

Census data helps regional planners understand what attracts people to live in regional Australia

The Regional Australia Institute gathers and analyses data to help governments and regional leaders make strategic planning decisions for regions.

Regional Australia encompasses all areas outside the five major cities and Canberra. It is home to 8.8 million people, accounts for one-third of national output and provides employment to one in three working Australians.

Kim Houghton, Chief Economist at the Regional Australia Institute said Census data was at the heart of providing social and economic evidence about regional areas.

“Census data showed that regional cities had 7.8% population growth between 2011 and 2016,” said Dr Houghton. “Incomes and qualification rates rose and the proportion of regional young people completing Year 12 increased.”

Dr Houghton said Census data gives unparalleled coverage at small area scale.

“No other data source gives a clearer picture of how people and places differ and are changing across regional Australia.

“Our research looks at national patterns and trends, combined with information from the ground to provide local scale analysis. For example, we use data on population growth and median age to investigate issues of workforce change in the health and disability services industries.

“Census data indicates that the over-65 population is growing in many regions. This is a combination of ageing in place and in-migration of retirees. While retiree migration helps boost local spending, working age population growth is needed for the region to remain resilient,” said Dr Houghton.

Regional Australia offers a great lifestyle with good work opportunities, low-cost housing and few commuting nightmares.

“Data tells us there are typically around 40,000 job vacancies in regional places each month, with most of these in highly skilled trades and professions,” said Dr Houghton. “There is a great range of jobs available for young people looking to accelerate their career, or families looking to cut their stress levels.”

This information combined with Census data boosts the view that regional Australia offers an attractive and viable lifestyle choice, while taking the pressure off the overcrowded major cities.

Dr Houghton said Census data is essential to its Pathfinder research that identifies a region's strengths and weaknesses and benchmarks them to identify strategic directions.

"Census data is integral to economic strategic planning and helping stakeholders view a region as a whole. For instance, we worked with the Cradle Coast Authority to create a unified approach across the region for a 'more jobs and better jobs' campaign."

The regularity of the Census also helps the Institute prepare its analysis of upcoming trends.

"When the 2021 Census data is released we'll be looking closely at mobility patterns in regional Australia to find out how Australians 'vote with their feet' in choosing to move to regional places with particular attributes," said Dr Houghton.

"We will analyse mobility data alongside social, cultural, environmental and economic measures to look for important 'attraction ingredients' to help explain the flows of people to desirable places.

"We rely on the Census and value it highly in providing insights into the many local and regional differences that we are trying to identify and understand."