



# Population trends BCARR Migration Geography

This factsheet provides an overview of population trends in Australia over five years, from 2016 to 2021.

The analysis is based on Estimated Resident Population (ERP) data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in July 2022.

A custom geography – Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research (BCARR) migration geography – is used to analyse Australia's population trends.

The BCARR migration geography classifies Australia into six region categories (without overlap) according to natural endowments, administration boundaries and proximity to amenities.

- These categories are:
- Capital cities
- Coastal cities
- Coastal country areas
- Inland cities
- Inland country areas; and
- Remote areas

The building blocks of this geography are the ABS 2021 Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2) boundaries. For further details on the classification, see Appendix.

## Overall findings and key statistics



Over the year to June 2021, Australia's population grew by 0.1 per cent, which is substantially lower than the national average annual growth rate of 1.2 per cent over the past 5 years, illustrating the impact of the pandemic.



As at June 2021, the combined capital city population was 17,252,876 persons, with a share of 67.2 per cent of Australia's population. However, the capital city population declined by -0.3 per cent over the year to June 2021, with Sydney and Melbourne experiencing population losses and Darwin experiencing virtually no change. Over the five years to 2021, population rose in all capital cities. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) experienced the highest annual average five-year growth rate at 2.4 per cent, with a lot of the growth occurring in the newly formed outer suburbs.<sup>i</sup>



Coastal areas remain an attractive destination for people, with the highest population growth over the year to June 2021. Coastal cities and coastal country areas grew by 1.1 and 1.5 per cent respectively. Among coastal cities, the highest growth (by number of people) over the one and five year periods to June 2021 was in the large population centres adjacent to the biggest capital cities: Gold Coast-Tweed Heads, Sunshine Coast, Geelong, Newcastle-Maitland and Wollongong.



Across inland cities, population growth by number of people over one and five years was concentrated towards the larger cities: Toowoomba, Ballarat, Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga, as well as Dubbo. In percentage terms, Dubbo, Ballarat, Alice Springs and Echuca-Moama experienced strong growth, with all above the national average annual growth rate over the past one and five years. Population growth of many inland country areas was linked to the population growth of their neighbouring inland cities, which occurred for the strongest growers over both one and five years (by number of people) of Googong (near Queanbeyan), and Wagga Wagga Surrounds.



Population in remote areas has declined over the five years to June 2021, with some of largest losses coming from remote SA2s associated with mining such as Ashburton (WA), Cobar (NSW), and Outback (SA).

Source: This publication is based on BCARR analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Estimated Resident Population: [Regional population](#), 2021, released July 2022.

Note: In ranking populations throughout, all SA2s below 100 persons in 2021 were excluded from the list. In mapping these SA2s are shown in grey denoted as "no data" in the legend.

i When SA2s are close approximations of suburbs, such as in the ACT, they have been referred to as such throughout this document.



# BCARR migration geography trends

- The very low population growth rate for Australia over the year to June 2021 (**0.1 per cent**) reflects the combined capital cities loss of **-47,253 persons** over the past year. This decline relates in part to international border closures due to the pandemic.
- Coastal areas remain an attractive location for people to live. Coastal areas had the largest increases by both number and percentage over both one and five years to June 2021. Over the year, coastal cities grew by **46,085 persons (1.1 per cent)**, while coastal country areas grew by **19,534 persons (1.5 per cent)** – the largest percentage increase).
- Inland areas grew over both time periods, with inland cities and inland country areas exceeding the subdued national growth rate over the year to June 2021. However, inland country's share of the nation's population is declining, from **5.5 per cent** in 2016 to **5.3 per cent** in 2021, while inland cities' share stayed at **4.9 per cent**.
- Figure 1** presents the populations of coastal country areas, inland country areas and inland cities between 2001 and 2021. Since 2001, the gap between the populations of inland country areas and the other two region categories has steadily declined.
- Remote areas have not experienced a year of positive population growth since 2013 (see Figure 2). The largest decline occurred in 2015 with **-5,815 persons**, but the degree of decline has slowed steadily over the five years, with a decline of **-1,078 persons** in the year to June 2021.
- Figure 2** shows the population percentage change for all classifications from 2011 to 2021. The negative population growth rate for remote areas is evident, as is the recent negative growth for the combined capital cities, which consistently had the strongest growth pre-pandemic.

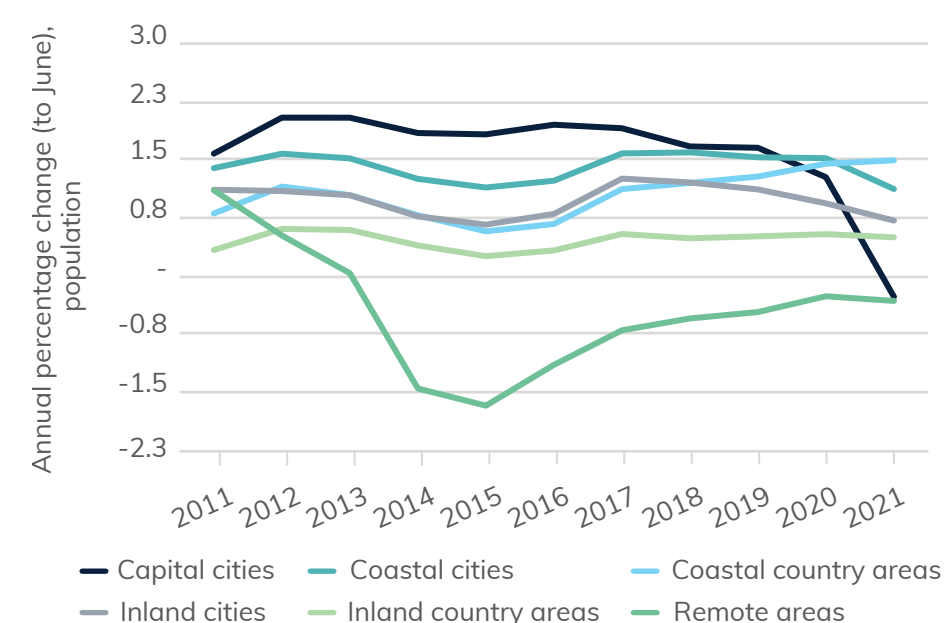
**Table 1 Population and population change by BCARR migration geography, 2016 to 2021**

BCARR Migration Geography	Population June 2021 (persons)	Population share 2021 (per cent)	Change 1 year (persons)	Change 1 year (per cent)	Change 5 years (persons)	Average annual change 5 years (per cent)
Capital cities	17 252 876	67.2	-47 253	-0.3	1 031 455	1.2
Coastal cities	4 168 953	16.2	46 085	1.1	292 582	1.5
Coastal country areas	1 331 649	5.2	19 534	1.5	83 597	1.3
Inland cities	1 249 922	4.9	8 822	0.7	63 143	1.0
Inland country areas	1 355 731	5.3	6 680	0.5	34 143	0.5
Remote areas	328 948	1.3	-1 078	-0.3	- 7 748	-0.5
<b>Australia</b>	<b>25 688 079</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>32 790</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>1 497 172</b>	<b>1.2</b>

**Figure 1 BCARR migration geography population, 2001 to 2021**



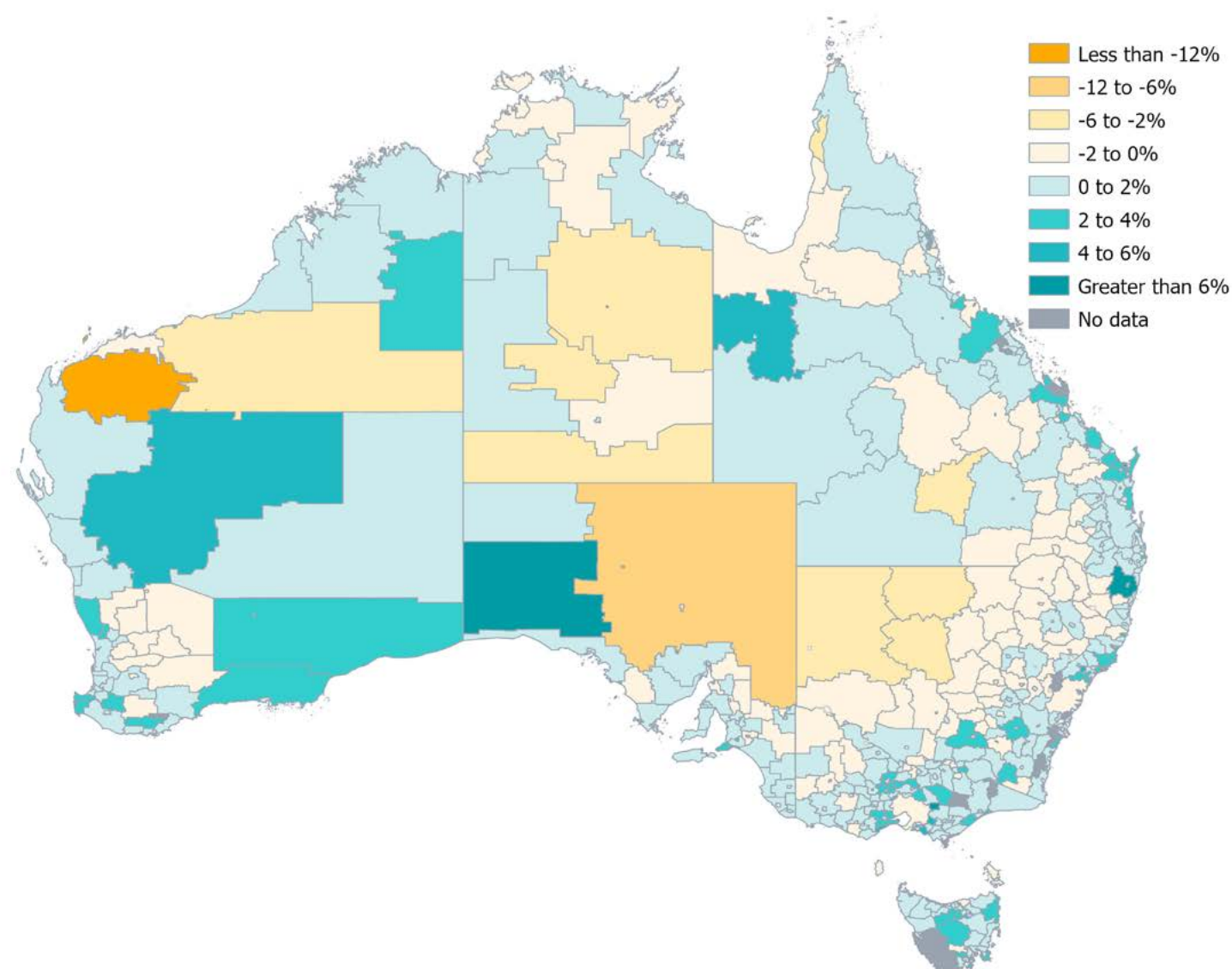
**Figure 2 BCARR migration geography population percentage change, 2011 to 2021**





# Overall trends

Map 1 BCARR migration geography population percentage change over 2020-2021



Note: In ranking populations throughout, all SA2s below 100 persons in 2021 were excluded from the list. In mapping these SA2s are shown in grey denoted as “no data” in the legend.





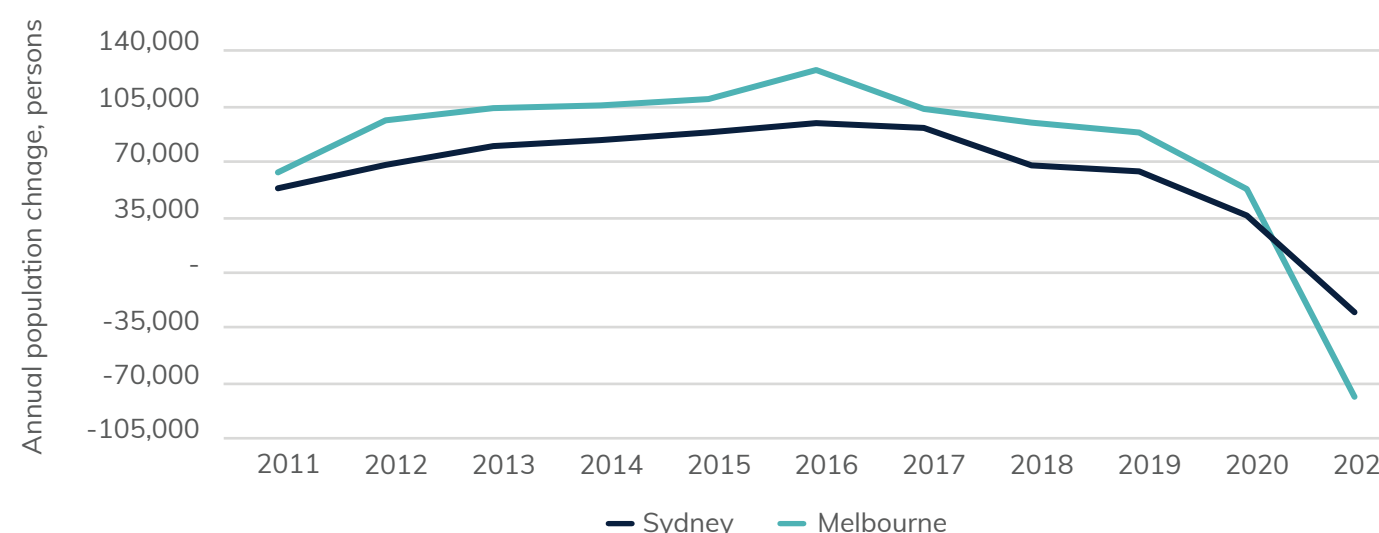
# Capital city trends

- Among the BCARR migration geography regions, **capital cities** had the largest population growth (by number of people) with **1,031,455 persons** over the five years to June 2021. But over the year to June 2021, the combined capital cities declined by **-47,253 persons** – the only category to decline aside from remote areas. This decline relates in part to the international border closures from early 2020.
- **Perth** and **Brisbane** had the largest population increase in terms of number and rate of growth over the year to June 2021, with **Perth's** population increasing by **26,300 persons (1.2 per cent)** and **Brisbane** by **18,679 persons (0.7 per cent)**.
- Over the five years to June 2021, the fastest growing capital cities were **Canberra** and **Hobart**, which grew by an annual average of **2.4** and **2.1 per cent** respectively. It should be noted that both of these cities have experienced upwards revised estimates (with the release of the Census).
- **Sydney** remains the largest capital city in the country with a population of **5,259,764 persons**, with **Melbourne** a close second with **4,976,157 persons**. However, both of these cities over the year to June 2021 experienced population declines of **-25,115** and **-78,682 persons** respectively.
- **Figure 3** presents the year-on-year population change for Sydney and Melbourne. The graph illustrates that the pandemic accelerated an existing downward trend in the annual size of population growth for both Sydney and Melbourne, which began in the year to June 2017.
- However, over the five year to 2021, **Melbourne** and **Sydney** had the largest increases by number of people with **261,770** and **234,841 persons** respectively.

**Table 2 Population and population change for capital cities, 2016 to 2021**

Capital Cities	Population June 2021 (persons)	Change 1 year (persons)	Change 1 year (per cent)	Change 5 years (persons)	Average annual change 5 years (per cent)
Greater Sydney	5 259 764	-25 115	-0.5	234 841	0.9
Greater Melbourne	4 976 157	-78 682	-1.6	261 770	1.1
Greater Brisbane	2 568 927	18 679	0.7	206 255	1.7
Greater Adelaide	1 402 393	7 107	0.5	78 336	1.2
Greater Perth	2 192 229	26 300	1.2	172 966	1.7
Greater Hobart	251 047	1 536	0.6	25 134	2.1
Greater Darwin	148 801	-4	0.0	1 699	0.2
Australian Capital Territory	453 558	2 926	0.6	50 454	2.4
<b>Combined capital cities</b>	<b>17 252 876</b>	<b>-47 253</b>	<b>-0.3</b>	<b>1 031 455</b>	<b>1.2</b>

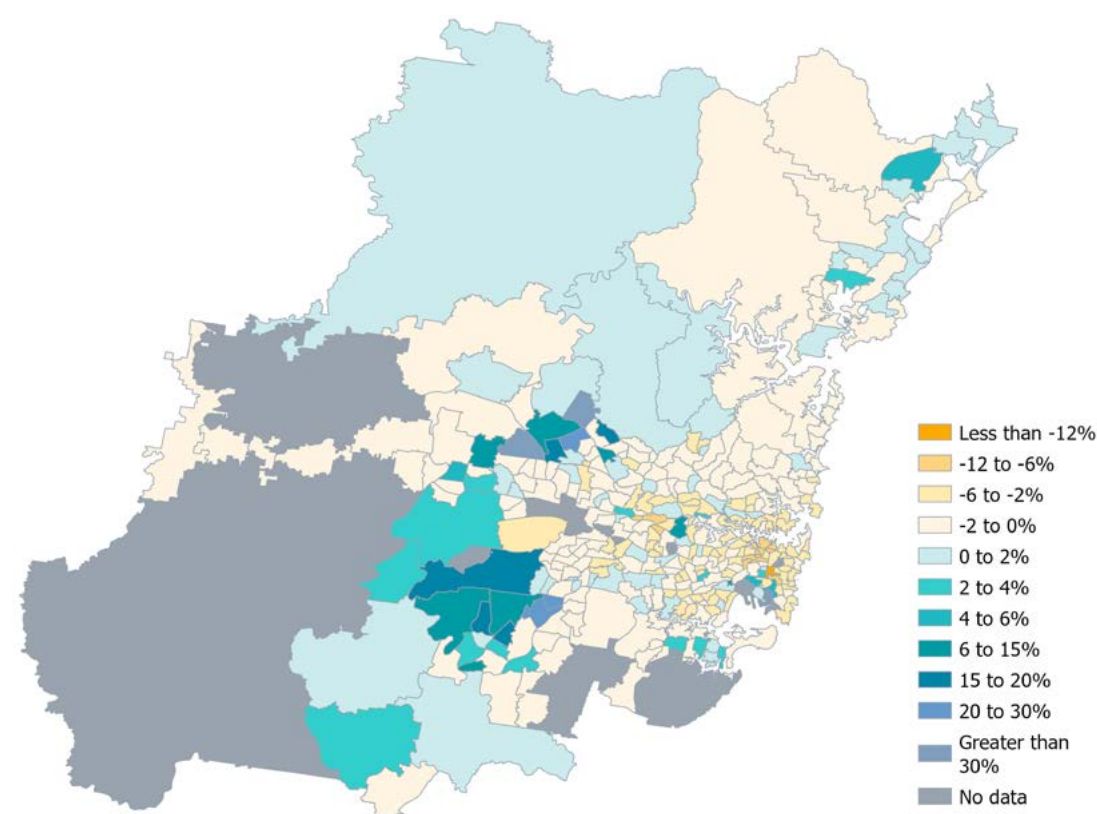
**Figure 3 Population change for Sydney and Melbourne, 2011 to 2021**





# Capital city SA2 trends - Sydney and Melbourne

Map 2 Population percentage change in Sydney SA2s over 2020-21

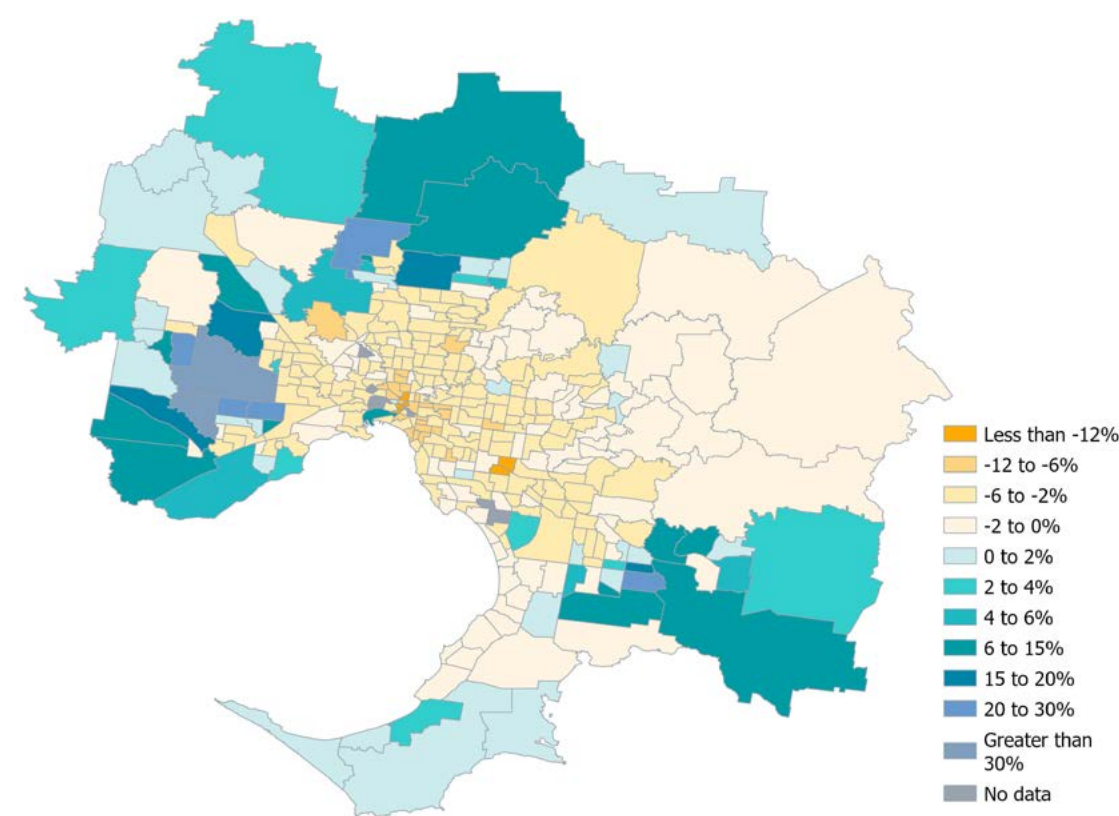


- **Maps 2 and 3** present population change in Sydney and Melbourne<sup>ii</sup> over the year to June 2021. In both cities the strongest growth occurred in outer suburbs while inner suburbs experienced some of the strongest declines. The impact of the pandemic on the year's population change is evident across the pattern of growth for these cities.
- **Map 2** illustrates the substantial population declines in areas of Sydney close to universities, such as **Randwick**, **Newtown** and **Kensington**. Western suburbs dominated population growth by both number of people and percentage change while inner suburbs had the lowest growth.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> Some region names have been truncated to their popular short form, for instance Greater Sydney to Sydney.

<sup>iii</sup> In capital cities where SA2s are close approximations of suburbs, they have been referred to as such throughout this document.

Map 3 Population percentage change in Melbourne SA2s over 2020-21



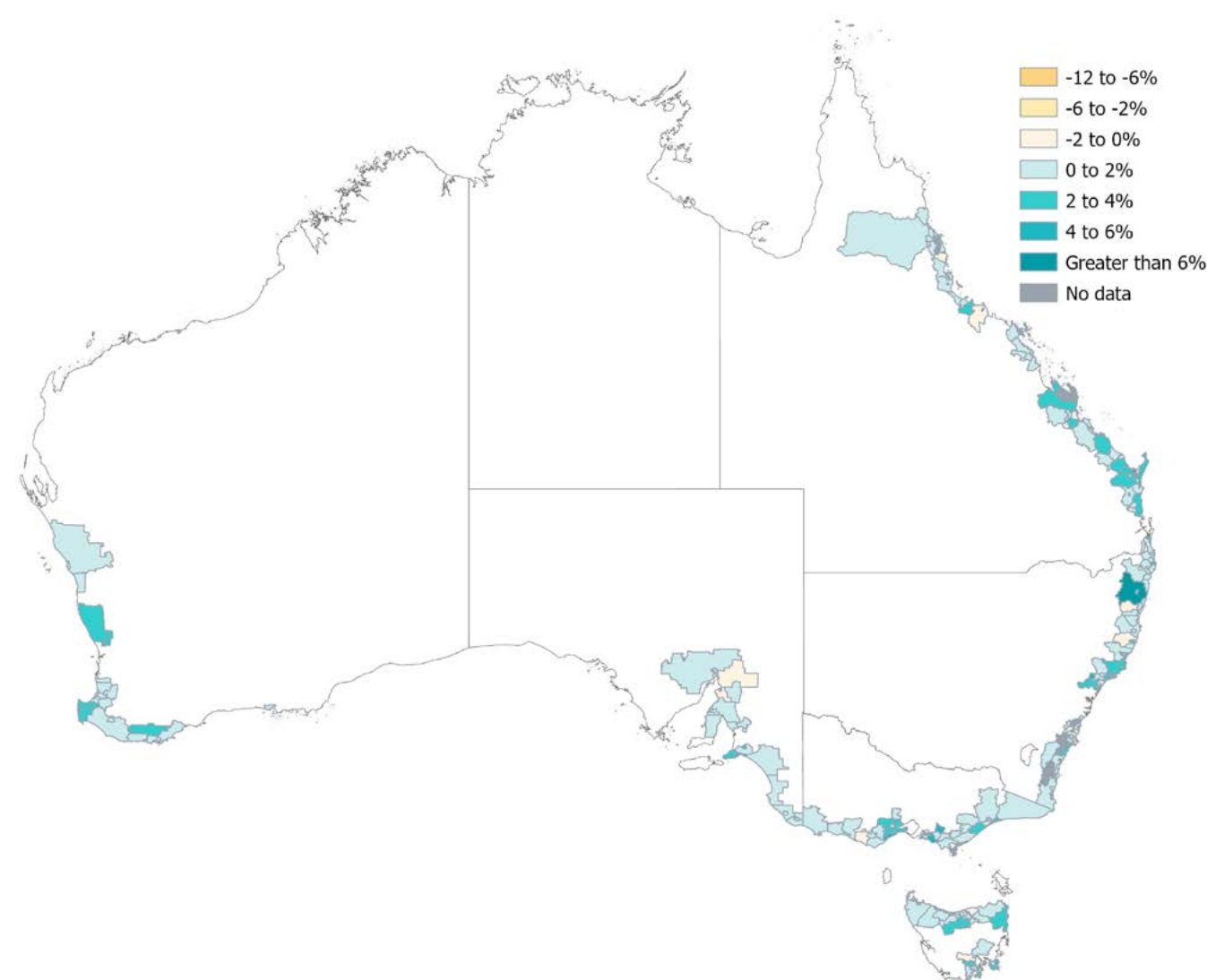
- **Map 3** illustrates that in Melbourne, the fall in the number of people in inner suburbs was more pronounced both in terms of distribution and degree. Out of the 20 SA2s with the greatest population declines (below -9.0 per cent) over the year to June 2021, 14 were in Melbourne, largely in the inner area, and five were in inner Sydney.



## Coastal area trends

- **Coastal cities** continue to be attractive places to live. **16.2 per cent** of Australians reside in a coastal city, such as the large centres of **Gold Coast-Tweed Heads, Newcastle-Maitland, Sunshine Coast** and **Geelong**.
- Coastal cities grew by over **46,000 persons** in the year to June 2021, the largest growth across all categories. **83 per cent** of coastal cities were at or above the national rate of growth of **0.1 per cent**.
- In the year to June 2021, the three largest coastal cities of **Sunshine Coast, Newcastle-Maitland** and **Gold Coast-Tweed Heads** had the largest population growth by person, with between **6,500** and **7,750 persons**. In terms of percentage growth, the fastest growing city was **Warragul-Drouin** (at **4.0 per cent** over the year), which is positioned just outside Melbourne. This city was also the fastest growing coastal city over the five years to 2021 with an average of **3.8 per cent** annual growth.
- Population decline was minimal across coastal cities, with only six SUAs experiencing population decline in the year to June 2021. The largest loss (by both persons and per cent) occurred in **Whyalla** at **114 persons** and **-0.5 per cent**.
- **Coastal country areas** reflect similar population growth patterns to coastal cities. In the year to June 2021, the majority **85.4 per cent** of the **185 SA2s** were at or above the national average growth rate of **0.1 per cent**.
- In terms of the number of people, the regions south of Melbourne, **Wonthaggi-Inverloch** and **Phillip Island** (neighbouring SA2s) were amongst the highest growth regions for both periods, with a combined increase of over 7,000 persons over five years.
- The fastest growing coastal country SA2s in terms of average annual growth over the past five years were associated with a regional or capital city. For example, **Phillip Island** (Melbourne), **Portarlington** (Geelong, Vic.) and **Booral-River Heads** (Hervey Bay, QLD), grew on average between **4.6** and **5.1 per cent** per year – substantially above the national average annual rate of **1.2 per cent**.
- **Map 4** presents population growth over the year to June 2021 for coastal cities and coastal country areas. The map shows less variation in population growth distribution among coastal areas than in capital cities, with most coastal areas experiencing population growth, particularly coastal country areas close to a city.

**Map 4 BCARR migration geography coastal areas population percentage change over 2020-2021**





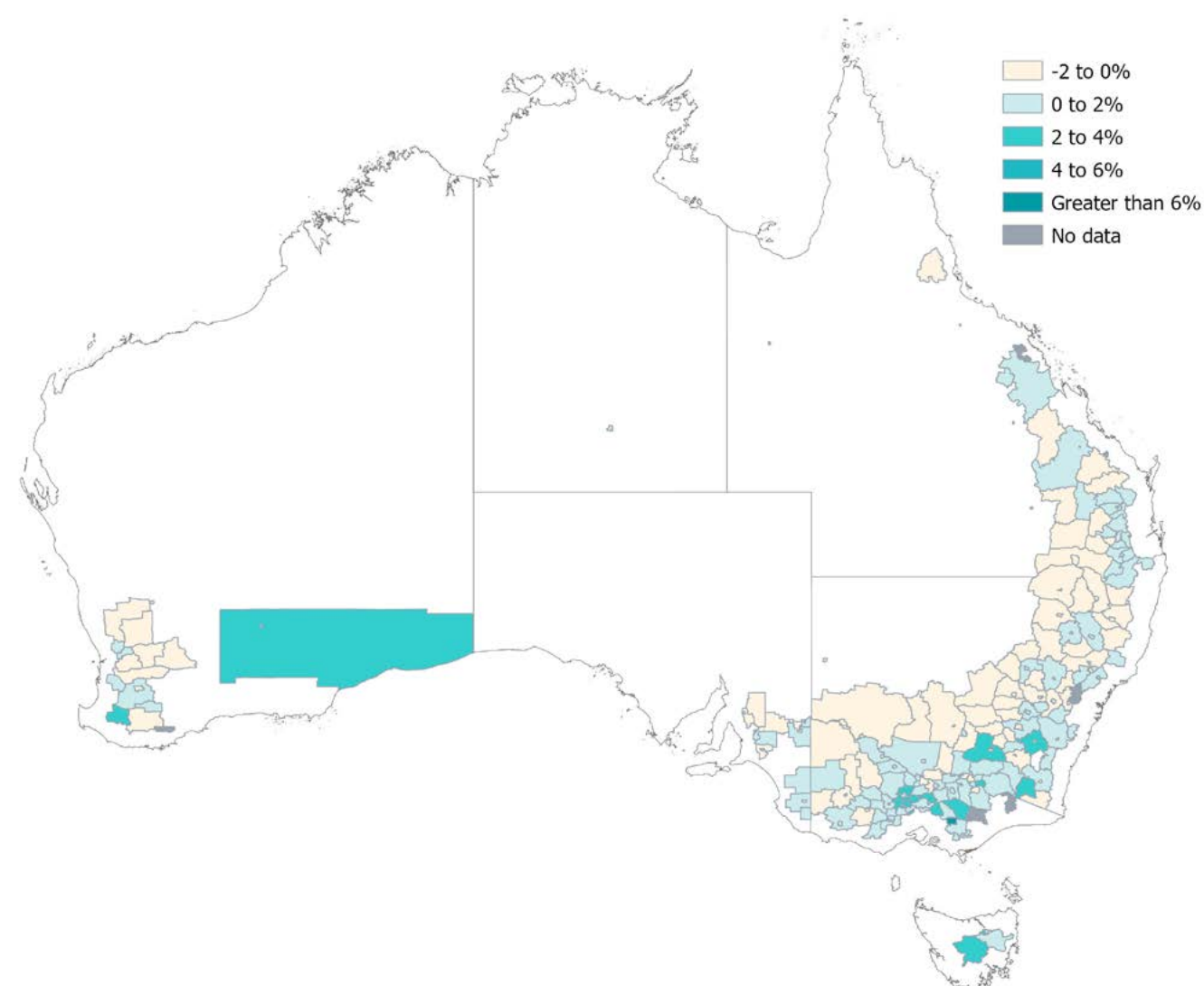


## Inland area trends

- The largest **inland cities** are **Toowoomba**, **Ballarat** and **Bendigo**, with each having a 2021 population of over 100,000.
- Collectively, inland cities have grown steadily, with the number of people living in an inland city growing **0.7 per cent** in the year to June 2021. This is slightly lower than the five year annual average rate of **1.0 per cent**. All larger inland cities with populations above 40,000 grew except for Mildura–Buronga which declined by **-0.2 per cent** over 2020-2021.
- Of the 34 inland cities, the majority (70.6 per cent), were above the national rate of growth over the first pandemic year (to June 2021). In contrast, this trend was reversed over the five year period, when the majority (73.5 per cent) of inland cities were below the national average annual rate of growth of **1.2 per cent**.
- **Ballarat** grew by over **10,000 persons** over the past five years, at an average annual rate of **1.9 per cent**; the second strongest growth by both persons and percentage change. This was maintained in the pandemic, when it had the strongest population growth by both persons and percentage change in the year to June 2021. Other inland cities that have grown strongly over five years include **Dubbo**, **Alice Springs**, **Echuca-Moama**, **Toowoomba** and **Albury-Wodonga**.
- Nine inland cities experienced population decline over the year to June 2021. The largest declines occurred in **Lithgow**, **Armidale** and **Swan Hill**, which declined by between **-0.8** and **-1.4 per cent**. Over five years, the largest declines were in the mining cities of **Lithgow**, **Mount Isa<sup>iv</sup>** and **Broken Hill**, with average annual rates of between **-1.0** and **-0.5 per cent**.
- Population growth across **inland country areas** has been consistently **0.5 per cent** or less each year since the year to June 2014. Inland country areas grew on average by **0.5 per cent** over both the one year and five years to June 2021. This reflects a long term trend of people moving to cities and coastal areas, and the proportional share of inland country areas declining.
- Some of the strongest growing inland country areas were associated with an adjacent city, such as **Googong** and **Wagga Wagga Surrounds**, which are just outside Queanbeyan and Wagga Wagga respectively.
- The strongest declines for inland country SA2s over the year to June 2021 were in **Narrabri Surrounds** (NSW) and **Inverell Surrounds-West** (NSW), at **-1.9 per cent**. They both experienced annual average declines over the five years of **-1.1 per cent**. These SA2s are next to their associated towns, with Inverell having slow but positive annual average growth over the past five years (**0.3 per cent**) and Narrabri experiencing average annual population decline of **-1.0 per cent**.

<sup>iv</sup> In contrast, Mount Isa surrounds (SA2) had strong population growth as highlighted in the discussion on remote areas.

Map 5 BCARR migration geography inland areas population percentage change over 2020-2021

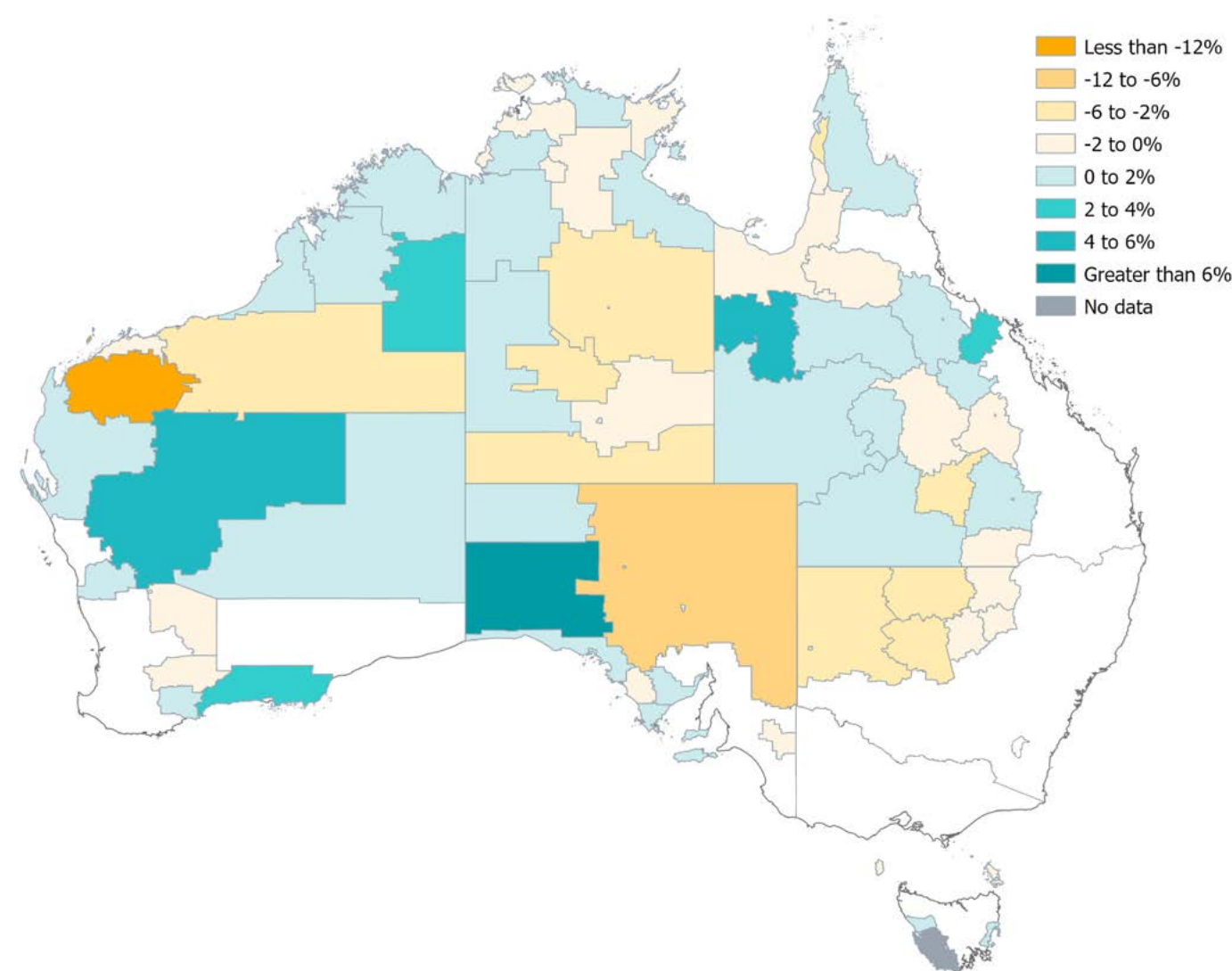




## Remote area trends

- **Remote areas** are the only category to record an overall population decline over both the one year (-0.3 per cent) and five year (-0.5 per cent, average annual) periods to June 2021.
- While this continues a trend of population loss which began in the year to June 2014, the rate of decline has slowed over the past five years.
- Of the 85 remote area SA2s, **50.6 per cent** were below the national average rate of population growth (**0.1 per cent**) over the year to June 2021. An even larger proportion of **81.2 per cent** were below the national five year average annual rate of growth (**1.2 per cent**).
- Over the year to June 2021, the highest population growth among remote area SA2s by number were in **Mount Isa Surrounds (180 persons)**, **Esperance Surrounds (144 persons)** and **Meekatharra (133 persons)**. **Mount Isa Surrounds** was also the third fastest growing remote SA2 at **4.6 per cent**, after **Western (SA) (9.9 per cent)**, whose population is only 144, and **Norfolk Island (5.9 per cent)**. However, taking Mount Isa inland city and the surrounding region together the overall population has been stable. Other remote SA2s that grew strongly in the year to June 2021 were **Meekatharra** and **Esperance Surrounds** which grew by **4.1** and **3.6 per cent** respectively.
- In terms of population declines both **Ashburton (WA)** and **Outback (SA)** had the strongest percentage decreases for the one and five year timeframes. **Ashburton (WA)** had an average annual decline over the five years of **-10.2 per cent**, nearly halving its population in that timeframe.
- By persons, the largest decline over one year was also in **Ashburton (WA)** with **-1,162 people**, which is a continuation of a downward trend which began in the year to June 2017. This region has a strong association with resource extraction industries. Other remote areas connected with mining that were also among the largest declines included **Cobar**, **East Pilbara** and **Coober Pedy**.
- Notably, if excluding **Ashburton (WA)**, the population growth or decline numbers in remote areas were small over the year to June 2021, ranging between **-149** to **180** persons. Despite the overall population loss, over the year to June 2021, remote areas displayed a fair amount of variation in population change across the remote regions (see **Map 6**). In some cases, some of the SA2s with the largest growth are next to SA2s with the largest declines.

Map 6 BCARR migration geography remote areas population percentage change over 2020-2021







# Appendix – BCARR Migration Geography

- Capital cities—2021 Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (GCCSAs) as defined by the ABS.
- Coastal cities—ABS 2021 Significant Urban Areas (SUAs) outside of the capital city GCCSAs that have their population-weighted centre within 50 kilometres of the coast. There are 58 coastal cities within the classification.
- Inland cities—ABS 2021 SUAs outside of the capital city GCCSAs that do not have their population-weighted centre within 50 kilometres of the coast. There are 34 inland cities within the classification.
- Coastal country areas—ABS 2021 Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2s) that have their population-weighted centre within 50 kilometres of the coast and do not have the majority of their population in either Remote or Very Remote areas (based on the ABS 2016 Remoteness Area (RA) structure) and are not part of a capital or coastal city.
- Inland country areas—SA2s whose population-weighted centre is not within 50 kilometres of the coast and do not have the majority of their population in Remote or Very Remote areas (based on the ABS 2016 RA structure) and are not part of a capital or inland city.
- Remote areas—Any SA2 region that has the majority (more than 50 per cent) of its population living in Remote Australia or Very Remote Australia according to the 2016 ABS RA structure.

Map 7 BCARR Migration Geography

