



Australian Government  
Bureau of Rural Sciences

# COUNTRY MATTERS



2008

SOCIAL ATLAS OF  
RURAL AND REGIONAL  
AUSTRALIA

# SUMMARY BOOKLET

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

# About the Atlas

*2008 Country Matters: Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia* (the Atlas) focuses on the people, communities and industries of regional and rural Australia. It describes the economic and social circumstances of over 7.5 million people living in more than 800 non-capital city regions across Australia.

The Atlas provides an analysis of the diverse characteristics of Australia, including aspects of emerging national and local social trends. These are represented visually in maps, including the dynamics of education, the ageing population, the changing workforce and industry diversification. The Atlas uses data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Census of population and housing* from 1996, 2001 and 2006.

The Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS) in the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) has produced the Atlas to inform policy development. The department's mission is to 'achieve stronger rural and regional communities through more sustainable, competitive and profitable rural industries'. Understanding social trends in rural and regional Australia is fundamental to achieving this goal.

## TERMS USED

The analyses in the Atlas are based on data obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *2006 Census of population and housing*. The following terms are used.

- Major urban centres — more than 100 000 people (including capital cities).
- Regional centres — 1000 to 100 000 people.
- Small towns — 200 to 1000 people.
- Rural areas — fewer than 200 people.
- Country — includes all the areas outside the capital cities.
- Statistical local area (SLA) — are fundamentally local government areas.



## Where do people live in Australia?

At the 2006 Census, more than 7.5 million Australians lived outside capital cities — the population in these non-capital areas increased by 472 700 between 2001 and 2006. The average annual population growth in non-capital city areas was higher than in capital cities.

People have been moving to coastal areas. The population of regional centres and small towns has been increasing, and the population in rural areas has been declining. The largest population growth outside capital cities occurred in Queensland — an increase of 271 300 people — mainly due to significant growth in coastal areas. The non-capital city population growth in Queensland was three times the non-capital city growth in New South Wales (85 900 people) and five times the non-capital city growth in Victoria (50 800 people).



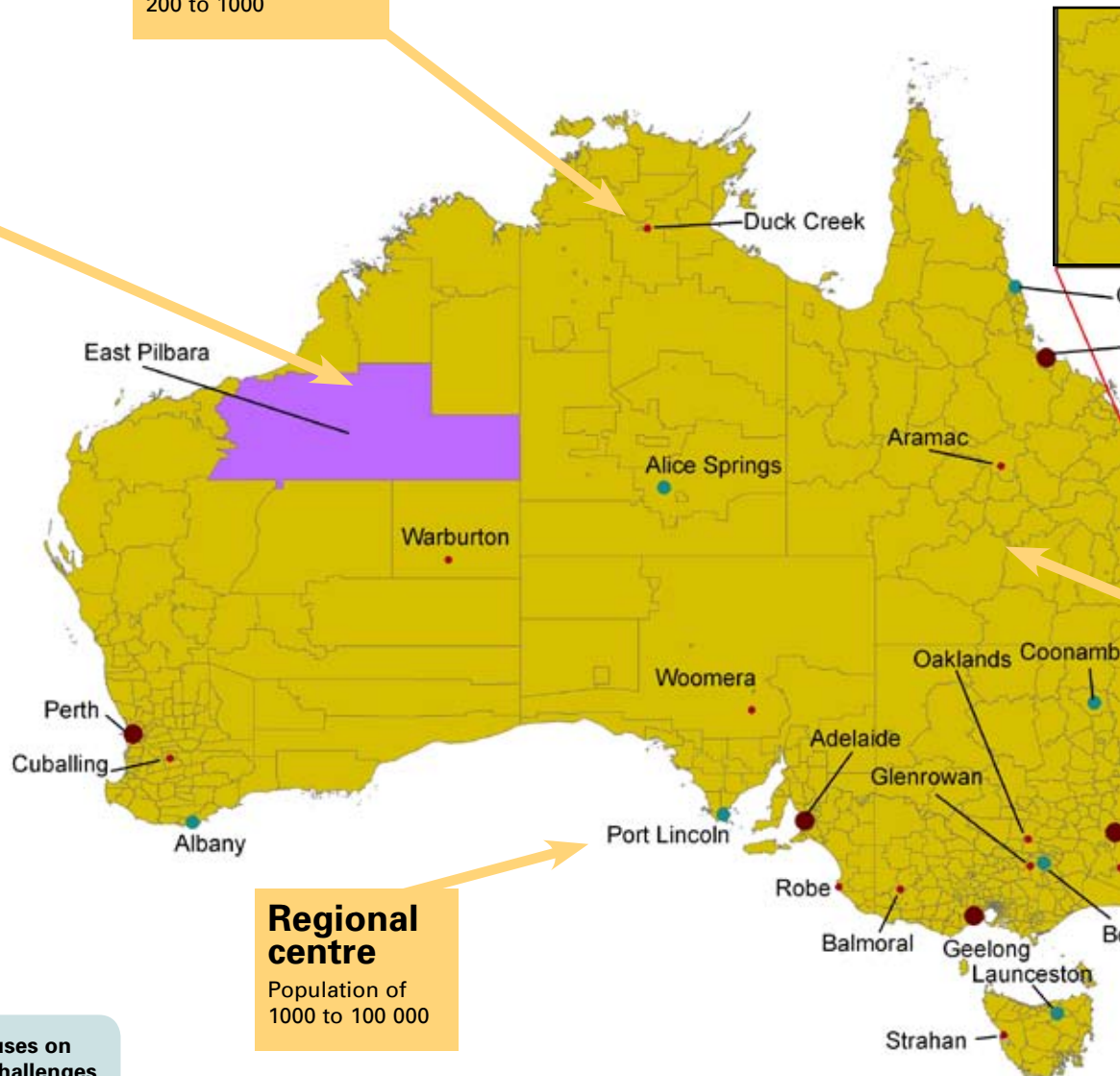


# Explanation of geographic classification

## Small towns

Population clusters of 200 to 1000

A statistical local area (SLA) such as East Pilbara is very large, and there are few people living here.



## Regional centre

Population of 1000 to 100 000

The Atlas identifies and focuses on unique features, lifestyles, challenges and opportunities in regional centres, small towns and rural areas.

## Social and economic circumstances in rural and regional areas

### Regional centres

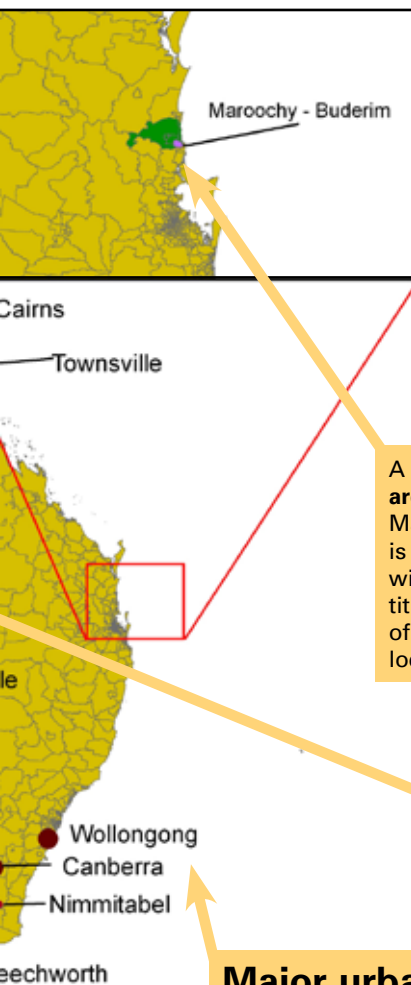
Regional centre populations are increasing. People from surrounding small towns, rural areas and major urban centres continue to move to regional centres for affordable housing, health and education services and lifestyle benefits. People from overseas are also settling in regional centres. A younger population age profile reflects both this domestic and international movement. Employment in regional centres is concentrated in retail, health and manufacturing, and regional centres provide a range of services to the surrounding small towns and rural areas. Regional centres also have the highest proportion of one-parent families in Australia, comparatively low levels of participation in the labour force, post-secondary school education attainment and 16-year-olds remaining in school, and only relatively moderate levels of household internet access.

### Small towns

Social and economic circumstances in small towns in Australia depend on their location. Small towns in coastal regions, near major regional centres or close to popular amenity areas have been growing and diversifying, while some small towns in remote areas or far from regional centres have been experiencing little change or decline.

Small towns have the oldest age profile in Australia and a high proportion of low-income households, although home ownership is high. They have comparatively low levels of post-secondary school education attainment and fewer 16-year-olds staying at school. Local retail, health services and manufacturing provide most of the employment for people living in small towns and employment growth has been high (particularly for those located in popular areas). Diversification into new industries has been occurring and participation in the workforce increasing. Small towns have one of the highest levels of volunteering in Australia.

# used in the Atlas



A small **statistical local area** (SLA) such as Maroochy – Buderim is one of several SLAs with Maroochy in the title because the city of Maroochydore is located in this area.

## Rural area

Population of less than 200

## Major urban centre

Population greater than 100 000, including capital cities

## Did you know?

- More than two-thirds of homes in Belyando (inland from Mackay, Queensland) and Kent (southwest Western Australia) had internet access, which is higher than the national average of 63.0%.
- A large proportion of people living in Dubbo (west of Sydney) owned or were purchasing a home (83.2%).
- The number of children in Jericho (central Queensland) dropped by 19.7% between 2001 and 2006.
- In both the Snowy River SLA (near Cooma) and Armidale (northern New South Wales) over 63.5% of people had achieved post-secondary school qualifications.
- More than 45.6% of the people living in the areas of Elliston, Cleve and Kimba (all located in the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia) were volunteers.
- Home alone? In 2006 there were 1.7 million one-person households across Australia; this is almost a quarter of all Australian households.
- The dating game for young men in Greenough (south of Geraldton) could be challenging — young men outnumber young women two to one.
- The national average proportion of 16-year-olds remaining in full-time education was 81.7%. However, areas such as Pingelly (southeast of Perth) and Kellerberrin (east of Perth) had significantly fewer 16-year-olds remaining in full-time study (57.1% and 55.6%, respectively).
- The proportion of people who volunteered their time in caring for those who have a disability in Pallarenda-Shelly Beach (near Townsville) was more than triple the national average in 2006.
- The area with the oldest median age in Australia was Victor Harbour (south of Adelaide) with a median age of 54.4 years.
- On Kangaroo Island, 81.4% of mothers with dependent children were participating in the labour force.
- The number of young people (aged 15–24 years) declined in the areas of Moree (19.7%), Walgett (20.0%) and Warren (35.2%) in northern New South Wales.
- The number of people employed in agriculture, fishing and forestry in rural areas was 192 500 in 2006, down from 216 900 in 2001.
- Fewer than 50 of the 800 non-capital city SLAs are getting younger — these are remote areas with relatively large Indigenous populations and some areas of the Gold Coast where young people and families have moved.

## and regional Australia

### Rural areas

Australia's rural areas face the challenges of prolonged drought and a high reliance on employment in agriculture. People have been leaving rural areas, especially young people and families with children. There are more males than females in rural areas, declining employment in agriculture and low levels of industry diversification.

However, rural areas have the lowest proportion of one-parent families, the highest levels of home ownership, levels of internet connection that are second only to major urban and regional centres, the highest levels of participation in the workforce, the lowest levels of unemployment, and the highest levels of mothers participating in the labour force. Rural areas also have the highest number of people with vocational qualifications, relatively high levels of 16-year-olds remaining in school and the highest levels of volunteering in Australia.





# Social trends

Critical insights about people and communities in rural and regional Australia provided by the Atlas can inform public discussion and policy development.

## Volunteering in the community

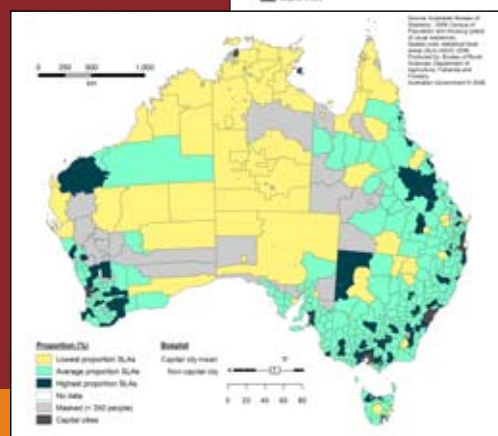
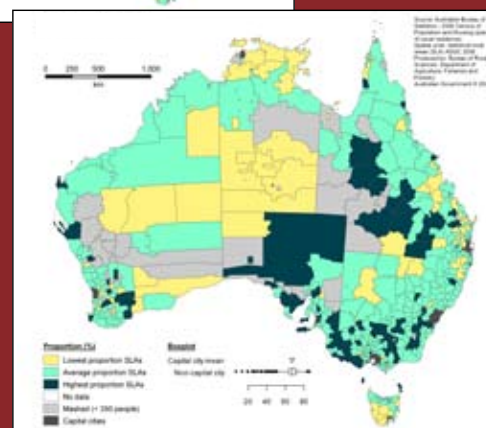
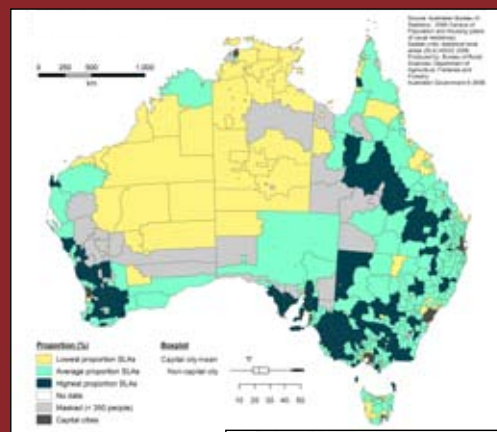
A higher proportion of people are volunteers in rural areas than anywhere else in Australia. Voluntary work includes help given willingly in the form of time, service or skills to a club, organisation or association. The smaller the community, the more people do voluntary work. In 2006, more than a quarter of people in rural areas (27.9%) and people in small towns (26.6%) volunteered. This level is much higher than the national average (19.8%) and illustrates the commitment of people in rural areas and small towns to maintaining services in their communities.

## Participation of mothers with dependents in the workforce

Mothers with dependents (children 14 years or younger or students aged 15 to 24 years) in rural areas have the highest level of participation in the workforce (71.0%), much higher than in any of the major urban centres (67.3%). Increasing participation of mothers in the workforce can have many benefits: higher household incomes, more opportunities for families, and more skilled and unskilled people available to work in businesses and industries. Rural mothers with dependents may be working on farms, in small businesses or in off-farm jobs close to rural properties, in order to supplement farm and family income.

## Internet connection

Access to computers and the internet is fundamental for modern businesses and households, including the operation of businesses and farming activities in rural areas. Major urban centres had the highest proportion of households connected to the internet (66.1%), but households in rural areas had almost caught up (63.5%). Household internet connection in rural areas was proportionally greater than in regional centres (54.8%) and small towns (51.3%). The 'digital divide' is no longer based on households being in either an urban or rural location.



# Social trends from the city to the country — emerging developments

**The Atlas highlights emerging trends in country areas (regional centres, small towns and rural areas). In terms of social and economic development, country areas are not 'behind' major urban centres, despite popular belief that this is the case. The Atlas shows that a range of positive trends have occurred outside Australian major urban centres:**

- The highest levels of workforce participation were in rural areas (67.5%) and rural people continued to work into older age than their major urban counterparts.
- Housing was more affordable and home ownership rates were higher in rural areas than in major urban centres. More than three-quarters (76.2%) of homes in rural areas and 69.4% of homes in small towns were owned or being purchased. This was considerably higher than the rate of home ownership in major urban centres (63.6%).
- Rural people are embracing the internet. All areas have experienced more than 25.0% growth in the number of households connected to the internet since 2001, but the largest growth has occurred in rural areas (28.5%).
- Country people are taking up the challenge of life-long learning. Across Australia, the number of people who attained vocational qualifications grew by 18.1% between 2001 and 2006, but the largest increase of people obtaining certificates or diplomas was in small towns (25.2%) and regional centres (22.7%).
- People in country areas were more likely to take on voluntary work to support their communities. In 2006, more than a quarter of people in rural areas (27.9%) and small towns (26.6%) volunteered their time. This volunteering rate was considerably higher than the national average (19.8%).

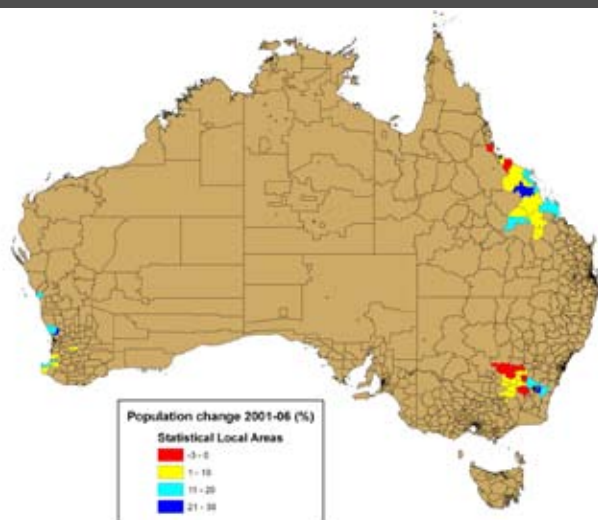


# Social themes in rural and regional Australia

The Atlas has four companion booklets, providing detailed analyses of four social themes pertinent to life in rural and regional Australia:

- *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.*

The following is a summary of *Drought in rural Australia*, in which the social impacts of prolonged drought are explored in three regions of Australia: central coastal Queensland, the Riverina in New South Wales and southwest Western Australia.



**Map 2: Location of case study areas and population change, 2001–06**

The pressures of drought can result in family stress, family breakdown, changes to family structure and loss of, or changes in, employment. In the three case study regions, declining employment in agriculture, fisheries and forestry is the biggest change that is most obviously attributable to the severe drought in the five years to 2006. The total number of people employed in each of the regions increased (from 10.7% to 19.1%), but the number of people employed in agriculture decreased (by 20.6% in central Queensland, 8.8% in the Riverina New South Wales and 7.8% in southwest Western Australia). In 2006, agriculture was no longer the biggest employment sector in these three case study regions — there had been a shift to other industries, such as mining and retail.

There were other changes in the three case study regions that were of greater magnitude than changes in regions with similar characteristics:

- the number of mothers in the workforce increased by 5.5% in the Queensland region, 4.8% in the Riverina region and 3.7% in the Western Australia region
- the types of families living in the three regions changed as the proportion of one-parent and double income, no kids (DINK) households increased.



# What is happening in areas within my state?

## New South Wales

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>People with post-secondary school qualifications</b> | New South Wales had the largest proportion of people with post-secondary school qualifications in small towns and rural areas. |
| <b>Double income, no kids (DINK) households</b>         | The lowest percentage of DINK households in regional centres, small towns and rural areas occurred in New South Wales.         |
| <b>Household internet connection</b>                    | The greatest proportion of household internet connections in small towns (55.5%) was in New South Wales.                       |

## Victoria

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Volunteering</b>                              | Victoria had the second-highest levels of volunteering in regional centres, small towns and rural areas.                               |
| <b>16-year-olds remaining in full-time study</b> | Victoria had the highest percentage of 16-year-olds remaining in full-time education in regional centres, small towns and rural areas. |
| <b>Low-income households</b>                     | The largest proportion of low-income households in small towns occurred in Victoria.   |

## Queensland

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Population</b>                 | Queensland's population growth in regional centres was relatively low (especially in centres away from the coast) and the population in small towns and rural areas declined.                |
| <b>Children (0–14 years)</b>      | The number of children declined in Queensland's regional centres, small towns and rural areas. However, there was an increase in the number of children in Queensland's major urban centres. |
| <b>Young people (15–24 years)</b> | The number of young people in regional centres and small towns across Australia increased, except in Queensland, where this increase occurred in major urban centres.                        |

## Western Australia

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Population</b>                                | Regional centres in Western Australia had the strongest population growth (14.7%) compared with the rest of Australia — more than double the national average population growth of all regional centres (5.7%). |
| <b>Household internet connection</b>             | Western Australia had the highest level of household internet connection in rural areas (65.5%).  |
| <b>Sex ratio in young people (15–24 years)</b>   | The greatest sex ratio imbalance in rural areas occurred in Western Australia, where there were 38.7% more young men than young women.  |
| <b>16-year-olds remaining in full-time study</b> | Western Australia had a relatively low proportion of 16-year-olds remaining in full-time education in regional centres, small towns and rural areas.  |

## South Australia

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Working mothers</b>                                  | The greatest proportion of mothers with dependents participating in the workforce in regional centres, small towns and rural areas was in South Australia. |
| <b>People with post-secondary school qualifications</b> | South Australia had the smallest percentage of people with post-secondary school qualifications in regional centres.                                       |
| <b>Volunteering</b>                                     | South Australia had the largest proportion of people volunteering in regional centres, small towns and rural areas.  |

## Tasmania

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Population</b>                 | High population growth occurred in Tasmania's regional centres and small towns, and Tasmania was the only state or territory with population growth in rural areas. |
| <b>Young people (15–24 years)</b> | The largest increase in the proportion of young people living in rural areas occurred in Tasmania.  |
| <b>One-parent families</b>        | Tasmania had the highest proportion of one-parent families with dependent children living in regional centres.  |

## Northern Territory

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Household internet connection</b> | The Northern Territory had the highest level of household internet connections in regional centres (63.4%), but the lowest level of household internet connections in small towns (25.0%) and rural areas (35.9%). |
| <b>Young people (15–24 years)</b>    | The largest increase in the numbers of young people occurred in Northern Territory small towns (18.3%) and also the largest decline in numbers of young people in rural areas (19.2%).                             |
| <b>One-parent families</b>           | The Northern Territory had the greatest proportion of one-parent families with dependents in regional centres, small towns and rural areas.  |





# Profile of rural and regional Australia

|  | Major urban centres | Regional centres | Small towns | Rural areas | Australia |
|--|---------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Population change, 2001–06 (%)                                       | 8.2                 | 5.7              | 3.1         | –0.9        | 6.6       |
| Change in the number of children, 2001–06 (%)                        | 4.0                 | –1.3             | –5.9        | –8.3        | 1.1       |
| Change in the number of young people, 2001–06 (%)                    | 7.8                 | 5.5              | 4.2         | –2.5        | 6.4       |
| Change in the number of working age people, 2001–06 (%)              | 8.8                 | 6.1              | 4.7         | –0.6        | 7.2       |
| Change in the number of people aged 75 years and over, 2001–06 (%)   | 16.8                | 20.9             | 14.3        | 16.4        | 17.7      |
| Indigenous people, 2006 (%)  | 1.2                 | 4.5              | 10.5        | 3.1         | 2.3       |
| Dependency ratio, 2006   | 46.9                | 58.3             | 58.3        | 48.5        | 49.7      |
| Young people sex ratio (no. males per 100 females 15–24 years), 2006 | 101.4               | 101.6            | 110.5       | 125.1       | 101.4     |
| Recent arrivals to Australia, 2006 (%)                               | 5.1                 | 1.5              | 0.7         | 0.9         | 3.8       |
| Couple families with dependents, 2006 (%)                            | 37.6                | 34.2             | 34.4        | 39.2        | 37.0      |
| Double income, no kids (DINK) households, 2006 (%)                   | 6.9                 | 4.9              | 3.4         | 3.2         | 6.0       |
| One-parent families, 2006 (%)  | 10.6                | 12.9             | 11.5        | 6.7         | 10.7      |
| Low-income families, 2006 (%)  | 15.2                | 19.6             | 20.6        | 14.8        | 16.3      |
| Own or purchasing home, 2006 (%)                                     | 63.6                | 63.6             | 69.4        | 76.2        | 64.9      |
| Household internet connection, 2006 (%)                              | 66.1                | 54.8             | 51.3        | 63.5        | 63.0      |
| Participation in labour force, 2006 (%)                              | 65.6                | 60.8             | 58.4        | 67.5        | 64.6      |
| Mothers participating in the labour force, 2006 (%)                  | 67.3                | 67.0             | 64.3        | 71.0        | 67.5      |
| Unemployment rate, 2006 (%)  | 5.1                 | 6.1              | 6.2         | 4.1         | 5.2       |
| Employment in natural resource industries, 2006 (%)                  | 1.0                 | 5.6              | 9.5         | 23.2        | 4.3       |
| Post-secondary school education attainment, 2006 (%)                 | 48.2                | 41.6             | 38.4        | 43.2        | 46.1      |
| 16-year-olds remaining at school, 2006 (%)                           | 83.7                | 77.3             | 73.7        | 81.0        | 81.7      |
| Volunteering, 2006 (%)   | 15.9                | 20.5             | 24.2        | 25.4        | 17.9      |
| Care for people with a disability, 2006 (%)                          | 4.3                 | 5.3              | 5.0         | 3.4         | 4.4       |



**Australian Government**  
**Bureau of Rural Sciences**

## 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 Matter: 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).