

# Census 2016 reveals our hidden heartland

Come with me on a journey deep into the hidden heartland of the Australian nation. And no I don't mean to the outermost suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, nor the iconic places that are so often cited as defining our modern nation such as the Gold Coast for its tourists, Canberra for its connections and perhaps Karratha for its resources. The hidden heartland of which I speak is smaller and is known by few because it's mostly scattered across the wheat belt, throughout the outback and along the fertile slopes of the Great Diving Range. You have to look for our undiscovered heartland.

Our hidden heartland is comprised of the many localities, villages and towns that breathe all aspects of life into every corner of the continent. Here are places that are neither glamorous nor hipster but they nevertheless contain communities that encapsulate core Australian values: they're hard working, community focused, sports obsessed and very often God-fearing. Here is an Australia that is physically removed from the hubbub and the hazards of capital-city life. Here is how life is lived in small-town Australia.

The 2016 census counted 23.4 million Australians who mostly organised themselves into 1835 cities, towns and villages, ranging from swaggering Sydney down to tiny communities of a few hundred residents. Australia's urban system shifts and shuffles every year. New towns are created; others disappear; some are gobbled up by the greater spread of our biggest cities. The most recent census shows that southwest Sydney, for example, has expanded and now incorporates the once separate settlements of Cobbitty (pop. 681 in 2011) and Leppington (pop. 239), just as southeast Melbourne now incorporates the previously separate settlement of Officer (pop. 1350). All three formerly separate settlements are now subsumed within the single amorphous mass of urban Sydney and urban Melbourne that in both cases stretches from side to side.

The Urban Centre and Locality (or UCL) dataset is one of the jewels of the census. It allows us to see at a granular level where the Australian nation is surging and shrinking. We created a net extra 14 towns between the last two censuses mostly comprised of new estates located beyond the edge of the metropolitan area (like Cobbitty and Officer, for example).

Australia's smallest localities generally have 200 residents, which means that if the population drops below this threshold it ceases to be recognised as a locality for statistical purposes. Its residents effectively recede back into the paddocks and the farmlands that make up our rural communities. Making it on to the UCL dataset has no official value but demographers get very excited when new towns appear and others disappear.

Towns that disappeared at the last census include Beulah in the Wimmera, which subsided from 208 residents in 2011; Yuleba near Roma, down from 211 residents; and Ringarooma near Scottsdale in Tasmania, down from 213 residents. But several other towns have simply “appeared” in the years since the previous census, including Eynesbury west of Melbourne, now with 2600 residents, and Beveridge north of Melbourne, now with 1900 residents.

**But the undisputed champion of Australia’s “new town” set is Yarrabilba, located between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, with 4100 residents and the kind of skewed age profile that only new towns can produce.**

Did you know that there are 648 tiny towns with between 200 and 500 residents in Australia and that their combined population is 204,000? About 1 per cent of the nation lives in these settlements. There’s another 725 towns with between 500 and 2000 residents, and 245 towns with between 2000 and 5000 residents.

I have taken a slice of small-town Australia in order to examine the rise and fall of the population in 40 towns with between 1900 and 2100 residents at the 2016 census.

Here are our hidden heartland towns like St Arnaud in the Wimmera, where the population dropped by 7 per cent to 2031 between the last two censuses. Other towns such as Normanville (pop. 1903) on the Fleurieu Peninsula and Drummond Cove (pop 2053) near Geraldton, both located on the lifestyle coast, recorded population growth of more than 40 per cent over these years.

Towns of around 2000 residents combined with a surrounding farming population generally support a small supermarket such as an IGA, a pharmacy, newsagent (although this function is under threat), a bank branch (down from several), maybe some medical, legal and accounting services, together with a school, various churches and several sporting clubs. These might be small towns but they are comprised of vibrant, engaged and socially cohesive communities. Working bees and cake stalls and volunteering as firefighters are all part of what makes these towns work.

However, based on census figures, some of the declining towns would struggle to retain services. All of a sudden a shrinking town’s football club amalgamates with that of a rival town. Church services are scaled back. Empty shops punctuate the main street.

**On the other hand, a bigger town such as Yarrabilba, for example, can offer more shops and a bigger supermarket, with a wider range of goods and services.**

Age profile of Queensland town Yarrabilba, and Australia



Australia’s small-town heartland is on display in the map of Western Australia showing towns that are growing and contracting. Over the five years to 2016 a vast swath of the West Australian outback shed population in the wake of the collapse of the mining boom.

Towns like Karratha and Kalgoorlie have both lost population: the former lost 4 per cent and the latter lost 3 per cent over these years. Newman dropped 17 per cent, Paraburdoo is down 10 per cent and Coolgardie is down 9 per cent. And yet the lifestyle town of Esperance on the south coast increased by 10 per cent in these years. In all townships stretching between the Pilbara and the Great Australian Bight east of Esperance, the population decreased between 2011 and 2016.

But then, hasn’t this always been the way of the Australian continent? In times of plenty — during a resources boom — the Australian population spills into the interior but when the downturn comes, people and jobs contract back to the safety of the capital. In many respects the interior of the Australian continent is a littoral zone subject to a tidal demographic flow of people moving in and out over the course of a decade. The five years to 2016 delivered an ebb tide in the flow of people across a land mass that is larger than Britain, Germany and Spain combined.

On the other side of the continent there is a different story. This isn’t a narrative driven by the fickle demand for gold, nickel or iron ore but by the steadier demand for agricultural products and for lifestyle amenity. Consider the sheer abundance of the Darling Downs centred on Toowoomba,

one of this nation's biggest provincial cities.

Not only did the number of people living in Toowoomba jump by 4 per cent over the five years to 2016 but so too did the population of every town within a 30km radius and especially in the direction of Brisbane. Consider the evidence: Highfields up 10 per cent; Crows Nest up 7 per cent; Cambooya up 21 per cent.

And therein lies the secret to the allure of Australia's small-town heartland. I think many Australians would love to live a small-town life, with its real sense of community — and especially if the town is positioned within commuting distance of a capital city or a provincial city with employment options.

I also suspect the cost of housing has something to do with Toowoomba's success. Heartland Australia wants affordable housing, a sense of security, cultural amenity, sporting and educational facilities as well as a pleasant climate, and right there you have the raw demographic fecundity that is the Darling Downs.

Despite the many attractions of small-town life it is a fact that most Australians still prefer to live in the suburbs of our biggest cities. And yet there is something about country life — perhaps it's our bush heritage — that I think reflects, or that I think should reflect, this nation's core values such as tolerance, resilience and boundless social cohesion. What's not to like about Australia's hidden small-town heartland?