

Australian Population Association
11th Biennial Conference
2020 Vision: Australia's Demographic Future
Wednesday, 2 October to Friday, 4 October 2002
Sydney Australia

Title: Where have the People Gone? Developing Population Strategies for Australia's Declining Regions.

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Context

Much of rural regional Australia, including Gippsland, is experiencing an ongoing loss and ageing of its population as well as significant population movement within these regions. While the population of rural regional Australia overall has continued to grow in absolute terms, there has been significant internal migration from inland rural regions to the capital cities and sunshine coastal belts of New South Wales and Queensland. During the twentieth century the proportion of Australians living in inland Australia fell dramatically from 61% to 17% of the nation's population.

In keeping with most Western societies, Australia's population is ageing as a result of falling birth-rates and due to the fact that Australians are living longer. In the case of rural regional Australia the other significant cause of population loss/ageing is the increased outmigration and non-return of young adults from regional communities. Indeed, in terms of these regions' future as prosperous, socially cohesive communities, one of the most worrying aspects of the so-called 'flight of youth' is the permanent loss of many of these regions' most capable young people. While it's unlikely that local government or regional development organizations can do a great deal about their region's falling birth-rate, these groups can work with state and federal government departments, local business and community organizations to both reduce population loss through outmigration and develop initiatives to attract more people, including skilled employees to their region.

Recent and projected population growth for Gippsland needs to be considered in the context of the state of Victoria's changed and changing demography and patterns of employment growth. For while Victoria's population will continue to grow, the rate

of population increase will fall from about 1 per cent in 1999 to a projected 0.4 per cent in 2021 (Deacon, 2000, p.2, Source ABS Cat. No. 3218.0). As a region, Gippsland is experiencing overall net population loss. During the twelve-month period from 30 June 2001, the only Gippsland LGA to experience significant population growth was the Bass Coast (3.0%). All other LGAs in Gippsland experienced population growth below the state average (1.3%) - Baw Baw (0.7%), South Gippsland (0.1%) or net population loss in the case of East Gippsland (-0.2%), La Trobe (-0.7%) and Wellington (-1.2%). Gippsland's recent experience of population loss needs to be understood in the context of employment growth in Victoria during the 1990s. An ABS Labour Force Survey compared employment growth in Melbourne and regional Victoria in 1991, 1996 and 1999. For the period 1991-99, while employment growth for Melbourne was 13.3% the figure for regional Victoria was a mere 4.6%.

This lack of employment growth is undoubtedly the key factor responsible for the increased outmigration and non-return of young adults. In Gippsland East around half of the young adults (20-29) leave the region (Curtain, 2002). The proportion of the region's young people who leave Gippsland will probably increase as more students complete secondary education and move away to access higher education courses in Melbourne. More young women than men are leaving and not returning to Gippsland. This has resulted in a growing sex ratio imbalance in the region with only 94 women in the 15-24 year old age group to every 100 men. The major challenge facing Gippsland is how to attract back more skilled people who have left as young adults to access educational, employment and cultural opportunities elsewhere.

As well as experiencing a net loss and ageing of its population, as a group the remaining residents of Gippsland are becoming increasingly disadvantaged compared to their regional and metropolitan counterparts. In his chapter on 'Population and Social Well Being in Gippsland' Birrell uses 1996 Census data to explain why there '...is an accumulation of disadvantaged people in Gippsland which derives largely from the economic difficulties...residents have to cope with' (Dibden 2002, p.38). In 1996 Gippsland had a high proportion of men in the lowest income category of less than \$300 per week (Birrell, 2002, p.33). This finding is consistent with recent studies which document the growing disparity in average income levels between residents of Australia's capital cities, regional centres, rural areas and rural towns (Harding et al, 2002)*.

Taking into account Gippsland's reduced capacity to generate employment, this 'accumulation of disadvantaged people in Gippsland' has a great deal to do with who is leaving and who is remaining in the region. Birrell's recent study of population movements in and out of the Gippsland region indicate that those most likely to leave are skilled adult males aged between 25-44 able to earn higher salaries elsewhere (Birrell, 2002, p.30). Similarly amongst those who remain or relocate into Gippsland there is a disproportionately large number of low income, often welfare dependent families who remain in or move to Gippsland to access affordable housing. Birrell's analysis indicates that in the past significant numbers of welfare dependent people, particularly single mothers, have moved to Gippsland attracted by available public housing in the La Trobe Valley towns (Birrell, 2002, p.36). However during the

* See also National Economics State of the Regions Report, 2001. See also Forecasts for Australian Regions Using the Monash Multi-Regional Forecasting Green Model, which ranked Australia's Substate Regions by Average Growth in Real Value Added 1996-97 to 2007-08. In this survey Gippsland was ranked 35th and East Gippsland 51st out of 56 regions.

1991-96 Census period there was actually a small net exodus of single mothers from Gippsland.

If Gippsland is not to remain a significantly disadvantaged regional community, future population strategies for the region need to be as concerned with population mix as well as simply attracting replacement population. For while additional people from any socio-economic background may help Gippsland's smaller country towns to keep their school, police station or pharmacy it is not in the long-term interest of any regional community to attract significant numbers of 'problem' families. Clearly all of Australia's regional communities, declining or otherwise, will seek to attract highly skilled young adults, possibly with self-funded retirees as a second choice. Yet the type of people regions particularly want to attract are those least likely to settle in smaller or more remote country towns where they are most needed. Gippsland therefore needs strategies to attract appropriate replacement population/skilled workers basically to the wider region with location within the region a secondary consideration.

For regardless of the success or otherwise of such strategies, the movement of population within Gippsland will be ongoing. Reflecting changes in employment growth and the desire of residents to access services, the population of the region will become increasingly concentrated in the larger urban centres and nearby commuter towns. With an increased proportion of retired people, the other major area for population growth will be the coastal areas.

In terms of how a regional community such as Gippsland can address ongoing population loss or current or predicted shortages of skilled labour there are a number of population attraction-retention strategies which need to be considered.

Traditionally, the understandable response to the 'flight of youth' and subsequent ageing of the region's population have been initiatives which aim to retain a greater proportion of a region's young adults through improved employment and educational opportunities. More recently, greater emphasis has been on developing 'attract them back' type strategies. Aimed at skilled young adults who having gained critical qualifications and work experience in the cities or overseas now wish to return to their home region. Such strategies may also involve offering special incentives to encourage graduates to accept employment in Australia's more remote rural regions. There is also growing interest in attracting metropolitan based mature workers or self-funded retirees to take advantage of cheaper housing and lifestyle opportunities in country towns. Finally there are proposals to meet critical labour strategies in certain country towns, by attracting both skilled and unskilled workers through community or government sponsored overseas migration schemes.

Policy initiatives by state or local government authorities to encourage skilled expatriates to return to their home state or region are a relatively recent phenomenon. In the United States, Iowa and Minnesota have developed strategies with similar demographic and economic aims which target young adults and their families. The Government of South Australia introduced a similar initiative in 2001 designed to reduce the net outmigration and non-return of people from the state^{*}. This 'Bringing Them Back Home' initiative sought to attract back people in the 30 plus age group

^{*} In May 2000 the Office of South Australian Premier commissioned the National Key Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems to develop strategies to attract skilled workers back to South Australia.

who were ‘...seeking the lifestyle attraction South Australia has to offer’ (Hugo, 2001, p.3). A survey of former residents of what factors would influence their to return to South Australia revealed that the dominant reasons for wishing to return included lifestyle reasons – family, friends, environment and house and land prices. For those who did not intend to return, the dominant reasons were employment related.

Given these options, what then are the most likely sources of skilled labour and suitable replacement population whose relocation to Gippsland would enable the region to become a more prosperous, socially cohesive community? An October 1999 ABS study on Population Mobility in Victoria (Deacon, 2000) provides useful information regarding residents of the state who moved during the 1996-99 period or planned to move in the 1999-2001 period. The fact that 28.8% of Victorians moved between 1996-99 suggests that Victoria’s population is highly mobile. In fact the great majority of these moves basically involved Melbourne residents relocating within the metropolitan area. However this study does provide some useful indicators regarding potential sources of new residents for Gippsland.

According to this study Victorians aged between 24-35 years are the state’s most mobile group with 52.7% (or 384,400) having moved between 1996-99. Those with post-school qualifications are more likely to move than those without. Families are more likely to move than single persons and predictably while only 9.6% of homeowners moved, 66.5% of renters and 30.7% of home purchasers did. Older Victorians, who are homeowners with well established neighbourhood networks, are obviously reluctant to move. Only 8.5% of Victorians aged 65 or over moved during

the 1996-99 period. One would anticipate that an analysis based on the 2001 Census data would produce similar findings.

This ABS study basically confirms that young couples with or intending to have children, seeking to purchase or upgrade their home are the group most likely to be attracted back to their home regions or one like it. For many such couples wishing to purchase their first house, the affordable alternatives are to either relocate to the outer suburbs or fringe areas of Melbourne or a regional centre or country town. The 'Bringing Them Home' type of strategy assumes that significant numbers of young adults working overseas or in Australia's capital cities in the 25-35 year age range could be interested in returning to their home region, though not necessarily the country town, where they grew up. For some, the perceived advantages of relocating to their home region will outweigh anticipated disadvantages such as more limited employment opportunities and the need to establish new professional and social networks. For young couples with children, the advantages of living and working in a region like Gippsland include opportunities to rent or purchase lower cost or better quality housing, reduced time and money spent on transport to work hence additional time for family and recreational activities as well as the prospect of living in a cleaner, safer, more community minded environment. For those contemplating returning to their home region there is also the so called 'granny' factor- the opportunity for them and their children to be more involved in their extended family network. Due to small numbers involved, even a highly successful 'Bringing Them Home' strategy would not do a great deal to assist regional communities to address population loss and ageing. However this type of initiative may provide a partial solution for regions such as Gippsland who are experiencing shortages in specific employment areas such as

health (doctors, dentists, nurses), agriculture (vets, farm managers), education and financial services.

Another strategy to encourage more skilled young adults to seek positions in Gippsland would be to increase the number of students from metropolitan areas who complete at least part of their tertiary course at local TAFE colleges or Monash University's Gippsland campus. The assumption is that students completing qualifications at regional universities or TAFE colleges are more likely to seek employment in regional communities. This may require more government funded places at regional universities or the development of new courses currently only available at metropolitan universities. The obvious difficulty in attracting students from Melbourne is that living away from home will involve considerable additional expense for them or their parents. More government or industry scholarships or reduced HECS obligation should encourage more capable students to take up places at regional universities and TAFE colleges. In the longer term a restructuring of Australia's TAFE/university system to enable merged regional tertiary institutions to offer more flexible, distinctive programs, and government funding policies which recognise the additional operational costs of regional universities is probably required. In those areas of specialist higher education such as law, medicine and dentistry, currently offered only at the larger metropolitan universities, more internships in regional communities would *in theory* increase the number of graduates willing to accept country appointments. This would obviously depend on the students' perceptions, positive or otherwise, of work and life in a particular town or regional community formed during their internship.

Whatever the merits of 'Bringing Them Home' type strategies, it could be argued that retention strategies which address the 'flight of youth' (16-24 year olds) have the greatest potential to address the net loss and ageing of Gippsland's population. Most regional economic strategies now give a high priority to the provision of increased employment and post compulsory education opportunities as a means of reducing the exodus of young people from rural regional Australia.

In addition to expanding opportunities for local youth to take up educational and training opportunities within the region, there may be a need to address local employer discrimination and employment practices against young adults. An issue which needs to be addressed is not simply the lack of employment opportunities for young adults but an *apparent* preference by regional employers, especially in the service industry, for older workers.

Together with improved employment and cultural opportunities for young adults, the increased provision of tertiary education courses/student places within the region have generally been regarded as the most effective means of addressing the 'flight of youth' from regional Australia by reducing the numbers leaving to enrol in courses at metropolitan institutions. Young people who attend regional universities and TAFE colleges are more likely to seek employment in regional communities after graduating. This should be even more the case if courses offered by non-metropolitan tertiary institutions provided students with specialist expertise in major regional industries (forestry, agriculture etc) and/or professional practice in rural communities. One possible strategy would involve increased provision for both metropolitan and country students to complete at least part of their undergraduate course at regional

universities or TAFE colleges before undertaking further specialist studies at larger metropolitan institutions.

Another strategic initiative with the potential to retain (or attract back) more capable young adults in their home region would be the development of youth enterprise initiatives similar to the Youth Enterprise South West, a 1998-99 Victorian State Government project which involved local government and community organizations. Simply put, the overall purpose of this North American style of program is to provide local youth (16-24 year olds) with opportunities to become more entrepreneurial who can then subsequently contribute to their local community's social and economic growth. Such program initiatives seek to encourage young adults to remain in or return to their home town or region to start their own businesses and take a more active role in their local community as volunteers or members of local organizations. For other individuals and communities the main value of youth enterprise projects would be to enable young people to take greater responsibility for their own social activities. As well as individuals acquiring additional skills and confidence, participation in appropriate youth enterprise activities should encourage more young people to remain in their regional community rather than leaving for the bright lights of Melbourne or Sydney.

Perhaps the most promising source of additional population for Australia's declining regions is to attract more retirees or 'life stylers' from Australia's capital cities who no longer need to remain in Sydney or Melbourne. The 1999 ABS survey indicated that by their mid thirties, Victoria's residents become increasingly reluctant to move especially if they own their own home. However this tendency is presumably less

evident as a proportion of Melbourne's 'baby boomers' look to early retirement options to make what amounts to a 'sea change' in their lives. Clearly there should be increasing numbers of recently retired couples without dependent children in Melbourne who would consider relocating to a Victorian country town or regional centre rather than the sunbelt communities in NSW and Queensland for lifestyle and financial reasons. America's experience, where some states commit considerable resources into enticing prospective older couples to migrate to their state, is worth noting. In the United States the older Sunbelt states such as Florida have gradually lost market share for older migrants. Self selection, the process where people weigh the relative quality of life in their current home against that of potential destinations, is seeing more older Americans relocate to the temperate climate states along the Atlantic coast (Longino, 1994, p. 24).

For Melbourne retirees the benefits of such a move to Gippsland could include more accessible services, better scenic amenities, a cleaner, less congested environment, and above all cheaper or better quality housing. For some the previous relocation of their children - grandchildren to a regional community provides an additional inducement for a recently retired couple to move there. For other couples early retirement is only a viable option if they have substantial capital to invest to generate retirement income. One option is to sell their metropolitan home and purchase a cheaper, yet suitable residence in a Gippsland regional centre or town. The movement of retirees from Melbourne is clearly significant in the boom in housing property prices in Victoria's coastal areas including the Bass Coast and to a lesser extent in inland towns.

For many North American rural communities the relocation of retirees into their towns presents something of a two edged sword. While the additional spending of welfare cheques and other retirement income provides a boost for local businesses, the increased demand on locally funded health systems can lead to financial difficulties for local authorities. In Australia, with its centralised Medicare system, this is not seen as a problem for country towns with a large number of retired residents. However those regions that attract large numbers of retirees, affluent or otherwise, will of course have an even older population and will obviously require increased provision of health and aged care services. On the positive side, usually with no mortgage payments to meet or dependent children to support, some self-funded retirees have relatively high levels of discretionary income to spend locally. Others may have capital - from superannuation payouts, inheritance or from the balance from sale of their Melbourne or Sydney property- to invest in local businesses if they so choose.

For regional communities with an ageing population there is a need to develop a more flexible approach to the whole issue of ageing in order to utilise the often-underestimated capacity of older people to contribute to their community. While most early retirees look to relocation to regional centres or country towns to begin a lifestyle change, many are capable and willing to contribute as volunteers to sporting clubs and community organizations or take on the role of mentors to assist young entrepreneurs. A distinctive feature of Australia's pre and post-retirement culture involves couples travelling extensively throughout regional Australia. This provides an excellent opportunity for Gippsland's visitor information centres to implement strategies designed to persuade more of these visitors to become permanent residents.

Innovative marketing utilising relevant information regarding available housing, employment opportunities and services, is obviously the key to attracting additional population to Gippsland's regional centres and country towns. Due in part to declining populations and less rigorous local building codes, affordable or at least cheaper housing has been and still is a major inducement for people to remain in or relocate to Victoria's regional centres and country towns. Recent increases in the cost of renting and purchasing housing in Australia's larger capital cities provides an even greater incentive for metropolitan residents, especially retirees, welfare dependent or low income families, to move to smaller country towns where a modest three bedroom house can be rented for as little as \$60 to \$80 per week. While moving to smaller country towns to access cheaper housing is an option for people who are sole parent, aged and disability pensioners, this is not generally the case for people on unemployment benefits given Centrelink's current restrictions on movements to areas of high unemployment. An increased movement of such people into Australia's declining country towns offers at least a partial solution to the ongoing loss of population, hence services, from these communities. However problems arising from the relocation of welfare dependent families into towns with virtually no prospects of employment and only the most basic services are obvious enough. In some regional communities one hears dark mutterings from locals regarding the recent and unwelcome arrival of 'ferals' in their town. Others refer to the new arrivals' lack of community mindedness and the burden such disadvantaged families place on the town's long-term residents.

A recent Monash University study concluded that affordable public housing was responsible for the influx of disadvantaged people (low wage, welfare dependent) from Melbourne into regional Victoria (Birrell et.al. 2000, p. 31). The point is that with rising housing costs and a shortage of public housing in Melbourne, Gippsland is likely to continue to attract disadvantaged families seeking affordable housing to areas with few opportunities for employment. While any regional community would be concerned at this type of immigration, in a free society it cannot be prevented. However a powerful case can be put to state and federal governments to provide the necessary additional resources in the form of better schools, subsidised childminding facilities, training programs and specific incentives to businesses to locate in the region to enable such families to improve their situation. Much of the drive and leadership will obviously have to come from disadvantaged communities themselves utilising available government resources.

Another difficulty in relying on 'affordable' housing to attract replacement population to regions experiencing population loss is the deteriorating condition and non-replacement of cheap housing in towns within these regions. In Australia's declining country towns most affordable housing is more than forty years old and often in need of major repairs or wholesale renovation. With low return from rent and little prospect of significant capital gains, owners of these properties have little incentive to undertake any major improvements. Similarly, builders and property developers in these regions appear to have little interest in constructing new affordable housing- either as flats for rent or basic houses and units for purchase. This is partly a response to increased costs and more stringent local government regulations involved in developing home sites and constructing residential dwellings.

Finally, with fewer average people per housing unit, more dwellings will be required in Gippsland even if the population remains stable or declines marginally. Due to fundamental changes in Australian society the average number of persons per household continues to decline with single person households becoming increasingly common. As a result even in regional communities experiencing net population loss there is a need for additional and different types of housing to meet the changing requirements of the existing population.

Available evidence suggests that there is a growing shortage of both 'affordable' and better quality housing within most regions. Major employers in the larger regional centres cite lack of affordable rental housing as a major obstacle to attracting much needed employees to the region. In the smaller country centres it is difficult to persuade managers or professional staff to accept appointments in towns where is no suitable rental accommodation. The issue of housing of all kinds needs to be addressed if strategies to attract more skilled workers or retirees to Gippsland are to be successful.

Thus far, this paper has not explored the possibility of attracting more overseas migrants to Gippsland as a means of stimulating population growth, filling gaps in the skilled workforce and even reducing the average age of the population. Increased numbers of migrants from non-British backgrounds would also result in Gippsland becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse and narrow the present cultural divide between Gippsland and Melbourne. Yet despite such initiatives as the Federal Government Migrant Settlement policy and the Victorian Government Skilled

Migration Program, the numbers of overseas migrants settling in regional Victoria will probably remain minimal.

A study undertaken by Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research suggests that even the prospect of well paid employment will not induce most overseas migrants to settle in regional areas such as Gippsland. In choosing a location in Australia the Monash University and a separate Immigration Department survey found that overseas migrants are more influenced by the presence of family and friends and the prospect of being part of their ethnic community than available employment (*The Age*, 18 March 2002). Non British professional migrants who have already lived and worked in several countries may be more willing to accept regional appointments. One perhaps also needs to ask just how welcome would certain overseas migrants of Asian and Middle Eastern background be made to feel in some traditional Australian rural communities. It may be possible to attract more overseas migrants to settle in Gippsland if this sensitive issue is properly addressed.

Conclusion

This paper has raised a number of factors to be taken into account in developing strategies to assist regional communities such as Gippsland experiencing population decline. As well as an ongoing loss of population hence services, decline involves the so-called 'flight of youth' and skilled workers leaving an ageing and increasingly disadvantaged population. While some of these changes in Gippsland's population are inevitable, others can be addressed through innovative, practical initiatives. To be effective such strategies need to be based on good information on just who is leaving and arriving in Gippsland and why, as well as the causes and consequences of

population movements within the region. It has been argued that strategies that involve attracting population at any cost will inevitably create more problems than solutions. It has also been suggested that it is probably in the region's long-term interest as well as realistic to put increased emphasis on strategies to attract experienced skilled workers back to Gippsland rather than retain more young people in the region. Given anticipated shortages of skilled workers in certain key areas, specific innovative strategies are required to attract more skilled employees and entrepreneurs to live and work in Gippsland. Consideration needs to be given to how Gippsland, as a traditional, relatively homogeneous regional community can attract skilled people from diverse backgrounds to relocate and remain in the region. Similarly the region has much to gain in attracting more early retirees to relocate to one of Australia's most beautiful and conveniently located regions, albeit with something of an image problem. This will involve innovative thinking regarding how the region can utilise the potential of migrants, including older people to contribute socially and economically to their new regional community.

Marketing strategies designed to attract more people, including skilled employees and entrepreneurs to Gippsland need to provide a balanced and basically accurate view of the region. The temptation to produce more glossy, tourist promotion - business investment propaganda should be strongly resisted. Similarly, in developing submissions for state and federal government funding, advocates for the region should avoid 'inverse boosterism', which overemphasises the difficulties experienced by the population of the region. While such special pleading may be successful in generating funding support, it may be equally effective in dissuading sought after population and businesses from relocating to Gippsland.

Finally, to be truly effective, population strategies as well as being realistic and innovative need to involve a whole of region approach on the part of government agencies and community organizations within Gippsland. This will not be easy and require considerable optimism, patience and vision. Basically much of what has been discussed in this paper involves the at times painful, yet urgently required, modernisation of what is still in many respects a traditional rural-industrial regional community. Some of these much-needed initiatives to address population decline and shortages of skilled labour will inevitably result in further growth of Gippsland's major centres rather than the smaller country towns or rural communities. Yet such strategies, if successful, will contribute to the overall wellbeing of Gippsland's current and future residents.

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