



Synthesising Northern Territory Population Research: A report to the Northern Territory Department of the Chief Minister

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Executive Summary

In September 2017, the Northern Territory Department of the Chief Minister contracted the Demography and Growth Planning research team at Charles Darwin University to synthesise twelve years of research on the causes and consequences of population change in the Territory and advise on strategies for stimulating population growth (the Terms of Reference are in Appendix 1). Each of the eight chapters in this report commences with a short summary of the chapter's purpose, its core messages and recommended actions.

The Territory is now eight years into a low population growth 'era' featuring a deterioration in interstate migration, and particularly the 'failure to arrive' of large numbers of people in what previously were key migrant groups. There have been two similar eras of nine and seven years' duration in the past 35 years, and our international research shows most 'northern' regions in developed countries have had similar experiences. Low growth eras are linked to slowdowns in both international and domestic migration. For the Territory, there have been reductions in arrivals from South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, and slowdowns in migration from Great Britain and South Africa. In addition to declining source markets, the Territory has become less attractive as a migration destination for people at particular life stages (such as women in the early stages of their careers), and has increasing difficulty in retaining people at other life stage transition points (such as retirement from full time work).

Although the Territory is in a low growth era, differences between current growth rates and the long term Territory average are relatively small. In person numbers, a return to the thirty-year average annual growth rate requires only a net improvement of around 2,600 people (about 1% of the total population). Additionally, overseas born communities in the Territory are growing quite rapidly, including the Filipino, Indian, New Zealand and Nepalese communities.

While there are many factors influencing migration to and from the Territory, 'work' is the prime reason migrants from all sources both come and go. Family and social issues influence out-migration to a greater extent than they influence in-migration. The likelihood of leaving the Territory in any given year decreases substantially once people have been here for five years. After that time, out-migration is influenced by life stage specific motivations such as worries about cost of living for people retiring from work.

Australian and international experience suggests that there is no single 'silver bullet' strategy for fostering high population growth in places like the Northern Territory. Rather, we recommend a suite of Market Orientated Population Initiatives (MOPI) that can help change migration behaviours of specific population groups. We suggest the most promising markets and strategies are:

- International migrants, with a focus on countries which are providing increasing numbers of migrants to the Territory in recent years;
- Territory 'alumni' (past residents) who might return themselves (one third of people leaving the Territory intend to return) and might be ambassadors for the Territory, promoting it as a destination for friends and colleagues;
- Late career workers and those retiring from full time work, particularly those who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s after Cyclone Tracy and Self-Administration; and
- Women in the early stages of their careers.

There are other markets which might also be influenced (lifestyle migrants, seasonal and temporary workers making the Territory their home base), but with lower likely returns on investment.

Over the page are the priority actions in relation to the more promising markets (Chapter 6). In addition to MOPI actions, there is a need to improve official population counts by, for example, encouraging new residents to update Medicare details in a timely manner. New research is also needed to inform MOPI actions and to identify new target markets as they emerge (Chapter 8). This research is particularly important given a number of global and generational trends that are likely to impact places like the Territory in coming years (Chapter 7).

'Single number' population growth targets (for example, to reach a population of 300 000 by 2020) tend to serve less effectively as a guide to population growth strategies than relative targets which apply to specific markets (for example, to achieve net positive in-migration of early career workers) for reasons explained in Chapter 5. We recommend that targets of this sort be set for each of the promising markets identified above.