Inquiry into Mental Illness in Fly In, Fly Out Workers

Submission from the City of Karratha

Karratha Dampier Wickham Roebourne Point Samson Cossack

"It's raining so because we are in such remote locations on some terrible roads the company shuts down the roads to all project vehicles so we're confined to camp…you kind of look forward to having a day off. At the same time it is a day that you dread. You dread the thought of sitting around in your tiny little prison room with nothing at all to do except watch tv and think.

I think about my family at home and how I'm out here to make money so I can provide a better future for them. It absolutely kills me to be away from them.

*Men in general feel intimidated to talk about these things. Blokes want to talk about how much of a d**khead that person is or about the boss. Generally speaking, I don't hear a lot of guys talk about how lonely they feel…some blokes say they've had problems expressing these feelings to their partners — not because they can't talk about it — but more because they don't even know how to describe it."*

Luke Baker, FIFO Communications Specialist

Author of Facebook page – FIFO Man

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Executive Summary

'Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) practices are one of the most challenging issues currently facing the Pilbara. It impacts on a range of critical social and economic factors. Left unresolved, these issues will strongly mitigate against the development of the Pilbara cities and townships as sustainable, welcoming, attractive and vibrant places in which to reside, work and lead a fulfilling life.

While FIFO is to an extent recognised as unavoidable during the short term construction phase of a resources boom, its ongoing use, growth and expansion during the more permanent operational period, is in fact counter-intuitive to the regional development objectives of both the State and Federal Governments. It is the cause of considerable pressures (financial and otherwise) for the Local Governments affected, compromising the future sustainability of their respective communities.

Located in the Pilbara region, the City of Karratha is approximately 1,200 kilometres north of Perth and covers a massive 15,278 km^2. It has significant opportunities to create substantial economic growth at a national level. The potential for the City of Karratha is infinite. However, to capitalise on these opportunities, it is essential that the community is healthy - both physically and mentally.

Figure 1: FIFO workers on a flight out of Perth

Source: News Limited

The City of Karratha welcomes the Western Australia (WA) State Government's inquiry into mental illness in FIFO workers and puts forward the following key actions that we believe will assist in the development of a healthy community (Table 1):

Table 1: Key Actions for WA State Government to Implement

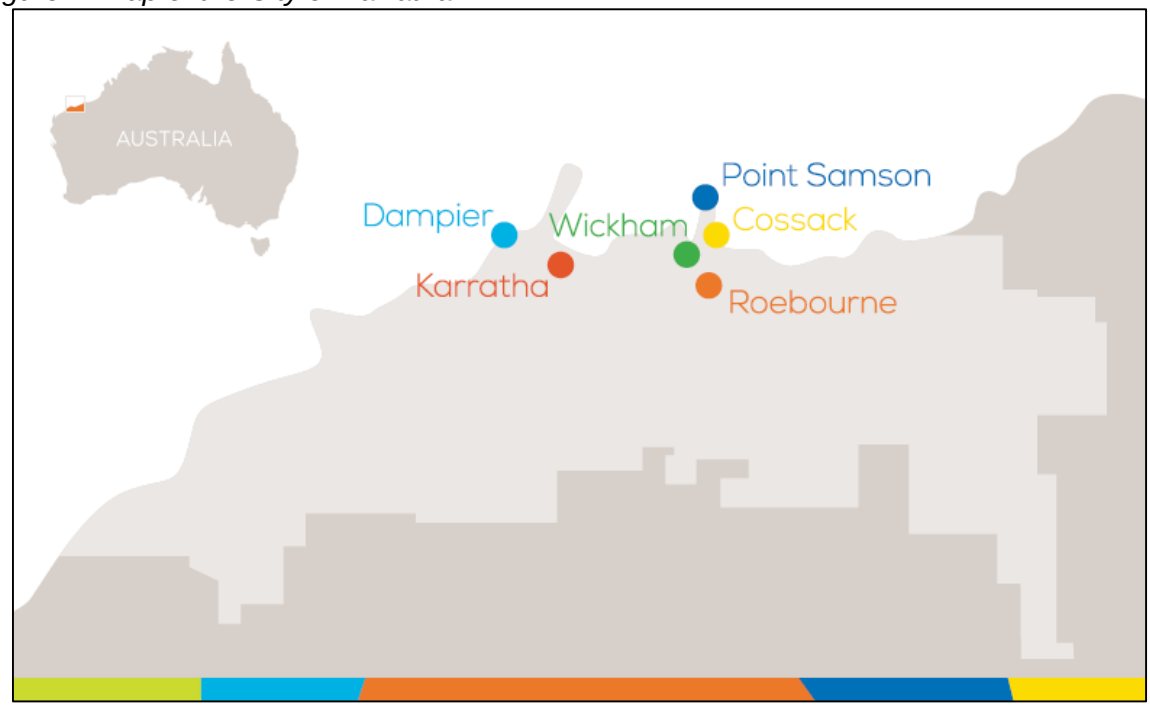
Actions
Action 1 – Establish and implement initiatives to enhance the wellbeing of FIFO workers • Assist industry to ensure FIFO workers achieve a balance between work, health and relaxation. • Introduce programs to assist FIFO workers form greater connections with established social networks (family and friends). • Work with industry to address the gender imbalance. • Ensure that FIFO workers have been given the choice to FIFO or preferably relocate with their family to the remote location. • Work with industry to encourage FIFO families to visit FIFO workplace locations.
Action 2 - Establish a conducive regulatory, taxation and legislative environment: • Negotiate contracts requiring a FIFO component that benefit and promote positive FIFO interaction with the community. • Narrow the definition for the term 'local' or stipulate "Pilbara based" in workforce quota requirements to ensure local residents are considered for roles. • Ensure a social responsibility focus is included in all agreements, policies and legislation pertaining to FIFO workers in the Pilbara region. • Lobby Federal Government for the prioritisation of tax reform which encourages regional population growth through the reduction of FIFO numbers. For example, review and alter Fringe Benefits Tax and the Living Away from Home Allowance (LAHA) to provide incentives for workers to reside permanently in the local community. • Deregulation of air travel to and from Karratha.
Action 3 - Allocate mental illness resources to the City of Karratha: • Increase resourcing through the location of State Government agencies in the Pilbara who are equip to address mental illness issues or financial support for not for profit agencies. This includes strategies for prevention and on-going support.
Action 4 - Provide seed funding for research and development: • Establish a cooperative research centre (CRC) or expand on an existing centre to focus on: – FIFO practices and the impact on remote communities – Mental illness in remote locations, specifically as it relates to the resource sector – Social and community engagement in remote locations • Investigate productivity and best practice, particularly in regards to working hours and rosters.
Action 5 - Coordinated approach and two way communication • Improve communication and collaboration through two-way engagement with local government, particularly in the early stages of major projects and policy initiatives that affect the region and its communities with the use of FIFO workers. • Improve relationships between industry and all tiers of government to address social issues within the FIFO workforce environment.
Action 6 – Improve social and economic infrastructure investment • Support the growth and development of the Pilbara Cities Vision for the City of Karratha by ensuring investment into critical economic and social infrastructure to increase the attractiveness of the city to workers and their families. • Improve telecommunications for FIFO use, particularly availability of mobile coverage as well as access and speed to internet connections. • Design FIFO accommodation to integrate with the 'look and feel' of the local community.

1. Introduction

Fly in, fly out practices are synonymous with Western Australia where they were first employed during the gold mining operations of the 1970s (Carrington et al, 2011). Located in remote areas, these small open-cut mines produced a low grade ore and as a result had a short life span.

Known for its remoteness, extreme climate, extensive mineral and energy resources and over 33,000 FIFO workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), the City of Karratha is approximately 1,200 kilometres north of Perth. Located in the Pilbara region, it covers a massive 15,278 km^2.

Figure 2: Map of the City of Karratha



One in five Australians experience mental health issues each year, with approximately half of the population experiencing a mental health issue at least once in their lifetime (Mental Health Australia, 2014). For workers in the resource sector however, this ratio increases to one in three with mental health issues. These workers are twice as likely to experience a mental illness during their lifetime.

The impact on industry is significant. Lost productivity, reduced labour force participation and high staff turnover (Australian Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health, 2011), all contribute to an estimated $20 billion in losses each year.

> *"On any 12 hour shift, a person with a mental illness will be unproductive for an average of 2 hours and 42 minutes. Every day, that equates to 2,700 hours of unproductive time – the equivalent of 225 people not turning up to work at all"*
>
> *Source: Australian Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health, 2011*

Even more concerning is the impact FIFO practices have on the individual worker, their family relationships and the wider community. Year after year, the Pilbara is witness to increasing

mental health statistics. These correlate to the increasing health problems, unsociable behavior, drug & alcohol abuse and suicide rates. From a Local Government perspective, these issues place significant pressure on the limited resources in the region and are detrimental to the resilience of the local community, not to mention the ramifications for sustainable community development and town planning.

In 2011, the City of Karratha put forward a submission to the Federal Government inquiry into the use of FIFO work practices in Australia. Concerns regarding the impact FIFO has on the development of a sustainable community were raised and reduction in the use of FIFO practices was recommended. Our position on this topic has not changed.

For those who live and work in the Pilbara, it is undeniable that there are significant issues amongst FIFO workers and that the current mental health system is failing (Morrison, 2014). FIFO practices require urgent and immediate review with strong legislative controls in regards to its use!

Figure 3: Arial View of the City of Karratha, 2014

2. Initiatives to Enhance the Wellbeing of FIFO Workers

Despite its long term use, FIFO practices and their impact on the workers, their families and the local community has not been a well-researched business practice.

> *"There is a striking absence of independent research on the costs and benefits of non-resident workforces as an alternative to a resident workforce. While the lifestyle associated with non-resident workforce practices no doubt suits some and is character-building for others, layers of risk and adversity are experienced by other non-resident individuals and their families. These include stress levels, lifestyle and health issues including fatigue (known as FIFO fatigue); gender relationships and*

inequalities; parenting problems; domestic and family violence; family break-ups; social effects for remote Indigenous communities; and psychosocial well-being of family members."

Source: Australian Research Council Research Team, 2011.

2.1 FIFO in the Pilbara

Currently there is no accurate way of measuring total FIFO numbers in the Pilbara. An estimated 50,000 FIFO workers are now employed in the Pilbara (Lopex, 2014), however there are no actual figures available. This lack of accurate data was exacerbated by the ABS in the 2011 census when they instructed resource sector employees to record the Pilbara as their usual place of residence if they spent more than 6 months of the year in the region (.Id the population experts, 2013). The results for the City of Karratha can be seen in Table 2, however as most FIFO workers would spend more than 6 months in the region, we believe that these figures significantly underestimate industry's utilisation of FIFO. During the boom, the transient workers accommodation in the City of Karratha (Appendix A) was at maximum capacity (13,000 beds) and FIFO workers were being allocated to hotels, motels, camping grounds and residential housing often creating significant overcrowding issues.

Table 2: FIFO workers and their usual place of residence, 2011

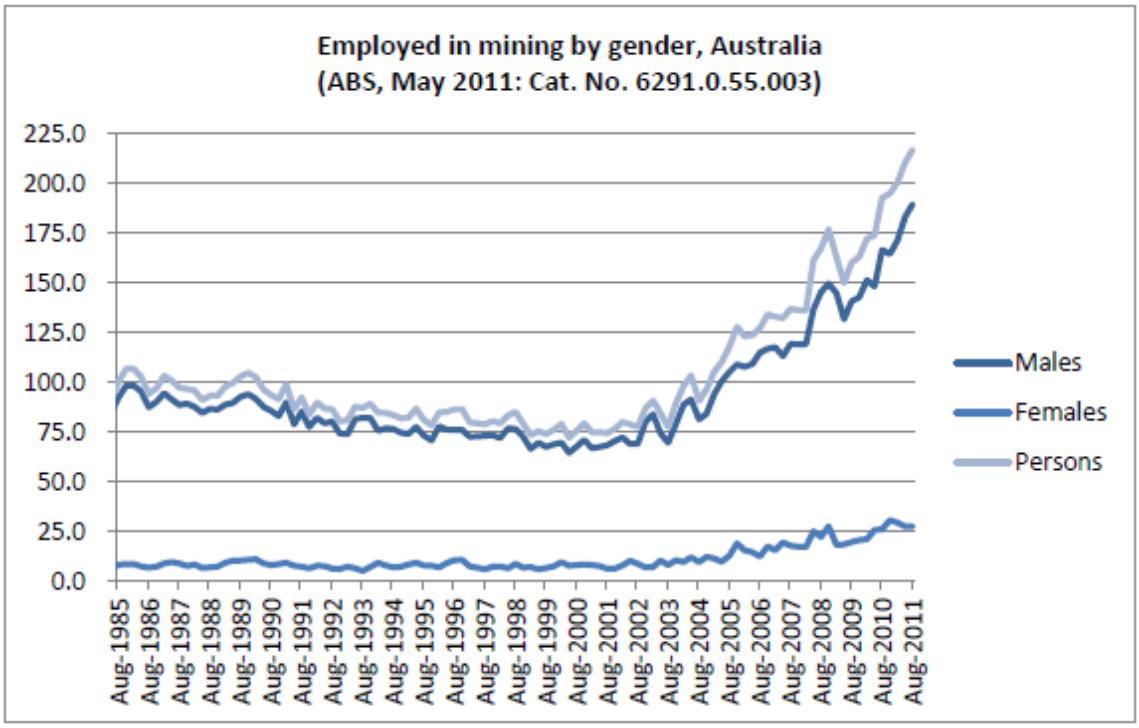
Place of usual residence	Number of FIFO working in the City of Karratha
Western Australia (excluding the Pilbara)	13,236
Queensland	714
New South Wales	456
Victoria	352
South Australia	181
Northern Territory	73
Tasmania	47
Australian Capital Territory	7
Total FIFO in the City of Karratha	**15,066**

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014

With a population ratio of male to female that is higher than the National average, the City of Karratha is also known for its gender imbalance, 87.5% of resource sector workers being male as can be seen in Figure 4. This male dominated city is renowned for its staunch macho culture – a culture that makes barriers, stigmas and discrimination towards mental illness prevalent in the Pilbara. Expression of one's feelings or frustrations is considered weak and will often be met with one of the following responses:

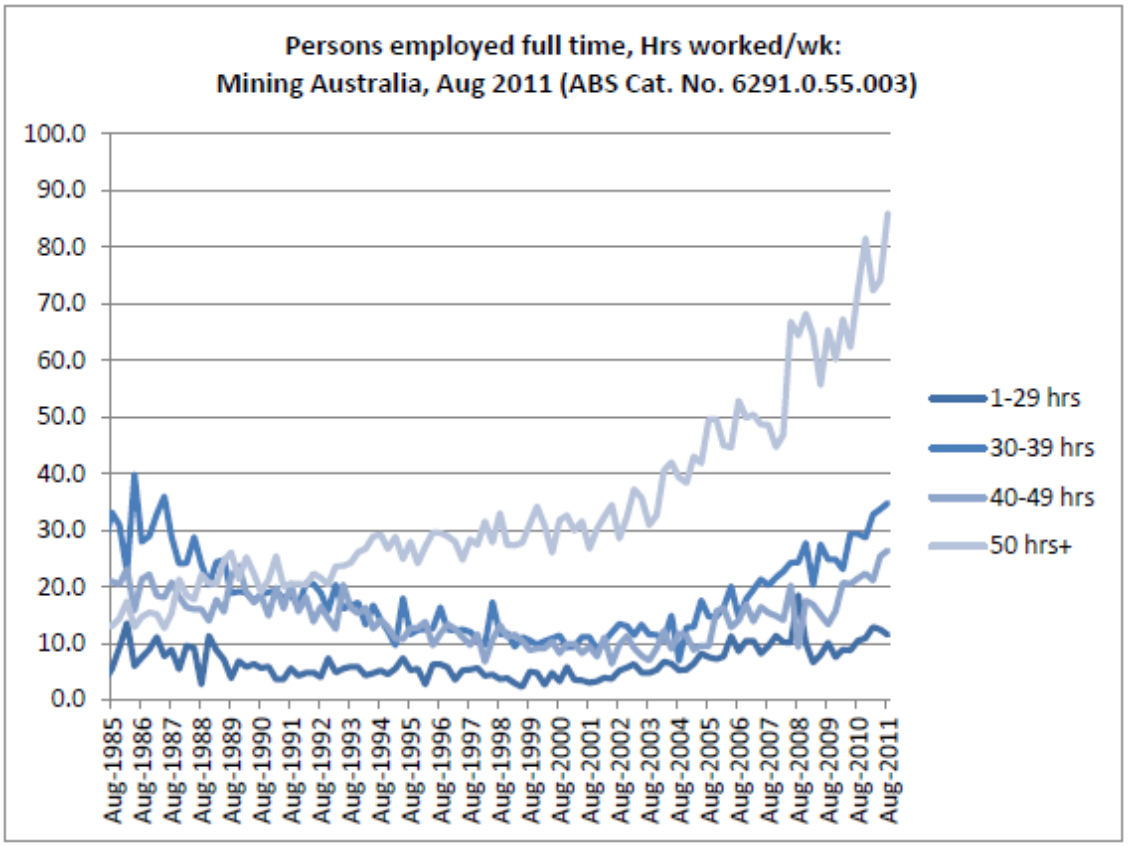
- "Harden up"
- "Suck it up, princess"
- "Get over it, you made this choice"
- "If you don't like it quit and stop moaning"
- "If you can't hack it there's 300 people waiting to replace you"

Figure 4: Persons Employed in Mining by Gender, Australia, 1985 to 2011



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013. Cat No. 6209.0.55.003

Figure 5: Hours Worked by Persons Employed in Mining, Australia, 1985 – 2011



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013 Cat. No. 6209.0.55.003

With FIFO numbers expected to increase by 16% by 2020 (Carrington et al, 2011), it is essential that the State Government find some way to measure the number of FIFO workers and the projected growth of this practice to enable accurate planning and monitoring of this employment method. It is also essential that other sectors who work directly for the resource sector are included in the figures. For example, construction, transportation, processing, maintenance, catering, cleaning, security and emergency management.

At this point FIFO numbers continue to increase. Industry stating that FIFO practices allow greater levels of efficiency to be achieved, increased flexibility in relation to worker numbers and employment contracts and union disputes are avoided ensuring that productivity remains at capacity. This can be seen in in Figure 5 as industry demands more and more hours to be worked, leaving little time to participate in community life or achieve a better work/life balance.

From a local government perspective, "employing large numbers of contractors and non-resident workers over local unionised mining and construction workers is a divisive strategy that has the potential to undermine social solidarity, community identity and breed widespread community discontent" (Carrington et al, 2011). This was proven in the results of the 2013 Living in the Regions Report (Department of Regional Development) which highlighted the Pilbara as having the lowest rating of all Western Australian regions for the following indicators:

- Lifestyle
- Sense of community
- Sense of connectedness
- Affinity with community

Figure 6: Resource Sector Workers Arriving by Bus to Pilbara Iron Ore Worksite

Source: The Conversation, 2013

2.2 FIFO Wellbeing

It has only been in recent times that FIFO mental health issues have been acknowledged. Health statistics continue to increase to phenomenal levels. The Australian Medical Association (2011) has produced a number of reports in which the Pilbara has been clearly identified as a high risk region (Carrington, 2011). Health concerns such as obesity, heart issues and mental health are represented at significantly higher levels amongst FIFO workers. "The mining industry is full of stories about FIFO workers suffering general health problems, relationship breakdowns, and sometimes the abuse of drugs, especially alcohol and Kronic [synthetic marijuana]".

The Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (2010) reported that the rate of suicide of male miners is **4 times** greater than that of the general male population. While preliminary findings from the University of South Australia's current study on FIFO mental health indicate that depression rates in FIFO workers are twice the national average (McTernan, 2014).

Results from the recent Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health's (ACRRMH) Wellbeing and Lifestyle Survey (2011) indicate that the most significant risk factors for FIFO workers relate to work, lifestyle and family, including:

- length of swings and shifts,
- pressure from senior management,
- remoteness and social isolation,
- missing special events,
- relationship stresses, and
- financial pressure.

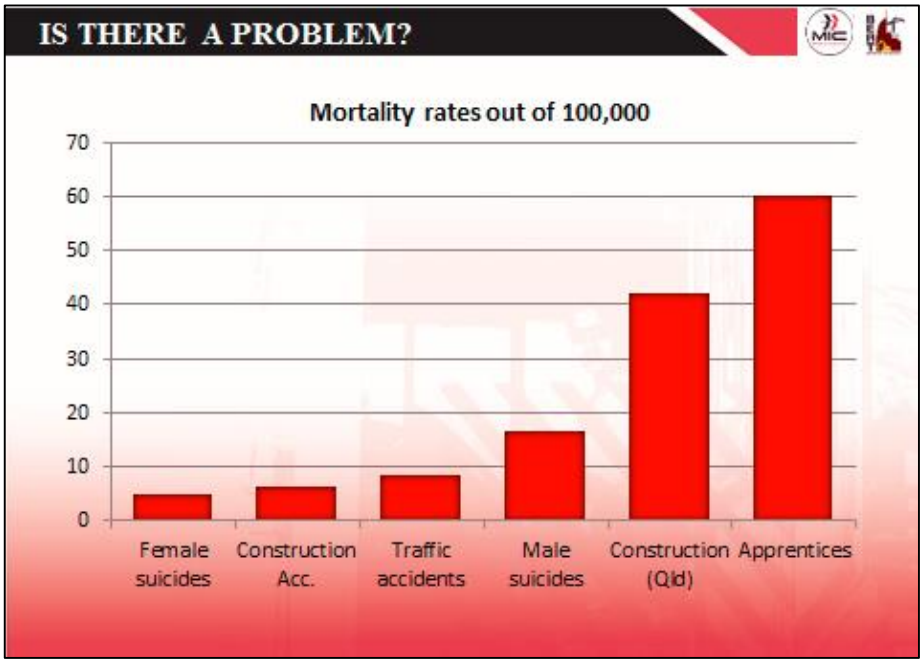
These factors (and others) impact on both 'source' and 'host' communities, creating a sense of 'split lifestyle' which can contribute to mental health problems and, in extreme cases, suicide (Bowers, 2014).

Figure 7: Construction of Rio Tinto Mining Site

Source: http://www.imeshe.org

As the construction phase draws to an end on current mining sector projects in the Pilbara, the impact of FIFO practices can be seen. Mates in Construction, a suicide prevention and mental health improvement programme that operates throughout the country report that construction workers are more likely to suicide than any other industry in Australia. Construction workers are six times more likely to die from suicide than a work related accident, while construction apprentices are 2.5 times more likely to commit suicide than any other group of young men in Australia (Figure 8).

Figure 8: National Mortality Rates, 2013



Note: WA Construction is a similar figure to QLD Construction.

Source: Mates in Construction, 2013

The evidence that is appearing, is so compelling that prevention programs and early interventions for mental health problems should be implemented as a **priority**. Policies, procedures and practices within industry and government need to consider both mental and physical health and safety for all workers in the Pilbara.

Demystifying suicide and increasing mental health education via the implementation of effective prevention programs (such as Mates in Construction) will aid in raising much needed awareness and improve coping skills of workers in the Pilbara. In particular, breaking down the macho male culture that dominates the resource sector enabling men to recognise their own feelings and the skills to ask for help.

Family relationships also require consideration as many fall apart under the increased pressure brought on by FIFO practices. This has a substantial impact on both 'source' and 'host' communities. Myths and unfounded rumours bring insecurities. Limited access to telecommunications and internet only enhances these fears. Commentators on the Facebook Page 'FIFO Man' often speak of the struggle families have coping without one partner, the fears of partners cheating, the breakdown of relationships and the increased behavioral problems with children.

Bringing FIFO partners and families to the Pilbara to view the work conditions and FIFO living quarters may alleviate some of these concerns, while enabling a greater appreciation of the FIFO lifestyle.

Appropriate mental health support services for both workers and their families are vital. These services need to de developed taking into account the limited access to telecommunications and internet, both onsite and at the accommodation camps. However, to truly develop a positive, healthy and sustainable workforce in the Pilbara, a reduction in FIFO practices is essential.

> *"Australia urgently needs systemic changes to its mental health system. To avoid the development of chronic mental illness and reduce the burden of disease on the community, fundamental and coordinated reforms require new ways of thinking and funding. These reforms do not just include service delivery and increased budgets, but reforms in education, media representation and overall perceptions of mental illness."*
>
> *Source: Mental Health Australia, 2014*

2.3 Summary

The City of Karratha recommend the following key actions should be implemented by State Government to enhance the wellbeing of FIFO workers:

- Assist industry to ensure FIFO workers achieve a balance between work, health and relaxation.
- Introduce programs to assist FIFO workers form greater connections with established social networks (family and friends).
- Work with industry to address the destructive macho culture.
- Ensure that FIFO workers have been given the choice to FIFO or relocate with their family to the remote location.
- Work with industry to encourage FIFO families to visit FIFO workplace locations.
- Reduce the use of FIFO in favour of a permanent residential workforce as part of the development of a sustainable and holistic community.

Figure 9: A FIFO Family

Source: The Australian, 2013

3. Regulatory, Taxation and Legislative Environment

FIFO is an optional method of employment. It is not mandatory, nor is it a necessity. All FIFO arrangements are contractually agreed between the State/Federal Governments and industry as part of each new resource sector project - this includes any requirements for Transient Workers Accommodation. It is worth noting that many of these projects fall under the parameters of ratified State Agreements under the *Mining Act 1978*, of which many decisions are currently being challenged in the Courts by the resource industry.

Many, if not all of these contracts, have little consideration for the social responsibility and in particular the impacts of FIFO work practices on the workers and the 'host'/'source' communities. In addition, the contract terminology leaves room for interpretation. For example, the term 'local' in relation to workforce quotas is frequently being stretched to a definition that incorporates all of Australia. Some companies going as far as setting up training facilities in other locations, such as State capital cities, to attract 'local' staff.

FIFO workers are generally not encouraged to integrate with the local community. In fact when the Council has invited FIFO workers living in the transient workers accommodation camps to community events, management have refused to let workers attend.

3.1 Legislation and Policies

The Western Australian State Government does not have any legislation or policies relating specifically to FIFO practices. However, the City of Karratha is aware that a policy focusing on Transient Workers Accommodation is being considered.

From a local government town planning perspective, the City of Karratha have very clear policies in place for the design, placement and length of service for Transient Workers Accommodation based on the *Planning and Development Act 2005* and the *State Planning Policy 3.1 Residential Design Codes of Western Australia:*

- A *Transient Workers Accommodation Policy* designed to provide guidance for the preparation and assessment of, and decision making on applications for transient workforce accommodation; and
- A *Social Impact Assessment Policy* whose purpose is to provide guidance to applicants, agencies and the City of Karratha in the consideration of social impacts, both positive and negative, in relation to proposed new developments and extensions to existing developments. Refer to Appendix B for an outline of key questions expected to be addressed by each Social Impact Assessment.

These policies provide a clearer framework for assessing new major proposals and contribute to the building of a more sustainable economy and holistic local community.

3.2 Taxation

There are two taxation reforms that would make a significant difference to the City of Karratha – the elimination of FIFO incentives and the creation of an economic zone allowance.

> *"The tax write-off involved in FIFO would well outweigh the added cost of fringe benefits the company will face housing people in the town (FMG told the*

government this in their submission looking at the effect of FIFO on towns). Good on them [YARA Pilbara] for taking on the added cost to try to save communities fast becoming FIFO camps. Based on the issues many have found associated with FIFO and family breakdown you may actually get the best person for the job who wants to keep his family together."

Source: M. Bastow, cited in Australian Mining, 2014

Fringe Benefits Tax was changed in 1986, the new exemptions allowing companies to offset their taxes against transportation, accommodation and catering spending for FIFO employees. From an industry perspective, "On average it costs $100,000 more to employ a person who lives in the Pilbara than to employ a person FIFO" (Lopex, 2014). This translates to a saving of $10 million a year for 100 residential workers replaced by FIFO workers. However, it is worth noting that while there is significant gain in the short term, this gain disappears if utilised over a long term period (15-20 years).

As part of the 2011-2013 Federal parliamentary inquiry into the use of FIFO workforce practices in Regional Australia, saw the following statement made by the Pilbara Regional Council submission:

The first of these shared issues is in respect to the application of various taxes, which encourage FIFO activities to the detriment of permanent based residents as workers. Currently taxation encourages companies to utilise FIFO workforces as all costs associated with the use of this workforce are largely tax deductable. If FIFO workers are housed in camp arrangements there are no FBT implications however, housing subsidies paid to a permanent resident workforce attract this tax. Further to this, to avoid FBT implications plus secure a 50% concession on rental costs, the companies can rent the house as opposed to purchasing it outright. This activity has a dual implication in some communities as this use of the commercial rental market to house FIFO workers drives the rental market upward.

As for the zone allowance the Pilbara Advocacy Group endorsed the following suggestion.

The second area of tax reform should be to the Taxation Zone Rebate (TZR) an income tax concession which recognises the disadvantages to residents in 'specific areas' of Australia. These 'specific areas' consist of two zones. Zone A includes nearly the entire continent above the 26th parallel and some offshore islands with the exception of approximately 50% of eastern Queensland.

Zone B which is deemed to be less remote includes the remainder of the continent except for highly populated areas. A resident is defined as a taxpayer who spends time in the Tax Zone Rebate zones, not necessarily continuous time. Entitlement to the rebate requires a combined residency period of 182 days minimum over 2 years. It presently allows large benefits in equal measure to FIFO workers and remote bona fide residents. It is recommended that for the purpose of Tax Zone Rebates the definition of resident be restricted to permanent residents residing continuously in an area and those eligible to be enrolled are enrolled at that address.

The City of Karratha would like the State Government to address the cause and not just the effects. This can be undertaken either by remedying or mitigating against current Federal taxation policies, or by advocating for tax reforms that encourage a reduction in FIFO practices. The City of Karratha would like to see the State Government support and encourage economic growth and community formation in remote regions such as the Pilbara.

Figure 10: FIFO Workers Waiting to Board Plane

Source: Aviation WA, 2013

3.3 Summary

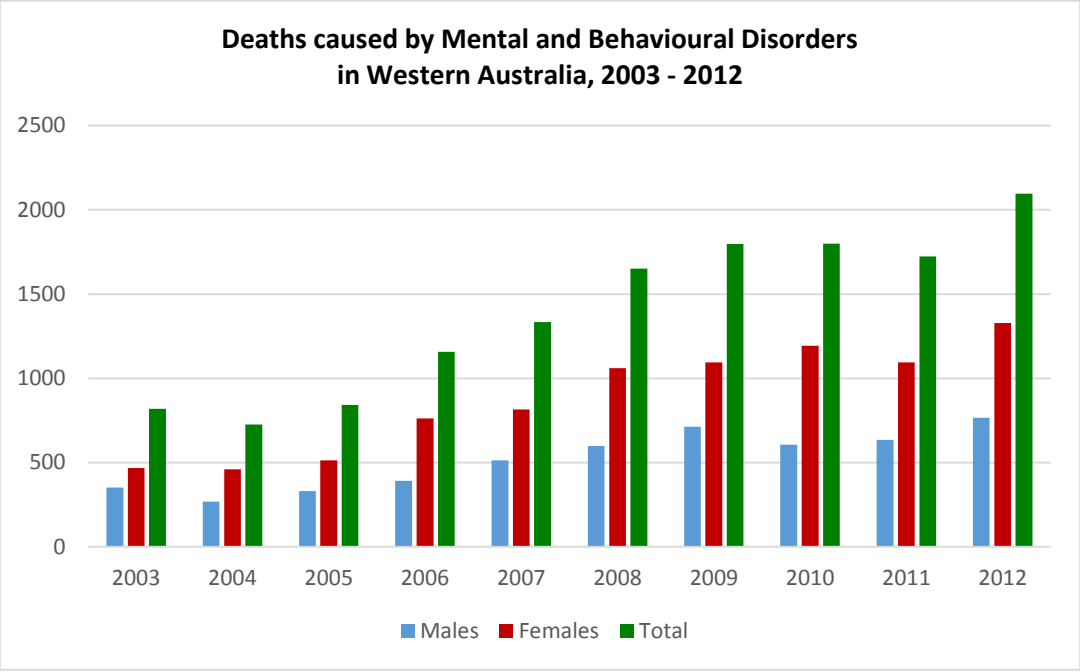
The City of Karratha recommend the implementation of the following key actions by the State Government to establish an effective regulatory, tax and legislative environment for the use of FIFO practices:

- Reduce the number of FIFO workers in favour of a permanent residential workforce.
- Negotiate contracts requiring a FIFO component that benefit and promote positive FIFO interaction with the community.
- Narrow the definition for the term 'local' or stipulate "Pilbara based" in workforce quota requirements to ensure local residents are considered for roles.
- Ensure a social responsibility focus is included in all agreements, policies and legislation pertaining to FIFO workers in the Pilbara region.
- Lobby Federal Government for the prioritisation of tax reform which encourages regional population growth through the reduction of FIFO numbers. For example, review and alter Fringe Benefits Tax and the Living Away from Home Allowance (LAHA) to provide incentives for workers to reside in the local community.
- Deregulation of air travel to and from Karratha.

4. Mental Health Resources

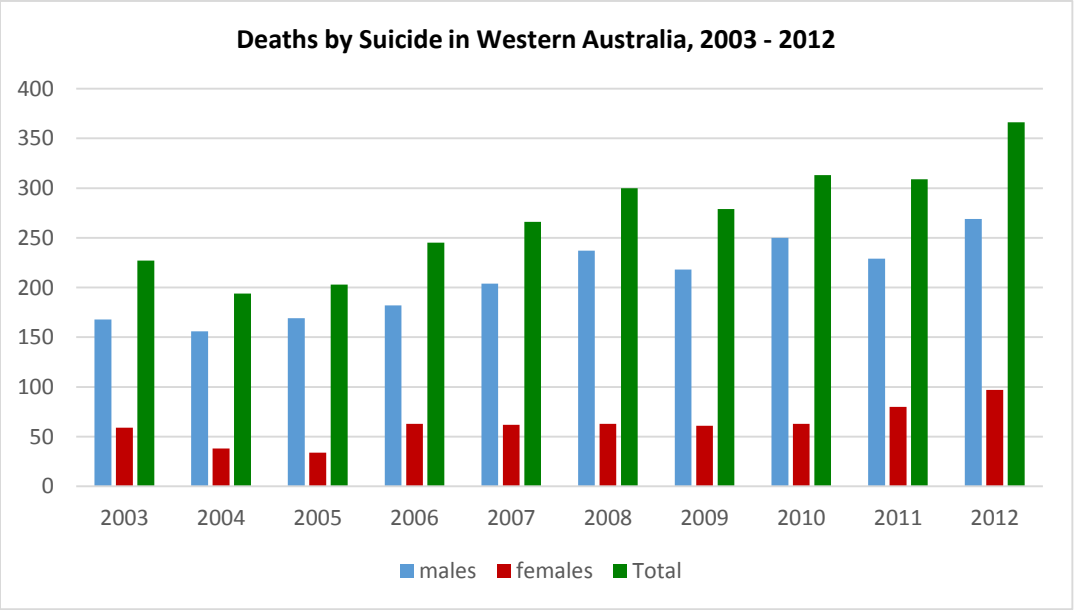
Mental illness is a significant problem in Western Australia, at its most extreme, resulting in death. As shown in Figures 11 and 12, the number of deaths attributed to mental illness has been growing exponentially over the past 10 years with male suicide leading the way.

Figure 11: Deaths caused by Mental and Behavioural Disorders in Western Australia



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013

Figure 12: Deaths caused by Suicide in Western Australia

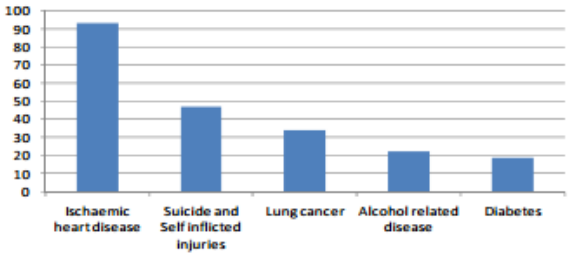


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013

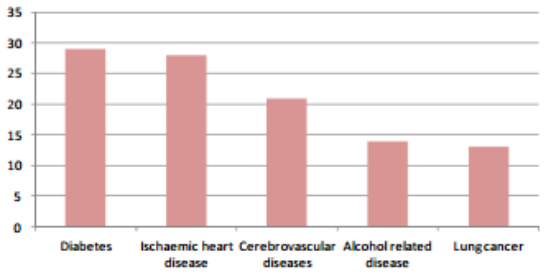
The Pilbara's rate of avoidable deaths has been significant over the past few years. Many of the leading causes can be correlated directly to mental health issues and/or ineffective coping mechanisms such as smoking, alcohol/drug use and the reduced ability to exercise due to long hours and fatigue (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Leading Cause of Avoidable Mortality in the Pilbara, 1997-2007

Males



Females



Source: WA Country Health Service, 2012

Recent media headlines (below) reflect the growing concern and outrage from both 'host' and 'source' communities regarding FIFO practices, particularly within the resources sector.

> *Gorgon workers say poor phone and internet connections on Barrow Island increase risk of suicide.*
> - Australian Broadcasting Corporation PM News 11/09/2014
>
> *Suicides highlight harsh conditions in Australia's mining industry.*
> - World Socialist Web Site 2/9/2014
>
> "*Nine fly-in fly-out workers have taken their own lives in the last 12 months in Western Australia*"
> - Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 19/08/2014
>
> *FLY-in fly-out workers (FIFO) need more than physical safeguards.*
> - The Sunday Times, 26/07/2014
>
> *Mining, fly-in, fly-out workers and the risk of suicide.*
> - The Conversation 17/1/2013

Yet there has been very little scientific study of FIFO work practices or their connection with mental illness and the increasing suicide rates amongst FIFO workers.

A 2011–13 Federal parliamentary inquiry into the increasing prevalence of FIFO work practices resulted in 21 recommendations for various studies and reviews to be undertaken, many of which are yet to be actioned. In addition, 12 "action areas" were identified for improvement by industry and all tiers of government. However the use of FIFO workers continues to increase and the death toll continues to rise. "Based on what we know about risk factors for suicide, it's fair to say that FIFO/DIDO work has the potential to create stresses and challenges that may exceed some individuals' coping abilities" (McPhedran, 2013).

Figure 14: Climbing Aboard Mining Machinery

Source: Courier Mail, 2012

4.1 Mental Health Resources in the City of Karratha

Port Hedland is the regional resource centre for health services in the Pilbara, 242 km away from Karratha. Within the City of Karratha, there are two hospitals – Nickol Bay and Roebourne, servicing a population of 26,000 permanent residents, a FIFO population of at least 15,000 plus approximately 50,000+ tourists who visit the region. Both hospitals accommodate less than 50 beds each. There is also a specialised Aboriginal Health Centre – which is fully booked for the 2015 year, and several GP clinics scattered throughout the city.

In the City of Karratha, Nickol Bay Hospital is the only mental health resource available to residents, workers and visitors.

Patient demand for mental health services in the City of Karratha is currently exceeding capacity, mental health patients often utilising 20% or more of the available hospital beds. Staff report that patient numbers are far exceeding our neighbours in Port Hedland and this trend is increasing as the City continues its extraordinary population growth pattern.

As the population grows, the mental health profile for the City of Karratha is fast resembling the profile of a bigger city. Yet the support services required to cater for such a profile are missing, putting pressure on resources in 'source' communities. Nickol Bay Hospital is recording significant increases in the number of patients arriving in a state of crisis, often suicidal. However, for patients requiring inpatient treatments, the only options available require relocation to Perth or Broome.

The following initiatives would be welcomed in the City of Karratha:

- Supported accommodation for mental health patients
- Supported employment options for those with mental illness, particularly in non-government organisations
- Availability of respite care
- Drop in centres for those with mental health issues, for example, a men's shed
- Mental health initiatives for prevention and support

4.2 Mental Health Resources for FIFO Workers

For the majority of FIFO workers, receiving mental health treatment is difficult to obtain. While many, if not all of the worksites provide medics who are trained to provide counselling, specific mental health counsellors are flown in if they are required.

It is unknown as to whether industry has policies in place for workers mental health requirements, but what is known is that the current FIFO culture ensures workers feel uncomfortable or unable to verbalise their issues. This was reiterated by the father of recent Pilbara suicide victim Rhys Connor who stated:

> *"Rhys was scared he might lose his job if he spoke to anybody on site, as like most other workers ... they do not trust being able to talk to anybody on site…If they [the organisations], had something where people were confident they weren't going to lose their job if they open their mouth people might start saying something. There's no trust."*

Source: Peter Millar, Illawarra Mercury, 2014

Lifeline WA's anonymous online survey (2013) of 924 FIFO workers showed a higher prevalence of psychological distress among FIFO workers, compared with the general population. A significant number admitting to the use of alcohol and/or illicit drugs to manage disrupted sleep due stress levels and rostering. The results also indicated that while the majority of FIFO workers knew about the mental health resources available to them in the workplace, the current organisational culture prevented them from accessing these resources when required.

Figure 15: Onsite Maintenance

Source: The Conversation, 2013

The City of Karratha fully support the implementation of recommendations put forward by LifeLine WA in their 2013 FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report (Table 3):

Table 3: LifeLine WA, FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013 Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - Develop supports that focus on increasing help-seeking behaviour within FIFO populations: • Address culture within the resources sector. • Diagnose mental illness early and accurately.
Recommendation 2 - Develop targeted supports, with awareness to the following: • Males were more likely to access informal supports during times of personal stress and females were more likely to access formal supports. • Young people were more likely to access formal and informal supports. • Those 50+ were less likely to access any form of support. • Trades and professionals preferred to access mental health services at home whereas labourers did not.
Recommendation 3 - Develop pre-employment services: What to expect from FIFO and how to cope, including: • What to expect from FIFO work. • How to cope effectively with the practical demands of FIFO work (hydration, eating healthily). • How to cope effectively with the impact of FIFO work on the self, family and friends. • Types of support services and their availability. • Role of support services and different health professionals. • How to recognise symptoms associated with mental health problems. • Self-care.
Recommendation 4 - Develop ongoing post-employment support services that reduce stigma and address mental health literacy and coping, such as: • Reduce the stigma associated with mental health and help-seeking. • Increase mental health literacy. • Promote effective coping. • Promote self-efficacy in this highly regulated and regimented working environment. • Promote self-care.
Recommendation 5 - Address organisational culture: • Organisations employing FIFO workers to actively address the 'suck it up princess' culture • Build policies and services from the 'ground' up to address the 'real' mental health needs of workers.

4.3 Impact of FIFO Mental Health on the Local Community

Many local residents in the City of Karratha work alongside FIFO workers, often undertaking a similar roster. For many, losing workmates to suicide or other mental health issues takes its toll on their own perceptions of well-being and general resilience.

Several years ago, the City of Karratha attempted to undertake research on FIFO practices through an initiative to employ a mental health worker. The aim of this role was to monitor the use of FIFO work practices, liaising between the Council and industry/workers with the aim of identifying new initiatives for implementation. Despite talks with industry occurring, this initiative never gained traction.

There are three key impacts that need to be considered:

1. The impact of the negative coping mechanisms employed by workers in the resources industry (both residential and FIFO), including alcohol and drug abuse, violence and other antisocial behaviours.
2. Self-resilience in a community where (statistically) one in three have mental health issues.
3. Community resilience when a workmate commits suicide.

Research undertaken in 2011 by the Australian Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health, indicated that for every dollar invested in mental illness prevention, a return of $9 will be seen in the first year through reduced absenteeism and workplace accidents; and increased employee performance and productivity. This figure increases to $48 for every dollar invested into prevention over the following 2-5 years.

Further research is urgently required in this arena, particularly in the face of rising mental health statistics.

4.4 Summary

The City of Karratha recommend the implementation of the following key actions by the State Government to increase the allocation of mental health resources within the region:

- Increase resourcing through the location of State Government agencies in the Pilbara who are equip to address mental illness issues or financial support for not for profit agencies. This includes strategies for prevention and on-going support.

Figure 16: Construction Workers

Source: The Conversation, 2012

5. Research and Development

> *The capacity and potential of the Australian mental health sector must be enhanced and its potential recognised, through collaborative and innovative ways of working across all sections of society, to effectively support the needs of people with mental illness. New collaborative models and service delivery are needed along with new and innovative ways of working across all sections of society. This includes stakeholders in government, private industry, the not-for profit sector and the general public.*
>
> *Source: Mental Health Australia, 2014*

As a local government, accurate research and monitoring into FIFO practices is urgently required and is long overdue. Anecdotally, the Council is aware that the total number of FIFO workers being employed each year is increasing. However, without accurate figures, it is difficult to ensure adequate planning results.

Research on the impact FIFO practices have on individuals, their families and 'host'/'source' communities is essential for all future planning, both for industry and for all tiers of government. This research should also incorporate how FIFO workers engage with the local community and vice versa.

Mental health issues in the Pilbara are of significant concern. The current statistics and latest research studies tell a story that is nothing short of shocking (LifeLine WA, 2013; Joyce, Tomlin, Somerford & Weeramanthri, 2013; Bailey-Kruger, 2012; Bahtic, 2011; Torkington, Larkins & Gupta, 2011; Carrington, McIntosh & Scott, 2010;). It is **unacceptable** for these figures to continue increasing without redress. New preventative initiatives are required that cater for the extreme nature of FIFO practices in the harsh and isolated Pilbara environment.

One death is one too many. The urgency of the current situation cannot be underestimated.

Bringing together multidisciplinary teams of researchers from industry and the public sector has proven successful on many occasions as an ideal platform in which to progress independent research. The City of Karratha believes the use of the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) Program would be a beneficial method in providing independent research and ongoing monitoring of the impact of FIFO practices. This could be undertaken in the following ways:

1. The establishment of a FIFO specific CRC focus specifically on FIFO work practices, concerns and impacts.
2. The expansion of the CRC for Mental Health to include industry specific mental health issues. In this case, focusing on FIFO workers and residents who work FIFO rosters in the resource sector.
3. The expansion of the CRC for Mining to focus specifically on FIFO work practices, concerns and impacts.

5.1 Summary

The City of Karratha recommend the implementation of the following key actions by the State Government to ensure a coordinated approach and two way communication occurs on the topic of mental health:

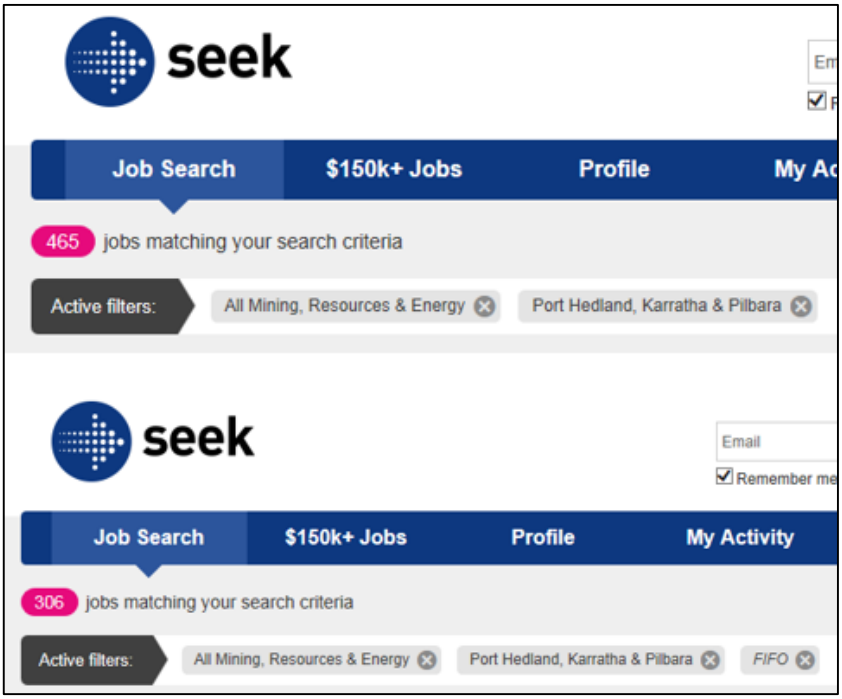
- Improve communication and collaboration through two-way engagement with local government, particularly in the early stages of major projects and policy initiatives that affect the region and its communities with the use of FIFO workers.
- Improve relationships between industry and all tiers of government to address social issues within the FIFO workforce environment.

6. Collaboration and Communication

The City of Karratha recognises that FIFO practices can be useful when applied to short-term contracts. Construction and maintenance positions often involve short term contracts and so FIFO arrangements can be useful when these workers do not wish to take on a residential position.

However, of recent times, workers are not always being offered the choice, especially those involved in ongoing operations. This increasing trend towards the use of FIFO practices is supported by popular employment websites such as Seek.com.au where 66% of all resources sector positions being advertised are specifically for FIFO workers (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Resource Sector Positions Available in the Pilbara as at 25/09/2014



Source: http//:www.seek.com.au

For those who do choose the FIFO option, it does not make them exempt to the stressors that a FIFO lifestyle can bring with it.

Clear communications and a willingness to collaborate openly without incrimination on the topic of FIFO practices is fundamental to countering the negative statistics. Closer relations between industry, all tiers of government, the FIFO workers and their families are therefore essential in the goal of identifying a coordinated approach. A focus on the impact FIFO practices has on both 'host'/'source' communities needs to be a priority moving forward.

While the City of Karratha ultimately would like to see a reduction in the use of FIFO practices in our region, we would advocate that any future use of FIFO practices are limited to the original intent of this employment option - attached to short term contract positions in construction only. The City of Karratha also calls for urgent independent research to be undertaken regarding the stressors placed on FIFO workers and their families with the aim of clearly identifying and addressing current and potential risk factors. Regular monitoring, honest statistics and the desire to improve the FIFO lifestyle through effective two-way communication along with the implementation of new initiatives will be indispensable in combating of mental health issues amongst FIFO workers.

6.1 Summary

The City of Karratha recommend the following key actions should be implemented by State Government to encourage a coordinated approach is undertaken and two way communication occurs:

- Improve communication and collaboration through two-way engagement with local government, particularly in the early stages of major projects and policy initiatives that affect the region and its communities with the use of FIFO workers.
- Improve relationships between industry and all tiers of government to address social issues within the FIFO workforce environment.

7. Social and Economic Infrastructure

Local governments are continually under pressure to ensure adequate social and economic infrastructure is available for residents. However, the increasing use of FIFO workers combined with a low ratepayer base often experienced in remote communities where the resource sector is the dominant industry, results in councils like the City of Karratha, struggling to keep up with the demand needed to service the local economy. "Funding options for the ongoing operation of infrastructure and social programs are constrained by the disparate relationship between the residential rate base and the consumers of the local government services and infrastructure" (Pilbara Regional Council, 2011).

Royalty for Regions assists with some infrastructure development, however, small cities like the City of Karratha frequently miss out on State and Federal government funding allocations due to criteria that heavily weights decisions towards highly populated regions. The impact of non-resident populations such as FIFO workers are not considered in this decision making process.

7.1 Impact on Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure includes schools, hospitals, child care facilities, housing and recreational and cultural facilities, the majority of which is provided by State and Local Governments. The

use of FIFO workers removes the need for land development under its general definition. It is easy to place dongas and transient workforce accommodation camps anywhere to service a construction project. However, recent research (Carrington et al, 2011).is indicating the use of these camps is having a profound social and criminological impact on workers, a Queensland University of Technology study (2013) referring to the housing as being “reminiscent of a prison cell”. Figure 18 shows an aerial photo of Woodside’s Gap Ridge Village. It comes complete with dry mess, wet mess, gym, sports courts, laundry, on-site medics and security gates enclosing the entire site. A 10 minute drive to the centre of Karratha township, however FIFO workers are not encouraged to leave the camp site, unable to re-enter once the security gates are closed for the evening (around 8.30pm).

Figure 18: Transient Workers Accommodation - Woodside’s Gap Ridge Village

Figure 19: Close-up of Transient Workers Accommodation

Figure 20: Typical Bedroom in FIFO Workers Camps

Source, FIFO Man, Facebook, 2014

Figure 21: Example of a Food Mess at Transient Workers Accommodation

Source: Courier Mail, 2013

The City of Karratha are currently working with industry to improve standards for workers accommodation. Figure 22 provides an example of how workers accommodation can incorporate the look and feel of a normal residential community:

Figure 22: Rio Tinto's Workers Accommodation in Wickham

Social infrastructure projects generally do not take into account the impact of temporary populations (such as FIFO). This leaves rural and regional communities such as the City of Karratha struggling to provide adequate social infrastructure that will cope with the numerous social issues arising from FIFO practices. Research from Queensland University of Technology (2013) identifies the following FIFO specific social issues:

- Loss of identity
- Long hours limiting ability to participate in community life
- Suspension from informal social controls of family & peers
- Higher rates of injury related to violence
- Organised drunkenness through the provision of buses from accommodation to pubs or through the location of pubs onsite at accommodation.
- High levels of police and community concern about chronic levels of alcohol related male on male fighting
- Local industries loosing staff to better paid mining jobs

These issues (and others) result in local human, justice, medical and emergency services being seriously over-stretched and often ill-equipt to deal with the increased pressures.

In addition, regulations dealing with Social Impact Statements often (if not always) overlook criminological and cumulative social impacts on a community. From an industry perspective, corporate social responsibility in the resource sector is often sub-contracted making self-regulation and self-enlightenment increasingly unsustainable.

> *"In many FIFO/DIDO locations, the cost of housing, family essentials (groceries and other services) and other infrastructure is extremely expensive. This places a great financial burden on residents. The extra competition for housing, owned or rented, pushes up the price of housing"*
>
> *Source: Australian Police, 2011*

Sustainable communities are **not** being built by the current FIFO practices. As they currently stand there is minimal contribution to the local community and local economy. It should also be noted that the high workforce turnover amongst FIFO workers is far greater than the turnover seen in residential employees (Carrington et al, 2011). The loss of productivity and increase in recruitment costs should be enough for any decision-maker to realise that keeping families together in a residential environment is critical to positive mental health.

Government investment into developing adequate social infrastructure is essential in attracting families to remote locations. Workers in the resources sector should be encouraged to relocate to the regions, strengthening families, increasing community engagement and growing healthy sustainable communities.

7.2 Impact on Economic Infrastructure

FIFO practices impact heavily on a range of critical infrastructure assets in the Pilbara such as:

7.2.1 Roading

Requirements that cater for oversized equipment and busloads of FIFO workers travelling to new resource sector projects often putting pressure on the Council to increase resourcing for road maintenance.

7.2.2 Airports

As workplace/worker accommodation incidents increase, air transport is required to take patients from the worksite to either Nickol Bay Hospital or further afield to Port Hedland or Perth. This not increases pressure on airstrip use and prioritises airspace, but also increases the demand on emergency services (many of whom are volunteers) involved in the transportation and care of each patient. In addition, if specialised medical staff, such as counsellors are required for mental health issues, they are flown up onto site by industry. It should be noted that this intensive use of air travel also raises the City's carbon footprint.

7.2.3 Power, Waste, Water, and Waste Water

With each new transient worker accommodation camp established, power, waste, water and waste water infrastructure is required to be implemented. These are often a difficult and expensive operation due to the remoteness of some of the resource projects.

7.2.4 Telecommunications and Internet

Availability and access to telecommunications and internet is the most vital for the health and wellbeing of FIFO workers, allowing them to stay in contact with family and friends. It also is one of the main avenues for accessing support services such as Lifeline phone counselling or social media support groups such as Facebook's FIFO Man. However, many worksites and workers accommodation camps lack sufficient coverage.

> *"Most FIFO workers were aware of formal supports offered by their employees, but the majority were reluctant or unwilling to engage in a formal support service either in person, by telephone or online. Barriers to help-seeking were linked to stigma around accessing support and appearing 'soft.' Another significant barrier to seeking support was structural; many work sites lacked the communication coverage to support current services, such as telephone counselling"*
>
> *Source: Lifeline WA, 2013*

Of those sites who do have some coverage, internet services are often referred to as the "world wide wait" as web pages can take significant amounts of time to load. In addition some support agencies may offer online services such as psychologists or counsellors. However, these services tend to operate during standard traditional work hours making them inaccessible to resource sector workers.

It is essential that investment into adequate telecommunications technologies is made a priority with a focus on access, increased speeds and availability.

7.3 Impact on Local Economy

FIFO practices by themselves do not promote any investment or expenditure in the local economy. A recent study undertaken by AEC*group,* estimated that there were a total of 33,100 FIFO mining workers in the Pilbara region in 2011-12. Had all these workers been local residents with the average expenditure pattern on goods and services, the local economy

would have benefitted (both from the direct contributions and the flow on activity) from an additional:

- $2,126 million in output.
- $1,087 million in gross value add to the local economy.
- $709 million in wages and salaries.

By comparison, the 33,100 FIFO workers, being paid the same amount and following the usual expenditure pattern of a FIFO worker in the region, the economic contribution to the Pilbara local economy is estimated to be:

- $339 million output.
- $180 million in gross value add.
- $123 million in wages and salaries.

On average, hiring a resident mining worker and not a FIFO mining worker in the Pilbara statistical district results in an estimated total (i.e. direct and indirect[1]) net beneficial impact of;

- $53,500 in economic output.
- $27,000 in gross value add (a measure of GRP).
- $17,500 in incomes (wages and salaries).

The City of Karratha would like to see State Government policies developed that effectively monitor the use of FIFO workers and actively discourage the increase of FIFO practices. Incentives for companies to locate their staff in regional locations would assist in creating balance rather than simply putting pressure on services that are only designed to cater for the residential population. By changing the incentives to support regional centres, local economies would be stimulated through the organic growth of local communities, small business and local investment.

7.4 Summary

The City of Karratha recommend the following key actions should be implemented by State Government to improve investment in social and economic infrastructure:

- Support the growth and development of the Pilbara Cities Vision for the City of Karratha by ensuring investment into critical economic and social infrastructure to increase the attractiveness of the city to workers and their families.
- Improve telecommunications for FIFO use, particularly availability of mobile coverage as well as access and speed to internet connections.
- Design FIFO accommodation to integrate with the 'look and feel' of the local community.

[1] Indirect type 1 impacts (industry induced impacts) have been included in this assessment; however, type 2 impacts (consumption induced impacts) have been excluded due to the nature of the study.

Figure 23: FIFO Worker Engaging with Local History (Red Dog)

Source: North West Star, 2013

7 Conclusion

It is well understood that the Pilbara is a region of vital national significance and its contribution to the overall Australian economy cannot be underestimated. Despite possible market volatilities and new competing sources of commodities, the resource sector and its use of FIFO practices continue to expand at an unprecedented pace.

Social and economic deficiencies that once provided obvious barriers to community growth such as housing availability and affordability, land restrictions, and community facilities are no longer. Projections see the City of Karratha continue its current path of population growth and continued normalisation, making it an ideal location for developing a residential workforce.

With one in three FIFO workers in the resource industry battling mental health issues, there is no question that immediate and effective action is required. Support services must be made available to workers and their families, both within 'source' and 'host' communities. Telecommunications must improve dramatically and above all, the macho culture of the resources sector must change.

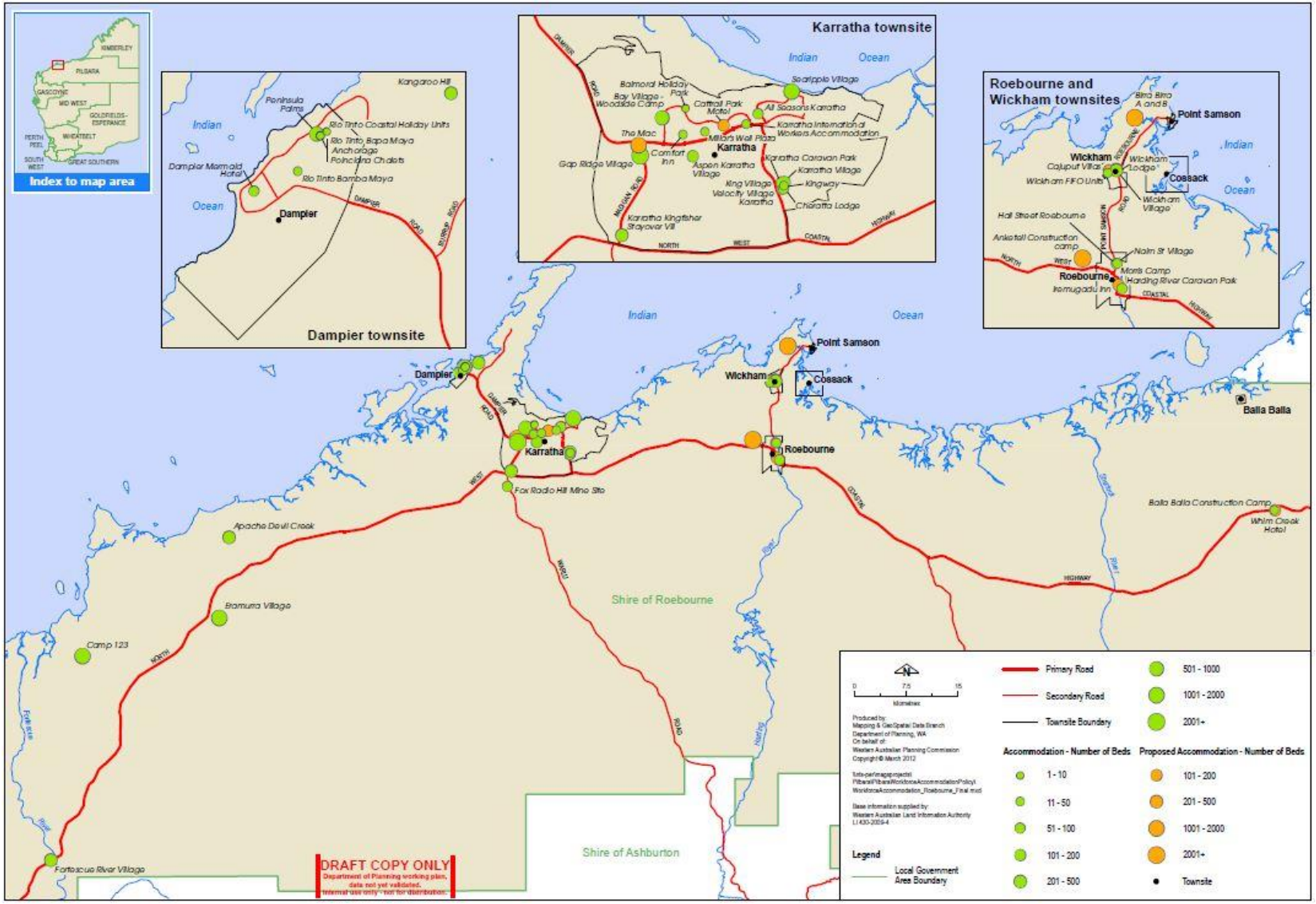
Indications show that unless major intervention occurs quickly, the value delivered by the Pilbara could be compromised through the inaction of underinvesting in the mental health and well-being of FIFO workers. Concern has been expressed in a large number of studies with input from the resource sector and all levels of Government that the current practises are not maintainable as they are not developing sustainable local communities.

State Government assistance is urgently required to strengthen and deliver a strategic long term sustainable focus to the region through incentives and legislative/regulatory change that effectively monitors and reduces the use of FIFO workers.

The time is now for creating strong resilient communities for the future and forever changing the perception of ‘mining boom towns’ to a sustainable region that has achieved an effective balance in employment practices.

Figure 24: The City of Karratha at Dusk

APPENDIX A: TRANSIENT WORKERS ACCOMODATION IN THE CITY OF KARRATHA



APPENDIX B: POTENTIAL SOCIAL IMPACTS AND SCOPING QUESTIONS

IMPACT	BASELINE INFORMATION/SCOPING QUESTIONS
1. Demographic and Population Change	– Would the development result in a change to the age structure, household structure or permanence of the resident population in the immediate/broader locality? – To what degree will the development increase the permanent and temporary population of the City of Karratha? – Would the development result in the displacement of current residents, visitors and/or workers? – Would the development increase the size of the population significantly in a short period of time?
2. Accommodation and Housing	– Would the development result in a mix of housing types and sizes? – Is the development targeted at specific groups in the community? – Would the development alter the availability of affordable housing in the community (either net increase or net loss)? – Would the development have a significant effect on the local housing market?
3. Accessibility to Community Services and Facilities	– Is the development appropriately located to maximise accessibility to existing towns/settlements, pedestrian/cycle networks? – Will the proposed development increase demand for community services and facilities? – Where an increased demand for services and facilities has been identified, how does this relate to existing capacity?
4. Social Infrastructure	– Will the development have implications on community and social infrastructure and services, either positively or negatively?
5. Cultural Values and Beliefs	– Will the development significantly affect cultural or community values and beliefs (positively or negatively)?
6. Community Values, Identity and Cohesion	– Would the development impact on an area/place/site/item of value or significance to the community? – Will the development promote integration with adjacent communities (eg. through design, facilities etc). – Would the development affect the capacity for people to participate in community affairs or other social interactions?
7. Health and Wellbeing	– Will the development affect local health and wellbeing (either positively or negatively)? – Will the development contribute to the location's walkability (in terms of connectivity, density and land use mix)?
8. Crime and Public Safety	– Will the development and associated operations provide opportunities for criminal or anti-social behaviour? – Will the development significantly impact on perceived or actual public safety?
9. Economic Considerations	– Will the development have an impact on local businesses (positively or negatively)?
10. Employment and Local Benefits	– How will the community benefit from this project? – What benefits can be offered to offset any adverse effect of the development on increasing the permanent population of the City of Karratha. – Will the development provide diverse local employment opportunities?

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