

Northern Territory population movement in the COVID-19 pandemic – Results from 2021

Background

Interstate migration has consistently detracted from population growth in the Northern Territory (NT), with more people leaving the NT than arriving. In the NT, this population loss is usually offset by natural increase (greater births than deaths). However, the COVID-19 pandemic may have resulted in inbound and outbound migration changes. The 2021 Census of Population and Housing was conducted in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, including closed borders both domestically and internationally. Analysis of Census data will help to inform migration patterns in the NT observed during this time.

The Australian Government closed its international borders to outside arrivals on March 20th, 2020 and remained closed until February 2022. The NT closed borders to all other Australian jurisdictions on the 21st of March 2020, then opened and closed to different jurisdictions at different times from June 2020 to December 2021. Other jurisdictions also closed their borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, including Western Australia, which had the longest internal border closure, and was the last jurisdiction to reopen its borders in March 2022.

This factsheet seeks to examine what, if any, impact these restrictions had on the mobility of the NT's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. It will also look at the main destinations for Territorians who moved interstate and the main source locations for new Territorians by state/territory.

The NT has much higher population mobility than Australia overall and is dependent on its younger

incoming working-age migrants to supplement the workforce available from its existing population. This includes a large group of non-resident workers that operate on a fly-in-fly-out basis. This includes not only workers in the mining and construction industries, but also in areas such as health care and social assistance, public administration and safety, and professional, scientific and technical services.

Inbound migration data is available by NTG region; however, the outbound migration data is only available at the Statistical Area 2 (SA2) level and, cannot be converted to NTG regions. Analysis has been conducted using ABS SA3 level data, except for the Greater Darwin region where SA4 data has been used.

Migration numbers were calculated by comparing place of usual residence as at the 2021 Census to their place of usual residence 12 months ago. Results were created using ABS TableBuilder datasets. Due to ABS confidentiality requirements, and the accuracy and completion of Census data, the values in datasets produced in TableBuilder may not align with each other. When comparing data based on Aboriginal status, the totals will include those who did not respond to the Census question and the NT total populations will include those who live in the category 'migratory, offshore, shipping'.

Those who lived in a different SA3 in 2021 compared to 2020 were considered to have migrated. Those who had changed address but remained within the same SA3, or who were listed as not applicable (such as those born less than one year ago, or who had not stated a usual residence 12 months ago) were excluded from the numbers of people who were considered to have migrated.

Northern Territory mobility

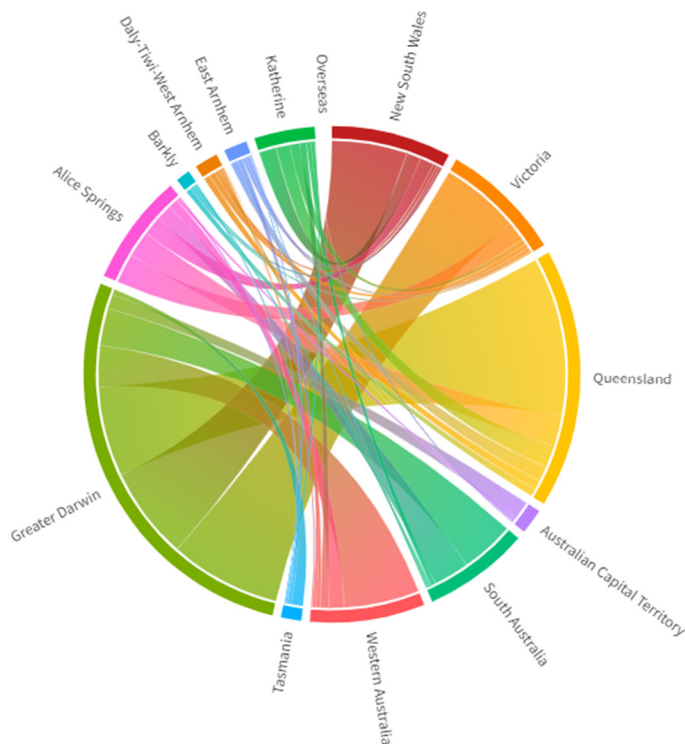
In the 12 months preceding the 2021 Census, 10% of the usual resident population moved in or out of the NT compared with 17% migration in 2016. The difference was largely accounted for by the decline in the number of people arriving from overseas over the previous 12 months, from 4,105 people in 2016 declining to 1,724 people in 2021. However, inter- and intra-state migration remained robust despite, or potentially because of, rolling border closures across the nation.

Net interstate migration is generally negative in the Territory, with more people leaving the NT for other jurisdictions than arriving in a given year. In most years, this is offset by natural increase (births minus deaths) and positive net overseas migration. Without the buffer of positive net overseas migration for 18 months of the five-year intercensal period and with a decline in the contribution of natural increase to population growth, the NT's population grew by just 1.6% between 2016 and 2021, compared to 8.6% population growth nationally.

Estimated Resident Population data from the ABS (as opposed to the unadjusted Census data breakdown) shows that net interstate migration into the NT was positive in early 2021 for the first time since 2010. Since then, there has been a noticeable decline, with net interstate migration returning to a negative state and the number of interstate arrivals in September 2022 being the lowest quarterly result since the early 1980s.

An examination of the migration data from the 2021 Census shows that closed borders did not necessarily cause a decline in internal migration and, instead, may have proved a catalyst to increase longer-term movements of people across borders. The analysis has been conducted by looking at the Census question on the place of usual residence one year ago. The Census also asks about the place of usual residence five years ago, however this data has not been considered due to the 2016 Census occurring during the height of a major economic development project which had significant impacts on the NT.

Figure 1: Change of address in 12 months prior to 2021 Census, NT SA3s and Australian jurisdictions (n)



Source: ABS Tablebuilder Census 2021, created with Flourish Chord Diagrams

Using the Census change of address indicator, around 18.1% or over 41,500 people living in the NT at the time of the 2021 Census had changed their address in the previous 12 months. This was slightly lower than at the 2016 Census, at 19.0%. The key reason for this change was the large decline in those who had moved to the NT from overseas (those housed in quarantine centres, such as the Centre for National Resilience at Howard Springs, were not considered usual residents in the Census, unless their usual place of residence was an NT residence). The number of people who had changed address from elsewhere in Australia to the NT increased in 2021 compared to 2016.

Victoria was the largest source of inbound migrants to the NT in 2021 increasing by 1,093 persons to 3,389, followed by Queensland and New South Wales. The main destinations for outbound migrants was Queensland (5001 persons, 33.8%), followed by Victoria (2368 persons, 16.0%), New South Wales (2303 persons, 15.6%) and Western Australia (2,216 persons, 15.0%). The key difference between the two censuses was that Queensland was the preferred inbound and outbound destination in

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2016 but not in 2021. There was a decline in the number of people moving into the NT from both Queensland and Western Australia in the year

prior to the 2021 Census, which was not reflected in declined movements out of the NT to those jurisdictions

Table 1: Inbound migration to the Northern Territory in the 12 months to 2021

Place of usual residence as of August 2020	Place of usual residence August 2021						
	Greater Darwin n (%)	Alice Springs n (%)	Katherine n (%)	Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem n (%)	East Arnhem n (%)	Barkly n (%)	Total n (%)
New South Wales	1818 (23.4)	378 (18.3)	330 (31.3)	79 (17.6)	71 (16.5)	47 (17.6)	2908 (22.6)
Victoria	2184 (28.1)	575 (27.8)	188 (17.8)	122 (27.2)	73 (17.0)	52 (19.5)	3389 (26.3)
Queensland	1756 (22.6)	524 (25.3)	284 (26.9)	126 (32.3)	139 (32.3)	111 (41.6)	3214 (25.0)
Western Australia	833 (10.7)	191 (9.2)	132 (12.5)	46 (10.3)	98 (22.8)	18 (6.7)	1437 (11.2)
South Australia	746 (9.6)	308 (14.9)	94 (8.9)	46 (10.3)	28 (6.5)	40 (15.0)	1327 (10.3)
Tasmania	108 (1.4)	40 (1.9)	9 (0.9)	6 (1.3)	12 (2.8)	0 (0)	204 (1.6)
Australian Capital Territory	276 (3.6)	45 (2.2)	7 (0.7)	10 (2.2)	9 (2.1)	3 (1.1)	358 (2.8)
Total¹	7729	2061	1044	435	435	271	12,849

Source: ABS TableBuilder

1 Note that due to cell adjustments by the ABS, and the inclusion of Other Territories, Migratory, Offshore, Shipping and No Usual Address (NT) in totals (N=2031), components will not sum to totals

Table 2: Outbound migration from the Northern Territory in the 12 months to 2021

Place of usual residence August 2021	Place of usual residence August 2020						
	Greater Darwin n (%)	Alice Springs n (%)	Katherine n (%)	Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem n (%)	East Arnhem n (%)	Barkly n (%)	Total n (%)
New South Wales	1481 (15.8)	280 (11.6)	282 (24.4)	73 (14.8)	59 (10.8)	50 (15.9)	2303 (15.6)
Victoria	1568 (16.8)	382 (15.9)	116 (10.0)	91 (18.4)	80 (14.7)	34 (10.8)	2368 (16.0)
Queensland	3145 (33.6)	610 (25.3)	420 (36.4)	184 (37.2)	301 (55.1)	147 (46.7)	5001 (33.8)
Western Australia	1487 (15.9)	298 (12.4)	174 (15.1)	82 (16.6)	63 (11.5)	31 (9.8)	2216 (15.0)
South Australia	1059 (11.3)	706 (29.3)	102 (8.8)	34 (6.9)	27 (4.9)	41 (13.0)	2009 (13.6)
Tasmania	235 (2.5)	61 (2.5)	26 (2.3)	30 (6.1)	16 (2.9)	9 (2.9)	403 (2.7)
Australian Capital Territory	373 (4.0)	72 (3.0)	32 (2.8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (1.0)	483 (3.3)
Total¹	9348	2409	1155	494	546	315	14,790

Source: ABS TableBuilder

1 Note that due to cell adjustments by the ABS, and the inclusion of Other Territories, Migratory, Offshore, Shipping and No Usual Address in totals (N=395), components will not sum to totals

Non-Aboriginal inbound migration

There was a decrease in the number of non-Aboriginal people (n=2,297) arriving in the NT from all other locations in the 12 months prior to the 2021 Census, compared to the 2016 Census. However, when considering interstate migration only, there was a small increase of 105 inbound migrants for 2021.

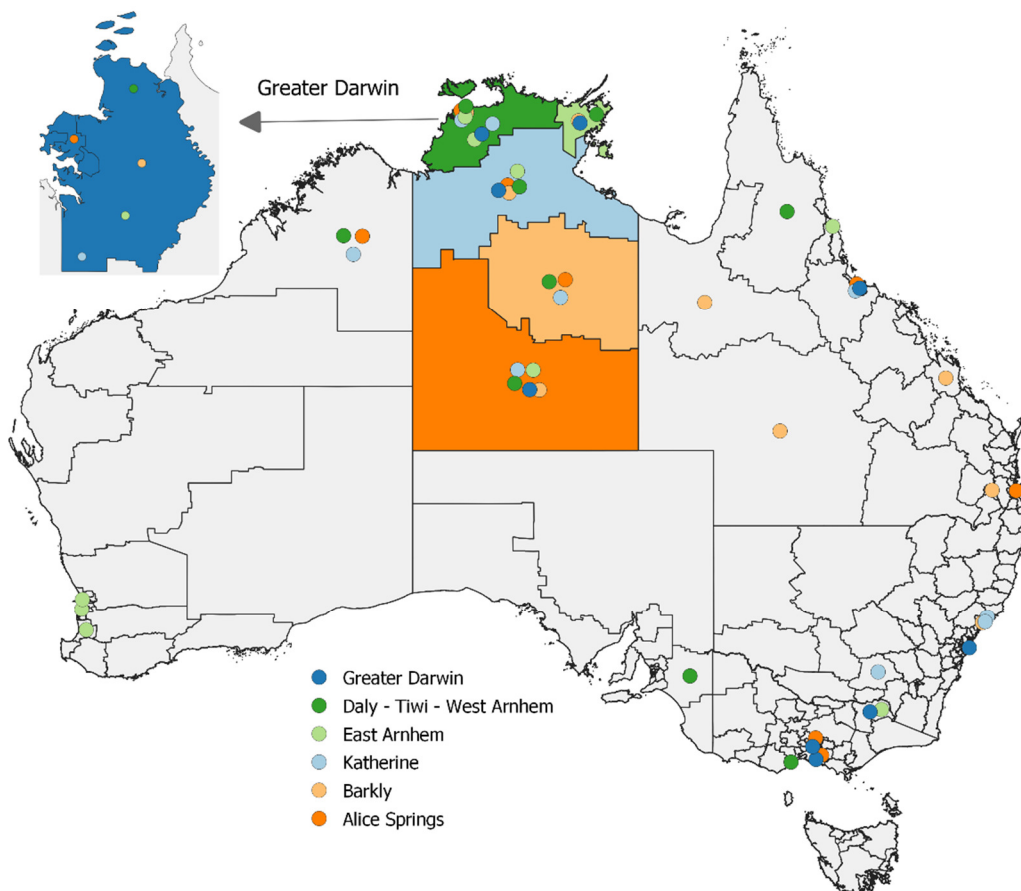
This was led by an increase of 1,082 people arriving in the NT from Victoria (n=3,265), as well as increases in migrants from New South Wales (↑452) and the Australian Capital Territory (↑84). These jurisdictions had longer lockdowns leading up to the 2021 Census and were also the leading source of non-resident workers in the NT in 2016. In contrast, the number of people arriving from Western Australia – which had the strongest restrictions on interstate movement of

any Australian jurisdiction – decreased by 582 to 1,437. There was also a decline in migrants from Queensland in 2021 compared to 2016.

Regional migration within the NT was an important part of the total migration story, with the highest sources of migrants being from other parts of the NT. In terms of interstate migration, the regions which supplied the highest number of inbound migrants in 2021 were Townsville (n=240), Mornington Peninsula (n=159), Kimberley n=135) and Newcastle (n=135).

The source of inbound migrants varied across the NT, with inner city regions being a major source of migrants for Greater Darwin and Alice Springs, and regional Queensland for migrants to the more remote Barkly. East Arnhem was an outlier, with regions in and around Perth a high source of inbound migration, despite the general decline in inbound migrants from Western Australia.

Figure 2: Source SA3s of inbound non-Aboriginal migrants to the Northern Territory SA3s



Source: ABS Tablebuilder, created with QGIS

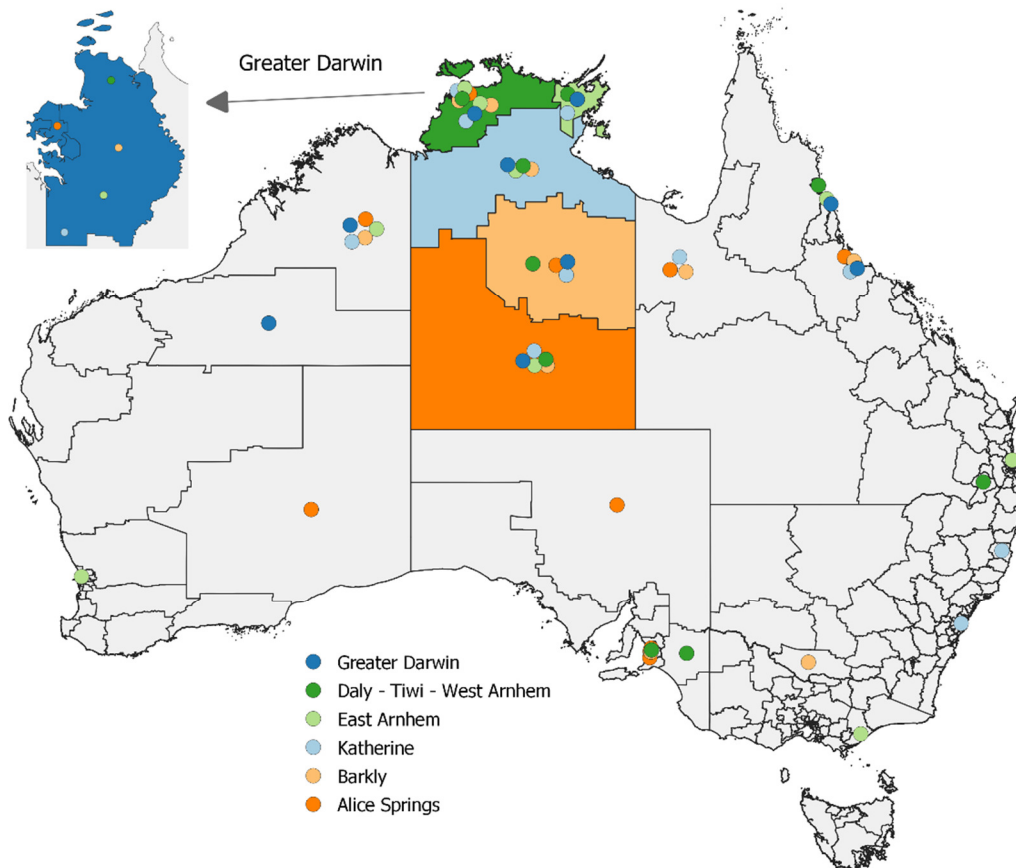
Aboriginal inbound migration

There was a small decline (n=57) in the number of Aboriginal people moving into the NT from interstate in the year before the 2021 Census, compared to 2016. Analysis of total trends is complicated by a significant overall reduction in the number of people who did not state their place of residence 12 months prior to the 2021 Census, which may have affected overall migration trends. The changes in total inbound migration trends were similar to the non-Aboriginal population, with an increase in the number of people arriving from New South Wales (↑52) and Victoria (↑23) and a decrease in the number of people arriving from Western Australia (↓49). There was little change in the number of Aboriginal people moving from South Australia to the NT.

The most common source regions for inbound Aboriginal migrants were from remote regions of Australia, including the Kimberley (n=49), Outback – North and East (South Australia) (n=43), Outback North (Queensland) (n=28), and East Pilbara (n=20), all of which share a border with the NT. The other regions that contributed inbound Aboriginal migrants included Cairns (n=29) and Townsville (n=43), as well as those moving to the NT from overseas (n=37).

Intrastate migration was the largest source of inbound migrants for all regions, with people most likely to move to an SA3 with a coinciding border. In terms of interstate movements, those moving to Greater Darwin were most likely to have come from similar cities, including Cairns (n=19), Townsville (n=22) and the SA3 of Kimberley (including Broome) (n=15).

Figure 3: Source SA3s of inbound Aboriginal migrants to the Northern Territory SA3s



Source: ABS Tablebuilder, created with QGIS

Small numbers ($n > 10$ persons per region) of inbound Aboriginal migrants from other parts of Australia to the rest of NT were more difficult to analyse, as those results were likely to have been adjusted by the ABS to preserve confidentiality.

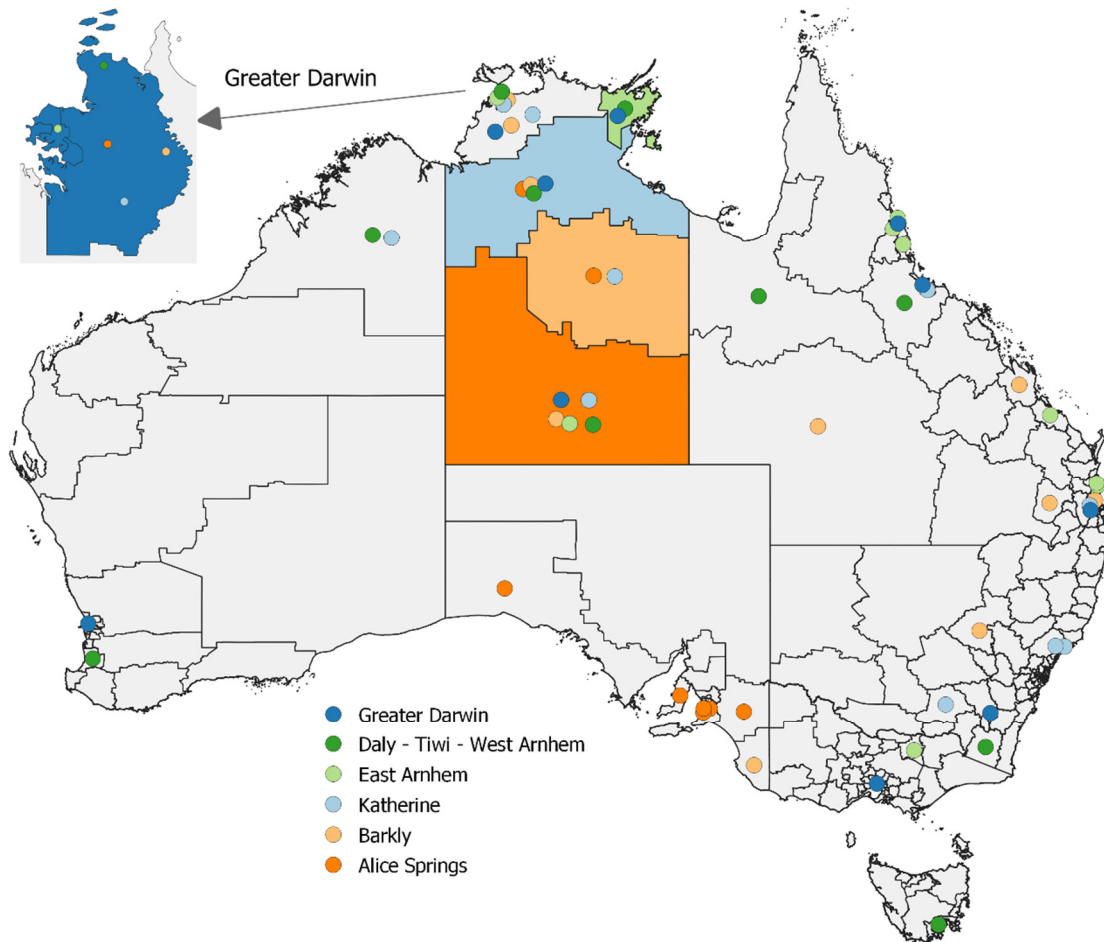
Non-Aboriginal outbound migration

There was a decrease of 335 persons in non-Aboriginal outbound migration from the NT in the 12 months prior to the 2021 Census compared to the same period in 2016, down from 13,806 to 13,471. However, the changes in movement patterns were not even across the jurisdictions. Despite the strict border controls over the time period, there was an increase of 355 non-Aboriginal people moving from the NT

to Western Australia in 2021. There was also an increase in non-Aboriginal migration to South Australia, up by 252. This was more than offset by the decrease in non-Aboriginal outbound migration to Victoria and New South Wales, with over a thousand fewer people departing the NT to those jurisdictions compared to 2016. This may be related to the high number of fly-in-fly-out workers from these jurisdictions, who would have faced difficulty moving in and out of the NT under border restrictions.

The most popular destinations for outbound migrants included regional Queensland, inner Melbourne, and the NSW central coast. The latter two regions are important source locations for the health and social service workforces in the Territory, so that may reflect former inbound migrants returning to their home jurisdictions.

Figure 4: Destination SA3s of outbound non-Aboriginal migrants to the Northern Territory SA3s



Source: ABS Tablebuilder, created with QGIS

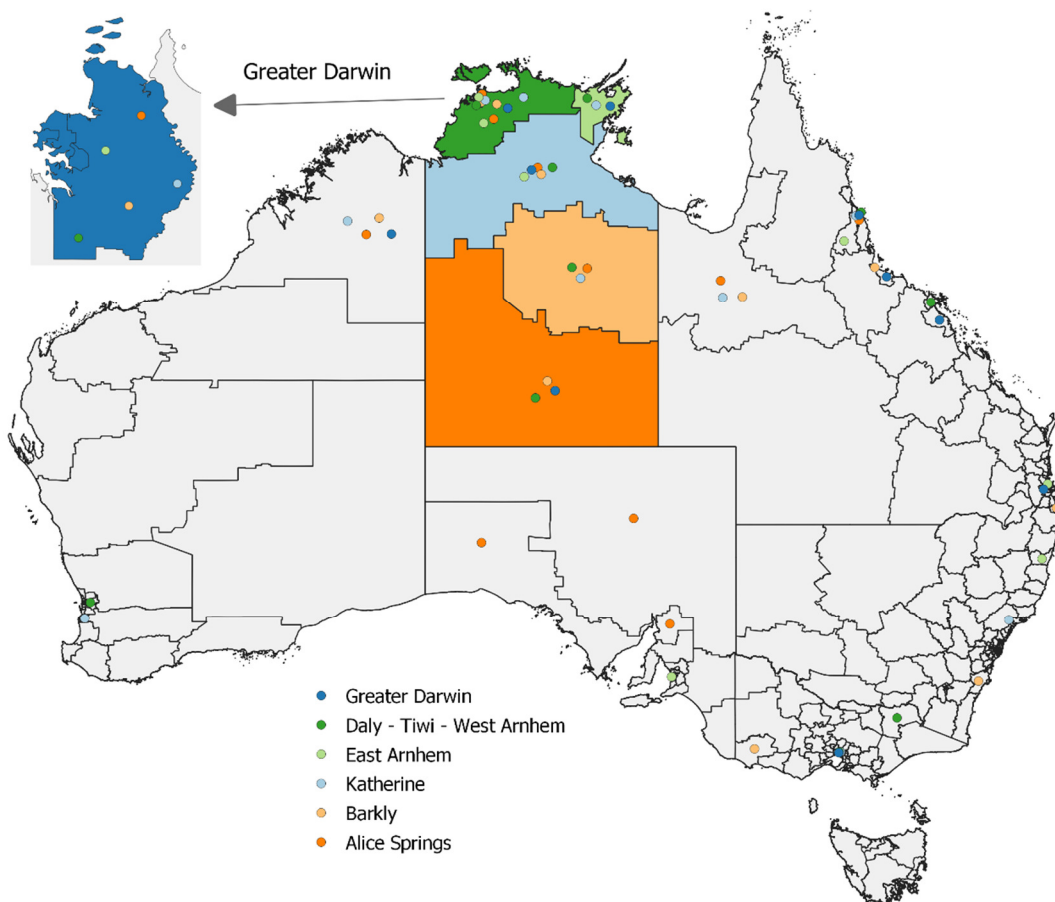
Aboriginal outbound migration

From Greater Darwin, 352 people moved to Canberra, another part of Australia with strong public sector employment prospects and high levels of population mobility. There was strong movement between the Alice Springs region and South Australia, with nearly one-third (n=25/72) of those moving from Alice Springs to regions in and around Adelaide being engaged in study. In the Barkly region those relocating were most likely to move within the NT rather than interstate. The highest interstate destinations for non-Aboriginal Barkly residents were regions with similar economies, such as the Darling Downs in Queensland.

There was little change in the number of Aboriginal people who left the NT in the year before the 2021 Census compared to 2016, with total numbers low compared to other groups of migrants. Aboriginal outbound migration was more heavily concentrated on intra-state migration rather than inter-state, compared to non-Aboriginal migration.

For those migrating inter-state, the regions bordering the NT were common destinations, similar to the inbound Aboriginal migration trends. Far North Queensland and inner Melbourne were popular destinations for Aboriginal outbound migration.

Figure 5: Source SA3s of outbound Aboriginal migrants to the Northern Territory SA3s



Source: ABS Tablebuilder, created with QGIS

Outbound Aboriginal migration occurred at the highest rate from Darwin (4.5% of the Aboriginal population living in Greater Darwin in 2020 had moved interstate) and lowest in Daly – Tiwi – West Arnhem (0.5%). Due to these low numbers, tracking changes in migration patterns in the smaller regions is difficult. For those who had lived in Greater Darwin 12 months before 2021, Daly – Tiwi – West Arnhem was the most common destination, followed by Katherine. In terms of interstate migration, Aboriginal outbound migrants from Greater Darwin were mostly likely to move to Townsville, Kimberley and Melbourne. For those who had left Alice Springs, the most common intrastate destinations were Greater Darwin and Barkly, with interstate destinations including Outback – North and East (in South Australia), Cairns and Kimberley.

Conclusion

There was a decline in both inbound and outbound migration in the NT in the 12 months before the 2021 Census, compared to the same period leading up to the 2016 Census. This is not surprising, given that there was a high level of uncertainty over the opening and closing of state borders over that period; however, the decline was not as great as expected. The changes in the number of migrants moving in and out of the NT were not uniform across regions, with an increase in inbound migration from New South Wales and Victoria offsetting declining migration between the NT and Western Australia and Queensland. In 2016, Queensland was the number one outbound destination for all regions and groups except for Aboriginal people leaving from Central Australia (who were more likely to move to South Australia). In contrast, Victoria was the number one destination for many parts of the NT and the NT non-Aboriginal population overall. There was also a large increase in the number of people migrating from Victoria into the NT in 2021 compared to 2016, which almost offset the decline in inbound migration from Queensland. There was also an increase in the number of people moving to the NT from New South Wales.

Part of this change in migration may reflect the difficulties presented by closed borders and quarantine requirements for fly-in-fly-out workers. Many employers in the NT use non-resident workers to fill employment gaps, including: the mining industry; health care; and social assistance. These industries are not conducive to work-from-home arrangements. In periods when such workers were required to spend two weeks in quarantine prior to entering the NT, it could have made practical sense to relocate on a more permanent basis to the NT. Additionally, multiple COVID-19 lockdowns, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney, may have led to the NT being viewed as an attractive destination, given the small number and short timeframe of the NT's lockdowns. An increase in working-from-home arrangements in many parts of Australia also made it easier for people to relocate interstate without the need to change jobs.

More data is needed to see if there is a reversal of those who moved to the NT during the COVID-19 pandemic or is simply part of the usual fluctuations in NT interstate migration.

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