

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF NET OVERSEAS MIGRATION IN POPULATION GROWTH AND INTERSTATE MIGRATION PATTERNS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY?

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The key trend preventing the Northern Territory (NT) from achieving consistent annual population growth has been the unpredictability and very high levels of Net Interstate Migration (NIM). Natural Increase (NI) and Net Overseas Migration (NOM) both appear to have provided consistent contributions over the past twenty years. This article examines the contribution of NOM to the NT population growth in the period 1996 to 2006 to establish whether it has in fact mitigated or sustained the high interstate migration rates. Two trends suggest that NOM in the NT has contributed to high levels of population mobility. First, it has been dominated by net long-term movement of temporary migrants rather than settlers. Second, the overseas-born have higher rates of interstate migration from the NT than do the Australian-born. Unfortunately the data on the interstate mobility of overseas-born residents do not permit us to distinguish between people holding long-term and permanent visas. But we believe that some migrants from both groups have participated in this transient population system.

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Territory (NT) is the least populous of all Australian jurisdictions (221,700 in 2008),¹ and it typically experiences large fluctuations in population growth rates. Maintaining population growth is one of the NT Government's objectives and at the same time a means of boosting economic and social development.² An expanded population is seen as important to creating business opportunities and supporting social capital growth, which in turn can make the NT a more attractive place to live. Much of the concern around sustaining population growth in the NT focuses on the unpredictability and very high levels of Net Interstate Migration (NIM), with Natural Increase (NI) and Net Overseas Migration (NOM) providing consistent contributions over at least the past twenty years. However, very little is known about how NOM and NIM interact—in other words, how does the method of entry into the NT population influence future migration patterns? This article first examines the contribution of NOM to NT population growth. It then analyses the volume contributed by each of the categories of movement in NOM. This enables us to discuss details concealed

in NOM statistics routinely published for states and territories. Finally, this article discusses whether NOM has mitigated or contributed to the observed high interstate migration rates in the NT. Intra-Territory movements are not discussed.

DATA AND CONCEPTS

This article draws on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data to analyse components of the population growth and the categories of movement in NOM in the NT in 1996–97 to 2005–06. To establish whether the proportions of these categories in the NT differ from the national picture, the analysis is replicated for Australia as a whole. The NOM data are based on the 12/12 month rule which was applied up to June quarter 2006, rather than the 12/16 month rule now used,³ so that analysis of change over time could be performed. NOM is a net gain or loss of the Australian population arising from the difference between international travellers leaving permanently or on a long-term basis and those arriving permanently or on a long-term basis. In order for a person to contribute to NOM they must stay in or be absent from Australia for a continuous period of 12 out of 12 months.⁴

Permanent movement refers to travellers who move to or from Australia on a permanent basis. Permanent arrivals (settlers) include: travellers who hold migrant visas (regardless of intended period of stay); New Zealand citizens who declare an intention to settle and those who are otherwise eligible to settle, for example overseas-born children of Australian citizens. Permanent departures refer to Australian residents (including former settlers) who on departure declare that they are leaving permanently. Long-term arrivals include overseas migrants (visitors and temporary entrants) who intend to stay in Australia for 12 months or more and Australian residents returning from overseas after an absence of 12 months or more. Long-term departures refer to Australian residents who intend to stay abroad for 12 months or more and overseas visitors departing who had stayed 12 months or more in Australia.⁵

In addition to permanent and long-term movement, there is also a category called 'category jumping'. Category jumping is an adjustment reflecting changes between intended and actual duration of stay of travellers to and from Australia: 'such that their classification as short-term or long-term/permanent movers is different at their arrival/departure from that after 12 months'.⁶ Short-term movements are less than 12 months in duration. Short-term arrivals comprise overseas visitors who intend to stay in Australia for less than 12 months and Australian residents returning from overseas after an absence of less than 12 months. Short-term departures comprise Australian residents who intend to stay overseas for less than 12 months and overseas visitors departing after a stay in Australia shorter than 12 months.⁷ Category jumping became highly volatile in the mid-1990s which led to it being set at zero from 1997–98 to 2000–01 as the ABS was developing a better estimation technique. An improved method for calculating NOM has been used since September

quarter 2006 onwards; these new estimates and the ones based on the previous method are not comparable.⁸ The period where category jumping was set at zero is covered by the data analysed in this article.

An advantage of this improved method for calculating NOM is that it considers travellers' actual rather than declared duration of stay in and out of Australia. The essence of the new method is the 12/16 month rule. Under this rule travellers are added or subtracted from NOM if they have stayed in or been absent from Australia for 12 months or more over a 16 month period. The 12 months do not have to be continuous. This recognises the increased propensity of long-term visitors to interrupt their stay in Australia with short-term absences.⁹ Under the 12/12 month rule, visitors declaring a long-term stay (for example overseas students) were included in NOM, but if they were away for short holidays, they were included in short-term departures. Then, upon returning to Australia and declaring again a long-term stay, they were counted as new long-term arrivals, leading to double counting. This problem required adjustments to reflect differences between declared and actual travel behaviour as well as to transform numbers of movements into numbers of travellers.¹⁰ However, our data are drawn from the period that pre-dates this reform and, as a consequence, the net figures of long-term visitors presented in this article have likely been somewhat inflated and therefore should be seen as indicative rather than absolutely precise.

NOM IN POPULATION GROWTH IN THE NT

Table 1 shows that annual population growth in the NT between 1996–97 and 2005–06 has fluctuated considerably from a high around 5,000 (1996–97) to a low of around 600 people in 2002–03, when population loss to NIM was particularly high. The absolute differences in levels of NIM

during this period were quite extreme and ranged from 46 (1998–99 and 1999–00) to 2,226 (1996–97 and 1997–98). The absolute differences in annual population growth between these periods were 45 and 2,115, respectively. This demonstrates that variations in absolute population growth figures in the NT follow the fluctuating levels of NIM. This table also reveals that net population gains from interstate migration were recorded only in 1996–97 and 2004–05.

NOM has represented annually between 10 and 51 per cent of the absolute population growth in the NT with an average for the period studied of nearly 30 per cent. NOM has therefore played a key role in (apparently) offsetting losses sustained through net interstate migration. On some occasions, offsets from NOM were small, but they have always been reported as positive. The role of offsetting the net losses suffered through interstate migration can also be seen in comparing the aggregate figure for NOM and NIM over the total period: the net gain

from these two was only 84 people but in the absence of NOM, total population growth in 1996 to 2006 would have been below 20,000. In considering the NIM and NOM outcomes it needs to be noted that the NIM data used in Table 1 do not distinguish between the overseas-born and Australian-born interstate movers. Regardless of the international port of entry and departure that the overseas-born use (Darwin or other), they are counted in the NT NOM if they declare the NT as their intended long-term place of residence or the place where they had spent most of their time. If after a couple of months spent in the NT they then move interstate, they are captured in NIM. When they leave Australia and list a jurisdiction other than the NT as the place where they have spent most of their time, this results in an adjustment to the NT NOM. This process works the other way around too, when an intended stay in another jurisdiction turns out to be a long-term stay in the NT. In consequence, the aforementioned NOM

Table 1: Components of population growth in the NT, 1996 to 2006

Year	Natural increase NI	Net Overseas Migration NOM	Net Interstate Migration NIM	Total population growth ^a	NOM as per cent of total population growth
1996–97	2733	541	1754	5028	10.8
1997–98	2825	560	-472	2913	19.2
1998–99	2749	1006	-953	2802	35.9
1999–2000	2722	942	-907	2757	34.2
2000–01	2851	878	-1592	2137	41.1
2001–02	2839	655	-1998	1496	43.8
2002–03	2946	325	-2768	635	51.2
2003–04	2755	648	-1487	2017	32.1
2004–05	2558	1004	610	4310	23.3
2005–06	2764	1891	-553	4254	44.5
1996 to 2006	27,742	8450	-8366	28,349	29.8

Source: *Australian Demographic Statistics*, December Quarter, 2008, ABS, Catalogue no. 3101.0, 2009, pp. 10–11 (and Table 2 for NT in excel downloaded from <www.abs.gov.au>)

Note: ^a Differences between total population growth and the sum of the components from 2002–03 to 2005–06 are due to intercensal discrepancy. Population growth figures for earlier periods are exact sums of all three components.

outcomes are broadly indicative rather than absolutely precise.

Finally, Table 1 shows that NI has been generally consistently contributing just below 3,000 people per year to the NT population growth. It has overall contributed 97.9 per cent to population growth in the period under review here. Such an outcome contrasts the NI contribution at the national level, where in 1996 to 2006 it has contributed 50.6 per cent and NOM 46.2 per cent.¹¹ Yet, the NT typically experiences a high outmigration of children, especially non-Indigenous children aged five to nine. This reduces the long-term contribution of the very high NI to the population growth. Specifically, by the age of ten, the NT has typically lost (net) 1,500 children to interstate migration. Some of those children were NT-born while others were not, it is

impossible to determine the numbers. What is important is that the outflow in this age group both in terms of volume and proportional share is the second largest of all age groups. Every five years the NT suffers a net loss of between eight and nine per cent of that age group.¹² Given the high levels of the interstate outmigration, which include young children, population growth is also pursued by means of overseas migration and efforts to attract interstate residents.

CATEGORIES OF MOVEMENT IN NOM IN THE NT

Table 2 shows the categories of movement in NOM. It reveals that, with the exception of 2001–02, long-term visitors have contributed the highest numbers to NOM each year. Between the beginning and the end of the period studied here, their number has tripled.

Table 2: Components of NOM in the NT, 1996 to 2006

Category of movement	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Net permanent movement (arrivals-departures)	222	118	216	199	158	104
Net long-term resident movement (returners-departers)	36	-44	19	-21	7	-99
Net long-term visitors (arrivals-departures)	335	486	771	764	713	139
Category jumping total	-52	0	0	0	0	511
NOM total ^a	541	560	1006	942	878	655

Category of movement	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	1996 to 2006	per cent change 1996 to 2006
Net permanent movement (arrivals-departures)	144	189	171	376	1897	22.4
Net long-term resident movement (returners-departers)	-125	8	23	-122		
Net long-term visitors (arrivals-departures)	415	714	620	1022	^b 5661	67.0
Category jumping total	-109	-263	190	615	892	10.6
NOM total ^a	325	648	1004	1891	8450	100.0

Source: Components of Net Overseas Migration (NOM), Northern Territory and Australia 1996–2006, ABS data provided on request.

Notes: ^a Final NOM was calculated by adding any required category jumping to the net of permanent and long-term arrivals and departures data.

^b This figure is composed of -318 net long-term resident movements and 5979 net long-term visitor movements.

Visitors are a self-identified category and the data used here do not permit determining the exact composition of this category.¹³ It is likely, however, that most of them were long-term temporary business visa holders (on 457 visas) and overseas students. Net numbers of long-term residents were low. In five years out of the ten net long-term movement of residents was actually negative and in 2002–03 and 2005–06 the NT lost more than a hundred of these residents. Net permanent movements were higher in each year than the net long-term resident movements, with the exception of 2001–02, but they have remained considerably below the net numbers of long-term visitors. Over the whole decade net permanent movement represented just one-fifth of NOM (22.4 per cent), whereas net long-term movement

(dominated by visitors) made up 67 per cent of NOM. This suggests that two-thirds of NOM's contribution to population growth in the NT has been in the form of long-term movement of overseas-born people. As noted though, the double counting of some long-term visitors may have somewhat inflated the reported outcomes and thus affected the proportional shares.

CATEGORIES OF MOVEMENT IN NOM IN AUSTRALIA

Table 3 below shows all categories of movement in NOM in Australia and allows comparison of the national patterns in NOM with those in the NT.

Table 3 reveals that in Australia as a whole, unlike in the NT, until 1997–98 there were more net permanent movements than

Table 3: Components of NOM in Australia, 1996 to 2006

Category of movement	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Net permanent movement (arrivals-departures)	55,895	45,342	48,962	51,194	60,845	40,659
Net long-term resident movement (returners-departers)	6393	4936	-14,951	-5267	-10,052	-3473
Net long-term visitors (arrivals-departures)	32,108	28,884	62,472	61,348	84,880	96,498
Category jumping total	-7317	0	0	0	0	-23,128
NOM total ^a	87,079	79,162	96,483	107,275	135,673	110,556

Category of movement	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	1996 to 2006	per cent change 1996 to 2006
Net permanent movement (arrivals-departures)	43,451	52,512	60,818	63,740	523,418	47.4
Net long-term resident movement (returners-departers)	9573	14,064	9666	5785		
Net long-term visitors (arrivals-departures)	101,201	98,045	107,488	129,748	^b 819,346	74.3
Category jumping total	-37,727	-64,655	-54,210	-52,520	-239,557	-21.7
NOM total ^a	116,498	99,966	123,762	146,753	1,103,207	100.0

Source: Components of Net Overseas Migration (NOM), Northern Territory and Australia 1996–2006, ABS data provided on request.

Notes: ^a Final NOM was calculated by adding any required category jumping to the net of permanent and long-term arrivals and departures data.

^b This figure is composed of 16,674 net long-term resident movements and 802,672 net long-term visitor movements.

there were net long-term visitor movements. The situation reversed in 1998–99 and, since 2000–01, the numerical gap between these two components has begun to widen considerably. In 1996 to 2006 net long-term visitor movement to Australia has numerically contributed most to NOM in Australia as a whole. Its annual contribution has ranged from 32,000 in 1996–97 to nearly 130,000 in 2005–06. With three exceptions (1997–98, 1999–2000 and 2003–04), the numbers of net long-term visitors have been rising continuously and, between the beginning of the period studied until its end, they have quadrupled. This is a faster growth than in the NT, again recognising the potential for double counting. Net long-term resident movements to Australia fluctuated and losses were recorded between 1998–99 and 2001–02. Their annual volumes have remained low in comparison to the net long-term visitor movements. Over the whole period studied, the total volume of net long-term resident movement was more than 48 times lower than the total volume of net long-term visitor movement. This shows how much NOM has been reliant on the latter. Table 3 also shows that over the whole decade net permanent movement represented 47.4 per cent of NOM and net long-term movement (dominated by visitors) 74.3 per cent. Category jumping brought net population losses to Australia at -21.7 per cent.

While the exact percentage shares contributed by categories of movement in NOM differed between the NT and Australia as a whole, the broad trends were somewhat similar. In 1996 to 2006, in the NT and Australia alike, NOM has chiefly relied on net long-term movement, which has represented 67 per cent and 74.3 per cent, respectively. In both cases these movements have been dominated by visitors. The percentage contribution made by net permanent movement was more than twice as low in the NT than in Australia: 22.4 per cent and

47.4 per cent, respectively. This illustrates that it has been difficult for the NT to attract a share of net permanent movers similar to the share represented in the national NOM. Unlike in Australia as a whole, category jumpers in the NT delivered an overall net population gain.

HAS NOM MITIGATED INTERSTATE POPULATION MOBILITY IN THE NT?

Has NOM contributed to a less mobile population in the NT and could it have such an effect in the future? Although numerically NOM has made up for net losses sustained through interstate migration in the NT in 1996 to 2006, it itself has been largely composed of long-term movers (chiefly visitors). This suggests that its mitigating effect on population mobility in the NT has been limited and instead that NOM has sustained the temporary nature of settlement in the NT. Although proportionately net long-term movement in the NT NOM was somewhat less important than nationally it has likely had a greater relative impact than on Australia as a whole. This has resulted from a combination of the high number of visitors (by definition non-permanent), the NT being the least populous jurisdiction, and its long-established pattern of exporting more people interstate than it takes in. Even though in Australia as a whole the number of visitors in NOM was high too, the proportion of net permanent movement approached 50 per cent of total NOM. If a similar proportion of permanent movement were achieved in the NT NOM, and if most of these individuals stayed in the NT, then NOM could possibly have had some stabilising effect on the high population mobility.

Yet, the overseas-born are most mobile in the first decade following their arrival in Australia. The 2006 census revealed that on the national scale six per cent of the overseas-born who arrived in 1996–2000 moved interstate but only 4.8 per cent of the

Australian-born did.¹⁴ The overseas-born in the NT were also more mobile than the Australian-born. The 2006 census has shown that those arrived in Australia in 1996 to 2000 had a 26 per cent migration rate out of the NT. Those who arrived most recently (2001 to 06) were slightly less mobile: their outmigration rate from the NT was 22.3 per cent. Yet, both of these rates were higher than the 19.6 per cent interstate migration rate for the Australian-born (all figures are five-year rates). The turnover rate of these overseas-born in the NT was also higher than the turnover rate of the Australian-born. For those arrived in 1996 to 2000 it was 45.5 per cent and for the recent arrivals 41.8 per cent. By comparison, the turnover for the Australian-born recorded by the 2006 census in the NT was 35.8 per cent.¹⁵ These data do not distinguish between the long-term and permanent movers, which could improve our understanding of mobility patterns of those captured by NOM in the NT. However, some of the overseas-born movers seem to have subsequently relocated interstate thus participating in the transient population system. Overall, the overseas-born contribute to, rather than mitigate against, the temporary nature of the settlement in the NT.

Judging by the trends discussed thus far, it is difficult to predict whether NOM in the NT could reduce the mobility of the NT population in the future. First, changing the proportions of contributing categories of movement developed during a decade may be difficult because these proportions are partly due to deliberate past policy choices, which have been tightened only recently. The dominant role of net long-term movement, particularly of visitors, in NOM, has resulted from a combination of factors including federal government decisions, made in consultation with the states and territories. During the decade under review here, opportunities to enter Australia on temporary visas were expanded. Overseas

temporary workers, business people and overseas students were responsible for the growing numbers of long-term visitors. The increase in the number of temporary visas has resulted from a combination of the demand for foreign labour in times of economic prosperity, growing interest in studying in Australia and from policy choices where temporary visa grants to business and skilled migrants have been preferred over granting them permanent status immediately. Most of these temporary visas have had pathways to permanent visas, which could be granted onshore. When the research reported here was being undertaken, it was impossible to immediately ascertain from the available data how many of the long-term visitors recorded by NOM in the NT indeed became permanent residents in the NT, under what visa categories, after what period of time and whether they have permanently established themselves there (in addition to being granted a permanent visa there) and whether they still live there.

Second, the regional migration schemes rolled out in 1996 with fixed-term residency requirements may have been somewhat conducive to relocation, too. The NT has a narrower choice of urban areas to live in than more populous jurisdictions in Australia, which means that if a relocation occurs, it is often to interstate. Finally, cuts to the permanent skilled migration program in 2008–09 (from 133,500 to 115,000) and 2009–10 (from 115,000 to 108,100) were introduced by the federal government. This was done in response to the economic downturn. The reduction will be achieved by offering fewer places in the general skilled category (where some visas offer permanent residency immediately),¹⁶ but places in employer-sponsored categories will not be affected.¹⁷ This reduction means that in the near future the ability of the NT to attract a higher number of permanent migrants will be affected.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1996 to 2006 NOM's critical role in population growth in the NT consisted in offsetting net interstate population losses. However, in the context of the small and highly transient population of the NT, the fact that NOM itself has been largely composed of impermanent movements has not helped to mitigate the high population mobility in the NT. The interstate migration rates of overseas-born people captured by the census were higher than those of the Australian-born. By being more mobile they have not behaved differently from the overseas-born in Australia in general, yet again in the context of typically negative net interstate migration in the NT, their behaviour has perpetuated rather than reduced population mobility.

Our analysis has been restricted by issues related to data quality such as the likely inflated net long-term visitor figures in NOM and the lack of details regarding the composition of this category. The annual NIM data did not permit us to separate the overseas-born from the Australian-born interstate movers. The census data did not permit us to distinguish between overseas-born long-term and permanent migrants (as per NOM categories) among interstate movers. This appears to be a wider issue where migration data are available for entry into the system but, once the overseas-born (particularly permanent residents), move interstate, this is not recorded because such migrants do not need to notify DIAC of changes in address. The pivotal role of interstate migration in population growth in the NT and the engagement therein of the overseas-born means that such data would enable us to describe more precisely the composition of interstate migration in the NT, and thereby inform planning and policy.

If NOM were to reduce the population mobility in the NT much higher numbers would need to be achieved every year and

long-term visitors, in particular, would need to stay in the NT. Alternatively a dramatic reduction in NIM would be necessary. The trends discussed here do not seem to suggest that this could occur in the near future. Does this mean that the NT is simply unlucky in that it has a small and highly mobile population in the first place, and that the overseas-born tend to be highly mobile, too? On the one hand, yes, it could be argued that the unique geography, narrower economic base and physical distance from the rest of Australia, as well as extreme climate, have contributed to the powerful trends in population mobility in the NT today.

In such transient populations durable social ties may be difficult to maintain and access to services may mean dealing with different people every time. But is high population mobility necessarily a bad phenomenon? It brings vitality, new skills and experience to a place. It could also be seen as a safety valve—a self-regulating mechanism to access infrastructure such as rental stock, health services and alike. If the NT had higher levels of interstate migration from elsewhere in Australia and at the same time fewer relocations to interstate, this access would no doubt become more competitive (at least up to a point where it would have resulted in higher outmigration of unhappy residents).

From this perspective, until access to infrastructure and services has been improved (which is being addressed by a number of NT Government policies), high population mobility can be seen as one means of ensuring functionality of services. Although technically outside the scope of this article, it may be further noted that this mobility translates into staff turnover. As recently discussed in the media,¹⁸ that turnover particularly negatively impacts upon access to services and outcomes for clients in remote Indigenous communities.

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