

Current Demographic Characteristics and Implications for Service Delivery to the Polish Community

PRESENTATION FOR THE POLISH CONFERENCE ON 14 Feb 2003

Polish Population in Australia

According to historical sources the first Pole arrived in Australia 200 years ago. The first official record of Polish settlers – the 1921 Census – put their number at 1,800 at that time. A substantial expansion of immigration from Poland to Australia however, took place after the WWII in three waves:

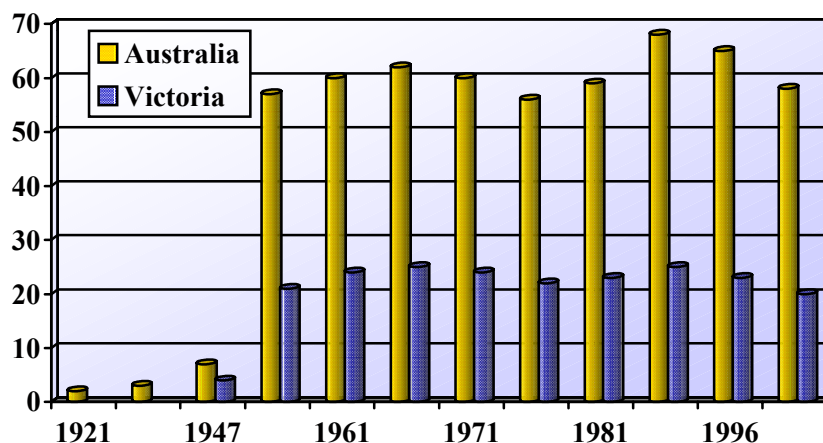
During the period 1947-1954 the Polish-born population in Australia increased from 6,600 to 56,000, the bulk of which were Displaced Persons.

The second wave arrived in Australia in late 50's to early 60's, mostly as a family reunion, and in response to a temporary relaxation of emigration policy in Poland. Consequently the post-war settlement peaked in mid 1960's at 62,000 total population, and then by mid 1970's declined to 56,000.

Since 1980 the immigration to Australia has increased again with the third wave of 22,000 Poles arriving between 1981 and 1991. At the 1986 Census there were 68,000 Polish-born persons living in Australia, the highest number ever.

(The number of Poles may actually have been over 80,000 if persons born outside of Poland – e.g. in refugee camps – are taken into account, and up to 140,000 if the second generation is also included).

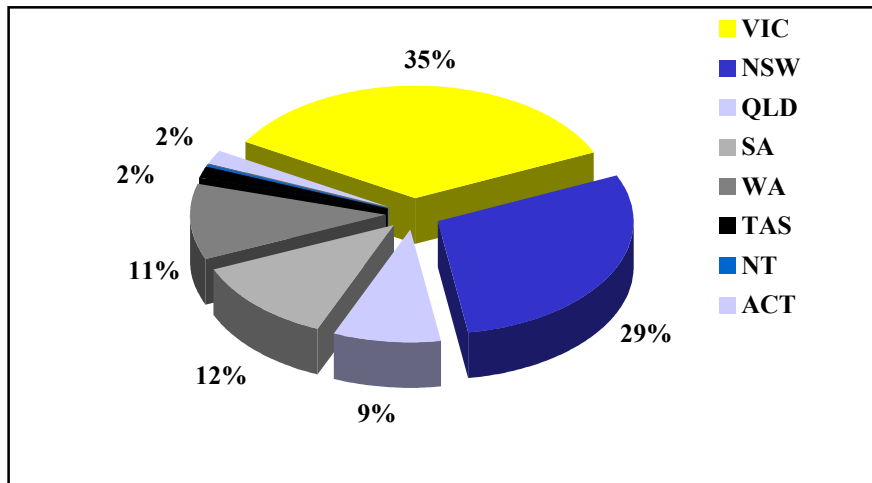
Since then the Polish population has been on the decline. Some died, some went back to Poland after the return to the democracy in early 1990's. The latest, 2001 Census puts the number of the Polish population in Australia at 58,000, which suggests a declining trend for the first generation of Poles.



Polish-born population in Australia

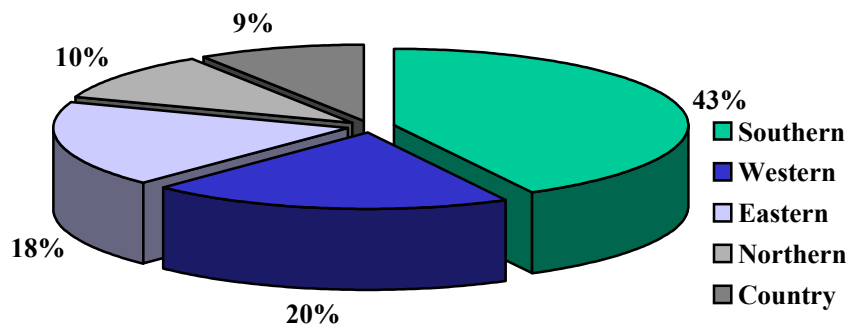
Polish Population in Victoria

At any given time of settlement 35 - 40% of Poles lived in Victoria, followed by New South Wales (around 30%). The remaining 30% settled in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, a small number choosing ACT, Tasmania and Northern Territory.



Polish population by state (2001)

Melbourne has the largest number of Polish-born residents of all the capital cities (18,500, i.e. nearly 1/3 of the total Polish population in Australia). The highest concentrations are in the western region (4,000) – mainly around Sunshine (2,000) – and in the southern region (8,600) – mainly around St Kilda and Caulfield (3,600). It is estimated that half of that number are people of Jewish background. Dandenong (1,300) proves the most popular outer area, whilst Geelong has the largest number of Polish-born people (750) outside the metropolitan area, followed by La Trobe Valley (200).



Polish population in Victoria (2001)

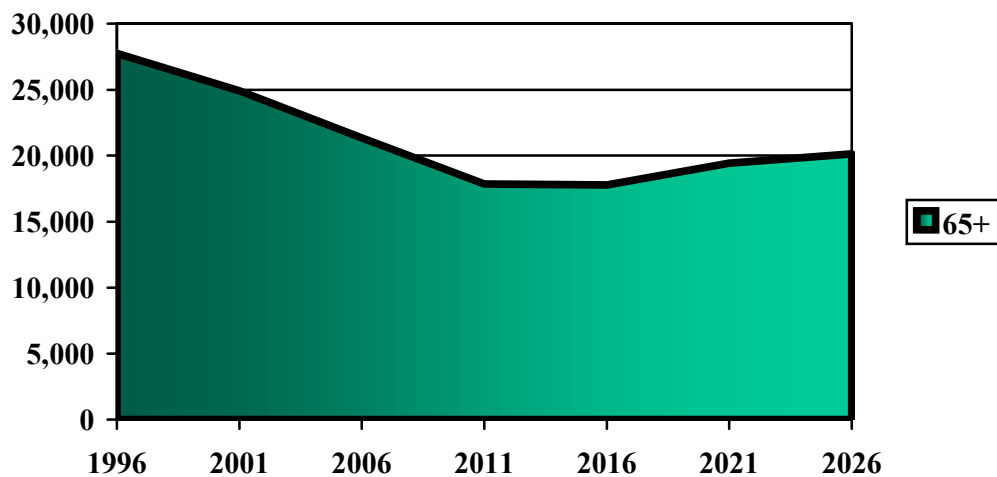
Polish ageing Population

The Polish persons aged 65 years and over (8,200) account for 41% of the whole Polish-born population in Victoria. 15 years earlier that age group represented only 25% of the total Polish population. In the rural areas this proportion is alarmingly high, nearing 60%. It is believed that this proportion is similar in other states as well.

	Southern	Western	Eastern	Northern	Country	TOTAL
TOTAL	8,627	4,050	3,759	2,100	1,864	20,400
AGEING	3,643	1,497	1,218	825	1,092	8,275
% ageing	42%	37%	32%	39%	59%	41%

Polish ageing population in Victoria (2001)

These figures make the Polish ageing ethnic community the third biggest CALD group after the Italians and the Greeks, and show clearly that the Polish population in Australia is rapidly ageing. The number of Polish persons in the frail age category, i.e. aged 75 and over, is now at its peak, which is expected to continue at least until 2006. This means of course a strong – and growing – demand for health and welfare services and supported accommodation for the aged.



Projection for aged (65+) Polish population in Australia

Access to welfare, age-related services

Australia has a very well developed system of social support delivered by thousands of various service providers. Their objective is to help older people, people with disabilities and their carers.

Some people chose, or – due to their condition – have to use residential care, which is available in a form of retirement villages, hostels or nursing homes.

Still, most older persons prefer to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. For some, at a certain stage, entirely independent living cannot be continued without assistance from community health and service providers, such as local governments, community health services, hospital networks, disability services and non-government organisations. Their services include:

- Home and Community Care
- Community Aged Care Packages
- Planned Activity Groups (previously called Adult Day Activity and Support Services)
- Respite Care Services
- Friendly Visiting Program (also called Social Support)
- Telelink

and an extensive range of services developed to meet a variety of special needs.

On average about 15% of aged Australians use these services. The studies show however, that only 5% of the Polish older persons take advantage of any form of support. This strikingly high inequity is particularly alarming in view of the fact that more than 40% of Polish people over the age of 65 live at home alone, and as much as 57% live on an income of less than \$300 per week.

So why does only such a relatively small proportion of Polish older persons use the social support services? The reasons for this can be found in the characteristics of the “first wave” of the post-war immigration, which consists largely of Displaced Persons, taken in their youth by the Germans to concentration camps and forced labour, separated from their families – often never re-united – and deprived of a chance of formal education. On arrival in Australia they usually had no option but to take up menial, low paid jobs, and relied on mutual support within the Polish community, which further restricted their opportunity of learning the language. As a result, 44% of Polish older persons speak English “not very well or not at all”. The lack of fluency in English exacerbated their level of confidence and contributed to their social isolation and disorientation in the Australian system of social support, which makes it difficult for them to seek information, advice and help. Secondly, these people are very proud, and the hard life taught them to be self-reliant. If anything, they might only expect help from their family (which in many cases they do not have). Consequently they often refuse to accept help until a crisis point is reached.

Understandably, an ever-growing overall demand for support services puts pressure on the ageing Poles to compete with others for access to limited support services.

The role of APCS

Australian-Polish Community Services (APCS) Inc. for the 20 years of its operation has had it as its objective to assist individuals and groups within the Polish community who are in need of help. During that time APCS has demonstrated a great commitment to – and experience in – the provision of aged care for members of Polish and – more recently – associated Eastern European community. Over the years it has developed a range of services including Community Aged Care Packages, Planned Activity Groups, Community Visitors Scheme, Social Support, information, referral and advocacy, community settlement services, carers support groups and emergency relief program.

Through its programs APCS identifies and addresses the needs of the Polish community, particularly those of older and frail people. The bureau employs 15 office staff, plus a number of care workers and volunteers. The office is based in Footscray, with outreach services in Geelong and Dandenong, and has a well established infrastructure which allows it to extend services to its clients at no additional cost (other than direct care costs).

It is expected that, along with other Polish organizations, APCS will continue its efforts – particularly in the next few years of the demographic peak of the Polish aged – to bridge the gaps in inequities and to facilitate access to services that are available within the service system for older persons, people with disabilities and their carers.

Recommendations

The first decade of the 21st century will present the Polish community in Australia with an enormous challenge of becoming one of the first ethnic groups to reach the peak demand for aged services. APCS has recognised that challenge, exacerbated by the overall increasing pressure on resources, and in 2001 – in cooperation with Jenny Ashby & Associates, multifaceted statewide consultants – developed a 10 Year Polish Aged Care Plan that identifies key-issues, sets priorities and recommends strategies to enable the proper care for rapidly increasing numbers of Polish older persons in Victoria.

APCS acknowledge:

- the need for focus on support services for older people at the home,
- the need for appropriate dementia care support services for Polish clients,
- the primary importance of carers,
- under-utilisation of Home and Community Care and Residential Aged Care services, and
- the need for stronger support for rural older Polish persons in Victoria.

The strategies for 2001-2011 determine four ways of dealing with these issues. These are: advocacy, partnership, service system resourcing and direct service delivery. The strategies have already been put into action.

Advocacy. Since the inception of this idea APCS has created a position of Aged Services Officer that is focusing on provision of information, assistance and advocacy for the Polish elderly, people with disabilities and their carers, in order to improve their access to relevant services. There is a continued need for promotion and lobbying for public and government attention, for direct approaches and information through publications, brochures and attendance at conferences.

Partnerships. New partnerships are being formed with other service providers to enable Polish clients to better utilise available services. Existing partnerships need to be developed further, especially in the area of dementia, carer support and palliative care.

Service system resourcing is taking the form of educational publications, articles, radio interviews and meetings with groups of Polish older people, aimed at explaining the system of community services. The emphasis is also on resourcing from other agencies. Programs that are designed to overcome the isolation that debilitates older people, especially in rural and remote areas, need to be developed.

Direct service delivery. In partnership with relevant service providers we need to promote a more attractive option for residential aged care to enable people to remain at home. In partnership with service providers we shall continue to explore ways that can better provide services to Polish elderly in reducing isolation, providing Polish cuisine, home maintenance support, carers respite, palliative care, etc.

Let's meet the challenges of this decade with confidence and determination to make a difference.

Marek Grzelinski