

LIVEABILITY IN AUSTRALIAN MID-SIZED TOWNS

While the decision to move to or within regional Australia is initially often based on the availability of appropriate employment and hard infrastructure; the decision of where to move to is often a question of liveability. **What do people need around them to call a place home?** The concepts of liveability vary from person to person however there are key indicators of liveability that are common to most people:



Health Services – health care services and the quality of those services, and that an array of services can be accessed easily.



Amenity – the natural, physical and cultural attributes of a place.



Education Services – options for primary and secondary schooling, and access to post school learning through vocational training or university.



Connection to Community – feeling socially included and connected to other people in a town, and a friendly, welcoming community.



Cost of Living – the balance between employment remuneration, affordable housing options and living expenses such as food, travel costs, and services.



Lifestyle and Opportunity – a slower pace of life, lower commute times, increased leisure time and the ability to reassess personal values so as to focus on “the important things” that help bring about a better quality of life.

There is a predominance of mid-sized towns (MSTs) in regional Australia, many of which are seeking to attract and retain tree- and sea-changers. These towns, ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 people are vitally important to regional economies, however face vastly different issues and challenges when considering liveability. The research summarised here assesses liveability factors across three mid-size town regions in regional Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland, and relative importance of these factors in people deciding to stay in their town.

There are **182 mid-sized towns** in Australia with populations between **5,000 and 50,000**



WHAT LIVEABILITY FACTORS MATTER TO PEOPLE IN MID-SIZED TOWNS?

RAI research in 2019 and 2020 found that people in mid-sized towns associate the concept of liveability with **good public services**, a wide variety of **community activities**, and **easy access to nature**. They value a quality of life that includes a **balance between work and leisure** time and the **presence of life-style factors**, such as good sport and recreational facilities. Having said this, approximately half of the people surveyed in this research were dissatisfied with the level of amenity offered in their mid-sized towns. Factors that would enhance their living experience would be reducing the costs of living and housing, better access to services (specifically **health services**), and improved **community connectivity**.

Further, approximately one-third of residents surveyed feel they are able to reap the benefits mid-sized towns have to offer. We gave this group the name Best of town living to reflect their satisfaction levels. However the research showed that with simple improvements to just one or two local liveability factors, another one third to half of residents would also jump into this Best of town living group, getting the best out of what mid-sized towns have to offer. These local factors include **work-life balance**, **accessibility to local amenity**, **quality of local leadership**, **opportunity to participate in local decision making**, **diversity**, and **the capacity for the community to pull together**.

Recognising that the economy is foundational to quality of life, the overall level of satisfaction with the quality of life in mid-sized towns is underpinned by a **key priority on employment**, and residents being able to **secure a livelihood** for themselves and their family. Without employment opportunities, young people who leave towns will not return, whilst inequality within towns contributes to social exclusion and prevents people accessing the amenity of the region. Town infrastructure is an important 'entry level' criterion, in that there is a level of infrastructure necessary for people to feel comfortable in a town in the first place, but it is not a primary driver of liveability or source of commitment to staying in the town.

In considering quality of life in mid-sized towns, it is important to consider towns within their regional and national, government, and socio-economic contexts. The above attributes of liveability are not fixed, and the significance of these indicators in relation to each other and their relative importance in the overall liveability of their town is a matter of qualitative assessment. As such approaches to defining wellbeing and liveability point to diverse solutions for solving challenges to rural quality of life challenges.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research provides an assessment of the critical quality of life issues and how they vary across three regional areas of Australia, compared with smaller/larger places. The research identifies the socio-economic and cultural tipping points and evidence around mobility decisions. This research provides a methodology and range of indicators that can help make an assessment of economic vitality, social cohesion, and well-being. The research methodology included 30 qualitative interviews, and a quantitative survey and discrete choice modelling experiment with 1200 participants. These were undertaken with participants from three regions, in regional Victoria, Western Australia, and Queensland.

LOOKING AT LIVEABILITY ACROSS THREE AUSTRALIAN REGIONS

VICTORIA



This region covered the Latrobe City Council local government area, which is defined by a number of mid-sized towns:

- Moe-Newborough (population 15,059)
- Morwell (population 13,540)
- Traralgon (population 25,485)
- Churchill (population 4,568).

This region has a total population of 57,652.

Survey participants and discrete choice modelling participants:
N=415

WESTERN AUSTRALIA



This region covered parts of the South Western and Great Southern regions of WA, and included the following mid-sized towns:

- Albany (population 29,373)
- Busselton (population 25,329)
- Collie (population 7,192)
- Manjimup (population 4,213)

This region has a total population of 66,107.

Survey participants and discrete choice modelling participants:
N=382

QUEENSLAND



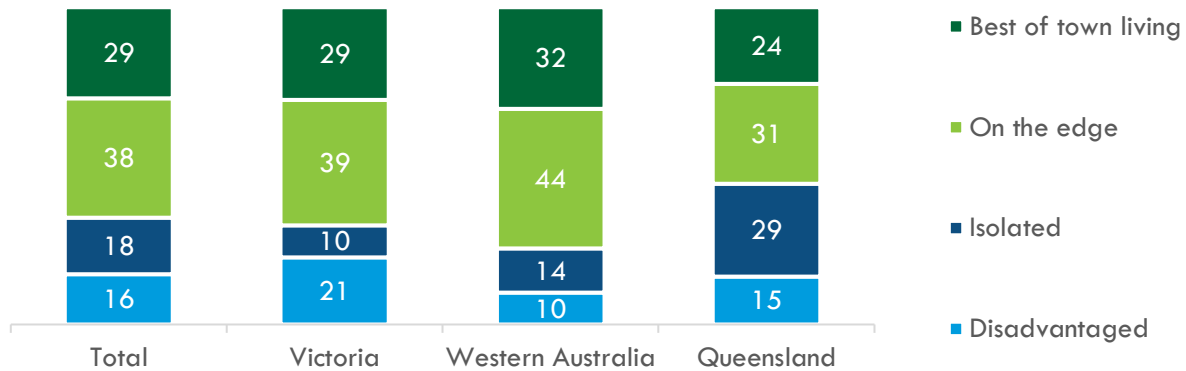
This region focused on parts of the Fraser Coast and Mackay regions, including the following mid-sized towns and a regional city:

- Mackay (population 75,710)
- Maryborough (population 22,206)
- Gympie (population 18,267)
- Kingaroy (population 10,066)

This region has a total population of 126,249.

Survey participants and discrete choice modelling participants:
N=418

WHO IS IN EACH PLACE?



Communities are made up of sub-groups of people whose risks and therefore whose subjective wellbeing, will differ. This research looked at the different segments of the communities surveyed in this research, using six social factors and community variables: (1) Quality of life (2) Cultural diversity (3) Accessibility and mobility (4) Community leadership (5) Unity and (6) Enjoyment of life. Each segment had the following characteristics:

Approximately one third of respondents are in the Best of town living segment and in a position to take full advantage of the benefits in their town, with Western Australian having the largest group in this segment, as well as the largest group in the On the edge segment.

Best of town living: Best of town living are the group of people who living well above average on all the key indicators. They are households with people aged 30+. They are earning higher incomes with a household income between \$60-80k. They are more likely to feel positive about their future income security.

On the edge: The group of people who are on the edge are slightly above average on the quality of life indicators. They are involved in decision making in this community and can easily get around the community. They are more likely to feel positive about their future income security.






Isolated: Isolated are the group of people who living without contact with their neighbours and the community. They are living well below average on the mobility indicator. They are older in age, and mostly retired. They are more likely to feel negative about their future income security.

Disadvantaged: Disadvantaged are the group of people who lack of money or economic support. They are living well below average on all the key indicators. They are younger households with lower household income. They are mostly unemployed or can't work. They are more likely to feel very negative about their future income security.

HOW LIVEABLE DO RESIDENTS FIND THEIR REGIONS?

Overall, residents in Western Australia found their region to be the most liveable, in comparison to the respondents from Victoria and Queensland. Across all three regions **Amenity and Lifestyle and Opportunity factors scored the highest.** Western Australian residents particularly believe that they have good public spaces, sport and recreational facilities, and work-life balance. Similarly residents from Victoria also thought their towns had great sports and recreational facilities, were close to national parks and outdoor amenities, and had good work-life balance. Queensland residents also have good public spaces and access to national parks and outdoor amenities, and feel that their community accepts people from different backgrounds.

Across all three regions, participants generally feel that their housing is too expensive, they don't have good job security, and that they don't feel that they are an important part of their community.

SURVEY QUESTION (RELEVANT TO LIVEABILITY)		VIC	WA	QLD
Overall	Agreed that they are satisfied with their overall quality of life.	59%	74%	63%
	Agreed that they really enjoy the lifestyle they have in their community.	65%	80%	61%
 Health and Education Services	Agreed that their community provides the kinds of services (e.g. health services, education services, or social welfare) you need to live well in regional communities.	57%	67%	49%
	Agreed their community has all the professional expertise (e.g. Doctors, Teachers, Mechanics etc.) that that they need.	38%	63%	45%
	Agreed their town is a regional hub for health services.	41%	53%	38%
	Agreed their town is a regional education hub.	83%	49%	39%
 Cost of Living	Disagreed that the housing in their community is too expensive.	42%	22%	35%
	Agreed that they can afford to pay their power bills.	56%	66%	55%
	Agreed that they have good job security.	28%	37%	35%
	Agreed that if something happens to their present job, they would be able to find another job in this community comfortably.	18%	25%	22%
 Amenity	Agreed that their community has good quality public spaces.	68%	79%	63%
	Agreed that their town has great sport and recreational facilities.	70%	79%	62%
	Agreed that they have opportunities to participate in affordable local arts and cultural activities if they want to.	58%	69%	59%
	Agreed their town is close to great national parks and/or outdoor amenities.	74%	78%	68%
 Connection to Community	Agreed that they always feel they are an important part of their community.	31%	37%	28%
	Agreed that this community accepts people from different cultures and backgrounds.	64%	68%	67%
 Lifestyle and opportunity	Agreed that they are satisfied with the amount of leisure time that they enjoy.	43%	54%	38%
	Agreed that they are able to find a good balance between work and family life.	70%	79%	62%

HOW COULD LOCAL LIVEABILITY BE IMPROVED?

Key elements that would encourage living in mid-sized towns were determined through the Discrete Choice Modelling experiment. Respondents were asked to consider a range of town scenarios with variations in economic viability and quality of life, and to choose whether that scenario would lead them to be more committed to staying in the town or not.

The below results highlight the aspects of liveability most important to respondents' intention to live in the town. For example, *Housing affordability* accounts for 21% of resident's intention to live in the town for the Victorian participants, and as such is the most important factor for them.

The factors that will drive improved intention to live in the towns in these regions differs across the three regions, however it is evident that changes to **cost of living and housing affordability, health services, employment opportunities, and community connections opportunities** will have the **greatest impact**. This aligns with the lower scoring liveability factors in each regions, **notably job security, feeling a part of their community, and housing costs**. However the choice modelling also highlights that factors such as health and education services are also important to increasing intention to remain in a place.

As outlined below, by applying what we have learnt about the importance of different liveability factors to each region, the research has been able to show how much each region can improve residents' intention to live in their town. For towns in Victoria, improving **housing affordability, cost of living and health services**, could improve this intention by 33 percentage points. Improving **community connection opportunities, health services, and cost of living** in Western Australia mid-sized towns could improve intention by 49 percentage points, whilst improving **housing affordability, employment opportunities and cost of living** could achieve a 17 percentage point increase.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF LIVEABILITY

	VIC	WA	QLD
Housing affordability	21%	13%	19%
Cost of living	18%	15%	17%
Health services	17%	17%	16%
Community connections opportunities	13%	22%	4%
Employment opportunities	13%	10%	17%
Leisure opportunities	10%	7%	10%
Education services	5%	15%	10%
Amenity and lifestyle	3%	1%	0%
Commercial services	0%	0%	1%
Cultural opportunities	0%	0%	2%

THE IMPACT OF IMPROVING KEY LIVEABILITY FACTORS IN EACH REGION

VIC	
Current intention to live in mid-sized towns in this region	46%
Intention if the following liveability factors were improved: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Housing affordability – cost of buying or renting a home is lower than the State average (houses are cheaper here). Cost of living – cost of living is better than the State average (It's cheaper to live here than elsewhere) Health services – more hospital, GP and health are being provided 	79%
WA	
Current intention to live in mid-sized towns in this region	39%
Intention if the following liveability factors were improved: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community connection opportunities – easy to join community groups and there is a wide variety of them with more forming every year Health services – more hospital, GP and health are being provided Cost of living – cost of living is better than the State average (It's cheaper to live here than elsewhere) 	88%
QLD	
Current intention to live in mid-sized towns in this region	51%
Intention if the following liveability factors were improved: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Housing affordability – cost of buying or renting a home is lower than the State average (houses are cheaper here). Employment opportunities – Unemployment is below the State average (jobs are being created) Cost of living – cost of living is better than the State average (It's cheaper to live here than elsewhere) 	68%

APPLYING CHOICE MODELLING TO THE QUESTION OF LIVEABILITY

This report details the results of the choice model experiment which helps to understand:

- Relative levels of interest/preference/dislike
 - The attributes that cause people to remain committed to the community and those attributes that won't
- Choice Modeling is different to traditional market research and the laws of statistics that apply to its use are conceptually different. In a traditional market research study any particular question gives you a measure of one individual's view on that specific question. Hence a certain number of these responses are needed to give statistical validity. Choice Modelling asks an individual to make a choice for a hypothetical scenario where, in this case, 10 attributes were simultaneously rated, along with the levels offered, and within the competitive set of two alternatives. This reduces the number of responses needed to reliably predict the action of a larger population