

The migration



of rural youth to Australian cities



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*Rural communities in Australia have long felt concern about the rate at which young people leave home to head for major cities, many never to return. **Kylie Hillman** explores the extent of this problem.*

The latest results from the long-running Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), published in late February, show that more than one third of young Australians from non-metropolitan areas relocate to a major city in the years immediately after leaving school. Although some return in the years to come, non-metropolitan areas experience a net loss of a quarter of their young people.

Gathering information on which young people leave their non-metropolitan homes, why they leave and what factors influence their decisions is important to understanding what interventions, if any, are necessary to help rural communities stop the decline of their youth population and to promote community and economic growth.

The need to help policy makers and rural community leaders establish some basic facts about the migration patterns of the non-metropolitan youth population prompted the first Australian national longitudinal study of young people's geographic mobility. The report, *Movement of non-metropolitan youth towards the cities*, published in February, also saw the LSAY program reach a major milestone as it was the 50th report published in the series.

This particular study focused on a group of 5112 young people who were living in non-metropolitan areas in their final years of secondary school, and the pathways they followed in the years following secondary school, including their geographic mobility



and participation in education, training and employment. They were tracked from 1997 (when most were in Year 11) until 2004 when most were 23 years old. Areas considered to be non-metropolitan are those outside the major cities of Australia and their surrounding suburbs (Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Hobart, Perth, Canberra and Brisbane).

The study had three broad aims: to investigate the post-school pathways of non-metropolitan youth; to investigate the characteristics of young people that are associated with remaining in their non-metropolitan community or, conversely, leaving the area and moving to the city; and to investigate various economic and other outcomes associated with decisions to move, remain or return.

The geographic mobility of young people

Overall the information on the movements and activities of young people shows that there is a general movement from non-metropolitan areas to the major cities of Australia. Young people tend to make these geographical shifts to take up study that may not be available in their home communities or in the other non-metropolitan centres, although there are other subsequent activities – such as work and travel – in which young people engage after leaving home.

Twenty-six per cent of the study's participants who had been living in a non-metropolitan area when the study commenced in 1997 were living in a major city at the end of the study in 2004. Thirty-six per cent had experienced at least one year in a major city between 1998 and 2004. While some return to their community, rates of return migration are lower resulting in a net loss to non-

metropolitan communities of 24 per cent of young people by around age 23.

Those making a move to a major city were typically drawn by the pursuit of further study, most often at university. Over the project's seven year period, approximately 40 per cent of the non-metropolitan youth who had moved to a city were studying either at a university or a TAFE institution or were undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship. University study was the most common reason cited for moving to a city. Fewer young people left to take up an apprenticeship or traineeship or other form of study. This finding suggests that there may be better provision of non-university forms of post-compulsory education and training in non-metropolitan areas, allowing more young people to remain in non-metropolitan communities to study while university-bound students have a greater need to leave.

The study looked at a number of background variables to determine how they may influence a young person's decision to either relocate to a city or remain in a non-metropolitan area. Background characteristics; school-related variables; post-school activities; geographic mobility; and outcomes were all considered. Most of these variables had a small influence. However, those with full-time employment in their non-metropolitan homes were more likely to stay there. Full-time employment also worked to keep young people in the city after completing their studies. There was also some indication that young men and women who were originally located in areas that were less accessible were also more likely to relocate. Having a parent with a tertiary qualification increased the likelihood of moving to a city for young men only.

Economic and social outcomes

Having identified which young people leave non-metropolitan areas and why, the study then turned to examining a number of social, financial and occupational outcomes at age 23. The study's participants were divided into three categories. Those who remained in a non-metropolitan location for all eight years were considered 'Stayers'. Those who moved to a major city at some point between 1997 and 2004 and remained there (or in another city) were considered 'Leavers;' and those young people who moved to a major city but then returned at some point to a non-metropolitan area were considered 'Returners.'

Of the financial and occupational outcomes investigated, there were no statistically significant differences in the levels of employment, the average gross weekly income or the average number of hours worked per week by young people in the 'Stayer', 'Returner' or 'Leaver' groups. The general and career satisfaction levels of young people in the three groups were very similar.

In terms of social outcomes investigated, there were no differences in the rates of marriage across the groups, while a smaller proportion of 'Leavers', compared to those in the 'Stayer' and 'Returner' groups, had become parents. Unsurprisingly, fewer young people in the 'Leaver' group were still living with their parents at age 23, while a greater proportion of 'Stayers' were still in the family home at the same age.



Conclusions

Non-metropolitan youth are likely to continue to leave their homes to pursue university study as non-metropolitan communities cannot offer the same opportunities for university study that are available in the major cities. However, the economic and social outcomes experienced by the three groups suggest that there may be some advantages to young people in returning to a non-metropolitan area once they have completed their studies. Rates of employment, average income and work hours were similar for both 'Leavers' and 'Returners.' Home ownership was slightly higher among those who had chosen to remain in non-metropolitan areas. Rural communities therefore have a challenge ahead of them to convince their young people to return after completing their education in the cities. ■

More information

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *The movement of non-metropolitan youth towards the cities* by Kylie Hillman and Sheldon Rothman. The study is research report number 50 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). This and other reports from the LSAY series can be downloaded from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au



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CEET Working Paper 65 by Chandra Shah and Mike Long looks at policies, programs and measures that encourage the mutual recognition of qualifications and cross border mobility. It describes developments in the EU and in Australia and New Zealand.

Labour mobility and mutual recognition of skills and qualifications: European Union and Australia/New Zealand is available on the CEET website

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50th LSAY report

The LSAY program has reached a significant milestone with *The movement of non-metropolitan youth towards the cities* being the 50th report published in the series.

Since 1996 LSAY reports have examined issues including school achievement and school completion; participation in vocational and university education; gaining and maintaining employment; and household and family formation. More detailed investigations have examined links between social characteristics, education and training, and employment.

Over the coming months LSAY reports will be published focusing on university completion, vocational education and training, career advice in schools, early school leavers, and young people's occupations and earnings. These forthcoming reports will further add to the knowledge base on transitions of young Australians from school to further study and work.

