



Pacific Islanders in Australia: where are the Melanesians?

By Jonathan Pryke

Labour mobility in the Pacific region has been [recognised](#) in recent years as a vital component of effective development in the Pacific. Yet little analysis has been conducted on those Pacific Islanders that have already made the leap to Australia. (By contrast there have been two [major pieces](#) of government funded research into the New Zealand context.)

A natural starting point for analysis of this kind is the census. For my analysis I

have opted to use the variable of ancestry as opposed to place of birth. Place of birth is the better indicator if you are interested in tracing individuals who are themselves migrants. Ancestry is a better indicator to assess overall stock of ethnic Pacific Islanders in Australia. It matters a lot because place of birth excludes the New Zealand migration pathway to Australia (see Samoa and Tonga), and includes a lot of people born in Pacific Island countries (e.g. Australians born in PNG) who do not identify as Pacific Islanders.

Pacific Islanders in Australia: ancestry vs. birth

	Birth	Ancestry	% difference
Cook Islands	6092	16,191	266%
Fiji	56,979	39,979	70%
Papua New Guinea	26,788	15,462	58%
Samoa	19,093	55,846	292%
Tonga	9,210	25,095	272%
Total	125,506	166,272	132%

Source:

[2011 Australian Census.](#)

Using this definition, Pacific Islanders in Australia still account for less than 1% of Australia's total population. By contrast, New Zealand's [2013 census](#) shows people with Pacific Islander ancestry (not including Maori) made up 6.9% of the population.

While the Pacific is not an important source of migrants to Australia, Australia is still an important migration destination for some Pacific Islands. Of the 166,272 Pacific Islanders in Australia, 35% are from Melanesia, 64% from Polynesia and 1% from Micronesia. (A detailed table with the number of people from each Pacific state can be found at the end of this post.) We can compare these numbers with those of the populations of these three regions. The ratio of Melanesians in Australia to Melanesians in Melanesia is 0.7%; the equivalent ratio for Polynesia is 15.9%; and for Micronesia 0.2%.

Why? Why are there more Cook Islanders in Australia than Papua New Guineans, when the latter has more than 430 times the population of the former and is our former colony? Why more Niueans than Solomon Islanders, when the latter has more than 360 times the population of the former, and has far closer links with Australia.

The explanation is simple: the New Zealand route. As the table below shows, one third of Australian Pacific Islanders who identify as Polynesian were born in New Zealand. This is because many Polynesian countries have migration access to New Zealand, and thus Australia via our open border policy with New Zealand.

Sub-regional breakdown of Pacific Islander migrants

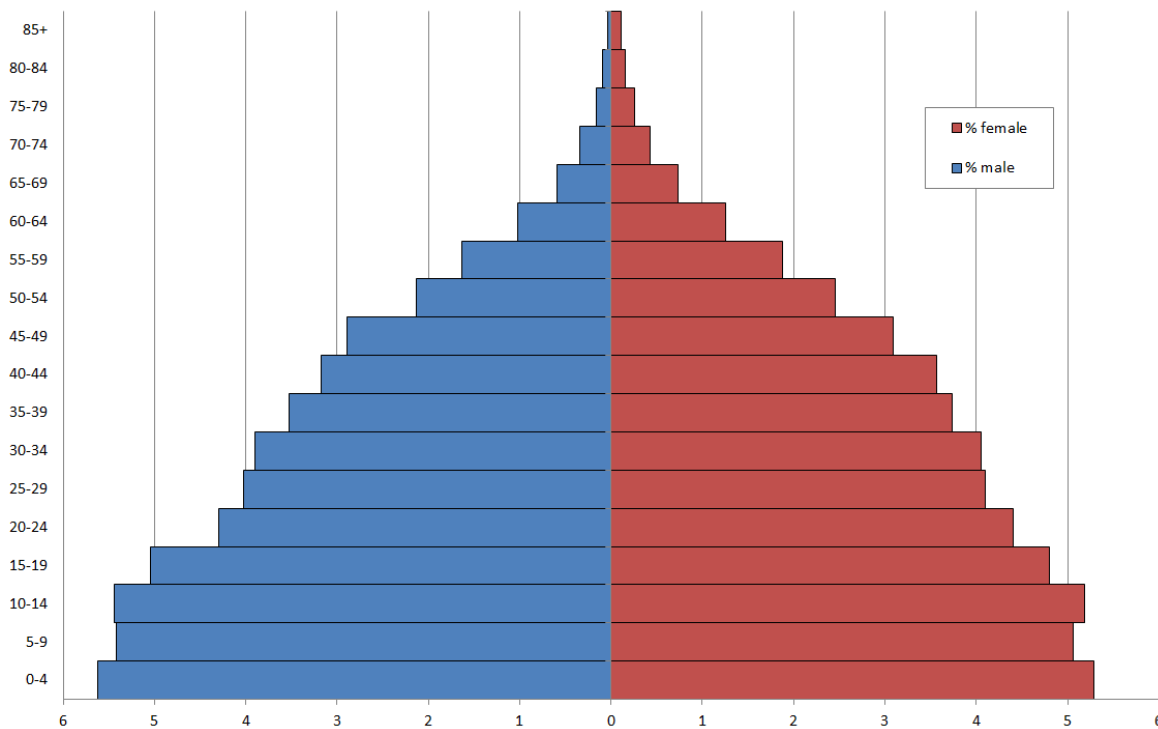
	Australian born	NZ born	Non-NZ migrant	Total stock
Melanesian	37%	3%	61%	58,938
Micronesian	38%	4%	58%	1,315
Polynesian	36%	32%	32%	106,019
Pacific Islander total	37%	21%	42%	166,272

Source:

2011 Australian Census.

Another component of the story of Pacific Islanders in Australia is the young age structure of the Pacific population here. 42% of all people in Australia with Pacific ancestry are under 20 years old.

Population pyramid for people in Australia with Pacific ancestry



Source:

2011 Australian Census.

How is the population of Pacific migrants changing over time? The total growth of Pacific Islanders in Australia reflects an annual average growth rate of close to 6%. This is more than three times faster than the total Australian population growth rate of 1.6% in 2012. If this growth continued for 30 years, the Pacific population would be close to 3% of Australia’s total population, compared to under 1% today.

This rapid growth is mainly due to growth in the number of Australian-born and NZ-born Pacific Islanders. The number of Pacific Islanders directly migrating to Australia from anywhere but New Zealand is growing at half the rate.

Growth rate of Pacific Islanders by place of birth, 2006-2011

	Australian born	NZ born	Non-NZ migrant	Total
Increase	16,424	11,125	10,372	37,921
Average annual Growth rate	6.9%	7.6%	3.9%	5.8%

Note:

Growth rate analysis in this post does not include 'Fijian Indians' (who accounted for about 10% of the Pacific Island population in Australia as of 2011) as they were not included as an ancestry category in the 2006 census.

Source: 2006 Australian Census and 2011 Australian Census.

It is also interesting to look back over a longer period, though we can only do this for some countries.

Average annual growth rates from 2001 for select Pacific Islanders in Australia

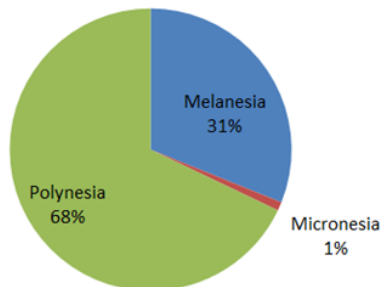
	2001-2006	2006-2011
PNG	5.7%	4.2%
Samoa	7.1%	6.7%
Solomon Islands	7.5%	4.5%
Tonga	4.3%	6.2%

Source:

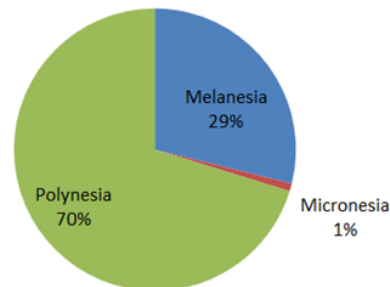
[Appleyard and Stahl](#) 2007, 2006 Australian Census and 2011 Australian Census.

As can be seen, the growth rate for migrants from both PNG and the Solomon Islands has fallen over the past ten years, while Tonga's has increased and Samoa's has remained the highest in the region. The increase in the number of Samoans living in Australia over the last decade (almost 28,000) is almost twice the total number of Papua New Guineans living in Australia (15,500). As a result, the proportion of Polynesians among all Pacific Islanders is actually growing, and the proportion of Melanesians is shrinking.

Pacific Islanders in Australia in 2006



Pacific Islanders in Australia in 2011



Source:

2006 Australian Census and 2011 Australian Census.

PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu. These are the six countries in the Pacific that have the fewest labour mobility opportunities, and are generally the poorest as well. Their share of the Pacific population in Australia has fallen over the last five years from 13.6% to 12.7%. The increase in the stock of migrants from these six countries over the last five years has been 770 a year on average. That's a drop in the ocean.

We need to get serious about offering labour mobility opportunities to those parts of the Pacific that most need it. New Zealand has been doing this for its former colony, Samoa, and other Polynesian countries over the last half-century. We have a long way to go to catch up.

Jonathan Pryke is a Research Officer at the [Development Policy Centre](#). This post is based on his presentation at the [2014 Pacific Update](#). Presentation slides are available [here](#). Read the second post in this two part series [here](#).

Growth in Pacific Islanders in Australia

	2006	2011	Growth
Fijian	19,171	23,768	24%
New Caledonian	246	208	-15%
Ni-Vanuatu	515	706	37%
Papua New Guinean	12,550	15,462	23%
Solomon Islander	1,118	1,401	25%
Melanesian and Papuan, not further defined	821	1,182	44%
Melanesia Total	34,421	42,727	24%
I-Kiribati	482	671	39%
Nauruan	233	410	76%
Micronesian, not further defined	391	234	-40%
Micronesia Total	1,106	1,315	19%
Cook Islander	11,399	16,191	42%
Niuean	2,182	3,149	44%
Samoan	39,996	55,846	40%
Tongan	18,427	25,095	36%
Hawaiian	276	327	18%
Tahitian	685	714	4%
Tokelauan	1,139	1,653	45%
Tuvaluan	334	433	30%
Polynesian, not further defined	778	583	-25%
Polynesia Total	75,216	103,991	38%
Total	112,140	150,061	34%

Notes

and sources: 2006 Australian Census and 2011 Australian Census. This table and the pie chart do not include 'Fijian Indians' as they were not included as a demographic category in the 2006 census.

See [here](#) for an updated blog with 2016 census data.

About the author/s

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Jonathan Pryke worked at the Development Policy Centre from 2011, and left in

mid-2015 to join the Lowy Institute, where he is now Director of the Pacific Islands Program. He has a Master of Public Policy/Master of Diplomacy from Crawford School of Public Policy and the College of Diplomacy, ANU.