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## INDIGENOUS MOBILITY AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY EMERGENCY RESPONSE

### ■ Andrew Taylor and Dean Carson

*A number of commentators have suggested that the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), introduced in June 2007, has promoted the movement of Northern Territory Indigenous people away from remote areas towards towns. Using both census and interview data the authors show that rural to urban movement in the Northern Territory has been well established since at least 1991. Mobility patterns are complex and many moves are simply short-term. But the long-term trend amongst Indigenous people follows the rural to urban pattern that has been observed in numerous other locations within Australia and overseas. Indeed, in the short term the NTER is as likely to inhibit mobility from more remote locations to urban centres as it is to promote it.*

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impacts that the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) may have on the intra-Territory migration patterns of Indigenous people. In doing so, we analysed data from the 1996, 2001 and 2006 census of population and housing to establish an understanding of the dominant formal migration patterns that have existed over the past ten or more years. The census data serve as a baseline against which we then used data collected in interviews with community members in four of the larger Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in mid 2008. We applied the results of the analysis of the two datasets to postulate whether the dominant migratory patterns in terms of origins and destinations of migrants, length of migration events, and number and type of people migrating. This mixed method approach allows us to document both the long-term (residential) patterns of migration and the more short-term, seasonal and cyclical patterns.

The Northern Territory Emergency Response was a Commonwealth Government initiative arising from a 2007 report to the Northern Territory Government documenting abuse and neglect of Indigenous children, particularly in remote communities.<sup>1</sup> The NTER was formally commenced in mid June 2007, with a

five-year timeframe. The NTER involved a range of measures applied mainly to remote communities in the Northern Territory. These included increased police and military presence in communities, tighter restrictions on alcohol and pornography, compulsory health checks for children, new housing construction, and a range of measures designed to increase school attendance and decrease spending on de-merit items such as tobacco, alcohol and pornography.<sup>2</sup> Chief among the latter was the Income Management Scheme (IMS) under which substantial proportions of welfare payments are held back from recipients and allocated to specific priority items such as food, children's clothing, housing and education.<sup>3</sup>

The small body of literature concerning Indigenous mobility in Australia includes some simple descriptions of census data,<sup>4</sup> and selected case studies of a few people in a few places.<sup>5</sup> The most comprehensive example of the former is the review by Taylor and Bell,<sup>6</sup> but this work examined only migration between regional areas and state capitals, and included data only to 1996. The later works tend to be informed by anthropological traditions that regard Indigenous people as the rightful inhabitants of remote Australia<sup>7</sup> and as having cultural and political imperatives to demonstrate continuous occupation of 'country'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, mobility patterns are seen as circular

and seasonal, but essentially embedded in a pattern of short-term population exchanges between various locations which provide economic, social and cultural inputs such as health and education services, access to alcohol and gambling, performance of cultural rituals and so on. Carson and Robinson<sup>9</sup> summarised the motives for mobility and the welcome and unwelcome consequences they might bring to the individuals involved and the populations in the origins and destinations.

The sentiment in much of the work on Northern Territory Indigenous mobility is that people should want to stay 'on country' in remote areas as far as possible but this seems at odds with what is known about patterns of migration among Indigenous people and rural dwellers internationally. From a theoretical perspective, the pull of 'country'<sup>10</sup> may be contrasted with the widely observed tendency for people with a new found capacity to travel to do so<sup>11</sup> and a universal attraction of the cities.<sup>12</sup> A lack of access to individual economic resources can restrict the distance travelled and the economic outcomes of migration, but may actually encourage mobility, particularly amongst the young.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, apparently poorer conditions encountered in new (urban) locations have not deterred immigrants, nor have improving conditions in (rural) origins stymied the flow of out-migration.<sup>14</sup> In the Northern Territory Indigenous context, increased capacity to travel has emerged from legislative recognition of Indigenous rights, closures of some missions, expansion of welfare programs, exposure to popular media, and prioritising of education, training and employment.<sup>15</sup> This is in addition to global mobility facilitators such as improved transport networks and access to information and communications technologies. Just how Indigenous people, including the young, in the Northern Territory have responded to the increased capacity to travel is unclear.

This paper argues that an understanding of the impact of events such as the NTER on migration patterns requires knowledge of historical conditions as well as of the actions that people may or may not attribute to the NTER. We are critical of claims by academics such as Altman<sup>16</sup> and Taylor<sup>17</sup> which ostensibly blame the NTER for rural-to-urban migration of large numbers of particularly young male Indigenous people without consideration of historical patterns. Likewise, media sensationalism which blames Northern Territory Indigenous people 'drifting' across the border to take up (unwelcomed) residence in Mt Isa and other Queensland urban centres on the NTER<sup>18</sup> reflects a poor understanding of history. To illustrate, the *NT News* has reported on the migration of Territorians to Mt Isa since at least the late 1990s,<sup>19</sup> and we have found at least 600 articles in the *NT News* and *Advocate* newspapers about the urban drift of Indigenous people in the year 2000 alone. The prima facie evidence, therefore, is that recent observations of rural-to-urban migration represent a continuation of trends of at least ten or fifteen years (one suspects the lineage could be traced much further) rather than an emergence of new patterns of mobility.

The questions of interest to this research include:

- What type of migration (changes in residence) and mobility (short-term migration) patterns have existed between remote/rural and urban centres in the Northern Territory (seasonal, cyclical, residential and so on)?
- Who (largely in terms of age and gender) is likely to migrate and be mobile?
- Have these patterns changed since the NTER came into force in June 2007?

To answer these questions we used data on long-term internal migration derived from change-in-residence information derived from census data as well as informa-

tion collected during interviews. Short-term mobility, by contrast, is not captured by the census; here we relied on the interviews with people in communities.

**METHODS**

Census data are inherently limited in their capacity to capture migration patterns particularly of remote Indigenous people. The census asks about place of ‘usual residence’ on census night, the same date one year previously, and the same date five years previously. There are questions about how well the concept of usual residence may be understood by Indigenous people, particularly those who have high levels of local mobility. The coverage of census data is also questionable because of a changing propensity for Indigenous people to identify as such and the reported large undercount of Indigenous people (and particularly of young males) in the Northern Territory.

Notwithstanding these issues, the census remains the best available source of data for understanding long-term patterns of residential mobility, which is one of the patterns of interest in this research. It also provides detail on the age and sex of migrators. In this research, we focused on comparing place of usual residence on census night with place of usual residence five years previous for respondents to the 2006 census, the 2001 census, and the 1996 census.

We divided the Northern Territory into seven geographic regions consistent with the Northern Territory’s service delivery regions. Movements to Greater Darwin, including Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield statistical subdivisions, or Alice Springs from any of the other five regions were considered rural-to-urban migration. Movement from Greater Darwin

or Alice Springs to the other regions was considered urban-to-rural migration. Movement between Greater Darwin and Alice Springs was urban-to-urban and movement between the remaining five regions rural-to-rural.

Age and sex of migrators was recorded. Persons aged zero to four years were excluded from the analysis, as were respondents who did not state a place of usual residence either on census night or five years prior, and those who stated their place of residence as offshore or migratory. At each census, this resulted in about 80 per cent of the Indigenous respondents to the census being in scope (see Table 1). In the results section, ‘population’ unless otherwise noted refers to the pool of potential movers for the relevant region (NT and the sub-regions) in the census data.

As part of a suite of research examining the impacts of various aspects of the Commonwealth Government’s management of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (including, but not limited to, the NTER), we interviewed more than four hundred Indigenous people across four large remote communities—two in the Top End, one in the Katherine Region, and one in Central Australia.

We asked respondents about their personal migration habits and whether recent events (specifically the NTER) had affected those habits, and we asked respondents to comment on changes in migration patterns they had observed among other members of the community. We were particularly

**Table 1: Indigenous persons included in the analysis versus Indigenous residents by census year**

	1996	2001	2006
Unit of analysis cohort	36,348	39,075	41,355
Indigenous usual resident population	46,285	50,845	53,655
Excluded cohort	21%	23%	23%

interested in short-term mobility (to address the gaps in census data), but also sought confirmation of the long-term mobility patterns observed in the census data.

Interviews were conducted between May and October 2008. It is important to note that the four communities (which cannot be named here for confidentiality reasons) had quite different experiences of the NTER and so a different sample of communities may have produced different results. However, being four of the larger remote communities, they represented a substantial proportion (around a quarter) of the total remote Indigenous population. Most interviews were conducted with heads of families and with other family and community members recommended by those heads. The bulk of the data therefore represents observations by relatively senior people who have cultural and social responsibilities that include monitoring the flow of population into and out of the community.

## RESULTS

At the time of the 1996 census one in four Indigenous people in the Northern Territory (11,790) stated they lived in urban areas, 68 per cent of whom were in Darwin (8,030 people) and 32 per cent in Alice Springs. From 1996 to 2001 the Territory's urban population grew by 14 per cent and by just under 10 per cent in the subsequent five years, taking the urban Indigenous share to 28 per cent by 2006. The populations of rural areas also grew, but at the substantially lower rates of eight per cent from 1996 to 2001 and five per cent from 2001 to 2006.

Between 1991 and 2006 some 7,126 Indigenous people changed their region of residence within the Northern Territory, at an average turnover rate for the three periods of seven per cent. Regional migration was at its highest during the 1991 to 1996 period where eight per cent of Indigenous people migrated and lowest during 2001 to 2006 at six per cent.

In gross terms, as shown in Table 2, migration from rural areas to urban areas accounted for some 50 per cent of all intra-Territory migration from 1991 to 2006. Migration in the opposite direction from urban to rural areas made up a quarter (1,729 people) and the net outcome of population flows between rural and urban areas was therefore an increase of the urban population by 1,799 people.

Absolute numbers for rural to urban migration have remained consistent over time while urban to rural (and rural to rural) movements have declined. A particularly large decline of around a third in urban to rural migration was recorded from 2001 to 2006. Urban to urban migration numbers have remained relatively small having comprised eight per cent of all migration over the 15-year period. Nevertheless, on a net basis, for every 100 people who left Alice Springs for Darwin, only 70 arrived and during 2001 to 2006 this ratio reached its lowest point at 54 per 100. Meanwhile migration between rural areas accounted for 18 per cent of all migration but its influence has declined over successive censuses. The Barkly and Katherine regions were the most prominent pairing for rural to rural migration accounting for 21 per cent of this type of migration.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the age profile of migration was consistently young with around 45 per cent of all migration since 1991 undertaken by those aged less than 20 years. In each of the three intercensal periods, the 10 to 14 years cohort comprised the highest proportion of migration (at 17 per cent of the overall total). Also of note is the consistency in the age profiles of migration where there are only one or two (age-group-specific) examples of the shape of the curves differing between one census and another. The age-sex profiles of migration were largely consistent between males and females across the entire period, however, a greater proportion of female

migration was undertaken by those aged 25 years or more. Most of this difference was accounted for by the 25 to 29 year cohort who comprised 11 per cent of female migration but only nine per cent of male migration from 1991 to 2006.

The census data results show the sex ratio for all Indigenous people who migrated between regions during the period from 1991 to 2006 as 91. Hence, for every 100 females who changed their region of residence during this period, there were 91 males who also did so. And at each individual census within this period the sex ratio was under 100, having fallen from 95 in 1996 to 89 in 2001, and then to 87 in 2006. There is evidence, therefore, that the ratio of female to male inter-regional migrants in the NT is increasing, at least as far as census reporting would indicate.

Disaggregation of the overall sex ratio for migrants during the 1991 to 2006 period results in a ratio of less than 100 for all age cohorts other than the five to nine year age group where it averaged 116 during the 1991 to 1996 period. A noticeable decline in the sex ratio is evident for the 25 to 29 years cohort which may reflect census reporting issues.

**INTERVIEW DATA**

Interview respondents identified a range of reasons why people moved in and out of communities. Travel was a common and often necessary experience for shopping, sport, recreation (including gambling and drinking, but also hunting and fishing), health treatment, work and study, along with cultural obligations to attend funerals and other ceremonies. Given

the distances and costs often involved in such trips, activities may be combined.

Each community was able to identify a set of locations among which population flow was common—this included people from the community going to these locations and people from these locations going to the community. Flows related to attending funerals, for example, were ostensibly between the home community and one (or sometimes more) discrete communities where family ties are maintained. Shopping activities, by contrast, tended to be more widely dispersed and less predictable. Locations were both urban and remote, but the more regular trips (shopping, gambling, drinking, and sport) were from remote communities to the urban centres of Darwin, Nhulunbuy, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs.

Respondents distinguished between mobility events that were supported by the community and those which were of concern to the community. Supported events included shopping, health treatment, sport and education, and cultural obligations. Concerning events were those related to excessive drinking and drug-taking. Some of these latter events involved longer term migration to larger urban centres, but many involved very short distance trips—to drinking camps established outside community boundaries, for example.

**Table 2: Indigenous intercensal migration, 1991 to 2006**

	1991 –1996	1996 –2001	2001 –2006	1991 –2006	Flows (per cent)
Rural to urban	1244	1088	1196	3528	50.0
Rural to rural	520	394	361	1275	18.0
Urban to rural	766	569	394	1729	24.0
Urban to urban	195	225	174	594	8.0
Total	2725	2276	2125	7126	100.0

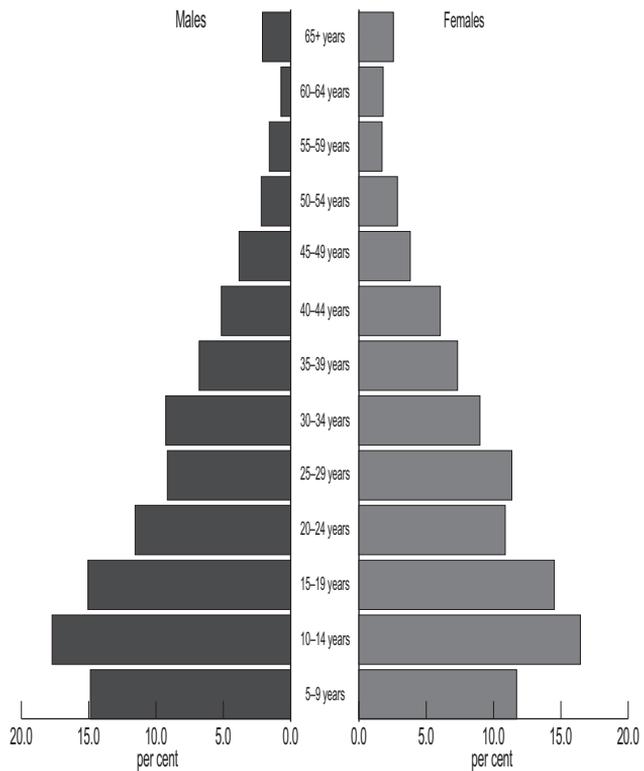
Given the wide range of mobility and migration motives, it was not surprising that respondents identified a range of community members who moved around. It was clear that young people (males and females) were more likely to move around than older people. At the same time, older people were likely to stay away for longer periods of time, particularly when seeking health care. In somewhat of a contrast to the census results, young males were seen as those most likely to move around a lot, and most likely to move for reasons that were of concern to the community, but drinking related mobility, for example, was not limited to young males.

Trip lengths to urban centres ranged from a few days to a few weeks. Respondents acknowledged that many types of moves (for education or work, in particular) would result in more or less permanent moves away, while most other people were expected to return to the community at some point. Moves were facilitated and hampered by access to transport (which could be seasonal) as well as access to money. The widespread use of telecommunications (specifically mobile phones) also enabled increased mobility by facilitating people making arrangements to visit family or friends and by informing people of special events that they might like to travel to (sporting events, concerts and so on).

A number of structures have been set up (and differ from community to community) to assist short

and longer term mobility and migration. These range from assisting children to attend school in Darwin and Alice Springs and consequently assisting families to visit those children, through to programs to return problem drinkers to remote communities from Darwin and Alice Springs. These types of programs have been in existence for many years and recognise the need for people to travel (for health, education, shopping) as well as the desire to travel (for socialising, sport and recreation). Their net effects in terms of stimulus of migration types (rural-to-urban, urban-to-rural, short term, long term) have not been analysed, but respondents suggested impacts were complex, with some programs encouraging moves out of the community and some en-

**Figure 1: Age and sex profile of Northern Territory Indigenous inter-regional migration, 1991 to 2006**



couraging moves back to the community.

Respondents likewise had mixed views about the impact of the NTER on mobility patterns. They pointed out that many of the changes in lifestyle that may have been attributed to the NTER (alcohol restrictions, welfare reform and so on) had been occurring for many years prior to June 2007, and while these changes had contributed to patterns of mobility, it was difficult to attribute additional change specifically to the NTER.

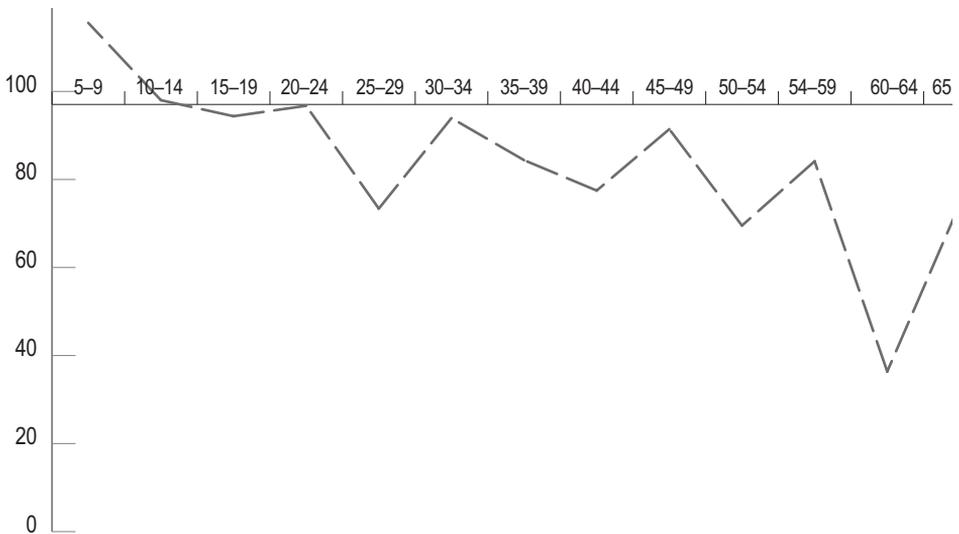
Some respondents claimed that increasing mobility (particularly leaving the community) was a common short-term reaction by some groups (particularly young males) to any substantial change in community life—the death of an elder, a police crack down on marijuana use, the introduction of new regulations and so on. The NTER represented another of these changes, and so respondents expected increased mobility in the short term. They also felt that patterns stabilised once changes became absorbed or were reversed, and expected that this would also happen with regards to NTER inspired mobility. Respon-

dents were reluctant to provide estimates of how many people had been affected by the NTER in this way.

On the other hand, some respondents suggested the NTER resulted in reduced mobility because of the red tape associated with temporarily changing residence (particularly with regards to making arrangements to access quarantined welfare payments), and the decreased capacity for people to pool money and share eftpos personal identification numbers and so on. This was because income management regulations emphasised individual responsibility for individual income over what had previously been more communal approaches. The NTER has also included investment in new services located in communities (including health care services, such as dialysis centres, and improved shopping facilities) which might reduce the number of reasons why people needed to move around.

The overwhelming perception of respondents was that people who wanted to move around, for whatever reason, would do so whatever rules were imposed by the NTER. Communities where royalty monies

**Figure 2: Sex ratios of Northern Territory Indigenous inter-regional migration, 1991 to 2006**



from mining and other ventures are distributed to families at relatively frequently intervals are a prime example. They have long experienced peaks in out migration to urban centres for shopping (and, where royalties are concerned, particularly for large items like cars and furniture), relaxation and socialising and the in migration of family at royalty time to share in the period of heightened social activity surrounding the influx of money. There was also widespread recognition that all communities experienced high levels of population mobility before the NTER and would be likely to continue do so in the future. Rural-to-urban migration had been, and would continue to be, most common, and young males would continue to be particularly mobile.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The census data revealed a consistent pattern of rural-to-urban migration of Northern Territory Indigenous people since the early 1990s. This is consistent with patterns observed by Taylor and Bell.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, the data provide only a partial view of mobility. Its coverage is residential mobility; this is relatively long term and is associated with housing, employment and other formal ties with the receiving location. The international mobility literature would lead us to expect more informal and short-term mobility patterns to mirror the formal migration patterns, at least in respect of locations involved.

What is interesting from the census data is the high proportion of females in the migrating population, and the relatively young age structure of migrants. The high proportion of migrators aged 10 to 19 years indicates education as a strong motivator for formal mobility. It may also say something about how different Indigenous populations are captured in the census. Data about females are more likely to be accurately captured than data about (particularly young) males. Nonetheless, the

broad patterns of mobility among Northern Territory Indigenous people are clear from the census data. The age and sex distribution may be less clear, but the patterns are what would be expected having considered the international literature. NTER impacts on existing patterns of formal mobility may be revealed in the 2011 census.

The patterns of mobility described by interview respondents were also consistent with those observed in the literature. Community members had mixed opinions about the impacts of the NTER on patterns of mobility, but they were agreed that, while there may be changes in degree (number of migrants and timing of movement), the trend of movement mainly from remote areas to urban centres and for a wide range of reasons had been well established before the NTER. Populations previously at risk of migration out of the community continued to be at risk. The NTER may well have introduced changes which are as likely to restrict mobility as to enhance it.

Meanwhile, post-NTER Indigenous policy reform from the Rudd Government, including proposed Community Development Employment Program and welfare reforms under the Closing the Gap initiative,<sup>21</sup> has espoused the role of job creation in remote communities for addressing socio-economic disadvantage.

It does this while saying very little about the employment and career prospects of the growing number of urban Indigenous residents. With urbanisation comes the need for policies to transition migrating people into suitable forms of housing and into the mainstream labour market.

At the same time urbanisation might be seen as beneficial because it situates those who have migrated closer to health, education and other essential services which are lacking in many remote communities and cost inordinately more per capita to provide there. For some Indigenous people, proximity to services in urban areas may be

a catalyst for a change in their life course which helps promote more active engagement in the mainstream economy. But at the same time, interview respondents said little or nothing about the role of mobility in providing better access to jobs or career paths. This is perhaps indicative of the primacy of mobility as an enabler for meeting the immediate and fundamental needs of individuals and families—the need for health treatment, the need for shopping, the need to consume alcohol, and so on.

But while this study has told us that Indigenous people in the NT are urbanising, it has not identified whether a returning (de-urbanising) cohort of people (who make a residential move to urban areas, and declare so on the census form, but subsequently move back) exists. Nor has it described the relative socio-economic fate of such people as they transition from a remote community to an urban centre and then back. Indeed, there was evidence from interviews that the NTER contributed to at least some of these types of movements as people sought to escape the perceived negative consequences of the NTER, and particularly income management measures, but subsequently realised that these consequences followed them to the city. This is just one of many areas of need in terms of further research.

For policy makers, coming to grips with the perspectives articulated by Indigenous people in this research may require a shift in mindset. As Prout<sup>22</sup> has recently discussed, gaps in our knowledge of the structural context of Indigenous mobility have fed perceptions of it being strongly linked to negative events like disengagement from the mainstream economy and anti-social behaviour. The clearly dynamic and complex nature of Indigenous mobility drivers are on show through the results of this

research. But more importantly, mobility patterns and flows seem so well entrenched that they are resistant to policy and legislation which, inter-alia, might be expected to affect such phenomena. Policy and service delivery models that seek to understand and recognise, rather than politely ignore, Indigenous perspectives on mobility are more likely to succeed.

In summary, Indigenous mobility in the Northern Territory (and possibly across Australia as a whole) has been poorly analysed in the academic literature to this point. The domination of post-colonial anthropological views of remote dwellers and their attachment to culture and community have precluded broader, and probably more relevant, attention to more robust demographic migration models, particularly of rural-to-urban migration. The NTER is one of a number of shock events and longer-term local and global trends which contribute to the emergence of particular patterns of mobility.

It is difficult to argue that the patterns observed in remote Indigenous Australia should be any different to those which have emerged in other developed and developing nations struggling with issues of regional development and the attraction of the cities. Reversing provisions of the NTER is unlikely to reverse the migration patterns which have been observed in this research. Better informed public debate would recognise the history of mobility that includes all the patterns now being blamed on the NTER. In doing so, we would be able to develop better models for testing the specific impacts of the NTER (and other interventions) and provide better advice both for the generating and the receiving communities about how to manage mobility.

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