

Measures of Australia's progress: summary

This publication is about Australia's progress. It is intended to help Australians address the question, 'Has life in our country got better, especially during the past decade?'

Answering the question is far from easy. Indeed there can be no definitive answer, because we all have our own views about what is most important to individual and national life. The ABS hopes that Australians will use these indicators to form their own views of how our country is progressing.

Assessing progress

A reader's assessment of whether Australia is, on balance, progressing will depend on the relative importance he or she places on each dimension. For some readers, an improvement in the health and education of Australians might be more important than a decline in our biodiversity. Others might disagree.

The reader's overall assessment might also be based upon the strength of progress or regress in each dimension. Or it might be based on patterns that underlie the national trends – so it might be important to know not just whether health is improving for the Australian population overall, but also whether it is improving for particular groups of Australians (such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples). The commentary on each dimension provides additional information of these kinds.

The suite of indicators presented in this publication suggests progress in some areas of Australian life and regress in others. What follows is a very brief summary of information embodied in the headline indicators. Overall progress, as explained above, should not be assessed by simply counting the numbers of areas getting better and subtracting those getting worse. Some aspects of progress (especially aspects such as national income and national wealth) are more easily

encapsulated in a small number of indicators, than are some social and environmental aspects. And some readers will give greater importance to some progress indicators than others.

Progress: Individuals

Three headline dimensions (*Health, Education and training*, and *Work*), and one supplementary dimension (*Culture and leisure*), are associated with this area of progress. There are three headline indicators and all three suggest progress during the past decade.

Health. During the past decade, Australians' health improved – children born in 2004 were expected to live two to three years longer than those born in 1994. While there have been some improvements, Indigenous Australians continue to have a life expectancy that is considerably lower than other Australians.

Education and training. During the past 10 years, the Australian population became more educated – between 1995 and 2005, the proportion of people aged 25–64 years with a vocational or higher education qualification rose from 46% to 58%.

Work. Since the last recession in the early 1990s the unemployment rate has continued to decline, and the average annual unemployment rate in 2005 was 5.1%.

Progress: The economy and economic resources

Five headline dimensions (*National income, Economic hardship, National wealth, Housing, and Productivity*), and two supplementary dimensions (*Competitiveness and openness, and Inflation*) are presented, although headline indicators are only available for four of the headline dimensions. There appears to have been progress in these dimensions.

Dimensions of progress

	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>The economy and economic resources</i>	<i>The environment</i>	<i>Living together</i>
Headline dimensions	Health	National income	The natural landscape	Family, community and social cohesion
	Education and training	Economic hardship	The air and atmosphere	Crime
	Work	National wealth	Oceans and estuaries	Democracy, governance and citizenship
		Housing		
	Productivity			
Supplementary dimensions	Culture and leisure	Competitiveness and openness		Communication
		Inflation		Transport

National income

Australia experienced significant real income growth during the past decade. Between 1994–95 and 2004–05, real net national disposable income per capita grew by around 3.0% a year.

Economic hardship

Between 1994–95 to 2003–04 the real income of less well-off Australians (those in the second and third lowest deciles of the income distribution) grew by 22%, as did the incomes of Australians in the middle income group.

National wealth

National wealth, as measured in Australia's balance sheet, grew over the past decade. Real net worth per capita increased by 0.9% a year on average between 1995 and 2005.

Housing

Housing is generally good in Australia, although poor or inadequate housing is a problem for some groups, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas. No headline indicator is presented.

Productivity

In recent years Australia has experienced improved productivity growth. During the decade 1994–95 to 2004–05, Australia's multifactor productivity rose 1.3% per year on average.

Progress: The environment

Three headline dimensions (*The natural landscape*, *The air and atmosphere*, and *Oceans and estuaries*) are presented. While there are six headline indicators across this broad area of progress, one headline dimension does not have a headline indicator. It is difficult to obtain national time series data that encapsulate the changes in Australia's natural capital. Several headline indicators suggest regress for some aspects of the environment during the past decade.

The natural landscape

Biodiversity cannot be measured comprehensively, but some experts, such as those on the State of the Environment Committee, believe Australian biodiversity declined during the past decade. This is partly encapsulated in a rise in the numbers of threatened birds and mammals. Land clearance, one influence thought to be reducing biodiversity, decreased by about 38% between 1993 and 2003. The area of land protected in national parks and the like increased.

In 2000, about 5.7 million hectares of land were affected by, or at high risk of developing, dryland salinity, a widespread form of land degradation.

Detailed national time series data are not available, but a variety of partial evidence points to a decline in the quality of some of Australia's waterways. In 2000 about one-quarter of Australia's surface water management areas were classed as highly used or overused.

The air and atmosphere

Australia's air remains relatively clean by the standards of other developed nations. The available indicators, such as the incidence of fine particle pollution in several cities, suggest that Australian air quality has not increased during the past decade, despite increased motor vehicle use.

Australia's total net greenhouse gas emissions in 2003 were 1.1% higher than they were in 1990. Per capita, we have one of the world's highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, although our per capita emissions are decreasing, as are our emissions per \$ of GDP.

Oceans and estuaries

No headline indicator is presented although the commentary discusses a range of information about the pressures on – and state of – Australia's marine ecosystems.

Progress: Living together

Three headline dimensions (*Family, community and social cohesion*, *Crime*, and *Democracy, governance and citizenship*), and two supplementary dimensions (*Communication and Transport*), of progress are presented. Only one headline dimension has a headline indicator, although there is some discussion about progress below for the other two headline dimensions.

Family, community and social cohesion

Family and community are important aspects of society. The quality and strength of people's relationships and bonds with others – their family, friends and the wider community – are important ingredients of the level of social cohesion. And a more cohesive society is one in which communities are strong and inclusive, and where fewer people fall through the cracks. Rather than present a single indicator, this commentary presents some measures which illustrate aspects of family and community life in Australia, particularly those that are important to social cohesion.

Crime

Though small, the changes in the victimisation prevalence rates for personal crimes between 1998 and 2005 showed an increase from 4.8% to 5.3%, the same level as in 2002. Most of these people were assaulted. Between 1993 and 2005, the proportion of households that were the victim of a household crime (an actual or attempted break-in or motor vehicle theft) fell from 8.3% to 6.2%, after remaining at about 9% in 1998 and 2002.

Democracy, governance and citizenship

National life is influenced, not just by material qualities such as economic output, health and education, but also by many intangible qualities such as the quality of our public life, the fairness of our society, the health of our democracy and the extent to which citizens of Australia participate actively in their communities or cooperate with one another. Rather than present a single indicator, this commentary presents some

measures which illustrate aspects of democracy, governance and citizenship.

Links between dimensions of progress

Most, if not all, of these dimensions of progress are linked. Changes in one dimension will be associated with changes in many others – sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. A few of these links are outlined in each headline commentary; but many other important links are not discussed.

Plans for the future

The ABS publishes a summary of the headline indicators on the website annually. The next full issue of *Measures of Australia's Progress* is currently planned for 2008. The ABS hopes to continue to improve the publication in the future and a review of the current content of MAP is planned before the next full edition.