Australian Government

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts

Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research

Emerging cities in Regional Australia

At a glance

This analysis investigates emerging cities outside of Australia's 20 most populous cities. It focuses on Significant Urban Areas (SUAs) that range in size from 25,000 to 90,000 residents.

Largest projected increases

- The emerging regional cities that are expected to add the most residents between 2026 and 2036 are Bunbury (16,705), Warragul-Drouin (13,214), Busselton (12,275), Mackay (11,946) and Nowra-Bomaderry (10,119) (Figure 1). Additional infrastructure and service provision will be required to meet the needs of these growing populations.
- The smaller cities of Yeppoon, Victor Harbour-Goolwa and Morisset-Cooranbong are also projected to experience substantial population increases, presenting future challenges and opportunities for these cities.

Fastest future growth

Cities with the strongest projected growth are the small to medium size cities of Yeppoon, Warragul-Drouin, Busselton and Nowra-Bomaderry (with average annual growth rates in the 10 years to 2036 of 2.8%, 2.4%, 2.3% and 2.1%, respectively) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Emerging cities with greatest projected population increases from 2026–2036

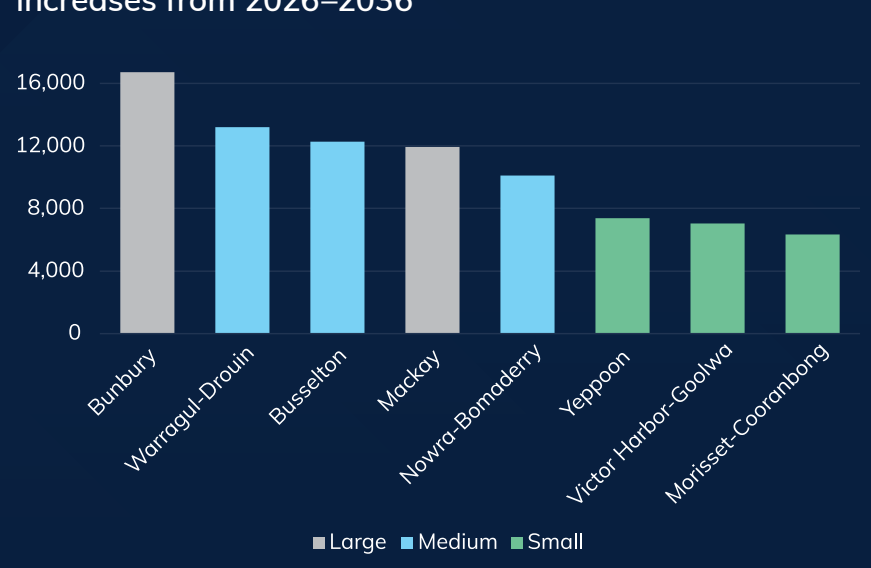
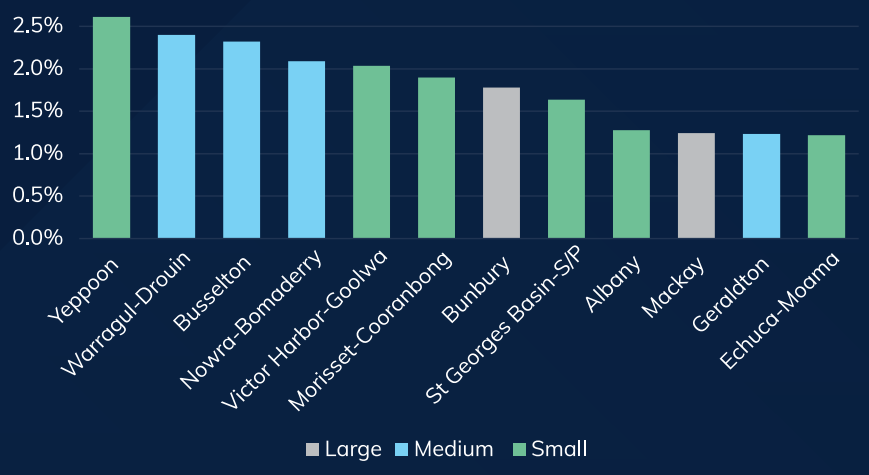


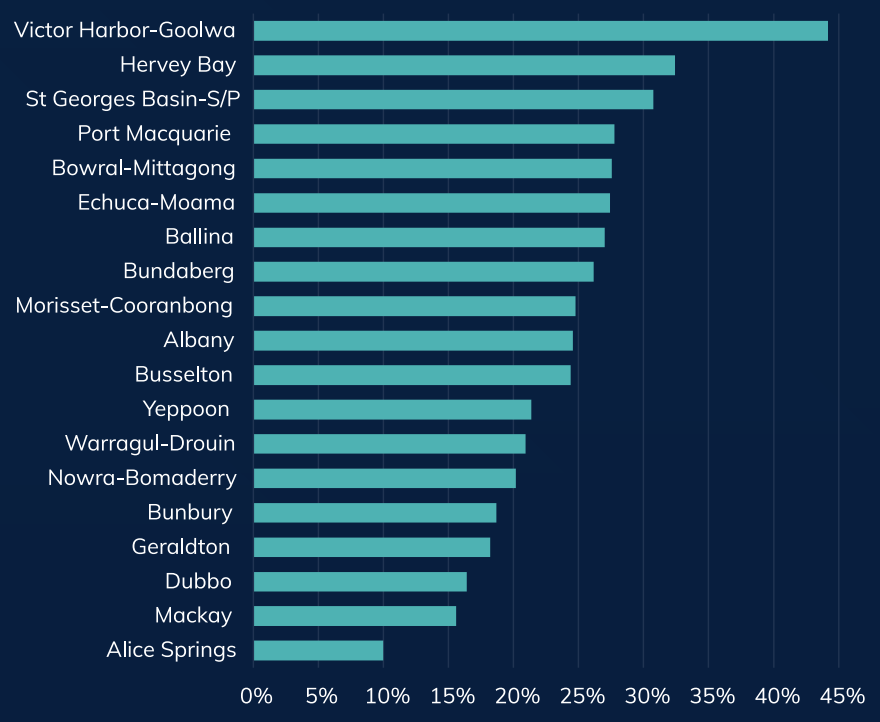
Figure 2: Emerging cities with the strongest projected average annual growth rates from 2026 to 2036



Age profile

- In 2024, the coastal lifestyle cities of Victor Harbor-Goolwa, Hervey Bay and St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point had very high proportions of people aged 65 and over (44.2%, 32.4% and 30.8%, respectively) (Figure 3).
- In 2024, Alice Springs, Mackay, Bunbury, Dubbo and Geraldton had the highest share of working-age people (70.6%, 65.0%, 62.2%, 62.2% and 61.8%), reflecting their roles as employment and service hubs within Regional Australia.
- Cities with strong working-age populations, such as Dubbo, Geraldton and Mackay also had high proportions of children (21.4%, 20.0% and 19.4%). Warragul-Drouin had a high proportion of children (19.2%), despite an average proportion of working age people, reflecting family-oriented growth.

Figure 3: Proportion of the population 65 and over, 2024



Introduction

This analysis explores the largest and fastest growing cities outside of Australia's 20 most populous cities (Table 1). It focuses on Significant Urban Areas (SUAs) that range in size from 25,000 to 90,000 residents. Population growth and projections are examined, as well as the age structure of the most rapidly evolving emerging cities.

Understanding future growth patterns in urban areas outside of the major capital and regional cities has important implications for planning and development, particularly in relation to infrastructure, housing and access to services. Before moving to this analysis an overview of Australia's population is presented.

Population overview

Capital cities

In 2025, 18.8 million people resided in Australia's capital cities, representing 67.9% of the total population (Table 1).

The 10-year average annual growth rate of the combined capital cities was 1.7%, slightly above the rate for Australia (1.5%) (Table 1).

Major regional cities

In 2025, the 12 largest regional cities had a combined population of 3.3 million, representing 11.9% of the Australian population.

The 10-year average annual growth rate of the combined major regional cities was the same as the capital cities (1.7%).

Regional Australia

In 2025, the population outside of Australia's capital cities was 8.9 million, accounting for 32.1% of the total population. The 10-year average annual growth rate was 1.2%, lower than the rate of the combined capital cities and major regional cities.

Table 1: Australia's 20 largest cities by population size
Capital cities

City	2015	2025	10-year AAGR[1]	% Australia 2025
Sydney	4,930,189	5,638,830	1.4%	20.4%
Melbourne	4,586,012	5,435,590	1.7%	19.7%
Brisbane	2,318,653	2,833,524	2.0%	10.3%
Perth	1,998,937	2,452,765	2.1%	8.9%
Adelaide	1,313,419	1,491,015	1.3%	5.4%
Canberra	395,813	484,630	2.0%	1.8%
Hobart	223,502	255,250	1.3%	0.9%
Darwin	144,914	159,284	0.9%	0.6%
Total	**15,911,439**	**18,750,888**	**1.7%**	**67.9%**

Table 1 continued:
Major regional cities

City	2015	2025	10-year AAGR[1]	% Australia 2025
Gold Coast-Tweed Heads	627,217	761,634	2.0%	2.8%
Newcastle-Maitland	471,483	541,634	1.4%	2.0%
Sunshine Coast	333,833	424,741	2.4%	1.5%
Wollongong	291,687	322,343	1.0%	1.2%
Geelong	247,166	314,381	2.4%	1.1%
Townsville	176,906	190,551	0.7%	0.7%
Cairns	147,603	164,149	1.1%	0.6%
Toowoomba	132,532	153,781	1.5%	0.6%
Ballarat	99,662	120,939	2.0%	0.4%
Bendigo	94,035	106,493	1.3%	0.4%
Albury-Wodonga	89,306	102,435	1.4%	0.4%
Launceston	85,557	92,993	0.8%	0.3%
Total major regional cities	**2,796,987**	**3,296,074**	**1.7%**	**11.9%**
Regional Australia	**7,904,556**	**8,862,766**	**1.2%**	**32.1%**
Australia	**23,815,995**	**27,613,654**	**1.5%**	**100.0%**

Population projections

By 2036 Australia's population is expected to reach almost 31.5 million (Table 2). Regional Australia is projected to account for 30.6% of the national population, slightly less that the proportion in 2025.

Population growth in Australia is expected to slow. The average annual growth rate is projected to be 1.2% in the 10-years to 2036 (down from 1.5% in the 10-years to 2025).

This is expected to be the case for capital cities as well as Regional Australia. In the 10-years to 2036 the average annual growth rate is projected to be 1.4% for capital cities and 0.8% for Regional Australia (down from 1.7% and 1.2% respectively, in the 10-years to 2025).

Table 2: Population projections 2026–2036

Geography	2026	2036	10-year AAGR[1]	% Australia 2036
Capital cities	19,037,000	21,833,300	1.4%	69.4%
Regional Australia	8,929,800	9,632,300	0.8%	30.6%
Australia	**27,972,000**	**31,470,400**	**1.2%**	**100.0%**

Defining Regional Australia

Regional Australia can be defined in many ways.
For the purpose of this analysis Regional Australia refers to areas outside of the Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (GCCSAs-ASGS Edition 3).

Large emerging cities

Population in 2025 and historical growth

Mackay, Bunbury, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Coffs Harbour, and Hervey Bay are the largest cities outside of Australia's 20 most populous cities (Table 3). They are all coastal cities with populations in 2025 that ranged from 63,312 in Hervey Bay to 89,761 in Mackay.

Of these cities, the smallest, Hervey Bay, has the highest 10-year average annual growth rate (1.9%) (Figure 5). Bunbury has the second highest rate at 1.4%, and Bundaberg the next highest at 1.2%. The rest of these cities have rates below the rate for Regional Australia (1.2%).

Hervey Bay had the largest number of people added between 2015 and 2025 (10,255), followed by Bunbury and Bundaberg (9,976 and 8,405 persons respectively) (Table 3).

Table 3: Large cities by population 2015–2025

City	State	2015	2025	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Mackay	QLD	81,110	89,761	8,651	1.0%
Bunbury	WA	73,476	84,332	10,856	1.4%
Rockhampton	QLD	79,109	83,508	4,399	0.5%
Bundaberg	QLD	70,156	79,283	9,127	1.2%
Coffs Harbour	NSW	69,239	77,244	8,005	1.1%
Hervey Bay	QLD	52,429	63,312	10,883	1.9%

Projected population 2026–2036

By 2036 Bunbury and Mackay are projected to reach populations over 100,000 persons (Table 4). Bunbury is expected to surpass the population of Mackay with 16,705 new residents added between 2026 and 2036 (Figure 4).

Bunbury and Mackay are also expected to have the highest population growth rates: Bunbury with a 10-year average annual growth rate of 1.8% and Mackay with 1.2% (Figure 6). For both of these cities, projected growth is expected to exceed historical growth.

The population growth in Hervey Bay is forecast to slow to 0.9% in the 10-years to 2036. Bundaberg and Coffs Harbour are also expected to have slower future population growth, while Rockhampton is projected to experience slightly stronger growth.

Table 4: Large cities by projected population 2026–2036

City	State	2026	2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Bunbury	WA	86,615	103,320	16,705	1.8%
Mackay	QLD	91,006	102,952	11,946	1.2%
Rockhampton	QLD	83,243	88,654	5,412	0.6%
Bundaberg	QLD	77,667	83,191	5,524	0.7%
Coffs Harbour	NSW	75,698	79,164	3,466	0.4%
Hervey Bay	QLD	62,523	68,108	5,585	0.9%

Figure 4: Large cities projected number people added 2026–2036

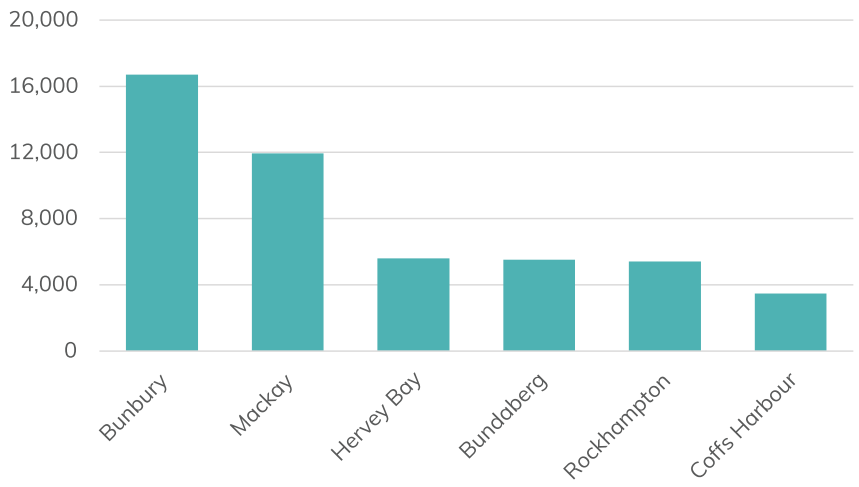


Figure 5: Large cities AAGR 2015–2025

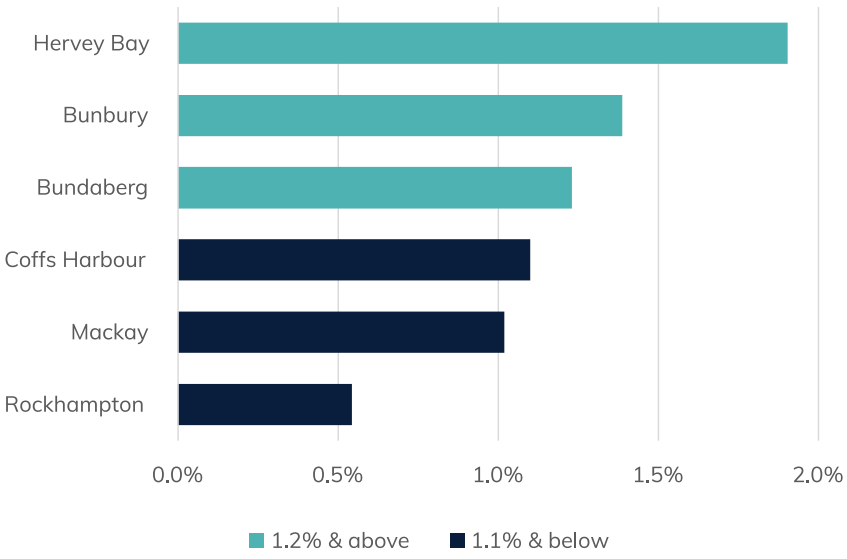
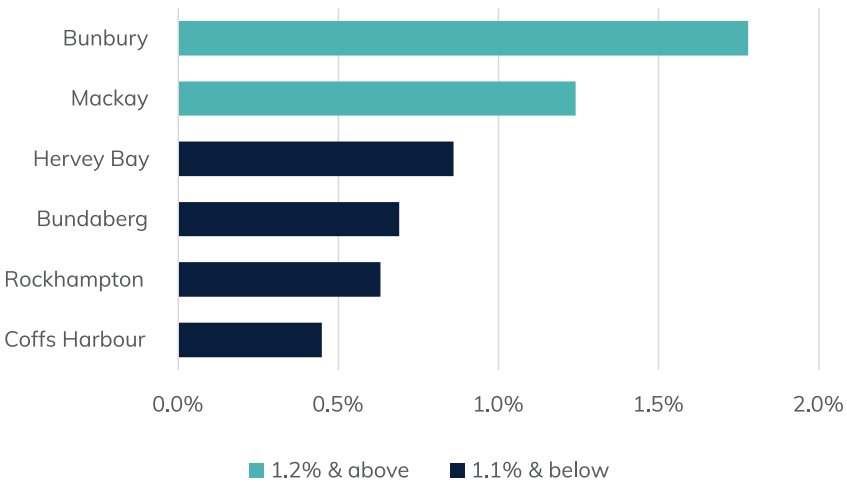


Figure 6: Large cities by projected AAGR 2026–2036



Medium emerging cities

Population in 2025 and historical growth

There are 15 cities with a population between 40,000 and 60,000 persons (Table 5). Wagga Wagga, Shepparton-Mooroopna, Mildura-Buronga and Port Macquarie are the largest of these (above 50,000).

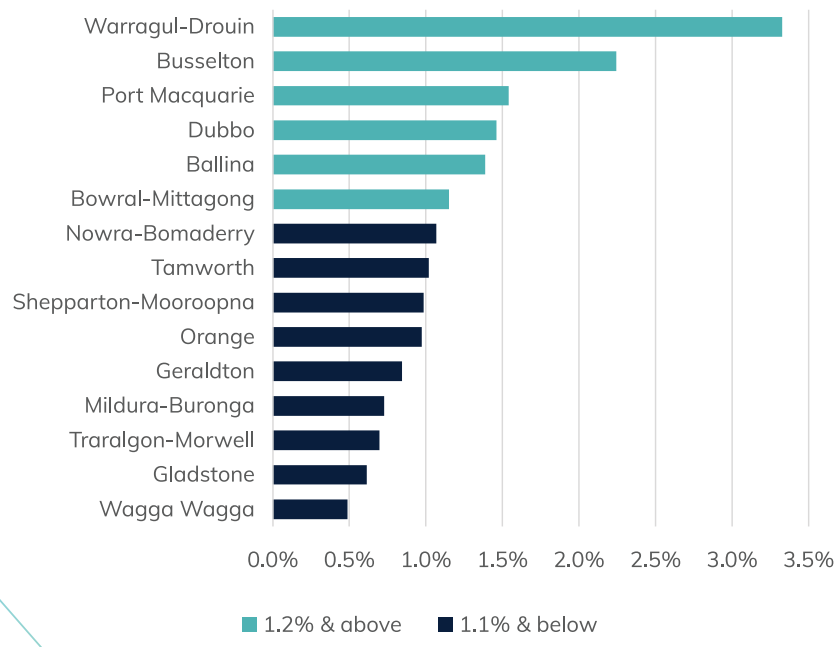
In the 10-years to 2025, 6 of these cities had average annual growth rates at 1.2% or above: Warragul-Drouin, Busselton, Port Macquarie, Dubbo, Ballina and Bowral-Mittagong (Figure 7). Warragul-Drouin and Busselton, in particular, had very high growth rates (3.3% and 2.2% respectively).

These two cities also had the largest number of new residents added (13,257 and 9,157 respectively), followed by Port Macquarie (7,571).

Table 5: Medium cities by population 2015–2025

City	State	2015	2025	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Wagga Wagga	NSW	55,359	58,117	2,758	0.5%
Shepparton-Mooroopna	VIC	50,161	55,332	5,171	1.0%
Mildura-Buronga	VIC/NSW	50,580	54,379	3,799	0.7%
Port Macquarie	NSW	45,798	53,369	7,571	1.5%
Gladstone	QLD	45,632	48,505	2,873	0.6%
Ballina	NSW	42,231	48,465	6,234	1.4%
Warragul-Drouin	VIC	34,253	47,510	13,257	3.3%
Tamworth	NSW	41,582	46,024	4,442	1.0%
Busselton	WA	36,866	46,023	9,157	2.2%
Traralgon-Morwell	VIC	41,125	44,085	2,960	0.7%
Orange	NSW	39,222	43,213	3,991	1.0%
Bowral-Mittagong	NSW	37,927	42,529	4,602	1.2%
Dubbo	NSW	36,715	42,452	5,737	1.5%
Geraldton	WA	38,705	42,104	3,399	0.8%
Nowra-Bomaderry	NSW	36,200	40,264	4,064	1.1%

Figure 7: Medium cities by AAGR 2015–2025



Projected population 2026–3036

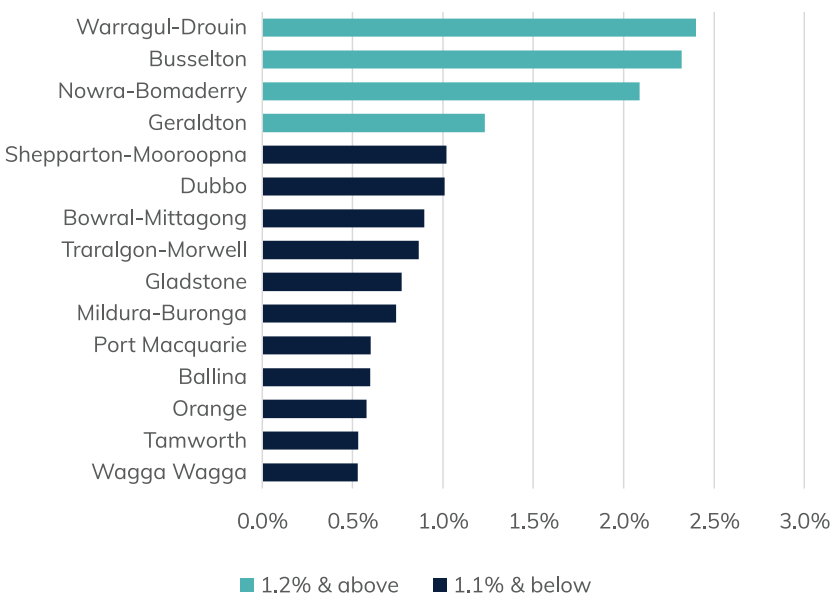
By 2036 Shepparton-Mooroopna, Warragul-Drouin and Wagga Wagga are expected to exceed populations of 60,000 persons (Table 6).

Warragul-Drouin and Busselton are forecast to have the largest number of new residents added (13,214 and 12,275). These cities are also expected to maintain high 10-year average annual growth rates (2.4% and 2.3%) (Figure 8). Very strong future growth is forecast for Nowra-Bomaderry (2.1%). Geraldton is projected to reach a 10-year average annual growth rate of 1.2%, exceeding historical growth. The historically strong population growth rates seen in Dubbo and Ballina are expected to ease.

Table 6: Medium cities, projected population 2026–2036

City	State	2026	2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Shepparton-Mooroopna	VIC	57,011	63,105	6,094	1.0%
Warragul-Drouin	VIC	49,357	62,571	13,214	2.4%
Wagga Wagga	NSW	59,009	62,210	3,201	0.5%
Busselton	WA	47,615	59,890	12,275	2.3%
Mildura-Buronga	Vic/NSW	55,588	59,852	4,264	0.7%
Port Macquarie	NSW	51,700	54,888	3,188	0.6%
Nowra-Bomaderry	NSW	44,092	54,211	10,119	2.1%
Gladstone	QLD	47,611	51,413	3,802	0.8%
Ballina	NSW	47,348	50,257	2,909	0.6%
Traralgon-Morwell	VIC	44,945	48,996	4,052	0.9%
Geraldton	WA	42,920	48,505	5,585	1.2%
Tamworth	NSW	45,582	48,060	2,478	0.5%
Dubbo	NSW	43,271	47,843	4,572	1.0%
Bowral-Mittagong	NSW	43,510	47,570	4,060	0.9%
Orange	NSW	43,429	46,007	2,578	0.6%

Figure 8: Medium cities by AAGR 2026–2036



Small emerging cities

Population in 2025 and historical growth

In 2025 there were 16 cities with a population between 25,000 and 40,000 persons (Table 7). Queanbeyan, Bathurst and Albany were the largest of these.

Morisset-Cooranbong and Victor Harbour-Goolwa had the highest 10-year average annual growth rates (2.8% and 1.8%), followed by Alice Springs and Albany (1.4% and 1.3%) (Figure 9). These 4 cities also had the most residents added between 2015 and 2025.

Projected population 2026–2036

By 2036 Albany and Bathurst are expected to exceed populations of 40,000 (Table 8), while Yeppoon, Echuca-Moama, St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point and Gympie are projected to reach over 25,000 people.

Six cities are expected to experience 10-year average annual growth rates at 1.2% and above, with Yeppoon and Victor Harbour-Goolwa projected to achieve very high rates (2.8% and 2.0%) (Figure 10). Albany, the largest of these high growth cities, is expected to have an average annual growth rate of 1.3% in the 10-years to 2035–36.

Yeppoon, Victor Harbour-Goolwa, Morisset-Cooranbong and Albany are expected to have the greatest number of residents added over the 10-year period (7,370, 7,043, 6,351 and 5,230, respectively).

Table 7: Small cities by population 2015–2025

City	State	2015	2025	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Queanbeyan	NSW	39,956	39,531	- 425	-0.1%
Bathurst	NSW	35,374	39,013	3,639	1.0%
Albany	WA	33,767	38,287	4,520	1.3%
Warrnambool	VIC	34,367	36,689	2,322	0.7%
Devonport	TAS	29,875	32,938	3,063	1.0%
Morisset-Cooranbong	NSW	23,877	31,333	7,456	2.8%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder	WA	31,519	31,016	-503	-0.2%
Victor Harbor-Goolwa	SA	25,851	30,900	5,049	1.8%
Mount Gambier	SA	29,405	30,875	1,470	0.5%
Alice Springs	NT	26,843	30,875	4,032	1.4%
Nelson Bay	NSW	27,137	29,024	1,887	0.7%
Maryborough	QLD	27,219	28,658	1,439	0.5%
Burnie-Somerset	TAS	27,170	28,643	1,473	0.5%
Lismore	NSW	29,111	27,856	-1,255	-0.4%
Taree	NSW	26,375	26,858	483	0.2%
Goulburn	NSW	23,138	25,647	2,509	1.0%

Figure 9: Small cities by AAGR 2015–2025

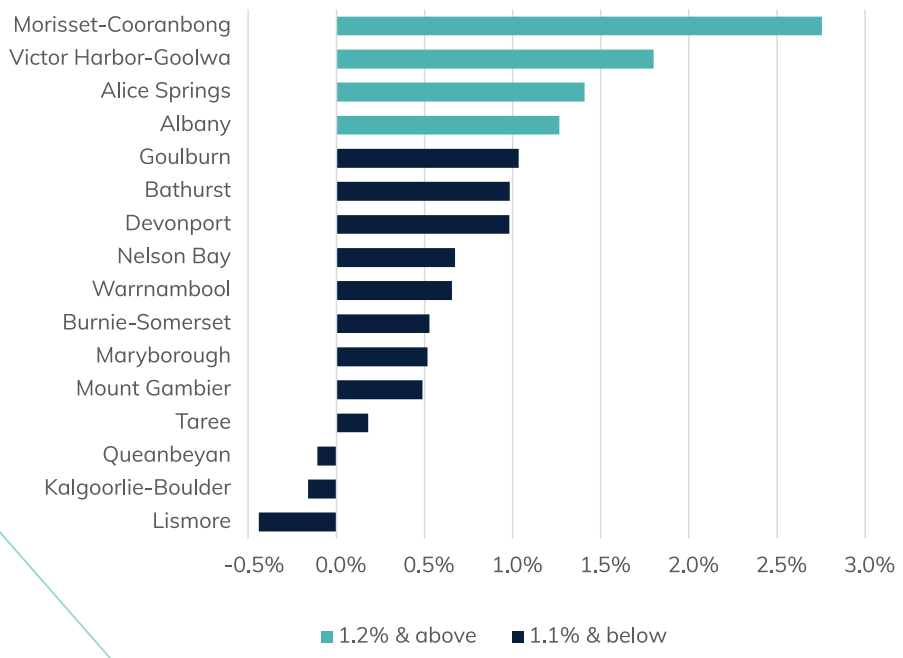
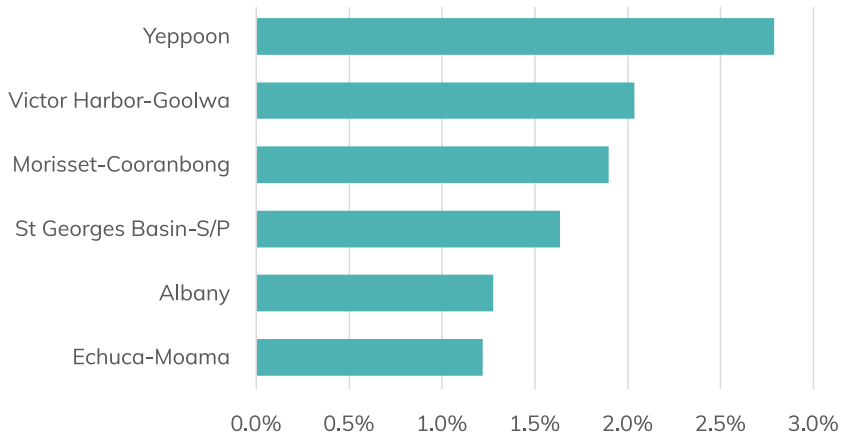


Table 8: Small cities, projected population 2026–2036

City	State	2026	2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Albany	WA	38,725	43,955	5,230	1.3%
Bathurst	NSW	39,582	43,820	4,238	1.0%
Queanbeyan	NSW	38,356	39,379	1,023	0.3%
Warrnambool	VIC	36,688	38,927	2,239	0.6%
Victor Harbor-Goolwa	SA	31,571	38,614	7,043	2.0%
Morisset-Cooranbong	NSW	30,733	37,084	6,351	1.9%
Mount Gambier	SA	31,607	33,781	2,175	0.7%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder	WA	31,090	32,525	1,435	0.5%
Nelson Bay	NSW	29,247	31,225	1,978	0.7%
Yeppoon	QLD	23,297	30,667	7,370	2.8%
Maryborough	QLD	29,021	30,379	1,358	0.5%
Lismore	NSW	29,135	29,777	642	0.2%
Goulburn	NSW	25,966	28,323	2,357	0.9%
Taree	NSW	26,929	27,434	505	0.2%
Echuca-Moama	NSW/ VIC	23,940	27,021	3,080	1.2%
St Georges Basin-S/P	NSW	22,069	25,957	3,888	1.6%
Gympie	QLD	24,360	25,430	1,071	0.4%

Figure 10: Small cities with the highest AAGR 2026–2036



Note

Projections for Alice Springs, Devonport and Burnie-Somerset and are not available as state government data are not published at the SA2/SUA level.

Drivers of population growth

This section examines the drives of population growth across the fastest growing emerging cities between 2022 and 2025.

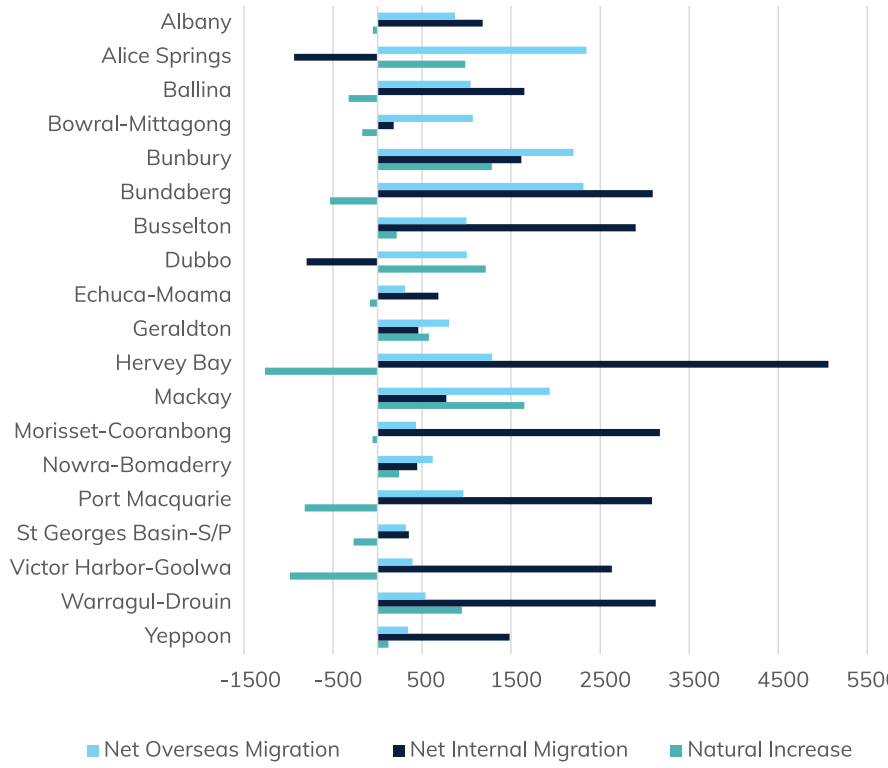
Population growth is influenced by three key components: natural increase, net overseas migration, and net internal migration. Net internal migration indicates whether people are moving into or out of a city from elsewhere in Australia.

Most of the fastest growing emerging cities have large inflows of internal migrants (Figure 11). In particular, the coastal cities of Hervey Bay (5,061), Morisset-Cooranbong (3,170), Warragul-Drouin (3,123) and Bundaberg (3,089) have very high levels of net internal migration. These cities are generally characterised by low or negative rates of natural increase (with the exception of Warragul-Drouin).

Alice Springs (-938) and Dubbo (-795) have experienced net outflows of residents to other parts of Australia. However, both cities maintain strong population growth through natural increase and net overseas migration. Net overseas migration is particularly strong in Alice Springs (2,344).

High rates of natural increase can be observed in Mackay (1,648), Bunbury (1,282) and Geraldton (577). These cities also attract substantial numbers of overseas migrants, contributing more strongly to population growth than net internal migration.

Figure 11: Population growth components, selected cities, 2022–2025



Note

A Regional Movers Index is produced by the Regional Australia Institute and the Commonwealth Bank. It presents data for Local Government Areas showing population movements between capital cities and regions.

Age profile–fastest growing emerging cities

Introduction

This section examines the age profile of the fastest growing emerging cities (cities with 10-year average annual growth rates, historical or projected, at or above 1.2%). Before undertaking this an overview of the age structure of the Australian population is presented.

Age profile of Australia

Australia's population is ageing. The proportion of people of retirement age (65 years and over) increased from 14.7% in 2014 to 17.3% in 2024 (Table 9 and Figure 12). This cohort also experienced the strongest 10-year average annual growth rate (3.2%), compared with 1.3% for the working age population (15–64 year-olds), and 0.8% for children under the age of 15.

This trend is more pronounced in Regional Australia where the proportion of the population of retirement age increased from 17.0% in 2014 to 21.1% in 2024. This compares with capital cities where the proportion of this age group rose from 13.4% to 15.3% over the same period. The 10-year average annual growth rate of this age group was slightly higher in Regional Australia than in capital cities (3.3% and 3.0%, respectively).

This reflects the tendency of people of retirement age to migrate from the major capital cities to regional centres, particularly coastal areas, to enjoy lifestyle benefits. Conversely, the proportion of people of working age in Regional Australia is much less than in capital cities (61.3% compared with 67.0%), reflecting broader employment opportunities in the major urban centres. This cohort is also growing at a slower pace in Regional Australia compared with capital cities, as is the child cohort.

Table 9: Population by age 2014–2024

Capital cities

Age group	2014	% of 2014	2024	% of 2024	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	2,851,271	18.7%	3,166,693	17.6%	1.1%
15–64	10,345,784	67.9%	12,029,404	67.0%	1.5%
65 & over	2,040,600	13.4%	2,752,857	15.3%	3.0%

Regional Australia

Age group	2014	% of 2014	2024	% of 2024	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	1,588,451	19.3%	1,627,158	17.6%	0.2%
15–64	5,248,032	63.7%	5,670,583	61.3%	0.8%
65 & over	1,401,548	17.0%	1,947,674	21.1%	3.3%

Australia

Age group	2014	% of 2014	2024	% of 2024	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	4,439,722	18.9%	4,793,851	17.6%	0.8%
15–64	15,593,816	66.4%	17,699,987	65.1%	1.3%
65 & over	3,442,148	14.7%	4,700,531	17.3%	3.2%

Projections

By 2036, the proportion of people of retirement age is expected to reach 25.5% in Regional Australia and 17.3% in capital cities (Table 10). The 10-year average annual growth rate of this cohort, however, is expected to slow with slightly weaker growth in Regional Australia (2.1% compared with 2.4% for capital cities).

Despite this easing trend, this cohort is still expected to grow at a faster pace than the other age groups for both Regional Australia and capital cities. The 10-year projected average annual growth rate for the working age population is 0.5% for Regional Australia, and 1.3% for capital cities; and the projected growth rate for the child cohort is 0.0% in Regional Australia, and 0.8% in capital cities.

The proportion of working aged people and children is expected to slightly decline for both Regional Australia and capital cities, consistent with historical trends.

Figure 12: Proportion of the population by age, 2024

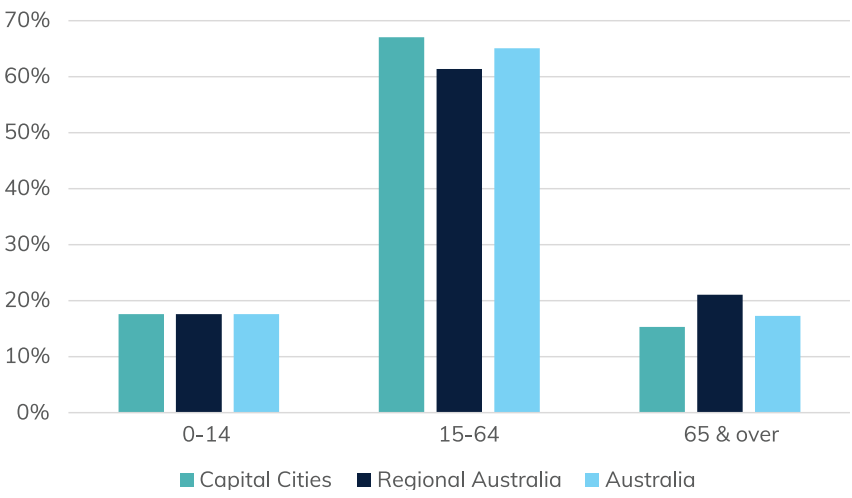


Table 10: Projected population by age, 2026–2036

Capital cities

Age group	2026	% of 2026	2036	% of 2036	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	3,267,400	17.2%	3,548,100	16.3%	0.8%
15–64	12,784,900	67.2%	14,498,000	66.4%	1.3%
65 & over	2,984,700	15.7%	3,786,200	17.3%	2.4%

Regional Australia

Age group	2026	% of 2026	2036	% of 2036	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	1,512,300	16.9%	1,509,400	15.7%	0.0%
15–64	5,414,600	60.6%	5,666,200	58.8%	0.5%
65 & over	2,003,400	22.4%	2,456,100	25.5%	2.1%

Australia

Age group	2026	% of 2026	2036	% of 2036	10-year AAGR[1]
0–14	4,780,800	17.1%	5,058,500	16.1%	0.6%
15–64	18,202,400	65.1%	20,168,400	64.1%	1.0%
65 & over	4,988,500	17.8%	6,243,500	19.8%	2.3%

Note

Discrepancies between totals and sums of components may exist due to rounding.

People of retirement age–65 years and over

In 2024, 12 of the 19 fastest growing emerging cities had a proportion of people of retirement age higher than 21.1% (the rate for Regional Australia). Victor Harbour-Goolwa was the highest of these with a proportion of 44.2%, followed by Hervey Bay (32.4%) and St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point (30.8%) (Figure 13).

These are all coastal cities relatively close to capital cities. Hervey Bay is the largest and is situated 300 km north of Brisbane. Victor Harbor-Goolwa and St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point are much smaller cities—the former located 90 km south of Adelaide, and the latter 200 km south of Sydney. These cities are attractive to retirees seeking lifestyle opportunities with relative proximity to major cities.

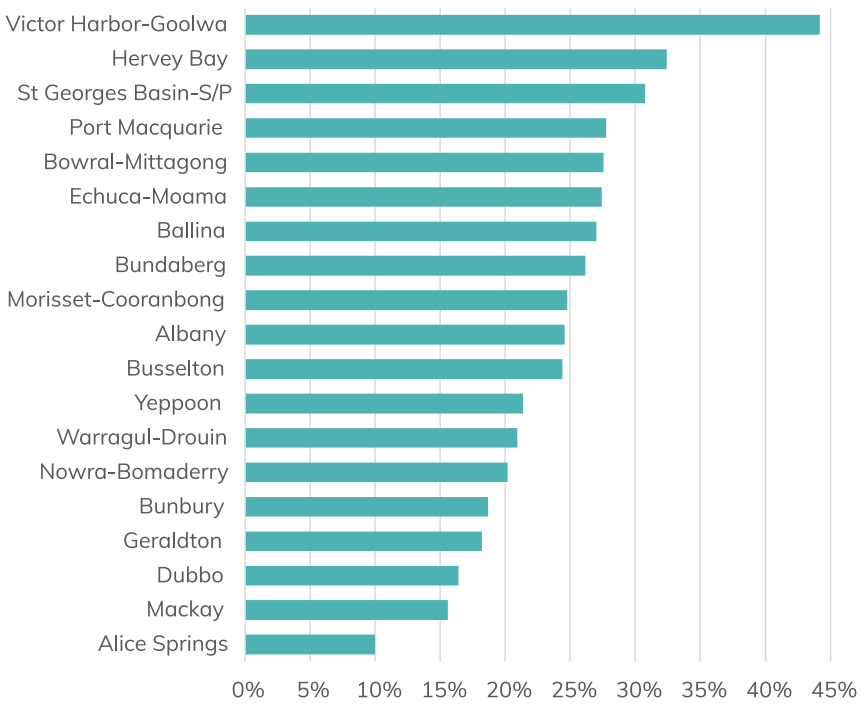
By 2036, Hervey Bay and St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point are projected to continue to have high proportions of people of retirement age (38.4% and 35.7%) (Table 11). Echuca-Moama is expected to have the next highest proportion (32.9%), with a very strong projected 10-year average annual growth rate of 2.6%. This is an inland city situated on the Murray River 220 km north of Melbourne.

Yeppoon, a coastal city 43 km from Rockhampton, is expected to have the highest 10-year average annual growth rate of people aged 65 and over (4.8%).

Strong growth for this age group is projected in Busselton, Warragul-Drouin and Bunbury (3.9%, 3.4% and 3.3%, respectively).

Bunbury is a coastal city 170 km south of Perth, and Busselton is 50 km south of Bunbury. Warragul-Drouin is 100 km east of Melbourne, slightly inland from the coast.

Figure 13: Proportion of people aged 65 & over, 2024



Note

Data on projections by age are not available for Victor Harbour-Goolwa or Alice Springs as state government data are not published at the SA2/SUA level.

Table 11: Projected growth 65 years and over, 2026–2036

City	2026	2036	% of 2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Albany	9,995	13,125	29.8%	3,130	2.8%
Ballina	13,304	15,336	30.5%	2,032	1.4%
Bowral-Mittagong	12,069	13,586	28.6%	1,517	1.2%
Bunbury	16,840	23,325	22.6%	6,485	3.3%
Bundaberg	21,026	24,821	29.8%	3,795	1.7%
Busselton	12,250	17,920	29.9%	5,670	3.9%
Dubbo	7,510	9,045	18.9%	1,535	1.9%
Echuca-Moama	6,878	8,892	32.9%	2,014	2.6%
Geraldton	8,210	10,890	22.5%	2,680	2.9%
Hervey Bay	21,299	26,132	38.4%	4,834	2.1%
Mackay	15,274	20,284	19.7%	5,011	2.9%
Morisset-Cooranbong	8,066	10,177	27.4%	2,111	2.4%
Nowra-Bomaderry	9,189	11,573	21.3%	2,384	2.3%
Port Macquarie	14,717	16,702	30.4%	1,985	1.3%
St Georges Basin-S/P	7,295	9,256	35.7%	1,961	2.4%
Warragul-Drouin	10,899	15,186	24.3%	4,287	3.4%
Yeppoon	5,464	8,753	28.5%	3,289	4.8%

Table 12 shows the cities that are expected to add the most residents aged 85 years and over from 2026 to 2036. Among these, Busselton (8.1%), Warragul-Drouin (6.7%) and Bunbury (6.6%) have very strong average annual growth rates. This has important implications for the planning of social infrastructure.

Table 12: Projected growth 85 years and over, 2026–2036

City	2026	2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Hervey Bay	2,539	4,480	1,941	5.8%
Bunbury	1,910	3,625	1,715	6.6%
Busselton	1,410	3,080	1,670	8.1%
Bundaberg	2,739	4,285	1,546	4.6%
Mackay	1,902	3,318	1,416	5.7%
Warragul-Drouin	1,393	2,672	1,279	6.7%
Port Macquarie	2,194	3,349	1,155	4.3%
Nowra-Bomaderry	1,306	2,324	1,018	5.9%

Working aged people and children

In 2024, Alice Springs had the highest proportion of people of working age (15–64 years) (70.6%) (Figure 14). This central Australia city functions as an administrative and service hub for surrounding communities.

Mackay, Bunbury, Dubbo and Geraldton also had high proportions of people of this age group—Mackay with 65.0%, followed by Bunbury and Dubbo (each with 62.2%), and Geraldton (61.8%).

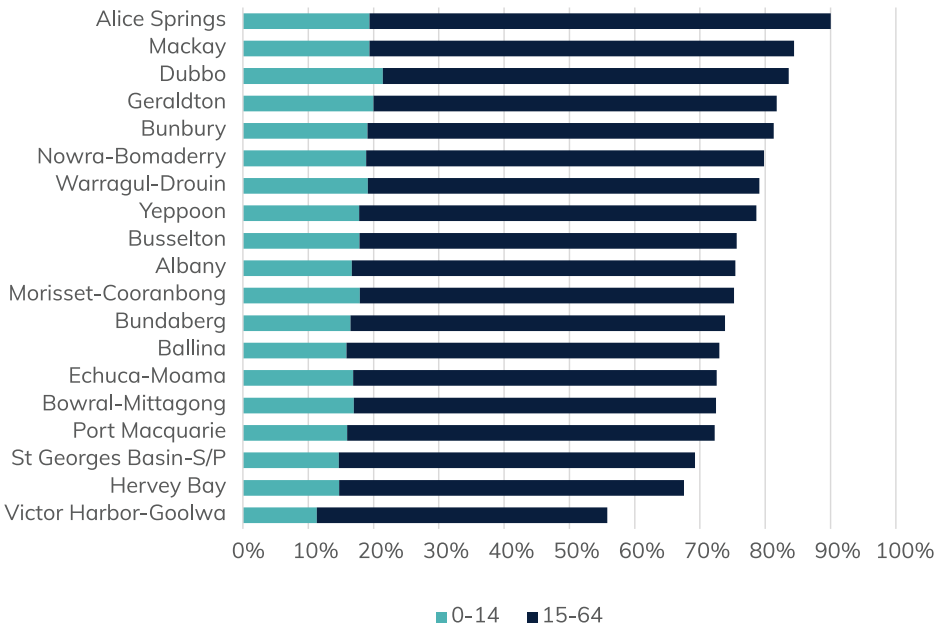
This suggests job opportunities in these cities attracting and retaining people or working age. Bunbury, Geraldton and Mackay are coastal cities that host major ports, exporting regionally produced commodities such as agricultural and mining products (Southern Ports 2026; Mid West Ports 2026; Mackay Ports 2026). Dubbo, an inland city located almost 400 km west of Sydney, is a major service centre for the surrounding agricultural region.

Warragul-Drouin, Yeppoon and Nowra-Bomaderry are projected to have the strongest 10-year average annual growth rates of people aged 15–64 (2.2% for Warragul-Drouin and Yeppoon, and 2.0% for Nowra-Bomaderry) (Table 13). Busselton is also expected to have strong growth of this age group (1.9%), as is Morisset-Cooranbong (1.8%).

Nowra-Bomaderry is a coastal city located 70 km south of the major regional city of Wollongong. Morisset-Cooranbong is situated on Lake Macquarie 45 km south of Newcastle-Maitland and 120 km north of Sydney. These cities provide residents with access to employment and services, as well as natural amenities and lifestyle benefits.

In 2024, Dubbo, Geraldton, Mackay and Alice Springs had the highest proportions of children aged 0–14 years (21.4% and 20.0% for Dubbo and Geraldton respectively, and 19.4% each for Mackay and Alice Springs) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Proportion of working aged people and children, 2024



This largely reflects the pattern seen with the working age cohort who are most likely to be of parental age.

Warragul-Drouin had the next highest proportion of children (19.2%), although it does not have a particularly high proportion of working age people (below the rate for Regional Australia). This suggest that families with young children are attracted to this city, possibly reflecting its proximity to Melbourne.

Table 13: Projected growth, cities with the most residents added aged 15–64 years, 2026–2036

City	2026	2036	% of 2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Bunbury	53,400	62,445	60.5%	9,045	1.6%
Warragul-Drouin	29,068	36,160	57.8%	7,092	2.2%
Busselton	27,305	33,100	55.3%	5,795	1.9%
Nowra-Bomaderry	26,512	32,287	59.6%	5,775	2.0%
Mackay	58,023	63,716	61.9%	5,693	0.9%
Morisset-Cooranbong	17,338	20,710	55.8%	3,372	1.8%
Yeppoon	13,887	17,206	56.1%	3,319	2.2%
Geraldton	26,555	29,485	60.8%	2,930	1.1%
Dubbo	26,544	28,969	60.6%	2,425	0.9%
Albany	22,430	24,495	55.7%	2,065	0.9%

Nowra-Bomaderry, Warragul-Drouin, Yeppoon and Morisset-Cooranbong are expected to see the strongest growth of this age group between 2026 and 2036 (Table 14)—the 10-year average annual growth rates for these cities ranging from 1.5% in Morisset-Cooranbong to 2.1% in Nowra-Bomaderry.

Table 14: Projected growth, cities with the most residents added aged 0–14 years, 2026–2036

City	2026	2036	% of 2036	No. added	10-year AAGR[1]
Nowra-Bomaderry	8,388	10,352	19.1%	1,964	2.1%
Warragul-Drouin	9,391	11,227	17.9%	1,836	1.8%
Mackay	17,709	18,952	18.4%	1,243	0.7%
Bunbury	16,395	17,515	17.0%	1,120	0.7%
Morisset-Cooranbong	5,330	6,196	16.7%	866	1.5%
Busselton	8,075	8,875	14.8%	800	0.9%
Yeppoon	3,947	4,708	15.4%	762	1.8%
Bowral-Mittagong	7,426	8,175	17.2%	749	1.0%
Dubbo	9,216	9,826	20.5%	610	0.6%
St Georges Basin-S/P	3,409	3,960	15.3%	551	1.5%

Conclusion

This analysis has explored the largest and fastest growing cities outside of Australia's 20 most populous cities.

Large cities

The largest of these, ranging in size from 60,000 to 90,000 persons in 2025, include Mackay, Rockhampton, Bunbury, Bundaberg and Hervey Bay. Hervey Bay, Bunbury and Bundaberg have the strongest historical population growth in the 10-years to 2025 (with 10-year average annual growth rates at or above 1.2%—the rate for Regional Australia). Bunbury and Mackay are expected to have the strongest projected growth in the 10-years to 2036.

Medium cities

15 cities have populations between 40,000 and 60,000 people. Of these, 6 have strong historical population growth, at or above the rate for Regional Australia (Warragul-Drouin, Busselton, Port Macquarie, Dubbo, Ballina, Bowral-Mittagong). Warragul-Drouin and Busselton are expected to continue to have strong growth into the future. Nowra-Bomaderry and Geraldton are also projected to have strong future growth.

Small cities

15 cities had populations between 25,000 and 40,000 people in 2025, with an extra four expected to reach 25,000 by 2036 (Yeppoon, Echuca-Moama, St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point and Gympie). Morisset-Cooranbong, Victor Harbour-Goolwa, Alice Springs and Albany have strong historical growth, with 10-year average annual growth rates above 1.1%. These cities (with the exception of Alice Springs where projections are not available) are expected to continue to have strong population growth into the future, as are Yeppoon, St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point and Echuca-Moama.

Age analysis

People of retirement age: 65 and over

In 2024, Victor Harbor-Goolwa, Hervey Bay and St Georges Basin-Sanctuary Point had the largest proportion of people aged 65 years and over. Yeppoon and Busselton are projected to have the strongest future growth of this age group. These are coastal cities relatively close to major cities or regional centres, offering retirees lifestyle benefits with easy access to urban centres.

Working age population: 15–64

Alice Springs, Mackay, Bunbury, Dubbo and Geraldton had the highest proportions of people aged between 15 and 64 years in 2024. These cities are characterised by employment opportunities that attract working-age populations. Mackay, Bunbury and Geraldton are port cities exporting regionally produced commodities. Alice Springs and Dubbo are inland cities that function as administrative hubs and service centres for the surrounding regions.

Children: 0–14

In 2024, Dubbo, Geraldton, Mackay and Alice Springs had the highest proportions of children aged 0–14 years, reflecting the working age structure of these populations. Warragul-Drouin also had a large child population, suggesting the appeal of this city close to Melbourne for young families.

Implications

There is much diversity among Australia's emerging cities in terms of population growth and demographic characteristics. While some cities, such as Bunbury, Warragul-Drouin, Busselton, Mackay and Nowra-Bomaderry are expected to experience substantial growth, more modest growth is projected for others.

Growth in some cities, such as the coastal cities of Hervey Bay, Busselton, Yeppoon and Victor Harbor-Goolwa, is related to life-style factors that draw retirees. Growth in other cities, such as Mackay, Bunbury, Dubbo, Geraldton and Alice Springs, is related to the roles that these cities play in local economies and industries, or in providing regional services. Such cities have higher populations of working age people and children.

Understanding the nature of current and future growth patterns in these cities is essential for the planning and development of infrastructure, housing and service provision.

Methods

Geography

Capital cities are defined using the Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (GCCSA) structure of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Edition 3. Regional Australia refers to all areas outside of the GCCSAs. Emerging cities and major regional cities are defined using the Significant Urban Area (SUA) structure of ASGS Edition 3. SUAs that fall within GCCSAs are excluded from this analysis. SUAs are an aggregate of SA2s (Statistical Area Level 2), and represent 'individual Urban Centres or Clusters of related Urban Centres with a core urban population of over 10,000 people' (ABS 2021). The city of Queanbeyan is defined using the NSW SA2s that form part of the Canberra-Queanbeyan SUA. The SUA boundaries are revised with each Census release. The next revision is scheduled for the second half of 2027 which may result in changes to the urban boundaries.

Historical population

The ABS Estimated Resident Population (ERP) 2024–25, from the 'Regional Population' release, has been used for historical population data. Data for capital cities has been prepared using GCCSA estimates—Table 4 of the spreadsheet 'Population estimates by SA2 and above, 2021 to 2025'. Data for Regional Australia has been prepared using combined 'rest–of–state' estimates from Table 4. Data for emerging cities has been prepared using SUA estimates – Table 2 of the spreadsheet 'Population estimates by LGA, Significant Urban Area, Remoteness Area and electoral division, 2001–2025'.

The ABS ERP has also been used to produce the analysis of population by age. The Data Explorer dataset 'Population estimates by age and sex, by SA2 and above, 2001 to 2024 has been used, extracted at the GCCSA level for combined capital cities, and combined rest-of-states for Regional Australia. Data for emerging cities had been extracted at the SA2 level and aggregated to form SUAs. 5-year age groups have been aggregated to construct the three age groups used in this publication: 0–4 years, 15–64 years and 65 years and over.

Population projections—Australia

Population projections for Australia, capital cities and Regional Australia have been sourced from the Australian Government's Centre for Population, 2025 Population Statement. The projections for each GCCSA (taken from the 'Capital city and Rest-of-State Population Projections' spreadsheet) have been aggregated to produce projections for combined capital cities. Projections for Regional Australia have been prepared by aggregating rest-of-state data. Projections for Australia have been taken from the 'National Population Projections' spreadsheet. Projections by age have been derived from the 'Population Projections, tidy file' where single year estimates have been aggregated to form age groups. Population at the end of each financial year has been used.

For more information about the methodology used by the Centre for Population please refer to the publication website (see data sources on the last page).

Population projections—emerging cities

Population projections for emerging cities have been sourced from the state governments of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. Data at the SA2 level has been aggregated to form SUAs, and 5–year age groups have been combined. Different methods have been used by state governments but generally incorporate the components of fertility, mortality, internal migration and overseas migration. Some state government projections, (such as those produced by New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia) use local planning information on future housing demand and supply, or expected dwelling construction, to enhance SA2 projections. For South Australia, this method has been used for SA2s withing the Greater Adelaide Planning Region only (which includes Victor Harbour-Goolwa, but not Mt Gambier).

Projections for Kalgoorlie-Boulder in Western Australia contain the Trafalgar SA2 which is outside of the SUA boundary.

For projections where multiple series have been published, the middle or central band has been used (ie, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia).

For projections by age, the sum of component parts may not align with totals due to rounding.

For more information on methods employed by state governments please refer to relevant publication sites (see data sources on the last page).

Data comparability

As the data is derived from different sources using a variety of methods, caution must be exercised when making comparisons. In particular, the historical data is not directly comparable with national or state population projections. The national population projections are not directly comparable with state-based projections.

Population projections produced by the ABS (2023) are based primarily on demographic factors and differ from projections prepared by state governments that may take into consideration planning information.

Notes

Population estimates and projections are for the 30th June of the reference year. The 10–year average annual growth rate (AAGR) has been calculated using the Compound Annual Growth Rate formula.

Data sources

BCARR analysis of:

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2026) Regional Population, Population estimates by SA2 and above 2001 to 2025; and Population Estimates by LGA, Significant Urban Area, Remoteness Area and electoral division, 2001 to 2025, released 31 March 2026.
- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2026) ERP and components by SA2 and above (ASGS Edition 3), 2022 onwards [Data Explorer], accessed 26 May 2026.
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End Note

1 AAGR refers to average annual growth rate.