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## Commentary



# Population mobility, 'usual residence' and the census: the case of Australia's grey nomads

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## 1. Introduction

Australia's public health response to COVID-19 included the temporary closure of state and regional borders in an effort to significantly curb population mobility. For those who were travelling at the time, the assumption seemed to be that they could simply return home, and resume travel when it was safe to do so. While it was recognised that mobility restrictions would cause difficulties for international tourists as they did not have a permanent residence in Australia, the assumption for domestic resident travellers was that they were 'away from home' and could therefore simply return to their place of 'usual residence'. Such normative framings of travellers as 'away from home' or away from a 'usual residence' present challenges for Australians who engage in practices of bi-locale and multi-locale forms of residence, for those that do not identify as having a single place of usual residence, and for the permanently nomadic. This includes a diverse range of sub-population groups: those experiencing secondary homelessness<sup>1</sup>; seasonal labourers; backpackers; highly mobile Indigenous peoples; long-distance commuters; travelling show families and workers; permanent house-sitters, and; grey nomads (the focus of this paper).

In the case of grey nomads, as mobility restrictions resulting from COVID-19 public health measures extended to the temporary closure of state and national parks and the camping grounds within, some travellers found they had little option but to move to costly private caravan parks, informal camping areas or to the properties of family or friends (Fowler 2020). The exact number of people likely to have been impacted is unknown. This is because, like most population sub-groups that are highly mobile and despite the phenomenon of grey nomads being a feature of the Australian population for more than four decades (Holloway et al. 2011), information about the size, characteristics and movements of this population is limited (Moore 2018; Raven 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Those moving frequently between one type of accommodation and another.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the need for a greater understanding of the nation's mobile populations who engage in regular, patterned and/or permanent forms of medium- (i.e., periodic, seasonal) and long-term population circulation. Many of these population sub-groups are considered 'at risk' for different reasons (e.g., ill-health, social exclusion/disconnection, socio-economic disadvantage), and are often problematised and/or statistically invisibilised within sedentary governance framings (see e.g., Prout Quicke and Green 2018). In an increasingly mobile world, governments need better tools for identifying the size, composition, patterns of movement and needs of such populations.

Australian scholars have been leading international efforts to develop standardised estimates of temporary populations at varying geographical and temporal scales (Charles-Edwards et al. 2020). This important work, expertly synthesised recently by Panczak et al. (2020), foregrounds the necessity of such estimates because of the significant service-related impacts that temporary populations can have on different kinds of small area localities. As Charles-Edwards et al. (2020) identified from their survey of (mostly government) stakeholders, information about temporary populations is critical for: infrastructure and social service planning; land use planning; assessing and managing potential social, economic, and environmental impacts, and; securing fiscal equalisation grants. Much of the work encompassed within this research field, therefore, understandably takes a location-based approach to the measurement of temporary populations and considers how *de jure* populations and *de facto* populations might be distinguished and tracked over time in particular locations.

In this short commentary piece, we take mobile sub-populations themselves as our frame of reference and probe the concept of 'usual residence' as operationalised by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in its five-yearly Census of Population and Housing (hereafter 'the census'), for its utility in relation to these groups, with particular reference to grey nomads as one case study group. We conclude by considering the possibilities for alternative survey logics and category framings in the 2026 Census.

## **2. Population mobility and conceptualisations of 'usual residence' in the census**

As the Australian Statistician David Kalisch noted in his preface remarks to the Census of Population and Housing: Topics Directions, 2021 paper, the census allows us to understand the cultural, economic and social diversity of our communities' and provides vital information to "locate health, education and transport services where they are needed" (ABS 2018 p. np). Perhaps less obviously, but arguably just as important, the census presents a normative framework for categorising and statistically capturing social, cultural and economic trends. In other words, what is counted, and how categories of enumeration are conceived, reflect particular understandings of what counts (pun intended) in Australian society and how society is structured.

We argue in this paper that census topics regarding population and location are underpinned by a particular normative assumption about the concept of 'usual residence' that obscures the potential for capturing critical information about certain population dynamics. In essence, the census provides for only two possible population positions in relation to usual residence. The first is absence: those that have no usual residence and are characterised as 'homeless'. The second (all 'non-homeless')

people) are assumed to have one identifiable place of ‘usual residence’, defined by the census as the place they usually live over a minimum six-month period during the census year. Such assumptions are problematic for many of the sub-populations identified in the introduction of this commentary.

The concept of usual residence, is of course, critical to the most fundamental applications of the census, including the ability to enumerate locality populations. Furthermore, the Australian census offers one of the more sophisticated and robust approaches to capturing nuanced aspects of population and locality. For example, since 1971, it has included questions that enable analysts to track internal migration across and between intercensal periods, and to distinguish place of usual residence from place of enumeration, on a quinquennial basis. Our central claim in this paper is not that the concept of ‘usual residence’ has no place in the census, but rather that accommodating (no pun intended) more than two positions in relation to usual residence might more accurately reflect the underlying realities of how population and locality intersect for highly mobile population groups. In particular, we are interested here in practices of residency that engage two or more places one might ‘usually live’ (i.e., bi-locale and multi-locale living) as well non-location-specific forms of residency that do not constitute conventional forms of primary or secondary homelessness such as sleeping rough or couch surfing.

In its 2018 public census review, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) received 355 submissions regarding proposals to change or add census topics (ABS 2018). Twenty-four of these addressed the topic of location (within which ‘usual residence’ was a sub-topic) and included proposals to introduce a question regarding second residences, as well as the need for better information regarding people “staying temporarily in other household without a usual residence”. While the first proposal was deemed nationally significant by the ABS, particularly in small towns and communities where seasonal population influxes impacted service provision, it was ultimately determined that after extensive research and testing, the question proved too complex for respondents and added considerable cost and complexity to processing census forms (ABS 2018). With respect to the second proposal, while the ABS acknowledged the importance of data and information regarding people with no ‘usual residence’ it expressed concern that changes to questions on addresses, which are foundational for census applications, “will only be considered with a view of the potential impact on quality of population estimates” (ABS 2018). In practice, this meant introducing very minor amendments to the instructions regarding how to respond to questions about place of usual residence for those that have no place of usual residence (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Census form changes to usual residence question instructions, 2016-2021

2016 Census	2021 Census
For people who have no fixed or return address (for example, due to family conflict or eviction), write ‘NONE’ in the ‘Suburb/Locality’ box.	For persons who have no usual address, write ‘NONE’ in the ‘Suburb/Locality’ box.

Source: ABS census forms

At the 2016 Census, 45,179 people identified having no place of usual residence on the census form (ABS 2021a). De-identified census records enable analysis of the socio-economic and demographic

characteristics of these individuals. However, there remains within the current census instrument no real capacity to distinguish primary and secondary homelessness from those who are permanently 'nomadic' or live between two or more localities. In the next section, we turn to examining these quandaries in relation to one case-study sub-population: so-called 'grey nomads'. In the broadest sense, grey nomads are typically characterised as older Australians who travel for extended periods of time seasonally, or on a permanent basis, throughout Australia. As Australia's population profile ages, and as international travel is likely to be limited and high-risk for older populations for some time to come, this sub-population is likely to continue to grow.

### 3. Grey nomads in Australia

In Australia, moving to high amenity and lower-cost areas for retirement is a long established and well recognised trend (Davies and James 2011). While retirement migrants have typically been thought to prefer high amenity, coastal and climatically warm destinations, regional mobility data over the last decade also highlights the growth in popularity of inland and colder climate destinations amongst older Australians who are not in the labour force (ABS 2021c). These retirement migrations, involving a permanent one-way move from one residence to another, are relatively easy to infer from census population data. This stands in stark contrast to the capacity to accurately capture the movements of grey nomads (Davies 2011). The published research on Australian grey nomads, most of which comes from tourism studies, draws substantively on case study-based investigations and survey-based methodologies. The variability in the spatial, temporal and demographic parameters used to define the grey nomad population has resulted in variability in research sampling frames and sampling strategies across these studies and, in turn, variability in conclusions being drawn about the grey nomad population in respect of its size, characteristics and movements.

In one of the earliest studies of grey nomads, Onyx and Leonard (2005 p. 61), defined this sub-population as "people aged over 50 years, who adopt an extended period of travel (at least 3 months) independently within their own country". Their definition made no stipulation regarding the retirement status of grey nomads. With respect to spatial dimensions, Onyx and Leonard (2005) drew comparisons between grey nomads and the better known North American snowbirds. They argued that while there were similarities between Australian grey nomads and North American snowbirds, the phenomena were different. North American snowbirds seasonal moves are bi-locale and highly location-specific: they leave their colder northern 'snowbelt' states during winter months for trailer parks and retirement communities in the more temperate southern 'sunbelt' states of the USA (Happel and Hogan 2002), returning to the same destination year after year (Smith and House 2006; Viallon 2012). However, Onyx and Leonard found in their study that grey nomads often avoided highly commodified experiences and were highly mobile, moving from destination to destination. While climate did impact destination selection, the more significant drivers were socio-cultural motivations, with the grey nomads seeking to explore the country, engage in experiences and have an adventure (Onyx and Leonard 2005). Reporting on a large study of 400 grey nomads two years later, Onyx and Leonard (2007 p. 384) also noted that some grey nomads travelled for extended periods (up to several years) and thousands of kilometres during this time.

In a large study of the population geography of grey nomads published shortly thereafter, Cridland (2008) – who also defined grey nomads using a chronological age of 50+, but used shorter temporal dimensions of travelling (one month or more) – sampled almost 2,000 grey nomads staying in caravans at large/commercial caravan parks (with more than 50 powered sites) across northern Australia. He also identified variability in destination and patterns of movement and developed a typology of grey nomads based on this variability and types of activities undertaken. However, studies that focus on non-random sampling from particular kinds of localities such as large caravan parks and rallies (e.g., Wu and Pearce, 2017; Mahadevan, 2014) cannot be drawn upon (nor do they make such claims) to extrapolate the characteristics and patterns of movements of all grey nomads since a portion of the grey nomad population is known to deliberately avoid highly commodified locations such as major caravan parks (Davies and James 2011).

Like Onyx and Leonard (2007) and Cridland (2008), Davies (2011) identified grey nomads using a chronological signifier (aged 55+). She extended previous analyses by showing that grey nomads could stay in a broader range of accommodation types during their travels, including hotels and private houses. However, in contrast to Onyx and Leonard (2005; 2007), Cridland (2008) and Davies (2011) some scholars eschew chronological parameters for defining grey nomads and instead draw on labour force status, and specifically retirement, as a key parameter (e.g., Higgs and Quirk 2007; Hillman 2013). More recent studies and reports on grey nomads tend to use chronological age classifications and specify that grey nomads are free from travel limiting work and family obligations, but do not specify that they are retired (see for example, Darley et al. 2017).

The variability of these definitional parameters, and the findings subsequently produced from each study highlight the need for a more standardised set of definitional parameters for identifying the grey nomad population in order to facilitate analysis of the size, characteristics and migration practices of the grey nomad sub-population. The ABS investigated this as part of a 2011 study on homelessness. It defined grey nomads as “people in dwellings where all people in the dwelling were aged 55 years and over, were not in the labour force, and were staying in caravans, cabins or houseboats on Census night” (ABS 2011). The ABS found that on census night approximately 2,500 people in Australia were grey nomads and of these, 80% were two person households (ABS 2011). The analysis revealed that 45% of the grey nomad population was ‘elsewhere in Australia’ compared to a year previous and 17% were at the same location as they were a year previous. Interestingly, 40% recorded having no usual address the year previous, suggesting that approximately 1,000 older Australians were, at that time, permanently nomadic. However, as with the aforementioned case study-based investigations into grey nomads, the ABS’s conclusions about grey nomads is limited by the definition used. Specifically, by viewing grey nomads as ‘retired’ the ABS’s analysis only included those not in the labour force. There is a need to revisit the definition used by the ABS in 2011 and consider alternative parameters for capturing meaningful information about this population in the census.

As most scholars agree that grey nomads include those living in caravans, cabins and houseboats and, with 55 years the most commonly used age marker in studies published in the last decade, these characteristics in the definition do not require reconsideration and can be easily extracted from existing census datasets. It is also most commonly agreed across the literature that grey nomads need to be traveling for an extended period to be considered a grey nomad. While the

duration of their travels is not possible to determine from the census, it is possible to determine that the dwelling location categories 'manufactured home estates' and 'retirement villages' should be excluded from the analysis.

It becomes more problematic when trying to accommodate variable retirement status among grey nomads, as well as the subset of grey nomads who are permanently nomadic. On the first point, as some grey nomads are not retired (indeed the website The Grey Nomads at <https://www.thegreynomads.com.au/> includes testimonials of grey nomads who are 'working' and a classifieds section for those seeking work) it is necessary to include those who are still in the labour force in any analysis. However, in including this group, it is likely that those who travel for employment and who do not consider themselves to be grey nomads would also be included. Those who are employed full-time or are unemployed seeking full-time employment can be excluded, as these people are unlikely to be grey nomads.

On the second point, it initially appears possible to identify grey nomads by identifying from the census those who were 'away from home'. As a portion of grey nomads are permanently nomadic, it is necessary to include those who were 'away from home' as well as those who were 'at home' on census night. However, including those who were 'at home' in a mobile dwelling at a caravan/residential park, camping ground or marina then includes those who permanently live in these places and do not travel and therefore would not fit the definition of a grey nomad. Table 2 shows these two groups.

**Table 2: People aged 55 and over in a caravan, cabin or houseboat on census night 2016**

	Employed, part time	Employed, away from work	Unemployed, looking for part time work	Not in the labour force	Total
<b>Elsewhere in Australia</b>					
Caravan, at caravan/ residential park or camping ground	1,356	3,715	179	42,177	47,427
Cabin, houseboat at a marina	32	20	4	324	380
<b>At Home</b>					
Caravan, at caravan/ residential park or camping ground	1,284	377	161	12,703	14,525
Cabin, houseboat at a marina	835	147	87	8,634	9,703
<i>Total</i>	<i>3,507</i>	<i>4,259</i>	<i>431</i>	<i>63,838</i>	<i>72,035</i>

Source: ABS (2021b)

In considering those who were 'at home' in a mobile dwelling, general characteristics can be identified such as age profile, median income, education, gender, volunteer participation, and need for assistance. These data could be used to guide policies to ensure that appropriate social and

health care services and infrastructure are developed to support grey nomads. However, as already noted, these data would include individuals who do not identify as grey nomads. In terms of revealing the mobility patterns of grey nomads, duration of travel, and bi-local and multi-local forms or residence, the extant census data are limited in their utility.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion: where to for the census?**

Official statistics, such as those derived from national censuses are powerful tools of governmentality (Kukutai and Taylor 2012). The way the census conceptualises categories of analysis determines the kinds of social realities that are rendered visible through it. The normative framing of the concepts of 'usual residence' and 'home' in the census obscures the variability in the way some sections of Australia's population experience residence and home. This paper focused on the grey nomad population to emphasise the challenges that exist in trying to develop an understanding of the size and characteristics of this sub-population from census data. With grey nomads not fitting into normative framings of usual residence and home, researchers have relied on discrete case study-based data to infer characteristics about the grey nomad population. However, a review of the extant literature reveals variability between the definitions researchers have used to identify the grey nomad population. These differences in definitions have informed the development of different research sampling frames, which potentially skews understandings developed about the grey nomad population.

Of course, the grey nomad population is just one example of a mobile sub-population whose mobility practices are not well understood. The rationalities and service needs of other sub-populations who engage in bi-locale and multi-locale living, as well as those that are not homeless but have no permanent addresses(s) are also invisibilised by the ABS's normative framework for conceptualising usual residence. The invisibility of these rationalities has very real policy implications. As an example, Australia's public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has sought to significantly curb mobility during particular periods, rests heavily on the understanding that most people have a permanent home to which they can retreat, or are homeless. However, as we do not collect data on non-normative performances of residence, it is difficult to determine how many people might have been left significantly displaced or detrimentally impacted by such mobility restrictions. There are also broader non-COVID related policy challenges for mobile population groups, from ensuring access to basic social services such as health and education services, to navigating through the common tropes often associated with mobile populations (e.g., as 'parasitic' in nature, as threats to conservation practices, as ungovernable etc.) (see Gilbert 2014).

The utility of the data collected through the census is, necessarily, limited by the nature, number and complexity of questions that can be included. However, we argue that in looking to the 2026 Census, enabling residence data to be captured in such a way as to facilitate an improved understanding of bi-local, multi-local and nomadic populations would enable a richer understanding of residence and population mobility in Australia and provide critical insights to better service these populations, wherever they may be located.

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