

## **CHAPTER 4 – STATE SERVICE PROVISION AND ABORIGINAL MOBILITIES**

### **4.1 Introduction**

During the first half of 2006, a print, television and radio media frenzy erupted in Australia concerning conditions in remote Aboriginal communities and the failures of all levels of government in adequately servicing them. Reports focussed on third world living conditions, ongoing cycles of alcohol and sexual abuse, and escalating violence in many Indigenous communities (see for example Banks, 2006; Gerard, 2006; Norington and Karvelas, 2006; Pennells, 2006; Rothwell, 2006b; a). In some ways, this increased public scrutiny seemed to strengthen the Federal Government's resolve to intervene more comprehensively in the lives of Indigenous Australians. In response to mounting criticism, and inspired by several public commentators, the language of 'unviable communities' crept into the public service vernacular. Johns (2006), for example, argued that many small, remote Aboriginal outstations are not economically viable. He questioned why such communities continue to be sustained by the Federal purse. Hughes and Warin (2005 p. 4) referred to economically stagnant remote communities as 'living museums.' They painted a picture of such communities, in their current state, as festering sores of economic and social decay that leach tax-payer resources. The Federal Government has drawn heavily on this perspective:

Listening to Indigenous Australians does not mean blindly accepting, for example, that services – like education, health and housing – can be delivered at equal levels and equally well in townships and the homelands for the same people. We have to be realistic and we have to be honest ... No more cultural museums that might make some people feel good and leave Indigenous Australians without a viable future. Continuing cultural identity does not require poverty or isolation (Vanstone, 2005 Section: Townships and Homelands, para. 11 and Section: Conclusion, para. 2).

A range of issues have been considered within policy discussions about the conditions within and viability of remote Aboriginal communities. One of these is the issue of servicing an often transient population. The Minister's comments in the

above quotation exemplify the persistent expression of concern amongst State and Federal service providers about resource wastage, real or imagined, associated with continuing to conventionally service highly mobile Aboriginal populations living in remote areas. Within the current climate of neo-liberalism and economic rationalisation, responses to the perceived inefficiencies of such resourcing procedures have inevitably reverberated around consolidating services in larger towns and providing fewer resources in smaller, often seasonally occupied settlements. Karvelas (2006) reported in May 2006 that the Federal Government was to embark upon an audit of approximately 1000 remote communities with fewer than 100 residents, with a view to 'voluntarily' move people out of 'unsustainable places.' According to the report, specific communities would be targeted for re-settlement or service reduction.

Responses such as service reduction and community closure demonstrate an ongoing failure of governments to seek to understand Aboriginal mobility processes beyond simplistic, conventional conceptualisations. Within the current policy debate about appropriately, efficiently and justly servicing Aboriginal populations, there have been few reported efforts toward understanding what motivates, shapes, and underpins Aboriginal mobility processes. Current responses are instead reminiscent of failed past policies that sought to problematise, redirect and control Aboriginal spatiality without any informed understanding of the forces that underpinned it. Although the focus of this most recent debate has been on small, isolated communities, the failure to carefully and systematically incorporate adequate understandings of Aboriginal mobility processes into service provision policies and frameworks at both State and Federal levels is evident at a range of geographical scales and locations. Further, the discussion as reported reveals very little insight into the relationship between service provision and Aboriginal mobility processes – a fundamental consideration in the context of both macro-scale and micro-scale policy decisions about service delivery to Aboriginal populations.

#### **4.1.1 A Dialectical Relationship**

In contemporary Western Australia, State Government service provision models continue to be based on implicit Eurocentric understandings of 'normal' mobility practices. Hamilton (1987) identified two general classifications of 'normalised'

intra-national mobility processes in non-Indigenous society. The first is commuting: regular, usually intra-urban, short-term movements between home and work. Commuting might be classed as a form of circulation since it doesn't involve a permanent change of residence. The second form of mobility process identified by Hamilton as 'normal' in non-Indigenous society, is larger movements that are classified either as holidays, or visits to relatives for special occasions such as birthdays or weddings. Again, these movements involve no permanent change of residence. A third category of mobility which may be added to Hamilton's list, is permanent or long-term migrations, or what Newton and Bell (1996) termed 'inter-regional' movements. In non-Indigenous society, these usually occur in response to job opportunities in geographically distant locales, or increasingly, for lifestyle reasons such as sea-changes and tree-changes (Wulff and Newton, 1996; Newton and Bell, 1996). These migrations are infrequent movements from one established locale to another for non-contingent, easily comprehensible and largely predictable reasons<sup>48</sup>.

Mainstream service provision policies and delivery frameworks have been developed to cater to these largely predictable, sedentary and increasingly urban-based lifestyles. Investment in fixed and permanent infrastructure such as houses, hospitals and schools through which services are delivered, reinforces a spatial ordering that privileges sedentarisation (Young and Doohan, 1989 p.199). Consequently, popular discourse regarding Aboriginal mobilities and service provision focuses predominantly on the ways in which 'abnormal' Aboriginal spatial practices disrupt service delivery frameworks. This focus was evident in most interviews conducted during fieldwork. A large portion of the data collected describes the impacts of Aboriginal mobilities on the provision of basic government services. As this chapter establishes, such disruption undoubtedly occurs. However, the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and service provision is dialectical rather than one-way. To frame discussion exclusively in terms of the ways in which the mobilities of 'transient' Aboriginal populations in Yamatji country challenge conventional models of service delivery, would be to overlook two important processes. First, the relative

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<sup>48</sup> While simplistic, this caricature of non-Indigenous intra-national mobility provides a robust, if basic, benchmark of the 'normalised' types of processes which emerge from the literature and are drawn into a public discourse.

conformity of the 'core' to the sedentary lifestyles which access to government services command. And second, the ways in which contested and sporadic interactions with basic government services shape and perpetuate Aboriginal mobilities.

Using the three services outlined above by Minister Vanstone – housing, health and education – as case studies in Yamatji country, this chapter demonstrates that provision of these services by the State Government is both deeply influenced by, and exerts influence over Aboriginal mobility processes. These processes must therefore be understood, not just mitigated against, if such services are to be delivered appropriately, effectively and justly to Aboriginal populations.

## **4.2 Public Housing**

As Ross (2000) has aptly noted, there are many angles from which to approach the broad theme of 'Indigenous housing.' These include history and policy, architecture and design philosophies, land use and residence, conceptualisation of shelter, and lived experience (Ross, 2000 p. 3). Indeed, extensive research has addressed many of these themes comprehensively (see for example Jackson, 1997; Kirke, 2001; Memmott, 1997; Minnery, Manicaros and Lindfield 2000; Morgan, 1999; Musharbash, 2003; Pholeros, Rainow and Torzillo 1993; Prout, 2002; Ross, 1987; Sanders, 1993; Thompson, 2001; Tonkinson and Tonkinson, 1979). However, the often contested relationship between public housing provision and Aboriginal spatial practice has received much less scholarship (for one analysis, see Gray, 2004). This section examines the dialectical relationship between the public housing sector and Aboriginal mobility practices in the fieldwork region. It focuses specifically on the causes of the contestation that often characterises this relationship.

### **4.2.1 Housing Arrangements**

As Chapter Three highlighted, one of the common local perceptions about highly mobile Aboriginal people is that they have no responsibilities or ties to a particular locale. Owning or renting a home is often seen as a particularly tangible example of such an anchor. A person's relationship to a housing structure is consequently used as a measure of their relative 'stability.' In Meekatharra for example, home ownership or lengthy rental arrangements are commonly used to distinguish 'the core' from 'the transients.' At least eight Aboriginal families in Meekatharra own

their own homes. One interviewee even suggested that some Aboriginal people in Meekatharra derive a similar sense of 'home' from their houses as she does from her relationship to her traditional country:

*You get a lot of locals, what they call home is their house. You know that unna. People get so attached to their house. And that's their home, that's their space. They bought that block of land, and then they get so attached to it, they don't want to move. They'll go, locals will go. They'll still have that house there. They'll rent it out and come back. Only unless something really dromestic [sic] happens, for them to force them out of town (Michelle Riley, 29 November, 2004).*

For these individuals, their home becomes a space over which they govern, and a familiar place to which they can return. Home ownership allows them a freedom to travel when necessary or desired but at the same time, anchors them to a particular place:

*MC: ... the home turns out to be the pain in the neck.*

*SP: So would you prefer not to be in a home like that then?*

*MC: I enjoy it while I'm there. Wherever I'm at. So yeh, home is somewhere to - it's good to have a home to come home to. A place to come home to so that you're out of everyone's way, nobody's in your face you know. And you need somewhere to land so when you're back after 10 days away people who have missed you or need you for some reason, they know you're home, they all come and visit. Then you catch up with them. It's good going away, it's good coming back (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

While a significant number of Aboriginal residents in Meekatharra own their own homes, many do not. Most of these people enter the public housing system or reside with someone who has.

In Western Australia, public housing is provided to Aboriginal people through a number of programs. In discrete Aboriginal communities, usually with populations under 500 and remotely located, most housing is provided through Federal programs

at low-cost rent<sup>49</sup>. Other housing in remote communities is provided by the Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Unit (AHIU) – a program initiative of the State Government’s Department of Housing and Works (DHW) that is jointly funded by the Western Australian and Federal Governments. In larger towns and cities, public housing is available to all low-income earners, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, through Homeswest, a branch of the DHW<sup>50</sup>. In Meekatharra, Homeswest have a substantial housing stock and rent properties to primarily Aboriginal tenants who enter a tenancy agreement with the State Government. Homeswest manage their housing stock through an annual construction program, a Spot Purchase Program (purchasing properties from the private market), and an Aboriginal Home Ownership Scheme which they promote with existing long-term tenants (DHW, 2004). In Yamatji country, the Murchison Region Aboriginal Corporation (MRAC) is an alternate, albeit far more under-resourced, public housing provider for Aboriginal people.

#### **4.2.2 A Contested Inter-relationship**

Aboriginal relationships with Homeswest are often characterised by frequent and ongoing contestation (Beresford, 2001). A recent report by the Western Australian Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) noted that although only 22% of Homeswest tenants were Aboriginal, 42.6% of all termination notices were issued to Aboriginal people. Further, 44% of all court orders and 42.5% of all bailiff evictions were issued to Aboriginal tenants (EOC, 2004). Between 1996 and 2004, the EOC reported having received over 400 registered complaints from Aboriginal people claiming that they had been directly or indirectly discriminated against by Homeswest (EOC, 2004 p. 43). The 2004 EOC Inquiry also detailed considerable anecdotal testimony of Aboriginal people who expressed concern about the nature of Homeswest service delivery. From a service provision perspective, Aboriginal tenancies are reportedly more likely to incur property damage and substantial repair and maintenance costs and be abandoned, resulting in rent arrears. This contested

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<sup>49</sup> Community housing is provided through the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) and the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS), both administered by the Federal department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Grants are provided to Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs) to provide housing and infrastructure services in specified communities. These grants are awarded on a provisional basis to ICHOs that have clear rental policies and demonstrate a proven capacity to collect rent from tenants.

<sup>50</sup> This program is administered by the State Government but is jointly funded by the Federal Government under a Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA).

relationship is the result of Aboriginal responses to both marginalising historical housing policies, and a contemporary public housing system which continues to fail to incorporate Aboriginal understandings about the role and purpose of housing.

Housing has historically been a mechanism of comprehensive non-Indigenous intervention in Indigenous lives (Sanders, 2000). Until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Aboriginal people were denied public housing, and government policy was concerned with segregating the Aboriginal population from non-Aboriginal society on reserves and in institutions. From the mid 1950s until 1972, public housing policy relating to Aboriginal people was directed by the concept of 'transitional housing' (EOC, 2004; Manning, 2004; Morgan, 1999; Sanders, 1990; 1993). As instruments of assimilation, transitional housing policies progressed Aboriginal people through various stages of housing as they demonstrated an increased integration into non-Aboriginal society and the capacity to manage their new living environments. For many Aboriginal people, conventional European-style housing became an icon of the shortcomings of 'Aboriginality' and a symbol of colonial attempts to reform and remake their identities. Reser (1979) noted that:

... 'housing' has been explicitly used and activated as the principle acculturation and socialisation agent for Australian Aborigines, the successful maintenance of a 'European' house assuring some semblance of an internalisation of white values (p.78).

Ultimately, transitional housing policies were developed based on particular Eurocentric understandings about the role and purpose of housing. Sanders (2000) described the pivotal role of conflicting housing traditions in Indigenous and non-Indigenous domains which contribute to contemporary contestations. Traditional Indigenous housing structures were flexible, seasonal and lived around and out of as much as within (Reser, 1979). Shelters housed various compositions of family members and in some instances, were constructed for separate men's and women's living areas (Sanders, 2000). In contrast, European housing was constructed for the year-round and life-long residence of nuclear family units. Sanders (2000) suggested that given these highly divergent housing histories, it is hardly surprising that housing remains a source of contemporary inter-cultural contestation. He stopped short of drawing the connection between these contradictory housing traditions and

the equally incongruous mobility practices which they served to support: the Indigenous housing tradition being based on a semi-nomadic lifestyle, and the European housing tradition on a settlement existence. It follows then that the Indigenous experience of contestation within the public housing system is not merely one of opposing housing traditions, but of the spatial practices which inform them.

The public housing system in Western Australia is clearly based on the dominant Eurocentric conceptualisation about the role and purpose of housing. Homeswest deliver permanent structures to house nuclear family units of generally between four and five people, who live sedentary lifestyles. For some Aboriginal people, this system has meant a confinement of their mobility practices:

*And I think you get into a Homeswest home and you get behind in your rent, and you feel that you shouldn't move out, you know, you gotta pay the rent. I don't know, all these little responsibilities that tie you down. Obligations and responsibilities to other people I think (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

For others, experiences within the public housing system are alienating and marginalising, often characterised as a struggle to maintain comfortable levels of conformation with the settlement expectations of non-Aboriginal society, and foster and uphold the practices of self-governance and cultural distinctiveness. In some cases, Aboriginal mobilities may represent a reluctance toward wholesale engagement with the public housing system which has in the past been the handmaiden of the colonial project<sup>51</sup>.

#### **4.2.2.1 Overcrowding – Effects at the Destination**

Overcrowded dwellings are perhaps the most commonly identified manifestation of contested interaction between Aboriginal people and the public housing system. There is a well worn research path describing the outcomes of overcrowding, including increased risks of health problems (Gray and Saggars, 1994), domestic violence and sexual abuse (Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002), and feuding (Tenants Advice Service, 2003 p. 17)<sup>52</sup>. Overcrowding is therefore often used as a measure of the failure of the public housing system to appropriately service the Aboriginal

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<sup>51</sup> See also section 4.6.

<sup>52</sup> Almost all of these outcomes were also described in fieldwork interviews.



population and/or a failure of Aboriginal tenants to conform to appropriate settlement expectations. The substantial repair and maintenance costs associated with overcrowding ensure that it remains an issue of substantial weight to housing providers. Interviewees identified overcrowded Aboriginal housing as a critical issue for service provision because of a number of cycles into which it feeds. In the interview excerpt below, the Mullewa School Principal describes the impact of overcrowded housing on children's academic potential within the school system:

*SP: In what ways do these patterns of movement and transiency influence the functioning of the school?*

*MSP: Highly. Highly! [chuckles] From overcrowding in the homes which causes (I know neglect is a really big word and I don't like using it) but it does become fairly obvious, because they come here, they don't -. If a whole family has just lumbered up at someone's house, they may not have enough food for the dinner and the breakfast the next day so the kids will come to school and they'll be hungry. And therefore there might be a dozen people trying to have a shower in the morning or something. So the untidiness and that unkempt sort of look creeps in really quickly. They won't come with stationery or anything like that, and generally they could just be left with a carer. So it not only affects the kids who are transient, but it affects the stable ones as well because they're in the home. So everyone's out of sorts. As I say, if you're overcrowded, you're not getting the best of nights sleep. They're probably up late watching TV or just the fact that there's so many of them they don't sleep, so, they're pretty much all coming to school tired. They tend to fight a lot. A bit of fighting going on in the homes in the community. These sorts of things occur. So we are highly affected (Mullewa School Principal, 15 September 2004).*

Another interviewee expanded on this scenario, suggesting that because of the increased challenges to learning in overcrowded homes, children living in such conditions often disengage from the school system altogether. Then, once outside of the school environment, boredom or limited options and opportunities often lead these youths to begin a cycle of juvenile offending:

*For instance housing – nana and pop often live with mum and dad with their six kids. And so there's overcrowding and then the kids don't get a good sleep because they're partying or whatever the situation is. So they don't go to school and then they get up at lunchtime and are seen hanging around town and causing a nuisance and so they tend to steal or cause a nuisance in many*

*other ways. And then, they're fined, and that's the cycle (Amanda Biggs, 7 February 2005).*

Beresford (2003a) affirms this observation, noting that the link between truancy, school drop-out, and crime amongst Aboriginal youth has been well established.

Overcrowding is commonly perceived by housing providers as a problem of supply: people live in overcrowded conditions because there are not enough housing options available to them. Certainly this is sometimes the case, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Perth, where there are extensive waiting lists for Homeswest accommodation and slow tenancy turnover periods of up to four years. Homeswest waiting lists are also increasing in larger regional centres such as Geraldton where the turnover time from application for housing to offer of tenancy, is generally 12 to 18 months. Similarly, MRAC currently have a waiting list of 45 applicants in Geraldton. Many waiting applicants bunk with relatives until housing becomes available, creating overcrowded situations in existing tenancies<sup>53</sup>.

However, conceptualising the 'problem' of overcrowding as being solved by increasing housing stock alone, isolates the concept of housing from its broader context. Sanders (2000) suggested that while providing more housing will solve some problems, it will inevitably create others because it is a solution based on a narrow understanding of the role of housing in the lived experience. Data from the present study supports Sanders' claim. For at least two reasons, simply providing more housing is not enough to 'solve the problem.'

Firstly, for some Aboriginal families, living communally in a small dwelling is preferable to separate living arrangements. It affords these families the opportunity to pool resources and jointly navigate the housing system. One interviewee explained that some Aboriginal people choose to live together when other housing options are available to them because of the security and support that such well established and cultivated arrangements afford. Like those who own their own homes, living together within extended family units can be an expression of self-governance.

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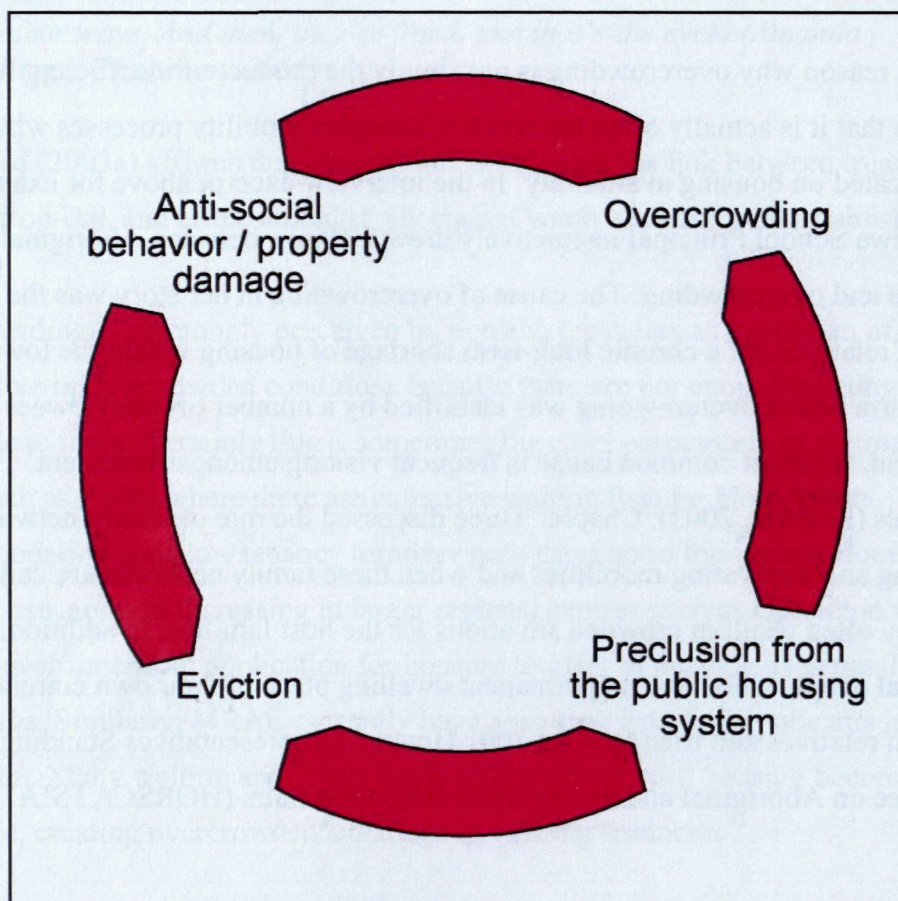
<sup>53</sup> Henry and Daly (2001) reported similar findings in Kuranda, Queensland. They suggested that the lack of housing availability has resulted in Aboriginal people bunking in crowded conditions with kin, in preference to moving elsewhere. Here, overcrowding was conceptualised as a matter of social necessity rather than cultural choice.

A second reason why overcrowding is not simply the product of insufficient housing supply, is that it is actually often the result of complex mobility processes which are not predicated on housing availability. In the interview excerpt above for example, the Mullewa School Principal instinctively drew the links between Aboriginal mobilities and overcrowding. The cause of overcrowding in her story was the sudden arrival of relatives not a chronic long-term shortage of housing within the town. In Meekatharra where overcrowding was identified by a number of interviewees as widespread, the most common cause is frequent visiting amongst 'transient' individuals (Fewster, 2003). Chapter Three discussed the role of family networks in facilitating and motivating mobilities and when these family networks are called upon, they often result in crowded situations for the host families. In addition, Aboriginal people who have no permanent dwelling place of their own commonly bunk with relatives and friends. As a 2001 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HORSCATSIA) report explains:

Homelessness, thus, often manifests itself as transience which brings its own problems – discontinuity of schooling and gaps in education, not to mention placing pressures and overcrowding on other family units (HORSCATSIA, 2001 p. 88).

Indeed, visitors and the overcrowded conditions they produce, are a common cause of tenancy failure for Aboriginal people in Western Australia (EOC, 2004; Gordon et al., 2002; Hansen and Roche, 2003). Placing strain on the resource of existing tenants, overcrowded housing situations can cause fighting and feuding as well as property damage which often leads to eviction and preclusion from re-entering the public housing system until accumulated debts have been paid. Evicted tenants then usually seek alternate accommodation with other relatives, producing further overcrowding and further mobility. As Figure 4.1 illustrates, overcrowding is therefore both a cause and a result of alienation from the public housing system.





**Figure 4.1 A Cycle of Alienation from the Public Housing System**

This cycle of alienation is in many ways underwritten by mobility processes, and is one of the most tangible manifestations of contested relationship between the public housing system and many of its Aboriginal clients:

*... they might say 'OK, there's overcrowding in Cue' where there's a limited number of houses, limited number of people actually residing in the town proper, and we've got no-one on our waiting list for example. And they'll say 'Oh, but we need houses, we need houses, we need houses.' And the wait list doesn't reflect that. So they're saying to us is there's people living in properties and not declaring that there's families living there. These people won't apply for housing because they've got a history with us before so what we try and do is get information out to people about 'OK, how do I again become eligible for housing.' Because a lot of the reluctance is due to debt. And I suppose it's head-in-the-sand kind of stuff; 'if I forget that I've got a debt or don't ever ask for housing, then we'll never have to address it'. But one of the policies we have to address that is 'OK, you acknowledge that debt, you agree to pay half, and we'll just forget the other half. That let's you back into public housing because we know that there's a need.' So when people tell us about overcrowding in small towns where there are no applicants or very little*



*applicants waiting for housing, then we go out and push debt discount; 'have you got history, have you got this? OK, how can we get you back on the list?' Because if we don't have a clear picture of the housing that's needed, we can't obviously accommodate people (Anonymous Service Provider 2, 11 November 2004).*

Interviewee Bill Atyeo, an Environmental Health Officer in Yamatji country, explained that in Meekatharra, many Aboriginal people have been frozen out of the public housing system because of debt accumulation. Consequently, 30-40% of Aboriginal households are crowded, whilst 13 or 14 Homeswest houses sit vacant.

#### **4.2.2.2 Rental Arrears – Effects at the Source**

Whilst overcrowding is one of the primary impacts of mobilities at destination places, there are similarly 'disruptive' impacts on housing services at source places. As one example, existing tenants who choose to travel away from their place of residence and remain away for extended periods may end their tenancies without giving the agreed notice of 21 days. As the following interview excerpt explains, the practice of unconventionally ending tenancies is relatively common in Yamatji country:

*P8: ... It's supposed to be 21 days obviously. But abandoned properties, coming in and saying 'right, I'm vacating' it's not out of the ordinary at all. It's actually probably more of the norm than not. Which makes it hard to let people know when they're going to get housing. They'll be waiting for 18 months and then we get a property vacant, suits their needs, then we're like 'OK, got a house ready for you, now.' So it's not something that we have an option in. We do always request 21 days notice. We don't get it 100% of the time at all.*

*SP: Are there situations where you'll find that a tenant's moved out and you actually weren't aware or -*

*P8: Yeh, but it doesn't take long to get aware. The, for example, if they stop paying rent, that becomes evident pretty much straight away. Most clients now who are on a Centrelink benefit will have their rent deducted automatically and because we have a system link up with Centrelink that's automated, as soon as that arrangement gets cancelled, that tenancy gets tagged. We'll get a task to have a look into that. So most people, if they're going to leave a tenancy and abandon it, the first thing they will do is cancel their Centrelink arrangement ... (Anonymous Service Provider 2, 11 November 2004).*

Instead of ending their leases, other tenants who wish to travel elsewhere may leave their property in the care of a relative. Both scenarios often result in accumulated debt. In the first instance, cancelled tenancies accumulate rental arrears. In the second instance, properties left in the care of relatives are reported to frequently incur considerable repair and maintenance bills that become the financial responsibility of the absent tenant.

These situations again highlight divergent conceptualisations between service providers and some of their Aboriginal tenants about the purpose and role of housing. For Homeswest, tenancy requires stationary lifestyles and individual responsibility. By contrast, some Aboriginal tenants see housing as merely a shelter. From this perspective, responsibility for the structure can change and be shared amongst various family members depending on circumstances. Here, housing is not a consideration which binds a person to a physical locale, particularly in the context of other more pressing considerations for which travel may be required.

#### **4.2.2.3 Cyclical Disengagement**

The above examples demonstrate the links between mobility, conceptualisations about the role and purpose of housing, and overcrowding and abandonment. They underscore how divergent rationalities by Homeswest and some of their Aboriginal tenants about the role and purpose of housing and mobility can perpetuate a cycle of disengagement from the public housing system. Homeswest procedural and administrative arrangements are also predicated on Eurocentric conceptualisations of mobility and housing, and often further perpetuate this cycle. The 2004 EOC report identified certain assumptions inherent in Homeswest policy which disaffect many Aboriginal clients (EOC, 2004). For example, Homeswest communication with housing applicants and existing or previous tenants is primarily undertaken through written correspondence. However, many prospective tenants do not have a permanent mailing address, and therefore may not receive important communications. The consequences of non-response can be significant. An applicant may lose their position on the waiting list if they do not respond promptly to an offer of accommodation. In addition, previous or existing tenants may accumulate large debts or be evicted if they do not respond to notices of rental arrears or repair and

maintenance charges. In the 2001 report by the HORSCATSIA, one submission referred to such systems of communication as “intimidating and incompatible with the often transient lifestyles of many Indigenous young people<sup>54</sup>” (HORSCATSIA, 2001 p. 88).

One of the most tangible expressions of the restricted, apprehensive, and often contested engagement that many Aboriginal tenants have with the public housing system is an indifference toward or limited knowledge of tenant rights and responsibilities in the initial phase of tenancy. Lack of knowledge about, or indifference towards, Homeswest procedures in these early stages of tenancy can often result in debt accumulation and further disengagement from the public housing system. Public housing available to Aboriginal people is often of a poor quality (EOC, 2004). However, new tenants might not necessarily understand the significance of the property commission report and may consequently find themselves becoming financially responsible for damage to the property caused by previous tenants. Such situations are relatively common in Yamatji country:

*... I went out a week after these people had been in there, they're very clean people, et cetera et cetera, and I put together three to five pages of defects in the house. Now if I hadn't done that, those people would be charged tenant liability on vacating because of the poor workmanship or the stuff that wasn't done before those people went into the house ... those people end up with a tenant liability bill that they can't surmount, they can't get over. And once it's actually in the system, they can't get over it. So once they're there, they can't get back on Homeswest housing. So while there's vacant houses, there's people waiting but they can't get on a waiting list, because they haven't paid their tenant liabilities (Bill Atyeo, Environmental Health Officer 10 September 2004).*

*And a lot of that shows up later on when people say appeal the charges at tenant liability when they've left a property. Damages or what have you, and they'll say 'but that was like that when I got there.' 'OK, well did you fill out your copy of the property commission report when you moved in?' 'Oh, no I didn't realise how important it was' (Service Provider, 11 November 2004).*

Clearly, response to the ‘intimidation and incompatibility’ of many Homeswest procedural and administrative arrangements is often further disengagement from the

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<sup>54</sup> The report submission referenced was speaking specifically about Youth Allowance correspondence methods which are the same as Homeswest.

public housing system. This alienation only serves to further entrench the importance of alternate networks of support and reciprocity and the movement required to maintain them.

#### 4.2.2.4 Housing Availability and Mobility Choices

The geographical availability of housing stock also considerably shapes and informs Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country. It has been noted that a lack of availability of housing in a particular place can cause overcrowding. It can also prompt prospective Aboriginal tenants to seek housing elsewhere. Several interviewees described a recent influx of Aboriginal people to Meekatharra because of the availability of State housing there. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rural depopulation, as well as tenancy eviction,<sup>55</sup> has resulted in increased vacancies in Homeswest stock in Meekatharra. The combination of these vacancies, and a shortage of housing options elsewhere, draws Aboriginal families from outside the area into the town:

*And all the infrastructure's been put in by the, basically by the white community if you like, but the population is mainly Aboriginal, or Indigenous. Again, because there's been a downturn of mining in the area, a lot of the housing has become vacant. Therefore, we've had an influx of Indigenous persons in the town who are taking up residency in those vacant houses. They're either purchasing those or they're becoming available through Homeswest (Officer in Charge, Meekatharra Police Station, 26 February 2005).*

Another interview observation linking Aboriginal spatial practices to housing availability was that the widespread availability of housing in smaller rural towns made it much easier for Aboriginal people to move frequently between these towns in the region and take up Homeswest tenancies. There was a common perception that the simplicity of the process of applying for and being offered housing in these more remote towns facilitated greater movement so that when a person got tired of being in one place, they could simply move on to the next and be granted housing there. Of such movements, one research participant wrote:

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<sup>55</sup> One interviewee suggested that there is an increased availability of housing stock in Meekatharra because of evictions when tenants have not paid their rent or caused considerable damage to the property.



Most want a roof over their head for temporary time not wanting to settle. They enjoy their freedom or take it regardless of policies, procedures or government bodies (Robyn Morris, 1 March 2005).

Her statement captures the sentiment of a number of local residents who felt that government service delivery practices too often pandered to the flippant whims of 'transient' Aboriginal people.

#### **4.2.2.5 Targeting**

A final manifestation of the contested, dialectical relationship between the provision of public housing and Aboriginal spatial practices is the continual struggle of Homeswest to effectively target its construction and property acquisition programs to the needs of a transient or itinerant Aboriginal client base. The challenge for Homeswest becomes one of sunk costs in allocating fixed resources to a spatially dynamic and changing population base.

In order to ensure the 'responsible' allocation of financial resources, Homeswest annual construction plans are based on a needs analysis derived from waiting lists. However, the same interviewee who explained this process and its justification had previously acknowledged, in an example of overcrowding in Cue, that waiting lists are not necessarily the most accurate measure of need. Further, housing stock expansion plans are developed annually whilst the housing needs of Aboriginal people do not conform to these timeframes and may change substantially at shorter intervals. These resource targeting measures are another example of the ways in which the structure of the public housing system militates against incorporation of Aboriginal understandings about the role and purpose of housing, and the mobility practices which inform these understandings.

#### **4.2.3 Stability vs. Fluidity**

Perhaps the most fitting way to summarise the underlying themes emanating from this analysis of the dialectical and the often contested inter-relationship between the public housing system and Aboriginal spatial practices, is to draw upon Hansen and Roche's (2003) concepts of 'stability' and 'fluidity.' In describing Noongar interactions with the public housing system in Western Australia's south-west, they capture and distil the essence of wider Aboriginal experiences:

The strength and priority of Aboriginal values in relation to their family, culture and spirituality is well known within multicultural Australia, yet remains a barrier to maintaining housing without societal conflict. Public Housing codes of behaviour especially demand tight restraints on size and occupancy of rental properties. It is not easily acceptable for family 'visitors' to come and stay for a while, or for tenant families to wander for a term elsewhere. The idea of the Aboriginal 'fluid' family that shares and travels and expands and contracts according to family needs and events is in conflict with a system that requires an ideal of family 'stability.' The system is designed for a family structure that rarely changes and where applicants know in advance whether they will need only 1 bedroom or two or three. The system cannot easily respond to the level of change and spontaneity that an Aboriginal family needs to have flexibility, freedom and life, nor comprehend the confusion and despair of struggling to comply with rules to keep their haven from homelessness.

Thus the culture that is the Noongar's intricate family support system can also become the trigger towards eviction within mainstream housing. During times of funeral or family illness or crisis, rent becomes food provision for extended family members. Every room in the house is potential shelter for weary long-travelled mourners to lay their head. Paintwork becomes damaged, fly-screens are torn, keys are lost and windows are broken to gain entry. Water use escalates as do costs for heating, cooking and lighting. The home becomes noisy. The children play and fight and laugh and throw a stone or two. The neighbours complain (Hansen and Roche, 2003, p. 5).

This quotation describes the inability of the public housing system to effectively engage with Aboriginal people whose families and lifestyles are fluid rather than static and stationary. The dominance of the European housing tradition in public housing delivery models and the persistence of Aboriginal conceptualisations of the role and purpose of housing have perpetuated contested interactions with Homeswest. Aboriginal spatial practices are therefore a central consideration undergirding cycles of alienation and disengagement from the public housing system.

### **4.3 Health**

Like housing, an analysis of the dialectical relationship between the provision of government health services and Aboriginal spatial practices must necessarily begin with some understanding of the ways in which both service provision models and Aboriginal peoples construct and understand 'health.' Social and medical research continues to identify a widening gap between the health of Indigenous and non-

Indigenous Australians (see for example the Australian Medical Association, 2002; Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001). The life expectancy of Indigenous Australians remains approximately 17 years lower than that of non-Indigenous Australians (Taylor, 2006b). The incidences of chronic disease are far greater amongst the Indigenous population. Howitt, McCracken and Curson (2005), show that circulatory disease, 'injury' (including in particular traffic accidents and incidents of self-harm), infectious disease, trachoma, diabetes and renal disease contribute to Indigenous morbidity and mortality at far greater rates than they do in the non-Indigenous population. Further, Australia lags behind Canada, New Zealand, and the United States in terms of health outcomes for its Indigenous population (Howitt et al., 2005; Watson, Ejueyitsi and Codde 2001).

However, Bond (2005 p. 40) cautions against dialogue about Indigenous health that continues to "discursively reverberate around the inadequacies, impairment and hopelessness of our people, families and communities." Bond astutely challenges the ways in which Aboriginal people have been constructed within the health system, which measures its success solely on the basis of its ability to bring the health indicators of Indigenous people up to the level of non-Indigenous people. She argues:

One must also question the practice of continually highlighting the health inequalities facing Aboriginal people without explaining the precise causal pathways ... The perception of Aboriginality as nothing more than a label, a health risk, and predictor of unhealthy behaviours within Indigenous public health practice reinforces stereotypical ideas of Aboriginality, demonises those who possess it, and disconnects Aboriginal people from their own identities in a manner similar to past oppressive policies of colonisation, assimilation, segregation and integration. Critically examining such practices is not just a matter of "political correctness", but a vital step that will have profound and meaningful implications for the health of Aboriginal people (Bond, 2005 p.41).

Following Bond's appeal, this section seeks to explore one of the 'causal pathways' in relation to health inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people: the often incompatible relationship between the delivery of public health services and the spatial practices of Aboriginal people.

#### **4.3.1 Services Chasing**

Unlike housing services, the Federal and State programs through which health services are delivered to Aboriginal people are not determined by community type. There are no Indigenous-specific health programs in discrete Aboriginal communities. However, the Federal Government provides funding for Indigenous-specific Aboriginal Medical Services that operate parallel to the services offered by the State Government. The Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service (GRAMS) services the fieldwork region and seeks to provide medical services that complement the State-provided health programs rather than duplicate them.

With the widespread adoption of neo-liberalist approaches to resource rationalisation, health services are being increasingly withdrawn from rural and remote areas and concentrated in larger urban centres. In Yamatji country therefore, emergency medical services, surgical services, obstetrics, and a comprehensive range of specialist services, are located Geraldton. There are then linkages to more basic services in distant parts of the region. In the fieldwork region for example, the only permanent health services are single-employee nursing posts in a number of towns including Cue, Mt Magnet, Yalgoo and Sandstone. Even in Meekatharra, with a RFDS base and a 28 bed hospital, no emergency services are available. Some specialist services are available to these towns through a range of fly-in fly-out rotating visitations by optometrists, speech pathologists and podiatrists. A range of population health programs are delivered through these various health centres, with an increasing emphasis on primary health prevention. A public mental health service is also based in Meekatharra. It is staffed by three mental health nurses who also service surrounding towns within the region. This team is assisted by a psychiatrist who visits the region once a month.

At a regional level, certain strategies have been employed by the public health service to respond to the challenges of servicing the changing needs of the service population. Health Director for the Midwest Health Service, Shane Matthews, described two programs – the Health Worker Program and the Therapy Assistance Program – that have been implemented to adjust to changing population compositions, and to what he described as a trend of declining rural populations:

*Changing that mix is quite challenging and that's why we have a lot of generic positions like Health Promotion, that can have some flexibility in re-targeting the issues that they're dealing with. But they're quite generic positions so the issues could change and we can still deal with it without necessarily changing the skill mix of the staff that we've got ... we've gone on a program of embarking on training Aboriginal health workers to do a whole range of things. And here in Geraldton and the Midwest we're looking at therapy assistance we call it, to do a whole range of things where, under supervision, those categories of employees can do a whole range; speech pathology, occupational therapy. And they can actually be the person that's implementing the programs under the supervision of a qualified therapist. We find that's really successful because those people, particularly the Aboriginal health workers, are the people that are there for the longer term. They're not going anywhere generally. To put our allied health staff out into Meekatharra, we would have a huge turnover rate because people would go stir crazy out there and just move on to the next challenge. So we've deliberately tried to resource and train people that we think are going to be long term. Not necessarily in the town, but within the district, who will be there and can continue to provide a level of service when the professionals come and go all the time (Shane Matthews, 15 September 2004).*

Whilst acknowledging the complexity of such a task, Mr Matthews described these programs as having been successful in addressing the issues of rural depopulation, changing service needs, and the necessity of service rationalisation.

At a more localised level however, Aboriginal itinerancy is interpreted by some health service providers as a factor which considerably mitigates against effective service delivery and improved health outcomes for Aboriginal people. It is often associated with sporadic, indifferent and/or apprehensive engagement with public health services, resulting in significant resource wastage and poor health outcomes.

#### **4.3.1.1 Discontinuity of Service**

Government health services are delivered through programs in fixed locations. As such, service continuity is disrupted by frequent movement in and out of towns:

*With them being so mobile makes it difficult in doing your service because you're doing one thing and then they're gone for a month or two months and for your own self it becomes quite frustrating when you're trying to work. And then you do spend quite a lot of time trying to chase them up. Your paper work's notorious which*

*Geraldton and Perth don't understand because you might have to leave a file open for a month or two months and because the policy is that if you don't see someone for three months then you close their file. But ... people do go away for long periods of time but always come back. And then they come back and see you and then they're gone again... And of course then you go to all the bosses and everything, they don't understand so they bitch (Anonymous Interviewee 3, 26 July 2004).*

As this interview excerpt suggests, Aboriginal transience interrupts ongoing treatments. It can also increase administrative tasks of tracing records or updating files. At the time of fieldwork, there was no State-wide health database where patient records could be accessed across the five State health regions. Therefore, if patients needed medical assistance whilst travelling outside of the health region in which they are normally treated, their medical histories were not available. Dr Jac de Bruyn describes the challenge of maintaining the medical records of a transient client base:

*It makes it difficult - the thing is we've got about fourteen, fifteen-thousand files of which perhaps five, six-thousand of them are active, very active files (that's people we see on a regular basis). But if a patient - and I think it's because of this fact that they move around so much, but we have files here that the patient was last here in 2001 and then all of a sudden he walks in as if he was here yesterday. And 'I just want to get my medicine again.' 'But you haven't been here -.' 'Oh yeh, I was just in Meekatharra.' And then we just phone Meekatharra and find out on what medicine he was the last time and update his file here and then he's ready to go again. But it makes it sometimes a bit hard because we have problems with compliancy, patients staying on their medicine. Lots of our administrative time at the front desk are dictated by other practices around the place phoning in; 'we've got a patient of yours here and we'd just like to know on what medicine he was.' Or that sort of stuff. If they run out of medicine visiting Perth for instance (Dr Jac de Bruyn, 14 September 2004).*

When records are not available, they can be transferred where required. However, these administrative transfers can result in a failure to keep records properly updated. Incomplete records may lead to inappropriate treatment and some patients in high-need situations can consequently become very sick or die because they 'fall through the cracks of the system.' In addition to disrupted treatment programs and resource-taxing record keeping, frequent Aboriginal mobility can also impede effective service follow-up:

*Whereas there's not the follow-up in the State system. And sometimes the follow-up, to be honest, is hard because they'll be seeing the doctor in - say they see the doctor in Meekatharra, and then they go home to Cue, or go home to Magnet or go home to Sandstone or go back out to Burringurrah. Where's the follow up? We don't have systems in place for follow-up sometimes. And I mean broader follow-up. Someone has a bub here in Geraldton goes home to Meekatharra, where's the follow-up? Is there much? I mean, we try, but sometimes it's that access that inhibits the follow-up too (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).*

A number of service providers described the difficulty in establishing post-care contact with patients who are highly mobile. They may have no permanent address to send important information to. They may not be contactable to make necessary follow-up appointments. In each of these scenarios, Aboriginal mobilities are understood to fragment the effective delivery of health services which endeavour to improve their health outcomes. The mentality of service providers easily becomes one of swimming upstream, or fighting a losing battle.

#### **4.3.1.2 Resource Wastage**

In addition to fragmented service delivery, Aboriginal mobilities were also described by several interviewees as affecting significant resource wastage for health services. The following interview excerpt summarises a common scenario of this ilk:

*So for today for instance, you might have a major plan organised for today right. You might be bringing in specialists ... say it's trachoma screening. And yet, we could fly someone in today, we could have all the gear ready, the whole - everyone could know, we could have all the consents done by the parents, everything, and there's a funeral on so actually no-one turns up because we've got a funeral on. Or it could be a funeral on at Wiluna, so everyone will leave town. You could be bringing in a specialist that cost you \$1500 a day and you could be bringing in another specialist who works with him who could cost you \$300 or \$400 and then you've got accommodation and airfares and everything and in fact when they get here, they can do no work because there's actually no-one to do it on. Because for Aboriginal people, the reason behind the transiency is much more important than anything else. But the difficult thing for us is that those same people could come in Monday morning and abuse the woopie out of you because 'my kids ear is really crook and when the hell are you gonna do something about it?' And you go 'well, remember Friday?' 'Yeh, well, I was busy Friday.' And that creates huge difficulties because, the Aboriginal people demand that they be*

*able to live the lifestyle that they want but there has been - while there has been an effort to create and provide services around that there has to be some join in the middle where there has to be some give and take on both sides. And in some areas, you'll see give and take on no sides, and a mixture, you know all sorts of mixtures from complete give and take, to none, and everything in between (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).*

Other stories of resource wastage were also recounted. In another scenario, a health worker described arranging patient visits to specialists in Perth, and finding out the day of the appointment that the patient has left town. Airfares to Perth, accommodation bookings, and the cost of the specialist appointment may all then be lost, seemingly because of spontaneous and contingent mobilities.

#### **4.3.2 Chasing Services**

So far, the discussion of health services has focussed on the ways in which Aboriginal mobility practices unsettle health programs and hinder positive health outcomes for Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. However, the method of health service delivery, which necessitates patient inflow into hospitals and clinics, also impacts the spatial practice of many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. Health Director Shane Matthews articulated a hope that health services were responding to the needs of the community, not dictating their behaviour. Some other interviewees agreed with Mr Matthews that the provision of health services had very little impact on Aboriginal spatial practices, and that their role was simply to continue to provide health services to whoever was within their jurisdiction at any given time. However, whilst he did not sense that location of health services had a substantial bearing on where Aboriginal people chose to live, Mr Matthews conceded that some movement amongst the Aboriginal population did occur to access services.

As the following interview excerpt illustrates, the provision of health service can considerably alter and inform Aboriginal mobility practices, either directly by anchoring people to a particular place or prompting movements toward larger centres with more health service, or indirectly by expanded mobility networks:

*SP: Does the way in which health services are delivered influence people's patterns of movement and transiency in the region?*



P2: *Yeh, to some extent. But that's not really a problem with the health service. It's a problem with the small size in our communities. You can't have an old person's home in bloody Sandstone, because it's just not big enough. So people will travel - people with chronic disease may travel to it. Renal dialysis classic example. You've probably had it pointed out to you several times. Families will move to Perth because their husband's on renal dialysis. Then he might get sent back here to Geraldton. After he's been stabilised he'll come back here to Geraldton stabilised. Family will move back with him to Geraldton. Mum might move down as well as brothers and sisters or wife and husbands, you never know who's going to turn up. Depending on - someone might be vacillating between moving out of Meekatharra and not, but if Uncle so-and-so's down Perth on dialysis, and he's got a house, 'hey, maybe we can live down there and the kids can go to school.' Or 'the boy can play footy.' Or whatever. That can actually, and that's probably a good example of where it does happen. Someone's having a bub. Hubby doesn't stay up there and leave his wife down here. He comes down and they all sort of settle down. And that might be a 12/18 month exercise ... so I suppose what I'm saying is, people may chase the services if they require them. We've got an old fella down here at the moment from Cue. He said he loved being in Cue, that's his home, always will be. He still goes home every chance he gets. But his Missus is crook and they like to be near the hospital. Just like my Mum and Dad moved to Mandurah to be near health services, they moved to Geraldton to be near health services. It's probably a country thing rather than an Aboriginal thing. Probably less, I'd say less inclined to move for health reasons than non-Aboriginal people. But that's probably a personal observation rather than anything clever. [pause] They'd rather die on their feet than live on their knees. It's better to bleed sweetly than to live your life in chains (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).*

This interview excerpt describes chasing services as 'a country thing' perhaps more than an 'Aboriginal thing.' As Chapter Two established, service withdrawal clearly affects all people living in remote and rural parts of the State. However, the effects on Aboriginal populations are particularly noteworthy given that a higher proportion of Aboriginal people live in these regional areas, and there are greater health inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

The combination of service withdrawal and increased health risks amongst the Aboriginal population is changing the spatial practices of many Aboriginal families.

Many people who suffer ill-health, particularly the elderly, either feel compelled or wish to access health services and must make difficult decisions about leaving their communities and country to migrate toward larger regional and urban centres. A number of interviewees noted an influx of Aboriginal people into Geraldton from more outlying areas such as Mt Magnet and Meekatharra, citing health considerations as the primary motivation for the population change:

*And if it's coming in from smaller towns like Meeka, Mt Magnet, Cue, it's to be near regional facilities like the hospital. And a lot of the cases that we get for movement from those areas are like for renal dialysis because it's only available at a large regional centre. Or for kids who have some sort of illness or disability that needs to be treated on a regular basis and it's just too cost prohibitive to travel (Anonymous Service Provider 2, 11 November 2004)*

Chronic diabetes is prevalent amongst Aboriginal populations in alarming proportions and one of the most prevalent examples of 'chasing' services, as this research participant notes, is movement for renal dialysis.

#### 4.3.2.1 Dialysis

The Australian Aboriginal population has one of the highest diabetes rates in the world. The diabetes mortality rate for Aboriginal people is 11.3 times that of the non-Aboriginal population (Watson et al., 2001). 7% of all Aboriginal deaths result from diabetes as opposed to 2.1% in the non-Aboriginal population (Watson et al., 2001). Diabetes has particularly impacted the Aboriginal population in Yamatji country. In the region, death rates from the disease amongst Aboriginal men are significantly higher than any other region in the State (Watson et al., 2001).

Because dialysis treatments are concentrated in Geraldton and Perth, diabetes sufferers in advanced stages of the condition who require dialysis have two options<sup>56</sup>. The first is frequent travelling either by plane or car, to a major centre for dialysis<sup>57</sup>. These individuals are financially assisted by the Patient Assisted Transfer Scheme (PATS) and are therefore able to travel regularly to receive treatment rather than permanently relocate. The more common trend, however, is a more permanent

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<sup>56</sup> There is one dialysis machine in Meekatharra that can treat approximately one patient. The next closest treatment centres for dialysis patients in the region are in Geraldton and Perth.

<sup>57</sup> Dialysis treatments take several hours and must be undergone two to three times a week.

migration to either Geraldton or Perth. This second option is commonly exercised by elderly sufferers. The following interview excerpt tells the story of the impact of dialysis, both on the spatial practices of a particular individual, but also on her wider community:

*There's still a lot of Aboriginal people in the Autumn Centre it's called on Gilford Rd. It's a facility for people, like we've got a nanna there now, Nanna Shirley. She's been there for four, five years because there's no dialysis machine in Wiluna, she has to live in Perth. And this is a woman who's got language, very strong in her culture, yet she's got to live in a country that's not hers. She's not a Noongar person. She's Wongi, she's from Wiluna. But she's made that move for her own health. So her family moved and lived in Armadale ... The Midlands district, Coongamia, that area, Greenmount, that Swan Districts area, a lot of Aboriginal people are moving there because it's where other Aboriginal families are and they feel comfortable there. Even Northam we're finding there's a few Wiluna people there, Jigalong people. It's access closer to Perth and there's other family members there. But health is another big thing. Yeh, huge thing with our families. I think in Wiluna's case they're trying to work with the mining companies to purchase two dialysis machines so they can have those people back in the community. The funeral that's on next Friday in Wiluna, that lady actually died in Perth. She died away from her family. She was on dialysis as well, which is hard (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 14 September 2004).*

This story highlights the ripple effects on Aboriginal mobilities of relocating to 'chase services.' Firstly, those requiring the health services which aren't available to them in their own community must make a very difficult choice: sacrifice their sense of security and belonging on country and with family, or, sacrifice their health. This can often be a very painful decision, particularly for elderly people who may serve important roles within their community and/or feel highly uncomfortable at the prospect of moving to a new, potentially unknown place. Secondly, for those who do decide to relocate for medical treatment, there can be significant 'flow-on effects' for their family members. It is not uncommon for immediate and extended family members to also relocate to be closer to their family member receiving medical

treatment<sup>58</sup>. In other cases, the relocation of a family member to a larger urban centre simply extends the geographical limits of the mobility networks within which their relatives feel comfortable moving. Such movements re-affirm the observations outlined in Chapter Three which suggested that Aboriginal mobility practices in Yamatji country are not all spatially reducible to the bounds of a person's 'traditional country', but are heavily influenced by the spatial distribution of kinship networks.

### **4.3.3 Spatial Mobility: A Casual Pathway to 'Ill-health'?**

This section has explored the dialectical relationship between Aboriginal mobility and the provision of health services. One implicit understanding shared by a number of service providers was that Aboriginal transiency fosters disengagement from mainstream health services which in turn leads to ill-health. Certainly, Aboriginal mobilities do often result in disjointed engagement with the public health services. And, according to non-Aboriginal conceptualisations of health, which are conceived upon the basis of measurable epidemiological data and outcomes, the general status of Aboriginal health is poor. However, as Bond (2005) has argued, the narrow conceptualisations of health that dominate in the mainstream can be alienating and marginalising for Aboriginal people. Like housing, this marginalisation can perpetuate a cyclical disengagement from the system, elevating the importance of mobilities required to maintain alternative networks of support and reciprocity. Aboriginal mobilities may alternatively or additionally reflect a more holistic understanding of health where Indigenous people experience 'health' through the broad and fluid processes of cultural affirmation, self governance, and family and community consolidation. The discussion presented above also suggests that many Aboriginal people have adapted their spatial practices to 'chase' services. In some instances this involves permanent relocation and in other cases, a desire to access health services simply increases peoples' mobility practices and networks.

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<sup>58</sup> Coulehan (1995) makes similar observations of Yolngu people in the Northern Territory. Coulehan explains that Yolngu are culturally obligated to 'keep company' with their sick, accompanying them to larger regional centres and cities for medical treatment. Coulehan (1995) contrasts this need to 'keep company' within the Yolngu paradigm of caring for the sick, with Western medical strategies that seek to isolate the sick. Coulehan (1995 p. 217) suggests that these widespread, although largely unaccounted, mobilities toward health services place considerable pressure on emergency housing services. Further, since those who move to 'keep company' frequently rely on the provisions of urban-based Yolngu people, such practices create overcrowding and economic burdens that 'threaten the viability' of urban-dwelling Yolngu households.

## **4.4 Education**

Of the three services investigated in this chapter, education is the least differentiated in terms of delivery to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Education is available through the State Government public school system or through independent schools such as Methodist and Catholic colleges. Whilst the school system is essentially mainstreamed for the whole population, the Federal and State Governments have an Indigenous Education Agreement and fund an Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program that “assists the State Education Department in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students” (Department of Education, 2002 p. 6). In addition, the Federal Government provides funding assistance for Aboriginal students on the basis of application and situation. ‘Abstudy’ is administered by Centrelink and is available primarily to secondary and tertiary Aboriginal students. It includes a fortnightly living allowance and contribution toward the costs of school attendance. The exact amount available to each student is calculated on the basis of individual living and study arrangements.

Engagement with the mainstream education system varies dramatically amongst Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. Like housing, education was historically used as a tool of the colonial project; modified according to different phases of government policy, from separation, to assimilation, through to self-determination (Beresford, 2003b). Aboriginal relationships to the mainstream education system have consequently been shaped by responses to these various attempts to intervene in their lives. In the contemporary context, participation in the mainstream education system ranges from active, voluntary and supported interaction, to compliance and pacification, and in some cases, purposeful resistance. As the following discussion explains, these variously participatory relationships are in many ways enacted through spatial practices.

### **4.4.1 The Fixing Effect**

Many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country consider a mainstream public education part of a natural progression, and a priority for their children. Because educational services are delivered solely through fixed-locale schools, residing permanently in one place is a fundamental necessity for these families. In some cases, the conviction that mainstream education is empowering and therefore advantageous has developed

through observing particular family members or role models who have followed that path. For others, these convictions have been sustained through generations. In this study, almost every participant who placed a high priority on their children's education was raised by parents who had prioritised their education, either by relocating to a nearby town with a school, or by remaining permanently in one place during the school term and only travelling during holidays. The only exception was Aunt Mavis Curley whose parents travelled extensively when she was a child, resulting in her missing substantial portions of schooling. When asked if she continued to travel around when she had her children, her response was:

*No because I had kids to put to school or, that sort of thing. It was a different way of looking at it you know. I s'pose different attitude towards schooling. And by that time mum was settled down here and you know the family was here and, all had houses (Aunt Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

She explains that by the time her children were of school age, the socio-political environment was not conducive to the lifestyle of travelling she had enjoyed as a child:

*Well you had to send your kids to school and. There was always that threat that if you didn't send your kids to school, I don't know why my parents weren't threatened with it but, it sort of hung over us where if your kids didn't go to school, they might be better off at the mission. Not that it worried me much because I was pretty ready to fight them, but my husband didn't rock the boat. You know. 'Just do what you're supposed to do and get on with it.' So I went with the flow (Aunt Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

While some of this generation, like Aunt Mavis, felt compelled to settle in one place for their children's education, others voluntarily made the decision, perceiving it as advantageous for their children. Speaking about a similar time period to the one of which Aunt Mavis (above) spoke (around the 1960s), the following interviewee describes her conscious move into town for her children's education:

All Aboriginal people worked on stations at that time because you didn't have social welfare then. If you wanted a feed you had to work. And there was no jobs for us in town. So everyone worked on stations and just followed the work around ... But when you had kids, you had to move into town so the kids could

go to school and be near a hospital (Anonymous Interviewee 10, 17 February 2005).

The children of this generation who had settled in town for their children's education, grew up with the perspective that it was important for their children (and indeed all Aboriginal children) to be educated within the mainstream system, and that this required a commitment to live in one place when their children reached school age. Interviewee Deborah Robinson, for example, recalled her parents' commitment to remaining in Meekatharra during her childhood, only occasionally going on travels elsewhere and only during school holidays. She was sent to boarding school in Perth to complete her studies and eventually returned to Meekatharra. Today, she places a high priority on her children's education and suggests that it is essential to everyone.

In the interview excerpt below, Deborah describes her perspective on engaging with the mainstream education system and the chief dilemma facing many Aboriginal parents living in rural and remote areas who hold similar viewpoints:

*Every child has to be given that chance. And I've done that for my kids and I tell them straight out 'I am giving you the chance. What you do with it from here is entirely up to you.' And this is why I sent my boys away to school. To give them that chance. So the reality is, if Meekatharra District was up to the standard throughout the State, then why would I want to send my kids away? I'd rather them be home with me (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).*

Deborah's words reverberate throughout Yamatji country amongst Aboriginal families who are concerned about the standard of education available to students in rural and remote areas. Lower standards of service in regional areas are prompting Aboriginal families who place a high priority on mainstream education to make difficult migration choices.

#### **4.4.2 The Relocation Effect**

Education services are delivered throughout the region in a series of local public schools. Small primary schools function in Mullewa, Yalgoo, Mt Magnet, Cue, Pia Wadjari, Yulga Jinna, Burringurrah and Meekatharra. A range of public and private schools (some with boarding facilities) also operate in Geraldton and Carnarvon. In

the fieldwork region, both Meekatharra and Mt Magnet run secondary programs and are classified as District High Schools. However, similarly to health services, declining rural populations and service rationalisation has left many of these schools under-resourced and under-performing.

Service concentration in metropolitan areas means that the variety of programs available in metropolitan areas such as Geraldton and Perth are not available in rural towns such as Meekatharra. In particular, Aboriginal students who excel in sports do not have the opportunities to pursue those activities in regional schools which lack the resources to support and foster their abilities. In addition, most of the schools in the region experience severe difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff (Prout, 2003). Consequently, these rural and remote postings are often allocated to graduate teachers who are involuntarily placed there in order to become eligible to earn permanency within the public teaching service<sup>59</sup>. These new graduates are themselves learning to teach and require additional support from administrative staff and more experienced colleagues. Compounding the under-resourced and under-performing milieux in which many of these schools operate, the sporadic participation of many Aboriginal students with the education system disrupts the teaching process both behaviourally and academically, militating against a focus on educational outcomes in the classroom. These processes will be further explored in section 4.4.3.

The deteriorating standard of education offered in rural and remote institutions is a growing concern for many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents who fear that their children's educational future is being compromised:

*There's too many kids that have fallen that far behind and there's not enough effort to help them catch up. Or the ones - they focus on those ones that are behind and leaving the ones that are in front at their own. There's no support for the kids that are smarter than the average in the school. When [my daughter]*

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<sup>59</sup> Teachers with permanency within the public school system in Western Australia are guaranteed a permanent teaching position in a public school. However, permanency has become increasingly difficult for teachers to earn. One of the requirements for eligibility is two years of continuous good services within a public school in Western Australia. Given that most metropolitan schools are fully staffed, most two or three year contracts available to graduate teachers are in rural and remote postings. Consequently, many graduate teachers accept rural and remote postings in order to increase their chances of being eligible for permanency.



*finished school, she finished at a Grade 7 level at year 10. How healthy is that. Grade 6, 7 sums she was doing at the end of year 10 (Elaine King, 27 October 2004).*

Aboriginal families are responding to the declining capacity of schools in these regional areas in several ways. Some families decide that they must relocate to a larger centre so that their children can be exposed to a higher standard of education and greater extra-curricular and social opportunities:

*There's quite a movement of people out of the remote areas for education. It's not only a non-Aboriginal thing. I left Meekatharra for my kids schooling. I'll be buggered if about three of four people with kids the same age as mine Aboriginal community didn't turn up in Geraldton about the same time. Getting their kids to a high school where they can actually have a chance at a matriculation rather than just entertaining them for four years (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).*

For some families this decision is extremely difficult as it involves leaving behind networks of social support, family members, and the security of familiarity. For one interviewee, her choice was either to relocate to Geraldton for her daughters' education or remain in Meekatharra to care for her elderly parents. Either choice involved significant sacrifice: the important role of caring for her parents, or her child's future mainstream prospects. She was reluctant to send her daughters to boarding school because of the bad experiences she had had at boarding school in her youth.

Past experiences within the education system are central considerations for many Aboriginal parents making decisions about their children's education. The common experience of being sent to Perth or Geraldton was almost always isolating and unhappy for the current generation of parents. Although a significant number of Aboriginal students, with the support of Abstudy, are sent to boarding school in larger regional centres, many parents would prefer not to exercise this option. To avoid boarding school, some parents arrange for their children to live in Aboriginal hostels or with relatives in larger towns or cities where better schooling options are available. Parents often feel more comfortable with these arrangements because their children are still within familiar support networks. In the following excerpt the

interviewee describes the role her Auntie fulfils for boarders at one such hostel in Perth:

*Most of those kids come from up North; Pilbara, Kimberley. Most of those kids that are based at that hostel. She was busting at the seams at one stage because all the kids wanted to stay with her. All the girls wanted to stay with her. And her limit was, maximum was 12. And there's a waiting list to get into the hostel that she was in because she'd become, even though her family was from Perth and Kalgoorlie, she'd married a Pilbara man and she understood Law, the Law Business, really understood it because her two sons had been through it. So, and families up there knew who [my Auntie], who she was. So they thought 'oh well, send the kids down to her.' (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).*

Placing children with extended family members in larger cities is a relatively common practice for Aboriginal families in rural and remote areas. It again demonstrates the significance of family networks in informing Aboriginal mobility practices and spatiality, and further demonstrates that security and belonging exists beyond the borders of a geographical region that an Aboriginal person might refer to as their 'country.' However, these fluid exchanges of care and reciprocity of family members, particularly in relation to children and youth, can prompt the disapproving and censorious gaze of non-Aboriginal society. A recent article in the West Australian newspaper described a tenancy dispute involving an Aboriginal family who, in addition to three of their own children, were caring for eight young boys, all relatives from the north of the state, who had moved to Perth for their schooling (Parker, 2005). The landlords were threatening legal action unless the family stopped running a 'boarding house.' The family's mother disputed the accusation that she was running a boarding house, noting that all the children under her care were part of her extended family (Parker, 2005).

In each of the situations described above, mobility is prompted by the desire to engage more actively with the mainstream education service. As in the case of health services, family networks of support and reciprocity often shape and inform these moves, but they are ultimately motivated by service considerations.

### 4.4.3 Disrupted Classrooms

Despite the emphasis in the preceding discussion on the significant ways in which the availability and delivery of education services impacts Aboriginal spatiality, few of the education service providers interviewed identified such impacts. Rather, the focus remained on Aboriginal people who have highly mobile or transient lifestyles. A common perspective was that such individuals are not hindered by the education system largely because their sporadic interaction with the system perpetuates a poor understanding of it, and further disinterest and disengagement from it.

When asked what impact Aboriginal mobility practices had on the provision of education services, interviewee Garry Davis began his comprehensive response with: *Well, 'decimates' is too soft a word.* Indeed the effectual relationship between Aboriginal transiency and mainstream education is perhaps one of the most contentious points of public discourse in the fieldwork region. Many interviewees, even those that were not involved in delivering education services, described the detrimental effects of Aboriginal mobilities on the functionality of schools and the academic progress of students.

*NT: And that's one of the hardest things at school because the kids are just - it's just a complete lack of education for the kids that are just carted around and never face the school because they haven't any permanent place of residency. And that's a big issue all over.*

*SP: So kids coming into school for short periods and then -*

*NT: Coming into town for short periods, and not even attending school. And we see a lot of that; kids that come and don't attend. They - Aboriginal people tend to shift around a lot for funerals and things and a lot of times their kids just miss schooling completely. And it's got to have an impact on the kid in its later life.*

*SP: The gaps in schooling, or going to different schools?*

*NT: The gaps in schooling AND going to different schools. You set up a program and if you're going to start the program, you want the kid here from the start to the finish if you want to teach them something. And unless you're an exceptional sort of a student, chopping and changing can't help can it (Norm Trenfield, 24 September 2004).*

One of the aspects of Aboriginal mobilities which positions them as a central issue facing mainstream educators in Yamatji country is the overwhelming impact of student movement in the towns and communities throughout the region. The

Mullewa School Principal for example explained that it was not uncommon for 100% of a class population to turnover in a given year. In Cue and Mt Magnet, it is estimated that between 60% and 100% of the high school population is itinerant, and at least 40% of the school population in Meekatharra are not in regular attendance<sup>60</sup>. A second aspect of Aboriginal mobilities which makes them a considerable concern for educators throughout Yamatji country is their capacity to comprehensively disrupt school functionality and consequently, student learning.

Children who are frequently mobile, usually travelling with their family, may miss significant portions of school and consequently fall further behind academically:

*Another example that I can use in relation to mobility is with the education department. When you have children who are highly mobile, they fall through the gaps of the education process which creates huge issues, particularly in relation to illiteracy which is very very high. And the twofold effect from that is a potential strengths building on gaining employment is hindered dramatically. So then you come back to that vicious cycle of poverty and lack of employment options for Indigenous (Nicole Adams, 15 July 2004).*

A common scenario described during interviews was for children to travel with their parents to another town or community with the intention of only staying for two or three days. Their children are therefore not enrolled in the local school. Ultimately, however, they end up staying for two or three weeks and their child misses that time at school. Some families who engage in similar circular mobilities will enrol their children at the school in their destination place for the duration of their visit. As this interview excerpt explains, however, the short duration of their stay often impedes academic progress:

*These kids are moved, and it makes it harder for them to learn. Because they've started a program say this week here, next week they go to Wiluna, which is completely different program or system that they're running. So they could be backwards in their work. They could be forwards where it's too hard for them. So by the time they get back here again, we have to start them back from scratch again. So they do a test and it's more or less, they haven't learnt anything if they're out of school that's not*

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<sup>60</sup> These figures are based upon anecdotal estimations since accurate statistical information about itinerancy is not yet available at these schools. Some schools are developing programs to distinguish itinerancy from truancy in non-attendance statistics.

*achieving much. They go right back to where they were when they were here in the beginning. So got a lot on them, it's a lot of impact on their learning (Anonymous Interviewee 12, 1 March 2005).*

Both attendance at numerous schools, and gaps in school attendance as a result of mobility processes, cause interruption to the child's academic development and mitigate against program continuity and academic progression. Furthermore, circular mobility processes which entail short enrolments in numerous schools and frequent returns to a 'base' school, are disruptive to classrooms at both the source and destination schools in two primary ways. Firstly, they increase the workload of teachers to the extent that teaching time and content is compromised. Secondly, they are often accompanied by behavioural issues that detract the teachers focus from fostering the academic progress of their students. The relationship between student mobility, academic progress, and behaviour problems has been established in other contexts. For example, a 1994 US Government Account Office report found that frequent mobility amongst American families with school aged children stunted their academic development and increased their likelihood of having behavioural problems (Anon, 2001).

Movement of Aboriginal families throughout and within Yamatji country means that school classrooms frequently contain new compositions of students, either because some have left to travel elsewhere, or new students have arrived for a short period, or some combination of both. As the following interview excerpt explains, these classroom composition changes compound the responsibilities of classroom teachers in achieving educational outcomes:

*Like our year 8/9 class for example, had 100% turnover. That's a lot for a teacher to monitor and assess and report on groups of students. Let alone always having to assess a student's level of work. Because the transient kids often are out of school for a great length of time before they enrol at a new school. So therefore if they've done that a few times, they're missing an awful lot of schooling. Which means their levels are no-where near a kid who's in school all the time. So a teacher could have 16 kids and yet almost 16 levels of ability. And until the student fronts up and the teacher can assess that level, it's pretty difficult. They can't actually do too much in preparation for them (Mullewa School Principal, 15 September 2004).*

Itinerancy amongst the student population means that substantial portions of teacher workloads are consumed with tracking the academic records of new students from their previous schools and assessing their academic progress. A number of interviewees suggested that strong inter-school, inter-regional, and inter-agency communication networks are vital in servicing 'transient' Aboriginal populations. Ultimately however, these tracking and tracing tasks detract from lesson preparation time and curriculum development opportunities.

Varying levels of academic ability in one classroom also make it extremely difficult for teachers to undertake group teaching exercises. Concentrated one-to-one instruction is required, but often not possible. In many cases, teachers simply lack the resources to invest in tracing records and carrying out individual assessments and lesson plans. Consequently, students who are enrolled in a school for only a short time may become passive participants in classroom activities for the duration of their stay. When they eventually return to the school which they normally attend, they may be equally as far behind as if they had not attended any school during their time away. Lessons are therefore necessarily aimed at the lowest level of academic ability in the classroom and many students are unable to be properly extended academically. Their potential is stifled. Poor academic results create dissatisfaction amongst some parents, but as this interview excerpt argues, educators often perceive this as a consequence of itinerancy amongst a significant portion of their school population:

I had a mother come into my office very upset and asking me to explain to her why her child was in year 10 and couldn't spell his own name. So I found a program called Direct Instruction (DI) specifically for spelling. It is repetitive, intensive, and works through small groups. Transiency means that we can't keep track or record of how or whether the kids are improving. Programs like DI require longevity to see results ... We are registered as a SAER (Students At Educational Risk) school. 70% of this, in my opinion, would be down to transiency (Anonymous Interviewee 4, 10 August 2004).

In this environment of constant change, student academic progress is not the only concern for education administrators. The strain on teachers, who are mostly new graduates, is also very wearing. They become frustrated when, after having put considerable effort into developing individual programs for children who are considered 'at educational risk' (because they frequently miss school), that child is

suddenly absent from school and then returns two weeks or three months later needing to start again. Teachers become stretched beyond their capacity trying to constantly foster and assess real educational outcomes amongst an ever changing classroom composition. Behavioural issues are a further encumbrance facing classroom educators which a number of interviewees attribute to frequent student population turnover:

*SP: In terms of kids coming and going, what impact does that have, or does that have an impact on the classroom and teaching?*

*MSP: Yes, yes, yes. We have to really really focus on health and wellbeing with our teachers. Because, they need to cope with the amount of movement in their classrooms, and often they are severe behavioural issues ... In schools such as this we get graduate teachers and they cop the toughest of schools. So yeh, it's difficult (Mullewa School Principal, 15 September 2004).*

With continual population turnover, classrooms become places of continual disruption and teachers remain focussed on behaviour management rather than teaching. Interviewee Garry Davis described a lack of an 'education ethic' amongst students who continually move with their families. He suggested that when parents 'cruise' or 'wander', their children do not see the value in education. These children are consequently disinterested at school and would rather play or be disruptive than learn. He described a process of 'code switching' which involves helping students settle into school life and adjust to the rules and behaviour codes which apply there. In interviews, many educators described code-switching as a lengthy and resource-taxing process.

In areas where there is considerable mobility amongst the Aboriginal population, many teachers face a combination of additional responsibilities including behaviour management, tracing and assessing the academic progress of new students, delivering lessons to students with a wide range of academic abilities, and developing individual programs for children 'at risk.' These experiences often foster resentment amongst many educators who begin to perceive their work as more of a baby-sitting service for itinerant parents, than a meaningful contribution to producing tangible educational outcomes.

#### **4.4.4 Entangled Co-construction**

The relationship between Aboriginal spatial practices and mainstream education services in Yamatji country might best be described as one of entangled co-construction. The fixed and permanent nature of schools has drawn some Aboriginal people to live stationary lives in a single locale. The deteriorating nature of schools in many remote and regional areas has prompted some Aboriginal people to make the difficult choice to move to larger towns or cities for their children's mainstream education. The declining nature of rural and remote schools is the result of a number of factors including resource withdrawal and staff inexperience. However, the lower standard of education available in many schools in the fieldwork region can also be at least partially attributed to the more transient student population whose turnover disrupts classroom environments and hinders academic progress. As the education standard of the whole school drops, 'core' parents (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) become increasingly concerned about their children's education, placing considerable pressure on all families to remain stationary when their children reach school age. For more itinerant families, their engagement with the mainstream education system is characterised by compliant or resistant responses to external pressures to settle in one particular place for their children's education. This external pressure comes from non-Aboriginal service providers as well as Aboriginal family members who value mainstream education and believe it must be supported by non-transitory lifestyles. Those who do not comply with this pressure are further alienated from the education system.

#### **4.5 Non-Aboriginal Itinerancy and its Implications for Servicing Aboriginal People**

So far, this chapter has focussed exclusively on the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and service provision. In addition to describing the impact of service location and delivery on Aboriginal spatiality, it has described the generally detrimental impact of Aboriginal transiency on the effective delivery of services. However, this dialectical relationship is also influenced by non-Aboriginal spatial practices, particularly those of the service population. Although non-Aboriginal movement usually occurs for economic or 'normalised' reasons, it can be equally disruptive to effective service provision and, as many interviewees explained, social cohesion within rural towns such as Meekatharra. This section provides a brief overview of non-Aboriginal spatial practices within the fieldwork region in order to



identify the important ways in which such practices impinge upon and compare to Aboriginal spatiality.

As with Aboriginal people, interviewees circuitously identified a form of 'core' and 'transient' division amongst the spatiality of the non-Aboriginal population living in Meekatharra (and the wider fieldwork region). The 'core' included those families who have lived in the town for many generations and whose businesses and livelihoods are located there. For them, Meekatharra is home. They have a great sense of ownership over the town and have seen it undergo many changes over the decades. This group have established their social network with such distinctiveness that they refer to themselves as 'The Purple Circle' – a label presumably indicative of their self-perceptions of elite-ness and longevity. Most of this group of local residents are between 40 and 80 years of age. Many of their children and grandchildren have followed opportunities out of the town. Like the Aboriginal population, many parents concerned about their children's education have relocated to larger regional centres and cities, or have sent their children to boarding school. Almost all of these individuals have been attached to a nearby pastoral station or have been integral participants in the mining or service industries over the years. Growing numbers of this 'core' are leaving Meekatharra because of increasing outbreaks of crime in recent times:

*... unfortunately in the last eighteen months it has been driven as a result of our high crime which by the way has tethered off and it's not as high as the public portrays it. But what we've found in the last 18 months is a considerable number of long term or local residents getting up and leaving and again unfortunately that was due to repeated levels of crime that we were experiencing. Because you do have a population that are locals (Nicole Adams, 15 July 2004).*

The more 'transient' non-Aboriginal population identified in Meekatharra are mostly public servants such as teachers, nurses and police officers. These workers are usually stationed in the town for a fixed term. Some take positions in the town voluntarily because they entail promotions or substantial salary benefits. Although these rural and remote postings are generally between one and three years in duration, it is not unusual for teachers, nurses and/or police to leave before they have completed a full year of service. At Meekatharra District High School for example,

there have been 15 principals in the last 9 years. Almost the entire school staff turns over every one to two years. Most of the nursing staff turnover regularly every few months. Others who might be considered part of this more transient group include electricians, plumbers and Shire workers. Most of these tradespeople come to Meekatharra for short periods of up to two years to make money.

Many of this 'transient' population feel excluded from 'The Purple Circle.' During the period of field research for this study, one social group within the 'transient' non-Aboriginal population actually labelled themselves 'The Orange Misfits' in a somewhat mocking rebellion against their perceived perpetual status as outsiders. To a degree, their relegation to 'outsider' status is the product of aggravation amongst longer-term residents about these 'transients'' perceived lack of engagement with, social integration into, or contribution towards the town – a social dynamic common to many small rural towns (see for example Dempsey, 1990). One interviewee describes her perspective of both groups, feeling somewhat caught between the two:

*You've got your core that stay here. You know, basically born and bred here or been here forever. And then you have the teachers who can't wait to get out of the place and have to race and go. And everyone says it's like you're doing your time here. A lot of it is seen in that sense. Which then doesn't give the community - when you've got people with that sort of attitude, then they're constantly finding - they don't put anything back into the town. They just can't wait to get out of the place, and do nothing but whinge and bitch. So it sort of adds to the town of being so, oh I don't know, disheartened ... the ones that are here for the core have got the friends and all that and are really quite terrible ... You can really tell. They're just like the teachers. I can't believe the teachers at times. It's a race to see who gets out of the place first. And when it comes to community ... like even trying to get them to buy raffle tickets or something they're not interested. It's seen as a sentence and I find that really sad because Meeka's got a lot to offer (Anonymous Interviewee 3, 26 July 2004).*

A number of interviewees compared the transiency of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal town residents. They suggested that in many ways, the transiency of non-Aboriginal people was more damaging to the town because unlike Aboriginal residents, the transient non-Aboriginal population were not socially invested in the town and would not return to it. In speaking of past employees who had come to Meekatharra with

the attitude of 'doing their time' and then leaving as soon as possible, interviewee Roy Seery declared:

*I didn't want people like that. They're a bigger problem than for instance the transient Aboriginal people because this is still their home. They might go away for a year, or something, but it's still their home. They come back. And you know, you never see these people again. They haven't necessarily done much to improve the community in my opinion (Roy Seery, 21 July 2004).*

In an almost complete inversion of the conceptualisation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spatial practices presented thus far, one Aboriginal interviewee described service providers as 'the movers' suggesting that it is in their nature to move because they're looking for employment. She went on to suggest that these moving service providers will consequently never fully understand why Aboriginal people stay in one spot. Even though Aboriginal people may engage in circular, short-term mobilities, there is a sense in which continual returns to 'home-base' reinforce their commitment to that place and can thus be understood as an expression of deep-rootedness and stability. Conversely, although many non-Aboriginal service providers may move less frequently, their lack of attachment to a given place and their reasons for moving are here conceived as evidence of their itinerancy. This observation is again consistent with Brody's (2000) argument that, across the span of time, hunter-gatherer peoples are more 'geographically-fixed' than their agriculturally-based counter-parts.

Interviewees suggested that, like Aboriginal itinerancy, this non-Aboriginal transience resulted in service discontinuity and perpetuated alienation amongst Aboriginal residents. This discontinuity was particularly evident in relation to health and education services. For example, previous research has noted that one of the most significant facilitators of academic achievement for Aboriginal students is their relationships with teachers (Partington and Gray, 2003). Clearly, Aboriginal itinerancy fragments the development of this relationship. Equally, however, the continual turnover of staff in schools means that even those students who are regular attenders must continuously forge new relationships. This process can quickly become disenchanting, particularly when it is called for so regularly. For many parents, the perpetual turnover of teachers and their reluctance to become involved in community activities during their posting, creates further barriers to Aboriginal

engagement with the school, and hinders effective communication and education about what the school is trying to achieve:

*Often communities would say 'well, we've had a different teacher every year.' Or, 'we've had a different maths teacher.' Or, 'my child has not had the same teacher two years in a row.' So it's about that perception of communities about schools as well. And that obviously is going to effect how they look at schools. So the transiency of teachers I think does have a big impact (EdWA Operations Manager, 14 September 2004).*

Although staff turnover is particularly damaging for schools where Aboriginal relationships with their teachers are crucial to their engagement with the mainstream education process, similar sentiments were expressed regarding police and health services:

*For us, it's really difficult because we are effected by that transiency of the non-Aboriginal community. And so that creates significant problems in providing consistency of service. Because our service is very much modelled on a primary health model - not an acute care services model - that actually requires significant education and significant understanding by clinicians most of whom have a very targeted, very task oriented focus. 'You have a cut, I'll sow you up, you're fine.' Our focus is 'how did you get the cut, how can we avoid you getting another one.' We'll fix the cut, but we also caused it and what we can do to stop it. And unless you've got a group of people who really understand and sit well with that philosophy, then in fact you lose a lot of that continuity of service. So one of our biggest difficulties has been maintaining a stable workforce. And to maintain a stable workforce for 12 months is actually a really good result. So to maintain it for anything longer than that is really difficult (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).*

One service provider who had been living in Mt Magnet for 15 years, an exceptionally long period of time for someone in his role, suggested that to the local Aboriginal population, transient staff are considered tourists: they come in and out of town, and nothing really changes. This perception only further alienates Aboriginal people from the services that these 'tourists' provide. Here, non-Aboriginal itinerancy offers very little incentive for 'transient' Aboriginal people to remain permanently in one place so that they can engage more actively with local public services.

## 4.6 Mainstream Services and Aboriginal Engagement

Through examining three case-study services, this chapter has depicted a continuum of Aboriginal engagement with basic mainstream services. At one end of the continuum, there are Aboriginal people who actively engage with health, housing and education services. For these individuals, access to basic government services is a priority and significantly influences their spatial practices – either prompting them to make long-term migrations, or remain permanently in one locale. At the other extreme, the case studies also identified Aboriginal people who have more passive engagements with housing, health and education services. These individuals generally engage in more transient lifestyles and have more contested and sporadic interactions with service agencies. So, whilst some parents maintain that a mainstream education is vital to their child's future prospects, and adapt their spatiality accordingly, other parents move frequently without necessarily attaching significance to the potential link between the number of schools their child attends in one term, and their educational progress. Similarly, whilst some Aboriginal people view housing as an essential component of their daily living, others have a more peripheral understanding of the public housing system, and remain at the margins of it.

The passivity that seems to characterise some Aboriginal interactions with government services is exemplified in the story told by one interviewee of a man who recently presented to the Department of Community Development in Meekatharra asking for a welfare ration. Although this incident took place within the last five years, the practice of handing out government welfare rations ceased some 50 years ago. The interviewee told the story to explain that for whatever reason, many Aboriginal people are often very removed from active engagement with government service agencies. Similar sentiments were echoed by another interviewee who described a recent inter-agency meeting in the town of Wiluna:

*That's what this whole agency meeting was about last week. Is getting the agencies together to sort of solve hopefully some of the issues we're looking at. And we're still doing that. We'll be doing that for a long time. But, we got a handful of people and we invited everyone in the town. No one wants to come. They'll come to land issue meetings. They'll come to other meetings, but when*

*it comes to education, employment, training, health. Like you try and get a community member to that, they'd all rather go down to the pub or stay at home. Don't care. You know 'just another bunch of whitefellas trying to get blackfellas to do something' (Richard Whittington, 23 February 2005).*

As Chapter Three (section 3.3.2.2) explained, many interviewees described these various engagements and subsequent spatial practices as a reflection of values and priorities: whilst some Aboriginal people value access to housing, health and education, others do not, and their sporadic engagement with such services reflects this prioritisation. However, the above interview excerpt suggests that story is more complex than merely reflecting a bi-polar range of values. Indeed Mr Whittington's comments suggest that some Aboriginal people have relegated basic government services to the realm of 'whitefella business' - an area of governance in which they have little desire to participate. Here, passive engagement with service agencies perhaps reflects a resistance to the perceived social control that such services command over their lives. In most cases, the degree to which a person engages with mainstream services is iteratively determined by their previous experiences and developed perspectives of that particular service. More passive engagements with mainstream services are therefore usually mediated by any combination of the following three considerations:

1. historical alienation;
2. perpetuated contemporary marginalisation, and;
3. divergent conceptualisations of health, housing, and education.

#### **4.6.1 Historical Alienation**

Previous sections have demonstrated that, as a result of historical policy, many Aboriginal people associate government service provision with intrusion into and external control over their lives. Government health, housing and education services have historically been symbolic conduits for the expression of colonial rule, producing a contemporary interaction which for many Aboriginal people, is marked by apprehension, confusion, and in some cases, defiance.

After colonial settlement first began in Yamatji country, Aboriginal people were excluded from accessing public housing, health and education services for several decades. When Aboriginal people were granted access to these services and

institutions, it was generally for the purposes of assimilating them into non-Aboriginal society. In essence, these services became tools for 'weeding out' Aboriginality. Transitional housing policies, for example, were powerful manifestations of this process. For some Aboriginal people, this history of exclusion and subsequent conditional engagement with mainstream services, produced resentment and mistrust which perpetuates further contemporary disassociation (Sims, O'Connor and Forrest 2003). Today, disinterest in or alienation from the public housing system may in some cases, be a legacy of resistance to these oppressive policies.

Of contemporary Aboriginal relationships with the education system, one interviewee reflected:

*... we used to ask them to just leave their kids at the gate. And we did this with non-Aboriginal parents: 'You leave your kid at the gate and come back and pick them up six hours later and we'll do whatever we do to them while they're inside the gate.' And now all of a sudden we're saying 'well no, schools are really participative consultative places. Come on in, welcome you.' It's going to be hard to make that transition and particularly for Aboriginal people given what – they've only really had access to education in the last 30 years (or a little bit over 30 years but roughly that). That's even going to be more in their minds, in terms of 'come in. You're welcome. We want your involvement. We want you to participate.' And in lots of ways, schools are – you can't get around the fact they're non-Aboriginal places of existing (EdWA Operations Manager, Geraldton 14 September 2004).*

A history of alienation from active and participatory engagement with the education system has for some Aboriginal people, produced deeply entrenched perspectives about the potentially discriminatory or harmful role of mainstream education in their children's lives. Their mobility practices, characterised by the sporadic insertion of their children into various schools, may therefore serve to facilitate some compliance with wider societal pressure which insists that all children should be schooled, whilst avoiding wholesale engagement with the system.

#### **4.6.2 Perpetuated Contemporary Marginalisation**

In addition to historical alienation, contemporary marginalisation can also stimulate and perpetuate passive engagement with mainstream services:

*I mean, there's certainly a perception that people don't use the services because they don't care about their health ... Whether it's because they're transient, or whether it's because they are, don't feel welcome at the service is the story. I mean a great example in Meekatharra is, I don't know if you've met a girl; [woman's name] at the Shire ... Lovely girl. Married to [husband's name] ... I mean they're really nice people. But absolute Meekatharra rednecks ... when I told her I was with the Aboriginal Medical Service, she said 'oh, where's the whitefellas medical service?' And I was really quick for a change, I said 'up there on the hill [referring to the Meekatharra public hospital].' It's \$2.3 million a year. And that's how it really is. It's a flash medical service designed for whitefellas in a town that's fundamentally black. So there's not a single non-Aboriginal person that has any trouble accessing Meekatharra hospital. But there are a lot of Aboriginal people that have trouble. Not all of them, don't make that mistake. You're probably talking about 50% have no problem, but unfortunately it's the bottom, or it's the 80/20 perhaps. The 20% that really need to, don't. The 80% that don't, can. And that's the perception people see. There's certainly Aboriginal people who are unfamiliar with and frightened of the system, don't come in anywhere near as quickly, as they should (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).*

As this interview excerpt suggests, the nature of service delivery can be very alienating for Aboriginal clients in Yamatji country. Previous sections discussed for example the often alienating reporting requirements and methods of correspondence implemented by Homeswest. In addition, some interviewees described an unease about the constant turnover of service personnel and the consequent apprehension about forging new relationships of trust regarding personal matters of health or education.

Perhaps one of the most profoundly marginalising facets of contemporary public services, however, is the stereotypical discourses of Aboriginality that often infuse them. Sims et al. (2003) have suggested that many Aboriginal parents and children face marginalising stereotypes in the public education system. Similarly, Bond (2005) has described the alienating impact of the dominant discourses of Aboriginal ill-health that pervade public health practice. She related passive engagement with mainstream services to a form of self-protection from negative stereotypes of Aboriginality:



Is it actually any wonder, then, that we'd have to beg "Aunty" to come along to a presentation where she was depicted as nothing more than a subset of problems and unhealthy afflictions that could be remedied by simply telling her to eat better and exercise more? I remember feeling shame about having enticed community members to a workshop for a free feed, only to have them subjected to the paternalism of visiting health professionals, who, by virtue of their occupation alone, assumed they could completely disregard cultural and community protocols and that they were instantaneously authorised to speak to our old people as a parent would to a child (Bond 2005, p. 40).

In a moment of casual conversation during fieldwork, Aunty Mavis Curley echoed Bond's sentiments. She described her belief that one of the primary factors underlying a pervasive apprehension amongst many of the local Aboriginal population in Meekatharra to engage with service providers, consultants, community development initiatives, or research projects, was the desire to protect the fragile remaining sense of self-autonomy they possessed. She suggested that years of government policies which dictated how they could live, parent, and interact, had left many people dejected and reluctant to expose themselves to potential ongoing criticism. While there is not scope within this study to elaborate further on the topic of contemporary Aboriginal experiences of marginalisation in interactions with basic government services, the brief discussion provided here alludes to the reality that in instances where very little security is derived from access to mainstream services, alternate networks of support and reciprocity become increasingly important, as do the mobilities required to maintain them<sup>61</sup>.

#### **4.6.3 Broader Conceptualisations**

A third consideration that mediates Aboriginal engagement with mainstream services is the extent to which accessing such services constitutes a person's prescription of being healthy, housed and educated. In other words, the more passive, sporadic or contested engagements that some Aboriginal people have with mainstream services may in fact reflect a more broad and fluid understanding of the concepts of health, housing, and education. For example, Bond (2005) contrasted non-Aboriginal conceptualisation of health, measured by discrete epidemiological statistics, with a more holistic Aboriginal understanding of health as interconnected to cultural

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<sup>61</sup> Chapter Seven provides a more detailed discussion of these processes.

exchanges and social processes which affirm identity. According to this conceptualisation, frequent mobility could be understood not as disruptive of health, but rather, when undertaken to foster and maintain social and cultural networks, as a practice which affirm 'healthiness.'

In applying this notion to public housing, some Aboriginal itinerancy is best understood not necessarily as a product of alienation from or contestation within the public housing system, but rather a reflection of a broader understanding of housing as something temporary which must be adaptable to frequent mobility. Some interviewees also noted that mainstream education represented only one part of a much larger process of learning for Aboriginal children. This broader understanding of the education process influenced parental decisions about the priority of school attendance in the context of other social and cultural obligations which may require movement. In each of these cases, more passive engagements with mainstream services are the product of broader and more fluid understandings of health, housing, and education.

## **4.7 Conclusion**

There are clearly complex and dialectical relationships between service provision and Aboriginal spatiality. Several themes regarding this relationship are common to all case-study services. Primary among these is the notion that by the fixed nature through which they are delivered, these services have constricted the mobility practices of many Aboriginal people who wish to have consistent and continuing access to them. Further, processes of rural decline and resource rationalisation have facilitated service withdrawal from many of the more rural and remote parts of Yamatji country where many Aboriginal people live. Like non-Aboriginal people, service withdrawal has prompted many Aboriginal people to migrate to larger centres or send family members to these distant locations. These migrations often have important flow-on effects. The relocation of family members to distant locales to access services enlarges the mobility networks in which family members feel comfortable to frequently move.

Conversely, some interviewees felt that the range of services available to Aboriginal people, and the ease with which they could be accessed, actually assisted itinerancy. The availability of Homeswest properties in rural areas, the number of schools and

ease of enrolment, were cited locally as conditions which combined to create an environment where Aboriginal people can take advantage of service networks whilst remaining engaged in itinerant lifestyles. For some, such statements were merely reflections and observations. For others, these observations were accompanied by attitudes of concern or derision over a perceived pandering to itinerant whims or catering to indulgent mobility practices.

Another theme common to all case-studies is the disruptive effect of Aboriginal itinerancy on services that were developed upon conceptualisations of 'settled as normal,' and consequently require stationary lives for effective access and use. In each case study, spontaneous and contingent movements amongst the Aboriginal population were constructed as problematic for service provision, particularly in terms of service continuity and resource allocation. These movements could not be predicted, monitored or planned for and caused despair for many service providers who felt their work was consequently ineffective. Each of these case studies illustrates the significant role of mobility processes in the context of service provision to Aboriginal people. Understanding Aboriginal mobility processes is therefore crucial to the effective delivery of government services.