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Changing Australia's settlement geography: The repopulation of regional cities and towns

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Introduction

Australia's population has grown by 5 million over the past two decades. This population growth has been described as unexpected, unprecedented, and unplanned. Driving such characterisations are the frequently reported occurrences of unmet demand for infrastructure and services across Australia's capital and regional cities resulting from population growth. From increasing travel times for commuters and escalating housing costs to overcrowded classrooms and extended waiting times for emergency medical services, reports that characterise the negative impacts of population growth are all too common. While these set out the negative impacts for city-dwellers and their lifestyles, it is the promise of the city lifestyle and employment opportunities that continues to attract people to move to cities.

With Australia's population forecast to grow by another 10 million people over the next two decades, this chapter considers how this population growth can be accommodated. It is not a fait accompli that major cities will need to be spatially expanded to accommodate population growth. Reflecting on recent settlement patterns that show that capital cities have

been experiencing net internal population decline for years (ABS 2021c), it is argued that it is time to question the adage that everyone wants to live in the city. While there is no doubt that rural to urban migration has been a dominant trend in Australia for many decades, times have changed and the factors that once drove rural to urban migration have also shifted. The liveability and employment opportunities in smaller regional cities and towns have diversified and expanded, diminishing the relative 'pull factors' of capital and large cities.

This chapter examines these issues and considers how Australia's public health response to Covid-19 is shaping population growth and the potential implications for Australia's settlement geography. In particular, the chapter considers potential implications of the normalisation of working from home and how changing perceptions of the relative safety of highly populous and high-density environments could have longer-term impacts for Australia's population geography.

Australia's population growth

The 'growing pains' being experienced in Australia's major cities, such as extended commuting times and shortages of affordable housing, have led to claims that population growth has been unmanaged or poorly managed. In reality, Australia's population growth is highly managed. To better understand this, it is useful to consider the component parts of population growth: international migration and natural change (births and deaths).

International migration

With approximately 66 per cent of Australia's population growth the result of international migration, at the macro-scale, Australia's population growth has long been regulated (ABS 2018). Australia's migration program regulates the number of migrants who move here. Through visa categories, the program also regulates the initial destination for some migrants (Tan et al. 2019; Department of Home Affairs 2021). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Australia's population was forecast to grow by another 10 million people over the decade from 2019, with population growth projected to be 0.9–1.4 per cent per annum (ABS 2018). International migration was projected to make up between 56 per cent and 66 per cent of this growth, with population growth from international migration alone projected to be 0.7–1.1 per cent per annum (ABS 2018).

Australia's public health response to Covid-19 resulted in the national border being closed for some time to most travellers and international migrants. As a result, population forecasts are being recalculated to accommodate this much reduced migration flow. The population forecasts underpinning the 2021–22 federal budget drew on an assumption that a small level of international travel to Australia, particularly for international students, would begin in late 2021. It was also assumed that broader international travel and permanent migration to Australia would resume from mid-2022. Based on these assumptions, net overseas migration was forecast to be 21,600 for 2021–22, increasing to 95,900 during 2022–23, and further increasing to 201,100 during 2023–24 (Love and Spinks 2021).

Natural change: Births and deaths

While a lot of attention is given to the implications of international migration on Australia's population growth, natural change—from births and deaths—is also an important factor. First, Australia's fertility rate is below replacement level, which is not a new trend: it has been the case since 1976 (with the replacement rate considered to be 2.1 births per woman) (ABS 2021a). Between 2009 and 2019, the fertility rate decreased from 1.97 to 1.66 (ABS 2021a). Second, Australia's standardised death rate is approximately 5.3 deaths per 1,000 standard population (ABS 2021b). The death rate has steadily declined from the 1970s and the gap between the death rates for males and females has also been reduced. In 1979, the death rate for males was 13.4 and for females it was eight. By 2019, it had reduced to 6.3 for males and 4.4 for females (ABS 2021b).

So, why are births and deaths interesting? While international migration accounted for approximately 65 per cent of Australia's population growth (before Covid-19), natural increase makes up the rest. Natural increase occurs when there are more births than deaths over a period. In Australia, as the fertility rate and the mortality rate have decreased (and the population has aged as a result), the contribution of natural increase to population growth has lessened; however, it remains an important factor. Importantly, there is geographic unevenness in birth and death rates across Australia, which has implications for localised variations in population growth and resulting service demand—an issue addressed further below.

The ABS's population projections produce three models to account for low, medium, and high-growth scenarios. Across these, there is relatively little variability in the mortality and fertility rates, which reflects the 'normal

state' in which trends in mortality and fertility are slow-moving. Essentially, unless there is a significant or catastrophic event, it is safe to assume Australia will continue to see below replacement fertility rates and an ageing of the population.

The question then becomes: is Covid-19 a significant or catastrophic event that will result in changes to the fertility or mortality rates? At the time of writing, Australia was managing the pandemic in such a way that there had been little impact on the overall fertility and mortality rates. Provisional mortality statistics for the period from January 2020 until April 2021 indicate excess mortality, with the number of deaths 5.6 per cent higher than expected (ABS 2022). Above average deaths were recorded between May 2020 and September 2020 and correlate with Covid-19 infections (ABS 2022). However, this variation is not sufficient to result in a change in life expectancy or the longer-term standardised death rate.

Some media reports indicated there could be a 'Covid baby boom' (for example, Boseley 2021; Street et al. 2021). Moving beyond the headlines, however, there is no robust evidence for this. Reports of baby booms point to increasing numbers of babies being born in some areas, but such trends can readily be explained by the overall population growth and demographic shift occurring in these places. This noted, the Australian Centre for Population (2020) projected a minor decline in the nation's birthrate because of the decline in international migration and suggested that some families would defer their decision to have children due to Covid-19.

Reforecasting Australia's population growth

The impact of Australia's public health response to Covid-19 had immediate impacts on the size and growth trajectory of the Australian population, which was approximately 4 per cent smaller than it was projected to be by mid-2021 (Centre for Population 2020). The sharp decline in international immigration has necessitated the revision of population forecasts, with Australia's population growth expected to have slowed in 2020 by the equivalent of three years. However, at the time of writing, reforecasts assumed that international migration would recover by mid to late 2022, and there would be little change in mortality rates because of Covid-19. With many unknowns remaining about the impact of the virus on human health and mortality, and uncertainties about the resumption and continuity of international travel and migration, it is plausible that population forecasts will need to be further revised.

From the rural drift to the city exodus

The past few decades have seen Australia's capital cities and surrounding metropolitan regions grow in terms of population, spatial coverage, and arguably, socioeconomic and cultural complexity. Indeed, since 1960, the share of Australians living in urban areas has increased from 82 per cent to 90 per cent, and more than two-thirds of the population is based in a capital city (Infrastructure Australia 2018). Furthermore, approximately 65 per cent of Australia's population lives in a city with more than 1 million people and another 10 per cent lives in a medium-sized city of between 100,000 and 1 million (PM&C 2019).

The rural to urban transition of Australia's population has been extensively explored in academic scholarship, with research highlighting the impacts of both the structural changes to employment in primary industries and the contraction of government-provided services in small and medium-sized settlements as drivers of outmigration from rural and remote areas (Davies and Tonts 2010; Argent et al. 2014; Smailes et al. 2014; Argent and Tonts 2015; Plummer et al. 2018). In contrast, it has been recognised that the concentration of government services and the diversification of employment and lifestyle opportunities in large urban areas and cities have underpinned the growth of those places.

But is Australia's rural drift now ending; are we seeing a population turnaround? While this question is not new, and counter-urbanisation trends have been reported for more than two decades (Tonts and Greive 2002; Gurran 2008; Argent et al. 2013), it has attracted considerable media attention since the Covid-19 pandemic (see, for example, Terzon 2021). Indeed, it has been suggested that the pandemic will result in an exodus from cities (Davies 2021b). Underpinning this suggestion are several issues and trends related to housing, working arrangements, and international migration patterns that have been bundled together. To work out what changes in population distribution are occurring and could occur in the near term, it is critical to accurately establish what the internal migration trends were before Covid-19.

Until the pandemic, Australia had an average per annum net population growth of 1.6 per cent over the previous decade, however, as noted above, this growth was spatially unevenly distributed (Centre for Population 2020). In a nutshell, the largest cities had the highest growth rates and very small

settlements typically had the lowest. It is this unevenness in distribution and the impacts on services, infrastructure, employment, and housing that have generated considerable concern for both large and small settlements.

With Australia's largest capital cities experiencing significant population growth rates in recent years, at a macro-level, it could seem that these large cities are experiencing similar development patterns. However, in examining the component parts of population growth for these large cities, there is considerable difference in the drivers of growth. Table 8.1 shows net interstate and net intrastate migration for the three largest capital cities for the period 2015 to 2019. The table also shows the net international migration to the respective states for these capital cities (further spatial breakdown is not available) for 2015 to 2019.

Greater Sydney has been losing population to other parts of New South Wales and other states since at least 2001 (ABS 2020b). Greater Melbourne has been losing population to other parts of Victoria for approximately two decades but gaining from other states since 2008. In contrast, Greater Brisbane has been gaining population through both intrastate and interstate migration. While Greater Brisbane has had net positive interstate migration for more than two decades, it has only had net positive intrastate migration since 2015.

Population movement—or churn—between or within states is not unusual. Australia has, in broad terms, a particularly mobile population (Bernard et al. 2017). About 40 per cent of the population changes address at least once within a five-year period (PC 2014). However, since the 1990s, the level of internal migration within Australia has fallen, driven by a 25 per cent decline in long-distance moves between cities and regions between 1991 and 2016. For those moving between states, the decline was smaller, however, it was still significant, at 16 per cent. Importantly, there is variability in the type and frequency of movement across demographic groups (Smailes et al. 2014; Bernard et al. 2017; Borsellino 2020; Davies and Prout Quicke 2021). Indeed, a recent analysis of internal migration patterns in Australia confirmed that despite absolute and relative growth in the number of people aged 65 and over between 1981 and 2016, there had been no concurrent increase in mobility within this group. In fact, migration intensity fell from 9 per cent in 1976–81 to 7 per cent in 2011–16 (Borsellino 2020).

Table 8.1 Component parts of population growth for Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, 2015–2019

Year	Greater Sydney			Greater Melbourne			Greater Brisbane		
	Net intrastate migration	Net interstate migration	Net overseas migration	Net intrastate migration	Net interstate migration	Net overseas migration	Net intrastate migration	Net interstate migration	Net overseas migration
2015	–13,687	–5,856	72,840	–5,533	13,335	64,190	3,458	3,395	19,480
2016	–15,591	–8,410	96,200	–8,026	16,983	82,910	5,671	6,466	32,430
2017	–18,160	–13,439	94,930	–12,645	15,439	87,130	5,056	9,494	27,640
2018	–17,019	–15,345	92,890	–14,637	12,760	89,540	3,219	10,160	33,740
2019	–13,995	–14,473	79,280	–11,569	11,021	85,060	6,903	10,044	33,920
Total	**–78,452**	**–57,523**	**436,140**	**–52,410**	**69,538**	**408,830**	**24,307**	**39,559**	**147,210**

Sources: ABS (2019–20) for net overseas migration; and ABS (2020b) for intrastate and interstate migration.

Providing insight into how demographic characteristics can impact population distribution, Borsellino (2020) also found that those aged 65 and over typically moved from highly urban and remote areas to 'middle-density' regions. This finding reflects the findings of Davies and James (2011), who identified that older people who moved were likely to move away from remote rural areas, which typically have limited services to support individuals as they move into late old age. Davies and James (2011) also found that older people were more likely to select high amenity and well-serviced 'lifestyle' destinations for their retirement.

Importantly though, Borsellino's (2020) analysis reveals how internal migration patterns are not static and do change in response to social, economic, and environmental factors. Given the migration trends of the 1980s and 1990s, it has become a truism that retirees head to high-amenity 'retirement' destinations of the north coast of New South Wales and South-East Queensland. However, the data reveal that from the early 2000s these areas and the peripheries of capital cities have become less popular as destinations for those aged 65 and over. In contrast, regional cities adjacent to capital cities are emerging as the new retirement destinations (Borsellino 2020).

Covid-19 and the so-called city exodus

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Australia's capital cities have recorded their largest losses of population on record. Despite this, for the financial year 2019–20, the population of Australia's capital cities still grew by 1.4 per cent. Approximately 160,000 international migrants moved to Australia and into its capital cities and there was also a natural population increase of approximately 110,000 persons. However, during this initial period, capital cities experienced a net loss of 54,800 people to internal migration (Table 8.2). This sparked considerable public interest, leading to concerns about a 'city exodus' and a related housing shortage in regional areas.

Table 8.2 Quarterly net internal migration for Australian capital cities, March 2020 to March 2021

City	March 2020	June 2020	Sept. 2020	Dec. 2020	March 2021	Total, March 2020 – June 2021
Sydney	–8,087	–6,378	–7,782	–9,317	–8,169	**–39,733**
Melbourne	–2,163	–7,994	–7,445	–8,491	–8,273	**–34,366**
Brisbane	1,874	3,189	3,215	4,770	3,274	**16,322**
Adelaide	–446	–181	–334	–247	59	**–1,149**
Perth	–72	408	1,388	1,794	1,554	**5,072**
Hobart	–166	–42	–162	–92	–289	**–751**
Darwin	–562	–202	8	259	–139	**–636**
Canberra	–520	243	–135	699	138	**425**
Total	**–10,142**	**–10,957**	**–11,247**	**–10,625**	**–11,845**	**–54,816**

Source: ABS (2021c).

Drilling further into the initial migration data, there was considerable unevenness across capital cities. Brisbane experienced substantive growth during the Covid-19 period, with nearly 5,000 new residents in the December 2020 quarter alone. Greater Perth moved from a net loss to a net gain—the latter typically only experienced during periods of mining construction and expansion in Western Australia. Canberra and Darwin also enjoyed quarters of net population growth, with Adelaide moving into net growth in the March 2021 quarter. Overall, considering the net population decline of Australia's capital cities, the greatest contributors to the 'city exodus' were Sydney and Melbourne.

Since March 2020, Sydney lost between 8,000 and 9,000 residents (net) each quarter. For Sydney, the net loss experienced since the pandemic has been a little larger than in previous years, but not substantively, and it does not exceed quarterly population losses recorded in the 2000s. However, for Melbourne, the story is a little different. While the overall net loss is less than that for Sydney, the change experienced was more significant. In the March quarter, Melbourne had a net loss of just 2,163 residents; however, by the December 2020 quarter, this had increased to a loss of approximately 8,500 and a further 8,200 by the March 2021 quarter (ABS 2021c). While the cause of the unprecedented outmigration from Melbourne is not provided by the ABS data, the observed increase does align with the periods of extended lockdown that were experienced in that city.

The data for internal migration during the Covid-19 period are showing the emergence of some interesting trends—including that Australians continue to be highly mobile despite lockdowns and border closures. However, the data are not yet showing an exodus from our cities. Indeed, while Greater Melbourne lost population to intrastate and interstate localities, the remainder of Victoria also lost population to interstate migration—and the loss from regional Victoria was, proportionally, more severe than that for Melbourne (ABS 2021c). Therefore, in Victoria, people are not leaving Melbourne for the country; they are leaving Victoria all together.

The data for Queensland since March 2020 are also interesting. Non-metropolitan Queensland experienced a significant upswing in net interstate migration (ABS 2021c). While it is not possible to determine from the regional migration data who is moving where in the regional areas of each state, drawing on population data from the 2016 census, it is anticipated that much of this population growth was concentrated in the populous Gold and Sunshine coasts. Indeed, the fastest-growing areas outside capital cities are those that offer sophisticated urban settings.

Overall, the introduction of public health measures in response to Covid-19 has increased movement away from some capital cities, but not all. Furthermore, during the pandemic, Perth, in the state that was subject to the strictest border controls, was recording arrivals at a level not seen since the last mining boom. At the time of writing, the data on regional migration are not sufficiently reliable to comment on whether Covid-19 will cause a longer-term disruption to the established migration flows between cities and between cities and regions, but the change observed is sufficient to warrant increased policy attention to internal population mobility.

Post Covid-19 and rural repopulation

Across Australia for some decades now, the populations of regional cities and large towns have been growing, largely through internal population redistribution. Urban areas adjacent to capital cities have expanded, become more urbane, and emerged as major cities in their own right. Smaller towns, particularly those with high amenity values, have attracted population. Population growth has resulted in these places transforming to become major hubs, some with all the trappings, including unmet demand for infrastructure and services. As these places have grown and transformed, their appeal to different demographic groups has also shifted, in turn impacting on in and outmigration trends.

Past trends in population movements typically provide the basis for future projections. However, as populations change (for example, grow, decline, age, and increase or decrease in average wealth), the factors that drive these flows also change. For example, while the sleepy coastal communities of the NSW central and northern coasts were once highly desirable to retirees and, conversely, lost young people through outmigration, these places have transformed into more dynamic urban settlements and now attract a more diverse working-age demographic. Therefore, it is important to consider how places are changing in response to population growth (and related demographic change) and how these changes, in turn, impact the push and pull characteristics of places for different demographics.

With the above in mind, in considering how the Covid-19 pandemic could shape Australia's population geography, there are two issues of particular interest:

- the normalisation of working from home arrangements in workplaces
- changing perceptions about the relative safety of highly populous and high-density environments.

As a result of the Covid-19 public health measures, many employers have enabled staff to work remotely, most commonly from home. The ABS's Household Impacts of Covid-19 Survey found that between 30 and 40 per cent of respondents had worked from home as a response to the pandemic (ABS 2020a). The uptake in working from home, while positioned as a short-term and 'emergency measure', could have longer-term implications

for Australia's population distribution. Indeed, one estimate suggests that more than 65 per cent of those able to work from home indicated they expected this to continue more regularly after the pandemic (Lennox 2020a).

A major barrier to rural in-migration in Australia has been the lack of diverse employment opportunities available in smaller settlements (Davies 2008; Argent et al. 2013). Indeed, this remains one of the major drivers of outmigration. This is a well-recognised issue and, as such, the potential utility of advancements in internet communications for enabling rural-dwellers to access more diverse employment opportunities is also appreciated (Davies 2021a).

It has been argued that information and communication technology innovations could be a panacea for small rural communities, with workers able to live in rural areas with limited local employment but access remote employment opportunities. However, there has not been broad uptake of fully online remote working due to a complex of factors, including the urban–rural digital divide, the costs associated with upgrading employers' internal systems to support working from home, and required changes in workplace organisational cultures and management frameworks (Davies 2021a). However, there are signs that these barriers to broader participation in remote working are being addressed. First, the pandemic necessitated workplaces to rapidly develop supportive organisational frameworks to enable staff to work from home—and, in so doing, removed one of the major initial barriers to a broader-scale and longer-term transition. Second, workers have become more familiar with navigating working from home arrangements—for themselves and their colleagues—meaning another significant barrier to longer-term change is being overcome.

What remains unknown is whether employers and employees will continue to engage in working from home arrangements over the longer term. While it has been demonstrated that such arrangements are possible as a short-term arrangement, whether they are preferable as a permanent arrangement is not yet known. On this matter, considering the initial impact of the shift of some Australian workplaces to working from home in 2020, Lennox (2020b) found that those who worked from home would be more prepared to undertake longer commutes to a central workplace if these were less frequent.

Also of interest to considerations of Australia's population geography over the longer term is the question of how people's preparedness to live in highly populated and dense environments could shift. Reports abound about city-dwellers moving out for the relative safety of country areas (Malatzky et al. 2020). Despite regional areas often having limited healthcare services, and certainly very limited medical facilities for dealing with any Covid-19 outbreak, they have been positioned as safer as they are less populous with lower population densities. This repositioning of country areas as safer, desirable lifestyle destinations could go some way to addressing another significant barrier to rural in-migration: the perception that rural areas are in decline and offer limited social and cultural opportunities compared with major-city counterparts.

Conclusion

There are many uncertainties about how Australia's population geography will be impacted by Covid-19 and the related public health responses. However, it can be concluded that without a recovery in international migration, Australia's population growth will sharply decline, the population will age, and the population will become less ethnically diverse. It can be concluded that as the characteristics of places change, migration flows will also respond and adjust. If highly dense environments emerge as places where people are at greater risk of disease, it is plausible that more people will move to less dense environments. This could be within the city (suburbanisation) or moves from the city to smaller regional settlements. However, it is also plausible that if the health crisis is prolonged, there will be increased in-migration to larger settlements with advanced tertiary healthcare resources. If the current temporary remote working arrangements in some sectors are broadly normalised in the longer term, it is plausible that there will be a disruption to the centralising of employment (and education) in major cities and, in turn, shifts in the established patterns of population distribution.

While the pandemic is throwing up uncertainties about the implications for population growth and distribution, the decrease in net international migration, the increase in net outmigration from some capital cities, and the increase in migration to some regional areas have drawn attention to the precarity of Australia's overall population growth, city growth, and spatial distribution. As Australia adapts to Covid-19, it will be particularly important to give attention to developing improved agility in the policies

and planning for growing and changing populations. Population growth in cities should not be assumed a fait accompli and, likewise, the growth of some regional settlements should not be interpreted as a shift to counter-urbanisation. As the implications of Covid-19 become clearer, population projections should be regularly reviewed. Within this, careful attention must be given to any shifts in the demographic character of a population as the result of changes in population growth and distribution.

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