

## The Population of Australia

Australia has the smallest population per hectare of any inhabited continent in the world. At 30 September 2008, Australia's estimated resident population reached 21,542,000 persons, an increase of 1.8 per cent on the previous year. According to the ABS, this is the highest rate of growth since the 1950s and 60s when high birth rates and post-war migration produced rates of above 2 per cent. At the time of the last census in 2006, the Indigenous population (people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) was 517,000 persons, constituting approximately 2.5 per cent of the Australian population.

Australia's population growth in 2007-08 was made up of 39 per cent natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) and 61 per cent net overseas migration (the excess of permanent and long term arrivals over permanent and long term departures). In 2007-08, natural increase contributed 153,400 persons (a 8.5 per cent increase on the previous year), while net overseas migration contributed 235,900 persons. The net overseas migration rate has fluctuated markedly over the past two decades, due to the Government's changing immigration targets, the movement of New Zealand citizens to and from Australia, the movement of long-term visitors, and prevailing economic conditions in Australia and overseas. An illustration of this variability is that in 1988-89, net overseas migration was 56 per cent

(157,400 people). In 1992-93, it was just 17 per cent (30,000 people) and in 2003-04 it was 49 per cent of the total population growth.

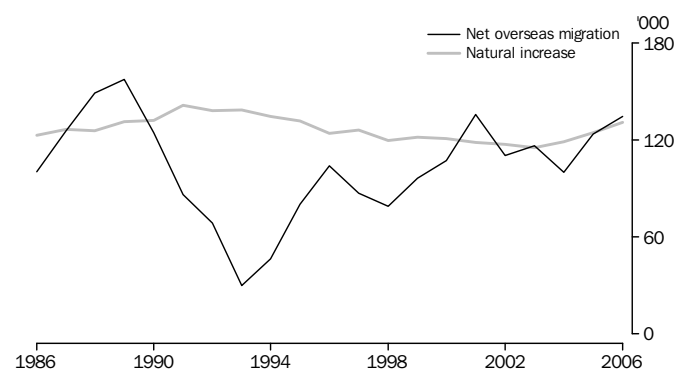
### Projections of population growth

The current projected growth rate of Australia's population is one person every 1 minute and 30 seconds. It is made up of:

- one birth every 1 minute and 50 seconds,
- one death every 3 minutes and 48 seconds,
- a net gain of one international migrant every 2 minutes and 36 seconds.

Long-term projections indicate that Australia's population will reach between 26-32 million by the middle of this century; the United Nations Population Division has predicted that Australia will have a population of 29 million in 2050 (based on what are called "medium" levels of fertility).<sup>1</sup> Currently, Australia's population growth rate is roughly the same as the world's population growth rate. ABS projections indicate that if the net overseas migration rate was 180,000 persons annually and fertility and life expectancy rates were at current levels, the population of Australia at 2056 would be 35.5 million. If net overseas migration was 140,000 persons annually and the fertility rate was at a "low" level (with life expectancy being at a current level), the population would be 30.9 million, whereas if net overseas migration was 220,000 persons annually, and fertility and life expectancy were both at "high" levels, the population would be 42.5 million by 2056.<sup>2</sup>

### Components of Population Growth



### The ageing population

Australia's ageing population poses many challenges. Since the 1970s, the average age of the population has increased in Australia and most other developed countries due to improved quality of life, declining fertility rates,

increased life expectancy and shifts in migration rates. Life expectancy at birth has increased from 55.2 years in 1901-10 to 79 years in 2005-07 for men, and from 58.8 years to 83.7 years over the same period for women. The median age of the total population has increased from 31.3 years in 1987 to 36.8 years in 2007 (up 0.2 years from 36.6 in 2006). By 2056, the median age of the total population is projected to be between 41.9 and 45.2 years. In 2007, people aged 65 years or older accounted for approximately 13 per cent of the total Australian population. By 2056, the proportion of people aged 65 years or older is projected to be between 23 and 25 per cent of the population. The situation of Indigenous Australians is strikingly different. In the period 1996-2001, life expectancy for Indigenous men was 59.4 years and for Indigenous women 64.8 years.

By international standards, Australia's population is 'younger' than Japan, Italy and Germany, but 'older' than countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Niger. According to the United Nations Population Division, in 2009 the total population aged 60 years and over was 30 per cent in Japan, 26 per cent in Italy, 26 per cent in Germany and 19 per cent in Australia. This may be compared with the total population aged 60 years and over in the Democratic Republic of Congo (4 per cent); Uganda (4 per cent), and Niger (3 per cent). Similarly, in 2009, the median age of the population in Africa was 19.2, whereas in Europe it was 39.2, in North America 36.4, and in Australia 37.5.

The Commonwealth Government's Intergenerational Report 2007 states that Australia's ageing population poses a serious long term challenge because of the increased demand expected for health services and a smaller working population able to provide the tax base to supply them. The report states that while there are currently 5 people of working age to support every person aged 65 or over, by 2047 there will only be 2.4 people of working age for every person aged 65 or over. There are, however, differing viewpoints. Some population experts argue that an ageing population is not a major problem for Australia and that the perceived 'crisis' is largely mythical. They suggest that potential labour shortages can be alleviated by encouraging older people to stay in the workforce for longer, by making full use of the currently underutilised skills of migrants and by employing the millions of Australians who are currently unemployed or underemployed. It is also claimed that

older people place less strain on the environment, cause less crime and social problems and substantially contribute to the community through volunteer work and other caring activities.

## The 'brain drain'

There are large numbers of Australians who live offshore permanently, many of whom are well-educated, skilled and highly employable. This has led some to argue that Australia is the victim of a 'brain drain'. The term 'brain drain' was first coined to describe the outflow of scientists and technologists to the United States and Canada during the 1950s. Whether a 'brain drain' actually exists in Australia is a matter of debate. Thomas Barlow, for example, argues that in some select areas (such as mathematics) Australia has experienced an 'exodus of talent', but across the entire spectrum "the total pool of skilled workers in the country (and certainly the total number of its scientists and researchers) actually seems to be growing strongly". In addition, recent research suggests that Australia loses less of its skilled workers than other countries and that we are net beneficiaries of brain drain from other countries.

## The population debate

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Australian leaders have regularly advocated population growth through increased fertility and immigration intake. Supporters of population growth argue that Australia has 'empty land' from which to absorb the world's excess population, including the housing of refugees and asylum seekers. They argue that population growth enhances social and cultural life in Australia, that a steady flow of skilled migrants is essential for the health of the economy, and that population growth is needed to support an ageing population. The size and nature of our population, it is said, will influence the size of our economy, the distribution of our resources, our capacity to generate new ideas, and the dynamism of our culture.

Despite strong support from business and government for this argument, there is consistent evidence that population growth and higher migrant intakes are much less popular with the general public. Surveys by Irving Saulwick and Associates suggest that support for population growth has declined over the past 25 years (see table 1 overleaf).

**Table 1: Australian attitudes to population growth (1977 and 2001)**

Attitudes to population growth	1977 (%)	2001 (%)
Prefer stability (or in 2001, reduction)	50	64
Prefer growth	48	36
Total	100	100
Total N	2000	1000

Source: Katharine Betts, "Keeping quiet about population growth" <http://www.science.org.au/events/fenner/betts.htm>

Public opposition alone is not a reason to reject increased immigration. There are more specific objections. Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) argues that there is little, if any, correlation between increased population growth and per capita Gross National Product, noting that in 2004, 14 of the 16 wealthiest nations had lower population growth rates than Australia. SPA suggests that population growth can have an adverse impact on the economy through increased costs of infrastructure as well as increased land and house prices. Increases in immigration intake, it is also said, contribute to a 'brain drain' of skilled workers from developing countries. Finally and most significantly, opponents of population growth point to the environmental impacts of population increases including increased consumption, further stress on limited water resources, habitat and biodiversity loss, pollution and waste generation.

The 1994 report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': One Nation Two Ecologies*, criticised the *ad hoc* population approach adopted by successive Australian governments. The report urged the Australian Government to develop an integrated population policy.

There is a strong case for an integrated population policy. It would need to have an environmental, social and economic dimension and to take into account net overseas immigration and natural increase. The environmental dimension needs to come first because of its far-reaching potential impacts. It should include a commitment to the resolution of current environmental problems in Australia and measures to ensure that any population increase will not aggravate them. The social dimension should take into account the well-being of Australian workers, family reunion, and the protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other marginalised communi-

ties in Australia. The economic dimension should take into account the genuine needs of industry, commerce and research communities, tourism, foreign aid, internal migration and education. Wherever possible, investment should be in skill development within Australia rather than in the importation of skills.

## Useful Sources

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2008). "Australian Demographic Statistics, Sep. 2008", <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0/>

This ABS report contains useful Australian population information and statistics for the year ending December 2008 (released March 2009). See also ABS 2008 Year Book, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1301.0>

Doughney, J., & King, J.E. (2006). "Crisis? What crisis? Myth and reality in the debate on an ageing Australia", *People and Place*, vol.14(1), pp65-74.

The authors of this article conclude that the ageing 'crisis' is largely mythical, rejecting the claim that Australia's ageing population poses serious challenges to long-term fiscal policy.

Sustainable Population Australia, <http://www.population.org.au/>

Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) raises public awareness of degradation caused by population growth both globally and in Australia. The SPA website has a range of information on population issues.

See also Fact Sheets on [Immigration](#) and [Multiculturalism](#)

## Endnotes

1. For more information on the assumptions behind these projections see: United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: the 2008 Revision, available at: <http://www.un.org/esa/population/>

2. For more information on the assumptions behind these projections see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Demographic Statistics, September Quarter 2008, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/5A9C0859C5F50C30CA25718C0015182F?OpenDocument>

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