

International comparisons

The information presented in *Australian Social Trends* provides a picture of how Australian society is changing over time and offers insights into the factors driving these changes. In some cases these changes and the underlying factors are unique to Australia. In others, the forces affecting Australian society are also felt in other parts of the world. Comparing trends in Australia and elsewhere can provide a useful perspective and add to our understanding of the forces shaping Australian society.

This article compares recent trends in Australia with some other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Where appropriate, countries outside the OECD have also been included in the comparison. The issues chosen for comparison are drawn from articles featured in *Australian Social Trends* throughout 2009 and 2010.¹

There can be difficulties in making comparisons between countries, as concepts, classifications and collection methods often vary from one country to another (see the *data sources and definitions* box). Despite this, there is still much to be gained from comparing trends in Australia with those in other countries.

Population

Together with many other countries, Australia's population is ageing (see *Australian Social Trends March 2009*, ['Future population growth and ageing'](#)). The size, growth and age

Projections of the world population – 2009

	Population (millions)	% of world population
New Zealand	4.3	0.1
Australia(a)	21.9	0.3
Canada	33.6	0.5
Italy	59.9	0.9
United Kingdom	61.6	0.9
Japan	127.2	1.9
United States	314.7	4.6
India	1,198.0	17.5
China	1,345.8	19.7
Rest of the world	3,663.2	53.6
World	6,829.4	100.0

(a) Based on Estimated Resident Population as at June 30, 2009.

Source: [UN World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision](#); and [Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2009](#) (ABS cat. no. 3101.0)

Data sources and definitions

The population projections in this article are taken from [World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision](#) produced by the United Nations.

Population projections are based on assumptions about future trends in life expectancy, fertility and migration. Different projections are produced on the basis of different assumptions about these trends. The data included in this article are based on the 'medium' set of projections.

The proportion of *daily smokers* is the percentage of the population aged 15 years and over who reported smoking every day. The information on daily smoking rates comes from the [OECD Health Database 2009](#).

Data on prison populations are sourced from the International Centre for Prison Studies [World Prison Brief](#). Comparability is affected by differences in whether pre-trial detainees, juveniles and offenders being treated for psychiatric illness or drug and alcohol addiction are counted in the prison population.

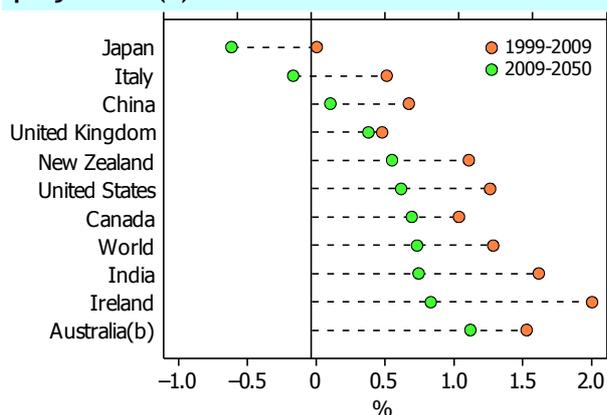
Data on childcare enrolment rates come from the [OECD Family database](#) and [OECD Education database](#). Childcare enrolment among 0–2 year olds includes enrolment in formal arrangements such as childcare centres, use of registered child minders and care provided by non-family members.

structure of a country's population has profound implications for its social and economic development. Population growth and age structure is affected by births and deaths (natural increase or decrease) as well as by migration patterns.²

In 2009, Australia's projected population of 21.9 million people accounts for 0.3% of the global population. In contrast, China and India's inhabitants account for 20% and 18%, respectively, of the world's population. The United States accounts for 5% of the world's population and the United Kingdom 1%.

Australia's population grew by an average of 1.5% per year between 1999 and 2009. This was slightly above the average growth rate across the world (1.2%) and in the US (1.2%), New Zealand (1.1%) and Canada (1.0%). Ireland had the highest population growth rate (an annual average of 1.9%) of any OECD country over this period. There was relatively slow growth in Japan (less than 0.1%), Italy (0.5%) and the United Kingdom (0.5%). Beyond the OECD, the Indian population grew by an average of 1.5% per year, while in China, where government policy mandates a limit of one child per couple in urban areas, the growth rate was 0.7%.

Average annual population growth and growth projections(a)



(a) Data for 2009 and 2050 are projections.

(b) Data for 2009 are based on Estimated Resident Population at 30 June.

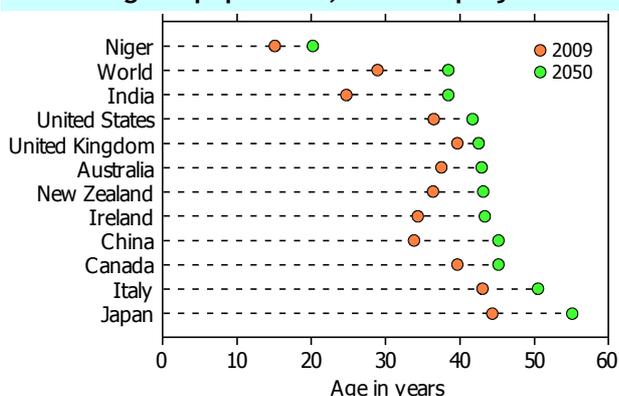
Source: [OECD Factbook 2009](#); [UN World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision](#); [Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2009](#) (ABS cat. no. 3101.0); and [Population Projections, Australia, 2006 to 2101](#) (ABS cat. no. 3222.0)

Australia's population is projected to grow at a faster rate than most other developed countries (1.1% per year), reaching 34 million of the world's 9.1 billion inhabitants by 2050. The Japanese population, on the other hand, is projected to shrink by 0.5% per year over this time, while falls are also projected in the Russian Federation (0.5% per year), Germany (0.4%) and Italy (0.1%).

Most population growth is expected to occur in the less developed countries. For example, India's population is projected to grow by 35% between 2009 and 2050, seeing it overtake China as the world's most populous country.

Declining fertility and increased longevity will see many countries experience rapid population ageing in coming decades. The median age across all countries is expected to rise from 29 years in 2009 to 38 years by 2050. In Australia, the median age is expected to rise from 37 to 42 years over this time. Japan has the oldest age structure of any country in the world, with the median age expected to reach 55 years by 2050.

Median age of population, medium projections



Source: [UN World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision](#); [Population Projections, Australia, 2006 to 2101](#) (ABS cat. no. 3222.0); and [Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories, June 2009](#) (ABS cat. no. 3201.0)

Population ageing is also expected in many of the least developed nations. These nations have relatively young populations as a result of high fertility and high mortality rates. For example, in Niger, which has the youngest age structure of any nation, the median age is expected to rise from 15 to 20 years between 2009 and 2050.

These trends will see an increase in the proportion of people in older age groups. In the more developed countries, the proportion of the population aged 60 years and over is projected to rise from 22% in 2010 to 33% in 2050. A similar trend is expected in less developed countries, with the proportion projected to more than double from 9% to 20%. In Australia, the proportion is projected to increase from 19% to 28% between 2009 and 2050. These trends are likely to pose serious economic challenges in many countries as the proportion of people of traditional working age falls, while demand for age pensions, health care and aged care services may increase.

Health risk factors – smoking

According to the World Health Organisation, tobacco is the second highest cause of death in the world, responsible for about one in ten adult deaths, or five million deaths each year.³ Tobacco is also rated as the largest avoidable risk to health in OECD countries.⁴

In 2007, Australia had one of the lowest smoking rates in the OECD, with around 17% of people aged 15 years and over smoking every day. Around the same period, Sweden had the lowest smoking rate in the OECD (15%), closely followed by the United States (15%). New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom and Italy all had rates below the OECD average of 24%, while Greece had the highest rate (40%).

Proportion of population aged 15 years and over smoking daily – 2007

	Men %	Women %	People %
Sweden(a)	12.3	16.7	14.5
United States	17.1	13.7	15.4
Australia	18.0	15.2	16.6
New Zealand	19.3	17.0	18.1
Canada	20.3	16.0	18.4
United Kingdom	22.0	20.0	21.0
Italy(b)	28.9	16.4	22.4
OECD(c)	29.8	19.3	24.3
Japan(b)	39.5	12.9	25.7
Greece(b)	46.3	33.5	39.7

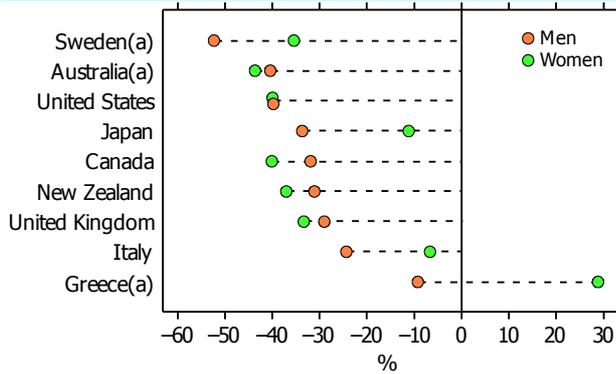
(a) Data are for 2006.

(b) Data are for 2008.

(c) Data are for 2005.

Source: [OECD Health Data 2009](#)

Changes in smoking rates by sex – 1990-2007



(a) Data refer to the period from 1989-2007 for Australia, 1990-2006 for Sweden, and 1990-2008 for Greece.

Source: [OECD Health Data 2009](#)

Like most other OECD countries, in Australia men were more likely to smoke every day than women (18% compared with 15%). Across the OECD the smoking rate for men was 30% compared with 19% for women. In Korea, the rate of smoking among men was 10 times that for women (47% compared with 4.6%). Sweden was the only country in the OECD where women were more likely than men to smoke on a daily basis (17% of women compared with 12% of men).

There has been a marked fall in smoking rates across OECD countries in recent years. The decline in smoking rates in Australia (a fall of 40% for men and 44% for women between 1989 and 2007) was among the biggest in the OECD, along with Sweden where smoking rates fell by 52% for men and 36% for women. Other countries with large falls included the US, Canada, New Zealand and the UK.

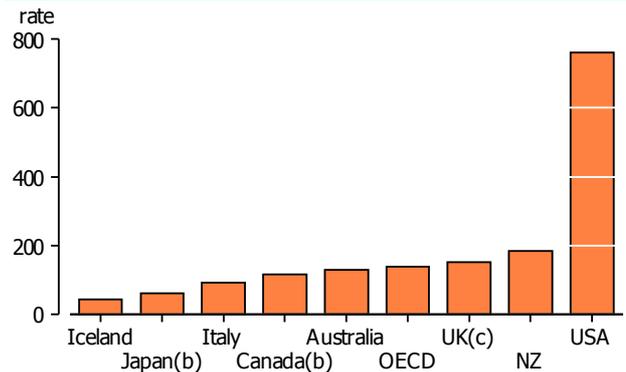
While the smoking rate for men fell in all OECD countries between 1990 and 2007, the rate among women increased in a number of European countries. In Greece, for example, the proportion of women who smoked on a daily basis rose by 29% over this period. There were smaller rises among women in France (5%), Germany (4%) and Spain (less than 1%).

Prison population

While crime levels have an impact on the rate of imprisonment, differences in prison rates across countries are also influenced by other factors associated with the nature of the criminal justice system such as sentencing policies.²

In Australia in 2008 there were 129 adults in prison per 100,000 people. This was the 12th highest prison rate out of 30 OECD countries. Iceland had the lowest prison population rate of any OECD country (44), followed by Japan (63). The United States by far the highest prison population rate in the world in 2008 with 760 prisoners per 100,000 people.

Prison population(a) – 2008(b)



(a) Adult prisoners per 100,000 people.

(b) Latest data for Canada are for 2007 and for Japan are for 2006.

(c) Data relate to England and Wales.

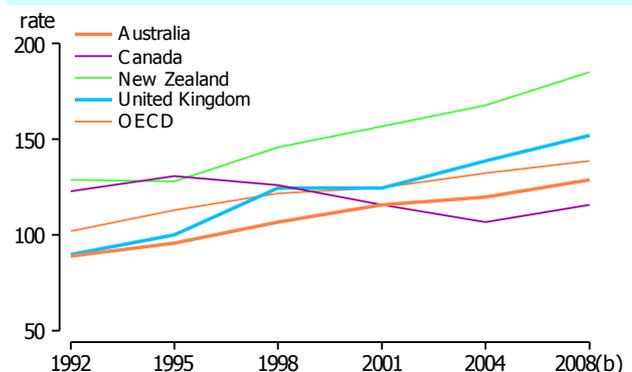
Source: International Centre for Prison Studies, [World Prison Brief](#)

Australia's prison population rate was slightly lower than the average across the OECD (139 prisoners per 100,000 people). However, this average is inflated by the US rate, which is more than three times as high as the next highest country, Poland (225). Without the US, the average prison population rate among the remaining 29 OECD countries in 2008 was 117 per 100,000 people, below the rate in Australia.

Research suggests that sentencing policies were a big factor in high prison rates in the United States. For example, property offenders and drug users are rarely imprisoned in European countries, while non-violent offenders make up more than half of the US prison population. However, violent offenders in the US spend five to ten times as long in prison as those in countries such as France.⁵

Over the past 15 years prison rates have risen in most OECD countries. Between 1992 and 2008, the average prison population rate across OECD countries rose by 26%. In Australia the increase was slightly higher (31%). The greatest rise in proportional terms over this period

Prison population(a) – 1992-2008



(a) Adult prisoners per 100,000 people. The graph only represents those years shown on the axis (1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2008).

(b) Latest data for Canada are for 2007.

Source: International Centre for Prison Studies, [World Prison Brief](#)

occurred in Turkey (64%), while the United States had the largest increase in absolute terms (up 255 prisoners per 100,000 people, or 34%).

There were a few countries where the prison population rate fell between 1992 and 2008. In Iceland the rate more than halved, while Korea saw a fall of 34%. There were more modest falls in Canada (6%), Denmark (5%), Switzerland (4%) and Finland (2%).

Across the OECD, women make up only 5% of the prison population. Women account for 7% of the prison population in Australia, and 9% in the United States. Racial minorities are often over-represented among prison populations. For example, in the United States the prison rate among black men in 2007 (4,618 prisoners per 100,000) was six times that of white men (773), while the rate among Hispanic men (1,747) was more than twice that of white men.⁶ Similarly, in Australia in 2008, the prison rate among Indigenous men was 13 times that of non-Indigenous men.⁷

Participation in formal childcare

There is substantial research pointing to the beneficial effects of high quality early childhood care on children's outcomes later on in life, along with the benefits children get from positive social interaction with peers and non-related adults. Early childhood care also affects broader social and economic goals such as providing choice for parents in balancing their work and family commitments. In many OECD countries, maximising the proportion of mothers, in paid work is seen as critical to maintaining economic growth and ensuring the sustainability of social protection systems.⁸

Participation in formal childcare for children aged 0-2 years – 2006

	Proportion of children in formal care %	Time per week in care Hours
Denmark	70	34
United Kingdom	40	18
New Zealand	38	20
United States(b)	31	31
Australia(a)	30	18
Italy	29	30
OECD	28	30
Japan	28	n.a.
Canada	24	32
Mexico	6	40
Czech Republic	3	17

n.a. not available

(a) Data are for 2008.

(b) Data are for 2005.

Source: *OECD Family Database*; for Australia: ABS 2008 Childhood Education and Care Survey

In 2006, an average of 28% of children between 0 and 2 years of age across OECD countries were enrolled in formal childcare. The Australian rate was similar, with 30% of 0–2 year olds attending formal child care in 2008. A considerable proportion of childcare in Australia is also provided privately or in an informal setting – in 2008, 30% of children under three were attending some sort of informal childcare. This was also the case in countries such as Mexico and the Czech Republic where less than 10% of children aged 0–2 years were enrolled in formal childcare.

Enrolment rates were much higher in Nordic countries such as Denmark (70%), Iceland (53%) and Sweden (44%), which have long histories of publicly funded childcare, and high levels of mothers participating in paid work.⁹

The amount of time children spend in childcare can also affect children's developmental outcomes, as well as parents' ability to combine parenting with paid work. Across the OECD in 2006, children who attended formal childcare spent an average of 30 hours per week in care. There was considerable variation between countries, from 40 hours a week in Mexico and Portugal, to 17 hours a week in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

In Australia, children aged 0–2 attending formal childcare spent an average of 18 hours in care each week. This was towards the low end of OECD countries, along with the United Kingdom (18 hours) and New Zealand (20 hours). Longer time in childcare was relatively common in Nordic countries such as Iceland (36 hours), Finland (35 hours), and Denmark (34 hours), while the United States and Canada were slightly above the OECD average (31 and 32 hours per week, respectively).

Endnotes

- 1 An article examining re-imprisonment in Australia is expected to be included in March 2010.
- 2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008, *OECD Factbook 2008*, OECD Paris.
- 3 World Health Organisation, 2009, *Tobacco key facts*, viewed 1 December, 2009. <<http://www.who.int/topics/tobacco/facts/en/index.html>>
- 4 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008, *OECD Health at a glance 2007*, OECD, Paris.
- 5 Gottschalk, M., 2006, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- 6 Sabol, W. J. and Couture, H., 2008, *Prison Inmates at Midyear 2007*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington D.C.
- 7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, *Prisoners in Australia 2008*, cat. no. 4517.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 8 Adema, W. and Whiteford, P., 2008, 'Matching work and family commitments: Australian outcomes in a comparative perspective', *Family Matters*, 80, pp. 9–16.
- 9 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006, *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*, OECD, Paris.