



Ageing and aged care

Extracted from *Australia's welfare 2009*

Chapter 3, pages 84–88

Life expectancy in Australia has been increasing almost continually throughout the last century and into this century, including for those in older age groups. At age 65, Australia's men can expect to live for another 18.5 years and women for another 21.6 years. This has resulted in growing numbers of older people who may need aged care services and financial support during retirement.

On 30 June 2008 an estimated 2.8 million Australian residents were aged 65 years or over (13.2% of the population). More than half were aged between 65 and 74 years, and were actively involved with their families and communities, including as carers and volunteers.

In the last decade, the growth rate in the population aged 65 years and over has been fairly constant at about 2% each year. Among the population who are most likely to need and use aged care services (those aged 85 years and over), the rate of growth has been considerably higher (between 3% and 7% each year). Between 1998 and 2008, the number of people in this age group increased by 61%.

Growth in the very old population will be a huge influence on government spending on aged care in the future, as projections estimate that the number of people aged 85 years and over may increase in the next 50 years to 1.8 million people, or 5% of the total population.

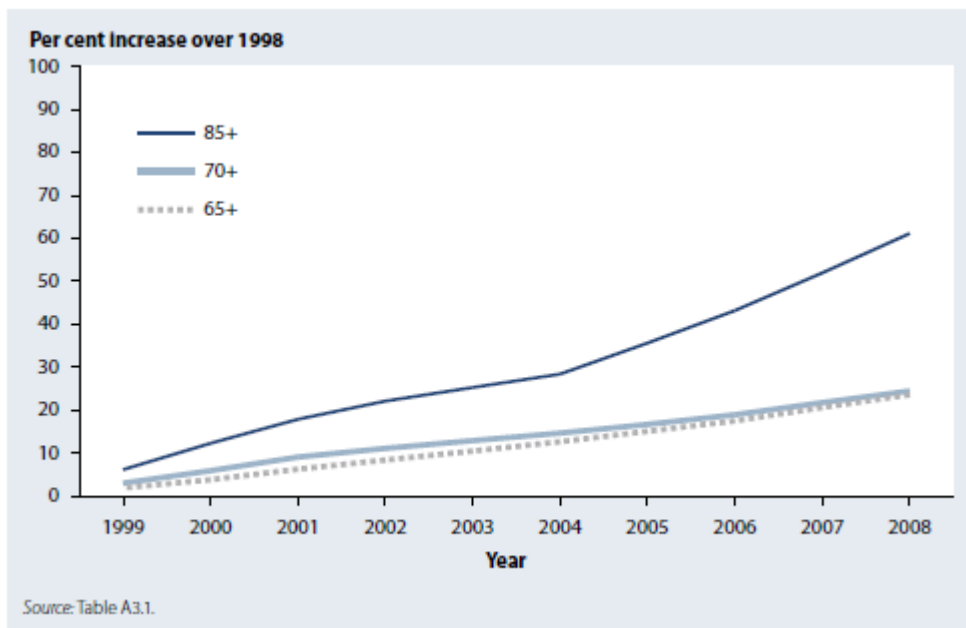


Figure 3.1: Increase in number of people aged 65 years and over, 70 years and over, and 85 years and over since 1998



Estimates from the Census of Population and Housing show there were almost 16,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 65 years and over in 2006 (making up 3% of the Indigenous population). Indigenous people have poorer health and higher rates of disability than non-Indigenous people, which may result in the need for care services at comparatively younger ages. For this reason, the number of Indigenous people aged 50 years and over is used in planning aged care policies and services. In 2006, there were almost 60,000 Indigenous people aged 50 years and over (12% of the Indigenous population).

Women of all cultural backgrounds in Australia tend to live longer than men. Women accounted for 51% of people aged 65–74 in 2008, but comprised a larger share of the very old (66% of people aged 85 years and over, down from 67% in 2006). The predominance of women in older age groups is diminishing as the life expectancy of men is increasing faster than that of women.

At 30 June 2007, around one-quarter of Australia's population (5.3 million people) was born overseas. The median age of overseas-born residents was 13 years higher than their Australian-born counterparts. Main birthplace countries of origin with high median age were Italy (66 years), Greece (64 years), Germany (60 years) and the United Kingdom (53 years). Numbering close to one million, overseas-born people accounted for 35% of Australian residents aged 65 years and over.

The population of older people is not evenly distributed throughout Australia. In 2008, the proportion of people aged 65 years and over was highest in South Australia and Tasmania (each 15% of the total population), and lowest in the Northern Territory (5%) and the Australian Capital Territory (10%). In other states, the proportion varied between 12% and 14%.

Despite a common myth that most older people live in some type of cared accommodation, the majority of older Australians in 2006 (92%) lived in private dwellings, either alone or as members of a family or group household. Only 8% were usual residents in non-private dwellings such as hospitals and aged care homes.

Questions for discussion

1. What could an ageing population mean for Australians who will enter the workforce in the next 5, 10 or 20 years? What could an ageing population mean for future governments?
2. Why has the growth in the 85 years and over age group been greater than the growth of the whole population?
3. Why is the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over used to plan aged care policies and services?
4. What does a high proportion of older overseas-born people mean for aged care services?
5. Can you explain the uneven distribution of where older people live and what this means for state and territory planning and budgets?
6. Why is it a myth that most older people live in cared accommodation such as aged care homes? How could such a myth have become popular?