

RWN State Advisory Committee (SAC)

Rural/Urban Divide Information and Statistics Project

January 2007

Preamble and rationale

At the June 2006 SAC meeting, members discussed a need to capture information and statistical data which highlighted the many differences for people living in rural areas in contrast to city dwellers. This 'hard evidence' could then be promoted through key networks as a tool for increasing, in particular, urban women's understanding of selected rural issues. It is hoped the document will be progressively updated.

Research findings so far...

Bush Talks, a report produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), draws on consultations conducted across rural, regional and remote areas of Australia during 1998 and provides valuable insights into the rural/urban divide. HREOC (1999) noted that improved technology, distance, isolation, lower incomes, limited employment and the decreasing levels of government and private infrastructure and business in many rural, regional and remote areas has resulted in great change to communities who often feel they have a minority status compared to their city counterparts.

Most city Australians have little knowledge of life in rural and regional Australia. Most of what they do know they learn through the media... For example, radio and television weather presenters largely define good weather as the absence of rain (Walquist, 2003 p. 67).

How do urban dwellers learn about rural Australia? Journalist and writer Asa Walquist (2003) suggests they learn through film, books and the media and these images are often not truly reflective of life in the bush or issues facing rural communities.

There is little evidence [in film, literature and the media] of the reality that one-third of farmers are women, most are computer literate, around 40% belong to Landcare, and thus are more active conservationists than many city people who like to think they are green, and that broadacre farmers made a very respectable annual productivity gain of 2.5% over the 20 years 1976–97 (Walquist, 2003 p. 67).

Social Demographer, Bernard Salt (2005) notes there is no longer a strong attachment to the bush. At the time of Federation 52% of people lived in rural and regional areas. When the first of the 'baby boomers' were born, 32% of the population lived in the bush. Whilst many of them headed for the city for careers, they remained country boys and girls for many years and headed 'home' for Christmases and Easters. Now about 14% of Australia's population lives in rural areas (Walquist, 2003).

Many of the assets taken for granted by city dwellers are absent or provided in quite different ways in rural, regional and remote communities.

An increase in prices, due to drought shortages, hardly affects most city dwellers, with food and fibre a comparatively small part of the average budget. It is only when water restrictions kick in, as they did in Sydney in 1995, and again in 2002–03, that city people begin to take cognisance of long dry periods. Most city people have little understanding of modern agricultural production or of the Australian climate and the significant role that El Niño plays (Walquist, 2003 p. 67).

Defining 'non urban' areas

What do the terms regional, rural and remote really mean? The Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) has a system of identifying and classifying urban and rural areas. Hugo (2000) states a need for an additional classification of accessibility/remoteness which allows areas outside of the major cities to be classified according to their degree of accessibility to services. This classification is known as ARIA (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia). I have broken the classification down one step further to provide a more useful distinction between regional centres, rural towns and rural villages as the ABS categories are very broad with 'other urban' encompassing populations of 1000–99 999. The table following can be used as a reference for this revised category listing.

Table 1: Regional groupings used in this paper (based on 2001 ABS and ARIA indices)

Remoteness area	Description	Examples with a NSW focus <small>(ABS 1996)</small>
Capital cities and major urban areas 40 000 +pop. <small>(ABS terms: 'major urban' = 100 000+ population)</small>	Geographic distance imposes minimal restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.	Central Coast, Maitland, Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong,
Regional centres 20 000–39 999 pop. <small>(ABS term: 'other urban' = 1000–99 999 population is inadequate)</small>	Geographic distance imposes some restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.	Albury, Armidale, Bathurst, Broken Hill, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Goulburn, Lismore, Nowra-Bomaderry, Orange, Port Macquarie, Queanbeyan, Tamworth, Tweed Heads, Wagga Wagga,
Rural towns 2000–19 999 pop.	Geographic distance imposes a moderate restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.	Alstonville, Ballina, Bateman's Bay, Bargo, Blayney, Bega, Bellingen, Bourke, Bowral, Broken Hill, Byron Bay, Casino, Cobar, Condobolin, Cooma, Coonabarabran, Coonamble, Cootamundra, Cowra, Deniliquin, Dungog, Eden, Forbes, Forster-Tuncurry, Gilgandra, Glen Innes, Gerringong, Gloucester, Grafton, Griffith, Gulgong, Gunnedah, Hay, Huskisson, Inverell, Jindabyne, Junee, Kempsey, Kiama, Kyogle, Leeton, Lennox Head, Lithgow, Macksville, Maclean, Manilla, Merimbula, Mittagong, Moree, Moss Vale, Moruya, Mudgee, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah, Muswellbrook,

		Nambucca Heads, Narrabri, Narrandera, Narromine, Narooma, Nelson Bay, Nyngan, Oberon, Ocean Shores, Quirindi, Parkes, Sawtell, Scone, Singleton, South West Rocks, Taree, Temora, Tenterfield, Tumut, Ulladulla, Uralla, Urunga, Wauchope, Wellington, West Wyalong, Wingham, Woolgoolga, Yamba, Yass, Young,
Rural villages less than 2000 pop. (ABS term: 'bounded locality' = 200–999 population is inadequate))	Geographic distance imposes a high restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.	Aberdeen, Balranald, Bangalow, Barraba, Batlow, Bermagui, Berrigan, Berry, Bingara, Bombala, Boorowa, Braidwood, Brewarrina, Brunswick Heads, Bundanoon, Bungendore, Canowindra, Coolamon, Coraki, Crookwell, Culcairn, Denman, Dorrig, Finley, Grenfell, Gundagai, Guyra, Hillston, Holbrook, Howlong, Iluka, Kandos, Lake Cargelligo, Lightning Ridge, Millthorpe, Molong, Murrumburrah (Harden), Portland, Tathra, Tocumwal, Trangie, Tumbarumba, Walcha, Walgett, Wallerawang, Wialda, Warren, Wee Waa, Werris Creek, Wollongbar, Yenda,
Very remote (The ABS term <i>rural balance</i> encompasses the remainder of state. This does not reflect the remote areas as the ABS term <i>rural balance</i> includes those living on small rural allotments within commuting distance of Major Urban centres as well as farms and other property throughout Australia).	Geographic distance imposes the highest restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.	500 000 people (about 3% of the population) live in 'remote' Australia.

There is ample evidence to suggest both that the position of non-metropolitan Australia is worsening relative to metropolitan Australia, and that the position of smaller towns is worsening in relation to larger regional centres (Collits, 2000).

Overall, much of the research confirms that rural communities have been in decline for some time which has created an increased pressure on communities and governments to respond.

People living in declining towns risk losing their savings, livelihood and support systems as they confront the break-up of their community, loss of jobs, deteriorating infrastructure and declining property values. In addition, declining towns often lose services through the closure of schools, hospitals, retail establishments and banks. Such closures have a direct impact on the health and well being of remaining residents, but they can also have psychological impact, with many seeing the closure of central services as signalling the 'death of a town' (ABS 1998: 10).

The greater the remoteness, the greater the challenges – communications are often unreliable and expensive, fuel costs are high, fresh food is harder to find and expensive, and locally available health services are non-existent, minimal and often under-staffed. Homes can be expensive to build and maintain, roads are poor and young children may have to leave home or rely on the School of The Air and their own parents' close involvement for education (Rural Health, 2005).

Researchers have identified several trends, evident since the 1970s, which have played a key role in contributing to the changes in rural, regional and remote areas. Some of these points are outlined below.

- **Out migration**

The escalating 'out-migration' from many small towns (especially of young people) is often associated with the withdrawal of services due to government and industry downsizing (e.g. banks, government offices). NSW has always been demographically and economically dominated by Sydney. This has been reinforced by transport routes and migrant population growth which are all geared to the 'metropolis'.

New immigrants to Australia predominantly settle in capital cities. People from non-English speaking backgrounds in rural Australia typically form very small communities. The lack of interpreters was the major issue they raised with Bush Talks. There are about five accredited interpreters in the area. Interpretation at the hospital is especially a problem. For example, people are asked to sign consent forms even though they do not understand them (HEROC, 1999 p. 27).

The metropolitan areas thus have a large 'voice'. Rural regions have often felt the 'poor relation' and over time, smaller and more remote inland centres, in particular have struggled to retain their populations. One of the key challenges for communities battling out-migration is to achieve critical mass in order to attract investment and retain services.

Salt (2006) estimates that 1000 people leaving a country town extract \$7 million in retail turnover from that community.

It should however also be noted that size and remoteness is not necessarily a negative feature for all country towns. For example, smaller towns such as Wee Waa and Gulargambone have developed their own 'strengths' because of their distance from larger centres and other towns such as Millthorpe have benefited from being closer to a larger centre such as Orange.

...the problem of 'small towns' is really a problem for certain types of region, not necessarily related to size alone (Collits, 2000).

Towns in New South Wales having lost 10% of population or more since 1986 have been Werris Creek (-18.4%); Barraba (-15.4%); Dorrigo (-13.2%); Wee Waa (-11.7%); Narrabri (-11.4%); Murrumburrah-Harden (-16.9%); Batlow (-12.9%); Scone (-18.8%); Nyngan (-10.5%); and Wilcannia (-34.4%).

A number of further towns had large absolute declines of less than 10% - Moree (-945); Lithgow (-928); Gunnedah (-829); and Kempsey (-705).

While many of these declining towns are inland, it is also the case that a number of inland towns are growing at a rate of more than 1% per year...

Nugent (1998) has analysed NSW population movements between 1991 and 1996 revealing complex intrastate demographic trends, the continuing domination by Sydney of the State's population, a pattern of inland migration to the coast and interstate, and very low growth or decline among inland regions. According to Nugent's analysis, inland regions' average annual growth between 1991 and 1996 was a low 0.03% (0.63% from 1986–91), and the population of most inland Statistical Local Areas actually fell in the latest intercensal period. Most growth occurred in larger regional centres or due to the opening of new mines or other events specific to the area concerned. Coastal growth slowed in comparison to earlier periods, while remaining higher than the State average...

With the rationalisation of employment opportunities out of rural areas into the regional centre, resulting in a pull of people out of rural areas, the ability of the rural community to retain and attract residents and future investment is impaired. As services are withdrawn from rural areas, the quality of life, measured in terms of access to essential and higher value goods and services, declines (Collits, 2000).

- **Growth on the coast**

About 86% of Australians live in cities or within 80 kilometres of the coast (Walquist, 2003). Coastal regions, such as Northern Rivers, the Mid North Coast, the Central Coast and the Illawarra, have experienced substantial population growth, based largely on lifestyle choices, tourism and retirement. Many coastal regions must now deal with the competing needs of development and fragile ecologies. Salt (2006) believes this third distinct rapidly growing coastal demographic group can't be ignored and that they have little or no allegiance to the city or the bush.

- **Growth of some inland towns**

Despite the coastal and urban magnetism, Salt (2006) and Collits, (2000) identified a number of inland smaller centres performing strongly against the general trends, particularly if located on major transport routes or have other attractors. Echuca on the Murray in Victoria is one of Australia's fastest growing inland towns. It has golfing, fishing, wine grape growing and manufacturing which attracts people. Other smaller centres which have performed strongly against the general trends in regional NSW were Mudgee, Parkes and Cabonne Shire (Collits, 2000).

- **Growth of 'sponge' cities**

Improved transport has facilitated 'out-shopping' and growth of what Salt (2006) terms 'sponge cities'; Over the last 20 years these larger regional service centres have continued to grow. Their economies have been able to diversify. They have become transport hubs and provide better infrastructure and access to increasingly diverse shopping and services. Regional centres such as Dubbo have grown since 1976 and no longer rely primarily on farming. While Dubbo has expanded, some villages on the fringe such as Brocklehurst have benefited from being the 'commuter zone'. However, every Local Government

area around Dubbo (Lachlan, Bogan, Warren, Gilgandra, Coonabarabran, Coolah and Wellington shires) have all experienced population loss (and in particular the younger people have left).

The decline of country towns in the 1990s proved to be one of the most important social phenomena of that decade. In fact, smaller Australian country towns (with populations under 2000) have been in trouble since the coming of mass car ownership in the 1950s and 1960s. With the rise of supermarket chains and the rationalisation of banks – most marked in the 1980s and 1990s – many medium sized regional centres (4000 to 10 000 plus) have grown at the expense of smaller towns (Beeton, 2000).

- **Decline in 'real' farming incomes and diminishing link between farmers and towns**

Because Australian farmers being among the most efficient (and least protected) in the world, rural communities can no longer rely on the farm sector for their economic well-being and the former strong symbiotic relationships have declined. Agriculture now contributes proportionately far less to the State's economic output. Farms are becoming fewer and bigger and increasingly mechanised leading to less jobs. Other factors such as drought, inconsistent and declining commodity prices, increased farm debt and a general decline in agricultural profitability for many, has impacted on communities who are required to 'adjust' to these forces (Collits, 2000).

Declining terms of trade (price received over price paid) means that to remain efficient, farmers need to expand the land they farm and/or farm more intensely. This also means more capital (i.e. machines) intensive production over time (i.e. bigger tractors wider ploughs etc.). This results in much lower farmers per hectare densities while production per hectare increases over time. This means that there are fewer families relying on their local town infrastructure, which, combined with better vehicles, facilitates families shopping in the cheaper 'sponge cities' rather than their local town.

A study by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) highlights some of these changes:

- agricultural industries have faced a long-term decline in the margin between real farm receipts and real farm costs, a common feature of resource based industries world wide;
- between 1955–56 and 1998–99, the volume of farm production rose by 187%, and the real gross value of farm production rose by 25%, with falling real prices for farm product;
- with rising costs, the net farm value of farm production fell by around 54% in real terms, with a decline in the number of commercial farms of 1.3% or 2000 farms per year; and
- many small farms were sold and amalgamated with other farms (ABARE, 1999 p. 8).

- **Drought**

The current drought has exacerbated the decline of many rural communities with the most profound impacts hitting those living in smaller rural centres and remote areas. Stehlik (2003) refers to research of QLD and NSW farm families' experiences during the drought of the 1990s. The impact of policies, a lack of a consistent profile in the media and a feeling of abandonment by the city of rural Australia has made coping with this current drought much more complex. The research concluded:

- that families are the first line of defence against the hardship of drought [often both husband and wife (and children) are involved in moving, feeding and watering stock on a daily basis];
- men and women experience drought differently [women often were the 'buffers' and were more likely to discuss their own and husband's stress levels while men played these down]; and
- their communities should not be taken for granted by broader society. [Especially city people for whom drought meant perhaps not watering the garden or washing the car regularly.]

It also found that the majority of producers do:

- strive for self-reliance;
- manage risk;
- try to plan and operate sustainably;
- have an environmental consciousness; and
- undertake 'whole-of-farm' strategic planning (Stehlik, 2003 p. 91).

Stehlik (2003) looked at rural people's resilience and ability to bounce back. Strategies for coping with trauma varied across individuals, families and networks. Often farming families relied heavily on spouses and by using friendship and community networks to cope. Others planned for the future to relieve anxiety of the present or sought professional help.

Stehlik (2003) found that gaining off-farm employment or value adding were often strategies women did (and still do) to supplement lower incomes impacted by drought or declining income. Increasingly farm labouring jobs were being undertaken by family members with wives often found managing the whole property themselves with little time out.

• **Information technology and communications**

The rapid spread of the internet and other information technology tools have greatly increased rural people and especially farmers' capacity to manage resources during drought. Internet use by Australian farmers is among the highest in the world despite poor access and line speeds in many areas. Farmers increasingly use the Internet for business purposes, information gathering and electronic commerce.. Internet banking and education and training are set to grow substantially. Farmers using holistic management software and tapping into climate change information to monitor aspects of weather such as the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI) have become accepted regular farming practices (Rin and Groves, 1999).

With telephone service delays up to three working days and possibly five days over a weekend, we are left without any means of communication at all. The area concerned affects people living on farms, and most are at least 50 km to 150 km from their nearest medical help (HEROC, 1999 p.17).

• **Globalisation**

The impacts of globalisation and related policies have lead to:

- changes in the patterns of regional trade and investment;
- the reduction of global trade barriers;
- an increase in industry restructuring;
- the deregulation of the financial system in the early 1980s;
- the adherence to a national competition policy in the 1990s;
- a decline in commodity prices;
- a dominance of multinationals who tend to establish regional headquarters in cities; and
- the further centralisation of economic activity. (Simple things like the loss of hotel licences has an impact on small towns. Licences are bought and relocated to metropolitan areas for more profitable gambling revenue.)

Other topics highlighting urban/rural difference

Income, economic prosperity and poverty

In 2000–01, wages and salaries accounted for 73% of total gross income in metropolitan areas, and 65% in non-metropolitan areas. Government cash benefits were 10% of income in metropolitan areas, and 15% in non-metropolitan areas (ABS, 2005). While discussions about poverty in Australia usually focus almost exclusively on the poor living in capital cities it is important to realise that the incidence of poverty is higher among people living outside the capital (Hugo, 2000). The *State of the Regions* report published by National Economics in 1998 showed the proportion of people living in poverty is increasing in rural and remote areas. Unemployment and under-employment are high with low education and real incomes declining. In 2001 average household income in capital cities were higher than for households in rural towns and the trend of capital cities doing well and rural towns not doing as well has not changed much in the past 10 years (Lloyd et al., 2004) see Table 2 below:

Table 2 **Estimated average household incomes, by region, 1996 and 2001** In 2001 dollars

	1996	2001
	\$	\$
Capital cities	50 912	56 975
Major urban areas	42 041	46 093
Regional towns	39 557	42 503
Rural towns	35 263	38 769
Rural areas	41 391	45 890
Australia	46 769	52 125

Source: ABS CDATA 1996 and 2001 and NATSEM calculations.

Higher incomes are concentrated around major cities and in some remote areas, especially those with mining communities and some regional centres (Hugo, 2000). However, it is difficult to accurately compare economic prosperity between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas because of the difficulty of accounting for some items such as food grown and consumed on farms. Finding Australian Bureau of

Statistics (ABS) on specifics such as cost of living is only collected for capital cities and gross domestic product (GDP) provided by the rural sector can only be found at a national level. Relative urban/rural wages are also not available; however, comparisons by industry can be sourced.

There is a concentration of low incomes in many of the dryland broadacre farming areas which in recent years have experienced low prices and droughts; coastal areas which have experienced a significant rise of retirees (although sometimes they are low income but asset rich); and some remote areas dominated by indigenous groups (Hugo, 2000).

Poverty and the associated family problems which arise from income deprivation are higher in rural than urban areas. The story is much worse for Aborigines who have a mortality rate over four times that for non-Aboriginal people and a life expectancy about 20 years lower. Stress related problems were also found to be on the increase in rural areas. Health workers reported increased substance abuse, low morale and depression. Longer hours of work also contribute to greater risk of accidents and withdrawal from community activities. With the closure of support services and the difficulty of accessing medical services, families have less access to help (HREOC, 1999 p. 4).

Health

The best and most holistic view of health and wellbeing in rural and remote Australia is the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Rural, regional and remote health: indicators of health*. The report found that 'Australians living outside major cities have shorter life expectancy, higher death rates and are more likely to have a disability compared to city dwellers. This is so even after allowing for the effects of the poorer health of Indigenous Australians' (Gregory, 2005 p. 16).

Research suggests that the general health of rural people is poorer than those living in urban areas. Rural people have above average rates of premature mortality and death through heart disease, cancer, suicide and tuberculosis (HREOC, 1999 p. 4).

Inadequate, inaccessible and diminishing health services were the principal concern of participants in the *Bush Talks* (1999) report and people outside major cities were more likely to display unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, be overweight, and drinking alcohol excessively.

For 1998–2000, a man born in the rural Central Darling area of NSW could expect to live 13 years fewer than his compatriot born in Mosman (Gregory, 2005 p. 17).

The level of expenditure per available hospital bed declines sharply with increasing rurality, for both public and private hospitals. In 1995–96, the rate of expenditure in comparison to 'capital cities' was 20% less in 'large rural centres' and 54% less in the 'remainder' of Australia (Strong et al. , 1998 p. 80).

A National Farmers' Federation report, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, published in 1997, showed a critical under-supply of rural doctors. A study by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reconfirmed this in 1998 stating that for those living in the remotest areas of Australia, a primary healthcare supply rate was 35% lower than that of capital cities (*Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, 1998).

The Shire of Jerilderie has had, like many other rural areas throughout the State, a lot of difficulty in attracting a doctor to practise in the small town of Jerilderie. The town until just recently was in fact without a doctor for about twelve months, a situation which has the effect of frightening a lot of residents, particularly the aged, and of frustrating many others... The community, having finally solved the doctor problem, now finds itself with a hospital which, for all intents and purposes is still open, but a hospital that the doctor is not permitted to use other than for accident and emergency cases, where he may only provide in-patient care for a maximum period of four hours (HEROC, 1999 p. 6).

Strong (1998) showed that metropolitan and large rural centres had 400+ nursing home beds per 100 000 people over 70 years of age. The number of beds diminished the more the remote the location with acute care hospital beds being used to compensate. They found nursing-home-type-patients occupying 20% of hospital beds.

The ability of small rural communities to sustain a range of independent service impacts on the provision of health and aged care services has been acknowledged. In 1992–93 the Commonwealth and State Governments instigated the Multi-purpose Service (MPS) Program to replace traditional small rural hospitals. These MPS facilities centralise acute services, residential aged care services and community based services. As of November 2006, 22 of the 36 planned facilities have been completed in NSW.

Neumayer's study (2004) shows that better standards of residential aged care for rural and remote communities result from the MPS service model.

Once services are gone from their local area people can have substantial additional costs of time and money to travel to larger centres to receive treatment. Research shows that this lack of access to services has a negative effect on health status (National Farmers' Federation, 1998). A shortage of allied health services was regularly raised as an issue of concern in the *Bush Talks* (1999) consultations and submissions.

In Wauchope NSW there is a two and a half year wait for a dental check-up, although the dentist can fit in emergencies. In Port Macquarie NSW there is no dental service in town for health care card holders and the one resident dentist was reportedly only available for emergencies (HEROC, 1999 p. 7).

In Bathurst NSW the nearest government disability therapist is in Orange and there is a wait of eight to nine months to obtain an initial assessment by a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist (HEROC, 1999 p. 8).

Education skills and employment

Research shows a lower proportion of adults in rural, regional and remote areas have completed Year 12 and rurally based seventeen-year olds are less likely to be in school and school leavers living outside cities are less likely to go to university (Gregory, 2005).

Children in rural and remote Australia are less likely to complete their education than children in regional and urban centres (HREOC, 1999 p. 10).

Fewer rural children are entering tertiary education: 25% in 1989; 16% in 1997. Tertiary education is almost exclusively available only in the capital cities (HEROC, 1999 p. 12).

There are many factors contributing to this including 'family, previous educational experience, inadequate access to secondary schools, the high turnover in teachers, lack of subject choices, poor skills in the use of technology, poor facilities, poor future employment prospects, and disincentives created by government assistance schemes' (National Farmers' Federation, 1997 p. 31).

School of the air and distance education is common among families living in remote areas. This form of education was seen as a poor substitute for more interactive secondary schooling. However, it was generally agreed to be adequate for primary students, although it can be an 'unremunerated burden on the supervising parent(s)' (HREOC 1999 p. 10).

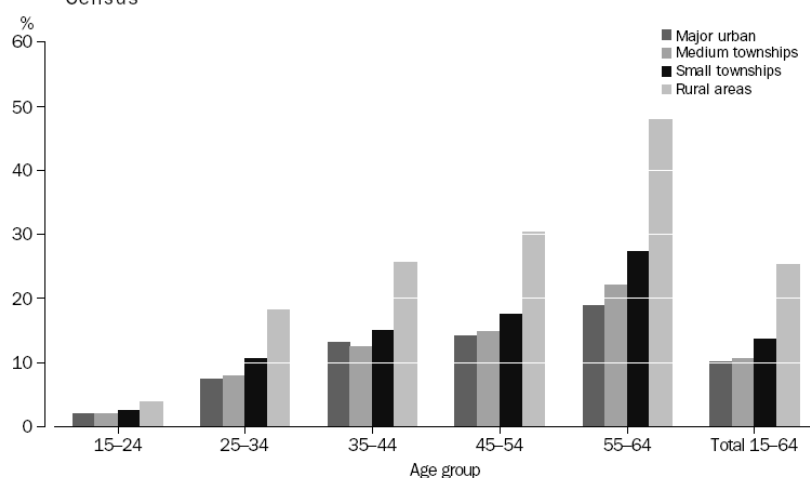
Students with special needs were much less likely to be catered for in rural and remote areas as there were not enough special schools in rural areas which resulted in very little choice even if one is available. There was also recognition that rural areas provided very little language support for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (HREOC, 1999 p. 12).

Around 60% of employed women aged 15–64 years in rural areas had no post-school qualification, compared to 52.5% of employed women in major urban areas. Over 17% of employed women had a university degree, in comparison to fewer than 10% of employed men. The overall trend of lower education levels in rural areas is likely to be at least partially indicative of the greater access to post-school education in large metropolitan centres (ABS, 2001).

Women in major urban areas are more likely to have higher educational qualifications, have the highest labour force participation rate, are least likely to be self-employed, and are less likely to be working part-time.

According to the ABS 2001 census, women residing in rural and regional Australia may face additional employment challenges to those faced by women in urban areas. Job prospects for rural women may not be as frequent or varied as a result of smaller and less diverse local economies.

11 SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN AS A PROPORTION OF TOTAL EMPLOYED WOMEN, By age: 2001 Census



Source ABS Perspectives on Regional Australia, Women's Employment 2001

The proportion of self-employed women in rural areas (25.3%) in 2001 was more than double the proportion in major urban centres (10.2%). Much of this can be attributed to women running and operating the family farm either as individuals or in partnership. In rural areas, 42.9% of self-employed women were engaged in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector. A further 12.7% were engaged in the retail sector. In small towns, 9.9% of self-employed women were engaged in accommodation, cafes and restaurants (ABS, 2006).

Unemployment contributes directly to the destruction of rural communities, and it places greater strains on the provision of support services for those who remain (HREOC, 1999 p. 21).

Services

Research shows that with reduced access to social services, people living in communities of between 5000 and 10 000 people face *considerable* disadvantage, while those living in communities of below 5000 face *extreme* disadvantages. Micro-economic reform, inappropriate urban service and funding models, and inadequate staffing and resources continues to have a huge impact on rural communities.

As governments seek to use their resources more efficiently they cut costs by closing services such as schools and hospitals which are deemed unviable as they do not have enough students or clients to justify their existence in monetary terms. This becomes a vicious cycle as rural populations are declining, which results in the closure of services, which in turn make it difficult to attract new population (Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, Valuing rural communities, 1998 p. 15).

Crisis accommodation is also limited in rural Australia and virtually non-existent in remote areas (HEROC, 1999 p. 18).

With the decline of rail services, many people in rural communities have to rely on private buses or cars. This creates additional limitations and restrictions impacting on exploring job opportunities and accessing a wide variety of services (HEROC, 1999).

Lack of transport limits the access young people have to health services, to education and to employment, all of which have an adverse effect on their health. For people under the age of 18, the lack of public transport means that they are reliant on others for transport. For example, Hillier et al. (1996) in a study of 860 young people in rural towns in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania found that young people under the age of 18 were mainly driven to the nearest regional centre by their parents (84%), creating difficulties for young people whose parents are not supportive of their needs (HREOC, 1999 p. 17).

Youth

Rural and regional communities feel there is little hope for their children and that the brightest and most motivated who leave won't come back. If they could be enticed to return or stay, perhaps younger people could play a role in reinventing rural communities (Ellyard, 2000).

The *Bush Talks* report showed a real concern about the lack of opportunities for young people in rural communities.

While there is a strong sense of community co-operation in a small town, the increasing rationalisation of all services, especially health does not encourage the young to remain in the district due to lack of employment and social opportunities (HEROC, 1999 p. 21).

Due to the limited nature of job opportunities in some rural areas, people looking for work, particularly in the younger age groups, may be more likely to seek out new and expanded opportunities in larger towns and cities (ABS 2006).

Young people are particularly vulnerable as isolation, social decline and lack of employment combine to give them a choice of leaving or having a very restricted lifestyle.

Boredom is a big problem for young people in non-metropolitan areas and is a major contributing factor to youth offending.

Because young people in many rural towns do not have 'legitimate' places where they can gather, they are often seen as a social threat if they gather in public places, such as the main street, the football oval, or other places where, officially, they do not have a reason to gather (HEROC, 1999 p. 21).

Bush Talks showed that negative perceptions have precluded young people from employment opportunities and housing.

Landlords often require references, but young people when they move out for the first time or lack experience rarely can comply, and are thus uncompetitive for housing (HEROC, 1999 p. 23).

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *A Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness*, 1995, found many rural and remote communities lack the essential service infrastructure required to support young people and their families and were practically non-existent in many rural parts of Australia. 'While local community support networks still exist in rural and remote communities, the changing social and economic circumstances in these communities no longer provide the safety net it once did for people when they are in crisis' (House of Representatives report, 1995 p. 329).

Young people in rural communities who have problems with drugs or alcohol often have difficulty getting access to appropriate treatment and other support services. There is an urgent need for a residential drug rehabilitation facility in the local area. Having to travel long distances to access such a service is difficult, expensive and alienating. It is especially problematic for young people from Indigenous communities (HEROC, 1999 p. 23).

Alarming youth suicide figures mask disturbing trends in depression in rural and remote communities. In 1986 there were 24 suicides per 100 000 males aged 15–24 years in rural areas. By 1995 the figure had risen to 34 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Youth Australia: A Social Report*, 1997 p. 38).

Depression is now one of the most common mental health problems experienced by young people. It is frequently a cause of significant problems such as school failure, family and peer disengagement and substance misuse. It is a major risk factor for youth suicide. Between one half and three quarters of all suicides are linked to depression (HREOC, 1999 p. 23).

Discrimination

Bush Talks (1999) also reported high levels of either discrimination or levels of disadvantage experienced among young people, gay and lesbian people, people with disabilities, Aboriginal people, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Their access to specific services and support were particularly impaired the further away from urban centres they lived (HEROC, 1999 p. 26).

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