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Rural youth drain: Attitudes, behaviours & perceptions

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Abstract

The issue of depopulation of the bush generally and the regional youth exodus in particular has become the focus of contemporary population debate. Net migration losses of youth aged 15 to 29 years are almost universal throughout the rural areas and the scale of migration has escalated over the past two decades. This paper focuses on Australia's regional crisis with reference to Richmond Shire in North West Queensland. This research examines the demographic characteristics, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of youth and their intentions of either staying or leaving the bush. The methodology employed included questionnaire surveys of youth at the secondary school level in Richmond and youth now living in Townsville, a major destination area, but formerly from Richmond. Community members were also interviewed to ascertain future destination choices and migration patterns. The research concludes that reasons for leaving the bush are diverse and dependent on the individual's life experiences. Youth migration is an inevitable stage in the life cycle, and in the case of rural areas it occurs much earlier.

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Abstract: The regional youth exodus and the depopulation of the bush is a major component of contemporary population debate. It is presumed that rural youth are making a free choice to leave rural areas for urban centres. This paper focuses on the Australian rural youth drain with reference to Richmond Shire, Queensland. The research examines the factors influencing rural youth decisions to migrate. An understanding of this process has been developed through unstructured interviews with rural youth previously from Richmond Shire and now living in Townsville. Qualitative analysis explores youth attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of the rural youth drain. This research reports that although rural youth are leaving for opportunities offered elsewhere, their choice to move is influenced by the parental household.

Young people aged between 15 and 24 years are typically the most mobile population group (ABS 2003; Weeks 1996). Youth are ready to embark on new opportunities as a result of changes in the life course including leaving school, starting a full time job, leaving the parental home, the first union and the birth of the first child. These events are referred to as the transition to adulthood (Billari 2001; Billari and Wilson 2001; Haurin and Haurin 1991; Molgat 2002). Rural youth are more likely to leave their parental home earlier than their urban counterparts for reasons of education and employment (Garasky 2002; Molgat 2002). Over recent decades there has been a continuing out-migration of youth, aged 15 to 24 years, from rural areas in the direction of urban centres in Australia (ABS 2003; Hugo 2000; Hugo 2001; Ryan 1984). This loss of youth is referred to as the 'rural youth drain'.

Inland rural populations are said to be stagnant or in decline, a result of youth leaving for education and/or employment. It is perceived that this decision to leave, made by youth, is a consequence of the limited opportunities of education and employment in rural areas (Alston 2002; Eversole 2001; Gabriel 2000; Garasky 2002; Hugo 2000; Jones 1999; Molgat 2002; Ryan 1984; Southcott 2002; Stimson 2001). However, not all rural youth are attracted to the freedom that the urban landscape offers (Young 1994). Therefore, the decision as to whether to stay or leave rural areas is important and is the focus of this paper.

Processes of diffusion and leaving the parental home play a fundamental role in the process of internal migration. Theories of migration decision making are governed by the assumption that individual's make a free, rational choice to migrate (Lee 1969; Lewis 1974). Contrary to this, processes of diffusion suggest that the information field constrains and directs migration decisions based on the real or presumed existence of opportunities (Getis *et al.* 2004; Gould 1969; Hägerstrand 1967; Haggett 1983). In terms of the process of migration, the perceptions of the given destination may intensify as the migrant communicates with family and/or friends residing in the place of origin. The knowledge and ideas about the place of destination may then be communicated to other friends and neighbours gradually spreading throughout the population. As a result of the information field other family members such as younger brothers and/or sisters, and friends may eventually move to that place of destination (Getis *et al.* 2004; Gould 1969; Hägerstrand 1967: 165; Haggett 1983).

However, there has been limited research examining the decision of rural youth to migrate. In particular, literature has not focused on the roles that the rural lifestyle and the household play in influencing this decision. This paper examines how the rural discourse and the family direct the decision of rural youth to migrate. The research explores the situation of youth who have left a rural area having made that decision.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used since this research focuses on the underlying processes of migration decision making. During the period of October 2003 to February 2004, detailed accounts of rural youth experiences were obtained through unstructured interviews. The research focused on 11 youth aged between 15 and 24 years who previously lived in Richmond Shire, Queensland and were residing in Townsville at the time of the interview. Townsville was selected because it is considered one of the major destination choices of Richmond youth. Owing to the lack of knowledge on locality destinations, snowball sampling was employed. This involved talking to numerous Richmond Shire community members which identified links with youth living in Townsville and established the community's perception of the rural youth drain.

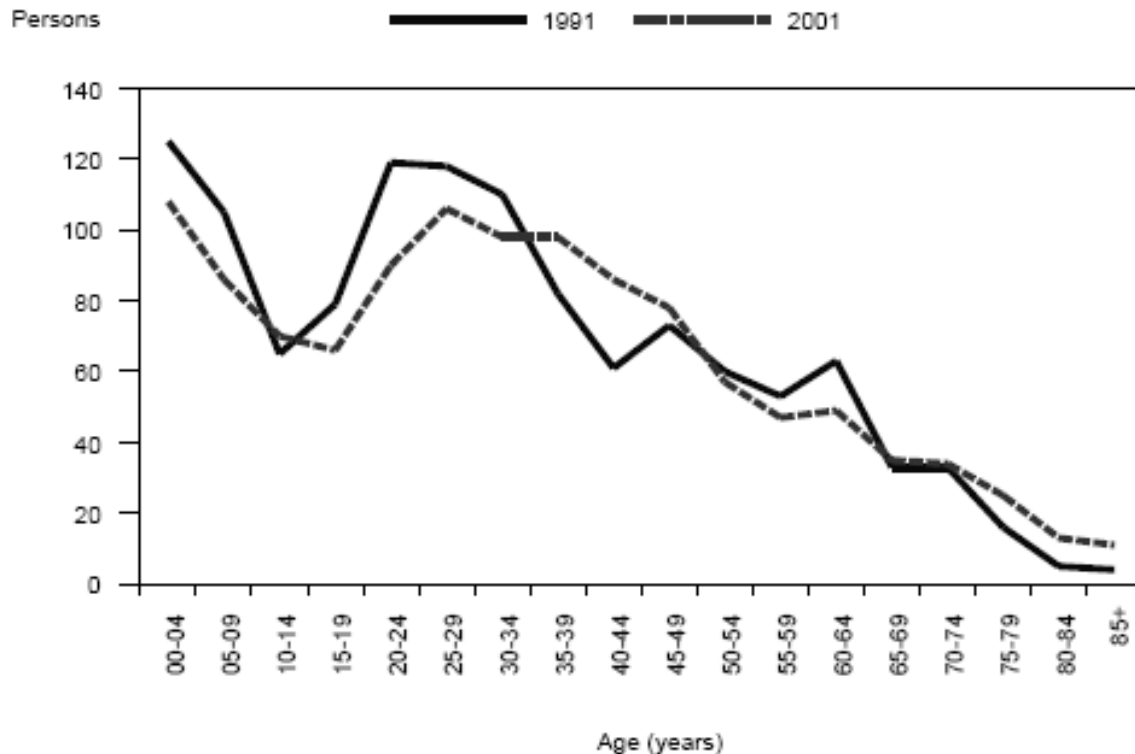
Richmond Shire is a small community of approximately 1,152 people (PIFU 2003). This Shire demonstrates characteristics of interest to the rural youth drain. Firstly, Richmond Shire is categorised as a 'very remote area' (according to the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA)) and is therefore classed as a rural area (Glover *et al.* 1999). Secondly, the Shire's age structure for 2001 shows a lower level of 13.3 percent within the 15 to 24 years cohort when compared with the age structure of the whole State of 14.1 percent (Table 1). This decrease in age structure is also evident in Figure 1 suggesting that youth aged between 15 and 24 years are moving away from Richmond Shire. Thirdly, Townsville is identified as being one of the major destinations for Richmond Shire youth.

Table 1. Population by Age Group for Richmond Shire and Queensland, 2001 and 2021

	Percentage Age Group				
	0-14	15-24	25-44	45-64	65+
Richmond Shire					
2001	23.2	13.3	33.4	19.9	10.2
2021	15.4	10.9	31.7	27.6	14.4
Queensland					
2001	21.3	14.1	29.8	23.2	11.6
2021	17.5	12.9	26.9	25.9	16.8

Source: PIFU 2003. p. 2

Figure 1. Estimated Resident Population by Age Group for Richmond Shire from 30 June 1991 to 2001



Source: OESR 2004. p. 3

THE COUNTRY LIFESTYLE

The rural lifestyle is not just about the lack of opportunities offered to youth (Alston 2002; Gabriel 2000; Jones 1999; Southcott 2002; Stimson 2001). Interviews with Richmond youth revealed that growing up in a small, close-knit community provides a sense of safety, unlimited freedom, and opportunities to drive cars, ride motor bikes and horses, and go swimming in rivers. As a result of these childhood experiences some Richmond youth also expressed a desire to return to Richmond to raise a family or after completing their studies and gaining work experience.

However, it is also due to this lifestyle and the small community environment that youth also revealed awareness for the limited education and employment opportunities. Encompassed within this perception is the expectation for youth to attend boarding school. While they enjoyed growing up in Richmond, they knew that they would have to leave for boarding school as indicated:

It was my choice. I would've had to go for 11 and 12 but I chose to go in Grade 10 (Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 8. 2004, pers. comm., 25 February).

This expectation of going to boarding school is further supported where a Richmond community member observed that:

...A lot of properties send kids at Year 8. It's partly tradition-mum and dad went at that age (Richmond community member 2003, pers. comm., 22 October).

Leaving for boarding school is a challenging aspect of the rural lifestyle. Rural youth accustomed to a small, close-knit community with unlimited freedom, enter an environment confined by rules and timelines, as stated:

...hated it, I would never send my child there. It was terrible. I went in Grade 11 and before that I never had to go away for long periods from home. I never had strict timelines of when to get up, when to study. School work was difficult. I was the dux in Richmond, in Townsville it was different. I found I prob'ly didn't learn what I really had to out west. I had to get tutors and stuff. I didn't care anymore, my schoolwork slipped a lot, I got into trouble. Year 12 I realised I had to buckle down and I passed senior year (Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 3. 2004, pers. comm., 25 February).

And

...“a necessary evil” I guess you could call it. You prefer to be home but you know you gotta be there. It wasn't that bad, you couldn't do what you want, you could only go into town for two hours once a week (Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 7. 2004, pers. comm., 25 February).

It is certainly an aspect where the parental household is playing a fundamental role in the decision to attend boarding school.

AWAY FROM HOME AS AN ACCEPTABLE LIFESTYLE

During this research it became clear that while the parents of the Richmond participants were not essentially making the decision for youth to migrate, they were encouraging it. Richmond youth who were unhappy at boarding school, or expressed a desire to return home after completing school, were debating with their parents to do so.

To convey the extent of the relevance of the family in the decision-making process, select participant profiles¹ are illustrated. These life histories are developed through the personal accounts provided by the participants.

Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 6 - Leigh

Leigh, an 18 year old female was born and raised in Richmond Shire. She enjoys life in Richmond on properties rather than in the town and would like to raise her children there.

Leigh had no choice and went to boarding school in Grade 8 in Charters Towers. She was homesick until Grades 9 and 10 when she started adjusting to the experience because she forged friendships. In Grade 8 she used to “ball (cry) her eyes out”. In fact, in Grade 10 she even thought about leaving school and attending agricultural college. Leigh is glad she did not because, while she loves her horses, she wants to do something different. Leigh’s parent’s “pushed” her to stay at school but let her decide. She believes that her parents wished for her to stay at boarding school because they knew she would have changed her mind about agricultural college and consequently, she would have had to “repeat” Grades 11 and 12.

After Grade 10 Leigh did not like returning to Richmond during holidays because she had no friends in the Shire, and because her brother did not return home anymore after changing schools. Leigh found that at home she was alone and consequently she would have to do a lot of work on the property. She was glad to be there to help her mum but stated, “it’s just so dry and dead”. Leigh commented that is probably the reason she moved out of her parental home straight after finishing secondary school. Leigh is glad that she attended boarding school because she feels that she would still be living in Richmond if she had not.

After school Leigh moved to Townsville where she attended university. She did not move to Charters Towers because she found the town boring during her five years of schooling. She states, “there is more to do in Richmond than Charters Towers”! She moved to Townsville because she had a desire to leave Richmond after living there the majority of her life. Townsville was also the preferred location because her brother resides in the city. At times she wishes that she had stayed at home longer because her mother is living in Richmond Shire by herself, and she misses her horses.

¹ The names used in the profiles are fictional. They have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.

Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 9 - Kate

Kate, an 18 year old female who moved to a property in Richmond Shire when she was in pre-school, preferred the rural lifestyle when she was younger. She lived in town during the week (for school) and on the property during the weekends. Kate went to boarding school in Grade 11 and “hated” it. She disliked being “locked up”. From the start of term two in Grade 11 she attended Hughenden State High School until she finished Grade 12. She liked going to school in Hughenden because it gave her the opportunity to drive home every weekend to be with her parents.

While Kate believes that her parents did not “push” her to attend boarding school as much as university, her mother did not want for her to complete her secondary education in Richmond Shire. In fact Kate’s mother states, “initially she was excited to be going but when reality hits, it is hard”. From her mother’s perspective, she believes that Kate found it hard to mix socially at boarding school because of peer pressure. Her mother was determined not to let her stay in Richmond so she reached a compromise with Kate where she attended Hughenden State School. Kate’s mother notes that it was the only way she could resolve the problem and is glad that she did not let her daughter stay in Richmond Shire.

Kate moved to Townsville for university straight after finishing secondary school, after having many arguments with her mother against leaving Richmond. She is glad that she did however, because she believes that it is unlikely that she would have left Richmond and gone to university if she had a taken year off from studying. Kate did not move to Brisbane because she felt it was too “far” and too “big” and “scary” for her, especially coming from Richmond.

Kate enjoys living in Townsville because she finds that there is more to do socially including the beach, movies, and night clubbing. She states, “you wouldn’t get that in Richmond, it has a different night life”, that of the pub. The only thing about Townsville that Kate dislikes is, that while there is always social activities, money is needed to resource it.

Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 11 - Nicole

Nicole, a 20 year old who grew up in Richmond Shire on her parent’s property, enjoys the rural lifestyle. Nicole completed her primary education through School of the Air until she was in Grade 7. She left for boarding school in Townsville to complete her secondary education and only returned home during holidays. Nicole did not enjoy boarding school education “like any normal teenager”, but found the social side “really good”. She was able to develop strong friendships and had the opportunity to socialize with families of “day” boarders on weekends. She states, “I would definitely send my kids there!”

Nicole wanted to return home after completing Year 12 at boarding school but her father insisted she find employment and “give it a go” in Townsville for 12 months. So she did. During this period Nicole purchased a unit which she resided in. She has just sold the unit after 12 months of ownership. Now, while she thinks that Townsville is a nice town because she finds it “small” and “friendly”, she wants to travel and see the rest of the world!

Interviews with Richmond youth revealed a perception that while their parents are happy with their children’s future aspirations, they were encouraging them to attend boarding school because of a desire for a better life for their children than they had. This is heightened due to the perception of the rural lifestyle offering limited opportunities of education and

employment. These life histories also illustrate that while it is a given that rural youth attend boarding school, parents are also encouraging their children to leave once it is finished.

Boarding school also plays a fundamental role in the leaving home process and the rural youth drain. The research indicated that absence from the comfort of their parents teaches independence. Consequently, many Richmond youth interviewed found the step from boarding school to leaving their parental home and Richmond as “not a big issue”, stating:

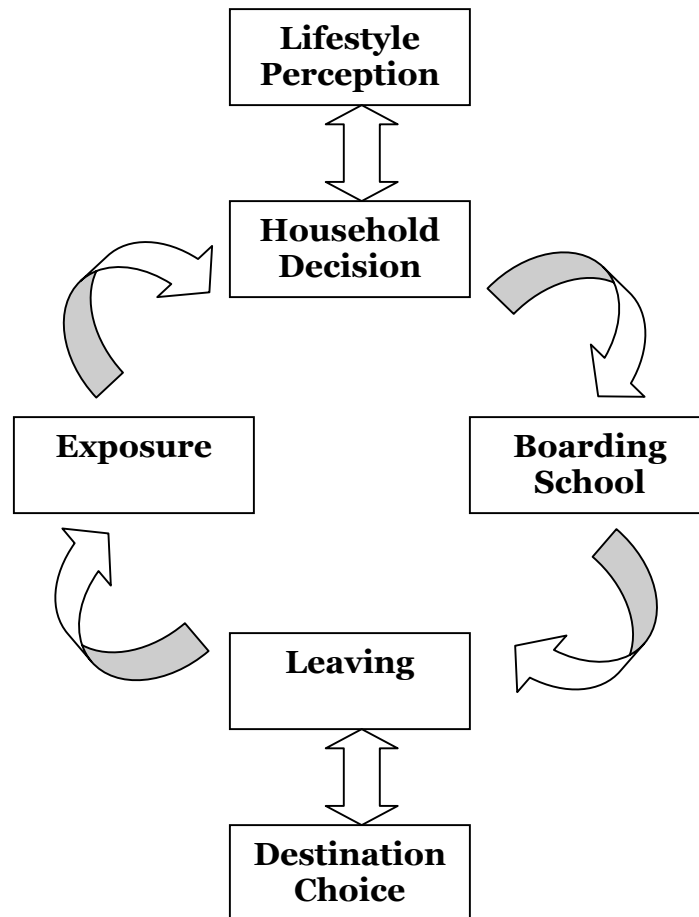
I came to Townsville and my friends here were still living at home with curfews and stuff. I think it's weird! I feel I've got a lot more independence than a few of my friends here...even when I was in Richmond 'cos we had to do jobs (Richmond Youth Living in Townsville 5. 2004, pers. comm., 19 February).

EXPANDING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Contrary to theories of migration which suggest that individuals make a free, rational choice to migrate, this research paper illustrates that Richmond youth are constrained and directed by the parental household perceptions of the rural lifestyle, encompassing boarding school, and consequently Richmond's information field (Lee 1969; Lewis 1974). While Richmond youth enjoy growing up in rural areas, with the freedom that the wide open space offers, the abundance of innovative leisure opportunities, a safe and close-knit community environment, the perception of the rural lifestyle having limited education and employment opportunities is also apparent. Interviews with Richmond youth created images of the rural lifestyle having limited education and employment opportunities which is enhanced by their parents' expectations for a better life for their children. This illustrates aspects of the processes of diffusion (Getis *et al.* 2004; Gould 1969; Hägerstrand 1967; Haggett 1983). The decision for rural youth to leave is directed by their parents' knowledge of the real or presumed existence of education and employment opportunities.

In summary, the rural lifestyle, boarding school, and the role of the family decision making processes influence rural youth's decision to migrate as illustrated in Figure 2. In particular, the rural lifestyle is heightening perceptions of the lack of opportunities through the information field of a small community. This is also directing youth towards attending boarding school. Consequently, the experiences at boarding school and the information field are encouraging youth to leave rural areas after school. Youth who have left are communicating back with their parental household, intensifying the presumed and real knowledge of the rural lifestyle and the availability of education and employment opportunities elsewhere.

Figure 2. Interrelationships of the Major Influencing Factors in the Rural Youth Migration Decision Process



CONCLUSION

Contrary to the common perception that the rural youth drain is a consequence of the free, rational choice made by youth to migrate for education and employment opportunities, this research paper shows that the parental household plays a fundamental role in affecting the migration decision-making process. Youth who are leaving are trying to make the most out of their lives by experiencing new things. There comes a time in everyone's life where it may be time to explore new avenues. It is just occurring earlier in the lives of rural youth as opposed to their urban counterparts.

While this research provides a detailed localised insight into the rural youth drain, further research is still pertinent. Central to this research paper is evaluating rural youth migration in the direction of urban centres. However, rural youth migration is also occurring in the direction of other inland rural towns from Richmond. Evaluating the rural youth drain not only in the direction of urban centres, but also in the direction of other rural localities would provide a greater insight into the factors influencing the migration decision process. Also, a broader qualitative approach looking at a variety of rural towns would be considerably worthwhile for a regional perspective of the issue.

Comprehensive understanding of the role that parents play in the migration decision process for rural youth also requires a greater understanding of the parental life histories and their views towards the youth exodus from rural areas. Investigating parental attitudes, behaviours and perceptions will also detail issues of conflict between the perceived importance of leaving rural areas or staying close to home. The majority of Richmond Shire youth living in Townsville who were interviewed were female. Therefore, implications for further research may also include investigating whether there is a trend for rural parents to encourage their daughters to leave and whether they have preference for their sons to stay and take over the family business.

Although many studies have looked at the rural youth drain and reasons for, only a few have looked at the governing factors behind the youth decision to migrate (Garasky 2002). For Richmond Shire, these underlying factors include the rural lifestyle, the boarding school experience and the household decision making-process. While there is room for further research, the implications are regional. The question now is whether these findings from Richmond youth are consistent with other locations. It is also important to determine whether the rural youth drain really is detrimental, both to the individuals and/or the communities concerned.

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