

# Current evidence of 'female flight' from remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities – demographic and policy implications

ANDREW TAYLOR\*

## Abstract

A small body of research has demonstrated the dramatic social, settlement and demographic effects of Indigenous 'female flight' from remote communities in Alaska, Canada, and the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas of Europe. In the Northern Territory of Australia, remote Indigenous settlement patterns are highly similar to these areas but neither research nor policy have had anything to say about whether female flight has or might also impact there. This paper applies quantitative tests to thirty years of Census data to look for evidence of precursors in the Northern Territory and discusses the demographic and policy implications in light of the findings.

**Keywords:** Indigenous migration, female flight, rural to urban migration, Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.

## Introduction

Quantum shifts in Indigenous settlement patterns have occurred as a result of rural to urban migration amongst the developed nations in Northern Europe and the Americas during the post-WWII era (Williamson et al., 2004; IOM, 2008). The phenomenon saw pipelines of migration away from small Indigenous communities into larger towns and cities driven by a number of factors drawing people to larger centres and also pushing them away from communities. Key amongst these was the role of improved educational outcomes for remote Indigenous residents in Alaska, Canada and the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas of Europe (Knapp, 2000). Migration away from these spaces commenced with, and was sustained by, females who became over-represented in the out migrating cohort (Hamilton & Otterstad, 1998) with the consequences being largely ignored until they became dire (Pedrazza, 1991). Women were not only more likely than men to migrate away, but also more likely to do so on a permanent basis and in their 1994 study, Hamilton and Seyfrit labelled these gendered differentials in out migration as 'female flight'.

The tenet behind female flight is that a host of structural and aspirational factors associated with the engagement of communities in the knowledge economy have facilitated the migration of women to larger towns and then to cities (Rasmussen, 2007). The transition away from traditional life saw women, more so than men, engage actively and more comprehensively in educa-

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\* Andrew Taylor is Senior Research Fellow in Population and Tourism Studies at The Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, Australia. E-mail: [andrew.taylor@cdu.edu.au](mailto:andrew.taylor@cdu.edu.au).



tion and career planning. Educational introspectiveness was noted especially in very small communities where Hamilton and Seyfrit (1994) and others found that female Indigenous high school graduates were placing a greater emphasis on mapping out and planning for future educational pathways. They found that females were better able to identify and articulate the skill sets required for building their careers, placing an emphasis on generic business skills which they could apply across a range of occupations. Importantly, the young females in Hamilton and Seyfrit's study (1994) were accepting of requirements to move permanently from their villages to establish their careers. Young males, by contrast, were reportedly focused on the very specific skills required for trade jobs in extractive industries (Nelson & MacKinnon, 2004). With work available these industries in remote areas, over time males were less likely to move away for work and less likely to devote time and effort to education.

For the Arctic, the literature has emphasised the permanent departures of women from communities as a bifurcation from the previous predominant migration flows where young men engaged as migrant workers outside of their traditional areas (Rasmussen, 2007). Meanwhile cities have in general become increasingly attractive to rural populations for reasons beyond education and employment (Ma, 2001). In his study of Indigenous migration from the northern frontiers of Canada, Petrov (2007), for example, has emphasised the role of negative issues in home communities for driving residential out migration. Once in the cities, it is apparent that females have been more likely than males to hold on to new jobs and then progress their careers (Carson & Taylor, 2009). Institutional economics argues that moving to the city at a particular life stage (be it for education, entertainment, employment or some other reason) can become a rite of passage for people from rural communities (for example, Horvth 2008; Monsutti, 2007) but this is generally expressed in the literature as a male domain. Meanwhile, advances in telecommunication technologies have assisted the urban diaspora to maintain important social and familial ties with those remaining in communities (Limstrand & Stemland, 2004) thereby reducing the emotional burden of migration. Urban areas have more shops, more entertainment facilities, more education and training opportunities, and a greater selection of potential marriage partners, making them 'sticky' for recent arrivals.

Notwithstanding these observations, economic transitioning for remote areas in developed nations has clearly occurred along non-discrete pathways. Diversity in the historical development of communities is observed in the demographic and economic diversity inherent in such populations today. Consequently, the process of transitioning between traditional lifestyles and its gender specific roles and norms, and the uptake of work and education has been staggered over time and space. For individual communities, female flight was first detected by dramatic rises in the sex ratios for source communities (Hamilton & Otterstad, 1998). The entrenchment of this 'footprint' of a female deficit was nevertheless disguised in some places by the arrival of tempo-

rary male workers in extractive industries (Hamilton, 2008) where the full effects went unnoticed until employment in these diminished. Notably in Alaska and elsewhere, many women migrated with their children and few returned (Martin, 2009). Such migration impacted on fertility and population renewal and in the long run became "...particularly acute issues of individual and cultural survival" (Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1994: 16). More immediately, the out migration of women prompted school closures and reduced the opportunities for employment in situ in this sector. Socially, the departure of females saw increased abuse of women (especially teenagers) and growing self-destructive behaviour like alcoholism amongst males (Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1994). Where these became commonplace, the departure of women was thought to have accelerated in response to declining community functionality.

Indigenous migration studies in the remote Australian context reveal immensely complex issues in relation to the interplay of culture, modernisation and individual behaviours. Hence, while the outcomes of migration choices are depicted as individualised (demographic) data, the drivers of such are rarely so. Uncertainties around cause and effect have long been a dominant thread in discussions in the literature (for example, Taylor & Bell, 1999). The introduction of the motor vehicle to remote parts, for example, provided a new means of mobility and facilitated more people to travel further distances for kinship and cultural purposes (Petersen, 2004). Conversely, vehicles also enabled more ready access to towns where alcohol was available, with the legacies of these introduced spatial reformations remaining today. Establishing the relative influence of moieties on migration and other behaviours is one example of how complex the depiction of future scenarios in relation to remote residents has become, not just in a demographic sense, but across the spectrum of economic, social and other issues.

In the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, around a third of the population is Aboriginal. More than half live in remote areas outside of the urban centres of Darwin and Alice Springs, and most of these in small and discrete Aboriginal communities. The population structure there is youthful, reflecting low life expectancies, and these communities are well documented as places of socio-economic depravity (Taylor, 2003). In political and academic circles, conflicting and trenchant ideologies persist on the value of 'staying on country' versus the benefits larger settlements offer residents for engagement with mainstream economic institutions and services (Rothwell, 2009). Large sums of Australian Government and NT Government funds are set aside under a raft of policies and programs to improve living conditions, develop infrastructure and deliver sustained improvements to Indigenous wellbeing. Improved educational outcomes are, for example, a key plank under the 'Closing the Gap' targets announced by the Australian Government in 2007 (Macklin, 2008). Meanwhile the *Working Futures* strategy of the Northern Territory Government seeks to establish 20 'strong towns' through the intensification and streamlining of service delivery, improved transport networks and the creation of 'real' jobs (Henderson, 2009). Importantly, *Working Futures* curtails funding

for homelands which are unoccupied for more than 3 months of the year, a decision which has attracted derision from homelands advocates for subjugating the residential choices of remote Aboriginal people (for example, Murdoch, 2009).

Despite the importance of these contextual debates, and the relative size of the Aboriginal population, extant research on Aboriginal residential migration in the NT is scant and there have been no attempts to lay out future demographic scenarios based on the overseas experience in places with highly similar settlement demographics. Research has instead focused on the domain of cultural continuance where migration is posited as short term, temporary and circular in terms of individual itineraries (Prout, 2008; Taylor & Carson, 2009). In part, the introversion of theory and research reflects sustained government efforts to balance progress with cultural maintenance, and research has focused on the issues for supporting this quest. Within this context, Aboriginal migration has by and large viewed as problematic for its effects on individual engagement with official systems. Public discourse too has targeted perceived negative outcomes from short term movements (particularly males) into towns, labelling it as 'urban drift'. The phenomenon has received a disproportionate amount of attention given there has been little evidence brought forward to quantify its patterns and volumes (Taylor & Carson, 2009).

Some evidence of Indigenous urbanisation in the NT has been provided by Taylor and Carson (2009) and, while the numbers are small, females have been over-represented in the urbanising cohort. Indications of the possible role of education are evident with, for example, 70 per cent of Indigenous post-school qualifications held by females in 1986 (ABS, 1990). By 2006 females made up close to 60 per cent of Indigenous people in remote areas who had completed the final two years of high school (Year 11 or Year 12) and 70 per cent of graduates at the advanced diploma level and above. Given this, it may be argued that remote NT communities are primed for female flight. This research poses the question of whether, and to what extent, demographic pre-cursors exist in the remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. To test this supposition we examine long term trends in the sizes and sex ratios for clusters of Aboriginal communities and conduct empirical tests to check for the emergence or existence of female flight. We reflect on the results by considering the social and political consequences for the Northern Territory in light of the findings.

## Methods

This research analyses 30 years of Census data (1976 to 2006) for the NT. The geographical level of analysis is Urban Centre/Localities (UCLs, or places with 200+ residents) located in remote or very remote areas with more than a 50 per cent Indigenous share in the population, and with an absolute size of less than 3,000 residents. This places the urban centres and mining towns (i.e. Darwin, Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, etc.) out of scope. Communities were

clustered according to size: large (1,000 or more), medium (500 to 999) and small (200 to 499). Variants of tests conducted for other countries (see Hamilton, 2008; Hamilton & Otterstad, 1998; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1994) were applied to 2006 Census data to examine for statistical relationships between community size, age and per cent female across 55 Aboriginal communities. Correlation tests between per cent female and the logarithm of population size for ages 20-39 years (the age group identified by Hamilton (2008) as most likely to exhibit a female deficit) were conducted and extended to include comparisons to other age groups.

There are a number of weaknesses with this approach. First and foremost it is relatively broad brushed, a function of poor data and the need to determine the baseline situation in the absence of pre-existing work on the topic. Issues with data quality and coverage for remote Indigenous populations are well documented in the Australian context (for example, Ross, 1999) including high rates of Census undercount. Undercounting is thought to be higher for males than females, and this no doubt directly affects the sex ratios in some communities (ABS, 2006). Sex ratios themselves may be misleading at the small area level when examined over time due to changed census procedures, changing propensities to identify as Indigenous and due to differential life expectancy gains across genders and ages in the NT (Wilson et al., 2007). Furthermore, census data captures only a snapshot of lifetime migration at one and five years prior to the census date. Finally, the empirical tests say nothing about how reverse (urban to rural) migration in the NT may have impacted on population structures in settlements and this warrants further research.

## Results

Remote Aboriginal communities, as defined for this research, were home to 24,773 Indigenous residents in 2006, or around 46 per cent of the total Indigenous population of the NT. The sex ratio for all communities in 2006 was 95.5 males per 100 females. There were also 2,200 non-Indigenous residents in communities and 881 who did not provide their Indigenous status. Outside of communities, around a quarter of all Indigenous people in the NT said they lived in places of less than 200 residents (stations, very small communities, etc.), 23 per cent lived in Darwin and surrounds (including Palmerston) or Alice Springs, and 6 per cent lived in the regional centres of Katherine, Jabiru, Nhulunbuy, Tennant Creek and Yulara.

In 2006, Community populations were clustered into four large, 20 medium and 31 small communities. The average size of large communities has increased steadily, and by around 60 per cent from 1,027 in 1981 (there were no large communities in 1976) to 1,615 in 2006 (Table 1). For medium sized communities, average size in 2006 (712) was similar to 1976 (709) and has not fluctuated substantially over time. Small communities have decreased in size

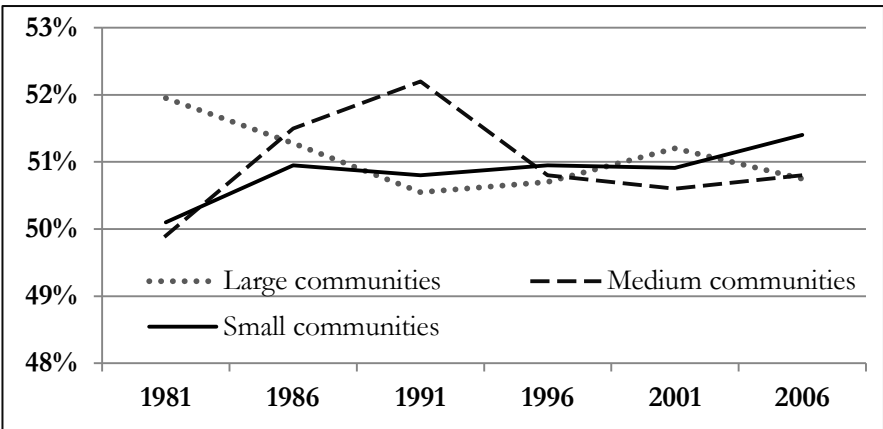
by around five per cent (to 305) from their average size of 320 in 1976. However, the average size of small communities has been quite variable.

**Table 1:** Selected measures for remote NT communities, 1976 to 2006

Year	Measure	Large communities	Medium communities	Small communities	Total for discrete communities
1976	No. communities	0	15	12	27
	Median size	n.a.	709	320	538
	Per cent female	n.a.	50.3%	50.5%	50.4%
1981	No. communities	2	13	11	26
	Median size	1,027	635	375	542
	Per cent female	51.9%	51.9%	50.0%	50.0%
1986	No. communities	3	12	19	34
	Median size	1,068	652	322	493
	Per cent female	51.2%	51.5%	50.5%	51.1%
1991	No. communities	5	9	16	30
	Median size	1,131	699	368	587
	Per cent female	50.6%	51.9%	50.4%	51.0%
1996	No. communities	5	12	23	40
	Median size	1,274	724	355	550
	Per cent female	50.7%	50.8%	51.1%	50.9%
2001	No. communities	4	17	30	51
	Median size	1,364	720	317	555
	Per cent female	51.1%	50.8%	50.7%	50.9%
2006	No. communities	4	20	31	55
	Median size	1,615	712	305	563
	Per cent female	50.7%	51.1%	51.6%	51.2%

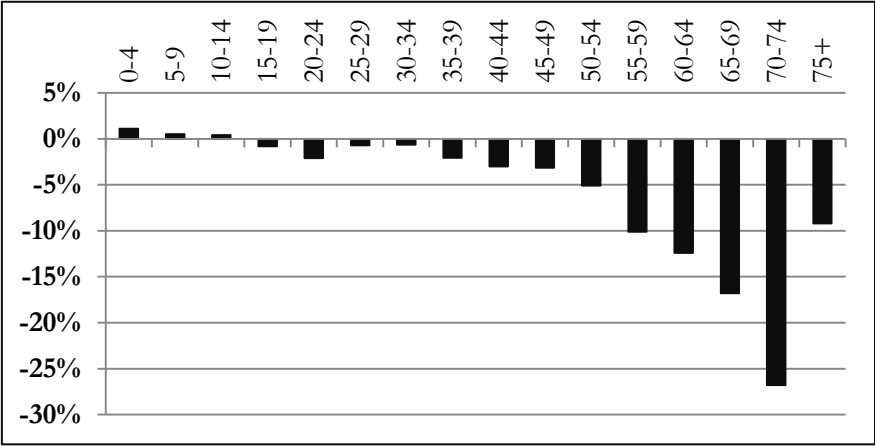
*Note - this table includes data for Indigenous residents only*

**Figure 1:** Per cent female in discrete Aboriginal communities, 1981 to 2006

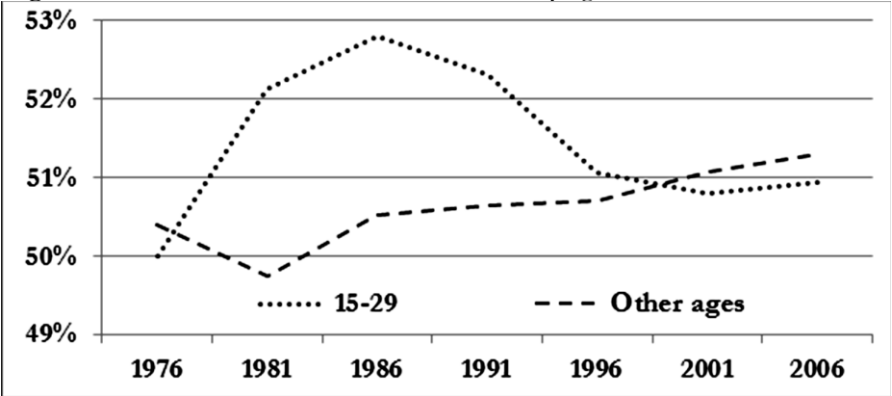


The per cent female in the population has grown in small communities but has fallen for large ones (in particular) and for medium sized communities to a lesser extent (Figure 1). In 2006 the rate was 51.6 per cent for small communities, 51.1 per cent for medium sized and 50.7 per cent for large communities. In all cases it is apparent there is no significant emergent or emerging female deficit. In small communities, for which female flight was first observed in rural to urban migration in other countries, the per cent female has actually increased over time. Nevertheless, in comparison to urban areas, a deficit of females in communities is observed in 2006 with the per cent female at 51.2 per cent compared to 53.5 per cent in urban areas. Figure 2 plots the age specific gaps in the per cent female in urban UCLs verses remote UCLs. A clear deficit is evident in remote UCLs from age 40 years and above.

**Figure 2:** Per cent female in remote and very remote (combined) versus urban NT, 2006



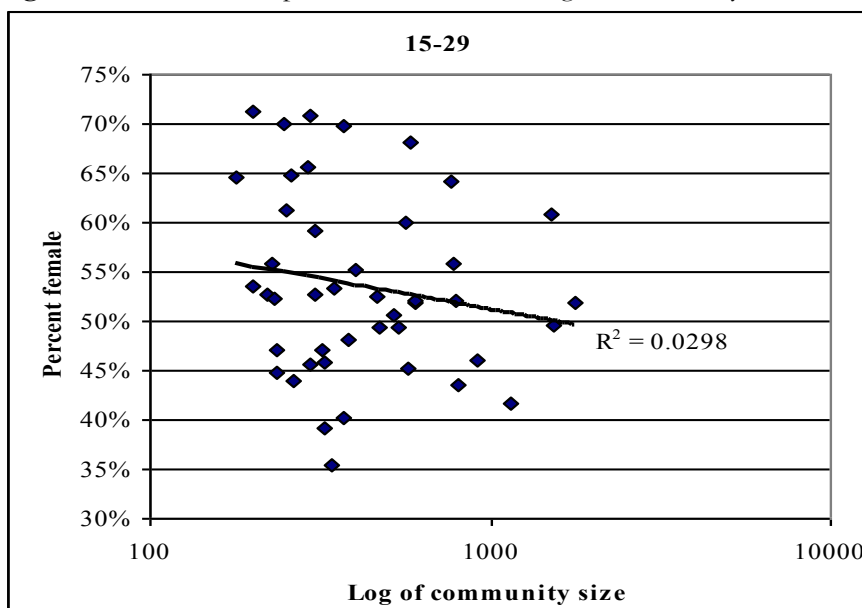
**Figure 3:** Per cent female in NT communities by age, 1976 to 2006



In comparing the per cent female in communities across specific age groups, an emergent gap in the 15-29 years age group is noticeable since 1996 when compared to all other ages combined (Figure 3). The per cent female aged 15-29 is observed to have fallen substantially since 1991 while rising consistently in all other age groups since 1986.

The application of Hamilton's tests to the supposition of a relationship between per cent female and the log of community size for discrete Aboriginal communities was applied to 2006 data. It reveals (unsurprisingly given the results above) that no discernable relationship exists for communities in the NT (Figure 4) with at best a weak correlation evident. A repeat of the test across all age groups (0-14, 15-29, 30-44, 45+) yielded similarly weak correlations.

**Figure 4:** Correlation of per cent female to the log of community size, 2006



## Discussion and conclusions

This analysis has revealed mixed results against the original intentions of examining available data for the emergence or existence of female flight from remote NT Aboriginal communities. On the one hand no evidence of a footprint exists in small communities where we would expect to find the effects if the experience overseas was repeated in the NT. However, there are clearly deficits of women in remote locations in comparison to urban areas, most noticeably from ages 40 years and onwards. And while no sign of a 'wave' of female out migration to urban centres or interstate exists, there are strong indications of female deficits in a handful of communities where sex ratios have



risen consistently over time. These are of varying size and with no apparent spatial patterning. Changes in the average sizes of clusters of communities are consistent with expectations under conditions of rural to urban migration with small communities progressively decreasing in size and large communities expanding over time. The expansion of the largest communities has and may continue to place added pressure on housing and services, with overcrowding of houses already being well documented as a major social issue.

What does stand out in the results is the apparent out migration of older women, from large communities in particular. The question is why this is the case? Part of the answer might be found in the conditions of poor housing, a lack of services and poor prospects which are faced by residents on a daily basis. Education too may be playing a role in pushing older women to urban centres since, although standards and outcomes have been low, educational facilities have at least been present in the larger communities for some time. It may be, therefore, that a form of female flight is occurring on a small scale but that its composition and magnitude does not approximate what has been observed elsewhere. Whereas in other countries out migration has been the domain of primarily young and educated females, in the NT a deficit is being established amongst older and educated women. Comparatively, out migration of older women produces reduced effects on fertility and perhaps mitigated social consequences. But a growing urban diaspora of older women may revise the dominant short term and residential migration patterns observed to date, notably in the form of visits by community residents to relatives and friends, as well as the likelihood of travel in the reverse direction.

But detecting female out migration is, as we have discussed, hindered by a mix of changed (generally improved) procedures for census enumeration, changing propensities to identify as Indigenous and other data issues. These mean that generalisations about the long term demographic trends at community levels should be treated with caution. Further complicating the issue is age and sex specific improvements to Indigenous life expectancies which have altered survival rates unevenly (see Wilson *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, it may be that the observations made here reflect a combination of these factors and nothing more. Indeed the purpose in this paper is not to present female flight as *fait accompli*. Aside from industrialised countries, the experience of poorer nations has been the opposite. Gendered differences in rural to urban migration in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, were strongly male orientated post-1960s due to the migration 'drag' of high very fertility rates (Brockerhoff & Eu, 1993) and from the disproportionate incentive of higher wage gains to be had by males who migrated to urban areas (Agesa & Agesa, 1999). However, as with female flight, male migrators had superior educational levels.

Thus, talk of radical change must also be tempered by knowledge about the spectrum of complex data, demographic, social, political, historical, and economic circumstances affecting Aboriginal communities in the NT. These render generic suppositions about their settlement futures unsatisfactory since each is located at a different starting point, a distinction which appears to have

been lost in the recent political climate where blanket approaches are to mending Indigenous disadvantage are favoured. Whether or not we tag the observations made here as evidence of female flight, this study raises issues of how new populations for remote communities may be sourced if current trends persist or accelerate. It has been well documented that the NT struggles to attract non-Indigenous migrants from other parts of Australia (it is more successful in attracting international migrants, although we do not know how long they stay in the Territory). The social, cultural, and legal structures around remote communities in the NT also make it very difficult to introduce new long-staying populations. It is difficult (often impossible) to buy property or establish businesses. There is a strong divide between the 'permanent' populations (often Indigenous people with land rights claims) and the more temporary ones (often non-Indigenous people working in the government service sector on short term contracts).

This study highlights that a better understanding of the migration futures of remote Indigenous populations is required for improving population projections modelling in remote Australia. This might commence with research with attempts to gauge the future aspirations of women in relation to education, place of residence and engagement with the global world as a baseline. Current approaches are focused squarely on short term mobility (ABS, 2004; Taylor & Carson, 2009) and deal uncomfortably with issues of intra-regional and cross-border migration. Residential migration has long been conceptualised as a minor redistributive force in the spatial realm of remote Aboriginal populations in Australia but space must be made in the debate for alternative paradigms. Specific research is also required to monitor changing fertility rates since we would expect that the number of births and the TFR would fall should sex ratios begin to increase from the out migration of females.

Female flight is just one of the many issues in the hotly debated space of appropriate models for depicting and describing economic development and improved wellbeing in the remote Indigenous context. The potential for female flight to occur highlights the importance of demographic futures to be considered as both inputs to and outcomes from policies aimed at 'closing the gaps'. This is particularly so in the current climate where blanket approaches are applied to disparate demographic contexts and without due consideration of the experiences for small communities in the remote parts of other countries. If the desired outputs from policy remain fixated on a set of quantitative 'proofs' of gap closing, there are real possibilities that such policies will drive opposite effects in some communities and regions. Education in situ is one example. Thus, while the evidence presented in this study is mixed, for policy makers there may be greater rewards in focusing on increasing the opportunities for welcome outcomes from residential migration and managing its effects on those who choose to remain as residents of remote communities.

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