



Australian Social Trends

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Article: Social participation of migrants

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Social participation of migrants

Almost one in seven people born in countries other than Australia or main English-speaking countries reported that they had no source of support during a time of crisis.

High levels of social participation and social connectedness are believed to contribute to the overall wellbeing of individuals and their communities.¹ Opportunities for social participation and interaction may be found through participation in paid and unpaid work, friendships and participation in culture and leisure activities.¹

Australia is a culturally diverse nation with migrants arriving from around two hundred countries during the past two centuries.² These migrants have played an important role in shaping our nation.³ Recent social and economic issues such as the ageing population and skills shortages have highlighted the role migration will play in the economic and demographic future of Australia.⁴ While migrants contribute to and enrich Australian society through their different skills, abilities and experiences, they potentially face difficulties such as language barriers, cultural differences and discrimination, which could affect their ability to participate in some social activities.

This article examines several areas of social participation in the context of whether migrants came from main English-speaking countries or other countries. These migrants may or may not be proficient in spoken English.

Migrants in Australia

According to the 2006 Census of Population and Housing, 22% (4.4 million) of people in Australia were born overseas. A further 26% of people who were born in Australia had at least one parent who was born overseas.

Data sources and definitions

Data for this article are primarily from the 2006 General Social Survey (GSS). This survey collected data on a range of social dimensions. This allows analysis of interrelationships in social circumstances and outcomes including the exploration of multiple advantage and disadvantage.

A *migrant* is a person who was born overseas and obtained permanent Australian resident status prior to or after their arrival.

Main English-speaking countries are the main countries from which Australia receives, or has received, significant numbers of overseas settlers who are likely to speak English. These countries comprise the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, Canada, the United States of America and South Africa.

People born in other countries refers to people who were not born in Australia or in a main English-speaking country. These people may or may not be proficient in spoken English.

For more information see: *General Social Survey: Summary of Results, 2006* (ABS cat. no. 4159.0).

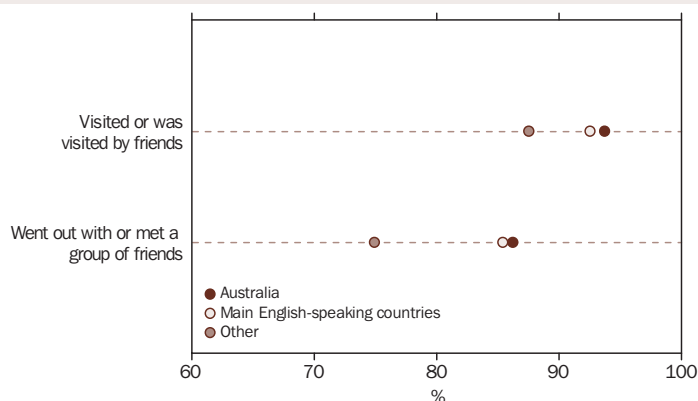
According to the 2006 General Social Survey, 37% of the migrant population were from main English-speaking countries (the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, Canada, the United States of America and South Africa). The remainder (63%) were born in other countries. Of those born in other countries, around 2 million (82%) were proficient in spoken English.

Over the last ten years, there has been an increased emphasis on skilled migration programs in Australia.⁵ During this time, the pattern of migration has also changed. For example, while migrants from the United Kingdom and New Zealand remained the two largest overseas-born groups, the proportion of migrants coming to Australia who were born in China, India and South Africa increased considerably between 1996 and 2006. (See *Australian Social Trends 2007, Migration: Permanent additions to Australia's population*, pp 24–29.)

Participation in social activities

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises that some level of social and cultural participation is a fundamental human right and need.^{1,6} Social participation is believed to have positive impacts on the health of individuals and on the strength of communities.¹

Participation in informal social activities by country of birth — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey.

...informal social activities

In 2006, the vast majority of migrants from main English-speaking countries (97%) and from other countries (92%) were involved in some form of informal social activity within the three months prior to being surveyed. People from main English-speaking countries were more likely than people who came from other countries to visit or be visited by friends (92% compared with 88%), and to go out with or meet a group of friends (85% compared with 75%).

...organised social groups

Involvement in organised social groups such as craft or hobby groups, or sport and recreation clubs, is another common form of social participation. In 2006, migrants from main English-speaking countries (34%) and people born in Australia (38%) were most likely to be involved in a sport or recreation group whereas people from other countries were most commonly involved in a religious or spiritual group (30%).

...sporting activities

In Australia, as in many other countries, attendance at sporting events or participation in sporting activities has been a common avenue for individuals to engage with the wider community.⁷

In 2006, participation in sporting activities (either formal or informal) through playing, coaching, refereeing or administrative roles, was a popular means of social interaction. Almost two-thirds (65%) of people from main English-speaking countries and just over half (53%) of people from other countries reported some form of participation in sport in the previous 12 months. The proportion of people born in

Australia who participated in sporting activities (64%) was similar to that of people from main English-speaking countries.

Just over half of people from main English-speaking countries (52%) and just under one-third of people from other countries (31%) had attended a sports event in the previous 12 months, compared with 57% of people born in Australia.

Attendance at cultural venues

Attendance at cultural venues was high for both migrant groups in 2006. Around nine out of ten people from main English-speaking countries and about eight out of ten people from other countries reported that they had attended a culture or leisure venue in the previous twelve months. Similarly, almost nine out of ten Australians attended a culture or leisure venue in the same twelve month period.

The cinema was the most popular venue for both migrant groups, as well as for people born in Australia. People born in Australia and main English-speaking countries had higher rates of attendance (71% and 70%) than did people from other countries (57%). This was also the case for attendance at theatre performances (23%, 24% and 16% respectively). These differences in participation may reflect the cultural content and predominance of English language in many popular films and live performances shown in Australia.

Friendships

Friendships generally provide networks of trust, reciprocity and cooperation, and may contribute to an overall sense of belonging.¹

People who were born in Australia or main English-speaking countries were more likely than people from other countries to report having three or more friends outside the

Attendance at selected cultural venues(a) by country of birth — 2006

	Born in main English-speaking countries	Born in other countries	Born in Australia
	%	%	%
Cinemas	70.2	57.2	71.1
Zoological gardens and aquariums	45.3	38.6	41.0
Popular music concerts	34.9	21.0	34.9
Theatre performances	23.6	15.6	23.2
Dance performances	16.6	16.5	15.5
Have attended culture/leisure venue	92.0	83.3	89.4

(a) Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey.

Friendships by country of birth: people aged 18 years and over — 2006

	Born in main English-speaking countries	Born in other countries	Born in Australia
	%	%	%
Number of friends living outside the household can confide in			
0 friends	13.5	22.5	11.0
1 or 2 friends	33.9	38.2	33.1
3 or more friends	52.6	39.3	56.0
Characteristics of friends(a)			
All or most friends are of similar age to self	66.0	62.9	66.3
All or most friends are of similar educational background to self	56.3	49.4	59.2
All or most friends are of similar ethnic background to self	66.7	50.8	78.7
Had face-to-face contact with family and friends living elsewhere at least once a month	94.5	90.2	94.8

(a) Refers to all friends, not only the ones the selected person can confide in.

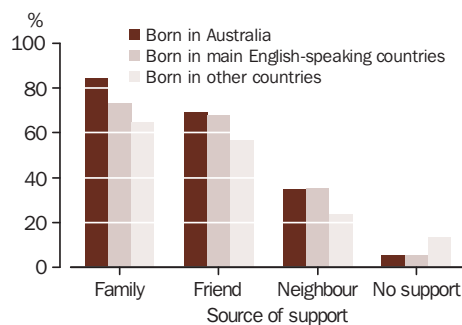
Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey.

household they could confide in (56% and 53% compared with 39%). A small proportion of people from main English-speaking countries (14%) and people born in Australia (11%) did not have any friends outside the household they could confide in, compared with over one in five (23%) people from other countries. This difference may reflect the fact that migrants to Australia, particularly those who have recently arrived, may not know as many people as those born in Australia and may not have had sufficient time to develop as many supportive friendships.

Sources of support

Research suggests that an individual's social support network can have a substantial impact on successful social and community adjustment. Strong supportive ties among family members are considered especially important.⁸

Source of support in time of crisis — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey.

Regardless of country of birth, the greatest source of support in a time of crisis was a family member. Over 80% of people born in Australia and around 75% of people born in main English-speaking countries could get support from family compared with 65% of people born in other countries. This difference will reflect whether or not migrants have family members in Australia.

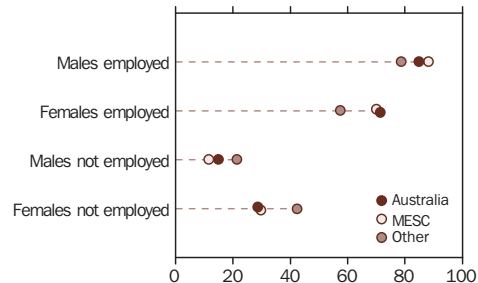
Friends were also a big source of support, with nearly 70% of both Australian-born and people born in main English-speaking countries, and over half (57%) of people born in other countries, reporting that they could ask friends for support during a time of crisis. Just over one-third of migrants from main English-speaking countries (35%) and people born in Australia (35%) reported that they could ask neighbours for support during a time of crisis, compared with just under one-quarter (24%) of migrants from other countries.

Almost one in seven people born in countries other than Australia or main English-speaking countries reported that they had no source of support during a time of crisis.

Voluntary work

Voluntary work provides opportunities for social participation through involvement in a variety of activities. Volunteering also provides benefits to the community, such as increased cohesion.¹ In 2006, people who were born in Australia were more likely than migrants to undertake voluntary work (36% compared with 29%). Migrants who were born in main English-speaking countries were more likely to be volunteers than were people born

Employed and not employed by sex and country of birth: people aged 18 to 64 years — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey.

in other countries (34% and 26% respectively).⁹ For more information about people who volunteer regularly, see *Australian Social Trends 2008*, Voluntary Work, pp. 42–45.

Labour force participation

Opportunities for social participation and interaction may also arise through paid employment. Social relationships may develop through interaction with colleagues and while conducting work-related business. Work also provides income, which facilitates participation in some social activities.

In 2006, people who were born in Australia and people who were born in main English-speaking countries were more likely than people born in other countries to be employed (78% and 80% compared with 68%).

Men were more likely to be employed than were women, within both the Australian-born population (85% and 71% respectively) and people who were born in main English-speaking countries (88% and 70% respectively). The difference between men and women was greatest among people born in other countries, with 79% of men and 57% of women employed in 2006.

People who are either unemployed or are not part of the labour force may have fewer opportunities to build social relationships. In 2006, around one in five people from Australia (22%) and main English-speaking countries (20%) were not employed, compared with almost one-third (32%) of people from other countries. A considerable proportion of women born in countries other than Australia or main English-speaking countries (43%) were not employed in 2006.

Conclusion

Both migrants and people born in Australia benefit from and contribute to Australian society through participation in social activities. Participation in the labour force and involvement in social activities provide people with opportunities to engage with the wider community and to build social support networks, which in turn contribute to an increased sense of community. People who were born in Australia or main English speaking countries generally had higher levels of social participation than did migrants from other countries.

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004, *Information Paper: Measuring Social Capital: An Australian Framework and Indicators, 2004*, cat. no. 1378.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2 Jupp, J 2002, *From White Australia to Woomera*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- 3 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Fact sheet 4 – More than 60 years of post-war migration*, viewed 1 April 2008, <<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/04fifty.htm>>.
- 4 Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, *Annual Report 2001–02*, viewed 17 March 2008, <<http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2001-02/report8.htm>>.
- 5 Parliamentary Library, *Skilled migration to Australia E-brief*, viewed 9 April 2008, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/INTGUIDE/SP/Skilled_migration.htm>.
- 6 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, viewed 16 April 2008, <<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>>.
- 7 Taylor, T 2003, 'Diversity Management in a Multi-cultural Society: An exploratory study of cultural diversity and team sport in Australia', *Annals of Leisure Research*, Vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 168–187.
- 8 Froland, C, Brodsky, G, Olson, M, & Stewart, L 2000, 'Social Support and Social Adjustment: Implications for Mental Health Professionals', *Community Mental Health Journal*, vol 36 (1) pp. 61–75.
- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007, *Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006*, cat. no. 4441.0, ABS, Canberra.

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