



# Economic evaluation of ‘Return to Country’: A remote Australian initiative to address indigenous homelessness



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** An increase in the number of Indigenous homeless persons in Cairns, Northern Australia, prompted the Queensland Police Service (QPS) to commence a pilot ‘Return to Country’ (R2C) program. The program was designed to assist homeless people who were voluntarily seeking to return to their home communities. This study assesses the costs of running the program and evaluates its net economic impact.

**Methods:** Retrospective uncontrolled cost, cost-effectiveness and cost-offset analyses were undertaken from a societal perspective. All costs were expressed in 2014 AU\$.

**Results:** The R2C program successfully assisted 140 participants to return home, reducing the prevalence of homelessness in the regional center by 9.6%. The total program cost was estimated as AU\$ 135,831 or AU\$ 970 per participant. The economic analysis indicated that R2C was value for money, potentially saving AU\$ 2,714,460. Limitations of the study included retrospective data collection and no established alternative comparison group.

**Conclusion:** R2C is a relatively simple, minimal cost program, which can be utilized by policy makers to offer one solution to homelessness. This economic evaluation informs the QPS of the effects of the R2C program in order to guide further program initiatives. The R2C model may be applied to assist temporarily stranded Indigenous people in other locations within Australia or internationally to return home. No funding was obtained for conducting this study.

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## 1. Introduction

Cape York is a remote peninsula with an area of approximately 128,000 km<sup>2</sup> located in Far North Queensland, Australia. The area contains only a few commercial ventures, although it remains home to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) people (~13,000) who live in sparsely populated communities surrounded by their tribal lands, Fig. 1 (Queensland Treasury and Trade Government Statistician, 2012).

*Abbreviations:* R2C, Return to Country is the name of the program; QPS, Queensland Police Service; PLO, police liaison officer; S.SGT, senior sergeant.

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The largest regional center, Cairns, is located in the south-east at the base of Cape York. Cairns encounters high numbers of homeless people, approximately 113 per 10,000 head of population compared to 49 homeless people per 10,000 nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Queensland Council of Social Service, 2011). A high percentage (82.9%) of Cairns homeless people are Indigenous, many of whom originate from Cape York communities (Memmott, Long, & Chambers, 2003; Queensland Council of Social Service, 2011; Turner, 2005).

After arriving in Cairns for various reasons, including visiting family, health appointments, art exhibition openings, and legal matters, some individuals miss their scheduled return flight back to their home community. Flight tickets issued by government departments, such as the Department of Queensland Health, or the Department of Justice, are purchased as discounted non-refundable and non-transferable tickets. Thus, after missing a return flight home, the individual can no longer use or exchange their pre-purchased ticket. Small regional airlines charge ~AU\$ 400–600 for

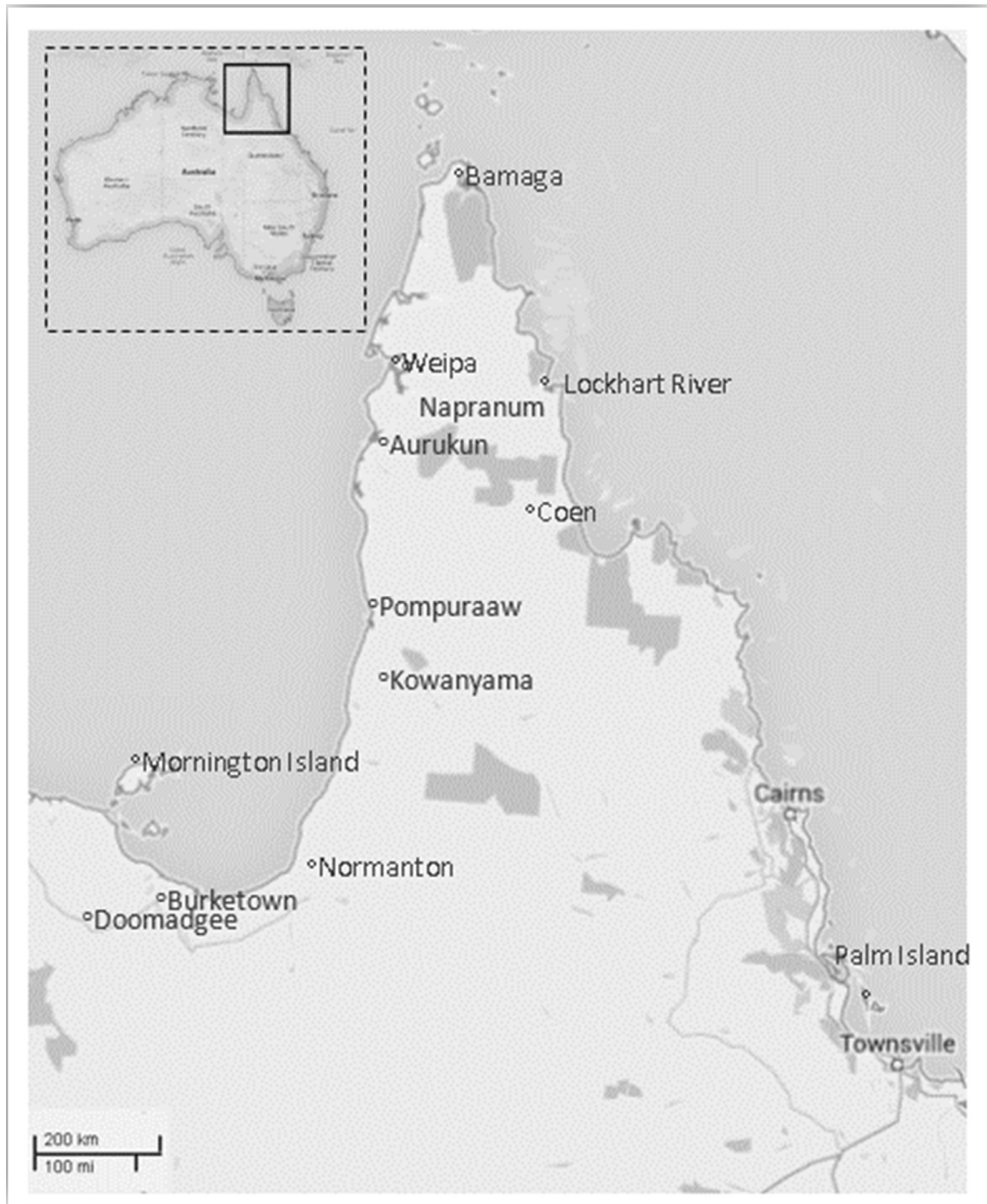


Fig. 1. Map of Cape York region in Far North Queensland, Australia.

a short flight. This cost is prohibitive to many Indigenous persons who are reliant on social security benefits as income, leaving them stranded or homeless in Cairns. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these people would return to their communities if they were financially able (Rogerson, Jacups, Haynes-Jonkers, & Tsey, 2013).

Once stranded in Cairns, Indigenous Australians generally do not have access to housing, so they become 'itinerants' or 'rough sleepers', living in town camps and parks (Rogerson et al., 2013). Their health may deteriorate due to poor access to food and hygiene facilities (shelter and bedding, showers and laundry). Isolation and separation from family and kin can lead to

psychological distress, mood and anxiety disorders resulting in higher utilization of the mainstream public support services such as health and justice (Zaretzky et al., 2013). Thus the cost to homeless individuals and their families, and the cost to the community can be high.

## 2. The cost of homelessness

Homelessness is not just the absence of secure housing. It is the cause of a range of other life factors such as domestic and family violence; drug and alcohol dependence and abuse; poverty; health, social and emotional conditions; poor employment outcomes

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