

8 Overview of the Study of small towns in Victoria revisited

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Introduction

In the mid 1980s the then Victorian Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs commissioned Henshall Hansen and Associates (HHA) to undertake a study of small towns in Victoria. The HHA study had several aims:

- to examine economic linkages between the government, commercial and farming sectors
- to analyse the perceptions of people in small towns as they respond to changing economic circumstances
- to identify strategic issues regarding the problems and prospects of small towns
- to prepare an agenda for continuing government and community involvement in small town development.

Since its first publication in 1987, the HHA report has been used by policy makers in State and local government and in community organisations, in their planning and decision making relating to the provision of services in Victoria's many small country towns. While there had been earlier studies (by anthropologists McIntyre and McIntyre, 1944, and psychologists Oeser and Emery, 1954) and many demographic descriptions of specific small towns, the HHA report is the only recent definitive and comparative study of small towns in Victoria that uses both quantitative and qualitative data. It was innovative in that it first used demographic and socioeconomic information to analyse these places prior to undertaking an

in-depth investigation of the reasons for the changes in each town. This process allowed public policy recommendations to be made as to how governments could respond to these changes. From this research, the State Government of the day introduced the Regional Assistance Program, which funded facilitators in small towns to assist in economic and community development programs.

In 2005, the Department of Sustainability and the Environment asked the Victorian Universities Regional Research Network (VURRN) to revisit each town involved in the original mid-1980s study, to see how these places had changed. Using Towns in Time data prepared by the department, university researchers based in non-metropolitan regions undertook the follow-up study, visiting these towns to meet with local people to learn more.

VURRN comprises Deakin University Warrnambool (reporting on Camperdown), RMIT University Hamilton (Ouyen), University of Ballarat (Stanhope), Monash University Churchill (Swifts Creek) and La Trobe University Bendigo (Beechworth and Murtoa). Professor John Martin for La Trobe University's Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities led the study and the members of the research network were assisted in the review by John Henshall (Essential Economics), the consultant and principal author of the original *Study of Small Towns in Victoria* (1990). John Henshall's partnership in this research was of great benefit to the

VURRN team. While the research strategy was to scope the initial project by first reviewing the Towns in Time data as it applied to each case study town, and then visiting each place over several days to meet with key informants, John's insights from the initial study, and his knowledge and understanding of rural Victorian towns today, ensured each research team developed a good understanding about the dynamics and culture of each place when he visited them in the mid-1980s.

In this report, we first outline the approach taken in our follow-up study. A report on each of the case study towns follows before a conclusion that draws together the key learnings from across the six towns.

In the original study, the HHA research team identified the number of small towns (populations greater than 200 and less than 5,000) in Victoria, and the main economic activity in each town. The team initially identified thirty types of towns, which they categorised into six general activity types:

- manufacturing/resource base (Swifts Creek)
- government/private sector services base (Camperdown)
- tourism/resort base (Beechworth)
- dry-farm rural base (Ouyen)
- irrigated-farm rural base (Stanhope)
- commuter/dormitory base (Murtoa).

In this partial listing of small towns in Victoria according to activity types, some



towns were categorised as one or more types. Two of the case study towns chosen—Beechworth and Ouyen—were included in more than one category, Beechworth in the government/private sector services and the tourism/resort categories, and Ouyen in the government/private sector services and the dry-farm rural categories.

We did not re-categorise Victorian small towns in this follow-up study. While the research team discussed this issue and how it affects our understanding of the diversity we know exists in these places given contemporary thinking about concepts such as social capital, resilience and networking, our purpose was to revisit what is still regarded as an effective, insightful and relevant

study of small towns. By updating our knowledge about how these places have changed since the original study, we can assess how this might assist our thinking about small town change more broadly. Interestingly, the Towns in Time database tells us that there are more small towns than when the original study was undertaken; this is more a reflection of the criteria used by government to identify such places than an actual increase in places of settlement.

Small towns in Victoria, those non-metropolitan places with urban populations between 200 and 5,000 people, increased by 30 (261 to 291) between 1986 and 2001. Population growth in towns up to 5,000 people outside metropolitan Melbourne over

this same period grew from 284,227 to 293,805. This 3.3 per cent increase in small town populations compares with an overall State population increase of around 17 per cent (table 8.1 below and table 3.3 in the 1990 HHA report). While the population growth rate in these towns is slower than overall State growth, there are more small towns today throughout regional Victoria contributing in various ways to the State's overall growth and development. Each requires a range of services from government, and understanding how small towns contribute to the regional economic and social development is of interest to governments because this determines the programs and resource allocation to support these places.

Table 8.1: Hierarchy of urban centres in Victoria, number and population size of centres, 2001*

Population range	Urban centres		Population		% of total non-metro Melbourne population of Victoria
	No.	%	No.	%	
200–499	113	33.4	22,431	0.5	2.1
500–799	59	17.5	38,837	0.9	3.6
800–999	13	3.8	12,180	0.3	1.1
1,000–1,999	60	17.8	84,348	2.0	7.8
2,000–2,999	28	8.3	69,073	1.6	6.4
3,000–4,999	18	5.3	66,936	1.6	6.2
5,000–9,999	24	7.1	173,952	4.1	16.2
10,000–19,999	13	3.8	166,692	4.0	15.5
20,000–149,000	9	2.7	440,684	10.5	41.0
150,000+	1	0.3	3,137,659	74.5	–
Total urban	338	100.0	4,212,792	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 Census data.

*Refer to table 3.3 in the 1990 Henshall Hansen and Associates report for comparison.



In addition to this information on how the number and population of small towns has changed in Victoria since the 1986 study, we also compared information on employment over this period in the six case study towns. Table 8.2 shows that the percentage of employment distribution across key industry sectors in each of the case study towns has not changed dramatically. Only in Swifts Creek where the timber mill closed has there been a dramatic change in employment in manufacturing, from 41.9 per cent to just 7.7 per cent of total employment. The employment take up in Swifts Creek has been uniform across the other industry sectors.

In all six case study towns, 'other' employment has grown, suggesting a diversification of employment in these places not readily captured by the current Australian Bureau of Statistics employment classification system. The reports on the small towns highlight that information and communication technology has extended the reach of these people, who can now choose to live in small rural communities. While small in number, we expect that their impact on these places is considerable.

Table 8.2: Employment distribution in key industry sectors in the case study towns, 1986 and 2001

Location	Agriculture %		Manufacturing %		Services %		Other %	
	1986	2001	1986	2001	1986	2001	1986	2001
Beechworth	2.8	4.4	4.6	10.4	88.8	79.6	3.8	5.6
Camperdown	4.3	5.9	20.3	15.3	72.6	69.8	2.8	9.0
Murtoa	8.3	8.8	7.4	8.1	81.2	75.0	3.1	8.1
Ouyen	15.5	14.0	0.0	3.0	79.5	73.4	5.9	9.6
Stanhope	13.7	14.8	35.2	35.4	47.9	42.6	3.2	7.2
Swifts Creek	10.5	26.9	41.9	7.7	43.7	57.7	3.9	7.7
Regional Victoria	14.9	10.5	13.9	14.2	66.9	66.6	4.3	8.8
Metropolitan Melbourne	0.8	0.5	20.6	16.4	73.7	76.1	4.9	7.0
Victoria	4.7	8.8	18.8	8.1	71.8	75.0	4.7	8.1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1986 and 2001 Census data.



Our approach to this research

Our approach in this study progressed through several stages. Coordinating a research team of 10 (nine academics and one commercial consultant) meant that we had to follow a largely prescriptive approach to the research. The following chapters on each town benefit from a process where each author(s) had the opportunity to read how their colleagues from different disciplines (a strength of the VURRN) including anthropology, economics, sociology, town planning, community studies, public policy and environmental economic approached the task.

The designated researchers visited each town to meet with key informants. They organised the research for each place, advertised their work, and conducted interviews and community meetings to discuss the economic, demographic, social and cultural changes since the 1986–7 study. The research ran for approximately five months and progressed through the following stages:

- the VURRN research team met in August 2005 with Department of Sustainability and Environment officials in Melbourne to map out the project, its aims and methods
- department staff provided the demographic and other data on each town
- prior to visiting each town, each researcher submitted a draft socioeconomic analysis based on the Towns in Time data
- an approach to interviewing people in each town was outlined (attachment A)
- information on the research in each town was communicated via a department media release and letter to councils, and general notices to local newspapers by each researcher
- the department identified recent and current State Government programs in each town
- interviews and town meetings were arranged by each researcher. John Henshall and John Martin visited each town for some of the interviews and all of the town meetings
- a one-day workshop was held for staff from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department for Victorian Communities and Regional Development Victoria to discuss initial findings
- penultimate drafts of each chapter were prepared
- a conference to present the findings to representatives from each town was held at La Trobe University, Bendigo
- the final draft of the report was prepared for the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The revisited small town study benefited from the comprehensive approach taken in the original study by HHA. Each researcher was also able to quickly build a socioeconomic profile of each place with the aid of the Towns in Time database maintained by the department, a data base that is available to the general community. Most importantly, they were welcomed by each community because the initial contacts were through local community groups listed in the original report, many of which are still operating today. Given that each researcher was typically in the region of their case study town, they were also able to use their networks in these places to meet with local leaders and to create interest in their research. We found this approach to be a valid, efficient and economical strategy for obtaining a good overview of the dynamics of each small town.



Undertaking interviews and meetings in each town

We envisage each interview/group meeting will proceed as follows:

The research team will introduce itself to the individual/group informing them that the purpose of the meeting is 'to both inform them of the socioeconomic and other quantitative changes to their town since the initial mid 1980s study and to learn from them what has happened in the intervening years in their town in response to these changes'.

The first thing each researcher will do is update people on the profile of their town since 1981 and seek feedback from them on the accuracy of the data. Be prepared for people to challenge the data. We should be asking them when they query the data what they actually think it is and how they would confirm their views. Our task is to hear their views first, not to judge them, but to ask them what evidence they can provide to support their view. This will be insightful information.

After this discussion—although I suspect people will have already raised what has happened—you should focus on how individuals and the community have dealt with the changes, for example, declining and ageing population, drought, and changes in communications technology. The data you present will lead them to areas of concern, which will be different in each town. When they don't raise obvious issues it will then be up to you to ask them what they think of the particular trend. This will also be a substantial part of each interview/meeting.

When people raise 'sensitive' issues—those that would embarrass them and third parties—simply record these so that we can see what these issues are across all towns. We may want to refer to them generally in the final chapters of the report in such a way as not to identify any one town.

The structure of the quantitative data will guide the discussion as you refer to each table and the inherent trend in each, that is, increase/decline/unclear.

You should adopt an inquisitorial approach—not quite Kerry O'Brien, more like Andrew Denton—to get behind what they are telling you and to explore more deeply why they think things in their town are as they are.

Be mindful of anything they say about other governments (State and federal) and the impact their various policies and programs have had on their town (something we want to feed back to the State Government officials at least).

Please also arrange to record all interviews/meetings. This is to allow you to engage in the interview more fully. If you are making notes all the time you may not pick up on the nuances in a face-to-face interview.

I expect you will pick up on thematic redundancy on some issues fairly quickly. Try to dig down on these and see what the underlying causes are. If this reveals little, move on.

References

- McIntyre, AJ & McIntyre, JJ 1944, *Country towns of Victoria: a social survey*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Oeser, OA & Emery, FE 1954, *Social structure and personality in a rural community*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London.