

Population ignorance in Australia, survey shows

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Australia is growing rapidly and many Australians are worried about this. But evidence from social surveys shows that few of them know much about demographic fundamentals says Swinburne University sociologist Associate Professor Katharine Betts.

Writing in demography journal *People and Place*, Betts says that Australians are ashamed of their ignorance and may fudge answers to some opinion polls in order to conceal it.

"Ignorance is widespread because business interests and, until recently, political elites, have preferred silence to debate," she says.

"Misinformation about the ageing of the population, lower fertility, and the supposed effects of immigration on both these phenomena has spread unchecked."

According to Betts, because of the public's lack of understanding, attitudes toward immigration can be poor indicators of attitudes towards population growth.

"But there is a long record of opinion-poll data on attitudes to immigration," she says.

"This shows support in the early 1960s, but high levels of opposition in the Hawke/Keating years, falling under Howard, and rising again under Rudd."

But Betts says we cannot use these polls as indicators of people's attitudes to population growth because few Australians know enough about demography to express their attitudes to growth through the medium of questions about immigration.

"If we want to know what Australians think about population growth we need to ask them directly. Few surveys have done this and, where they have, they sometimes make the mistake of asking respondents to put a number on their preferences - to say how big they would like the population to be. While most have opinions about growth few know enough about demography to express that opinion in numerical terms."

According to Betts, the recent Australian [Survey of Social Attitudes](#) avoided this trap. It found that 72 per cent of voters thought [Australia](#) did not need more people and, in April 2010, Essential Media found that 87 per cent of people wanted Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to either stay the same size or shrink. These surveys allowed respondents to express their opinions without having to draw on, or pretend to, a knowledge of [demography](#).

"Ignorance and social anxiety mean that different questions and different methods can produce different results. But all recent surveys that asked the right questions show majorities in favour of lower growth or stability. Irrespective to their feelings about immigration, between 50 and 87 per cent of Australians do not want further [population growth](#)."

More information: '*Attitudes to Immigration and Population Growth in Australia 1954 to 2010: An Overview*' will be published in *People and Place* on Monday 1 November 2010.

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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