



The sponge city hypothesis: does it hold water?

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Over recent years, Australia's major regional cities (i.e. those urban centres positioned within the urban hierarchy intermediate between country towns and capital cities) have increasingly been characterised as 'sponge cities'. This group of centres have generally experienced above average rates of population growth over recent censuses while also cementing their roles as the dominant service and administrative function providers within regions. Simultaneously, those centres positioned further down the urban hierarchy have generally witnessed service loss. The 'sponge city' sobriquet has been used as a metaphor to link these two processes together. It is often (and uncritically) suggested within the literature that regional centres, as 'sponge cities', mop up population and services from their hinterlands, thereby centralising business and administrative functions at the expense of smaller towns and their residents. This paper tests the 'sponge city' hypothesis by examining in- and out-migration trends to a number of New South Wales major regional centres over the past 15 years, paying particular attention to the origins and destinations of these migrants. The paper argues that demographic trends at the intra- and inter-regional scale are far more complex than the 'sponge city' metaphor can account for.