

Introduction



A Picture of the Nation: The Statistician's Report on the 2006 Census analyses information collected in the 2006 Census of Population and Housing. It also incorporates information from previous censuses—in some instances going back as far as 1911. It presents stories about contemporary society and trends that affect the lives of Australian people. Drawing on the rich variety of topics covered by the census and looking across different geographic areas and population groups, this report showcases the many strengths of census data.

The report consists of eight chapters, each focusing on different areas of social interest and concern: population, cultural diversity, community, living arrangements, education, work, economic resources and housing. Each chapter contains an overview and two or three feature articles. The overviews report on relevant census findings at a broad level. The feature articles focus on specific social issues or population subgroups. While the overviews and feature articles are self-contained and readable in their own right, they complement the other articles in their chapters. For example, along with unpaid childcare and unpaid care for people with disabilities, the 'Community overview' examines volunteering in Australia at the broad level. Complementing this, one of the chapter's feature articles, 'Volunteering across Australia', further explores the geographic dimension of volunteering by focusing on smaller geographic areas across Australia.

To help readers get the most from the stories presented here, tables, graphs, maps and boxes are used in conjunction with the easy-to-read analysis. For those wanting to understand more, a Glossary provides definitions of the complex concepts used throughout the report, and definition boxes explain terms and concepts that are specific to the overviews or articles where they are used. While the articles primarily draw on census data, information or data obtained from other sources, such as other publications or Australian Bureau of Statistics data collections, are referenced in endnotes for each overview and article.

The fact that high quality national censuses have been held in Australia for almost a century, allows the characteristics of Australia's diverse population to be analysed in many different ways. Two approaches for examining sub-groups of the population have been used in this report: Life cycle and Generational group analysis. By grouping together people at similar stages of life, Life-cycle groups help to reveal the common stories and trends experienced by members of these groups. For instance, young adults have the greatest diversity in living arrangements, reflecting the many transitions they are facing (see the 'Living arrangements overview', p. 60–72). Similarly, by splitting the population into five age-based Generation groups, such as the Lucky and Baby Boomer Generations, and Generation X and Y, interesting differences emerge. For instance, more than three quarters of the Lucky Generation were affiliated with a Christian denomination, compared with just over one half of Generation X and Y (see 'Religion across the generations', p. 54–58).

Reflecting the important role that the census has in providing information about small geographic areas, many parts of this report illustrate the different ways that Australia can be divided geographically from the census. These range from states and territories, cities and regions, down to small communities and urban centres, as well as broad categories of remoteness that cross state and territory borders.

More information about the basis of the different population counts used in this report, as well as the techniques and standard methods used in analysing and presenting data, can be found in the 'Technical notes', p. x–xii.

About the census

The five yearly Census of Population and Housing is the largest statistical collection undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and one of the largest regular peace time operations conducted in Australia.

The 2006 Census was conducted on Tuesday, 8 August. The census included all people in Australia on Census Night, with the exception of foreign diplomats and their families. Visitors to Australia are counted regardless of how long they have been in the country or how long they plan to stay. Australian residents out of the country on Census Night are not counted in the Census. More detail on the conduct of the 2006 Census is available in *How Australia Takes a Census* (cat. no. 2903.0).

The legislative basis of the Census of Population and Housing is the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*. This Act also requires the ABS and its officers to protect the confidentiality of the information collected.

Two broad objectives underpin the Census. The first is to measure accurately the number and key characteristics of Australian residents and the dwellings in which they live. The second is to provide timely, high quality and relevant data on these topics for small geographic areas and small population groups.

Census data provide a reliable basis for the estimation of the population of each of the states, territories and local government areas, primarily for electoral purposes and the distribution of government funds. The census also provides statistical information that can assist decision making in all sections of society: governments, businesses, academics, researchers, students, community organisations and individuals.

Census data complement other sources of information collected by the ABS and other organisations. For instance, many of the household surveys conducted by the ABS use more detailed questions than the census can support and therefore are much richer sources of information on their particular topics. However, these surveys typically cannot provide these data for small population groups or small areas.

To achieve accurate, high quality data from the census, extensive effort is put into census form design, collection procedures, and processing. There are four principle sources of error in Census data: respondent error, processing error, partial and non-response, and undercount. Quality management aims to reduce these errors as much as possible. The Census page on the ABS website (www.abs.gov.au/census) provides links to more information on census data quality, including information about the quality of specific data items from the census.