

# Where do Australians live?



A person's wellbeing is closely linked to where they live. Location largely determines the range of opportunities, and goods and services available to satisfy an individual's needs and lifestyle. Because people's needs vary they will settle in different places, seeking out a location which they can afford and that provides the best mix of opportunities, and goods and services for them and their family.

For people with children, one area might be attractive because it provides access to the support and care provided by other family and friends. Some locations might be important to a person's identity, allowing for the expression or development of particular cultural facets of a person's life; for example, traditional lands for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Other places might offer particular educational opportunities, or provide enhanced employment and promotional prospects in a chosen field. Other areas might be attractive for their environment—located close to the ocean, or away from crowding and pollution. In others, access to specialist medical services may be important for people with a serious illness.

Areas that have a range of the most popular opportunities, and goods and services often have expensive housing because many other people seek to live there. For many people, compromises must be made between affordability and the distance travelled to access these opportunities, and goods and services. The result of the decisions and compromises made by all Australians is a settlement pattern, but one which has been dynamic over time—changing with shifts in individual and family needs and preferences, the ability of particular locations to meet those needs and preferences, and the relative income and wealth of individuals and families.

**In 2006, three quarters of the population were in coastal towns and cities.**

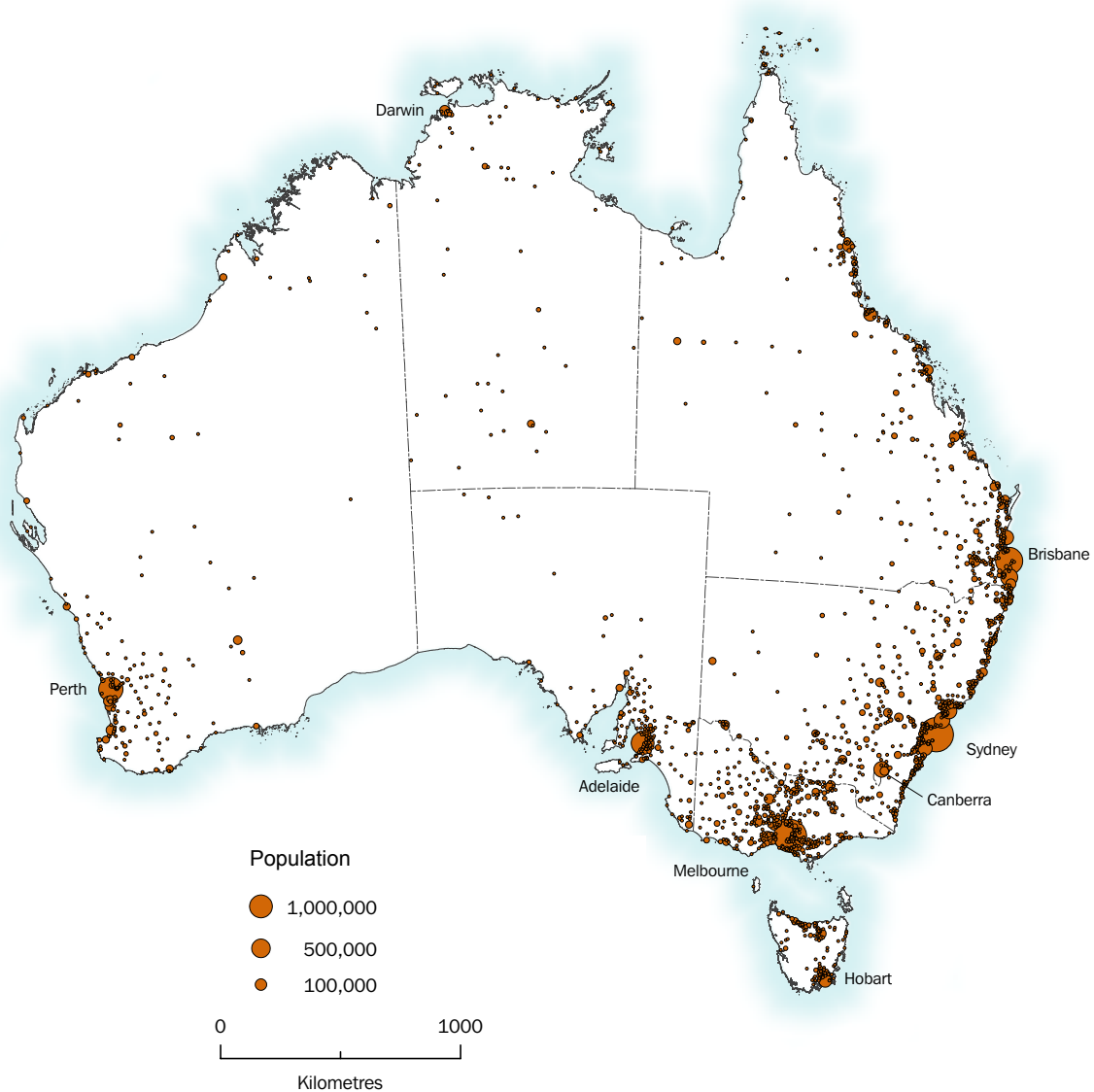
## From the bush to the coast

Over time, changes have occurred in the opportunities, such as employment, and goods and services, such as health facilities, that many areas traditionally provided. Further, people's idea of what is desirable has changed, including an expectation of having a broader range of options available. This has brought about a shift in Australia's settlement pattern from one that was strongly rural at Federation (in 1901) to one currently dominated by urban coastal settlement.

At the 1911 Census, the main focus of the Australian economy was primary production and 42% of the population were living in Rural Areas. This strong rural settlement pattern came about because of the settlement of inland areas primarily for agricultural use and the large amount of employment created by the labour intensive farming practices of the day. Other factors encouraging rural settlement were the population dispersal caused by the gold rushes, the development of other mining industries, and the establishment of road and rail infrastructure in these areas.

By 2006, only 12% of Australians were located in Rural Areas, while just over three quarters (77%) were in towns and cities of over 1,000 people within 50 km of the coast. This pattern reflects the attraction of coastal environments

Population(a) of Urban Centres and Rural Localities, Australia(b), 2006



(a) Population is census count on a place of enumeration basis.

(b) Excludes Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas Islands.

to contemporary Australians, but perhaps more importantly it highlights the fact that the large coastal towns and cities are now the centres of employment and provide many other desirable opportunities, and goods and services.

While the desire to live in these towns and cities are driven by contemporary preferences, the concentration of these towns and cities along the coast to a large degree reflects Australia's colonial history. Sites of the colonial capitals and penal settlements required access to coastal anchorages, adequate supplies of fresh water and land with good agricultural potential, fixing the location of many current Australian towns and cities on or near the coast.

## Increasing urbanisation

Over the past century, while remaining sparsely settled, Australia has emerged as a highly urbanised nation. Over this period, there has been a consistent, general trend for a greater proportion of the population to live in Australia's cities and towns. Over the 30 years prior to the 2006 Census, the relative importance of the Metropolitan Urban areas (that is, the state capitals, and Canberra from 1954) has generally declined, while the coastal population centres, especially those near these cities, have increased their share of the population.

## Classification of urban and rural areas

An area is classified as urban or rural according to the level of population density and the type of land use. Across censuses the size of urban areas generally increases as the number of people in these areas grows. This occurs as land that was previously classified as rural is developed to house the population or to be used for purposes that are urban in nature (for example, roads, shopping centres and airports). This reduces, by a relatively small amount, the area of land that is classed as rural.

For the first part of this article, Australia is divided into urban and rural areas according to the Urban Divisions classification used in Statistician's Reports between 1921 and 1966, along with corresponding areas back to the 1901 Census. From the 1976 Census onwards, a close approximation to this classification has been made using the Urban Centre and Locality, and Section of State classifications, allowing comparison with statistics from the earlier censuses. It should be noted that the areas of most cities and towns have expanded as population has increased, and some cities and towns included separately in earlier censuses have been joined into the urban area of larger cities in later censuses (for example, Ipswich into Brisbane).

Where data from the 1976–2006 censuses are presented separately, the Urban Centre and Locality and Section of State classifications are used as described in the text. For further information on these classifications please see *Statistical Geography: Volume 1—Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), 2006*, ABS cat. no. 1216.0.

## Urban Divisions classification

**Metropolitan Urban** include the capital cities, and surrounding suburbs, of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart, with Canberra included from 1954. The Urban Centres corresponding to these capitals, from the Urban Centre and Locality classification, make up this category from 1971 onwards.

**Other Urban** include the remaining incorporated towns and cities (including Darwin) and, from 1954, other towns that contained 1,000 or more people (750 for Tasmania until 1966) at the time of each census. The change to the towns and cities included in Other Urban between the 1947 and 1954 Censuses prevent comparison of the Other Urban and Rural Areas categories across these two censuses. From 1971 onwards, Urban Centres of 1,000 persons or more are used for this category.

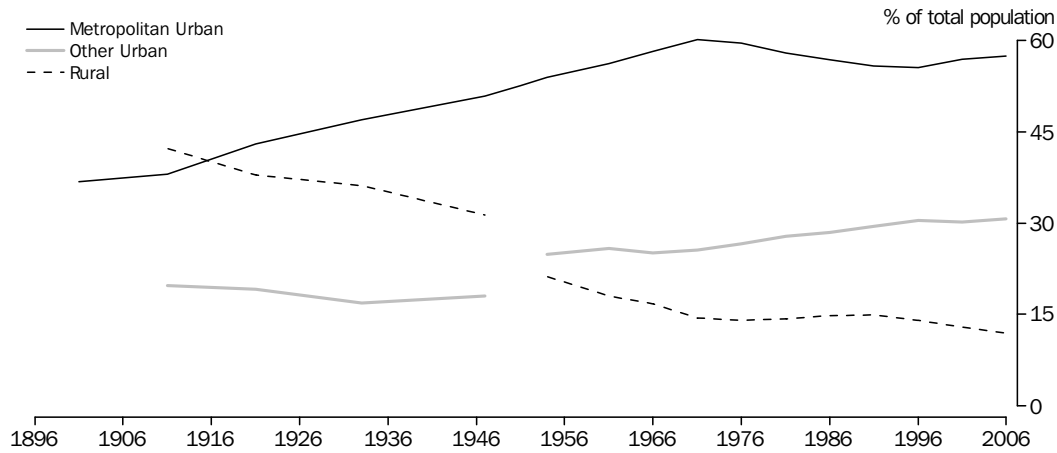
**Rural Areas** are the balance of the Australian population, including towns (or localities) not included in Other Urban above, and the migratory population.

Where these categories of Urban Division are used in the text of this article they are capitalised. Where the words are not capitalised their use has a more general meaning.

## Population counts in urban and rural areas

In this article populations in urban and rural areas are examined back as far as the 1901 Census. Data from these early censuses are only available on a place of enumeration basis, and so data on this basis are used for all censuses years examined. As Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island were only included from the 1996 Census, the Other Territories category has been excluded from the analysis and the figures used in this article, including total Australia populations. This ensures figures are as comparable as possible.

Population distribution(a) by Urban Divisions(b), 1901–2006



(a) Population is the census count on a place of enumeration basis.

(b) Some comparability issues are present across censuses in the geographic classifications used to present these data and therefore it should only be used for identification of general trends. The Urban Division classification and the break in series shown are explained on the previous page in the box titled Classification of urban and rural areas.

Metropolitan Urban

Metropolitan Urban areas have accommodated much of Australia's population growth over the past century, growing to contain slightly over 11 million people in 2006. As a result, 57% of Australians were in Metropolitan Urban areas in 2006, compared with 37% in 1901. The first time the census recorded that Metropolitan Urban areas accommodated over half of the population was in 1947. The population share of Metropolitan Urban areas continued to grow steadily until 1971, when it reached a peak of 60%; accommodating 7.6 million people at that time. This period of growth in population share occurred in line with strong expansion in employment in manufacturing and, to a lesser extent, service based industries in the capitals.<sup>1</sup> For more information on changes to employment by industry see 'Generations of employment', p. 159–166.

Between 1971 and 1996, Metropolitan Urban areas continued to grow in size, with an additional 2.2 million people in these cities. Despite this, the proportion of the total population located in Metropolitan Urban areas declined slightly to 56%. In part, the decline in the share of the population is associated with strong growth in urban areas close to Metropolitan Urban areas; for instance, Gold Coast–Qld, Rockingham–WA, Melton–Vic. and Central Coast–NSW (see table, Population growth and decline, p. 22). The growth in these nearby cities indicates that there was little real decline in the importance of Metropolitan Urban areas over this period.

Between 1996 and 2006, there was a return to growth in population share for the Metropolitan Urban areas (reaching 57% or 11.4 million people).

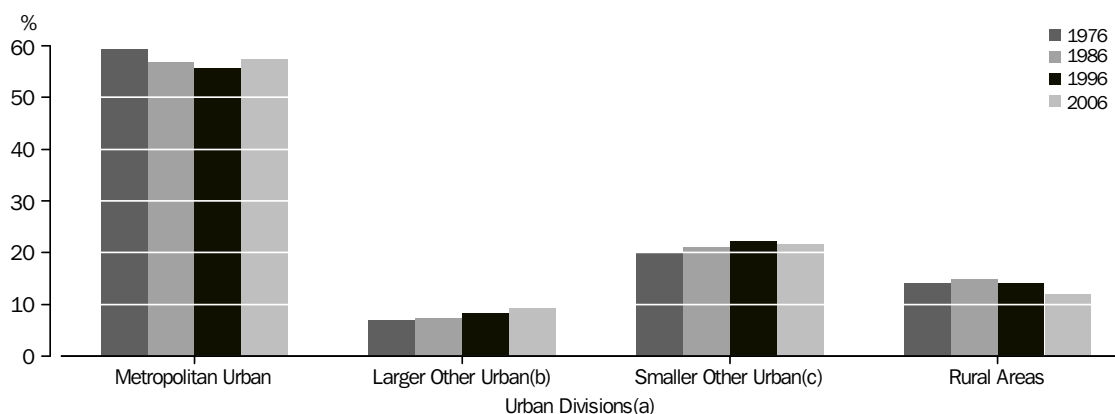
Other Urban areas

Other Urban areas, that is those towns and cities outside of the Metropolitan Urban areas, initially lost some of their share of the population in response to early Metropolitan Urban growth, declining from 20% in 1911 to 17% in 1933. Despite this, the number of people in these areas increased over this period (from 0.9 to 1.1 million). Earlier Statistician's Reports<sup>1</sup> suggested that this slow growth and declining population share was, at least in part, due to the loss of employment in these areas during the 1930–33 Depression.

From 1933 onwards, the Other Urban areas tended to increase their share of population. This was particularly apparent between 1966 and 1996, when Other Urban areas made relatively strong gains in population share, increasing from 25% to 30% of the population; reaching 5.4 million people. Between 1996 and 2006, with slower growth in population in these areas (to 6.1 million in 2006), population share has remained steady.

This recent stronger growth of Other Urban areas at the expense of the Metropolitan Urban areas can be examined using more detailed information available from censuses after 1966.

Population distribution, 1976–2006



(a) See box titled Classification of urban and rural areas on p. 18. Excludes Other Territories.

(b) Urban Centres with populations from 100,000 to 999,999 people in 2006, excluding those in Metropolitan Urban.

(c) Urban Centres with populations from 1,000 to 99,999 people.

Larger Other Urban cities (with populations from 100,000 to 999,999) showed very small but consistent gains in population share between 1976 and 2006. These cities increased their share by 2.4 percentage points in the 30 year period to reach 9%; and accommodated 1.8 million people in 2006. Smaller Other Urban cities and towns (1,000 to 99,999 people) showed stronger growth in population share between 1976 and 1996; growing 2.4 percentage points in the shorter 20 year period. Despite a small decline of 0.7 percentage points in population share in the 10 years to 2006 (down to 21%), these smaller cities and towns continued to grow in population reaching 4.3 million.

Rural Areas

The growth in towns and cities since Federation has resulted in a declining share of the population living in rural parts of Australia. While comparability issues cloud the picture over the long term, a steady downward trend is evident. The 1933 Statistician's Report attributed this decline to slow growth in the agriculture sector, along with the increased mechanisation of farming activities, causing reduced demand for labour in Rural Areas.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to urban areas, the population in Rural Areas has only increased by a relatively small amount since Federation—by about half a million people between 1911 and 2006.

Moreover, unlike other areas, the total number of people in Rural Areas has declined at various times. In the 10 years to 2006, the share of population in Rural Areas declined by 2.1 percentage points, caused by a decline of 119,300 people in Rural Areas throughout Australia. This left 2.4 million people in Rural Areas in 2006. The recent population decline in Rural Areas occurred after a period of stability for these areas, with population share steady at between 14–15% between 1971 and 1996. Recent declines are likely to have been accentuated by the presence of drought conditions at various times over the preceding decade across many parts of Australia. These conditions have curtailed farming activities, which in turn have impacted associated businesses and communities.

One of the most significant issues surrounding the loss of population from Rural Areas is that young people make up a large proportion of those leaving. In 2006, young people aged 15–24 made up 26% of those leaving country inland areas, well above the average of 19% of young people who moved regions across Australia.<sup>2</sup>

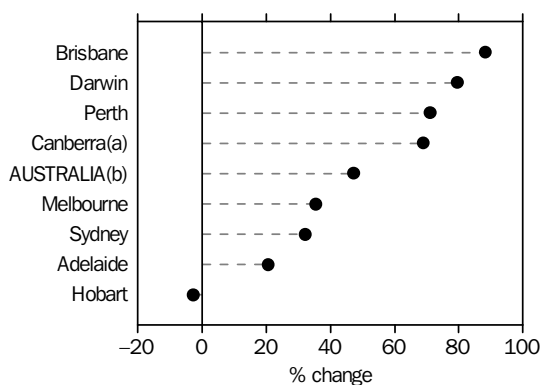
This loss of young people makes it increasingly difficult for population levels in rural areas, and the communities in these areas, to be sustained. Much of this movement of young people is to large cities and two factors linked to this movement are the employment and educational opportunities available in these cities.<sup>3</sup> The movement of people within Australia is further discussed in 'On the move', p. 24–32.

## Cities—growing, declining and stable

The concentration of the population into urban areas at the expense of rural areas has not been consistent across Australia. Some towns and cities have grown strongly—some by a very large degree, while a few have experienced population decline, and others have a relatively stable population—not declining in size but failing to keep pace with population growth nationally. Those towns and cities that have a desirable mix of opportunities, and goods and services that suit many people’s needs and lifestyles have increased their share of the population, in some cases attracting population away from other centres.

In the 30 years to 2006, growth in the census population count in the state and territory capital city Urban Centres (42%) did not keep pace with national population growth (47%). Even so, due to their size, they have accommodated an additional 3.4 million people, or a little over half of Australia’s population growth in this period. When examined separately, the Urban Centres for several capitals did exceed the national average—Brisbane (88%), Darwin (79%), Perth (71%) and Canberra (69%). Melbourne (36%), Sydney (32%) and Adelaide (21%) did not grow as strongly, while the population of Hobart dropped by 3%.

### Capital city urban areas, population growth rate, 1976–2006



(a) Includes Queanbeyan–NSW.

(b) Excludes Other Territories.

### ...the impact of employment

Employment opportunities are considered to be one of the strongest factors attracting people to move locations and big cities are generally regarded as good places to find employment.

Between 1976 and 2006, population growth in the capitals aligned with employment growth in the relevant state and territory economies very closely. The four capitals that gained population share over this period were in those states and territories that had rates of employment growth above the national average, while Tasmania had the lowest rate of employment growth. While the faster population growth in these cities will have generated higher levels of employment, even when this effect is taken into account, employment growth remains stronger in these cities. This indicates that expanding employment markets have encouraged people to relocate to these cities.

The attraction of employment opportunities in state and territory economies, especially in the capital cities, has had an impact on city growth more broadly. Many of the Urban Centres that grew the most between 1976 and 2006 were in Queensland and Western Australia (see table, next page). Further, 7 of the top 10 were within commuting distance of a capital city, including centres such as Mandurah–WA, the Sunshine and Gold Coasts–Qld, and the Central Coast–NSW. This may represent a willingness on the part of those settling in these commuter areas to trade off longer travel time to the adjacent capital city, where they may work or access the wide variety of opportunities and services, against the local lifestyle factors and perhaps cheaper housing costs. For example, retirees might see such areas as offering an attractive mix of coastal amenity and housing affordability; while also ensuring that they have access to comprehensive medical and other services in the nearby capital city; and, for some, that they are still able to be close to family (especially their grandchildren).

Some of the other growth cities act as regional centres (for example, Bunbury–WA and Port Macquarie–NSW), which may be attracting population from surrounding rural areas and smaller towns. One consistent characteristic of the top 10 growth cities is that they are all within 50kms of the coast, indicating that proximity to a coastal environment is a desirable element for many of those who move. For areas like



Population growth and decline: Urban Centres above 20,000 people in 2006

	Percentage change (per annum)				Percentage change (per annum)		
	2006	1976–2006	1996–2006		2006	1976–2006	1996–2006
Highest 10(a)	no.	%	%	Lowest 10	no.	%	%
Mandurah–WA	65 100	27.5	8.2	Whyalla–SA	21 200	-1.2	-0.9
Sunshine Coast–Qld(b)	195 800	18.0	4.3	Goulburn–NSW	21 000	-0.1	-0.1
Hervey Bay–Qld	43 600	12.6	3.8	Hobart–Tas.	127 600	-0.1	0.2
Gold Coast/Tweed Heads–Qld/NSW	478 100	11.9	5.9	Armidale–NSW	20 100	0.1	-0.5
Rockingham–WA	65 600	9.1	3.2	Maryborough–Qld	21 600	0.2	0.2
Sunbury–Vic.	29 000	8.4	3.1	Geelong–Vic.	135 400	0.4	0.8
Port Macquarie–NSW	40 100	6.7	2.0	Devonport–Tas.	21 700	0.4	-0.3
Melton–Vic.	35 100	6.4	1.6	Launceston–Tas.	71 100	0.4	0.5
Bunbury–WA	53 300	5.8	11.4	Newcastle–NSW	285 100	0.5	0.6
Central Coast–NSW	277 800	5.8	2.2	Wollongong–NSW	231 900	0.6	0.6
<b>Australia</b>	<b>19 852 700</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>19 852 700</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.2</b>

(a) There was no equivalent Urban Centre for Palmerston–NT in 1976 and so it could not be included in this list. In 2006, it had a census population of 23,600 and had grown by 9.4% per annum since 1996.

(b) Sunshine Coast only existed in its own right as a single Urban Centre from the 2001 Census. For censuses prior to 2001, the Urban Centres from the equivalent area to that in 2001 have been used to represent the population at that time.

Hervey Bay–Qld, their coastal environments have attracted large numbers of retirees, along with others seeking the employment generated by the construction, and health and aged care industries that have grown in these areas.

Many of the towns that had negative growth (declining population levels) or growth below the national average between 1976 and 2006, had experienced the loss or winding down of a major employer. In this 30 year period, the number of people in Whyalla–SA declined by more than one third. This decline has been directly associated with the closure of Whyalla's shipyards and substantial loss of employment through the restructuring of its steel works, which triggered a decline in other employment and services in the community.<sup>4</sup> Similar declines in manufacturing employment are likely to have contributed to population decline or stagnation in a number of the cities listed in the table above—Geelong–Vic., and Newcastle and Wollongong–NSW.

Other cities in the lowest 10 for population growth either lost population to, or were overlooked by those moving to other larger centres or elsewhere. One example of this is Maryborough–Qld, which has experienced

limited population growth (0.2% per year between 1976 and 2006), while the adjacent coastal city of Hervey Bay (approximately 30kms away) was the third fastest growing urban area in Australia. It therefore seems likely that Hervey Bay is taking potential population growth away from Maryborough, perhaps because of its location on the coast. Hobart's population decline and the slow growth in a number of Tasmanian cities, is directly linked to the slow growth in the overall state population. This has largely resulted from loss of population to the rest of Australia, particular among younger age groups<sup>5</sup>, with many pursuing employment and education opportunities elsewhere.

### Endnotes

1 Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 30 June, 1933, Statistician's Report*, p. 48–49, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra.

2 Their place of usual residence in 2006 was located in a different Statistical Subdivision than 5 years previous. For more information on the methods used to examine these population movements and for a definition of country inland areas see 'On the move', p. 24.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003, 'Youth migration within Australia' in *Australian Social Trends 2003*, cat. no. 4102.0, ABS, Canberra.

4 Salt, B. 2001, *The Big Shift: Welcome to the Third Australian Culture: The Bernard Salt Report*, Hardie Grant Books, Victoria.

5 Jackson, N. and Kippen, R. 2001, 'Whither Tasmania? A note on Tasmania's population 'problem'' in *People and Place*, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 27–37.