5.1	31.8	64.0
Not stated	17.8	15.0	3.6
Total (percentage)	**100**	**100**	**100**

Alice Springs also has a booming economy based on tourism (especially related to Uluru, which results in 500 000 tourists visiting Alice Springs per year), the Pine Gap Joint Defence Space Research Facility, a satellite monitoring base (which employs 700 workers and adds $12 million per year to the economy) and significant government funding for Aboriginal programs (ASTC 2007).

Aboriginal people living in the town camps were less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force than Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs. Only 17 per cent of town camp residents 15–65 years old were employed, and that employment was predominantly within the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, a form of work-for-the-dole. By contrast, 49 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 15–65 years in the rest of Alice Springs were employed.

Table 5: Labour force, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal people in town camps	Aboriginal people in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal in Alice Springs
Number of people	1131	3367	17 509
Not in the labour force	525	845	No data available
Total labour force	166	1,071	
Employed incl. CDEP	81.3	91.2	
Unemployed	18.7	8.8	
Total (percentage)	**100**	**100**	**–**

No data are available for either Labour force participation or weekly individual income for non-Aboriginal Alice Springs residents.

The income status of individuals aged 15 and over, and households are shown in Tables 6 and 7. In Alice Springs (as elsewhere in Australia), Aboriginal people remain the poorest residents. Among Aboriginal people in town camps there was a steep peak in the income distribution, with 51 per cent of individuals having an income in the range of $150–249 per week and a further 17 per cent having an even lower income of $1–149 per week. This range corresponds to the levels of both social security payments and CDEP wages, and supports the notion that the economy of town camps is dependent on passive welfare. Only 1 per cent of town camp residents earned over $800 per week.

By contrast, the income distribution of Aboriginal people in the rest of Alice Springs is more evenly distributed, with only 18 per cent being in the $150–249 range, a further 15 per cent being in the $250–399 range and 23 per cent spread over the $400–799 range that is more typical of income derived from substantial employment. Eighteen per cent of Aboriginal residents of suburban Alice Springs earned over $800 per week. Weekly individual income was not available for the non-Aboriginal people of Alice Springs, but Sanders (2004) found in the 2001 Census that only 6 per cent had weekly incomes in the range that is typical of heavy reliance on Commonwealth income support payments, and 25 per cent earning over $800 per week.

Table 6: Weekly individual income of people aged 15 years or more, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal people in town camps	Aboriginal people in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal in Alice Springs
Number of people	1131	3367	17 509
Level of income (percentage)			
Negative/nil income	2.1	7.3	No data available
$1–149	17.4	7.6	
$150–249	51.2	17.6	
$250–399	7.6	15.2	
$400–599	2.5	13.5	
$600–799	0.7	9.4	
$800–999	0.4	8.1	
$1000 or more	0.7	9.5	
Income not stated	17.3	11.8	
Total (percentage)	**99.9**	**100**	

The pattern of income differentials between the three groups changes if we examine household income data instead of individual data. Just 18.3 per cent of town camp households earned less than $350 per week and 23.3 per cent earned more than $1000 per week. Similarly, 17 per cent of Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs earned less than $350 per week and 35 per cent earned more than $1000 per week. The median household income for town camp households was $592 per week

compared to $363 for Aboriginal households in the rest of Alice Springs. The difference in this pattern compared to the individual income data is due to household size. The Aboriginal people living in town camps live in larger households (average size 5.3 residents) than those in the rest of Alice Springs (average size 3.1 residents). In contrast, for non-Aboriginal Alice Springs residents only 7 per cent of households earned less than $350 per week and 60 per cent earned more than $1000 per week.

Table 7: Weekly household income, 2006 Census

	Aboriginal households in town camps	Households with Aboriginal people in rest of Alice Springs	Households with non-Aboriginal persons in Alice Springs
Number of households	181	1,310	6,638
Level of income (percentage of households)			
Negative/nil incomes	0	0.5	0.7
$1–149	6.1	3.8	0.7
$150–249	7.2	4.8	2.5
$250–349	5.0	7.7	3.1
$350–499	16.0	4.4	0.9
$500–649	10.5	10.2	6.3
$650–799	2.8	6.4	6.9
$800–999	11.0	7.6	6.8
$1000–1399	14.4	14.8	17.3
$1400–1999	7.2	10.5	19.1
$2000–2499	1.7	4.8	9.7
$2500 or more	0	4.5	13.4
Partial income stated	7.7	11.9	10.3
All incomes not stated	10.5	8.0	2.2
Total (percentage)	**100.1**	**99.9**	**99.9**

12

There were between 180 and 186 town camp households enumerated in the 2006 Census, of which 21%per cent were multi-family dwellings. In contrast, only 6.3 per cent of the 1310 Aboriginal households in the rest of Alice Springs were multi-family dwellings and only 0.5 per cent of the 6638 non-Aboriginal dwellings in Alice Springs were multi-family dwellings. Hence the average household size for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living in the rest of Alice Springs was approximately half the size of the households in the town camps.

Table 8: Number of people by household type, 2006 census

	Aboriginal households in town camps	Aboriginal households in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal households in Alice Springs
Number of households	186	1310	6638
Household type (percentage households			
One-family	69.4	71.2	66.1
Multi-family	21.0	6.3	0.5
Lone person	7.0	18.7	27.8
Group household	2.7	3.9	5.6
Total (percentage)	**100.1**	**100.1**	**100**

Finally, town campers live exclusively in dwellings which are rented from a community organisation (or did not state their tenure type). As Memmott et al. (1992, p. 180) state:

> *… they are cheap places to live; there is no pressure put on residents by Whites or other town-dwelling Aboriginals; they are important socialising and drinking venues for visitors and the general Aboriginal community; some are very convenient and close to shops, hospital, and hotel; they serve as short-term camping areas for visitors; residents enjoy general acceptance of changing lifestyles without the burden of a state housing commission home and high rents.*

By contrast, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal households in the rest of Alice Springs are spread across housing tenure types – owning, purchasing, government rental and private rental.

Table 9: Households by tenure type, 2006 census

	Aboriginal persons in town camps	Aboriginal persons in rest of Alice Springs	Non-Aboriginal persons in Alice Springs
Number of households	180	1129	6638
Fully owned	0	5.6	18.0
Being purchased	0	28.4	42.4
Community rental	86.1	0.4	0.6
Government rental	0	26.0	5.1
Private rental	0	24.4	22.1
Other rental	0	4.1	8.7
Other tenure e.g. rent free	0	0.8	0.8
Tenure not stated	13.9	10.5	2.4
Total (percentage)	**100**	**100.2**	**100.1**

Discussion

In general terms, the main factors associated with the viability of communities and settlements are: acceptable access to essential services such as water, energy, health and education; sufficient economic activity to support and engage the population underpinned by good governance; and availability of desirable social and cultural activities (Department for International Development 1999, Cape York Institute 2005, Pleshet 2005). In general a settlement – taken as the spatial unit of housing, infrastructure and associated technical services – will be valued if it enables people to live lives they have reason to value.

For the Central Arrernte traditional owners of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) the landscape contains many sites of importance and Arrernte people continue to observe their customary law, look after country and teach children the Arrernte language and the importance of their culture. Issues of cultural identity and self-determination may be relevant for Central Arrernte people. For other Arrernte and other Aboriginal residents of town camps and the rest of Alice Springs the town may also be valued as a service centre, a place of employment, connection with family members and so on. Taylor (2006) comments on the difficulty of identifying single indicators for cultural wellbeing given the diversity of desert settlements and communities. He asks whether standard social indicators which might show low socioeconomic outcomes in areas where Aboriginal language is intact might also hide the cultural benefits and sense of wellbeing that is achieved through communities having their own language. The pressure to use standard indicators could lead to ethnocentric indicators that do not allow the development of Aboriginal measures of success through a ‘common agreed view of different and shared perceptions of wellbeing’ (Taylor 2006, p. 8).

The central Australian Aboriginal population as a whole is highly mobile – moving between remote communities, outstations and urban centres to visit family, access services (including health), shopping and to attend sporting events. The majority of people residing in town camps are permanent residents, many of whom are now third, fourth and fifth generation, but they also provide camping areas for visitors, many of whom stay for extended periods (more than three months). The lack of available accommodation options creates enormous difficulties for families and ‘house bosses’ in town camps in maintaining their homes due to the sheer numbers of people needing somewhere to stay.

All town camps have historically experienced poor infrastructure and service provision. At their least developed the camps can be a series of officially unrecognised improvised humpies. Nowadays however most camps are considerably more developed, with some security of land tenure, some community facilities (such as running water, lighting and ablution blocks) and some more formally constructed dwellings, be they perhaps only basic tin sheds. At their most developed the Alice Springs town camps have some of the characteristics of low-cost residential housing estates, with toilets and other facilities in individual houses, a clear block and road layout and house numbers, if not street names.

‘Problem behaviours’ are also well documented. They include alcohol-related violence, inappropriate sexual behaviour, sexual assault, the spending of money on alcohol leaving little or none for food, the ignoring of obligations to non-drinking relatives, neglect of commitments to work and ceremony, damage to personal and public property, and inappropriate behaviour to host families by bush visitors. Binge drinking injures the health of the drinker and also often leads to rowdy behaviour, social disruption, neglect, violence, property damage and vehicle accidents. It inflicts both social and economic costs on the community (Memmott et al. 1992). The problems listed above can be seen as symptomatic of the deeper seated problems: inadequate employment, poor education, low incomes and overcrowded housing. Previous and ongoing strategies by Tangentyere Council (the Aboriginal organisation specifically established to assist the development of the town camps) to address these issues have included proactive methods such as encouraging appropriate social behaviour, developing camp rules and norms, educational programs, improved leadership and social cohesion, and preferred

drinking styles in moderation. Reactive methods have included night patrols, conflict management and mediation, participation in judicial and corrective services processes and alcohol counselling and treatment.

Visitors from remote communities also derive value from the Alice Springs settlement. For the 11 000 to 12 000 Aboriginal people living in remote communities who lack access to a range of services, Alice Springs offers access to educational facilities, housing and infrastructure, mainstream employment and health and other services. However, if populations in remote settlements were forced, through the cessation of government support, to move into larger towns and centres such as Alice Springs, such action would just transfer the welfare dependency from one location to another and exacerbate existing issues in the new location (Altman referring to a recent ABS report entitled *Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians* (ABS 2006d)).

The dual impacts of high demographic growth and increased regional mobility have created a crisis. High visitor numbers, overcrowding and the lack of alternative accommodation options have caused substantial pressure on town camp residents, Tangentyere Council and the wider Alice Springs community. Long-term refusal by successive Commonwealth, Territory and local governments to deliver essential basic services like water, power, sewerage and rubbish collection has led to poor infrastructure and conditions. At the same time, the town benefits from significant expenditure by temporary visitors (Alice Springs Town Camps Review Taskforce Report June 2006). There are currently major government initiatives designed to redevelop the facilities of town camps to 'a standard where they become an integral part of the Alice Springs urban structure'. According to the Alice Springs Town Camps Implementation Steering Committee, 'This will improve living conditions not only in town camps but also in the broader Alice Springs community' (Alice Springs Town Camps Implementation Steering Committee chair Barry Chambers, 2006[1] on ABC 29 July 2007).

In June 2008, Tangentyere Council agreed to an Australian Government offer to take over control of housing and essential services by revoking the leases on town camps for the next 40 years. The Rudd Labor Government offered a $50 million housing boost, with an immediate $5.3 million transitional payment (SBS News, 26 June 2008). A previous $60 million offer by the Howard Liberal–National Coaltion Government for a 99-year lease was rejected by Tangentyere Council (ABC, 22 October 2007).

Specific outcomes that the Australian Government wants to achieve in Alice Springs include:

- Improvement in living conditions for Aboriginal people by upgrading existing housing to mainstream standards just like other suburbs in Alice Springs, and implementing a sustained maintenance program.
- An ability to deliver services to town camps of an equivalent standard as in other areas of Alice Springs, including essential services, municipal and telecommunications infrastructure, rubbish collection, dog management and rates payments.
- Better access to education, employment, housing and health services.
- Establishment of accommodation for temporary residents in camp sites and hostel style accommodation to relieve problems associated with overcrowding on the town camps and to provide local authorities with an alternative to deal with illegal camping.
- Specialist rehabilitation facilities to support Northern Territory Government alcohol management plans (Northern Territory Government, June 2007, July 2007).

In response to the Australian Government's emergency intervention in Aboriginal communities and recognition that alcohol is fuelling the widespread sexual abuse of children, the Northern Territory

[1] The Implementation Steering Committee draws its members from the following organisations: Alice Springs Town Council, Tangentyere Council, Australian Government Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation, NT Department of the Chief Minister, NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services, NT Department of Local Government, Housing and Sport.

Government also banned all alcohol consumption in Alice Springs town camps from August 2007. Alice Springs has officially become a dry town where drinking is allowed only in pubs or restaurants and private homes (except those private homes within town camps) (Northern Territory Government, 6 July, 2007).

Fundamental to any initiative that aims to enhance the sustainability of settlements is the capacity for internal settlement functions to adapt to changing external factors (Doxiadis 1968). Alice Springs is currently experiencing multiple legislative and structural changes resulting from Australian Government concern about the viability of small remote desert settlements, the recent 'emergency' plan to tackle child abuse through the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007*, recent reforms to passive welfare provision and the Community Development Employment Program under the *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007*, the tightening of Northern Territory alcohol legislation, and negotiations between the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments with Tangentyere Council to secure funding to upgrade town camps.

Although structural changes to improve the living conditions of Aboriginal people living in Alice Springs are necessary and welcome, there is contention about how this process of change should be approached. The goals expressed by the inhabitants, or aspiring inhabitants, of settlements underpin any settlement development processes. According to Doxiadis the main motivation for settlement development is a perceived sense of happiness and security/safety (Doxiadis, p. 6). We need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: initiatives for change need to be relevant to the needs of its participants, start where people are 'at' and engage different people who have differing life experiences and opportunities and who may be at different levels of motivation and ability (McCashen 2005). Despite the evident need for improvement in the housing and infrastructure in town camps, by the end of 2009 protracted negotiations between the federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Tangentyere Council related to the control and nature of proposed developments had broken down pending a Federal Court decision. The issue of how development should occur and how the involvement of the town campers and the Tangentyere Council could be maintained were unresolved. Without the involvement of town camp residents in the development of their settlements it is unlikely that developments will be sustainable or achieve the Australian Government's aims.

The FWB empowerment program is a strengths-based program that can assist people to start to 'gain understanding of self and situation' in order to engage in change processes (Tsey & Every 2000). The GEM tool can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts that Aboriginal people themselves have been making to take care of themselves and to address fundamental issues that affect their lives and hence the sustainability of their changed living situations.

References

ASTC. 2007. Alice Springs Town Council website. Available at <http://www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/>. Accessed 1 October 2007.

Alice Springs Town Camps Review Taskforce. 2006. Report. Available at <www.towncamps.nt.gov.au>. Accessed 3 October 2007.

Alice Springs Town Camps Implementation Steering Committee chair Barry Chambers, 2006. Available at <www.towncamps.nt.gov.au/implementation_committee>. Accessed 3 October 2007.

Altman, referring to a recent ABS report entitled Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (ABS 2006d). Available at <http://www.google.com.au/search?q=labour+force+characteristics+of+aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islanders&btnGNS=Search+abs.gov.au&oi=navquery_searchbox&sa=X&as_sitesearch=abs.gov.au&hl=en&rlz=1T4ADRA_enAU353AU353>. Accessed October 2008.

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2006a. 'Census Quickstats: Alice Springs (Indigenous Region)'. Available at <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/>. Accessed October 2009.

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006b. 'Census Quickstats: Alice Springs (T) excl. Town Camps (Indigenous area)'. Available at <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/>. Accessed October 2009.

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006c. 'Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing Cat no. 2068.0'. Available at <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/>. Accessed October 2009.

Cape York Institute. 2005. 'Can Cape York communities be economically viable?' CYI Viewpoint, Available from <http://www.cyi.org.au>. Accessed October 2008.

Department for International Development. 1999. 'Sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets'. Available from www.dfid.gov.uk/. Accessed October 2008.

Doxiadis CA. 1968. *Ekistics: An Introduction To The Science Of Human Settlements*, Hutchinson of London, London.

Haswell-Elkins M, Kavanagh D, Tsey K, Reilly L, Cadet-James Y, Laliberté A, Wilson AJ and Doran C. (Forthcoming). 'Psychometric validation of the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM) applied with Indigenous Australians'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (revision submitted October 2009).

Kennedy A. 2009. CRH Seminar series_Alice Springs: Preliminary findings on Aboriginal perspectives on engagement with governments. Available at http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/publications/conferencepresentations.html

Long S and Memmott P. 2007. *Aboriginal mobility and the sustainability of communities: Case studies from north-west Queensland and eastern Northern Territory*. Desert Knowledge Cooperative research Centre Working Paper Series 5.

McCashen W. 2005, *The strengths approach: a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria.

Memmott P and the staff of Tangentyere Council. 1992. *Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele (Sitting Down Good In Alice Springs) A Project By Tangentyere Council*. http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/previous%20series/proceedings/1-27/~/media/publications/proceedings/21/memmott.ashx. Accessed October 2008.

Northern Territory Government (2007). Town camps update, June 2007. Available at <www.towncamps.nt.gov.au/town_camps_update_june_2007>. Accessed October 2008 .

Pleshet N. 2005. *Viability analysis for desert settlement and economy: Working Paper 1 – Value in and of desert Australia*. Centre for Appropriate Technology and Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

Sanders W. 2004. *Indigenous people in the Alice Springs town camps: the 2001 Census data*. Discussion Paper no 260/2004. Centre for Aboriginal economic Policy Research.

SBS News. 2008. Article broadcast 26 June and available at <http://news.sbs.com.au/worldnewsaustralia/alice_springs_town_camps_to_sign_lease_550302>. Accessed 5 September 2008.

Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2005. *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: key indicators 2005*. Productivity Commission, Canberra.
SCRGSP: see Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision.
Syme, S. L. (1998). Social and economic disparities in health: thoughts about intervention. *The Milbank Quarterly,* 76, 493 -503.
Syme S.L. (2003) Social determinants of health: the community as an empowered partner. *Preventing Chronic Disease*.
On-Line: http://www.cd.gov/pcd/issues/2004/jan/syme.htm. Accessed October 2007.
Taylor J. 2006. *Indigenous peoples and indicators of well-being: An Australian perspective on UNPFII Global Frameworks Paper No. 33/2006*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Working.
Tsey K. 1997. 'Aboriginal self-determination, education and health: towards a more radical attitude towards Aboriginal education'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* vol. 21, no. 1, pp.77-83.
Tsey K and Every A. 2000. 'Evaluating Aboriginal empowerment programs: the case of family wellbeing'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 509–14.
Wallerstein, N. (1992). Powerlessness, Empowerment and Health: Implications for Health Promotion Programs, American Journal of Health Promotion, 6(3), 197-205.
Wallerstein, N. (2006). What is the evidence on effectiveness of empowerment to improve health? Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. Health Evidence Network Report: http://www.euro.who.int.Document/E88086.pdf.
Wilson T, Condon J and Barnes T. 2007. 'Northern Territory Indigenous life expectancy improvements, 1967–2004'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 184–8.
Young E and Doohan, K. 1989. 'Mobility for survival: a process analysis of Aboriginal population movement in central Australia', North Australia Research Unit, ANU, Darwin. In W Sanders, 2004, cited above.

DKCRC Partners