At 31 March 2012, Australia's estimated resident population was 22,596,500 persons. This figure represents an increase of 1.5 per cent (or 331,200 persons) on the previous year. The current rate of growth is higher than that recorded for the year ending March 2011 (1.1 per cent) but still lower than the high rates that have been seen in recent years. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia's rate of population growth reached 2.2 per cent in December 2008. Prior to this, rates of above 2 per cent had not been seen in Australia since the 1950s and 60s, when large increases in the size of Australia's population were fuelled by post-war immigration and the so-called 'baby-boom'.

**Annual Population Growth Rate(a)**, Australia

![Graph showing annual population growth rate](image)

Source: ABS, 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Mar 2012
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3101.0Main%20Features3Mar%202012/opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3101.0&issue=Mar%202012&num=&view=

Australia’s population growth is made up of two elements: natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) and net overseas migration (the excess of permanent and long term arrivals over permanent and long term departures). In 2011-12, natural increase contributed 43 per cent or 149,600 persons (an increase of 0.3 per cent on the previous year), while net overseas migration contributed 57 per cent or 197,200 persons (an increase of 18.2 per cent on the previous year). The net overseas migration rate has fluctuated markedly over the past two decades, much more so than the rate of natural increase. The net overseas migration rate is affected by such factors as the changing immigration targets as set by the Government; the movement of New Zealand citizens into and out of Australia; the movement of long-term visitors; and prevailing economic conditions in Australia and overseas. As an example of these variations, in 1988-89, net overseas migration represented 56 per cent (157,400 people) of the total population growth, whereas in 1992-93 it represented just 17 per cent (30,000 people).

**Components of Annual Population Growth(a)**, Australia

![Diagram showing components of annual population growth](image)

Source: ABS 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Mar 2012
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3101.0Main%20Features3Mar%202012/opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3101.0&issue=Mar%202012&num=&view=

**Projections of population growth**

The current projected growth rate of Australia’s population is one person every 1 minute and 31 seconds; this assumes that there will be:

- one birth every 1 minute and 47 seconds,
- one death every 3 minutes and 36 seconds,
- a net gain of one international migrant every 2 minutes and 42 seconds.
Long-term projections indicate that Australia’s population could reach between 31 and 43 million people by the middle of this century, depending on net overseas migration as well as on levels of fertility and life expectancy. For instance, assuming current trends in net overseas migration, fertility and life expectancy, ABS projections suggest that the population of Australia at 2056 would be 35.5 million.

The ageing population

Australia’s ageing population poses many challenges; political, social and economic. Since the 1970s, the average age of the population has increased in Australia, and most other developed countries, due to declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy. As ABS figures show, between 2001 and 2011, the median age of Australia’s total population increased from 35.7 to 37.3 years, and the proportion of people aged 65 years or over rose from 13 per cent to 14 per cent. By 2056, the proportion of people aged 65 years or older is projected to be between 23-25 per cent, and the median age is projected to rise to between 41.9 and 45.2 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. In 2009, the world’s most developed countries had a median age of 40, while the less and least developed regions had ages of 26 and 20 respectively. Nevertheless, while the most developed countries currently have the oldest populations, the United Nations Population Division stresses that ageing is a global trend, the twin factors of declining fertility and increasing life expectancy affecting almost all countries of the world, in a manner that has never before been seen in human history. While developed countries currently have the oldest populations, and are continuing to age, developing countries are also ageing, indeed, at a faster rate, and are tipped to reach same level of ageing by 2050 as that currently found in the developed world. Globally, the median age is currently 28 years, and this is projected to rise to 38 years by 2050. Between 1950 and 2000, the number of people aged 60 years or over tripled to 600 million, and by 2050 it is expected that there will be 2 billion people in this age group. Further, within this category, the fastest growing group is made up of those aged 80 or over; their number is expected to rise from the current rate of one seventh of people aged 60 or over, to one fifth by 2050.

The Commonwealth Government’s Intergenerational Report 2010 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 2050 there will only be 2.7 people of working age for every person aged 65 or over. However, 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. Further, critics have argued that many of the assumed costs and problems associated with an ageing population are ameliorated by the fact that older people place less strain on the environment, cause less crime and fewer 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’, a term which was first coined to describe the outflow of scientists and technologists to the United States and Canada during the 1950s. Whether a ‘brain drain’ currently exists in Australia is a matter of debate. For example, Thomas Barlow, a research strategist and former advisor to the Australian Government, has argued that there is a problem only with respect to some select areas (mathematics, for instance), but that the overall picture is one of an increasing level of skills and talent in the country. In addition, recent research suggests that Australia loses fewer of its skilled workers than other countries and that we are net beneficiaries of the losses from other countries.
**The population debate**

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Australian leaders have regularly advocated population growth through either increased fertility or immigration intake, or both. Current supporters of population growth argue that it is essential for the health of the economy, that it is needed to support an ageing population, and that it enhances social and cultural life in Australia. The size and composition of our population, it is said, will influence the size of our economy, our capacity to generate new ideas, and the dynamism of our culture.

Against this view, opponents of population growth, such as Sustainable Population Australia (SPA), have argued that there is little, if any, correlation between increased population growth and per capita Gross National Product. For instance, in 2004, 14 of the 16 wealthiest nations had lower population growth rates than Australia. Further, they have suggested that population growth can have an adverse impact on the economy through the increased costs of infrastructure as well as increased land and house prices. Increases in immigration intake, it is said, also 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 further stress on limited water resources; habitat and biodiversity loss; pollution; and waste generation.

Until recently there was strong support for population growth from both business and government, and little public debate on the issue. In the last decade or so, beginning with the Howard Coalition Government, immigration, particularly of skilled migrants, was increased to record levels. Public debate on population, however, was focused mainly on asylum seekers and refugees, who make up only a very tiny proportion of the overall immigration intake. This situation changed somewhat in the lead up to the 2010 election, as widening public concerns about problems in infrastructure, housing affordability, and resources like water were linked to the question of population growth (and, in particular, to increasing immigration). During the election campaign both parties made pledges regarding the immigration intake and population policy and in 2010-11 the rate of immigration was consequently slowed. Since that time, however, the rate of immigration has begun to rise again and it is unclear whether and for how long this trend will continue.

**An integrated population policy**

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. Such a policy needs 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 communities 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.

The current Gillard Government has promised that, for the first time, the question of population will be addressed in a direct and integrated way, with reference to Australia’s infrastructure, water, environmental, housing and health needs. The extent to which this occurs will be a matter of great interest.

**Useful Sources**


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 (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

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**Endnotes**


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