



**REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA**
INSTITUTE

Talking point: Returning to regional Australia

There's no place like home

A steady flow of working age people are moving from the capital cities to regional Australia.

This migration is a real win-win for everyone involved.

Regions can offer people a lifestyle and quality of life that is beyond the reach of most in the city. In turn, the communities that people return to, and become a part of, benefit from new skills and resources that can be vital to their future.

Although it is difficult to precisely identify who is making the move, a large portion are likely to be 'Regional Returners' - people who left the regions as young adults but choose to come back later in life.

As well as evidence to support this trend, this Talking Point provides some insights from people who have chosen to move back to the regions.

While it is clear many people have already decided to return to regional Australia, the Regional Australia Institute suggests there are likely to be many more thinking about it.

For those out there who are still pondering a return, why not take the advice from someone who has made the move:

"Don't stop and think, just do it. The overall quality of life, affordability, environment and lifestyle really make it a no-brainer".

Kerry Grace, Regional Returner



Starting a conversation

At the Regional Australia Institute (RAI), we seek to identify evidence-based trends and opportunities in regional Australia. While we typically focus on policy issues and the decisions that government should make, in the case of Returners, we see a trend that is truly community led.

It is also one that tends to slip a little bit under the radar despite the significant contribution it is making to regional Australia and the nation as a whole.

The choices Australians are making for their own future are creating new opportunities for regions.

The purpose of this Talking Point is to highlight the trend and raise its profile to start important discussions about what is happening in our communities.

About Us

Independent and informed by both research and ongoing dialogue with the community, the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) develops policy and advocates for change to build a stronger economy and better quality of life in regional Australia – for the benefit of all Australians.

To find out more about the RAI contact us at info@regionalaustralia.org.au or visit www.regionalaustralia.org.au

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Changing gears in life

Our late 20s to early 40s are times of transition for many Australians.

The satisfaction initially gained through leaving home, breaking childhood ties and going to the city, or maybe overseas, starts to fade.

Meanwhile, a change in priorities begins to sneak up on us, taking many by surprise.

For some, the biggest surprise can be changing perspectives on where they want to live.

As this change occurs, many people who left the regions in their early life choose to go back.

These people are the Regional Returners and they are an important but often unnoticed group who are changing their futures and the future of many regions.

'When I left home [in regional Australia], I didn't think I would ever want to go back. But since having my own children I appreciate it more. That was something that surprised me'.

Louise Evans, Potential Returner



The numbers

Looking at the Australia's population we can see that there is a strong link between a persons age and where they are likely to be moving (Figure 1).

Younger people move more often and for many regional people in their late teens and early 20s, this move is to the bright city lights.

However by their late 20's, the net loss of people from the regions is reversed. Amongst people in their late 20s to early 40s, a steady flow toward the regions has become apparent.

While ABS Census data does not allow us to directly track how many of these people are returning to regional Australia, anecdotal evidence and several studies suggest that a significant portion of these people are likely to have originally lived in the regions.

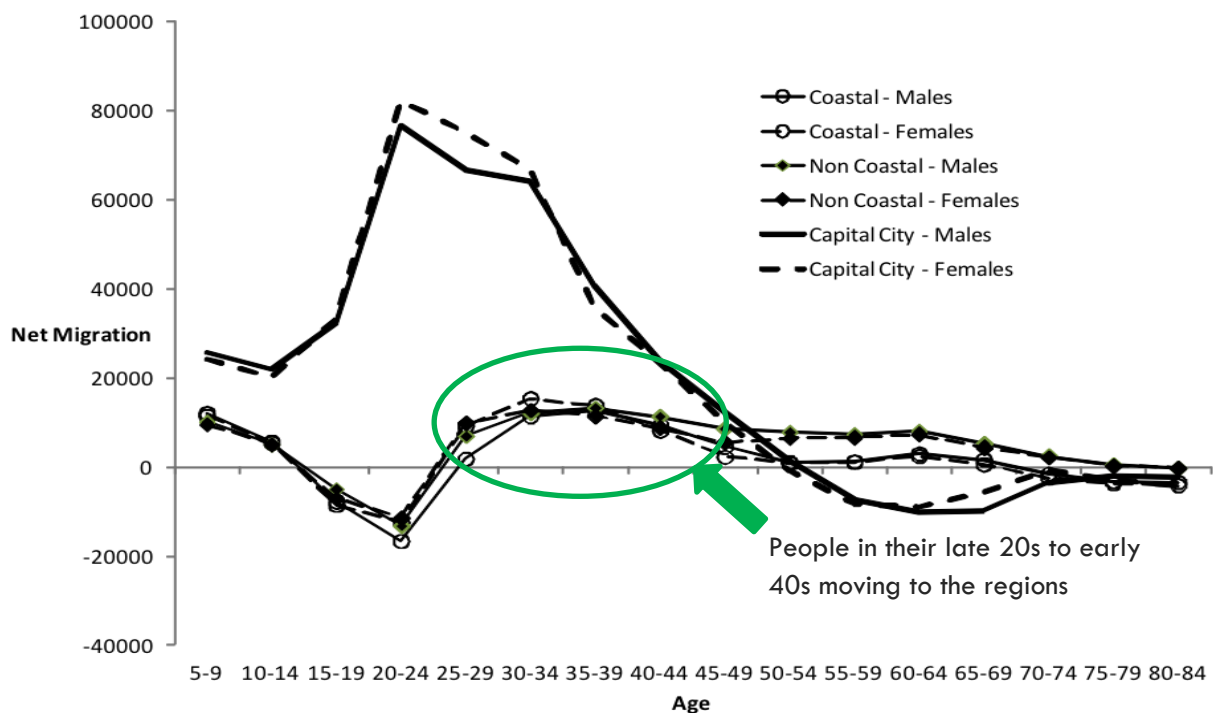


Figure 1 Australia: Where are people moving to by age (domestic population), 2006-11
Source: ABS 2011 Census

International evidence for this trend is quite strong, with return migration patterns documented in Ireland, New Zealand, the Caribbean and West Africa.¹

It is believed this return migration is very likely linked to the strong regional affiliation gained through childhood experiences, values, friends and family.

In Australia this is supported by research from the University of Western Australia which demonstrates that people who currently live in or have lived in regional Australia have a more positive perception of the regions.ⁱⁱ

Of those who have come from a regional area, 65% are willing to live more than three hours from a metropolitan area. More than 40% are prepared to live more than five hours from a major metropolitan area. In contrast, those from the capital cities are generally only prepared to live less than an hour from a major metropolitan area.

Similar patterns can be seen in regards to preferences for where people would like to work. People from the capital cities again, clearly favoured remaining in the city. Most of those who had moved to the city from the regions, however, stated that they would like to return to a regional area for work.

Returners are important to the future of regional Australia. The desire of these people to return offers many communities access to skills and experiences they could not usually access.



So where are people going?

This movement of working age people is not limited to any particular part of Australia (Figure 2).

There are net gains of people in a range of regions including mining related areas in Western Australia, most of the east coast and some inland areas. In contrast, our capital cities (with the exceptions of Perth and Hobart) are experiencing a net loss of people in this age group.

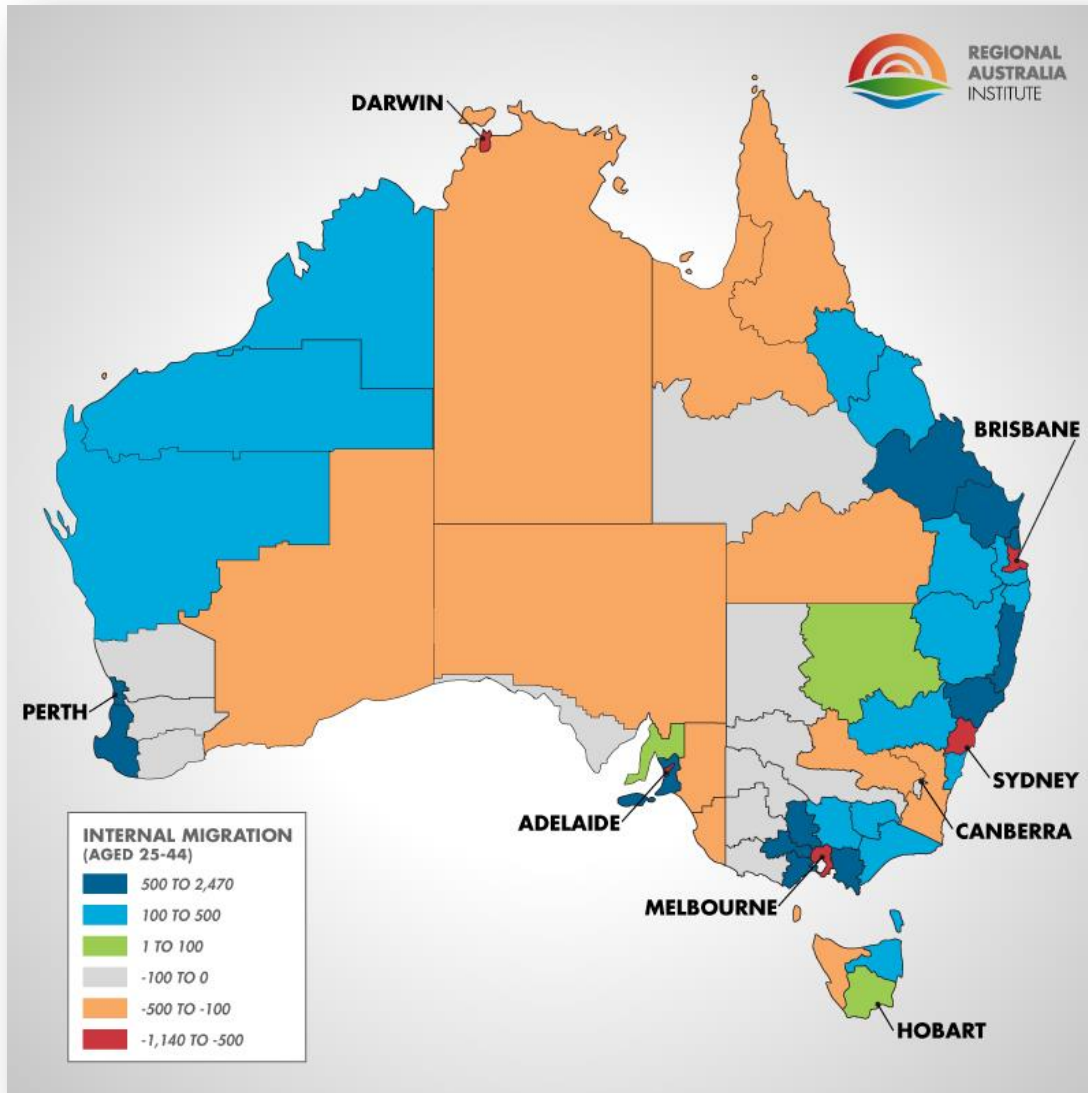


Figure 2: Domestic Mobility by Age and Statistical Division 25-44 years (see Appendix for the numbers in each Statistical Division)

Source: ABS Migration, Australia, 2010-11 Catalogue No. 3412.0

Insights from those who have made the move

To explore this story further, we spoke to some people who have made the move, or hope to do so in the near future, and looked at some of the evidence on the advantages of regional life.

Love the lifestyle

Many of the Returners agree that the dominant advantage of regional living is the lifestyle.ⁱⁱⁱ A slower and more relaxed pace of life, environment and open space are all large factors, especially for those with young families.

The diversity of regions means that people can combine their desire for a regional lifestyle with their other priorities. For example, some Returners moved back to the family farm, others enjoyed having constant access to the beach, or for some it was about living in the regions while still maintaining close proximity to the cities.

For young families, the so called 'granny' factor was also a particularly important draw card. Being close to grandparents and extended family increases the opportunities for the whole family to be involved with the children and often acts as a valuable means of childcare.



Getting ahead

Affordability of life in the regions is also an important factor. The reduced cost of good housing and the overall cost of living is especially attractive. The advantage of owning one's own home was consistently raised by Returners.

Less than 4% of people in a regional city paid over \$550,000 for their property. In Sydney, 33% paid more than that amount.^{iv}

For those looking to enter the property market this is an important factor in deciding whether to move or stay.

'Returning to the region meant we bought our first home...as well as gaining more housing security, we also returned our children to their large extended family, with closer contact with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.'

Kim Britton, Regional Returner

More time to enjoy the little things

For people living in the capital cities, the amount of time spent commuting on average varies from between 2 ½ hours up to 4 hours and 43 minutes.^v

On average, people in the regions spend 1 hour and 50 minutes less time commuting per week in comparison to those living in their states capital. Less traffic congestion and a shorter commute means that people in the regions have more time to enjoy their lifestyle.

Regional values

Surveys identify that people from both the regions and capital cities perceive a series of positive qualities in regional communities.^{vi} These include:

- Commitment to community;
- Strong sense of family;
- Loyal to their country;
- Tolerant of others;
- Toughness or resilience;
- Self-sufficiency; and
- A sense of initiative.

"There's an authenticity, trust and warmth among regional folk that I didn't really find in the city"

Kerry Grace, Regional Returner

The Regional Returners we spoke to reinforced this point as an important factor in their choice to move to a region and put down roots.

“There were a number of recent immigrants who moved from Sudan to the area. Moving from their own country to settle in regional Australia was especially difficult for them as they had little to no driving experience.

Due to limited public transport they could not access most work places without being able to drive. Therefore learning to drive was critical. Locals offered their time and cars to teach some of these immigrants to drive. They didn't really know them but just wanted to help out. This is typical of the generosity you can find in regional areas.”

Robyn Fitzroy, Regional Returner

Thinking about taking the plunge

Despite the multiple advantages of regional living, many people with a desire to return are likely to stay in the city.

There are several common reasons people might not decide to make the move.

A perception of negative impacts on career development is commonly cited reason for remaining in the capital cities.^{vii}

A lack of career options, the perceived need to accept a loss of income for doing similar work or the need to establish new professional and social networks are raised as key barriers in work that has explored this issue.

Reduced availability of services in regions is another area of major concern.

“My mum had major hip surgery in 2011 that had to be done in Sydney. It was very difficult as she was stuck there [more than 600km away] for 4 or 5 weeks each time without any family support. I worry that if one of our kids was really sick (or my husband or I), there would be the added stress of needing to travel for treatment.”

Louise Evans, Potential Returner

Overcoming these concerns

While compromise is inevitable in any move, there are a range of ways that these concerns can be overcome.

Although regions cannot compete with capital cities in terms of size, regional job markets do offer diverse and rewarding employment opportunities.

“My husband owns his own business and constantly has work, despite never advertising. People just know who he is and that he does good work.”

Robyn Fitzroy, Regional Returner

A number of Returners we spoke to identified advantages that living in a regional area had on their own career development. It was just a matter of them thinking differently about their career’s pathways.

With lower costs of living, the risks of starting a business can be lower in regions. Living in smaller communities may also offer capable people the opportunity to move into other areas of work that would be closed to them in cities.



Exploring the wide range of employment options in regional areas is essential for anyone looking to relocate.

The greater affordability of housing and the security that comes with owning your own home is a significant drawcard that can help to offset a loss of income.

"We earn more, work less with better jobs, pay less costs, own our own house and farm which is huge compared with the tiny place we had in inner Melbourne..."

Rebecca McGowan, Regional Returner

Addressing concerns about services, and to some extent income, can come from examining the liveability of an area. Returners identified the advantages of regional services- especially in regards to schools where students were given more individual attention.

Regions who value the potential contribution of Returners should be active in communicating with them and helping them work through issues that may arise over time. They should also work towards ensuring people develop lasting connections to the area. This is crucial for attraction and retention.^{viii}

"[We] have great local schools who are really interested in our kids without the anonymity of the city schools (or the cost!)"

Rebecca McGowan, Regional Returner

Perhaps the most important factor in overcoming any concerns about moving back to the regions is hearing from those who have already done it.

*"I think **everyone** should try it – living in rural Australia! The rent is cheaper in most places, the air is cleaner, the pace gentler, the space is luxurious and the people are fabulous. It's the best place in the world to raise children too."*

Amanda Salisbury, Regional Returner

Continue the conversation

We want to hear from you!

We are eager to know more about why you decided to return or what has been holding you back.

Help us understand more about Regional Returners and connect with others who have made the move or are thinking about it.

We want to share your stories and perhaps help more people to make the move to regional Australia, because sometimes that little bit of advice is all you need.

Visit our website and leave a comment on our blog or go to the 'Have Your Say' page.



Appendix - Internal Migration by Age and Statistical Division¹, 2010-11

State	Statistical Division	0–14 years	15–24 years	25–44 years	45–64 years	65–84 years	85+ years
NSW	Sydney	-6,051	-192	-7,753	-5,730	-306	-217
NSW	Hunter	735	489	1,655	1,156	91	32
NSW	Illawarra	437	-235	459	949	-48	13
NSW	Richmond-Tweed	268	-830	349	286	72	3
NSW	Mid-North Coast	754	-1,103	702	919	-35	29
NSW	Northern	91	-116	163	59	47	15
NSW	North Western	-205	-177	25	-113	-1	1
NSW	Central West	302	-97	407	11	-50	-13
NSW	South Eastern	550	-1,134	-138	1,181	258	54
NSW	Murrumbidgee	-117	-384	-489	-99	-10	3
NSW	Murray	-31	-125	-21	102	19	-8
NSW	Far West	20	2	-10	-60	-27	-1
QLD	Brisbane	-845	1,572	-1,370	-874	662	30
QLD	Gold Coast	466	726	481	360	-144	-33
QLD	Sunshine Coast	1,039	-260	906	722	-67	60
QLD	West Moreton	390	-222	329	234	-49	2
QLD	Wide Bay-Burnett	678	-560	645	1,080	-166	-52
QLD	Darling Downs	329	45	443	146	52	30
QLD	South West	-90	-170	-127	-32	-2	2
QLD	Fitzroy	338	38	555	99	14	1
QLD	Central West	30	-11	-8	-33	-3	-10
QLD	Mackay	143	-131	201	-186	-28	-9
QLD	Northern	322	542	260	-163	93	40
QLD	Far North	-41	-384	-356	-21	-55	9
QLD	North West	-245	-32	-203	18	5	-5
VIC	Melbourne	-2,891	1,864	-1,527	-3,292	295	11
VIC	Barwon	650	129	812	868	112	3
VIC	Western District	160	-112	-3	184	-22	-6
VIC	Central Highlands	512	117	654	415	-29	-12
VIC	Wimmera	47	-111	-58	37	-55	-5
VIC	Mallee	-14	-227	-77	-29	-18	-41
VIC	Loddon	566	-101	632	334	61	12

¹ Note: Numbers are based on Statistical Divisions, the ABS geographical boundaries.



VIC	Goulburn	290	-279	245	521	-187	-2
VIC	Ovens-Murray	309	-221	275	168	-10	7
VIC	East Gippsland	259	8	199	415	-7	8
VIC	Gippsland	638	-26	709	638	-58	15
SA	Adelaide	-641	505	-1,869	-1,074	243	-73
SA	Outer Adelaide	418	-193	698	583	-11	47
SA	Yorke and Lower North	39	-145	80	275	-97	-4
SA	Murray Lands	5	-149	-110	101	-1	-17
SA	South East	-41	-169	-179	-6	-10	4
SA	Eyre	-34	-46	-48	-35	-27	1
SA	Northern	-200	-111	-159	-62	-100	-1
WA	Perth	797	2,470	2,084	-282	-75	-17
WA	South West	1,179	71	1,349	1,009	119	28
WA	Lower Great Southern	31	-292	-67	107	-5	-1
WA	Upper Great Southern	-78	-106	-97	-106	-36	-5
WA	Midlands	-142	-277	-35	-50	-143	-6
WA	South Eastern	-326	-194	-484	-169	-50	10
WA	Central	-73	-127	115	168	-48	-5
WA	Pilbara	-45	46	145	-273	23	4
WA	Kimberley	-42	-36	125	-21	-1	-3
TAS	Greater Hobart	9	-121	4	98	84	8
TAS	Southern	9	-121	4	98	84	8
TAS	Northern	38	-210	161	149	31	0
TAS	Mersey-Lyell	18	-334	-193	205	45	10
NT	Darwin	-727	426	-635	-288	-61	-1
NT	Northern Territory	-234	-251	-324	-350	-112	8
ACT	Canberra	148	1,335	428	-439	-154	37

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Experimental net regional internal migration estimates

End notes

- ⁱ Laoire, Caitriona Ni The 'Green Green Grass of Home'? Return Migration to Rural Ireland *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, 2007
- ⁱⁱ Davies, Amanda Declining Youth In-Migration in Rural Western Australia: the Role of Perceptions of Rural Employment and Lifestyle Opportunities *Institute of Australia Geographers*, 2008
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- ^{iv} Evocities, Great 'lifestyle divide' forces more Sydney people to consider a better life elsewhere, new research shows media release 2012
- ^v Flood, Michael and Barbato, Claire *Off to Work Commuting in Australia* The Australia Institute, 2005
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- ^{vii} Forth, Dr. Gordon Where Have the People Gone? Developing Population Strategies for Australia's Declining Regions Australian Population Association 11th Biennial Conference, 2002
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