



Australian Government  
Bureau of Rural Sciences

# COUNTRY MATTERS

## 2008

SOCIAL ATLAS OF  
RURAL AND REGIONAL  
AUSTRALIA



# SOCIAL FABRIC

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

# Social fabric in rural and regional Australia

## For more information

The 2008 Country Matters: Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia is an online tool available at [www.brs.gov.au/socialatlas](http://www.brs.gov.au/socialatlas). The Atlas enables you to create and download a customised regional profile containing key social and economic information for any region.

The Atlas has five companion booklets that provide a summary of the Atlas and detailed analyses on four social themes:

- 2008 Country Matters: Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia — Summary Booklet
- Education and training in rural and regional Australia — people in country areas rising to the challenge
- Changing employment in industries in rural and regional Australia
- Social fabric of rural and regional Australia
- Drought in rural Australia — exploring the social impact in three case study regions.

## HOW DO I GET A COPY?

These booklets and a copy of the Atlas are available for download from the Bureau of Rural Sciences shop at [www.brs.gov.au/shop](http://www.brs.gov.au/shop).

## Introduction

The *2008 Country Matters: Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia* (the Atlas) includes information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001 and 2006 *Census of population and housing*. The data contained in the Atlas provide information for many critical social issues affecting rural and regional people, industries and communities.

This thematic study uses information in the Atlas to explore the changing social fabric of the non-capital city parts of Australia.

Box 1 shows definitions of important terms used in this document, based on the terminology used in the Atlas.



### Box 1 Terms used

- Major urban centres — population clusters of 100 000 people or more, including capital cities.
- Regional centres — population clusters of 1000 to 100 000 people.
- Small towns — population clusters of 200 to 1000 people.
- Rural areas — less than 200 people.
- Country — includes all the areas outside the capital cities.
- Statistical local area — fundamentally, SLAs are local government areas.
- Place of usual residence — the data are based on the person's place of usual residence on Census night. This means that some people could live in rural areas, but work in a small town or regional centre, explaining why there are numbers of people working in retail, health, manufacturing and government services in rural areas.

## Social fabric

### WHAT IS SOCIAL FABRIC?

Social fabric is associated with concepts such as social capital, social networks, social systems, social wellbeing, community participation and social inclusion. Social fabric has been described as the glue that connects members of a community to each other and to the place itself (Cox 1995).

Social fabric is used to describe the processes between people that establish networks, norms, values, rights and obligations and social trust, and to facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Cox 1995). Social fabric also includes social or institutional structures; social and cultural support networks; community organisations; and access to public and private services, such as affordable housing, small business, health, community and family support services.

In addition, social fabric is:

- often measured by a community's level of optimism, volunteering and participation in community activities and decision-making — a connected community where residents interact positively and participate in community life, have a sense of belonging, and an interest in local and regional issues is evidence of a strong social fabric (Wyong Shire Council 2002)
- dynamic and essential to support sustainable social and economic development and innovative enterprises (Queensland Government Department of Communities 2005); the destruction of social fabric through rapid economic development,

population growth or drought can disrupt established decision-making structures and increase social problems (such as drug abuse and crime) and limit regional development opportunities (Cheers 1993)

- discussed and assessed in qualitative language (for example, from 'weak' to 'strong' or 'high'), not in quantitative measures expressed in calculated numbers or indexes.

## WHY IS SOCIAL FABRIC IMPORTANT?

Social fabric is essential for building the 'adaptive capacity' (the ability or capacity to adapt) of a community to manage change. Without strong social fabric, loss of environmental and economic capital is difficult to rebuild. The degree and depth of social fabric is considered the key to economic vitality and social prosperity (Cocklin and Alston 2003). The Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has as its mission 'to achieve stronger rural and regional communities through more sustainable, competitive and profitable rural industries'. Building strong rural communities means building the social fabric on which industries can prosper and maintain economic vibrancy.

## Data and analysis

Demographic data can provide an indication of the strength and changing nature of social fabric. ABS population census data are used to describe social fabric in rural and regional Australia. The list of indicators in Box 2, above right, is not exhaustive but has been selected to provide a basis for discussing certain elements and changes in the social fabric of rural and regional areas.

### Box 2 Indicators of social fabric

- Community participation — involvement in activities through volunteering, sporting organisations and community associations.
- Population — growth of regional centres and shrinking population (especially young people) in rural areas; ageing population; gender imbalance in the population.
- Access to information technology — levels of access to internet for individuals, business, and communities; connectedness to information, people and organisations.
- Participation in the labour market — social inclusion; increasing participation of women.
- Distance and access to services — structures and services to support the commercial and social vibrancy of communities.
- Recent arrivals to Australia — influence of cultural diversity on the values and norms of communities.

# Community participation and isolation

The social fabric of rural and regional communities is strengthened through inclusive practices that encourage community participation and ability to adapt to change. As the population of rural and regional Australia continues to age faster than the population of urban centres and cities, building social fabric is essential for minimising social and geographic isolation. This is particularly relevant for older people and those on limited incomes who are likely to be more exposed to increased isolation. The long periods of difficult times experienced in many rural areas during prolonged periods of drought and industry restructure affects not only the operation of rural farms and families, but also has an extensive effect on many other businesses, people and the communities in which they live. Difficult times affect the way in which communities operate and inter-relate.

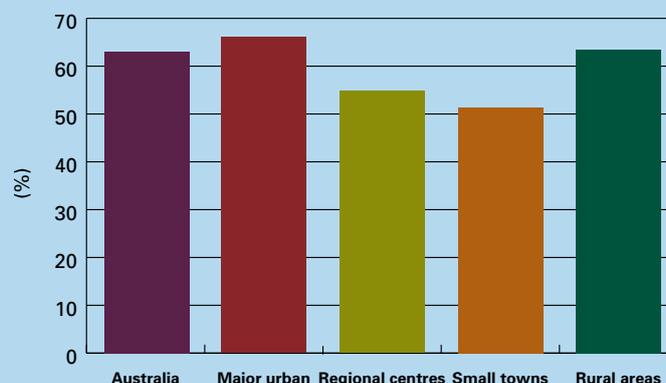
Isolation may occur as a result of where people live. People living in remote areas may be geographical-

Over the five years to 2006, there was strong growth in household internet connection throughout Australia, but the greatest increase was in small towns. This provides new opportunities to build stronger social fabric in communities that may be geographically isolated.

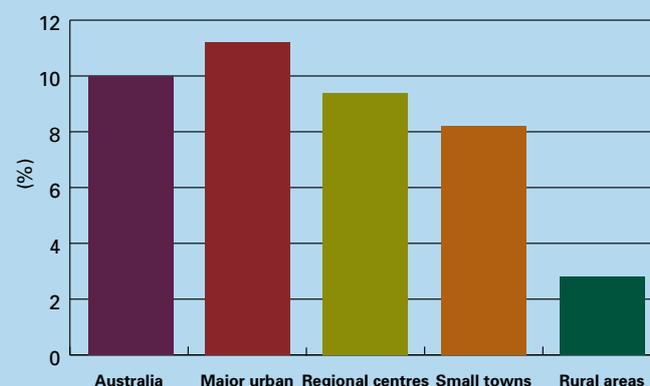
Isolation is also related to access to private and public transport. Due to infrequent public transport in rural and regional Australia, access to a motor vehicle is critical for social interaction, participation in community and to undertake a wide range of basic personal activities. In 2006, only 2.8% of rural dwellings did not have a motor vehicle, in contrast to 11.2% of dwellings in major urban centres (see Figure 2). The smaller the urban centre, the higher the proportion of dwellings with a motor vehicle.

Access to motor vehicles is increasing. Over the past decade, the proportion of dwellings that did not have a motor vehicle reduced across all urban centres, and reduced more in rural areas. These figures indicate a positive trend for access generally, but some people, (including young people, the elderly and the poor), may not have access to transport facilities. This limits their participation in personal and community activities.

ly isolated, which makes it difficult for them to participate in, and interact with, their local community. However, they are able to bridge the isolation gap in other ways. Modern communication using the internet allows a range of personal and community networks to be formed remotely. In 2006, internet connection in rural areas was high (63.5% of households), second only to people living in the major urban centres (66.1%; see Figure 1). Connections to households in rural areas were higher than those in regional centres (54.8% of dwellings were connected) and small towns (51.3% of dwellings).



**Figure 1 Proportion of dwellings with internet connection, urban and rural, 2006**



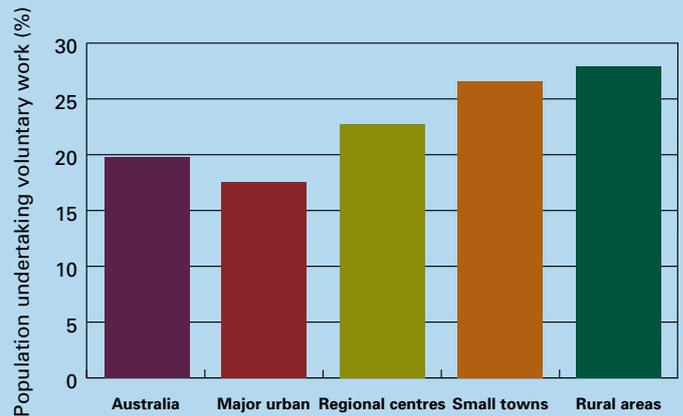
**Figure 2 Proportion of households without motor vehicles, urban and rural, 2006**

## VOLUNTEERING

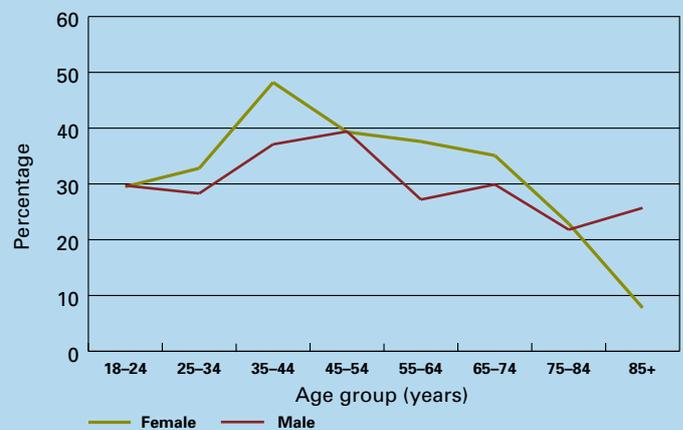
Social fabric is often described and measured in terms of community participation and volunteerism. Volunteering fulfils many important functions that directly affect the wellbeing and quality of people's lives and improves the inter-connectedness of people living in communities. Rural and regional Australia has a culture of volunteering that is reflected in the higher incidence of voluntary work. In 2006, more than one quarter of people in rural areas (27.9%) and people in small towns (26.6%) undertook voluntary work, which was much higher than the national average of 19.8% (see Figure 3).

Although volunteer rates varied across different groups in the population, women tended to volunteer more than men (36.0% compared with 32.0%) and people in the 35–44-year age group have been the most active volunteers (43.0%; see Figure 4). This age group includes a large number of parents of school-aged children.

Over the past decade, competing priorities and a decline in population (particularly young adults and families) in many rural areas is likely to have reduced the number of people available for volunteering in rural areas, especially women. For women, the opportunity cost of volunteering has increased, given the necessity (or the opportunities) to seek paid employment or higher education. However, national statistics suggest that men and women in the workforce, either in full-time or part-time jobs, had a higher volunteer rate than those who were unemployed or not in the labour force. The likely impact will be an increased burden on the remaining population of older people in rural areas and small towns to undertake the high level of volunteering in the community to maintain the services and community relationships that are required for good social fabric in country regions.



**Figure 3 Percentage of population in voluntary work, urban and rural, 2006**

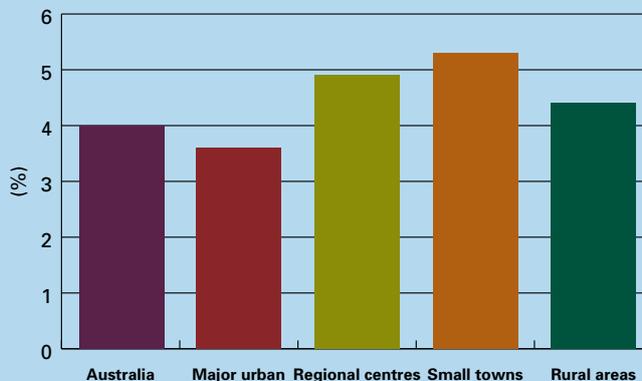


**Figure 4 Volunteer rate by sex and age, 2006**

## ROLE OF WOMEN

Suitable child care and access to education and training are key factors for increasing workforce participation and social inclusion. Many young people, particularly young women, have been leaving small towns and rural areas for secondary and post-secondary school education, and have remained in regional and urban centres for employment and lifestyle opportunities. Therefore, the increasing trend of women entering the workforce and further education (often outside rural areas) is likely to affect the social fabric of rural communities because of women's central role of volunteering in the community.

These changes in the roles of women in rural and regional Australia have been a short-term response to extended drought conditions, as well as a longer-term social and labour market trend. Over the decade to 2006, women with dependent children have continued to increase their participation in the workforce. In 2006, mothers in rural areas had the highest level of participation in the workforce (71.0%) — much higher than in any of the urban centres. Over the five years to 2006, the largest increase in the level of participation by mothers in the workforce occurred in small towns and regional centres (see Figure 5). This is likely to be a consequence of the recent drought where many mothers were working on-farm or earning off-farm income to supplement household income.



**Figure 5 Change in participation of mothers in the workforce, urban and rural, 2001–06**

## Changing values and norms

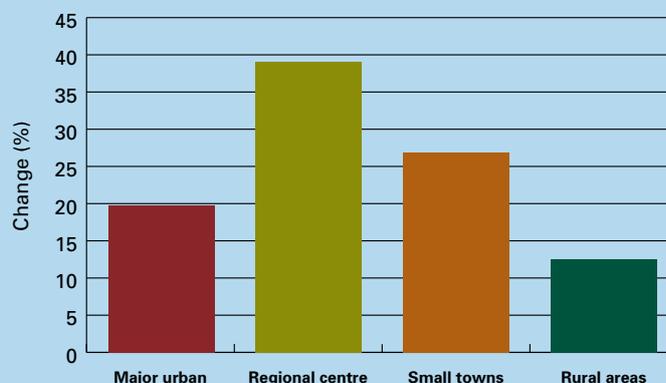
Recent demographic and social trends, such as movements in population, changes in the sex ratios of the remaining population, increasing education levels and participation rates, are influencing the values and norms of regional and rural Australia. Small towns and regional centres are attracting people from both the bush and cities for a range of reasons, including moving to be closer to health and care facilities, to be closer to other members of the family, to attend education and training institutions, and housing affordability. Regional centres in particular have attracted an increasing number of new settlers from overseas.

In rural areas, the migration of residents, particularly women aged 18–24 years, has created a major gender imbalance in this age group. For young people aged 18–24 years, there is a greater proportion of males living in rural areas (1:1.25) and in small towns (1:1.1). This means that there are 25% more young males than young females in rural areas and 10% more young males in small towns. The gender imbalance could affect future household and family formation, social relationships, and community activities and development.

### RECENT ARRIVALS TO AUSTRALIA

Housing in country areas is more affordable than in urban centres, making it increasingly attractive to new arrivals to Australia. In the five years to 2006, 65 100 people from overseas settled into regional centres — 39.1% more than the 46 800 people in the five years to 2001.

In the five years to 2006, 3500 people from overseas settled into small towns and 16 900 people from overseas settled into rural areas. The growth in the number of new arrivals in regional centres over the five years to 2006 (compared with the previous five years) increased by 39.1%. The growth was also strong in small towns, increasing by 26.9%, but remained much lower in rural areas, increasing only by 12.5 % (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6 Increase in the number of new settlers, percentage change from 2001–06**

The flow of different ethnic groups into regional Australia has increased cultural diversity and the social fabric of these regions. New settlers are contributing to the local community and building the workforce in regional areas. For some regional centres, the ratio of new settlers to the total population is high. For example, in Cobram in northern Victoria, Iraqi refugees represent about 10.0% of the total population. This increases the number of people attending schools and supporting local retail businesses, and creates new demands for health services and other community support services.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Higher levels of education and training contribute to upgrading skills, increasing the productivity of the workforce and building the social vitality of the community. However, a change in education levels also can challenge traditional norms and values.

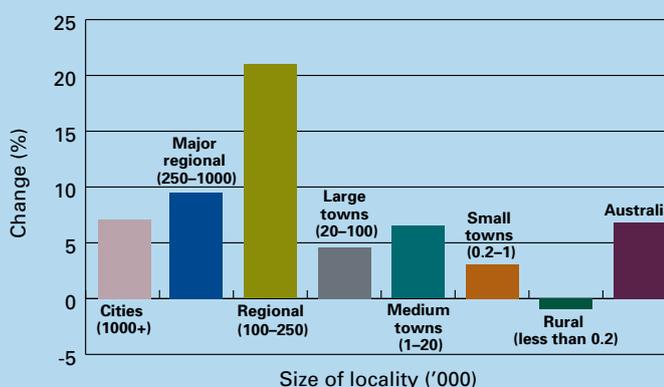
The number of people of working age who have obtained post-secondary school qualifications has continued to increase. Over the period 2001 to 2006, the lowest increase occurred in rural areas, with the

number of people with post-secondary school qualifications increasing by 15.0% (compared with 23.2% nationally). Part of the reason was the population decrease to 2006 in rural areas. The number of people with certificates or diplomas increased most for people living in small towns (25.2%) and regional centres (22.7%). The increased number of people with qualifications and training in rural and regional areas provides a positive outlook for the future of these communities. For more information on this topic, see the *Education and training* thematic publication in this series.

## Access and availability of services

Services in rural communities play both a social and commercial role. They provide employment, act as the focal point for community networks and provide support for individuals (Cocklin and Alston 2003). Availability and access to services reflect the strength of social fabric and community vitality. A challenge for many inland rural and remote Australian communities is maintaining businesses and services as the population decreases and ages.

People of all ages are moving to larger towns and regional centres in search of employment opportunities, education, better quality of life and a broader range of services. Between 2001 and 2006, the total population in rural and remote areas of Australia decreased (see Figure 7). Some rural areas no longer have the critical mass or threshold population to sustain community services and activities. The availability and access to services are critical for supporting and building social fabric.



**Figure 7 Population change between 2001 and 2006, by size of locality**

An ageing population increases the dependency on the working population and the demand for a range of services. Over the five years to 2006, dependency ratios have decreased because of a reduction in the number of children in rural and regional Australia, thereby accelerating the rate of ageing (see Figure 8). This is likely to reduce future labour supply for local industries and have an impact on the future viability of some towns and rural communities.

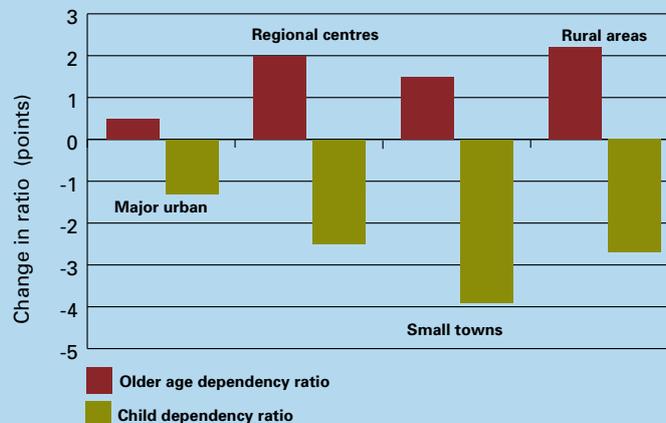
## Impacts of the prolonged drought on communities

Drought has placed a considerable stress on rural and regional communities, often adversely affecting the social fabric, which is not easily recovered. Many people have had to seek employment off-farm for additional household income, and the health and wellbeing of rural communities has deteriorated.

The extended period of drought experienced since 2001 has also contributed to the decreased employment opportunities in agricultural industries and other ancillary and services industries in rural areas, and has also caused a population shift to larger regional centres. This poses increasing difficulties in maintaining the social fabric of shrinking towns during and after drought periods. For more information on this topic, see the thematic *Drought in rural Australia — exploring the social impact in three case study regions* in this series.

## Conclusions

Building and maintaining social fabric is important for the future of rural and regional communities and industries. This thematic study uses analysis of social and demographic data from the ABS Census to assess the social fabric in rural and regional Australia. More work — particularly using case studies — is needed to investigate and test the causalities inferred in this study to assess the impact on the nature of social fabric in rural and regional areas. Further research is also needed to better understand the inter-relatedness and influence of social fabric over economic and environmental capital.



**Figure 8 Change in child and elderly dependency ratio, urban and rural, 2001–06**

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## Attachment 1 Indicators of social fabric in selected areas

This attachment presents information from *Country Matters: Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia* (the Atlas) for six rural areas, to demonstrate how the social fabric of communities can be very different.

### PALERANG (PARTS A AND B)

The Palerang region in southeast New South Wales is on the eastern border of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). It is predominantly a rural area with wool, beef, and sheep grazing industries alongside wineries, vineyards, arts and craft galleries, and nineteenth century heritage-listed buildings. The region benefits from its close proximity to Canberra, especially from the movement of people to a rural lifestyle.

Palerang A is on the eastern side of Canberra and includes the towns of Bungendore and Captains Flat. It has had very high levels of population growth (27.8% from 2001 to 2006) mainly from people from Canberra moving for the rural lifestyle. The area has a high proportion of children because of the young families moving to the area. The area has a low dependency ratio (41.7) compared with the non-capital city average (55.5) — the dependency ratio measures the number of dependents (aged 0–14 years and 65 years and over) compared with the number of people of working age (15–64 years) — and has a balance in the number of young males and young females. Consequently, the median age of the area (39 years) is only slightly above the non-capital city average (38.8 years). It has a very high rate of participation in work (75.5%), including a high number of working mothers (largely because of the proximity of jobs in the Canberra workforce) and low proportions of low-income families. Palerang A has very low levels of unemployment and relatively low reliance on employment in agriculture, because many people are part of the Canberra workforce. The population has high levels of qualifications (again, because of the proximity to Canberra-based education institutions) and high levels of retention of young people in

schools. Home ownership is high, and there are high levels of car ownership because of the need to travel to Canberra. The area has good internet access and the community has high levels of volunteering.

Palerang B is on the eastern side Palerang A, and is closer to the coast. It includes the town of Braidwood. It has also experienced high levels of population growth (16.1% from 2001 to 2006), mainly from people from Canberra moving for the rural lifestyle. The area has a low proportion of children and young people (and many more young males than young females) because of the slightly older age group moving to the area. Consequently the median age of the area (45.8 years) is well above the non-capital city average (38.8%). Levels of participation in work are similar to the non-capital city average and unemployment rates are low. It has a higher proportion of low-income households because of the older age profile. Palerang B has a high level of dependence on employment in agriculture because it is further from Canberra, making it more difficult to commute to employment in Canberra. The population has high levels of qualifications, but below-average retention of young people in school. Many people own their own homes, as well as cars (because of the distance to travel to nearby regional centres). The area has average levels of internet access and the community has high levels of volunteering.

## KIMBA

Kimba is on the Eyre Peninsular near the Gawler Ranges in South Australia, midway across Australia. The area is highly dependent on agriculture for employment, with nearly half of all employment being in agriculture. Overall, the population is decreasing. Proportions of children in the population are low (and decreasing), and the proportion of young people is very low — although the numbers are now increasing. There are more young males than young females, because young women tend to leave for better education and employment opportunities. Kimba has high levels of participation in work, and very high levels of mothers working. Retention of 16-year-olds in schools is 100%, but the level of post-secondary school education attainment is very low. Kimba has a low proportion of one-parent families, but high proportions of low-income households because of the older age profile and the dependence on agriculture for employment. Home and car ownership is high, internet access is average, but levels of volunteering in the community are very high (more than double the non-capital city average).

## TUMBY BAY

Tumby Bay is on the southern Eyre Peninsular in South Australia, and is highly dependent on agriculture for employment. The area's population increase has been low, and it has low (and decreasing) proportions of children, and low proportions of young people (although the numbers of the latter are increasing). Tumby Bay has more young males than young females, because young women tend to leave for better education and employment opportunities. However, the area has low levels of participation in the workforce (57.5% compared with the average of 62.0%), but high levels of mothers working. Retention of 16-year-olds in schools is high, but the level of post-secondary school education attainment is very low. The area has low proportions of one-parent families, but high proportions of low-income families because of the older age profile and the dependence on agriculture. Home and car ownership is high, internet access is very low (43.8% compared with the average of 52.7%), but levels of volunteering are very high (nearly double the non-capital city average).

## ROMA

Roma is a township in central southern Queensland. It has experienced above-average population growth and has high proportions of children and young people. Roma has approximately four times the average number of Indigenous people in the population (9.0%), and the number of Indigenous people is increasing rapidly. The township has more young women than young men; consequently, it has a young age population profile (only 32.3 years). Roma has high levels of participation in the workforce (more than 10.0% higher than the average), and very high levels of mothers working in full-time employment (nearly 10.0% higher than the average), and low levels of unemployment. The township has low levels of employment in agriculture, because it is largely a service town to the surrounding area of Bungil. The area has low levels of retention of 16-year-olds in school (only 60.0%, and decreasing), and low levels of post-secondary school educational attainment. It has high levels of one-parent families. The town has low levels of home ownership, low levels of internet access and average levels of volunteering in the community.

## BUNGIL

Bungil is the rural area around Roma in central southern Queensland. It has experienced above-average population growth (11.1%) and has very high proportions of children but a low proportion of young people in the population. The area has an average proportion (2.3%) of Indigenous people, although the number of Indigenous people is increasing rapidly. The population contains many more young males (45.3% more) than young females, and an average age population profile (39.4 years). Participation in the workforce is very high (more than 20.0% higher than the average), many mothers in full-time employment (more than 10.0% higher than the average), very low unemployment, and high levels of employment in agriculture (nearly half the total employment). The area has very low levels of retention of 16-year-olds at school (63.0%, but increasing), and very low levels of post-secondary school educational attainment (36.4%). Bungil has very low levels of one-parent families. The area has high levels of home ownership, average levels of internet access and above-average levels of volunteering in the community.

## LOCKHART

Lockhart is a sheep and cereal growing area west of Wagga, known as the 'verandah town' of the southern Riverina in New South Wales due to its heritage verandahs. The population of Lockhart has decreased by 6.7% since 2001 but comprises an above-average proportion of children (in contrast with a below-average proportion of young people). It has 27.8% more young males than young females, and an older age profile, with the median age of 42.5 years (which is much higher than the Australian average of 36.6 years).

Participation in the workforce is average, many mothers work in full-time employment, and the level of unemployment is average. Employment in agriculture is high — 38.8% of total employment).

Lockhart has average levels of retention of 16-year-olds at school and average levels of post-secondary school educational attainment. It has low levels of one-parent families, but this is increasing. The area has very high levels of home ownership, average levels of internet access and average levels of volunteering in the community.



Table A1: Indicators of social fabric for selected areas

—	signifies indicator of very strong element of social fabric							
-	signifies indicator of strong element of social fabric							
-	signifies indicator of low element of social fabric							
	Total non-capital city average	Palerang A	Palerang B	Kimba	Tumby Bay	Roma	Bungil	Lockhart
Population growth, 2001–06	6.9%	—	—	-	-	-	-	-
Proportion of children, 2006	20.8%	—	-	-	-	—	—	-
Increase in children, 2001–06	-0.4%	—	—	-	-	-	—	-
Proportion of young people, 2006	12.5%	-	-	-	-	—	-	-
Increase in young people, 2001–06	6.9%	—	-	—	-	-	—	-
Ageing (median age), 2006	38.8 years	-	-	-	-	—	-	-
Increase in median age, 2001–06	2.0 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dependency ratio, 2006	55.5	—	-	-	-	-	-	-
Young people sex ratio (number of males per 100 females), 2006	105.2	—	-	-	-	-	-	-
Participation in work, 2006	62.0%	—	-	—	-	—	—	-
Increase in participation in work, 2001–06	1.6%	—	-	—	—	—	—	-
Mothers in employment, 2006	67.9%	—	-	—	—	—	—	-
Increase in mothers in employment, 2001–06	25.4%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Unemployment rate, 2006	3.6%	—	—	—	—	—	—	-
Change in unemployment rate, 2001–06	-2.6%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Industry concentration, 2006	37.0%	-	-	-	-	—	-	-
Employment in agriculture and mining, 2006	12.1%	—	-	-	-	—	-	-
Post-secondary school qualifications, 2006	48.4%	—	-	-	-	-	-	-
Increase in qualifications, 2001–06	+3.2%	-	-	—	—	-	-	-
16-year-olds in school, 2006	78.1%	—	-	—	—	-	-	-
Change in 16-year-olds in school, 2001–06	2.0%	—	-	—	-	-	—	-
Proportion of DINKs, 2006	4.5%	—	—	—	-	—	-	-
Change in number of DINKs, 2001–06	11.2%	—	—	—	-	—	-	-

Table A1: Indicators of social fabric for selected areas (continued)

	Total non-capital city average	Palerang A	Palerang B	Kimba	Tumby Bay	Roma	Bungil	Lockhart
Proportion of one-parent families, 2006	11.4%	—	—	—	—	-	—	—
Change in number of one-parent families, 2001–06	4.8%	-	-	-	—	-	—	-
Proportion of low-income households, 2006	16.7%	—	-	-	-	—	—	-
Own home, 2006	65.2%	—	—	-	—	-	—	—
Access to car, 2006	92.1%	—	—	—	—	-	—	—
Household internet access, 2006	52.7%	—	-	-	-	-	-	-
Volunteering, 2006	21.4%	-	—	—	—	-	-	—

DINK = double-income no kids





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