

Multicultural demographics data explorer

NSW multicultural population
summary profile

2023



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Introduction to the multicultural population in NSW

Australia is a multicultural nation, and New South Wales (NSW), particularly Sydney, is the first port of call for migrants from most countries. Typically, NSW has a pattern of gaining the largest share of overseas migrants within Australia's jurisdictions, however, it loses population as people move to other states. This movement can also be seen in microcosm in areas of Sydney, as well as in regional NSW.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census (2021 Census) showed that 29.3% of the NSW population was born outside Australia, which is above the Australian percentage of 27.7%. This is an increase of 27.6% or 300,000 people since 2016. It equates to 2,366,960 people in NSW who were born overseas recorded in the 2021 Census. The increase is despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw Australia's borders closed for 18 months prior to census day in 2021.

Birthplace	NSW pop 2021
United Kingdom	275,351
China	247,595
India	208,962
New Zealand	118,527
Philippines	106,930
Vietnam	97,995
Nepal	64,946
Lebanon	63,293
Iraq	55,353
South Korea	53,046



Language	NSW pop 2021
Mandarin	270,685
Arabic	227,243
Cantonese	148,943
Vietnamese	117,907
Filipino/Tagalog	82,469
Hindi	80,051
Greek	78,691
Spanish	71,868
Nepali	68,148
Italian	64,039



Figure 1: Top 10 countries of birth in NSW and languages other than English spoken in NSW.

The percentage of people speaking a language other than English in NSW was 26.6% in 2021, up from 25.1% in 2016, an increase of more than 267,000 people in five years.

The level of multicultural population is often measured by the percentage of people born overseas or the percentage speaking a non-English language. These are not definitive measures of cultural diversity (e.g. the entire population could be speaking one other language or from one overseas birthplace, which by definition is not multicultural).

Most parts of metropolitan Australia have a mix of language and birthplace groups, which represent a lot of cultural diversity. Another measure of multicultural population is to count the number of birthplaces or languages represented. In NSW, the 2021 Census recorded 127 countries of birth with at least 100 people, and 103 languages spoken by at least 100 people.

The 10 largest overseas countries of birth and languages other than English for NSW in 2021 are shown in Figure 1.

These top 10 birthplaces comprise 16% of the total NSW population and 54.5% of those born overseas. While the top 10 languages comprise 15% of the total NSW population and 56.5% of those speaking a language other than English. For comparison, English speakers make up 67.6% of the total population, and those born in Australia make up 65.3%.

Despite the similarity of the percentages, these populations are not the same. While there is a substantial crossover, many people speaking a language other than English are born in Australia, and many of those born overseas speak English as their primary language, so it is worth considering each group separately (see Figure 2).

Each birthplace and language has different individual characteristics. The top 40 languages and 45 birthplaces are profiled in individual reports accompanying this summary report (*Multicultural demographics data explorer - Birthplace commentary and analysis: Top countries of birth in NSW* and *Multicultural demographics data explorer - Language commentary and analysis: Top languages used at home in NSW*). Combined, the profiled groups make up close to 90% of the multicultural population in NSW.

Other measures of cultural diversity can include different religious groups and the subjective measure of a person's ancestry. In this report, we are primarily looking at people born overseas and speaking a language other than English at home, but other measures are explored briefly in the summary.

NSW population by birthplace and language, 2021

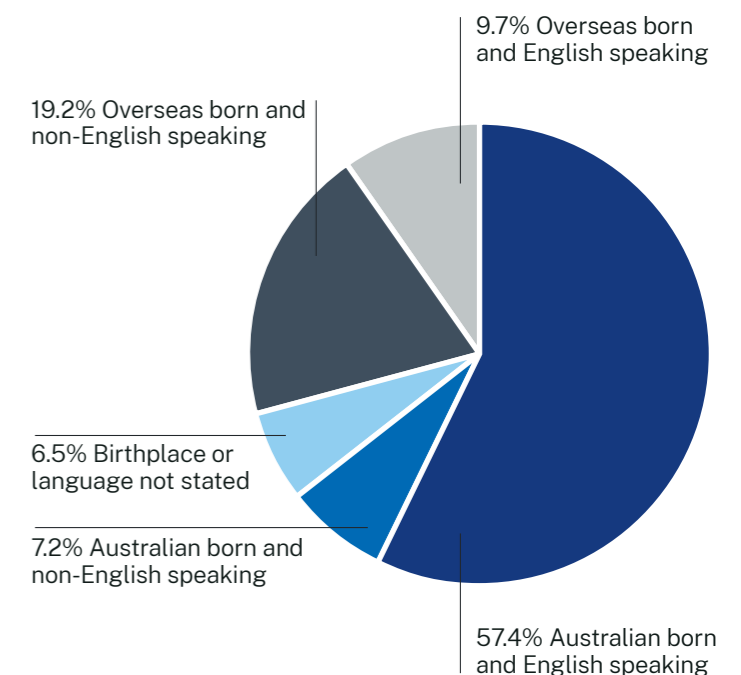


Figure 2: Percentages of NSW population by birthplace and language. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of population and housing.

Geographical distribution

With a few exceptions, the overseas-born and language-other-than-English populations of NSW are in the Sydney metropolitan area. Exceptions are detailed in the individual language and birthplace profiles, and are available on the Cancer Institute NSW website. In 2021, Greater Sydney recorded 38.6% of its population born overseas and 37.4% speaking a language other than English at home.

In regional NSW the equivalent figures were 12.2% and 6.6%. The proportion of people speaking non-English languages in Greater Sydney is six times that found in regional NSW. Another way of looking at it is of the total population speaking non-English languages at home in NSW, 91% live in Greater Sydney, while for those born overseas, it is a little lower at 86%.

Within the Sydney metropolitan area, Western Sydney Local Health District (LHD), South Western Sydney LHD and Sydney LHD have the most cultural diversity.

South Western Sydney LHD has a higher percentage of people who speak a language other than English at home, than it does of overseas-born people. This is due to a large number of Australian-born second-generation language speakers, and fewer migrants from English-speaking countries. For all other LHDs, there is a higher percentage born overseas than speaking a language other than English.

Within regional NSW, there are pockets of cultural diversity, notably in Wollongong, Griffith, and Coffs Harbour, but most of the population is Australian-born and English-speaking.

Local Health Districts by proportion of overseas born and Language other than English

Local Health District (LHD)	Overseas born % of population	Language other than English % of population
Sydney LHD	44.4%	43.1%
South Eastern Sydney LHD	37.9%	32.5%
Northern Sydney LHD	39.7%	30.8%
Western Sydney LHD	47.4%	51.1%
South Western Sydney LHD	38.8%	46.4%
Nepean Blue Mountains LHD	19.7%	13.9%
Central Coast LHD	16.1%	7.1%
Hunter New England LHD	10.5%	5.6%
Illawarra Shoalhaven LHD	17.8%	11.3%
Southern NSW LHD	13.9%	7.1%
Mid North Coast LHD	12.6%	5.5%
Northern NSW LHD	12.9%	4.9%
Western NSW LHD	8.2%	4.9%
Murrumbidgee LHD	10.1%	7.5%
Far West LHD	5.6%	3.8%
Albury Wodonga Health LHD	12.5%	8.6%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

Emerging and declining groups

Emerging birthplace groups represent communities that have had a lot of recent migration to Australia and few people leaving. This includes skilled migrants and refugees from war-torn countries or where there have been other disasters.

Between the 2016 and 2021 censuses, the largest increases in countries of birth outside Australia were:

Countries of birth with largest five-year increase, NSW, 2021 Census

Country of Birth	2021 population	Change from 2016
India	208,962	+65,503
Nepal	64,946	+32,829
Philippines	106,930	+20,181
Iraq	55,353	+15,082
Vietnam	97,995	+13,865
China	247,595	+13,087
Pakistan	33,902	+9,378
Brazil	20,411	+8,097
Malaysia	39,555	+7,900
Syria	16,746	+7,455

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

The largest increase of migrants to NSW was from India, which is also the largest source of new migrants into Australia. China, the other country with a large amount of recent migration, does not appear high on this list as the population increased only slightly in the past five years. This is due to a loss of predominantly student population during the COVID-19 pandemic, when universities paused face-to-face learning.

The China-born population did increase but not as much as in previous census years. The population born in China has nevertheless tripled since 2001.

The second-largest increase in NSW since 2016 is from Nepal, and this is also the largest percentage increase of any country of birth with significant population. It has increased more than 100% since 2016, and almost the entire Nepalese population in NSW has arrived since 2006, now the seventh largest country of birth outside Australia.

The largest decreases in countries of birth were mostly in established European communities that have migrants from pre-1960. Mortality has also had a major impact on these populations. The Italian-born population in NSW is mostly elderly, and many have died in recent years. Other countries that decreased between 2016–2021 are also ageing, post-Second World War migrants. This includes the Netherlands, Malta, Hungary, Germany, and Austria. Nine of the top 10 decreasing population groups, by country of birth, are from Europe.

The language groups that have either increased or decreased are closely related to countries of birth, however, there are some differences.

Languages spoken at home with largest five-year increase, NSW, 2021 Census

Language spoken at home	2021 population	Change from 2016
Nepali	68,148	+33,542
Mandarin	270,685	+30,740
Arabic	227,243	+26,418
Punjabi	53,460	+20,025
Urdu	46,618	+16,896
Vietnamese	117,907	+15,011
Filipino/Tagalog	82,469	+13,128
Hindi	80,051	+13,017
Tamil	38,446	+8,765
Spanish	71,868	+8,341

The increase of the Nepalese-born population residing in NSW places its primary language, Nepali, as the most increased language spoken at home.

The second-largest increase of language use in NSW is Mandarin, which has increased more than the China-born population living in NSW. Mandarin is also widely spoken in South-East Asia, so some migrants from South-East Asia are speaking Mandarin in NSW, and there would be some second-generation migrants born in Australia who speak Mandarin.

Arabic has the third-largest increase, and this language is spoken by migrants from different countries. Many Indian languages also had large increases, however, none of the many languages from India increased as much as the India-born population.

The number of Italian speakers in NSW declined almost as much as all the other declining languages combined, decreasing 11,000 since 2016, and 32,000 (about a third) since 2001. NSW is now home to more speakers of the Nepali language than Italian.

Languages spoken at home with largest five-year decrease, NSW, 2021 Census

Language spoken at home	2021 population	Change from 2016
Italian	64,039	-11,655
Chinese, nfd	3,132	-3,983
Greek	78,691	-2,992
German	20,161	-2,872
Maltese	10,377	-1,950
Dutch	7,204	-1,482
Hungarian	5,194	-1,339
Croatian	20,420	-736
Polish	13,502	-622
Serbo-Croatian Yugoslavian	1,332	-496

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 and 2016 Census of Population and Housing

The second-largest decrease is 'Chinese, not further described'. This is more of an administrative idiosyncrasy of the 2021 Census. With a greater online response in 2021, more people were able to mark the provided box for 'Mandarin' or 'Cantonese' and fewer wrote in the less specific 'Chinese' in the freeform field. This can also explain some of the increase in Mandarin speakers beyond those born in China.

'Serbo-Croatian Yugoslavian' is the category for people who wrote 'Yugoslavian' as their language or were not specific enough within the Slavic languages group.

All the 10 largest declines apart from 'Chinese nfd' are from Europe and reflect the post-Second World War migration.

The multicultural landscape in NSW has shifted over the last two decades from predominantly European to predominantly Asian and Middle Eastern, but there are substantial numbers of groups from all over the world residing in the state.

Age structure and cancer screening groups

The age structure of the populations born overseas and speaking a language other than English is hard to define as a broad group because it varies greatly between different cultural groups. It's recommended to read *Multicultural demographics data explorer – Birthplace commentary and analysis: Top countries of birth in NSW* and *Multicultural demographics data explorer – Language commentary and analysis: Top languages used at home in NSW* for more details.

Generally, people born overseas are more likely than the wider population to be in the young, working-age groups. People are most likely to migrate when they are aged in their 20s and 30s. There are low numbers of children born overseas living in NSW (however some language groups have large numbers of children who were born in Australia speaking the language).

Age structure, born overseas, language other than English and total population, NSW, 2021 Census

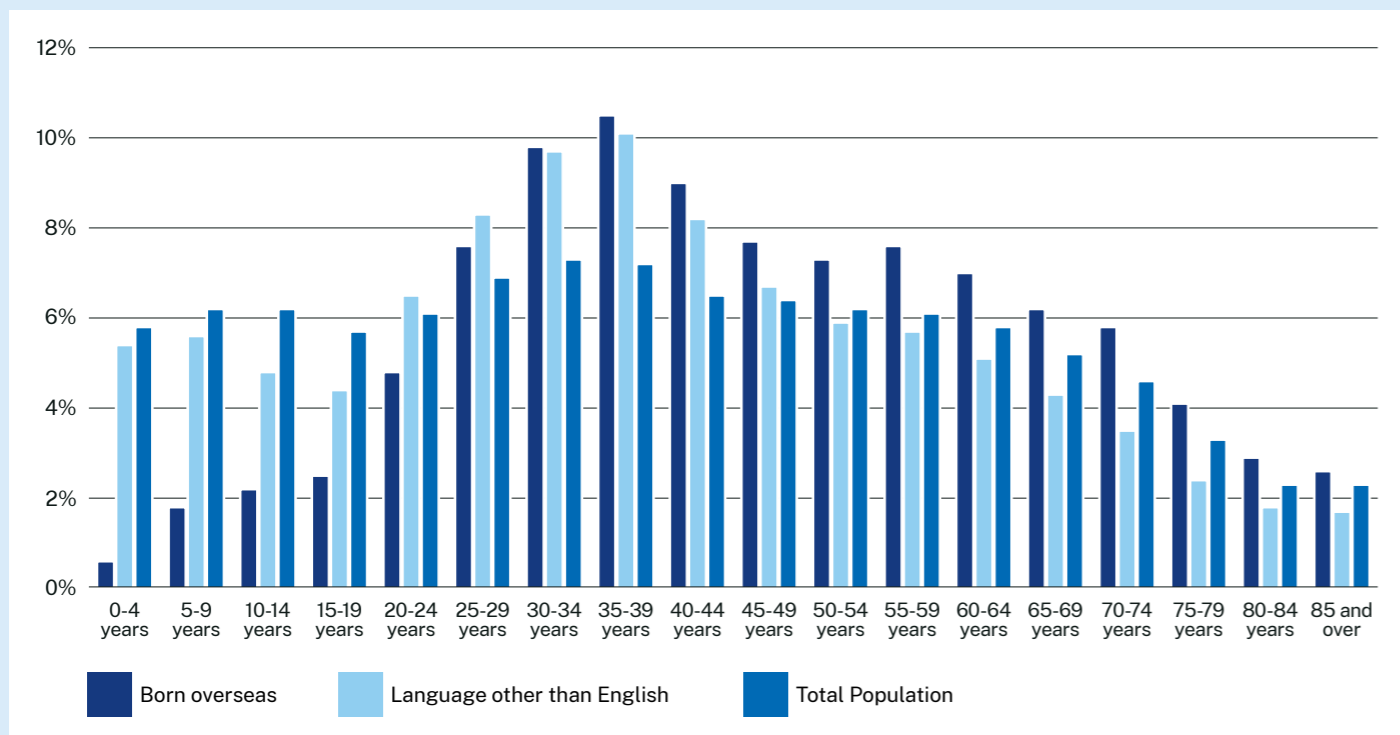


Figure 3: Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

Figure 3 shows in five-year age cohorts the total people born overseas, language other than English speakers and the total NSW population. The 'language other than English' speakers are relatively close to the total NSW population in age structure, with just a smaller share in the teenage years and a smaller proportion of elderly as well. There is a larger share of working-age population, particularly people in their 30s.

The overseas-born age structure is more concentrated among those same working-age groups, broadly from ages 30–64, but there are also a larger share of elderly and retirees among the overseas-born, probably reflecting the older European-migrant communities. As previously mentioned, there are very few young children born overseas because most people don't migrate with their children, and have children in their new country.

Cancer screening

The cancer screening age cohorts for the born-overseas and non-English speaking populations as a percentage of total are shown below:

Screening cohort	Born overseas	Language other than English	Total population
Breast screening 50–74 females	17.7%	13.1%	14.3%
Cervical screening 25–74 females	40.7%	35.4%	31.7%
Bowel screening 50–74 persons	35.4%	24.5%	27.9%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

Overall, the population born overseas has a higher share of people in every cancer screening cohort than the total NSW population. Those speaking a language other than English at home have a larger share in the cervical screening cohort, but a smaller share in the bowel and breast screening cohorts.

The population with the lowest share across the screening cohorts is a combination of those who were born in Australia and speak a language other than English at home. These people tend to be very young, and under the threshold for screening populations (25 for females and 50 for males).

Only 4% of those born in Australia but speaking a language other than English were in the breast screening cohort, for example. The largest share of population in the screening cohorts is among those who were born overseas and speak a language other than English at home. For cervical screening it is 42.1% - as they mainly fall into that target age range of 25–74-year-olds. This is because migrants from non-English speaking countries are primarily in working-age population. Children and elderly are not highly represented.

Again, there are enormous differences between language and birthplace groups, so it is best to look at the specific language and birthplace profiles for more details. However, in general, the declining European-born communities are older and have a larger population eligible for breast and bowel screening.

Income, education and health

Income

The income levels of multicultural populations vary greatly. Many overseas-born groups have above-average incomes, while some have below average. In NSW, in 2021, the median income for those born overseas was \$802 per week, which is close to the median for the whole population of \$813.

For those speaking a language other than English at home, however, the individual incomes were notably less, with a median of \$741 per week. Again, this varies a lot between groups but overall, we can say that incomes are lower for those whose primary language is not English. This is only representative of individual income and doesn't necessarily translate into an equivalent level of household income, which may have more to do with the number of employed people in the household.

Top % of population with a university level qualification by birthplace, NSW, 2021 Census

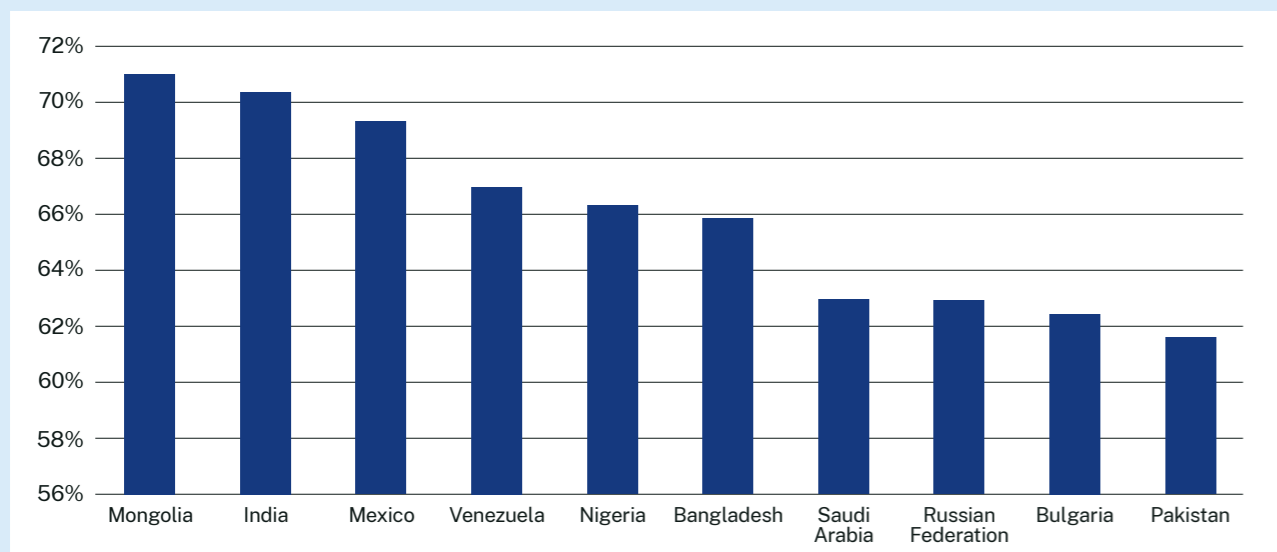


Figure 4: Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

Education

Levels of qualification tell a slightly different story. Skilled migration tends to target people with degree qualifications, and many migrants come to Australia to earn a degree and stay after completing it.

Overall, 40% of those born overseas (aged 15+) have a bachelor's degree or higher qualification, compared to 23% of Australian-born. This is heavily skewed by the population born in India, for which 70% have a degree qualification, the second highest of any birthplace group (only the small population from Mongolia has a greater share of degree qualifications).

Figure 4 shows the top 10 population groups with a university degree (note that birthplaces with less than 1,000 people in NSW have been excluded).

In contrast, some large populations by country of birth have low percentages of university qualifications, such as Greece (7%), North Macedonia (11%), Croatia (11%), Portugal (12%) and Syria (12%). These are a mixture of elderly populations who migrated when going to university was not the norm, and recently arrived communities who are mainly arriving as refugees (e.g. Syria).

The proportion of people speaking a language other than English with a degree qualification was similar to that of the overseas-born population (39.9%).

Many migrants come to Australia to study at university. This reduced in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but there were still a lot of overseas-born students in Australia.

For NSW in 2021, 4.6% of the total population was attending university, but for certain countries of birth it was much higher. The largest percentage for any country with a significant population living in NSW was Saudi Arabia, with 21.2% attending university.

This was closely followed by Nepal, with 20.9% (over 13,000 people). African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe also recorded high percentages though relatively small numbers.

Though there is a stereotypical perception that most of the Chinese in Australia are students, in fact only 8.2% of the population born in China were attending university in 2021 (this is still higher than the total population average and decreased due to the pandemic, it has never been as high as some other groups). Many Chinese-born people are not attending university.

Health

A measure that is new to the 2021 Census, and not strictly a socio-economic characteristic but related to socio-economic status, is long-term health conditions. The presence of long-term health conditions is generally higher in low socio-economic communities, and some, such as arthritis and dementia, are also strongly correlated with age.

Overall, the population speaking a language other than English is less likely to report a long-term health condition compared to the total NSW population. Overall, 74.8% of people speaking a language other than English reported no long-term health conditions, while 60.1% of English speakers did. The only condition where those people speaking a language other than English reported a higher incidence was diabetes, which affected 5.8%. The language group with the highest incidence of diabetes is Maltese (17.1%).

The reporting of mental health conditions was strikingly different, with 10.3% of English speakers reporting this, compared to 3.7% of people speaking a language other than English. This could be due to cultural differences in what constitutes mental health or willingness to seek a diagnosis.

One of the long-term health conditions measured is cancer (including remission). This covers all types of cancer but may not include those who have fully recovered (the question specifies remission, but this may be interpreted differently by some people). The incidence of cancer as a long-term health condition is quite low compared to other conditions: 2.9% of the total NSW population was recorded, and 1.7% for language other than English speakers. This is also more likely to be high in elderly populations, so speakers of Slovene (7.2%), Maltese (5.7%), Hungarian (5.1%) and Italian (5%) had the highest reported incidence of cancer as a long-term health condition in the 2021 Census.

Other measures of cultural diversity

Religion

While overseas country of birth and non-English language are the most common measures of multiculturalism or cultural diversity, other characteristics from the census can also be used to look at cultural diversity.

Religion is an important measure of cultural diversity, though in recent years the percentage of people shifting from stated religious affiliations (mainly Christian) to the 'No religion' category has made it difficult to analyse as a measure of changing cultural groupings.

NSW remains the Australian jurisdiction with the highest reported religious affiliation across all religions. Nevertheless, in 2021, 33% of the NSW population stated they had no religion or a secular belief (e.g. atheism, agnosticism). This was up from 25.4% in 2016, an increase of more than 767,000 people and has tripled since 2001 (11.7%).

The Christian religious categories, primarily the Anglican and Uniting churches, have been decreasing. In 2001, 71.5% of the NSW population stated a Christian affiliation, and in 2021 it was 47.6%. In the same 20-year time frame, non-Christian religions doubled in percentage terms from 6.4% to 12.1%.

Religious affiliation in NSW, 2021 Census

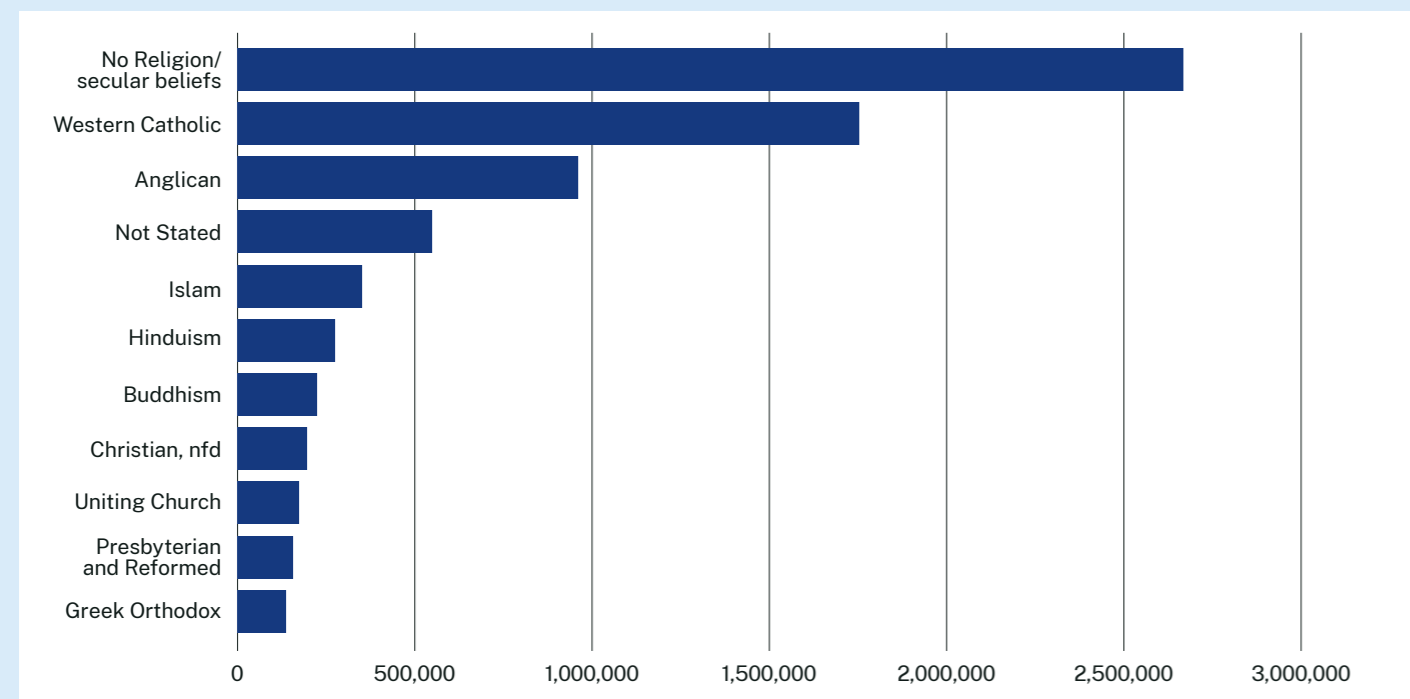


Figure 5: Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census.

Figure 5 shows Western Catholic remains the largest religion in NSW but is decreasing, and Anglican decreased the most, declining more than 200,000 people in five years. This could be due to fewer people marking their birth religion on the census form, reflecting a decline in active religious participation from many years earlier.

The growth religions are largely non-Christian. Hinduism increased more than 92,000 people, or about 50%, due primarily to the large migration from India. Islam increased more than 81,000 (30%) due to migration from many countries where it is the dominant religion, as well as from and increasing numbers of second-generation migrants from those countries.

Buddhism also increased, but at a slower rate. This is mainly due to Vietnamese and south-east Asian migration.

Though outside the top 10 and not shown in Figure 5, one of the fastest growing religions in NSW is Sikhism, increasing almost 50% to 47,165 in 2021. Again, this is due to Indian migration, predominantly from the Punjab region.

Ancestry

Another measure of cultural diversity is ancestry. This is measured in the census and allows respondents to state their ancestry or heritage with up to two cultural groups represented.

It is much more subjective than other measures, especially given that many people can nominate far more than two potential ancestries. The census guide suggests looking back up to three generations, however, people will interpret this in different ways and it's more a measure of cultural background and identification in some ways. However, it does allow the measurement of certain communities which are not well represented in birthplace, language or religion categories (e.g. Maori population from New Zealand, which had 39,714 people in NSW in 2021).

It is also potentially a deeper measure of the level of multiculturalism in a population. Ancestries show the spread of cultures and backgrounds in the population, including those born in Australia and speaking English at home who have different ancestries. In NSW, the top ancestry responses in the 2021 Census were English, Australian, Irish, Scottish, Chinese, and Italian, in that order.

However, within the ancestry classification (which doesn't record every cultural group in the world but does include a great number of them) there are 320 distinct groups represented by 256 ancestry categories reported by at least 100 people across NSW, an increase from 245 categories in 2016, which represents another measure of increasing diversity.

Summary

NSW is a multicultural community, and its cultural diversity was shown to be increasing between the 2016 and 2021 censuses. This is despite the COVID-19 border closures, which resulted in very little migration in the last two years of the census period. Over the past 20 years, cultural diversity has increased rapidly in every measure.

Greater Sydney has 91% of people speaking a language other than English at home, and the Western Sydney and South Western Sydney LHDs are particularly diverse.

The largest birthplace groups in the state (outside Australia) are the United Kingdom, China, New Zealand and the Philippines. The largest language groups are Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Filipino/Tagalog. Each of the top 40 languages and birthplaces are profiled separately on the Cancer Institute NSW website.

Of the top 10 languages, eight of them recorded an increase in population between 2016 and 2021. The largest increases were Nepali, Mandarin, Arabic and Punjabi speakers. The population born in India had by far the largest increase of any country of birth in NSW.

However, in the last 15 years, the most significant story is the emergence of Nepal as a birthplace and Nepali as a language—a population which has approximately doubled every census since 2001. Almost unheard of as a country of origin in NSW before 2001, it is now in the top 10 and contains the largest proportion of students of any major birthplace group.

On average, those speaking a language other than English have slightly lower incomes than English speakers but are more likely to have a tertiary qualification. It is difficult to characterise many of the populations as these measures vary a lot between different languages. Read the individual language and birthplace profiles *Multicultural demographics data explorer – Birthplace commentary and analysis: Top countries of birth in NSW* and *Multicultural demographics data explorer – Language commentary and analysis: Top languages used at home in NSW* for more details.

The age structure of overseas born and language other than English populations also varies greatly between the languages and birthplaces. However, on average, overseas-born populations are somewhat older than those born in Australia, while those speaking a language other than English are younger.

The overseas-born population has a larger share in all the three main cancer screening cohorts, while those speaking a language other than English at home have a smaller share in the two older cohorts (breast screening and bowel screening) and a larger share in the cervical screening cohort.

The overseas-born community being relatively older is at least partly to do with the smaller number of children. Very few 0–4 year olds are born overseas, and few people migrate with babies. Most migrants do not have children with them but may have them once they arrive in Australia (meaning the baby would have a birthplace of Australia, and not counted in the overseas-born population).

Other measures of cultural diversity also show an increase in these characteristics. There are more reported ancestries among the population over time. And there has been a distinct increase in non-Christian religions (particularly Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Buddhism) over the past 20 years. However, Christian religions have mostly been in decline, with a very large increase of 'No Religion' recorded in recent censuses.

With Australia's borders reopened after the COVID-19 pandemic; it is likely that migration will continue to increase the level of culturally diversity in NSW over the next few years.

Contact

For more information about individual country of birth and language groups, please see the associated birthplace and language profiles on the Cancer Institute NSW website.

For more information, please email CINSW-Multicultural@health.nsw.gov.au

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