

## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

### Key points

- Australian towns have changed and adapted to new circumstances over the course of the twentieth century.
- This study investigates the underlying processes that have transformed Australia's settlement pattern.
- The ABS/CBCS Census of Population and Housing from 1911, 1961 and 2006 is the primary information source used in the analysis.
- The report is divided into two parts covering a descriptive analysis followed by an analytical approach to consider underlying processes.

### Introduction

The story of towns and regions in Australia is one of change and adaption to new technology, population growth and economic and social circumstances. Over the twentieth century the functions of towns have been evolving, transforming them from many relatively similar tiny rural towns in the early 1900s to the complex array of towns and cities today with diverse sizes and functions.

Often the perception is that shifts take place in response to shocks. Economic stress is often attributed to a seemingly-obvious local cause—a drought, a change in markets, the withdrawal of a key industry or the like. Yet even casual observation suggests that there might be wider forces at work. This report seeks to identify these forces. It examines how Australia's town settlement patterns have changed between 1911 and 2006, and the factors and processes which created this change.

The study takes a very broad approach and draws out the observable, long-term and across-the-board changes that have shaped settlement patterns. By understanding these long-term trends both government and towns can understand what has shaped Australia's current settlement. For example, a hundred years ago a large part of our transport system was dependent on people walking to work and moving freight by horse and cart or by rail. Today, cars and trucks have revolutionised the movement of people and goods, to profoundly impact on the shape of settlements.

This report covers issues such as history and geography, industry and investment, provision of goods and services and amenity, to examine the drivers and processes of changes occurring in the settlement pattern. We need to also recognise that economic and social change will continue; that technology will keep shifting the relationships between industry, labour and towns; and there will be new ways to access goods and services for households and industry. These will form part of the influence on the decision-making process of individuals. Consequently, we can expect patterns of settlement to keep evolving.

## Purpose

The basic questions that form the foundation of BITRE's investigation are:

- How has Australia's town settlement pattern changed from the first national Census in 1911?
- What were the factors and processes creating the changes in the settlement pattern?
- What can the mechanisms of settlement pattern change tell us about likely future developments?

## Approach

The report examines Australia's settlement pattern by investigating the number, location and population size of towns—the individual pieces in the settlement pattern—across three Censuses (1911, 1961 and 2006) based on the populations of localities.<sup>1</sup>

These snapshots of Australia's settlement pattern provide a record of the structure at that time and enables comparison over time. Population estimates provide an important basis for quantitative analysis of settlement patterns. Descriptive and analytical records are used to augment our understanding of economic activity.

The study is designed to be accessible to the layperson, and takes a cross-disciplinary approach, by using economic theory in the context of history, geography and demography to make sense of the changing settlement patterns.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was commenced before the 2011 Census results were available and so 2006 Census data was used. Given the long term nature of the processes involved, it is unlikely that 2011 data would make any material difference to the results or conclusions of this report. Subsequent inspection of 2011 Census data has confirmed this view.

## Report structure

The report is divided into two parts. Chapters 2 to 7 present the data findings and context (theoretical and historical) to enable interpretation.

Existing theories of the distribution of economic activity are discussed (Chapter 2), with Chapter 3 describing the processes, drivers and trends that formed Australia's settlement patterns to 1911. Chapter 4 investigates town population data from the 1911, 1961 and 2006 Censuses to identify important national trends, while Chapter 5 looks more closely at particular towns and regions. Chapter 6 examines some of the wider context of economic, social and technological changes over the twentieth century. Chapter 7 summarises the findings, and discusses the results of the data analysis in light of the context and seeks to identify the key patterns and drivers of change.

The second part of the report tries to understand the underlying processes for the change in the settlement pattern: basically, how and why did the settlement pattern change. For example, the physical geography of a location has always played a critical role in the establishment of settlements and Chapter 8 investigates its role, along with the local history, to explain the current structure of settlement.

Industry has been a major contributor to the establishment of many towns but has also undergone a substantial amount of change over the past century. Chapter 9 considers the effect of this industrial change on the location of activity. This chapter also discusses the important role of investment from industry, along with households and government, in the growth prospects of a town.

How people access and how firms provide goods and services has changed markedly. Its impact on settlement patterns is explored in Chapter 10, with a particular emphasis on the shifts in the market structures.

Chapter 11 examines the role of amenity in the choice of location for households. Coastal locations have been the most noticeable aspect of this movement but this chapter also explores the underlying factors for the increasing importance of a location's amenity to the changes in the settlement pattern.

Chapter 12 discusses the report's conclusions and what this may mean for towns and government in the future.