



POLICY BRIEFING

- ▶ Policymakers see remoteness and high levels of mobility as challenges.
- ▶ Mobility needs to be seen in terms of its contribution to people's wellbeing. Approaches that do not are bound to fail.
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities travel large distances to access services.
- ▶ Barriers to mobility significantly limit livelihoods for people living in remote communities.
- ▶ Moves to rationalise smaller and more remote communities are likely to negatively impact on the wellbeing and socio-economic outcomes of the people displaced.

Key Findings

Policymakers see remoteness and high levels of mobility as challenges that contribute to inferior educational, employment and housing outcomes and generally frustrate mainstream models of service delivery. Yet rather as a challenge to service delivery, mobility needs to be seen in terms of its contribution to people's wellbeing. Approaches that do not are bound to fail.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities travel large distances to access services. The costs associated with that travel imply substantial potential benefits from innovation in service delivery and improvements to transport networks.

Barriers to mobility significantly limit livelihoods for people living in remote communities. In particular, not having a driver's licence appears to markedly limit employment outcomes.

Moves to rationalise smaller and more remote communities are likely to negatively impact on the wellbeing and socio-economic outcomes of the people displaced. Instead, beneficial policies would promote community enterprise development, enhance service access and improve transport access and networks.





Background

The Population Mobility and Labour Markets project is one of a wide range of projects being undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and which seek to address the economic challenges facing remote Australia.

High rates of temporary mobility among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians living in central Australia are often seen as a barrier to socio-economic advancement and as frustrating mainstream models of service delivery and infrastructure provision.

Despite this view, policymakers and service providers in fact have very little understanding of the mobility patterns of remote community populations.

The aim of the Mobility project is to enhance livelihoods and economic participation by providing a better understanding of the drivers of mobility and generating estimates of the extent and patterns of mobility. This evidence base will contribute to planning and decision-making by communities, service providers, policymakers and employers.

This policy brief is based on initial data from 885 surveys completed across 21 communities. While we believe this already makes the Mobility project the largest ever survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility, further valuable information will be collected through follow-up surveys over a period of around 12 months.

We've employed over 60 local Aboriginal Community Researchers to carry out the field work.

Building the picture

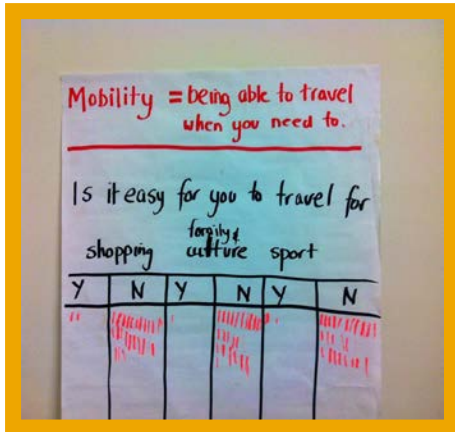
The consultations undertaken for the Mobility project and the survey data now being collected are helping to provide valuable insights about the mobility of people living in remote communities in central Australia – where they go, why, how and what problems they encounter, and what trips they wanted to make but could not.

Accessing services

The sample was drawn from a cross-section of communities from which people would potentially travel to Alice Springs as a major regional centre. The distances by road between these communities and Alice Springs varied from between 85 kilometres for Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) and 883 kilometres for Lajamanu. Residents of Lajamanu mostly travel to Katherine to access services.

People do travel a great deal to get the things they need. The survey asked people whether they ever left the community to access a range of services. The main service they reported travelling for was shopping, but other commonly cited reasons were for banking, health and to visit Centrelink.

On average people report making 19 trips per year away from their community to access services – or just more than one trip every three weeks. For those who go to Alice Springs, we can estimate the average distance they travel to access such services is around 865 kilometres per month.



These travel requirements add considerably to the cost of living in remote Australia. In coming months we'll be breaking down the distances travelled on sealed versus unsealed roads and calculating the average costs for different modes of transport. This information will be used to evaluate alternative models of service delivery and for cost-benefit analyses of road upgrades and transport services, such as the Bush Bus.

Despite this evidence of extensive travel to access services, residents of the remote communities studied felt the things they needed were mostly available in their community or nearby, and they were generally happy to make these trips.

Overnight trips

To get a gauge of the extent of 'temporary mobility' and the time people spend away from their community, we asked respondents about trips they took that involved at least one night's stay away. Around 60 per cent of respondents reported taking such trips. Across the full sample (including those who make no trips) the average number of trips taken involving an overnight stay was 14 per year. When people do go, they typically spend 4-5 nights away.

When asked the main reason for taking trips involving an overnight stay, the most common response was for shopping. But when we look at all the things people did on those trips, as opposed to the main reason for going, the most common activity was visiting friends and family, followed by shopping and football.

More than two-thirds of people indicated they usually stayed with family. Other sources of accommodation included staying with friends, hotels or apartments and in hostels (each nominated by around 10 per cent of respondents).

Barriers to travel

The early survey results point to significant constraints on people's travels.

Of the people aged 17 and over, only 41 per cent reported having a current driver's licence.

When asked if they could get access to a vehicle if they needed one, only around half indicated 'Yes' or 'Most of the time'.

Around a third of people indicated there were times in the past year they had wanted to travel but could not. The main thing that prevented people from making the trips they wanted to was the lack of transport (including no safe vehicle, no driver, not being able to get a lift). Other reasons for being unable to take trips included a lack of money and cultural reasons.

Policy relevance

There has only been opportunity for a first glance at the survey data, and a great deal of richer information will be accumulated as the respondents are followed up in the coming months. However, the preliminary results already provide some insights for policy and highlight issues that warrant more detailed analysis.

A different perspective

Good policy and planning decisions require understanding how people will respond to different incentives. Conceptual work undertaken for the Mobility project has argued that to fully understand human mobility across different cultural contexts, mobility should be seen as a means to accessing things that contribute to wellbeing, or avoiding things that contribute to illbeing.



Consistent with existing literature, the data highlight the importance of connection to country, culture and kinship networks in determining where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live and where they travel. In our sample, 86.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they lived on their homelands. When they travel they stay with family. Visiting family or homelands, hunting and collecting bush tucker and attending cultural events are common activities.

The enduring nature of these drivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility suggests country, kin and culture are intrinsic to their wellbeing. If policy does not take account of this, then either people will not respond as intended, or policy will fail to accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations.

Enhancing livelihoods in remote Australia

Accessing basic services such as shopping for food and groceries, banking and visiting a doctor add substantially to the costs – in time and money – of living in remote communities. The scale of the distances travelled suggests large potential gains from innovations in service delivery or from improved transport networks. Identifying such opportunities will be a focus of future analyses.

Livelihoods are also constrained by barriers to mobility, including the lack of licences and limited access to adequate vehicles.

Employment opportunities

Only around a third of the people surveyed were employed. The unemployment rate in the sample communities can be estimated to be roughly 46 per cent. People with a driver's licence were more than twice as likely to have a job than those without a licence. Living in more crowded housing is also associated with a lower chance of being employed, and exploring what lies behind this relationship is a priority for ongoing research. The main reason cited for not working was the lack of available jobs.

Sustainability of remote communities

Question marks hang over the future of smaller remote communities. The data from the Mobility Survey and lessons from history suggest the residents will not readily sever ties with country, kin and culture, for this is what their wellbeing and identity are built around. Mobility facilitates this. Steps to rationalise communities and the services provided to them will at most see people drift into larger centres, where lack of jobs is already an issue. Any such measures would have to be carefully weighed against the alternatives of promoting economic development and livelihoods within those communities: addressing the lack of licences and housing, improving transport networks and promoting local enterprise.

Acknowledgement

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Population Mobility and Labour Markets

