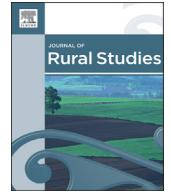


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Local economies of mobility in sparsely populated areas: Cases from Australia's spine

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There is a growing contemporary body of literature about the 'new mobilities' – increasingly mobile populations and their impacts on local economies, particularly in more sparsely populated areas of developed nations. Much of the focus has been on the 'fly in/fly out' workforce associated with mining projects, but attention has also been paid to increasing numbers of 'fly in/fly out' workers in the health sector, the changing nature of tourist populations, the use of temporary contract labour for government administration, and the movement of Indigenous people from remote communities into urban centres. This paper uses five case examples in South Australia and the Northern Territory (Australia's 'spine') to examine the diversity of experiences of the new mobilities. The paper presents a framework for investigating new mobilities at the local settlement level through developing an understanding of macro and micro factors driving mobility and the consequences in terms of aspects of social and economic distance between mobile populations and host communities. The framework provides for useful insights to be drawn from secondary data sources including the Australian Census and tourist surveys. The paper concludes that the geographic characteristics of short term mobility observed in this research essentially conform to the 'Eight Ds' model of the human and economic geography of sparsely populated areas.

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1. Introduction

Increasing levels of short term population mobility (involving 'circulation' between a number of locations and regular return to one or more home bases) have been proposed as characteristic of contemporary society since at least the 1960s (Bell and Ward, 1998). The 'mobility transition' hypothesised by Zelinsky (1971) was assumed to apply most directly to post-industrial societies which have the income and technological resources to support mobile populations (Long, 1991). As human and economic geographers have become more aware of the role of mobility in contemporary society, there have been calls for better theoretical and conceptual understandings of the impacts on local and regional economies. Hannam et al. (2006) coined the term 'new mobilities' paradigm to reflect the need for new understandings of how places, societies and economies are shaped by the flow of people and other

resources. However, Zandvliet et al. (2008) remarked that general understandings of what mobilities have emerged and how they influence generating and receiving places continue to be lacking.

In Australia, Martin Bell and colleagues (Bell and Ward, 1998; Bell, 2001; Bell and Brown, 2006) have been at the forefront of research into short term population mobility, and have identified some classifications relating to who is mobile, why they are mobile, and the relationships between places connected by mobile populations. While these researchers, along with others such as Taylor (1998) and Biddle and Prout (2009), call for more standardised approaches to measuring mobility and creating national views of mobility patterns, there is a recognition that great diversity exists in the experiences of mobility from place to place. Biddle and Prout (2009) emphasise the role of scale in shaping our understandings of mobility by alerting researchers to the Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP) where results from spatial analysis can change according to different levels of scale applied to the analysis. A concrete example of the MAUP in action was provided by Bell and Ward (2000) showing how, at a city wide level, Sydney appears to be a net receiver of mobile and migrant populations, yet at finer geographical scale it is apparent that mobile populations favour the city centre, while migrant populations favour the outer suburbs.

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The rural and remote parts of Australia, as in other developed nations at least, are in general principal sites for the enactment of the mobility transition and new mobilities (Taylor et al., 2011a), but they are also likely to experience particularly high levels of diversity between places, due to the sparsity of human settlement and the complex relationships between resource availability, seasonality, technological distance, and historical patterns of development (Stafford Smith, 2008; Carson et al., 2011). This paper examines how mobile populations might affect local economies in what has been termed Australia's 'spine' – the rural and remote areas of South Australia and the Northern Territory (Carson and Porter, 2013 – see Fig. 1).

The 'spine' has provided the primary transport and communications technology links across Australia's vast 'Outback' regions since at least the 1870s (Carson and Cleary, 2010), facilitating not just north to south human and resource flows, but providing traverse points for east to west flows. In recent times, a number of economic changes along the spine have led to expectations of increased human mobility and increased impact of mobility on generating and receiving places. These have included a growing 'fly in/fly out' workforce associated with mining and resources projects (Haslam McKenzie, 2011), increasing numbers of non-resident health workers (doctors and nurses in particular) in the centre (Wakerman et al., 2012), the changing nature of tourist populations across the region (Schmallegger et al., 2011), the use of temporary contract labour for government administration in more remote areas (Carson and Stehlik, 2012), construction 'booms' associated with wind farm and other energy projects (Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008), and the movement of Indigenous people from remote areas into large urban service centres (Fisher, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to search for evidence for the impacts of these mobilities on specific locations along the spine. In doing so, the paper addresses conceptual and methodological issues relating to the new mobilities and their impacts on relatively sparsely populated areas.

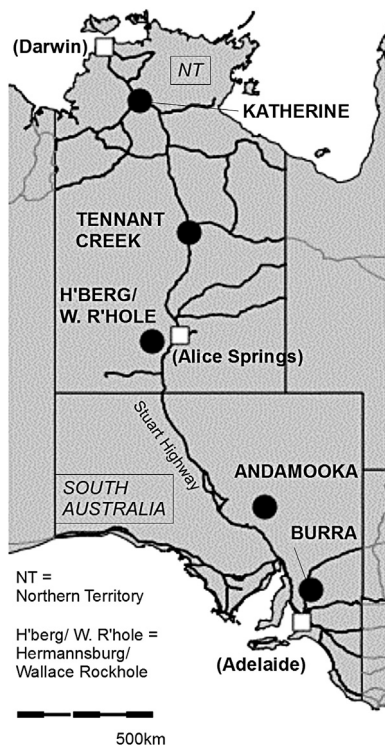


Fig. 1. The location of case sites along Australia's spine.

2. New mobilities and sparsely populated areas

Carson (2011) proposed a framework for understanding the characteristics of human and economic geography in sparsely populated areas of developed nations such as Australia, Canada, the United States, and northern and Arctic Europe. The initial 'Seven Ds of Demographic Research at the Edge' (Carson et al., 2011; pp. 11–15) have since become the 'Eight Ds' (Carson and Carson, 2013), and they attempt to explain why human and economic geography is different in sparsely populated areas compared with more densely populated rural and urban ones:

- **Disconnected:** Carson's (2011) study of labour migration patterns in Australia's north showed the absence of strong core-periphery structures that typically dominate rural and urban systems (Currie and Kubin, 2006). This makes modelling migration patterns and anticipating population dynamics more challenging in sparsely populated areas.
- **Discontinuous:** Settlements in sparsely populated areas tend to have fewer historical and functional ties to one another because they have emerged in specific places for specific purposes (for example being where the minerals are or where the church mission was established), rather than from continuous fringe development brought about by growing urban populations and the demand for nearby agricultural production (Bylund, 1960). This means different settlements are likely to attract different populations (Randall and Ironside, 1996).
- **Diverse:** This history of development also means that diverse responses to interventions are likely (Barnes, 2005). In sparsely populated Australia, for example, settlements established for the purposes of mining, tourism, health service provision, pastoralism, and various forms of Indigenous population management, even when relatively near to one another, will have substantially different social and economic attributes (Newman et al., 2008). Averaging the characteristics of a region containing multiple settlements is therefore unlikely to provide useful information about any individual settlement (Carson and Koch, 2013).
- **Detailed:** Relatively small changes can have large impacts over time. Martel et al. (2013) demonstrated this by examining the long term significant impacts on the historically young age structure of Australia's Northern Territory arising from relatively small numbers of older professionals migrating there in the early 1980s.
- **Dynamic:** Change is a more 'normal' state of socio-economic systems in sparsely populated areas than is stability. Stafford Smith's (2008) 'desert syndrome' emphasised how sparsely populated areas tend to have proportionally greater flow-through of human and other resources because of the complex interdependencies between relatively distant people, climate, and other environmental challenges.
- **Distant:** Settlements are not just relatively isolated from one another, but they can become more isolated over time despite (and because of) improvements in technologies. Carson and Cleary (2010) demonstrated how this applied to the spine of Australia as improvements in aviation and communications technology over time have reduced the number of functioning nodes in those systems. For example, the number of airports that receive commercial air services has decreased because of the requirements for specialist skills to maintain increasingly technologically complex aircraft.
- **Dependent:** Small populations, large areas of land seen as underutilised resources, and political realities relating to defence, population 'protection' and welfare, among other things, mean that external agents (such as distantly based

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