

Indigenous labour mobility – Evidence and lack thereof

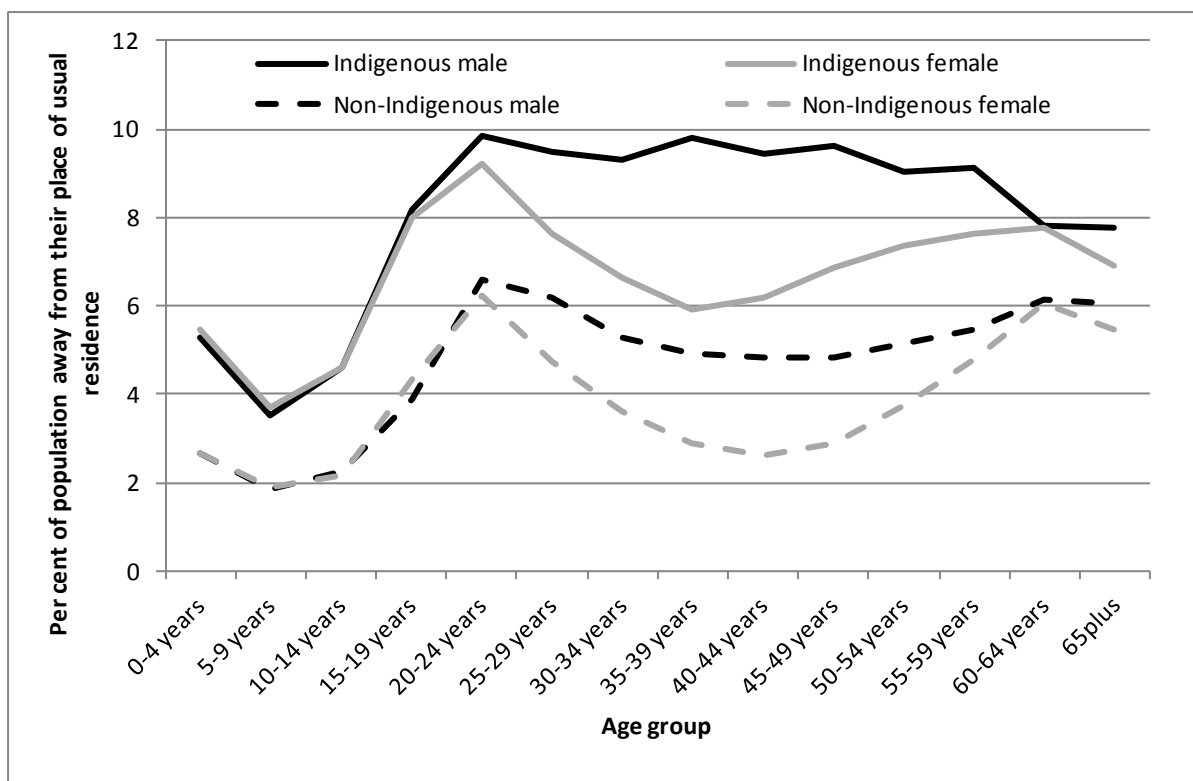
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While infrastructure is relatively fixed and immobile, people move on a temporary basis throughout the day and across the year, and on a more permanent basis from one year to the next. According to the most recent (2011) Census, around 1.0 million Australians (or 4.8% of the population) were counted as being away from their place of usual residence on census night. Furthermore, around 6.7 million Australians (or 37.7% of the population aged five years and over who were living in Australia in 2006) changed their place of usual residence between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses. Some of this temporary and permanent mobility is likely to be over relatively short distances—across suburbs or within cities. Other moves will be of much greater distance and could include relocation across State or Territory boundaries and/or from one location or remoteness type to another.

In one of the more consistent findings of census-based analyses, it has long been recognised that Indigenous Australians change their place of usual residence more often than the non-Indigenous population (Taylor 2006). Around 6.9 per cent of Indigenous Australians were away from their place of usual residence on the night of the 2011 Census, compared to 4.4 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians. There is less of a difference in five-yearly migration rates, with 43.7 per cent of Indigenous Australians (who were in Australia on the night of the 2006 Census) changing usual residence between 2006 and 2011, compared to 37.7 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.

There are distinct age patterns to this Indigenous mobility. This is demonstrated in the following two figures. The first looks at temporary mobility (as measured by a person being away from their place of usual residence on the night of the census) whereas the second looks at long-term mobility (changing usual residence over a five year period).

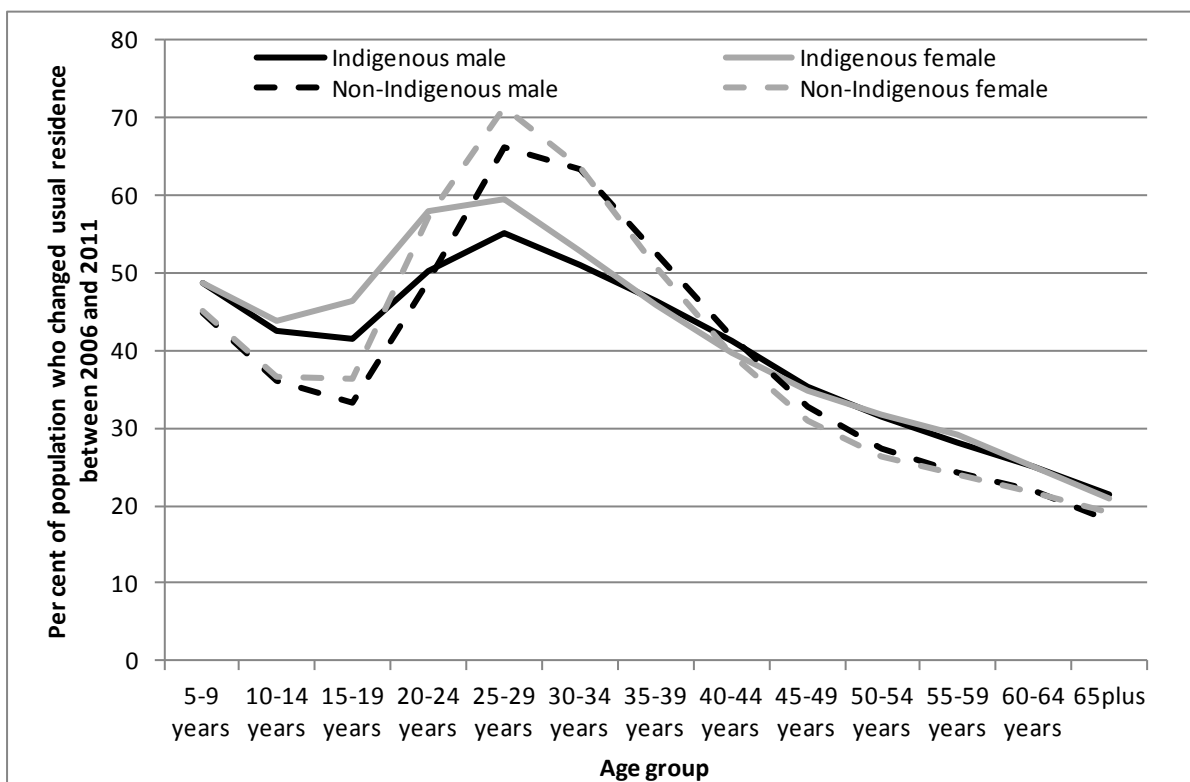
Figure 1. Percentage of population away from their place of usual residence on the night of the census, by Indigenous status and sex, 2011



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

There are three points to note from Figure 1. First, there is a distinct lifecycle pattern to temporary mobility which is consistent for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Beyond the mid-twenties, the second key finding from Figure 1 becomes apparent—divergence by gender. While rates of temporary mobility stay reasonably high for Indigenous males (and to a lesser extent, non-Indigenous males), there is a substantial decline in temporary mobility for Indigenous and non-Indigenous females. Figure 1 also demonstrates that at every point on the age distribution, Indigenous males and females are more likely to be away from their place of usual residence than their non-Indigenous counterparts. This result holds even when using more detailed econometric analysis of individual-level data (Biddle & Yap 2010), highlighting the fact that temporary mobility is a key feature of Indigenous demography.

Figure 2. Percentage of population who changed their place of usual residence between 2006 and 2011, by Indigenous status



Source: Customised calculations based on the 2011 Census.

Note: Excludes those who were overseas either temporarily or permanently on the night of the 2006 Census.

All four population subgroups follow a similar pattern of long-term mobility across the lifecycle. However, while the patterns are similar, there are differences in levels by Indigenous status and by sex. The Indigenous population has higher rates of migration than the non-Indigenous population for those younger than 20 and older than 45. During the peak migration ages and peak employment years, however, rates are often higher for the non-Indigenous population, with the highest rate of

migration across all groups occurring in the group of non-Indigenous females aged 25–29 years (71.5%).

Many factors influence peoples decision to change their place of usual residence, including a comparison of the characteristics of the area in which they live and the characteristics of other potential areas of residence. In terms of temporary mobility, people are away from home for similarly broad reasons including leisure, family reasons or to access services. For both the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous population though, one of the motivations to move is the economic circumstances of the area in which they live. For example, in a recent analysis using data from the 2011 Census and an area-level index of socioeconomic outcomes (Biddle and Markham 2013) we showed that those areas which are relatively disadvantaged have a higher rate of outward migration for the Indigenous population than those areas that are relatively advantaged.

One of the key aspects that people are likely to take into account is the job prospects of the area in which they live. On the one hand Indigenous Australians tend to have lower employment rates than the non-Indigenous population which might signal a weaker relationship to the labour market in making decisions. This is supported by data from the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) which showed that employment reasons ranked behind housing, family and lifestyle ones as the main reason given by Indigenous Australians for their last move. On the other hand though, because of these relatively poor labour market prospects, the areas in which Indigenous Australians live is likely to matter more in explaining their labour market outcomes.

Consider those Indigenous Australians who lived in one of 17 large urban areas (with a population of 100,000 people or more) in both 2006 and 2011. Within the working age population (aged 15 to 64 years) in this group, 54.3 per cent were employed in the 2011 Census. This is compared to 43.7 per cent of those who lived outside these urban centres in both 2006 and 2011. This is quite a large difference, especially when you consider that there is only a minimal difference for non-Indigenous Australians in the two groups – 73.9 per cent for those in large urban areas and 72.0 per cent for those outside of large urban areas.

An initial policy response to such a finding is that Indigenous Australians should be supported or encouraged to move to large urban areas as a way to improve their employment prospects. There is some support for this idea in the data. Specifically, those Indigenous Australians who moved to a large urban area from the rest of Australia between 2006 and 2011 had an employment rate of 47.2 per cent. This is much higher than the employment rate for those who stayed in what we might call non-urban Australia.

There are, however, five factors that caution against labour mobility as a solution for Indigenous employment disadvantage. First, those Indigenous Australians who moved from non-urban areas to urban areas actually have a lower employment percentage than those who moved in the opposite direction (51.1 per cent). This and other research (Biddle and Yap 2010) highlights that while location is important, most of the difference in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is explained by other characteristics like education, health and prior experience. If Indigenous Australians who move to urban areas (or others with relatively favourable job prospects like those with a high mining presence) are not supported through adequate and effective training then improvements in their employment prospects are only likely to be small.

The second reason to be cautious about labour market mobility is that there are a range of factors specific to the Indigenous population that either enhance or reduce the motivation to move either on a temporary or permanent basis (Taylor 2006). These include, but are not limited to ceremonial activities and filial obligations. Thirdly, mobility can also impose a cost on destination areas if there is no commensurate increase in services. For example, Biddle (2008) showed that a movement of Indigenous Australians into an area had a significant and substantial association with the rate of overcrowding in the area.

The fourth and most compelling reason to be cautious about the net effect of population movement is that there are many other reasons for why Indigenous Australians might have a strong ongoing attachment to areas of relatively low employment. Many will have a deep spiritual attachment to the area which they see as their country. This will be bolstered for many through strong family networks. This can lead to measures of employment and socioeconomic status that move in opposite direction to other measures of subjective wellbeing (Biddle 2013).

Fifth and finally, we don't actually have the data that would tell us whether an Indigenous Australian who was encouraged to move would have improved employment prospects or whether it is simply that those who we have observed moving would have had better outcomes anyhow. This is because there is no longitudinal datasets in Australia with representative information on the working age Indigenous population. We have good longitudinal data in Australia including the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. We also have reasonable cross-section data on the Indigenous population like the Census, the NATSISS and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS). There is also the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), which has good information on a cohort of Indigenous children and their carers (Biddle 2012). However, there is currently no data that has information on the employment outcomes of an Indigenous Australian before they move and their employment outcomes afterwards. This is precisely the type of data that is necessary for understanding Indigenous geographic labour mobility.

Note: While this paper was submitted as a staff member of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University (ANU), the opinions expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to either organisation.

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