



## Promoting the social inclusion of young families moving to non-metropolitan areas

**Between 2001 and 2006, significant population growth occurred along the eastern seaboard of Australia.** A substantial proportion of this growth occurred outside capital cities, particularly on the urban fringes of large cities, coastal areas and the areas around mining towns. The *Families on the Fringe* study focused on the movement of young families to four non-metropolitan areas of Queensland and New South Wales, with the aim of building an understanding of the experiences and needs of these families.

### KEY POINTS

- Between 2001 and 2006, there was significant population growth in coastal areas, especially in areas within commuting distance of Brisbane and in regions around Sydney.
- Population growth was strongest in relatively advantaged non-metropolitan areas.
- Families in the four areas studied had relocated due to a combination of push and pull factors. Their importance varied according to the location.
- A major push factor was the cost of housing (in three of the four areas). The pull factors were increased quality of life and lifestyle, access to affordable housing and, especially in the Queensland areas, better employment opportunities.
- Building a new life in a new location was not always easy. The factors which contributed to families feeling socially excluded in their new community were: dislocation from family and social networks, lack of transport, and inadequate local service systems especially health and community services and child care.
- Commuting long distances for work (in Camden and Wyong, NSW), perceived insularity (in Oakey, Queensland) and mobility of the community (in Gladstone, Queensland) contributed to social exclusion in some of the areas.
- The activities which contributed most to the social inclusion of newly arrived young families were: low-key outreach by neighbours and work colleagues; affordable recreational networks; and proactive outreach by local services.
- There was some evidence of disadvantaged families being displaced by the new arrivals as housing and other local costs rose. This led to increases in disadvantage in neighbouring areas.
- The research highlights the need for policy responses at three levels: to reduce the push factors leading young families to move away from their original locations, particularly where they have better employment, transport and services; to improve the planning and establishment of transport and service infrastructure in growing non-metropolitan communities; and to build the capacity of such communities to support newly arrived young families.
- Increased availability of affordable, appropriate and accessible housing is required if families are to be given the opportunity to remain in their original location.
- For those families who do relocate to non-metropolitan areas, adequate employment and service systems are essential.
- Effective service systems in growing non-metropolitan areas require: the provision of services through multi-service centres; active outreach to newly arrived families; holistic service provision; adequate resources for transport; flexibility to provide mobile services; flexibility in funding to allow services to focus on outcomes relevant to the particular local communities; and workforce strategies to attract and retain professionals.

## THE AIMS

The Families on the Fringe study looked at the movement of young families to non-metropolitan areas of Queensland and New South Wales, with the aim of building an understanding of the experiences and needs of these families.

The study examined:

- population growth of young families in four diverse non-metropolitan communities
- service providers' perceptions of the needs of young families who relocate
- the experiences of young families who have relocated to non-metropolitan areas
- the factors that contributed to the social inclusion, or exclusion, of newly-arrived families.

The research was funded through an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant in partnership with researchers at The University of Queensland, School of Social Work and Human Services and The University of Sydney, Faculty of Education and Social Work, the Queensland Government Office of Economic and Statistical Research, The Benevolent Society and Mission Australia. The research was conducted by Prof. Karen Healy, Dr Margot Rawsthorne, Amanda Donnet, Fiona Caniglia, Anne Hampshire and Annette Michaux.

A full report is available at: [www.missionaustralia.com.au](http://www.missionaustralia.com.au) and [www.bensoc.org.au](http://www.bensoc.org.au).

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## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in four areas:

- Wyong Shire, NSW (coastal regional, 90 kms north of central Sydney)
- Camden, NSW (urban fringe of south west Sydney)
- Oakey, Queensland (inland rural town 160 kms west of Brisbane)
- Gladstone, Queensland (coastal regional city, 500 kms north of Brisbane).

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used. A socio-demographic analysis of population growth in non-metropolitan areas of NSW and Queensland between the 2001 and 2006 censuses was undertaken, as well as a more detailed analysis of population growth trends and changing levels of disadvantage between the two censuses within the four specific areas.

The field research involved in-depth interviews with 55 service providers (mostly in education, health, community services and child care) and 43 parents of young families who had relocated in the previous three years. Community forums involving social service agencies, community leaders and parents were also held in each location.

The research was conducted between 2006 and 2008, prior to the global financial crisis and it is likely that this has affected all the communities studied. For example, one site, Gladstone, has been greatly affected by employers announcing the shedding of hundreds of local jobs in 2009. While our findings relate to a particular snapshot in time, they point to underlying trends that are likely to remain under current economic conditions.

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**Table 1: Comparison across areas of key demographic features**

Demographic features	Wyong	Camden	Oakey	Gladstone	Australia
Percentage of population <14yrs %	20.4	25.5	24.2	24.4	19.8
Proportion of households with one parent and children %	18.6	14.0	19.9	13.5	15.8
Median income pw (families)	\$1,081	\$1,465	\$995	\$1,437	\$1,171
Unemployment %	7.1	3.9	6.6	5.0	5.2
Percentage of population who is Indigenous %	2.2	1.3	9.1	3.3	2.3
Percentage of population renting %	25.7	18.9	36.2	29.1	27.2

(adapted from ABS data cited above)

## THE FINDINGS

### Population growth and relative disadvantage

The study found that many coastal areas in Queensland experienced large growth between June 2001 and 2006, most significantly in coastal areas within commuting distance to Brisbane. In NSW, substantial population growth occurred in regions around Sydney. In both Queensland and NSW, many areas of high population growth were also becoming less disadvantaged. However, there was also some evidence of disadvantaged families in non-metropolitan areas being displaced by new arrivals, as many inland regions near the coastal areas of high growth became areas of substantially greater disadvantage between 2001 and 2006.

In the Queensland study sites, marked population growth in Gladstone was associated with a significant decline in disadvantage in Gladstone and neighbouring Calliope Shire. However, more inland areas, such as the Banana Shire, experienced little population growth and remained highly disadvantaged as measured by the SEIFA index<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Oakey, the one inland rural site in the study, underwent limited population growth between the two censuses and remains a disadvantaged area.

In the NSW study sites there was significant growth in the Wyong region with large population growth in

North East Wyong. This growth was accompanied by an increase in relative advantage as measured by the SEIFA index. Camden is a relatively advantaged area and continued to experience strong population growth relative to other areas in the region.

Overall, the study found that population growth was strongest in relatively advantaged areas and increased population was associated with further increases in relative advantage in three of the four study sites.

### Reasons for relocation

Analysis of data from interviews with service providers and families revealed a number of reasons for relocation and a range of factors which promoted social inclusion or, conversely, heightened the risk of social exclusion once families relocated.

The study found that families relocated as a result of a combination of 'push' factors and 'pull' factors. Overall, relocation to the four non-metropolitan areas provided the majority of respondents with opportunities, such as improved housing and employment opportunities, or increased quality of life or lifestyle opportunities. Analysis showed that the importance of these pull factors varied by location.

<sup>1</sup> SEIFA stands for Socio-economic Indexes for Areas. This suite of indexes ranks geographic areas across Australia in terms of their socio-economic characteristics.

- **Housing:** Access to quality, affordable housing emerged as a major factor in the relocation of young families to Camden, Wyong and Oakey. In all three sites, some respondents identified that access to affordable housing for private purchase was a motivating factor for relocation. In addition, in Wyong and Oakey improved access to private rental and public housing were cited as factors in families' decisions to relocate.

*Where I was living before in Western Sydney, I was paying \$180 a week in a unit and it was horrible. So I thought, why not pay rent at the same price and actually be able to move to the beach? (Parent)*

- **Employment:** Work opportunities emerged as a theme in the two Queensland sites, but not in the NSW sites, where a lack of local employment opportunities and the need to commute long distances to work, were identified as stressors following relocation.
- **Lifestyle and safety:** In all four locations, lifestyle issues, such as a more relaxed environment and perceptions of greater safety, factored in families' decisions to relocate. Whilst not a dominant factor in any community, this theme was mentioned in approximately a quarter of interviews. Families also reported that once they had made a decision to relocate to a non-metropolitan area, they also took into account access to family and friends in deciding where to move to.

**Table 2: Motivation for relocation by field research site**

Location	Housing	Employment	Lifestyle & safety
Gosford/ Wyong (NSW)	✓	x	✓
Camden (NSW)	✓	x	✓
Oakey (QLD)	✓	✓	✓
Gladstone (QLD)	x	✓	✓

### Contributors to social exclusion

Participants who had relocated were also asked to rate the extent to which they felt part of their new community, or not. An assessment was made of the factors which families and service providers felt contributed to families feeling socially excluded in their new community.

Six key themes emerged as contributors to social exclusion:

- dislocation from informal networks
- lack of transport
- inadequate services
- commuting long distances for work
- perceived insularity of the community
- mobility of the community.

The relevance of these themes varied across the study sites, however three factors were common to all: dislocation from informal social networks; inadequate local transport systems; and inadequate service systems, referring in particular to poor availability of health and community services and of child care services.

*Sometimes I feel a bit lonely and left out, but I just think kind of, 'Well what I can I do?' You know? And especially not having friends in the area, and my husband is working all the time so I don't think it's an issue for him now. (Parent)*

Commuting for work was a significant issue in the two NSW study sites.

*We've got a whole range of issues for kids - if both parents work in Sydney - long hours in childcare, or kids that probably aren't really old enough coming home from school and not having anyone home... So when the parents get home at night, they're tired, they don't have much ability to participate in their communities. And I think that prevents you from building social networks. (Service provider)*

The issue of perceived insularity of the community emerged as a theme in Oakey, which was the only inland rural site in the study. Mobility, which referred to work-related mobility, was identified as factor contributing to social exclusion in Gladstone, where population growth was associated with work opportunities in the local mines.

### Promoting social inclusion

In examining the factors that promoted social inclusion, three types of local activities contributed to the social integration of young families in the community.

- **Low-key outreach by neighbours and work colleagues to welcome newcomers:** young families who had at least one member in employment within the local area were more likely than those who were unemployed or not employed locally to experience this form of informal outreach.
- **Affordable recreational networks:** participation in social, cultural and sporting activities was seen as important in bringing new families into contact with established networks in the area. However, barriers to participation in these activities included, in some instances, prohibitive costs and lack of time. Lack of time was a major issue for families in which one or more members commuted long distances for work.
- **Proactive outreach by existing services:** in all four study sites, local health, education or community service institutions incorporated strategies for identifying and welcoming young families to the area. These strategies seemed especially important for engaging vulnerable young families.

*The community runs events aimed at getting people together. They have a GOATTS festival – which is ‘Go Out And Talk To Someone’. And there is a youth-driven art exhibition, picnics in the parks and things like that, where the youth and the local services are all involved...it gets people to know each other and network together.* (Service provider)

### Future directions

The migration of young families to non-metropolitan communities is a well-established trend that is likely to continue. To a large extent this is a product of the perceived housing and lifestyle opportunities available in non-metropolitan communities.

This research confirms that young families face a myriad of challenges as a result of relocation to these communities.

In the course of this study, a number of examples of flexible and active outreach by a range of local service organisations to promote the social inclusion of young families were observed. Of note was the extent to which these activities were something the organisations did of their own initiative, often unrecognised and unsupported by funding bodies.

Currently, the social inclusion of young families in many non-metropolitan communities appears to be a matter of good luck rather than good planning. Yet, the phenomenon of non-metropolitan migration of young families is something government and service providers should not continue to ignore as a major social concern, both for the sake of the current generations and the generations to follow. It is hoped this report will provide policy makers and practitioners with evidence for enhancing the social inclusion of young families who relocate to non-metropolitan areas.

**Table 3: Contributors to social exclusion**

Location	Dislocation from informal networks	Inadequate local transport system	Commuting for work	Insularity	Mobility	Inadequate service systems
Gosford/Wyong (NSW)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
Camden (NSW)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
Oakey (QLD)	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓
Gladstone (QLD)	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Responses at policy, program and practice levels must address both the push factors that contribute to young families' decisions to relocate and the factors that contribute to increased vulnerability to social exclusion after relocation.

The study findings suggest that policy approaches should operate at three levels to:

- reduce the push factors leading young families to consider moving away from their original location of residence, particularly where this location offers greater access to employment, transport and services.
- improve planning, transport and service infrastructure in non-metropolitan communities; and
- build community capacity to support and engage newly arrived young families.

### Reducing the push factors

For young families to have the opportunity to remain in their location of choice will require policies and programs that ensure the availability of affordable, appropriate and accessible housing, particularly in the social and private rental sectors. The Federal Government has recently taken positive steps towards improving housing affordability. However, the needs of young families could be better reflected in the existing housing affordability schemes, and future private housing developments need to include a mix of housing options for families with different income levels.

### Supporting young families relocating to non-metropolitan communities

The research also shows that there is a clear need for better transport infrastructure, local employment opportunities and more coordinated services for those families who make the move to non-metropolitan communities.

Governments need to support local economic development opportunities resulting in medium, high income and permanent employment. This can include relocating major government units to non-metropolitan areas.

There is also a pressing need for flexible, local/regional transport models that facilitate easy movement around the region as well as catering to the needs of young families in design and cost. Nationally, and internationally, there are examples of effective responses to the challenge of adequate public transport provision, such as Integrated Transport Plans in South Australia and the Transport Connections Program in Victoria.

Overall, access to quality health, education, child care and community services was a major concern in all study sites. The research highlighted the importance of:

- multi-service hubs located in visible and high profile locations combined with a capacity for active and assertive outreach;
- adequate resources for transport to enable more people to access services, and adequate funding to services to provide outreach to young families;
- flexibility to provide mobile services where a team of professionals, particularly allied health and dentistry, visit particular locations where access is an issue, especially for low income families;
- holistic service provision approaches that are responsive to the diverse needs of young families relocating to non-metropolitan areas;
- flexible funding focused on assessing outcomes which are relevant to local communities;
- community capacity-building strategies which equip communities to support young families; and
- workforce strategies to attract and retain professionals in non-metropolitan areas.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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