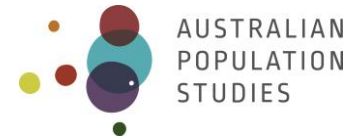

APA Conference



Demographers in a time of COVID

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1. Introduction

I would like to begin by recognising the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional owners of the land that we meet on today, land that was never ceded. I pay my respects to elders past and present, and pay my respects to Aboriginal peoples from other country who are here today.

As demographers, we recognise the intricate links between people and place over time – into the future and back to the dreaming. And I think it's important we recognise these links, especially as Australia talks about formalising this recognition through a voice to Parliament.

I would like to start by saying how fantastic it is to finally be able to hold this conference in person. In 2020 when Ann Evans was President, it felt like a gift to have on-line sessions about demography, but I have been ridiculously excited at the thought of seeing you all, my friends and colleagues in person again. And excited to be able to talk about population with people who get it, and who know what a cohort effect is, and who know what NOM [Net Overseas Migration] means!

I can't go any further without acknowledging that this conference wouldn't have happened without a fantastic organising committee headed by Edith Gray with Denise Carlton, Brian Houle, James O'Donnell and Ray Harris. But a particular thank you must go to Edith whose work behind the scenes has been so important.

I must admit it's quite a daunting task writing a President's Address, particularly after the past couple of years we've all had! When I sat down to prepare, I looked to past Presidents for inspiration (APA Presidents, not Trump). I've sat through several President's addresses based on the research they're doing, but I don't have any research to present. When Alison Taylor was President, her Presidential Address in Hobart in 2018 started with photos of her travels through Europe and how demography was everywhere.

2. The effect of COVID

My first year as President had a huge lockdown in the middle of it – 107 days, not that we were counting, and I know – not as long as Melbourne! And outside of lockdown our state borders were closed so there was no going anywhere, not even WA.

So in my family, every Saturday we picked a country, and every family member cooked a course for dinner, and we dressed up to represent that country (Figure 1). It really was the highlight of our week. What strikes me when I look at the countries we picked is that we didn't have to travel at all to see demography everywhere. Every country we picked was based on our friends and where they are from. And I'd say, like many households, this range of cuisines is actually a diversity we see most weeks – either through the food we cook or buy from our local restaurants.

While all COVID restrictions have been lifted, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic and it exposes us all to risks of morbidity and death. We can't escape the fact that the last couple of years have been frankly horrendous – family members stuck overseas, zoom funerals, mental illness, redundancy. And that's just me.



Figure 1: Johnstone family dinner outfits

Source: Kim Johnstone

But, of course, everyone was affected. We know that everyone's lives were disrupted and disrupted in ways that will see continued impacts for evermore. We are already talking about the COVID generation – the group of young people who were on the cusp of adulthood – about to leave school, get their first job, leave home for the first time, travel overseas when the pandemic hit. What was I saying about cohort effects?

We have good data on what happened over the past couple of years – with one in five Australians experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in 2020 and 2021, higher levels than pre-pandemic. We saw levels of household work and childcare increase. We saw incomes go up for those reliant on government pensions, and go down for people whose hours were cut but still working, and stay the same but with more hours worked for people able to work from home.

We know that young people were disproportionately affected by higher levels of psychological distress, and by higher unemployment. Women suffered greater stress and anxiety than men, were more likely to lose hours of work, and shouldered much of the responsibility for home schooling.

There were notable spatial differences in how people experienced pandemic restrictions. I live in one of the harsh lockdown local government areas of Sydney – what we called the plague zone in our house, an LGA with lower socio-economic status, and a large population who had a very different experience to the Northern Beaches [of Sydney] who were locked down at the end of 2020.

Our work as demographers and population specialists is going to be critical in ensuring that not only that we understand the impacts of COVID and the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 at the time, but also as they play out over the next 5, 10, and 20 years. I believe our strength as interdisciplinary researchers means we will be key contributors to understanding the longer-term effects of this pandemic across social demography, life course research and the impact on the key drivers of population change – mortality, fertility and migration. Not only will COVID affect our population for years to come, I'm picking it will be a key conference theme at our APA conferences for some time yet.

3. COVID and demography

One of the things COVID has done for our profession is put population front and centre of people's minds. It started when Australia went into its first lockdown, when the international border was closed, and when unemployment lines wound around street blocks. Everyone wanted to know what it meant! I know several of us in this room were on radio, TV and in print talking about what was happening and the likely impacts. It really emphasised how much we, as demography professionals, had something useful and important to say about what was happening.

Demographers were certainly flavour of the month. We benefited from the focus on epidemiology, being able to interpret data and what it meant for populations. It was a real joy to see younger demographers filling our screens and airways to talk about population issues. And having just seen the world population hit 8 billion, I was very happy seeing Liz Allen and Elin Charles-Edwards on my TV screen to talk about this.

For me, I found (and continue to find) that the challenge in responding to this media interest in population is a focus on short-term impacts, when a lot of what we do in relation to demographic dynamics is slow moving and less responsive. It's particularly difficult when you get 30 seconds to convey a message. I kept coming back to two key messages, that still hold true. The first is – age is important. You have to understand the age of the people – and this applies to everything – the age of the people in this place, the age of the people who are moving, the age of the people who are not moving, etc. We know this as demographers. But it is the hardest thing I have to convey to the non-demographers I work with.

The second message was – even though we're seeing changes in some parts of our communities – most people are not moving, and most people's circumstances are not changing. All the people we need to be thinking about are here and will still be here next year. And here in 10 years.

I have noticed that now that our borders are open and restrictions lifted, there's less interest in talking to demographers. And indeed, because of inflation rates and RBA interest rate rises, economists are once again the experts most likely to be called upon. While I don't begrudge skilled professionals being recognised for their expertise, I do get cranky when economists do our work. This is mainly because they often get it wrong – ignoring age structure and basic demographic processes. I am mighty sick of explaining that a bigger household is not a measure of lack of housing supply, or explaining that you cannot replace overseas one year ago in the Census with NOM data and then expect it to add up to ERP [Estimated Resident Population].

While I joke about economists, I do think that demographers need to find ways to improve how we communicate about the impacts of the pandemic and changing age profiles on our communities. This is a key issue that policymakers need to understand, and our politicians, who are not renowned for a long-term view, also need to understand. The population frameworks that we work within, without even thinking about it, are I think the most reliable tools we have to consider the wide range of factors at play.

We demographers also need to be talking about the distinction between developments that are caused by COVID-19 and those that are based on our population structure. This migration exodus out of Sydney, for example, had an age profile of people who moved which was exactly the same as those people who left before COVID. Fertility rates were already going down.

4. COVID and new data

One of the things that has been a real boon to us as demographers since the onset of COVID has been new data. And I know that we have several papers on the program at this conference looking at this very topic. A huge thank you to the ABS who stepped in with more regular release of key data products to help understand the COVID impacts. When I was working as a consultant they were the main source of data we used to inform clients in local government about what might happen in their communities.

We saw several nation-wide surveys administered – the ABS household impacts survey, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Families in Australia survey, the Melbourne Institute Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey, Monash University did a survey and the National Children's Commissioner. We've seen surveys about COVID impacts from ANU, Asthma Australia, Architects Australia ... I don't have an exhaustive list. But it's clear we have a wealth of insights that will help our work well into the future.

One of the exiting developments was the exploration of new data to fill data gaps. There is a poster [at the 2022 APA Conference] from my colleagues that I encourage you all to see about how we used drivers license change of address data in NSW to understand population mobility. What was striking was that the pandemic exposed data gaps that we have long been aware of – in this case, local moves. The need to understand these moves so government could prepare appropriate pandemic responses has set up processes that have enabled data sharing, and strengthened an evidence base that we need not just for pandemics, but for all service and infrastructure planning.

A note of caution though – I am excited by the new data, but none of it is perfect. Population data gaps were exposed that remain problematic. Data on temporary populations is one such gap. How do we measure people when they don't live in a place permanently but are there for a long time, or who are living in a second residence for part of the year? This is particularly important across regional Australia where the usual resident population doesn't change but there is not enough housing or water infrastructure to meet workers who are in town. I know that addressing these and other data challenges is going to be a big part of the work of our statistical agencies here and around the world, as well as dealing with the impact of COVID on our data sources that we have relied on and which may need to be looked at with more caution for at least the next few years.

5. Key challenges

So thinking about our theme of population and policy, I have been thinking about what are the challenges that I see for us as demographers, those things that are challenges for me in my day job. I hope they are relevant to all our work.

First, there is the challenge in needing exact numbers when planning infrastructure, sometimes 60 years into the future, and managing uncertainty. We're currently working with people putting together a budget bid for a new hospital in an area that is not projected to grow based on the changes to NOM. But if we are wrong, and a new hospital is not built, we will have service gaps in another 20 or 30 years' time. Why this matters is because for those people asking for the precise numbers – when we can't do it – the value of the demographic process, or our own professional capability, is questioned. Often the policy response is to throw more data at the challenge, or more complex models – which doesn't necessarily deliver better outcomes.

The challenge to us as demographers is how to communicate those things we can be certain of – age structure for example – and explore ways to narrow some of the uncertainty gap. We also need to engage in the policy responses so they make sense. My latest talk was to a school planning conference talking about projected populations of children, and a key takeaway was the need for multi-functional space as we prepare for waves of children alongside population ageing. But this response will need legislative changes for how public schools can be used, designed, and funded.

The second challenge is translating research into an outcome policy makers can use. For my current work, and for the work I did in the private sector, this often means understanding what outcomes mean at a local level. If we want to see evidence informing policy, part of the work needs to include identifying which policy lever the evidence applies to and by which level of government – state, federal or local. Evidence also needs a translator – I've sat down with many planners and policy makers who are excited by a research idea but don't know what to do with it.

And, third, we can't talk about challenges without the issue of how research is funded. I know many of you faced job uncertainty at the height of lockdowns when university funding was severely constrained, and this continues with short term contracts and no ongoing funding streams. I know from government it is very hard to be an industry partner for ARC Grants when you only get an annual budget allocated and experience ministry of government changes, and a new Secretary. It's certainly hard as a public servant to fund research we don't know the outcome of because the first

question is: what do we get out of it? I'm certainly hopeful that the new Australian Universities Accord is useful in bettering what we see in this space.

The fourth challenge is about Aboriginal demography and population data. It's been 10 years since I did my PhD on Indigenous fertility in the NT and I feel that the progress in the areas of Indigenous data sovereignty, increasing the talent pool of Aboriginal data experts, and ensuring communities use data to make sure they get the services they need hasn't made much progress. I am alarmed by the glacial pace of change, and I find it disappointing that when I talk about Aboriginal data and population data, I'm mostly talking with other whitefellas. I know there are a lot of people in this room trying to do more in this space, but the data challenges are significant and I think ensuring we as a professional organisation support both Closing the Gap data sovereignty initiatives and making sure we train more Aboriginal people to be in the room when the work is done has to be a priority.

I don't have solutions to these challenges, and I know many of them are part of the amazing conference program we have the privilege to be immersed in this week. But what I do know is that this professional group we are part of through the APA, and our network of demographers and population analysts that goes beyond the Association is collegial and as a collective we are well placed to address these challenges, spanning as we do public, private and academic sectors.

When I was thinking about how we address these challenges as a group, I remembered all the people who have given me ideas, helped me understand different methods (very patiently), edited my work, over the years. This year the man who is the reason I am a demographer, Ian Pool, died. And I remember him with such fondness because of his generosity of spirit in promoting me and supporting me, and everyone he worked with.

I was thinking of Ian because we've lost other demographers over the past two years, last year Iwu Utomo, and this year Gavin Jones, who we are honouring at tomorrow morning's plenary. What strikes me in remembering these demographers is how for each of them, it is their generosity with their intellect, support and kindness to newcomers that is talked about, as well as the work they left behind.

And I think this is the thing that makes our family of demographers, and the Australian Population Association, such an invaluable professional network to be part of and well placed to address the challenges we face in understanding Australia's population, and those of our neighbours and around the globe.

We are very good at what we do, and we support each other. It's why I think we will continue to do amazing work and address the challenges we face from surviving a pandemic, to understanding what it means for Australia's population and those across the world.

I would like to close by saying thank you to everyone who is here today – this conference wouldn't happen without you. Thank you to all APA members, the long-standing members and new ones. And a thank you to the APA Council – all our work is voluntary and frankly, that's been hard yakka the past couple of years.

Thank you.