



COVID-19 Impacts for Residents of the Northern Territory of Australia

Analysis from *The Territory and Me - COVID Update survey*

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KEY POINTS

- This paper is about COVID-19 impacts on the population of the Northern Territory of Australia. The focus is on tracking changing sentiments towards migrating from and to the Territory, perceptions about the Territory as a place to live and work, and aspects of individual wellbeing.
- This is the first population-orientated COVID-19 research in Australia. We compare pre-pandemic sentiments (2019) from our large 2019 survey *The Territory and Me* with our post-pandemic 2020 survey *The Territory and Me – COVID Update*.
- COVID-19 has increased population retention rates for all life-stages in the Northern Territory and especially for Early-career residents. This bodes well for growing the population but may require direct policy initiatives to garner actualisation of expected retention.
- People resident in the Territory for less than a year were almost twice as likely to say they will live in the Territory in two years compared to longer-term residents, providing opportunities for policy to influence population retention.
- Participants who were purchasing a home or born overseas had higher population retention rates and have increased their retention expectations since the onset of COVID-19.
- Uncertainty about where some people expect to be living in two years has increased. However, retirees seem more certain about their migration intentions. Their rates of retention in the Territory remain the highest of all life-stages.
- COVID-19 has worsened perceived mental wellbeing for participants and those who said this was the case were more likely to express an intention to leave the Territory within two years when compared to others.
- There were regional differences in the experiences of Territorians during 2020. Those living in Alice Springs appear to have suffered more significant negative impacts compared to people living in the Greater Darwin region.
- As dynamicism continues for internal and international migration, we recommend ongoing research to assess how and why COVID-19 might be influencing migration and other sentiments through a longitudinal survey. This would be useful for informing economic and population policy responses.



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Introduction

The economic and social disruption presented by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted global economies, public health, livelihoods and the mobility and migration of people across and within borders. Australia's island geography and tight immigration controls enabled it to close international borders towards the beginning of 2020 when COVID-19 first surfaced in Wuhan, China (WHO 2020). This policy rolled out as an incremental tightening of border restrictions which extended to South Korea and Iran and eventually to all countries by mid-March (Duckett and Stobart 2020). The measures implemented to manage the spread of COVID-19 also saw a number of restrictions placed on the movement of people within Australia with many businesses not allowed to operate and 'work from home' policies became commonplace throughout the country.

Latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) illustrate the dramatic impacts from international border closures on population flows to and from Australia. Both short-term arrivals and resident returns to Australia plummeted by approximately 99 percent in the year to November 2020 (ABS 2021b). Regional internal migration estimates by the ABS also reflect some dramatic changes. In the year to September 2020, 10,600 fewer people (12% less) moved interstate with greater capital cities such as Melbourne experiencing a net loss of minus 7,445 people (ABS 2021a) which is clearly linked to the recent COVID-19 second wave in Victoria. Indeed, the 2020-21 Federal budget incorporated population projections which suggested lasting impacts in terms of lower national (and consequently State and Territory) population growth from reduced net overseas migration in the short and medium-term (see <https://budget.gov.au/index.htm>). Meanwhile, data on internal migration also shows a significant decline in the size of flows (ABS 2021a).

The Northern Territory's hard border closure to interstate jurisdictions early in the pandemic and lack of community transmission has seen it emerge as a 'COVID-safe' location. However, while available ABS regional internal migration estimates and interstate migration data for 2020 do not quite reflect the surge of 'COVID refugees' in media representations (see ABC 2020), there are some indications of an increase in population retention. Since March, efforts to manage population mobility both to and within Australia has seen continuous adjustments made to international and internal border restrictions, however these closures have come at a cost, greatly affecting people's relationship, livelihoods, and mental and physical wellbeing (ABS 2020c).

With international migration to Australia essentially 'turned off' and with no confirmed pathway towards its re-inception, individual jurisdictions like the Northern Territory may benefit from population oriented understanding of whether and how sentiments towards internal migration may have changed due to COVID-19. There is, for example, currently no research in Australia providing information about migration sentiments as they relate to population-orientated aspects of people's lives subsequent to the onset of the pandemic, and how these have changed as a result.

In this report we provide preliminary analysis of data from a sentiment monitor delivered in the Northern Territory (herein NT or Territory) called *The Territory and Me – COVID* update (TTaM-CU). The TTaM-CU survey was designed to capture ongoing impacts from COVID-19 on the Northern Territory's population, residents and families. Importantly, TTaM-CU data can be compared to data from the 2019 *The Territory and Me* survey (TTaM), the largest population survey to-date conducted in the NT (publications with findings from the TTaM survey on drivers for population attraction and retention in the NT are available from <https://theterritoryandme.cdu.edu.au/publications>). Further analysis from this survey on employment, business and other impacts from COVID-19 for the Northern Territory will be released during 2021.



Building on the initial survey, TTaM-CU provides an important source of information on how the pandemic has impacted the lives of Territorians and influenced the migration decisions of people arriving to and departing from the NT. It was also designed to investigate how perceptions of the Territory as a place to live have been influenced from geographical and jurisdictional differences in COVID-19 case numbers and State/Territory policy responses to the pandemic. While recent ABS data strongly suggests COVID-19 has impacted on mobility within Australia, apart from some anecdotal evidence, there is a lack of research in this space to date.

In this working paper we primarily report on data sourced from questions in the TTaM-CU survey seeking to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on population retention in the Northern Territory, as well as its effects on respondent's physical and mental wellbeing, their financial situation and the overall impact on their lives. We also provide analysis of some of the free-text questions in the TTaM-CU survey which sought to garner a richer understanding of the context and consequences of the pandemic for Territory residents and their families.

This report is based on 1,152 completed survey responses collected during the period 09/09/2020 to 12/11/2020. During this time there was some significant dynamicism in policies relating to State and Territory borders, restrictions within States and Territories and in relation to global pandemic developments. These may have impacted point-in-time sentiments as they relate to the NT. Results from this research may be transferrable to other jurisdictions seeking to understand how their residents' sentiments and aspects of individual, familial and societal wellbeing may have changed in light of the global pandemic.

Methods

The Territory and Me – COVID Update survey was conducted by demographers at the Northern Institute of Charles Darwin University (Human Research Ethics Clearance number H18091). It commenced on 9 September 2020 and is ongoing at the time of writing. The survey was designed and tested using SurveyMonkey, a web-based tool allowing researchers to build and host the survey online. The main research questions were:

- How has COVID-19 changed migration and settlement intentions for people living in, moving to or departing NT?
- What impacts has COVID-19 had on personal and financial stressors for Territory residents?
- How has COVID-19 impacted on the perception of the NT as a place to live and work?

The online survey comprised a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions categorised into themes broadly relating to demography, employment, housing, personal, social and financial wellbeing, and migration intentions to and from the NT of those residing in and outside of the Territory. A number of questions from the 2019 TTaM survey, particularly those relating to migration intentions, were repeated in the TTaM-CU survey to facilitate comparisons. This is important as administrative sources from the ABS, while useful in highlighting patterns and trends in population mobility, are unable to explain factors that influence migration and settlement intentions and sentiments.

The TTaM-CU survey was open to everyone aged 18 years and over and was actively promoted through a range of channels including general awareness campaigns, social media, newsletters and various websites. A link to a PDF version of the survey is provided at the end of this report as Appendix 1. The sampling frame at the time of writing was 1,152 in total with 863 (or 75%) being NT residents. A more detailed analysis of the sample composition is provided at the start of the Results section below. Many respondents in the TTaM-CU survey participated in the original 2019 TTaM survey and were contacted by consent to do so after providing their details in the latter survey.



At this point, no effort has been made to link participants of the 2019 TTaM to their responses in the TTaM-CU, however, it is worth noting that a significant proportion of respondents participated in both. Analysis was completed on de-identified records. Participants were invited to voluntarily leave their contact details if they wished to participate in a draw to win a \$500 retail voucher or one of two \$100 runner-up retail vouchers.

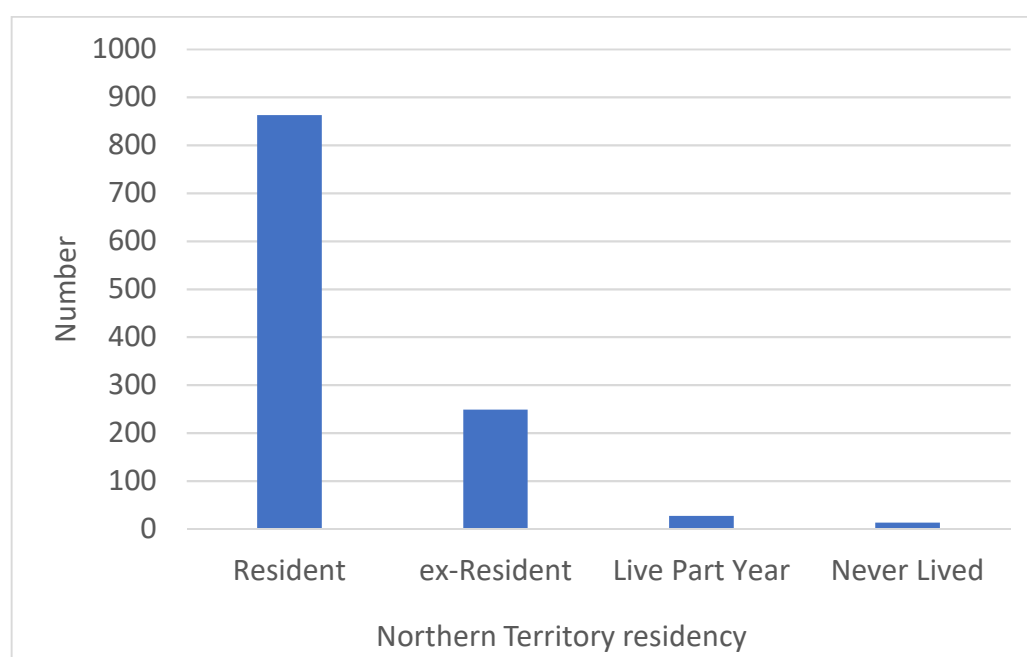
The next section is an overview of the results from the TTaM-CU survey beginning with a demographic profile of participants. This is followed by analysis comparing two-year migration retention rates for the NT between the TTaM-CU and the original 2019 TTaM survey. This is primarily based on differences in migration intentions across broad age groups which represent key life-stages: Early-career (aged 18 to 29 years), Mid-career (aged 30 to 49 years), Pre-retirees (aged 50 to 59 years), and Retirees (aged 60 years and over). This allows us to compare and contrast results relatively easily. Next, we investigate how the pandemic has impacted migration sentiments and people's physical, financial and mental wellbeing based on a range of closed nominal demographic and other questions, rating scales (ordinal) and open-ended (free-text) questions. Finally, we summarise and discuss policy implications and major findings from this analysis.

Results

An Overview of TTaM COVID Update participants

Of the 1,152 survey participants, 863 (75%) lived in the Territory, 249 (22%) used to live in the Territory, 27 (2%) lived in the Territory for part of the year (e.g. second home, regular visitor, fly-in-fly-out or seasonal worker), and 13 (1%) had never lived in the Territory (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Survey Participants by relationship to the Territory





Of the Territory residents who specified their place of residence, 684 (83%) lived in the Greater Darwin area, 82 (10%) lived in Alice Springs, and 63 (8%) lived elsewhere in the Territory (Figure 2).

Figure 2 NT Participants by Place of Residence

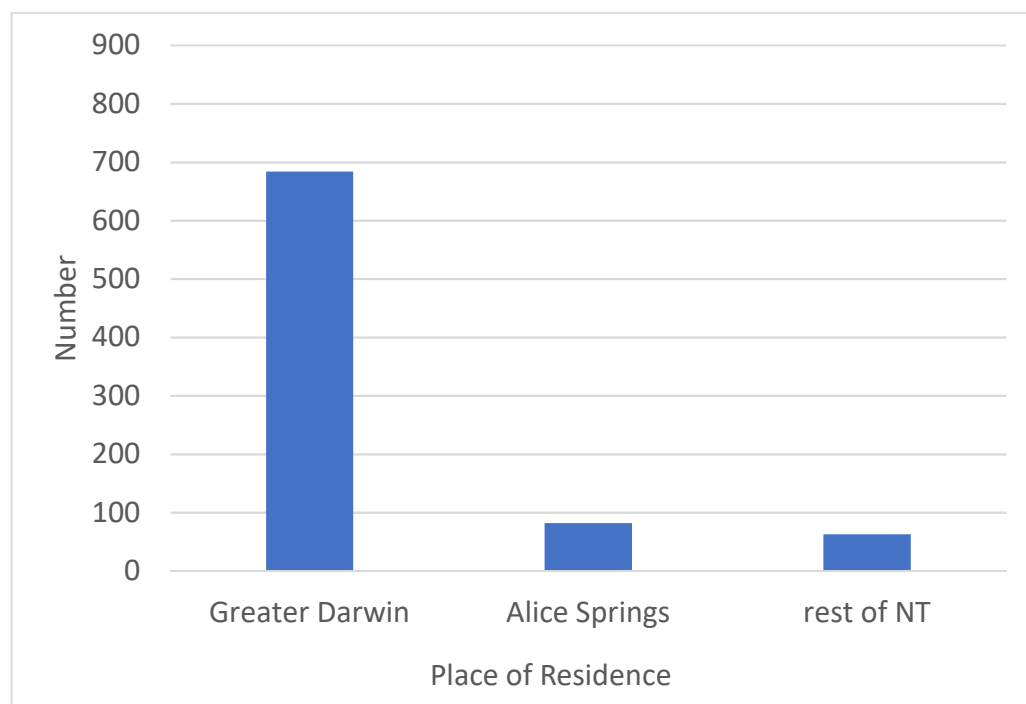
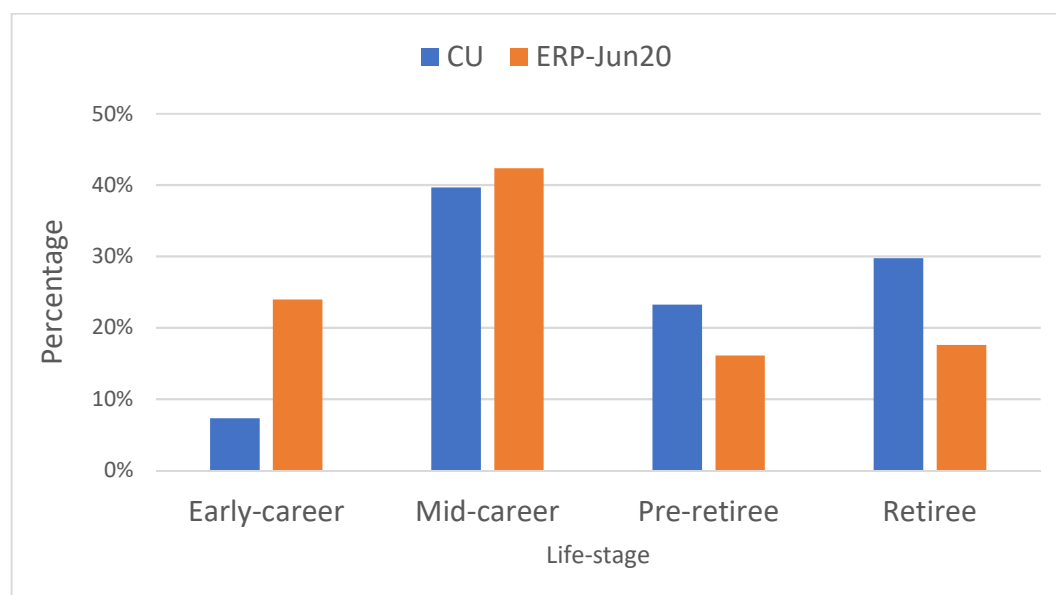


Figure 3 compares the life-stage distribution of survey participants with the Territory's estimated resident population as of June 2020. Similar to the 2019 TTaM survey, the TTaM-CU included a lower percentage of respondents aged in the Early-career life-stage and higher percentages in the Pre-retiree and Retiree life-stages. Because much of our analysis is based on life-stages, which reflects the respondent's age at the time of completing the survey, these differences do not greatly affect our results.

Figure 3 Life-stage Distribution of Survey Respondents, and Estimated Resident Population, 30 June 2020





Changes to Territory migration retention rates after COVID-19

Northern Territory residents were asked where they intended to be living in two years. From this question we calculated a two-year retention rate which reflects what people say they intend to do in relation to migration but not necessarily what they will end up doing. The rate is based on the number of respondents who indicated they intend to be living in the Territory in two years as a proportion of those who had decided to either remain or leave, excluding those who were undecided about where they would be living.

Results show retention has increased across all life-stages in comparison to the 2019 survey, most notably for the Early-career (up from 57% to 85%) and Mid-career (which rose from 69% to 83%) life-stages. As a result, there is now a 'flatter' trend of retention across age groupings (Figure 4). It should be noted, however, that the number of Early-career participants was relatively low at 88.

Figure 4 Two-year Retention Rate by Life-Stage

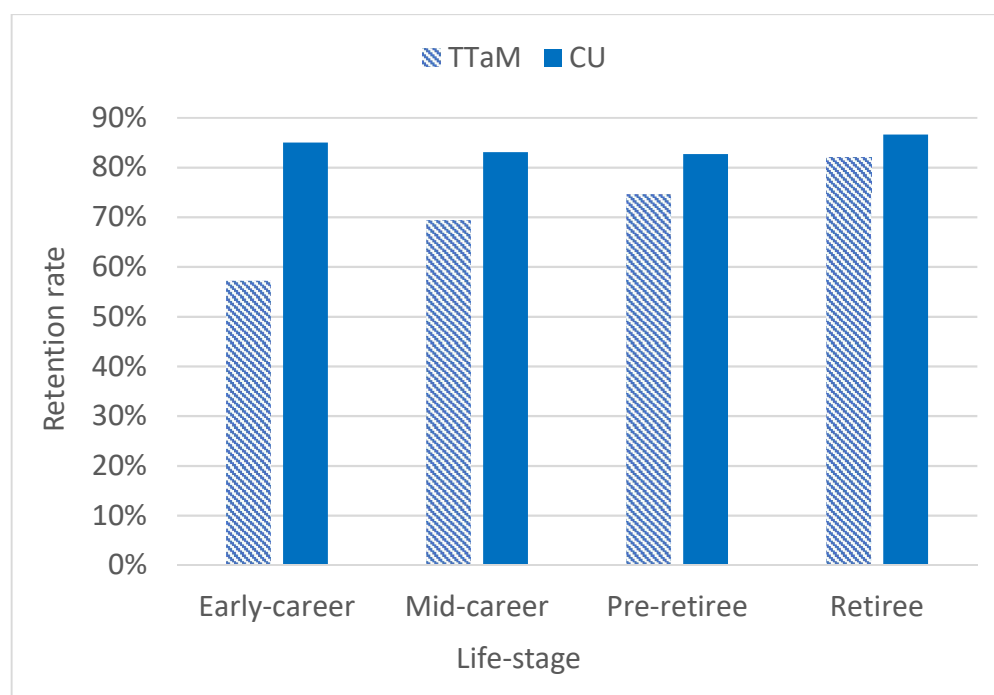
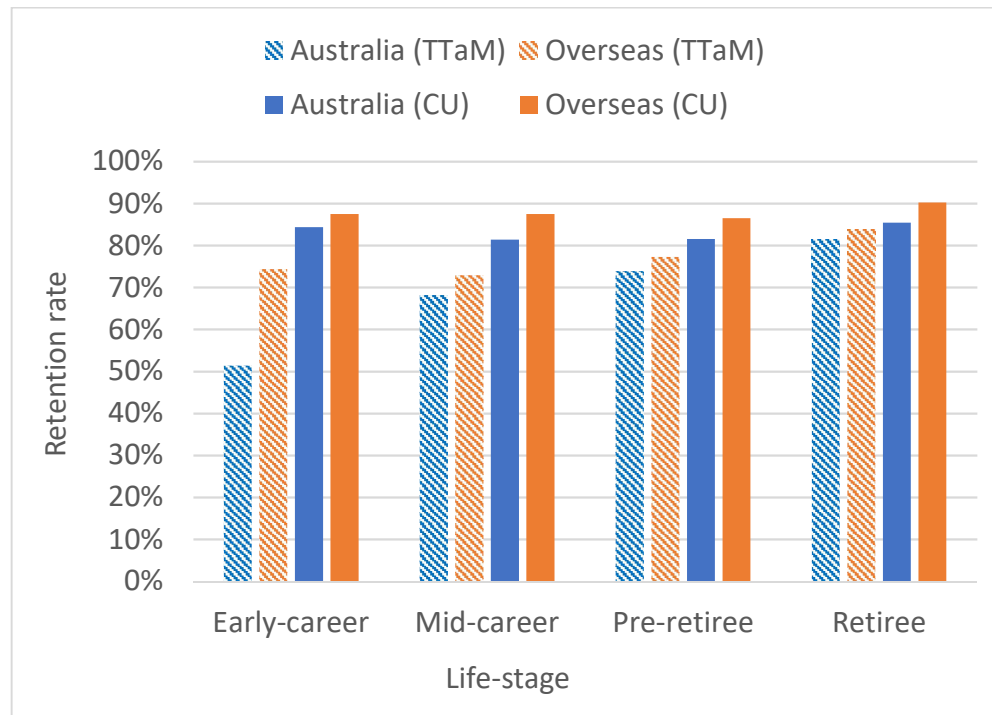


Figure 5 illustrates the two-year intended retention rate by country of birth. It shows overseas-born Territorians continue to have a higher retention rate than Australian-born but the difference between the two groups in the Early-career life-stage is smaller as a result of the large increase in the intention of Australian-born Early-career Territorians to remain in the NT.

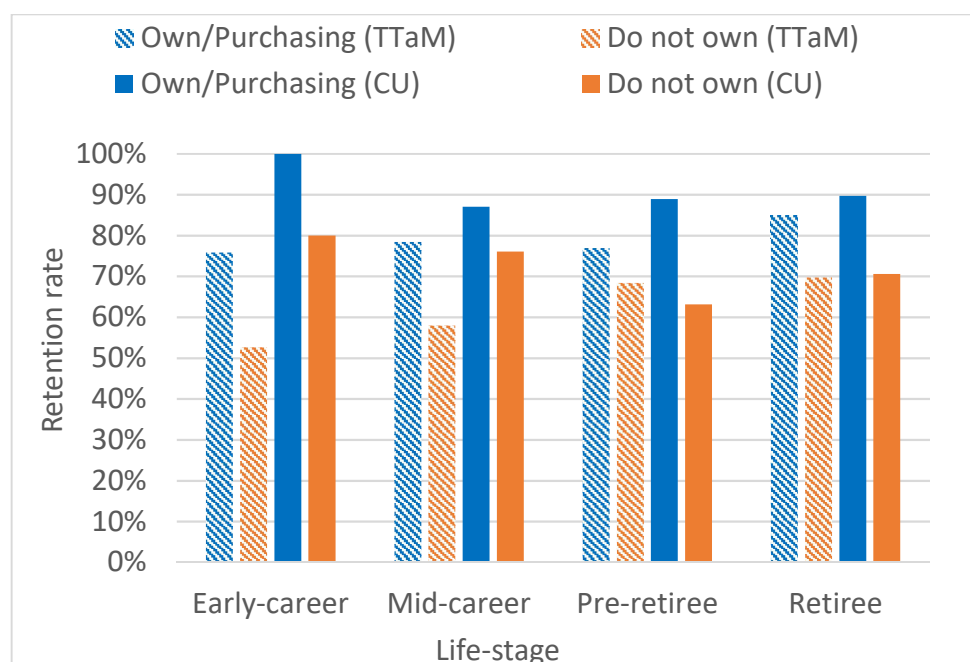


Figure 5 Two-year Retention by Country of Birth



Home ownership in the Territory, or being in the process of owning a home, continues to significantly influence intended two-year retention rates (Figure 6). For those who do not own their home, there has been a shift in the trend of retention by life-stage from increasing to decreasing, driven again by expectations of remaining in the Territory in the young life-stages. However, as there were only 10 TTaM-CU respondents in the Early-career life-stage who were not renting, the observed retention rate of 100% should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 6 Retention rate by home ownership





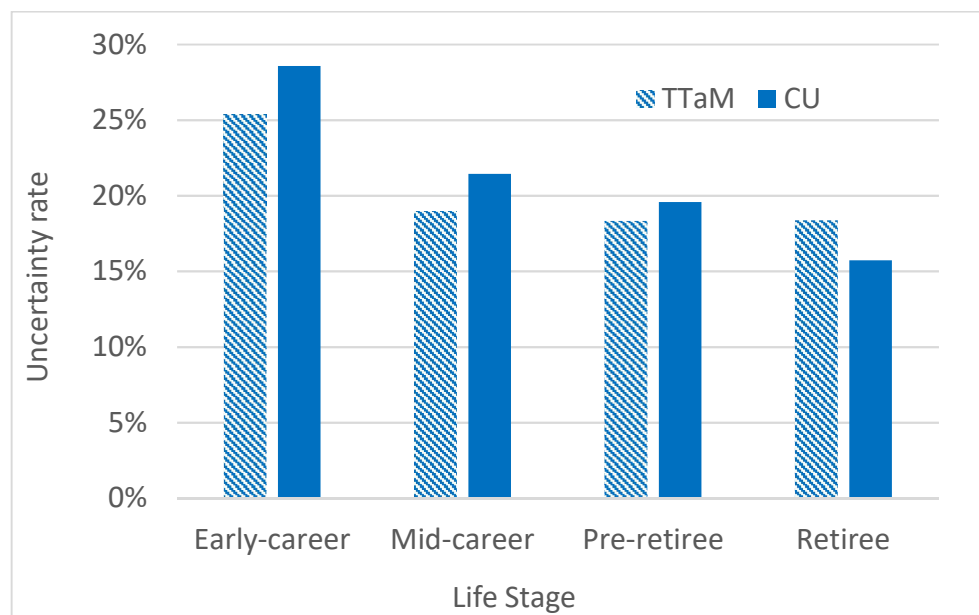
Length of residency in the Territory continues to significantly influence the intended two-year retention rates (Figure 7). Compared to the original survey, there was a weakening of the differences between established life-stages (Mid-career and Pre-retiree) and a strengthening of the difference in the transitioning life-stages (Early-career and Retirees). There was also a decrease in retention rates for Retirees living in the Territory for less than 5 years.

Figure 7 Two-year Retention Rate by Total Length of Stay in the Northern Territory



Some participants (164) were uncertain where they would be living in two years. From this we can calculate the uncertainty rate which is the number in each life-stage who were not sure where they would be living, divided by the total number of responses. There has been an increase in the uncertainty rate since the onset of the pandemic for all life-stages except Retirees, for whom uncertainty has decreased (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Two-year Uncertainty Rate

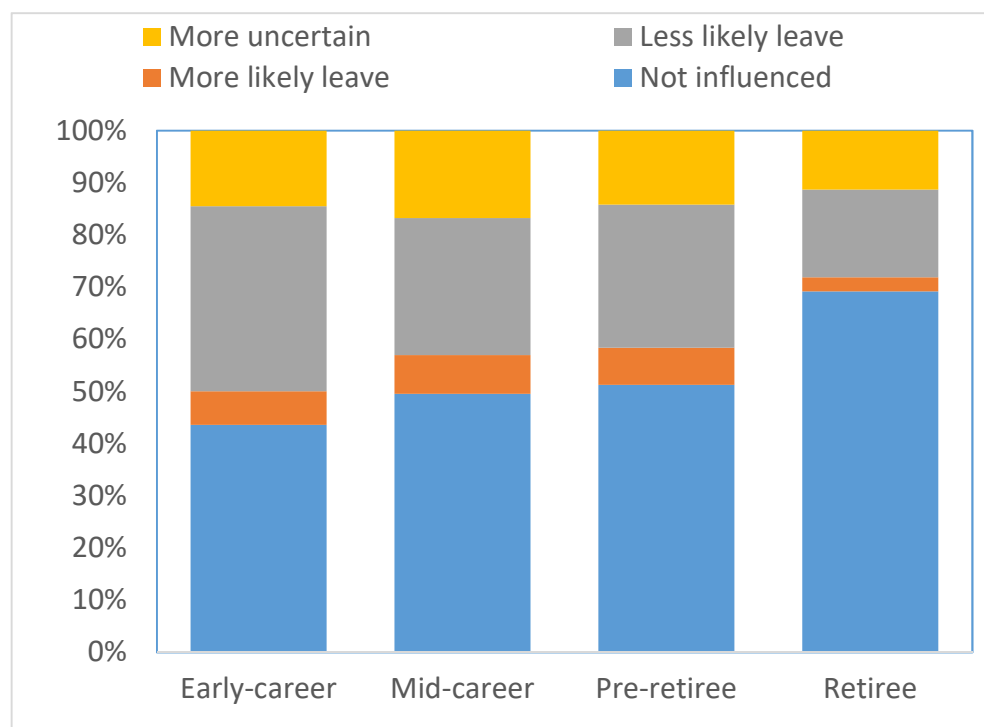




COVID-19 impacts for population retention and changing migration sentiments

The question ‘*How has COVID-19 influenced your plans about living in the Territory?*’ was included in the TTaM-CU survey to understand how the pandemic may have influenced migration sentiments for Territory residents. In Figure 9 (below) we show results for this question cross-classified by life-stage. COVID-19 appears to have had less influence on migration sentiments as age increases, with a 25-percentage point difference in those whose sentiments were not influenced between people in their Early-career and Retirees (44% and 69% respectively). Half of those in the Mid-career or Pre-retiree life-stage said COVID-19 had not influenced their migration plans. Younger life-stages expressed a greater sentiment towards remaining in the Territory because of COVID-19 with 35% of Early-career residents less likely to leave compared to 17% of Retirees.

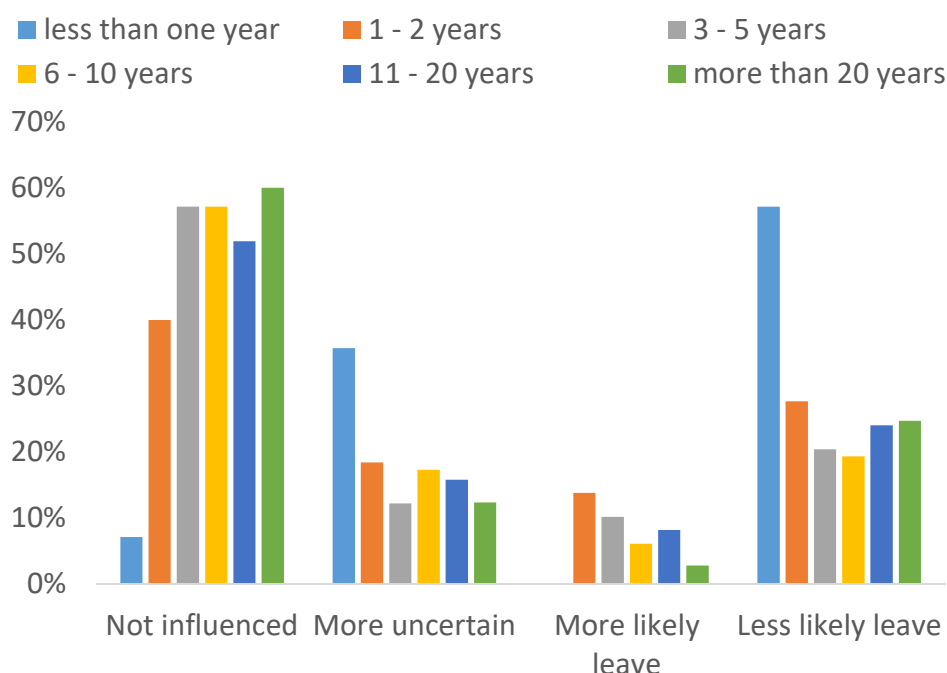
Figure 9 COVID-19 influence on migration intentions for Territory residents by life-stage



We also examined changes in sentiments based on the length of time (total) respondents had lived in the Territory. In general, migration sentiments for those who had lived in the Territory for three years or more were less likely to have been influenced by COVID-19. For example, 60% of those who had been resident in the Territory for 20 years or more were not influenced at all (Figure 10). However, this dropped to 40% for those who had lived in the Territory for one to two years and just 7% for people with residency of less than one year. For the latter group, sentiments strongly favoured being less likely to leave the NT due to COVID-19 (57%) or being more uncertain due to COVID-19 (36%). This suggests that up to 93% of those who had been resident in the Territory for less than a year might be positively influenced towards staying as a resident in the Territory at the time of the survey and possibly beyond.



Figure 10 COVID-19 influence on migration intentions for Territory residents by total length of time in the NT



Impacts from COVID-19 on the physical, financial and mental wellbeing of Territorians

There is a growing body of evidence about impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and families (The Lancet, 2020). Variations in the types and severity of impacts across sub-populations (for example seniors compared to young people or one geographic region compared to another) are important for framing targeted policy responses during and subsequent to the pandemic. In the TTaM-CU survey we asked respondents a number of questions to discern how Territorians considered they had been affected in relation to their physical health, financial situation, and mental wellbeing. We also asked them to self-rate these at the time they completed the survey.

In the three charts and tables below we have cross-classified responses to respondent's self-rated score (from zero to ten with zero being the lowest rating) with the question *'Is this better, about the same or worse because of COVID-19?'* for each of the following questions:

- Q12: Please rate your physical wellbeing
- Q14: Please rate your mental wellbeing
- Q16: Please rate your financial situation

We found significant differences in the distribution of responses to these questions between respondents resident in the Greater Darwin area and those resident in Alice Springs.

The majority of respondents (85%) said their physical wellbeing was about the same after COVID-19 (the blue section of the chart bars below), with 10% stating it was worse (the red sections) and 5% better (the green in Figure 11). However, a much higher proportion of Alice Springs respondents (21% compared to 9% for Greater Darwin – see Table 1 below) said their physical health was worse. Meanwhile, 5% of all respondents said their physical health was better as a result of COVID-19, largely those in the higher end of the self-rating scale for physical wellbeing.



Figure 11 Proportional distributions of responses to self-rated physical wellbeing with whether it was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19

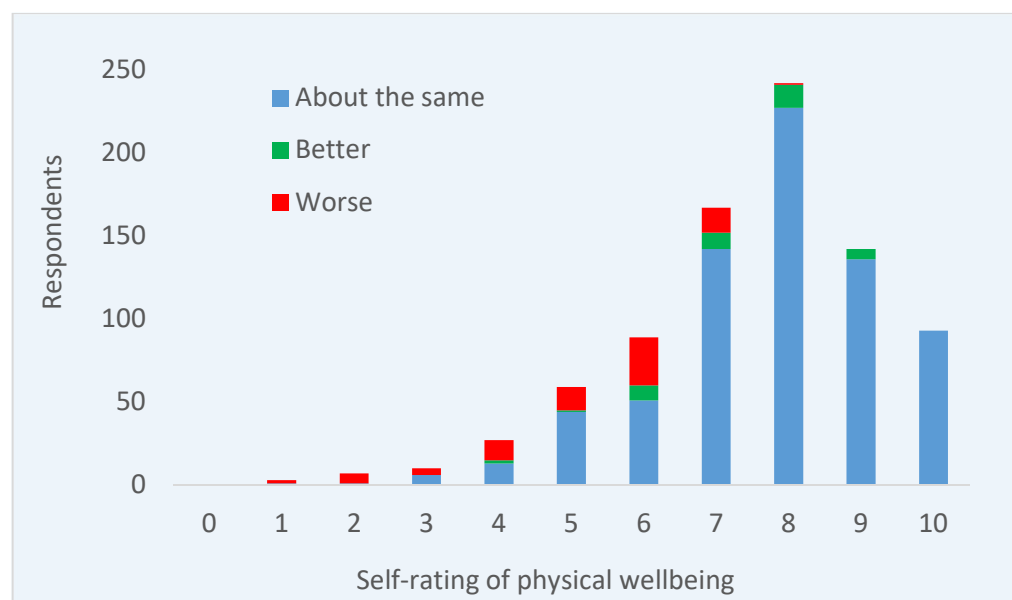


Table 1 Proportional distributions of responses to whether physical wellbeing was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19 for all of the NT, Alice Springs and Greater Darwin

	All NT	Alice Springs	Greater Darwin
About the same	85%	73%	86%
Better	5%	6%	5%
Worse	10%	21%	9%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Respondents were also asked to self-rate their financial situation and, when cross-classified with whether this was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19, a greater negative impact was evident in comparison to physical health. Although most people (69%) said their financial situation was about the same after COVID-19 and some (9%) rated it better, nearly a quarter of respondents (22%) said COVID-19 had made their financial situation worse with those providing a low-end self-rating accounting for most of these (Figure 12). There was a more negative sentiment in relation to the financial situation of respondents for Alice Springs residents compared to Greater Darwin (Table 2).



Figure 12 Cross-classification of responses to self-rated financial situation with whether it was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19

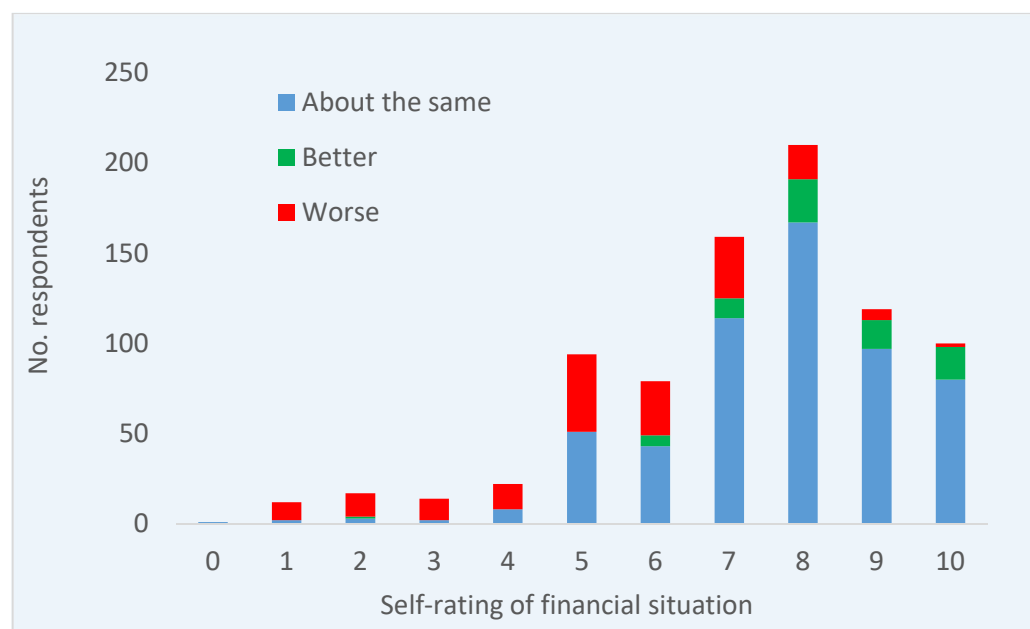


Table 2 Proportional distributions of responses to whether the financial situation of respondents was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19 for all of the NT, Alice Springs and Greater Darwin

	All NT	Alice Springs	Greater Darwin
About the same	69%	62%	70%
Better	9%	10%	9%
Worse	22%	28%	21%
Total	100%	100%	100%

In comparison to the impacts of COVID-19 on respondent's physical wellbeing and financial situation, mental wellbeing shows a far greater negative sentiment. Overall, 30% of respondents said their mental wellbeing was worse due to COVID-19 and in Alice Springs a concerningly large 43% of respondents indicated their mental wellbeing had deteriorated (Figure 13 and Table 3).



Figure 13 Cross-classification of responses to self-rated mental wellbeing with whether it was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19

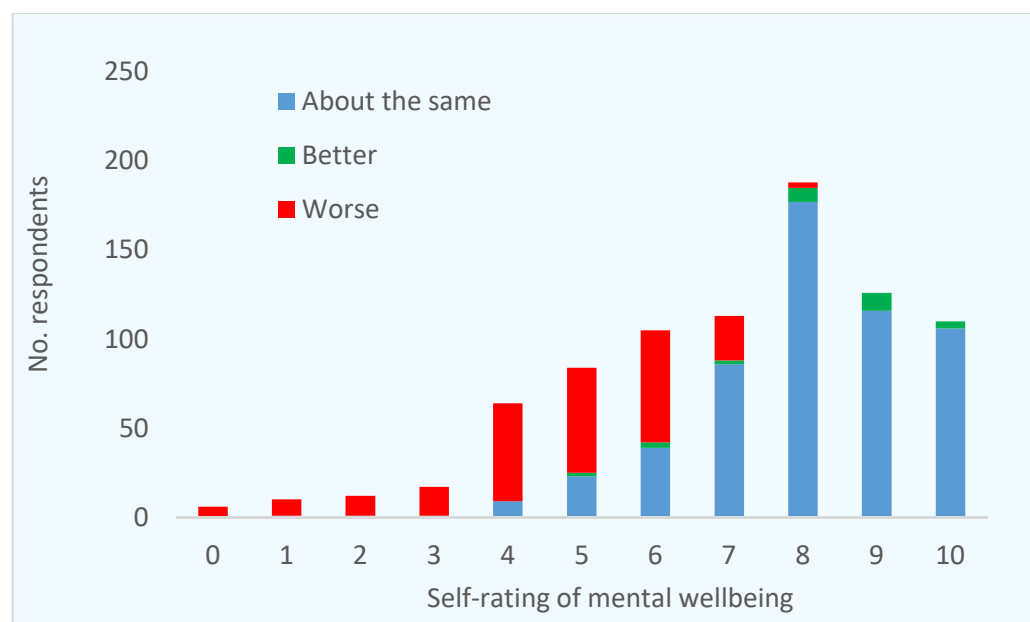


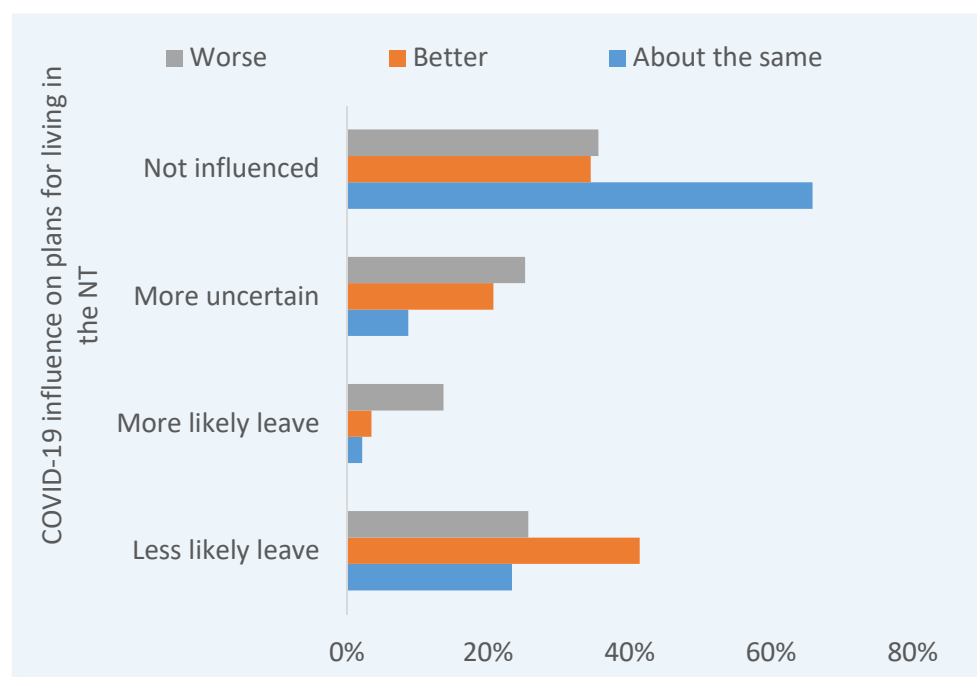
Table 3 Proportional distributions of responses to self-rated mental wellbeing and whether this was about the same, better or worse due to COVID-19 for all of the NT, Alice Springs and Greater Darwin

	All NT	Alice Springs	Greater Darwin
About the same	67%	51%	69%
Better	3%	6%	3%
Worse	30%	43%	28%
Total	100%	100%	100%

When we cross-classified results for impacts from COVID-19 on participant's mental wellbeing with the question on where they intend to live in two-years, an association between a worsening mental wellbeing and a greater intention to leave the NT within two years or increasing uncertainty about leaving is apparent (Figure 14). Those who said their mental health had deteriorated were far more likely to state their intention was to leave the NT while those who said their mental health was better due to COVID-19 were far less likely to think they would leave the NT. However, readers should note that this is likely to be a complex association which may reflect, or have been influenced by, pre-existing mental wellbeing or other life pressures and situations.



Figure 14 Impacts from COVID-19 on Territory migration sentiment cross-classified by impacts on mental wellbeing



Impacts of COVID-19 on overall lifestyle

A free-text question in the TTaM-CU survey sought to obtain insights about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected respondent's overall lifestyle. We undertook a meta-analysis of responses to distil the main positive and negative themes. Many responses contained sentiments that contributed to more than one theme. The main themes are presented in Figures 15 and 16 (below).

In terms of positive sentiments, by far the most common theme was that the pandemic had limited or no impacts on the person's overall lifestyle with 182 free-text answers relating to this. The second most common positive theme aligned with situations where people could save more because they were spending less (32). In some cases, this was explicitly related to reduced costs associated with childcare, less travel and less money spent on entertainment and eating out. A range of lifestyle-related themes were evident in many responses including the opportunity to slow down, reflect and appreciate a simpler existence and to improve their work/life balance. Two themes emerged in relation to the relatively low case numbers and associated restrictions in the Territory: being grateful for living in the NT and the chance to engage in local tourism, and the NT being safer due to its isolation or low case numbers.



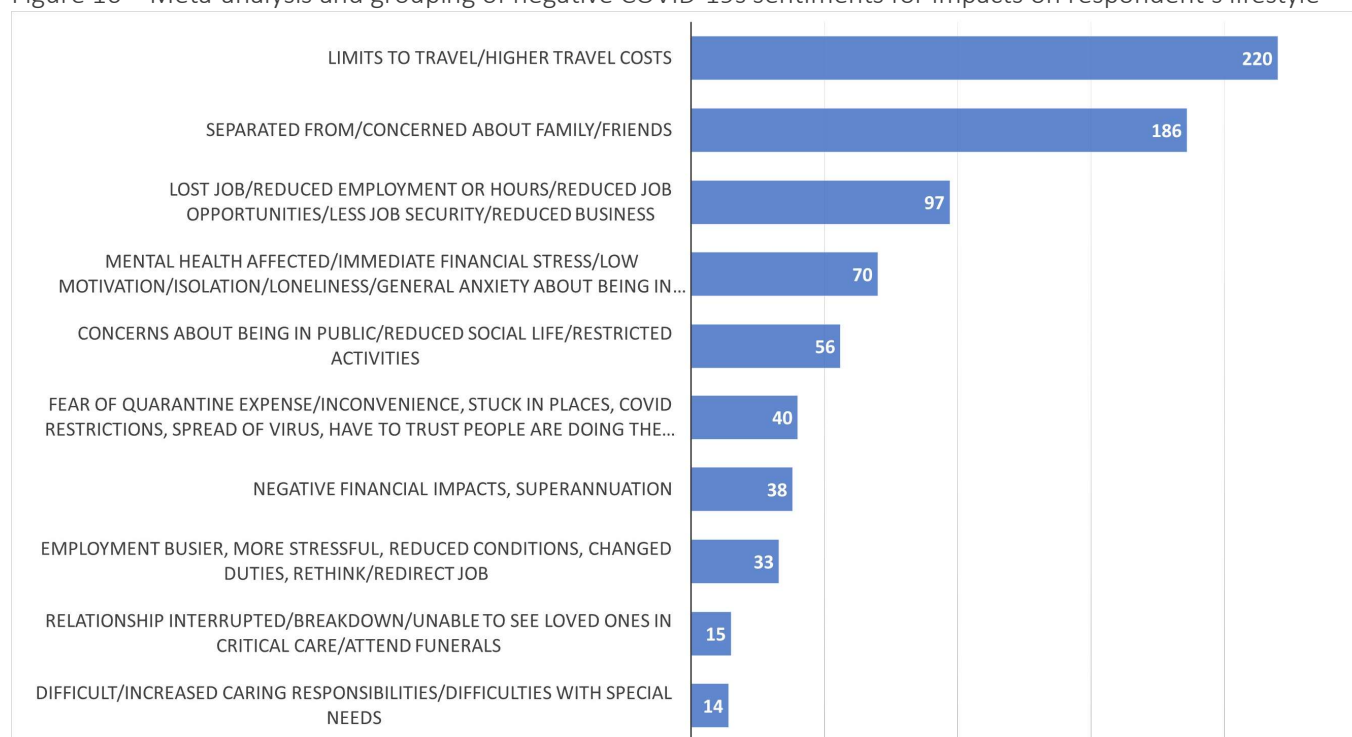
Figure 15 Meta-analysis and grouping of positive COVID-19s sentiments for impacts on respondent's lifestyle



In terms of negative sentiments expressed in the question of COVID-19's impact on the respondent's overall lifestyle, Figure 16 (below) shows a broader spread of comment themes than for positive sentiments. The most commonly discussed theme was limitations to travel outside of the NT and costs relating to this (220 responses) followed by feeling separated from or concerned for family or friends (186). These two themes were often linked in people's responses because family and friends were generally living outside the Territory. Economic impacts from job losses, reduced employment, work hours or impacts on personal businesses was the third most common theme. Mental health and stress or anxiety featured heavily in many responses and appeared as the fourth most common theme, followed by more generalised concerns about the virus and the financial and opportunity costs associated with quarantine. Thirty-three people said that their employment had become busier and more stressful with some reporting no opportunities for a break or holiday. Relationship breakdowns and restrictions associated with attendance at funerals and visiting relatives in critical care affected 15 people.



Figure 16 – Meta-analysis and grouping of negative COVID-19s sentiments for impacts on respondent’s lifestyle



A range of feedback in the free-text questions related specifically to population retention, attraction or loss for the Territory as a result of COVID-19. Some examples of positive and negative comments are provided in Table 4 below. In reality, there is significant uncertainty around how these sentiments might or might not influence future migration decisions of individuals or families. Nevertheless, they are worth documenting for future reference.

Table 4 – Examples of positive and negative sentiments in relation to population, COVID-19 and the NT

Example population attraction or retention sentiments	Example population loss or negative sentiments
“We were <u>planning to move to QLD</u> by the end of the year, the uncertainty convinced us to keep our jobs and <u>stay in the Territory.</u> ”	“The pandemic has kept us apart from loved ones so it might be important for people to <u>leave the Territory</u> to be with family and friends.”
“I became unemployed in Victoria and <u>returned</u> to the NT in order to be able to work.”	“NT can be a good place to live, but I’ve never considered it home. <u>My home is where I’m from ... and because of the covid situation I’ve noticed my homesickness has amplified throughout the year.</u> ”
“Covid has <u>prevented an interstate move</u> which was planned and is now cancelled for another three years”	“People have had their lives put on hold and I believe they are more likely to <u>make bigger life decisions more quickly</u> when they have some freedom to do so.”
“There is more time that I feel lucky to live in the NT since the COVID-19 outbreak. It is one of the <u>safest places</u> to live in Australia.”	



Impacts of COVID-19 on others thinking of migrating to the Northern Territory

To further gauge sentiments for moving to the Northern Territory subsequent to COVID-19, we asked respondents 'Do you know anyone who is thinking about migrating to the Northern Territory (either from overseas or from elsewhere in Australia)' and followed this with the question 'Given developments with COVID-19, do you think they are more likely, less likely or equally likely to migrate to the Territory in the next 6 to 12 months?'

Of the 188 respondents who said they knew someone who was thinking of migrating to the Northern Territory, 48% (91) said they thought those people were now more likely to migrate as a result of developments with COVID-19. Most of the 88 people who provided a reason cited themes such as the Northern Territory being relative safe, COVID-free and without significant restrictions on movements and activities. Work opportunities and being close to family were also commonly cited.

Discussion and policy implications

This analysis provides early insights into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's lives and their migration intentions relative to the Northern Territory. Evident in responses was that many residents of the Territory felt grateful, proud and relieved that they did not experience the severe health impacts and restrictions on everyday life experienced elsewhere in Australia and abroad.

In summary, these first results show:

- The influence of COVID-19 appears to have increased the Territory's expected retention rates across all life-stages, with the largest impact on the Early-career life-stage. More than a third of these said they were less likely to leave the Territory because of the pandemic.
- COVID-19 has had the greatest impact on people resident in the Territory for less than one year. They are almost twice as likely to think they will stay living in the Territory compared to people who had longer NT residency.
- Uncertainty about where some people expect to be living in two years has increased. However, Retirees seem more certain about their migration intentions with their retention rate remaining the highest for all life-stages.
- Purchasing a home or being overseas born continued to be associated with higher expected retention rates and both groups have increased their retention expectations since the onset of COVID-19.
- COVID-19 has had little or no impact on the lives of many current Territorians, however for others it has negatively impacted their financial circumstances and their mental wellbeing. Results show an association between worsening mental health and an intention to leave the Territory or an uncertainty around where they expected to live.
- There were regional differences in the experiences of Territorians during this period. Those living in Alice Springs appear to have suffered more negative impacts compared to people living in the Darwin region.

Improvements in expected retention rate for residents in their Early-career years (20 to 29 years of age) is a significant result. This group accounts for a large share of migration flows out of the Territory and, although our results were based on smaller numbers of Early-career participants, any improvement to retention rates for this group would reflect positively on the Territory's net interstate migration position, which has been deteriorating for around nine years.



It is reassuring that factors shown in the original 2019 TTaM survey as positively influencing retention rates in the Territory's population were likewise evident in the TTaM-CU survey. These include being born overseas, purchasing or owning a home and being resident in the Territory for more than five years. Being born overseas elicited a 90% two-year retention rate for Retirees, 88% for Early-career and Mid-career residents and 86% for Pre-retirees. In terms of the length of time a person has been living in the Territory, retention rates rose in comparison to 2019 even for those with residency of less than five years. This was observed across all life-stages apart from Retirees (see Figure 4). Meanwhile, a significant jump in the retention rate was noticeable for Early-career residents purchasing or owning their home, up from 76% to 100%, although this was based on a relatively small number of responses.

While it is reasonable to suggest that the Northern Territory and its residents were to date the least impacted of all jurisdictions in Australia (with no incidences of community transition of the COVID-19 virus) Territory residents were nevertheless significantly affected in relation to their mental wellbeing and, to a lesser degree, their physical wellbeing and financial situations. With large proportions of the NT population migrating from elsewhere it is unsurprising that significant numbers feel vulnerable and exposed when restrictions were applied to State/Territory borders. These concerns played-out in the free-text responses to how the pandemic impacted their overall lifestyle, with many citing the negative consequences of being separated from their family and friendship networks and the anxieties caused by being unable to attend funerals and visit relatives in critical care. Significant proportions of respondents also cited stresses associated with lost or reduced employment, and increased business or employment pressures related to the impact of COVID-19 on their work responsibilities and expectations.

Concerningly, some negative impacts were disproportionately felt in some regions. Over 40% of respondents in Alice Springs said their mental wellbeing was worse due to COVID-19 and the self-rating of mental wellbeing in Alice Springs was lower than for the Territory as a whole. While these results are concerning, they may in part be a legacy of pre-existing sentiments in the community prior to COVID-19. These could be linked to general negativity around crime and economic circumstances in Alice Springs (and elsewhere, but to a lesser extent) which were highlighted in results from the original TTaM survey and these are likely to require specific place-based government responses.

The troubling decline in self-rated mental wellbeing and sentiments in relation to mental wellbeing suggests support and intervention strategies will be needed well into the future for Territory residents. Aside from directly supporting the health and wellbeing of Territory residents, interventions may assist in retaining population in the Territory with this research showing there is a link between deteriorating mental wellbeing and an intention to leave or uncertainty about staying in the NT (shown in Figure 11).

In contrast, text responses to the impact of COVID-19 on overall lifestyle featured 'no or little impact' which, in the context of the pandemic, must be considered a positive sentiment. Positive sentiments also echoed lifestyle factors associated with population attraction and retention that were prominent in the original 2019 TTaM survey results. These included themes such as slowing down, being grateful for the extra freedoms, enjoying what the Territory has to offer and the opportunities to increase community connections. These themes provide insights into some aspects of what people value about living in the Territory.

Given these results, policy responses could include:

- Continuing incentives around home-ownership, particularly targeting people in the Early-career life-stage
- Mental health interventions designed to enhance community resilience and link people to community support networks
- Continuing employment initiatives to capitalise on circumstances where people find themselves "stuck" in the Territory and more willing to stay
- Investigating subsidies or tax-benefits associated with air travel supporting family reunion
- Utilising current positive sentiments on what sets the Territory apart from other jurisdictions to grow the population



Conclusions

The nature of sentiments is that they reflect how somebody is feeling at a point in time. This highlights particular limitations to distilling clear associations between changed sentiments and the relative influence of COVID-19, not least because a wide-range of associated or pre-existing factors may also influence sentiments at the time of completing the survey. Nevertheless, the main policy take-away from this report is that the Territory appears to be benefiting from a noticeable increase in positive retention sentiments. However, as other States and Territories lift restrictions around quarantining and as case numbers nationally remain low, the Territory may lose this competitive advantage. The biggest gains for population growth are to be had by harnessing the retention sentiments of Early-career workers because they account for a large portion of migration outflows each year. Consideration should be given to incentivise retention. In light of improving national case numbers, it is unlikely that marketing campaigns which highlight the Northern Territory's good management of the pandemic or low case numbers will gain much traction in 'converting' positive retention sentiments to actualised decisions to stay in the Territory once all State and Territory, as well as some international, borders are opened. However, a focus on what continues to distinguish the Territory as a great place to live may align well with some of the generalised consequences of a pandemic such as reassessing lifestyles, the renewed attraction of regional locations, and the protections of relative isolation.

Looking to the future, high uncertainty remains around the size and directions for interstate and overseas migration to and from the Territory. A host of factors which are largely beyond the control of the Territory will largely determine whether and how trends prevail in relation to attracting new residents. What is clear from this research are possibilities for improved population retention, which is at least as important as the attraction of new residents, as evidenced in sentiments and retention rates reported here. It is important that sentiments and changes to retention rates are monitored as a basis for policies and initiatives to improve retention and therefore overall population growth rates. We continue to recommend a longitudinal survey with a suitable rotating sample. With the international and national environment changing so rapidly, implementing this to improve the Territory's position in migration markets is pressing.



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Appendix A: *The Territory and Me* – A COVID Update: Survey instrument

The full survey instrument for *The Territory and Me* – COVID Update survey conducted during 2020 can be accessed from our website at <https://theterritoryandme.cdu.edu.au/survey-link>. Readers should note that respondents were sequenced to selected questions according to their answers to prior questions (ie respondents were not required to answer all questions in this survey). Readers please note that the survey is subject to IP caveats and should not be replicated in full or part without the consent of the researchers and, if approved, must be used with appropriate acknowledgements.