

The fly-in, fly out debate: what happens to the communities?

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The fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive out (FIFO) workforce in Western Australia (WA) has increased by 400% over the past 20 years.¹ The recent commentary in this Journal highlights the need for a better understanding of this population group and cautioned against making generalised statements about their health due to a lack of empirical evidence.²

Social capital has been associated with improved health, education and economic outcomes,³ and is dependent on community participation, trust, reciprocity and altruism.⁴ The current and projected^{1,5} population shifts due to the FIFO workforce are likely to have significant impacts on the social capital of home and host communities.

The House of Representative Standing Committee Enquiry's report *Cancer of the Bush or Salvation of the Cities*¹ suggests one of the primary concerns about the use of FIFO operations is their impact on established communities and the perceived rejection of towns and their way of life in favour of high wages and temporary camp living environments. WA has a well established resource industry with several major thriving rural centres that have grown from this industry. These long-term resource communities have a vested interest in the growth of the resource sector; however, to be sustainable they want to encourage workers and their families to live and engage in the local community.¹

Living costs have increased to almost unaffordable levels for many families in major WA resource towns.^{1,6} When individuals and families leave towns there is a cumulative impact on the community. As towns become smaller, services reduce. This includes access to a variety of commercial and health services and schools. The increased demand for housing generated by an increased population seeking work in the FIFO industry in major cities like Perth has also been speculated to generate a range of financial, social and emotional problems.

Although some individuals and families indicate that they do not want to live in rural towns because they prefer the lifestyle associated with major cities, others enjoy a rural lifestyle.¹ Such individuals and families are likely to enhance social capital through their active involvement in schools, sport and arts groups, community activities and voluntary positions.

Threats to social capital exist not only for the host communities, but are also of concern for home communities.¹ Although many individual FIFO workers enjoy the lifestyle because it affords them 'quality time' with their families and friends, and often provides an income that can support a comfortable lifestyle, this on-off structure impacts community participation and altruism. There are reports of clubs suffering and junior sport clubs and groups, such as scouts, struggling to find coaches and leaders in both home and host communities due to the FIFO lifestyle.¹ In smaller towns, volunteers are needed to ensure essential services, such as the ambulance, are able to operate.¹

The need to amend the current Commonwealth taxation regime to focus on building regional Australia was highlighted by the Standing Committee's Inquiry. Under the current system, companies are rewarded for having a FIFO workforce through tax cuts. Taxation should work to encourage resource companies to provide a resident workforce in existing towns.¹

It is likely the FIFO lifestyle will continue to grow.^{1,5} Although sound empirical research is required to understand the health of workers and their families,² research to understand how host and home communities can be supported to enhance social capital is also needed. As health promoters we have a role to advocate for the maintenance and growth of regional towns and to research effective interventions to enhance social capital in both home and host communities.

References

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