

# How the progress indicators are presented

*Measures of Australia's Progress* (MAP) portrays national progress using an array of indicators that measure change within different aspects of Australian life. The indicators provide the building blocks to which readers can apply their own evaluations to assess whether Australia is on balance progressing and at what rate.

Readers can use this publication in three ways to assess progress:

- ◆ First, by examining the data and reading comments about each indicator's historical movements.
- ◆ Second, by reading the discussion of links between indicators.
- ◆ Third, by reading the comments about factors that influence change and the national assets that may support future progress.

## Considering each indicator in turn

The data are presented in a variety of ways and the comments made about the progress indicators also vary. But some common features are discussed for each:

- ◆ National, disaggregated national and international progress.
- ◆ Direction and rate of change.
- ◆ Recent and longer term progress.

### National and other indicators

The indicators have been chosen to reflect recent progress (primarily over the past 10 years) at the national (or whole-of-Australia) level.

**Disaggregated national data.** Although an aspect of life for Australia as a whole may be progressing or regressing, the rate of change – or even its direction – may not be mirrored in every state and territory, or in every industry in Australia. For example, between 1995 and 2005 the number of people employed in Australia rose by 21%; some industries experienced much faster rises (for example in mining, employment grew by 60%), while in other industries there was a fall (employment in wholesale trade fell by 32%). We cannot discuss every difference within Australia for every indicator in this publication. But we do discuss some of the more significant differences and provide signposts to the more detailed and disaggregated data sets underlying the indicators.

Similarly, rates of progress may differ between various subgroups of the Australian population. We do not draw attention to every difference, nor do we systematically compare progress between men and women, between Indigenous and other Australians, or between other groups of people. But the commentary draws attention to differences that are particularly noticeable.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

*Measures of Australia's Progress* (MAP) is built around indicators that provide a national summary of important areas of progress, presented in ways which can be quickly understood by all Australians. Its focus is Australia-wide, rather than summarising the progress of particular groups of people. However, acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's first inhabitants, and recognising the marked and widespread disadvantage that they experience, some supplementary commentary is included: their health, housing, education, and work are discussed within each headline indicator's commentary alongside differences between men and women, young and old, etc. (some of these issues were also examined in the article *Multiple disadvantage* which appeared in the 2004 edition of MAP). The commentary does not attempt to summarise general progress for Indigenous Australians. Rather, it contrasts their health, education, etc. with that of Australians generally. However, for some dimensions of progress, data comparing Indigenous Australians with other Australians, or showing changing levels of Indigenous disadvantage over time are still being developed.

But perhaps more importantly, Indigenous Australians' notions of what constitutes progress may differ in some ways from those of other Australians. For some areas of progress, such as family and community, Indigenous views of progress may be of a different nature from the notions of progress that are set out in this publication. Issues relating to cultural and spiritual values, including language and the relationship of Indigenous Australians with the land, are likely to be important. Further development of MAP will benefit from consultation between the ABS and Indigenous peoples about which issues of concern can be reflected in such a statistical summary.

While MAP looks at progress generally, and some aspects of Indigenous disadvantage in particular, the report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, most recently issued in 2005 by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, contains more detailed statistics on Indigenous peoples. The report, like MAP, is built around a statistical framework with headline and supplementary (strategic change) indicators. It will be released regularly to measure progress in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

**International comparisons.** *Measures of Australia's Progress* reflects on issues of importance to Australia and Australians, and no systematic or comprehensive attempt has been made to compare Australia's progress with that in other countries. Considering Australian progress side-by-side with progress in other countries can be informative. However, if we were confined to presenting indicators for which comparable overseas data are available, the coverage here would be narrower and its focus would probably be less relevant to Australian concerns. Where possible we draw some international comparisons of headline indicators for those dimensions of progress for which comparable international data are available. And a special article compares information from members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) across a range of areas of progress.

## Direction and rate of change

Both the direction and rate of change in a progress indicator are important. It is informative to see whether life expectancy is increasing or decreasing, but the rate of increase is also informative, particularly when compared with historical rates.

Just as the rates of progress or regress differ, so do the levels of economic, social or environmental wellbeing attained. We concentrate on progress and hence on change but, when assessing national progress, it is sometimes informative also to consider levels.

## Past, present and future

Each indicator considers progress during the recent past, typically the past ten years. Where possible, though, reference has been made to progress over the longer term. Some indicators move only slowly, and so a longer time horizon is needed to perceive any appreciable change. For other indicators, the longer lasting trends that are of greatest interest are overlaid by cyclical and other short term variation (e.g. the business cycle or regular climatic patterns such as El Niño).

## How the indicators relate to one another

Each aspect of progress is related, either directly or indirectly, to most of the others. Change in one dimension of progress is typically accompanied by change elsewhere. Therefore it is important to consider the full array of indicators together.

Broadly, we may think of two types of relationship between different areas of progress – trade-offs and reinforcements.

- ◆ *Trade-offs* occur when one area of progress improves at the expense of another. In some cases, trade-offs arise after a change of preference: spending on education might be cut, for example, to give more money to health. But they also occur as flow-on effects: for example, economic activity rises and so might greenhouse gas emissions.
- ◆ *Reinforcements* occur when one aspect of progress improves and strengthens another. For example, as economic production rises, so might employment.

In reality, the overall effect of a change in any one dimension is much more complex. An intricate system of trade-offs and reinforcements comes into play when any dimension of progress changes. For example, suppose factory output increases. This generates more income, and so there is more money to pay for health care, for example. But increased factory output might also increase air pollution, which is harmful to people's health or might be detrimental to other economic activity such as agriculture.

## Health and national progress

Health is linked with many other aspects of progress, and is both influenced by – and influences – them. Here are some of the relationships.

*Health and the economy:* economic activity provides the money (be it private or public) to pay for doctors and nurses and to build hospitals. But that money is spent at the expense of something else, be it education, law and order or more money for investment that might stimulate economic growth. In turn, a healthy population provides the work force to create economic growth. The changing composition of the economy, as well as the overall level of economic activity, can also affect health: proportionally more people employed in office-based jobs might mean fewer industrial accidents or pollution, but might also create an increase in medical complaints like repetitive strain injury. There might be health implications too if those working behind desks take less exercise than those in more active employment.

*Health and Economic hardship and Housing:* studies have pointed to the link between economic hardship and poor health. Although some of the links are not fully understood, it seems reasonable to speculate that the poorest members of society may have an inferior diet or accommodation (perhaps they might even be homeless) which will affect their health.

*Health and Education and training:* a healthy population is better able to take part in education. An educated population provides doctors and nurses to treat the sick, and the scientists to develop new treatments.

*Health and Crime:* being the victim of crime can of course affect one's health, while some crime is committed by those with a drug dependency, itself a health issue.

*Health and the Environment:* many aspects of environmental progress relate to health. Air pollution – both the quality of the air we breathe and the chemicals that have damaged the ozone layer – may affect health. Salinity and other forms of land degradation affect fresh water quality and availability. Land clearance has been one driver of land degradation. It has also put pressure on native wildlife. Many scientists believe that various cures for diseases lie hidden in the genes of animals and plants. Each time a species becomes extinct, its genetic material is lost.

*Health and Family, community and social cohesion:* a society whose members take care of one another will put less strain on the health system and perhaps leave it more available to take care of those most in need. Some experts believe that there are links between levels of social attachment and the incidence of both physical and mental illness.

Although within the indicator commentary we mention some of the more obvious links, we do not mention every relationship, and we hope that readers will bear in mind the many possible links between indicators. As an illustration, the box above discusses some of the relationships between progress in the health dimension and other headline indicators.

## Looking to the future

Australians are, of course, concerned not just with historical progress or with the current condition of the nation, but also with the future. One salient question is 'Will progress in any area lead only to short term gain and perhaps eventual loss, or is the progress sustainable in the longer term?' This is not an easy question to answer.

When trying to paint a statistical picture of the future, one must invoke many more assumptions and exercise much more judgment than when depicting the past. Many styles of forward-looking analysis are not within the ambit of official statistics.

This publication tends not to enter into any direct discussion of sustainability into the future. Even in ecological studies, where the concept of sustainability most commonly arises, agreement has not yet been achieved regarding suitable summary measures of sustainability. Agreed measures are still more distant for such concepts as a sustainable distribution of income.

However, it is natural that people wish to consider the future, and the ABS believes that this publication has a role in facilitating this. One way of looking to the future is to consider whether Australia's stocks of assets (human, natural, produced and financial, and social) are being maintained. Our indicators measure progress in dimensions that relate directly to, or are intimately linked with, Australia's assets.