

Australia's population growth still slow, Queensland booming again

BY [GLENN - THE CENSUS EXPERT](#) · MARCH 18, 2022

The latest quarterly population figures give new insights into how population patterns are changing across Australia's states and territories. Glenn breaks the data down, analysing the impact COVID-19 lockdowns in the September 2021 quarter impacted international and interstate migration.

The September quarter 2021 population figures are just out, and show that at September 30th, Australia's population stood at 25,750,198, an increase of just 12,056 in 3 months. This translates to an annual growth rate of 0.27%. While this is a slight increase from the last annual figure (to June) of 0.18%, it is still very low, mainly because the borders were closed and overseas migration remained negative.

Lockdowns changed overseas and interstate migration patterns

Not only did overseas migration remain negative, but it was much *more* negative than the previous quarter. In the September quarter of 2021, almost 20,000 more people left Australia long-term than arrived; this figure was almost even for the June quarter. This probably reflects the COVID issues which commenced in the eastern states during June 2021; for Sydney and Melbourne, most of the September quarter was spent in various stages of lockdown, making it an unattractive place for overseas migrants.

The effects of lockdowns are seen really strongly in the state change figures for the year and the quarter. The June 2021 data seemed to show almost a return to normal patterns of migration (absent overseas migration due to borders still being closed). Roll on September, and we see greater overseas migration loss from Victoria and a huge interstate migration loss from NSW, while Queensland's population is (relatively) booming, clocking up 1.1% growth, or 57,000 people for the quarter. Lockdowns are the defining feature of the September quarter data, with population declines due to interstate migration losses from those states with the most severe lockdowns, to (what were at the time) "COVID-Zero" states.

State/Territory	Population September 2021	Annual change	Annual change %	Quarterly change September 2021	Quarterly natural increase	Quarterly overseas migration	Quarterly interstate migration
New South Wales	8,186,789	+24,214	0.30%	-1,862	+10,854	+924	-13,640
Victoria	6,643,062	-32,716	-0.49%	-6,004	+6,972	-10,828	-2,148
Queensland	5,240,520	+57,764	1.11%	+19,287	+7,576	-4,901	+16,612
South Australia	1,772,787	+2,551	0.14%	-609	+967	-1,385	-191
Western Australia	2,685,165	+17,794	0.67%	+2,908	+3,939	-2,584	+1,553
Tasmania	540,839	+189	0.03%	-476	+197	-160	-513
Northern Territory	245,865	-585	-0.24%	-44	+643	-50	-637
ACT	430,469	-308	-0.07%	-1,142	+852	-958	-1,036
Australia	25,750,198	+68,917	0.27%	+12,056	+31,998	-19,942	0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. [National, state and territory population, September 2021](#)

While Australia's population added 12,000 for the September quarter, only two states actually increased (Qld and WA) while the other four states and both territories declined in population.

Victoria continues to decline in population

The September decrease was larger than the June decrease, but the annual fall of -32,716 people was lower than it has been, as the June 2020 quarter drops out of the annual figures, which was the largest impact during Lockdown 1 (September quarter covered Lockdowns 5 and 6 in Victoria). Interestingly most of the September 2021 population decline for Victoria is due to an increase in overseas migration loss, back to almost -11,000 for the quarter, double the previous quarter. Interstate loss of -2,148 is the *lowest* quarterly loss from Vic since the pandemic began.

Queensland is booming

Annual growth for Queensland is 57,000, or 1.1%, but the September quarter is a standout, with growth of 19,287 people. This translates to an annualised rate of 1.6% which is back to the Australian pre-COVID average (but still low for Qld). A massive +16,612 net interstate migration for the quarter is the core contributor – a level not seen since records began in 1981!

New South Wales population declined in the September 2021 quarter

Queensland's boom is at the expense of NSW, which recorded only its second quarter of population decline in the pandemic, at -1,862 people. This was entirely due to the largest interstate migration *loss* since records began: -13,640 people in a quarter. No prizes for guessing where most of them went. Sydney endured its worst lockdowns of the pandemic during this quarter. Melbourne was also under strong restrictions, but much of the exodus had already happened there during previous lockdowns, so it was like NSW was experiencing the pandemic anew.

We know that migration from Sydney into Regional NSW also accompanies interstate migration loss in NSW, so it's likely to be leading to increases across many regional areas of the state as well – but we don't have these figures yet.

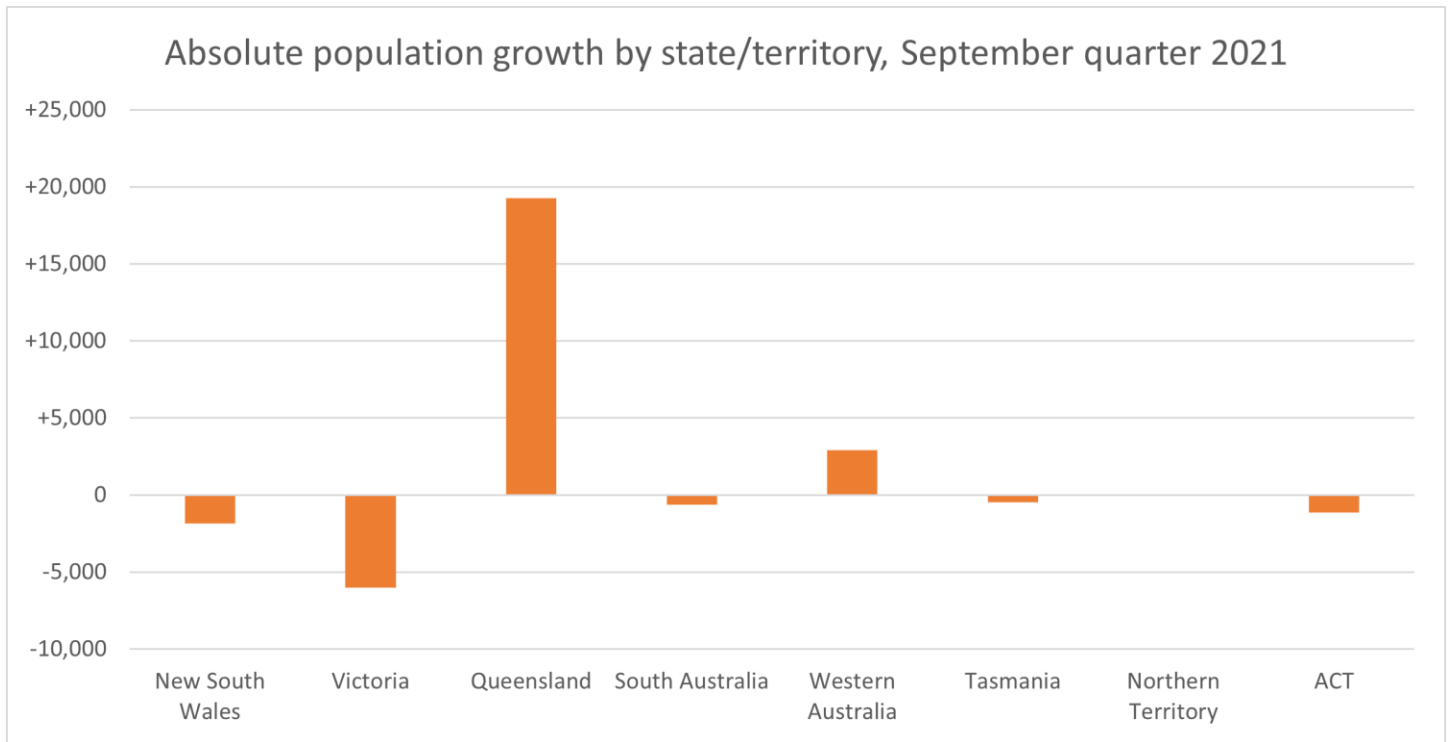
Western Australia gains on interstate despite overseas migration loss

Western Australia added about 3,000 people for the quarter. Interstate migration was positive to the state with the most border closures, but it was offset by a higher overseas migration loss for the quarter.

Declines in other states and territories

The ACT – also in lockdown for much of the period – recorded its largest quarterly population decline since 1981, down by 1,142 people and again mirroring the NSW interstate migration loss. Tasmania and South Australia also had small declines for the quarter, despite their COVID-Zero status.

The chart below shows the quite extreme imbalance of population growth between the states.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, [National, state and territory population, September 2021](#)

The pandemic has clearly had a significant effect on Australia's population growth and the distribution of it. This was not due to a high mortality rate – Australia is one of the few countries with negative excess mortality during the pandemic – but due to a significant group of people clearly fleeing lockdowns by moving to Queensland and Western Australia.