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Article: Population distribution

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Population distribution

Between 1996 and 2006, the population in Australia's big cities grew faster (1.6% per year) than the national average (1.2%), while the number of people living in Australia's remote areas fell.

Australia's population is spread across a diverse range of places, from large metropolitan cities to isolated, outback locations. The distribution of the population is an important issue as it influences policies around service provision, economic performance and the socio-economic wellbeing of communities. Between 1996 and 2006, Australia's population grew by 2.4 million people. As the population grows, its distribution and composition changes.

Population distribution

In 2006, Australia's population reached 20.7 million people. More than two-thirds of people lived in Major Cities (68%) and the remainder (32%) were in Regional and Remote areas. The proportion of the population living in each of the Remoteness Areas (broad geographical areas sharing common characteristics of remoteness – see box on this page) varied considerably across the states and territories. For most of the large states, including New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, people were concentrated in the Major Cities. Queensland had a relatively high proportion of its population in the Inner and Outer Regional areas (37%) compared with the other large states. All of the people living in the Northern Territory were located in either Outer Regional areas (including Darwin) (55%), Remote areas (22%) or Very Remote areas (23%).

Data sources and definitions

The analysis in this article is based on the preliminary estimated resident population (ERP) data for 30 June 2006, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

Remoteness Area (RA) is a structure of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC). It classifies areas sharing common characteristics of remoteness into six broad geographical regions (Remoteness Areas). The remoteness of a point is measured by its physical distance by road to the nearest urban centre. As remoteness is measured nationally, not all Remoteness Areas are represented in each state or territory. The six Remoteness Areas are: Major Cities of Australia; Inner Regional Australia; Outer Regional Australia; Remote Australia; Very Remote Australia; and Migratory. The Remoteness Area names used in this article are abbreviated versions of these names with 'Australia' omitted. For further information about Remoteness Areas see Chapter 8 of *Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), July 2007* (ABS cat. no. 1216.0).

Population growth

Between 1996 and 2006, Australia's population grew by 2.4 million people, an average annual growth rate of 1.2%. During this decade, the population in Major Cities grew at a faster rate than the national average with an annual average growth rate of 1.6%, followed by Inner Regional areas (0.8%). In contrast, the population in Outer Regional areas remained stable and the population

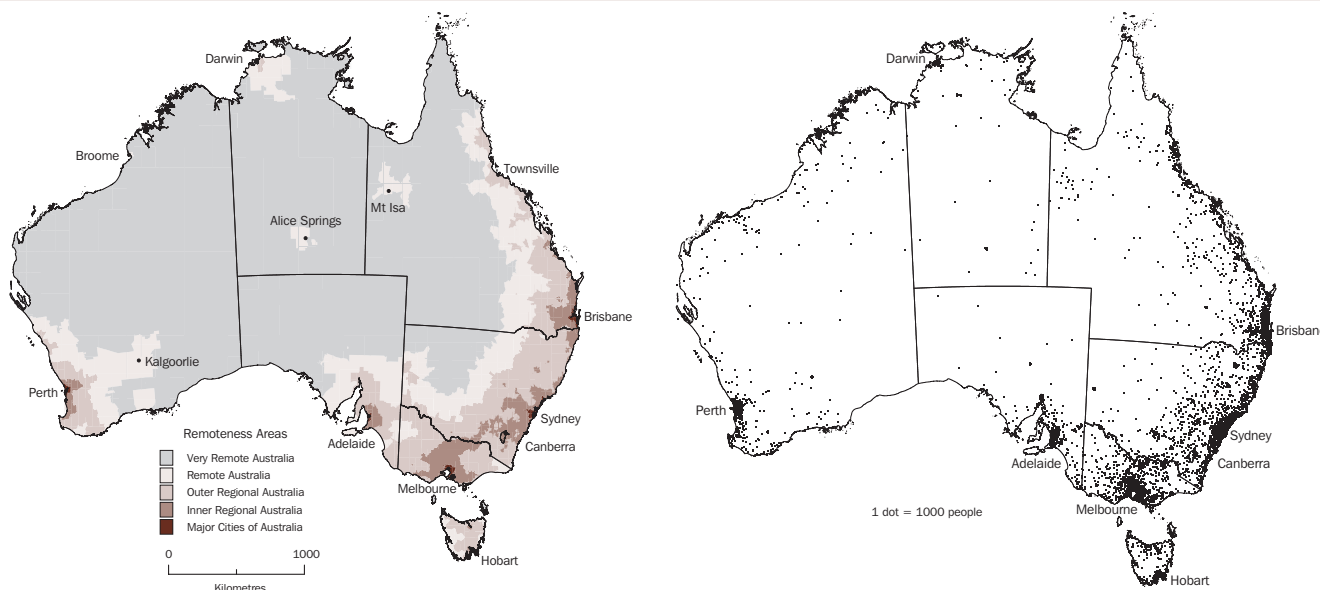
Distribution of the population across Remoteness Areas — 30 June 2006

State or territory	Major Cities %	Inner Regional %	Outer Regional %	Remote %	Very Remote %	Total '000
New South Wales	72.6	20.3	6.5	0.5	0.1	6 817.2
Victoria	74.8	20.2	4.9	0.1	..	5 128.3
Queensland	59.6	21.9	15.2	2.1	1.2	4 091.5
South Australia	72.7	12.0	11.5	2.9	0.9	1 568.2
Western Australia	71.5	12.5	9.3	4.5	2.3	2 059.0
Tasmania(a)	..	64.7	33.2	1.5	0.5	489.9
Northern Territory(b)	..	..	54.8	21.7	23.5	210.7
Australian Capital Territory	99.8	0.2	..	..	..	334.2
Australia(c)	68.4	19.7	9.5	1.5	0.8	20 701.5

(a) Hobart is classified as Inner Regional.
 (b) Darwin is classified as Outer Regional.
 (c) Includes Other Territories.

Source: ABS preliminary Estimated Resident Population, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

Remoteness Areas and population distribution — 30 June 2006



Source: ABS preliminary Estimated Resident Population, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

declined in Remote (–0.4%) and Very Remote (–0.3%) areas during the decade to 2006. The population declines in these areas were particularly evident in areas that have been affected by drought. For example, the New South Wales local government areas of Moree Plains and Walgett declined by 1,700 (–2.1%) and 1,100 people (–2.9%) respectively between 2001 and 2006. Moree Plains recorded the largest population decline of any local government area in inland New South Wales.¹

The largest variation in average annual growth between 1996–2001 and 2001–2006 was in Outer Regional areas with an average annual growth rate of –0.7% for 1996–2001 and 0.8% for 2001–2006. The growth of Major

Cities slowed in the second half of the decade, while the growth rate of all other Remoteness Areas increased.

Demographic characteristics

In 2006, there were 99 males for every 100 females in Australia. Women outnumbered men in Major Cities and Inner Regional areas, but the reverse was true in more remote areas. The highest ratio of males to females occurred in Very Remote areas, where there were 113 males for every 100 females. This is likely to be due to the types of industries common in Very Remote areas, such as agriculture and mining, which tend to be dominated by men.

In 2006, the median age of the Australian population was 37 years. In Inner Regional areas the median age was highest at 39 years, followed by Outer Regional areas at 38 years and Major Cities at 36 years.

In 2006, Remote and Very Remote areas had the highest percentage of children (aged 0–14 years) as a proportion of the population. This is likely to be partly due to the younger age profile of Indigenous Australians (who make up nearly half the population in very remote areas) and the relatively high fertility rates of women in remote areas. Very Remote areas also had the highest proportion of young people (aged 20–34 years), followed by Major Cities. The industry structure of very remote areas may affect the age structure, with some mining towns having relatively young populations

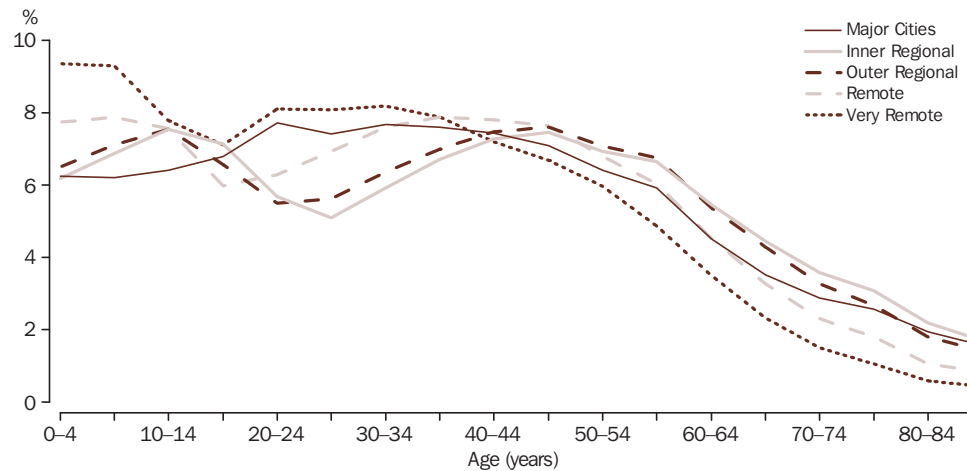
Population change — 1996–2001 and 2001–2006

	Population change 1996–2006	Average annual growth rate		
		1996(a)–2001	2001–2006	1996–2006
Remoteness Areas	'000	%	%	%
Major Cities	2 069.2	1.8	1.4	1.6
Inner Regional	330.2	0.3	1.4	0.8
Outer Regional	9.3	–0.7	0.8	0.0
Remote	–12.2	–0.7	0.0	–0.4
Very Remote	–5.7	–0.5	–0.2	–0.3
Australia	2 390.8	1.2	1.3	1.2

(a) 1996 Remoteness Areas derived at Statistical Local Area level.

Source: ABS 1996, 2001 and preliminary 2006 Estimated Resident Population.

Age structure of Remoteness Areas, Australia — 2006



Source: ABS preliminary Estimated Resident Population, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

(see *Australian Social Trends 2008*, Towns of the mineral boom, pp. 13–18), while Major Cities attract and retain young people by offering greater opportunities for higher education, employment and social interaction.

Regional areas had the highest proportions of people aged 50–79 years, partially including the baby boomer generation (aged 41 to 60 years in 2006). The lower cost of housing in inner and outer regional areas compared with city areas, in combination with the larger number of services for the aged compared with remote areas, may have contributed to this pattern.² There is also a counter-flow of young people moving from regional areas to Major Cities for employment and education.³ The median age of regional areas is likely to increase in the future with baby boomers expected to live longer⁴ and regional areas being able to provide specific services for older people, such as aged care and specialist health care.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population

At 30 June 2006, the preliminary estimated resident population of Indigenous Australians was 517,200 people, comprising 2.5% of the total population.⁵ The distribution of the Indigenous population was notably different from the population as a whole. In 2006, just under a third of Indigenous people lived in Major Cities (32%), which was much less than the proportion living in Major Cities for Australia as a whole (68%). A further 43% of Indigenous people lived in Inner or Outer Regional areas, 10% lived in Remote areas and 16% lived in Very Remote areas. As a result, Indigenous people comprised 48% of the total population in Very Remote areas, and 16% of the total population in Remote areas.

After the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and South Australia had the highest proportion of Indigenous people living in Major Cities (50% and 49% respectively), followed by New South Wales (43%). In contrast, 79% of Indigenous people from the Northern Territory lived in Remote and Very Remote areas combined. Similarly, in Western Australia a relatively high proportion of Indigenous people lived in Remote and Very Remote areas (42% combined).

Most Indigenous people lived in New South Wales (29%), Queensland (28%), Western Australia (15%) and the Northern Territory (13%).

Indigenous Australians comprise only a small percentage of the total population in the states and the Australian Capital Territory. In the Northern Territory, in contrast, almost one in three people are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Median age and sex ratio across Remoteness Areas — 2006

Remoteness Areas	Median age			Sex ratio(a)
	Males years	Females years	Persons years	
Major Cities	35.1	36.7	35.9	97.6
Inner Regional	38.3	39.9	39.1	98.9
Outer Regional	38.1	38.6	38.3	104.4
Remote	35.5	34.4	35.0	111.4
Very Remote	31.0	29.1	30.1	113.0
Australia	35.9	37.4	36.6	98.8

(a) Males per 100 females.

Source: ABS preliminary Estimated Resident Population, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population(a) — 30 June 2006

Proportion by Remoteness Area

State or territory	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote	Very Remote	Total	Indigenous population	Proportion of total Indigenous population	Proportion of state/territory population
	%	%	%	%	%	%	'000	%	%
New South Wales	43.3	33.3	18.3	4.3	0.8	100.0	148.2	28.7	2.2
Victoria	49.6	34.8	15.4	0.1	—	100.0	30.8	6.0	0.6
Queensland	28.1	20.6	29.1	8.6	13.7	100.0	146.4	28.3	3.6
South Australia	48.8	9.2	23.3	4.2	14.4	100.0	26.0	5.0	1.7
Western Australia	34.6	8.0	15.0	17.4	25.0	100.0	77.9	15.1	3.8
Tasmania(b)	—	53.9	42.5	2.4	1.2	100.0	16.9	3.3	3.4
Northern Territory(b)	—	—	20.7	23.3	56.0	100.0	66.6	12.9	31.6
Australian Capital Territory	99.9	0.1	—	—	—	100.0	4.0	0.8	1.2
Australia(c)	31.8	20.9	21.9	9.6	15.8	100.0	517.2	100.0	2.5

(a) Preliminary estimated resident population data. Estimates are subject to revision once 2006 Census-based population estimates have been finalised.

(b) Hobart is classified as Inner Regional. Darwin is classified as Outer Regional.

(c) Includes Other Territories, so components may not add to total.

Source: ABS Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 (cat. no. 4713.0).

Looking ahead

Australia's population is projected to increase to between 24.9 million and 33.4 million people in 2051 (depending on the prevailing fertility and migration). The ageing of Australia's population, already evident in the current age structure, will also continue. The median age of Australia's population, 36.6 years at June 2006, is projected to increase to between 44.6 years and 48.2 years in 2051. All capital cities are projected to experience higher growth (in percentage terms) than the respective balance of each state and territory, resulting in further concentration of Australia's population within the capital cities.⁶

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007, *Regional Population Growth, Australia, 1996 to 2006*, cat. no. 3218.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2 Sparrow, L 2006, 'Migration and Return Migration in the Older Population of the Southern Fleurieu Peninsula – an overview', *Ageing-in-place: Implications for local government*, Australian Local Government Association, Occasional Paper 1, July 2006, pp. 6–10.
- 3 Ward, G and Barker, R 1997, 'Population Change Between 1986 and 1996 in Australia: Population numbers, components of change and age profiles', *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 1–11.
- 4 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003, *Western Australia's Baby Boomers*, cat. no. 4149.5, ABS, Canberra.
- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, cat. no. 4713.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Population Projections, Australia, 2004 to 2101*, cat. no. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra. This publication presents three main series of projections (series A, B and C), based on different assumptions. The projections for median age are based on series A and C and projections for capital cities are based on series B.

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