



Talking Point: The missing migrants



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Executive Summary

Higher rates of population growth in our big cities are not driven by Australians moving from the regions to the city.

Regional Australia has lower population growth than the cities because it does not attract its share of international migrants.

Overall the migration of Australians is generally in balance, with young people leaving regions for the city and working age and older people moving out.

International immigration is responsible for over half the population growth in Australia.

If more international migrants settled in regional Australia, our regional population would grow at the same pace or even faster than the capital cities.

International migrants make their most important contribution in small rural towns that are most at risk of population decline.

For more than 100 mostly small rural areas, international migration was their only source of population growth. These places include Naracoorte and Lucindale (SA), Banana (Qld), Circular Head (Tas) and Carnarvon (WA).

These are mostly ageing places and migrants are often young and ambitious. They not only provide population stability, they also build diversity in the local community and create new jobs.

Regional communities can increase migration to their areas if they are proactive. Dalwallinu (WA) and Nhill (Vic) have achieved significant population growth through community led international migration strategies.

Others can follow their lead.

International migrants are missing from our vision of a successful regional Australia.

A better balance of regional and metropolitan migration will help to reduce the congestion issues in our big cities. It can also result in much better outcomes for migrants.

Often international migrants are seen as an option of last resort for regional communities that need more people. This Talking Point suggests they should be the top priority.

Starting the Conversation

At the Regional Australia Institute (RAI), we seek to identify evidence-based trends and opportunities in regional Australia.

We also want to start important conversations about what is happening in our communities and how local leaders can seek to create a better future.

Contrary to popular belief, the population of regional Australia is diverse, dynamic and growing. Regional returners, super boomers and international migrants are moving to regional communities, bringing with them new skills, experiences and opportunities.

However many small towns in rural and remote areas are struggling to attract the people they need to support their local economy and sustain their communities.

International migrants offer many advantages to growing regional communities and those at risk of population decline. They can boost regional economies, population size and help to strengthen local communities.

Despite this, international migrants and regional Australia are often seen as a poor match or international migration is treated as a last resort.

For areas with genuine capacity for growth, international migration can be an effective solution and should be more readily considered.

Talking Point: The missing migrants provides the much needed evidence to start an informed discussion about international migration and the role it could play in the success of Australia's small towns.

The Regional Australia Institute's Population Dynamics Series

Talking Point: The missing migrants is the final Talking Point in a series of three examining the core population trends in regional Australia.

Australians are increasingly mobile people. It is important that policy, infrastructure, services and institutions understand and are responsive to population demand and demographics.

To better understand the different population trends, the RAI has developed a series of Talking Point papers, designed to stimulate discussion and showcase regional experience.

Returning to Regional Australia

Talking Point: Returning to regional Australia looks at the influx of Australians aged between 25 and 44 years into regional areas. There are now more people in this age group migrating from metropolitan to regional areas than vice versa. Many of these are regional 'returners', people who have left in their younger years but have come back later in life to resettle their roots in familiar ground.

The Rise of the Super Boomer

Regional Australia is ageing faster than the rest of the country. With baby boomers making up 39 per cent of the regional workforce, our regions are at the forefront of the economic and social changes that will come as Australia ages.

[*Talking Point: An ageing \(regional\) Australia and the rise of the Super Boomer*](#) provides an overview of how ageing is occurring in different regions. It also identifies some of the contributions baby boomers are making in regions and encourages regions to leverage the positives of ageing.

These Talking Point papers originated from the RAI's first piece of work on population mobility, [*Population Dynamics in Regional Australia*](#). This report explores the major factors, key drivers and influences of population change, including ageing populations, economic drivers, the role of international and internal migration, temporary migration and analyses how they influence the distribution of population across the regions.

The report demonstrates that regional Australia is diverse and dynamic - not static, homogenous and declining as many people assume.

Population data for each of the 623 local and regional areas is available in [*\[In\]Sight: Australia's Regional Competitiveness Index*](#). A summary of the key findings of this data is also provided in [*\[In\]Sights for Competitive Regions – Demography*](#).

The Numbers

International migration is responsible for half of the population growth in Australia.ⁱ

Regional Australia is no exception to this trend. In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of international migrants living in the regions.ⁱⁱ Between 2006 and 2011 alone, 187,000 international migrants arrived in Australia and settled outside the major capital cities.ⁱⁱⁱ

During this period, almost all regions attracted new international migrants, with some regions experiencing a greater influx than others. Regions in Western Australia, for example, were particularly attractive, reflecting the resources boom and the new employment opportunities this created.

Regional cities and large regional towns have also had significant refugee communities settled in the area. Host communities include Shepparton, Launceston, Albury, Coffs Harbour, Toowoomba, Townsville and Mount Gambier.^{iv}

However, overall less than 20 per cent of the international migrants that arrived in Australia between 2006 and 2011 settled in a regional area. This is significantly less than the proportion of the population already living outside of the major capital cities. Approximately a third of all Australians live in regional areas.

A proportional settlement of international migrants in the period between 2006 and 2011 would have seen more than 125,000 additional migrants settle in regional Australia rather than in the major capital cities.^v

If it had occurred, population growth trends in Australia would look radically different (see Table 1).

Proportional settlement of international migrants would have resulted in the annual average population growth rate in regional Australia rising from 1.4 per cent to 1.7 per cent. The population growth rate of the major capital cities would also have dropped to 1.6 per cent.

This means that the annual average population growth rate in regional Australia would have been higher than the growth rate of the major capital cities.

Table 1: Impact of international migrants on average annual population growth rates

	Proportion of international migrants settling in regional Australia	Average annual population growth rate of regional Australia	Average annual population growth rate of major capital cities
2006 to 2011	18.5%	1.4%	1.8%
Scenario: Increasing regional settlement of international migrants	32%	1.7%	1.6%

However, shifting the settlement of international migrants is not primarily about numbers. It is about enabling regional communities to access people with the vital skills and resources they need to ensure their future.

The Contribution of International Migrants to Regions

International migrants are a vital asset for building the local economy and the community.

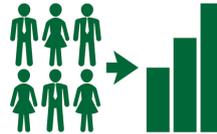
International migrants make a number of vital contributions to the regional communities they settle in



Help to fill workforce shortages



Create new jobs



Important source of population growth



Revitalise the local community

Figure 1: Contribution of international migrants to regional communities

International migrants can fill skill shortages and gaps in regional areas including essential positions such as doctors and nurses.

The majority of international migrants settling in regional Australia are skilled migrants. This is reflective of Australia's migration program and its emphasis on attracting skilled workers.

International migrants are also important contributors to the unskilled workforce, often filling positions that domestic workers are unwilling to do. Abattoirs and poultry plants are important businesses in regional Australia that would often be unable to operate without international migration.

Contrary to the popular belief that international migrants take Australian jobs away from Australians, by filling many of these positions and settling in regional areas, international migrants are helping to create new jobs. An examination of the experience of Nhill in Victoria (see Case Study page 9) showed that new entrants helped to create more than 70 new full-time equivalent jobs during the period between 2009 and 2014.^{vi}

International migration is also an important source of population growth.

For many small towns, international migrants are their only source of population growth.

Between 2006 and 2011, more than 100 local government areas relied on international migration to help offset the net loss of the domestic population (see Figure 2).

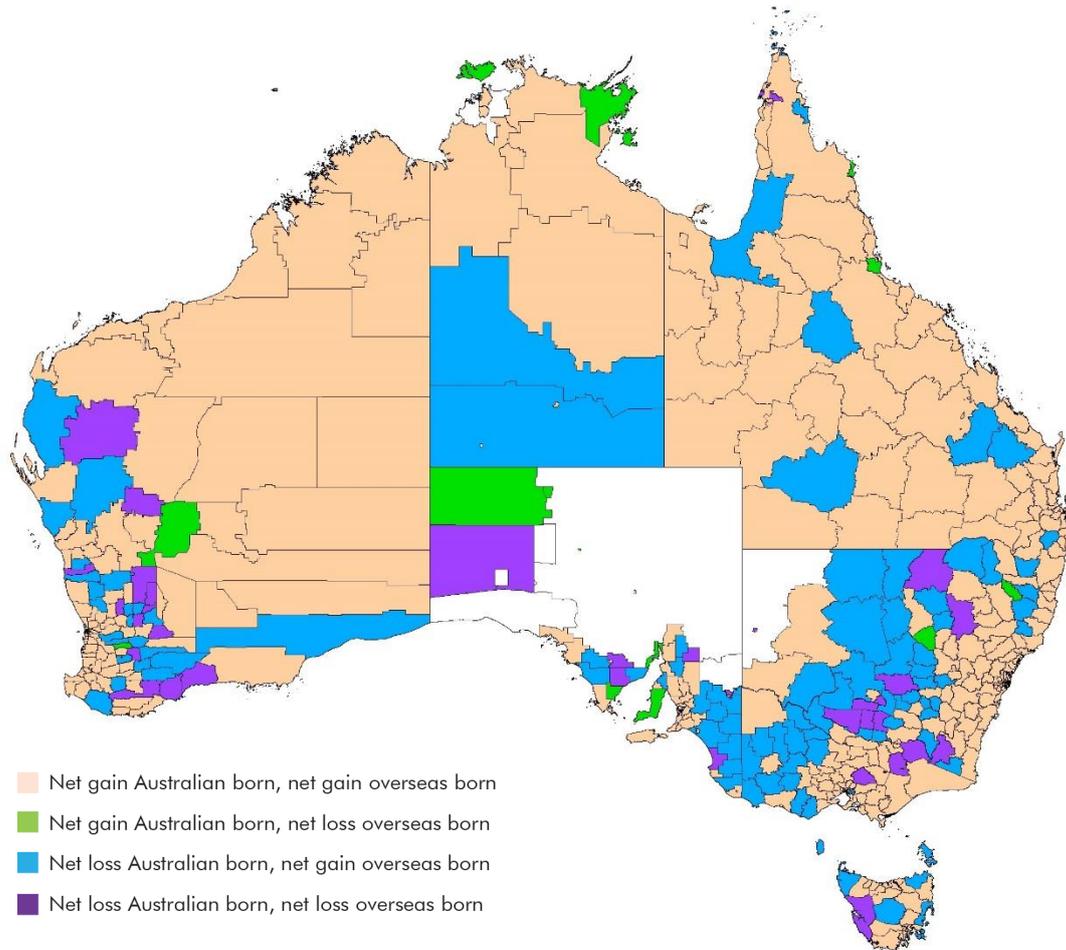


Figure 2: Growth Australia-Born and Overseas-Born Population, 2006-11
 Source: ABS Census data 2006, 2011

By settling in regional communities, international migrants are helping to provide stability to the local population and services as well as bringing more diverse and younger residents to these communities. For example, 40 per cent of recent international migrants that were living in regional Australia in 2011 were aged between 20 and 34 years.^{vii}

International migrants settling in regional Australia play a crucial role in community building, participating in sport and other community groups and volunteering.^{viii}

In order for regions to access international migrants and make the most of these many advantages, we need a policy environment that facilitates and encourages regional settlement.

Getting to Regional Australia

The people who come from overseas to Australia, the skills they bring and their destinations, are guided by policy to a much greater extent than internal migration and natural increase.

Therefore it is critical that we create the right policy environment to ensure international migrants are able to settle in regional Australia if they choose to.

Depending on their eligibility, international migrants can use any of the currently available visas to settle in regional Australia including skilled, family or temporary visas (for example 457 visas).

The Australian Government also has a series of migration initiatives that are specifically designed to attract international migrants to regional areas. These include the Skilled Regional visa and the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. Many of these visas have concessions or offer incentives to encourage international migrants to settle in regional Australia. These might include shorter processing periods or more flexible criteria for determining an international migrant's eligibility.

These initiatives are mainly designed to target young, skilled, English-speaking migrants and bring them into areas where they are needed most.^{ix}

There are also initiatives in place that do not have the same emphasis on skills but still encourage international migrants to live and work in regional areas. The second Working Holiday visa is a well-known example of this. To be eligible for a second Working Holiday visa, migrants must have undertaken a minimum of three months' work in a designated regional area in a specified industry.^x

Initiatives like the second Working Holiday visa specifically target temporary international migrants, meaning those who do not plan to stay in Australia long-term. Although temporary migrants offer many unique advantages for regional communities, this Talking Point specifically focuses on permanent migrants.

To encourage refugees to settle in regional Australia, the government has re-introduced the Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV).

SHEVs are valid for up to five years and are designed to encourage people to work and study in specified regional areas. If a SHEV holder is working and not receiving income support, or is engaged in full-time study in one of the specified regional areas for a period totalling 42 months, they will be eligible to apply for a range of general migration visas, including some permanent visas.^{xi}

Visa incentives that encourage regional settlement are important for attracting international migrants to regional Australia. However, evidence shows that many international migrants remain in regional areas beyond visa requirements.^{xii} This suggests that visa concessions are not necessarily the reason they stay. The local community, access to services and the preferences of international migrants are more likely to shape this decision.

More detailed information about specific visas is available on the [Department of Immigration and Border Protection's website](#).

Migration in Practice

While policy is important and can be improved, the tendency to see international migration as an option of last resort may be the biggest barrier to improving the number of migrants moving to regional areas and their success when they arrive.

Recently there have been a number of examples of regional communities taking a pro-active and coordinated approach to attracting groups of new migrants with significant success.

The case studies below are examples of the win-win regional settlement can provide for both host communities and international migrants.

CASE STUDY Karen refugees, Nhill

Since early 2010, the small town of Nhill in north western Victoria has successfully settled approximately 160 Karen refugees.

Attracting new migrants to the area was an opportunity to reverse recent trends of population decline and to support the expansion of Luv-a-Duck, the largest local commercial business.

It was Luv-a-Duck management that first identified the Karen as potential new residents for Nhill. Working in collaboration with AMES Australia, small groups of Karen refugees moved to Nhill in 2010. The positive experiences of these families inspired others and by the following year there were more than 70 Karen refugees (including families and children) in the community.

The increased population has enabled the creation and filling of additional jobs across a number of broader local businesses and services.

Between 2009 and 2014, a total of 70.5 Full Time Equivalent positions have been added to the regional economy. The settlement of the Karen refugees in Nhill has been arguably the largest contributing factor to this growth.

The contribution of Karen refugees goes well beyond job creation. They have redressed population decline in the town, revitalised local services and helped to re-energise the community.

In the words of the Hindmarsh Shire Council CEO:

“The social impact of the Karen settlement is extraordinary. Nhill, a very conservative community, has embraced and opened their minds and hearts to the Karen. This has made Nhill a better place to live.”

The local community plays a core role in the successful settlement of Karen refugees. The Nhill community provided support for the new families, managing the cultural adjustment (for both communities) and providing initial accommodation.

Source: AMES and Deloitte Access Economics (2015) Small Towns Big Returns: Economic and social impact of the Karen resettlement in Nhill

CASE STUDY Dalwallinu

In 2010 local community member, Stuart McAlpine had become disheartened with the underutilisation of infrastructure and the declining population in his hometown of Buntine, in the Shire of Dalwallinu, Western Australia.

After making contact with the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre and the Office of Multicultural Interests in Perth, Stuart presented a concept plan to the Shire of Dalwallinu. Seeing the merits of the proposal, Council endorsed the project and the Regional Repopulation Pilot Project was launched.

Identifying that there were also labour shortages in the town, the Regional Repopulation Pilot Project looked to settle refugee families into the area. Disappointingly secondary settlement of humanitarian refugees was not successful, however the repopulation of skilled 457 visa holders was.

The Shire of Dalwallinu has funded the Regional Repopulation Pilot Project and continues to support the project financially by way of a number of key staff, initiatives such as the running of English classes and hosting various community events. It was these events that had a galvanising impact on the social inclusiveness and successful integration of new residents to the Shire.

Their persistence has reaped benefits for the district. As of May 2015, 198 new residents had moved to the Shire of Dalwallinu since the 2011 Census. This is more than a 15 per cent increase in the population.

New residents have come mostly from the Philippines but also from India, Burma, Thailand, China, Finland, Britain, Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, England, Africa and New Zealand.

As a Shire once facing decline, the community has managed to turn this around in just a few years. Dalwallinu is attracting new residents from overseas and also different parts of Australia because it recognised the potential of international migration and took action.

Source: Shire of Dalwallinu interviews and Regional Repopulation Pilot Project Report 2014

The case studies of Nhill and Dalwallinu show overwhelmingly that a proactive, community-led approach can successfully attract and retain new international migrants to small regional towns.

Although employment opportunities were crucial for attracting the migrants, jobs alone are not enough. Nhill and Dalwallinu had to consider what assets their towns would need into the future and what type of migrants could meet these needs.

They also had to consider what aspects of the town (for example housing and services) would help them to attract and retain the people they needed. Where necessary, they adapted to help meet the needs of the incoming migrants including providing access to suitable housing, English classes and building a supportive and inclusive atmosphere.

In both towns, leadership from the Local Government was essential. The Dalwallinu council, for example, independently funded support staff, community initiatives and events.

Having the wider community involved was also important for creating a supportive environment. Both of these communities had quite small overseas born populations and therefore were likely unsure about what to expect. Community meetings to inform residents and allow them to ask questions or voice concerns were helpful. Running events providing information about ways the local community could help international migrants settle in encouraged residents to feel like they are a part of the change.

Equally important was preparing the incoming migrant community, letting them know more about their new home and what to expect. To help with this, Nhill identified cultural leaders to act as role models and assist with coordination.

The case studies also emphasise that a big change often starts out small. Both communities initially attracted a small settlement group to the region to trial their approach. Once they started to see some success, the town and migrants helped to encourage others to move to the area. The initial settlement group were proof of the opportunities these communities offered and made it easier to attract other international migrants.

Lessons from Nhill and Dalwallinu



Figure 3: Lessons learnt from Nhill and Dalwallinu

The success that Nhill and Dalwallinu have achieved with this approach should be grabbing the attention of other small towns facing similar circumstances. These communities have proven that international migration presents an opportunity for regional areas to provide their own solutions to the challenges of population loss and a slowing local economy.

This type of approach could spell success for many other towns right across the country.

Where to From Here?

Australia's current distribution of international migration is creating twin concerns. Some, like former [NSW Premier Bob Carr](#), are worried about the pressure that population growth is placing on the quality of life in our major cities. Others in the regions are concerned that without new people joining their communities, their way of life and the economy they depend on, is at risk.

With the re-introduction of Safe Haven Enterprise visas and Australia's commitment to take in [an additional 12,000 refugees](#) who have been displaced by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, there is a chance more refugees may consider settling in regional Australia.

The time is right for Australia to take stock of its approach to international migration.

Over the next few years, there will likely be hundreds of thousands of international migrants moving to Australia, and with them will come new skills and experiences.

These international migrants could be a vital resource for many small towns, but we need to make sure that they settle in areas that will benefit from the increase in population.

Small towns with genuine capacity to grow their population and economy should be actively considering different ways they can attract and retain new international migrants to the area. These towns should look to the success already seen in towns like Nhill and Dalwallinu and learn from their experiences.

Settling international migrants is a shared responsibility. Better outcomes for regions and international migrants will come from government, businesses and communities working together to make the most of the opportunities regional settlement offers.

Change will only happen if local leaders play an active role.

It is time to move beyond the myths of regional population dynamics and focus on the genuine opportunities for positive change.

Keeping the Conversation Going

Regional settlement can be an ideal solution for regional communities and international migrants.

This Talking Point is the beginning of important conversations about how regions and policy makers can work together to achieve better outcomes.

Now we want to hear from you.

If you are a regional community that has a thriving international community we want to know what you did to attract and retain them and why this has been important for your success.

Likewise if you are an international migrant living in regional Australia, tell us why you made the decision to live in your community.

To share your story, visit us at www.regionalaustralia.org.au and leave a comment on our blog. Alternatively you can head to the 'Contact us' page or connect with us via [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

End Notes

- ⁱ Graeme Hugo and Kevin Harris (2011) *Population Distribution Effects of Migration in Australia*
- ⁱⁱ Regional Australia Institute (2015) *Population Dynamics in Regional Australia*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year of Arrival in Australia (YARRP) by Local Government Areas (2011 Boundaries)*
- ^{iv} Department of Social Services (2015) *Humanitarian Settlement in Regional Australia*
- ^v Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year of Arrival in Australia (YARRP) by Local Government Areas (2011 Boundaries)*
- ^{vi} AMES and Deloitte Access Economics (2015) *Small Towns Big Returns: Economic and social impact of the Karen resettlement in Nhill*
- ^{vii} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006 and 2011) *Census Data*
- ^{viii} Regional Australia Institute (2015) *Population Dynamics in Regional Australia*
- ^{ix} Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2015) *Regional Initiatives*
- ^x Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2015) *Working Holiday Visa: Employment Verification*
- ^{xi} Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2015) *Safe Haven Enterprise Visas*
- ^{xii} Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014) *Regional retention of migrants: critical success factors*