

# THE ORIGIN OF LONE-PARENT CONCENTRATIONS IN METROPOLITAN AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA



Research shows that there are higher concentrations of lone-parent families in Australia's regional centres than in its major cities. But is this a result of a decline in "traditional" family values? Or a product of migration into these centres? Or is it a consequence of the higher incidence of socio-economic disadvantage in these centres relative to metropolitan areas?

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**A**ccording to the 2001 Australian Census, some 21.4 per cent of families with children aged 0–14 years were headed by a lone parent (male and female). The comparable figure in 1996 was 19.4 per cent, and in 1986 it was 14.6 per cent (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 43). Australia is not unique in this trend. The proportion of families headed by lone parents is even higher in the United Kingdom and the United States. Nevertheless, the rising share of Australian families in which one parent (mainly female) has to

shoulder most of the tasks of parenting, often under trying financial circumstances, is of concern.

The theory that changes in family values have made a major contribution to the growth of lone parenthood is widely held by conservative and feminist researchers alike. The argument is that economic developments and a greater acceptance of feminist values have encouraged the movement of women into the labour market and, in the process, disrupted previous arrangements in which women were expected to play the "housewife/mother" role and

men the “breadwinner” role. The combination of these changes, along with the determination of women to pursue their work interests, is thought to have led to increasing conflict between men and women about family roles. This has in turn resulted in greater levels of relationship breakdown and a higher incidence of lone-parent families (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986).

The Australian experience suggests that this explanation for the rise in lone parenthood is only part of the story. If correct, it would be expected that communities where liberal family views prevail, and which also offer the greatest opportunities for women to participate in the workforce, would show higher lone-parent rates than the communities at the opposite end of this spectrum.

However, research shows that there are higher concentrations of lone-parent families in Australia’s regional centres than in the major metropolises (Birrell and Rapson 2001). This does not fit well with the argument that the rise of lone parenthood

is connected with the alleged decline in “traditional” family values – for the simple reason that that this “decline” has clearly progressed further in metropolitan areas.

Women in regional Australia tend to have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in paid work than their city counterparts (ABS 1996). Thus Sydney, rather than the bush, should have higher levels of lone parenthood. Yet, as Table 1 shows, the proportion of families with dependent children headed by a lone parent is higher in centres outside Sydney and Melbourne than within them.

Table 1 indicates that the more rural parts of the non-metropolitan areas show quite low lone-parent rates, as do the metropolitan centres. The highest rates of lone-parent families are in regional centres, including those located on the New South Wales and Queensland coast. In Queensland for example, the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast (both 22 per cent) have much higher concentrations of lone-parent families than Brisbane (18 per cent). Similarly, in Sydney, 16 per cent of families with children aged 0–14 were headed by lone mothers, well below the rural centres of New South Wales (21 per cent).

Perhaps the family ethos in regional Australia is not as centred on traditional values as imagined, particularly in the regional centres where lone-parent concentrations are the highest. An alternative hypothesis is that the high concentrations of lone-parent families in regional centres are due to in-movement of lone parents from elsewhere, particularly the major metropolises. It would be fair to say that this hypothesis has gained considerable credence in popular accounts of lone parenthood, particularly in relation to sunbelt coastal locations. But there is academic support as well.

This article examines patterns of geographic mobility in order to assess whether migration is likely to be the major cause for high lone-parent concentrations in regional areas, or whether such concentrations are largely a consequence of “home grown” factors.

### *Migration from metropolitan to regional areas*

The basis for the migration hypothesis is that many lone mothers are marginalised economically. The lack of a partner with whom they can share work and child care responsibilities means they are

**Table 1** Proportion of families with at least one child under the age of 15 headed by a female lone parent, across Australia in 1996

	% of families headed by a female lone parent
Sydney	16
Wollongong and Newcastle	19
NSW coastal rural centres	21
NSW inland rural centres	21
NSW other rural coastal	22
Rest of NSW	15
Melbourne	16
Geelong	19
Victoria rural centres	20
Rest of Victoria	14
Brisbane	18
Gold Coast (includes Tweed (S) Pt A)	22
Sunshine Coast	22
Townsville	19
Queensland rural centres	21
Rest of Queensland	14
ACT and Queanbeyan	17
Rest of Australia	18
AUSTRALIA	17

Rural centres have populations of 10,000 people or more.  
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

**Table 2** Impact of internal migration on concentration levels of female lone parent families, Sunshine Coast, 1991-1996 (data for 1996 includes those who were overseas or did not state where they had lived in 1991)

	Persons reporting that they lived in Area in 1991	Movement				Net rate (per cent of 1991)	Total counted 1996		Per cent of total counted 1996 excluding net movement	Per cent of total counted 1996	Amount of growth explained by net movement of families 1991-1996
		Stayer	Out	In	Net moves		excluding net movement	Total 1996			
Male lone parent	563	449	114	191	77	14	618	695	3.3	2.9	
<b>Female lone parent</b>	<b>3,537</b>	<b>2,751</b>	<b>786</b>	<b>2,051</b>	<b>1,265</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>3,965</b>	<b>5,230</b>	<b>20.9</b>	<b>21.6</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Female partner	13,368	11,292	2,076	6,019	3,943	29	14,383	18,326	75.8	75.6	
Total	17,468	14,492	2,976	8,261	5,285	30	18,966	24,251	100.0	100.0	

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

highly dependent on welfare. Also, studies of the marital status of lone parents indicate that a growing proportion have never married (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 45); this group is the least likely to have access to resources such as ownership of the family home.

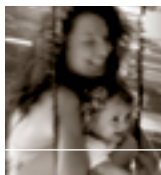
In a context of increasing metropolitan housing and living costs, it has often been argued that lone parents, like others on the employment margins, would have a strong incentive to move to more affordable and perhaps more “lifestyle-friendly” locations. This was a prominent theme in the “counter-urbanisation” literature of the 1970s and 1980s (Flood 1992; Hugo 1996). Although this theme was much less influential among scholars in the 1990s, there is a continuing flow of anecdotal reports about the alleged movement of lone parents and other welfare-dependent people out of the metropolises.

There are obvious grounds for scepticism about the migration hypothesis. In particular, it might be expected that lone parents’ decisions about residence will be heavily influenced by the existence of family and friendship networks. Nevertheless, such scepticism does not seem to have inhibited speculation about the movement of lone parents from metropolitan to regional areas.

more marked growth in many of the regional areas selected for study. If little of this growth in the regional areas was attributable to net migration over the period it would constitute a robust (if not conclusive) refutation of the migration hypothesis.

It was expected that to the extent migration did account for an increase in lone-parent concentrations relative to all families with dependent children between 1991 and 1996, it would be a consequence of two possible pathways. The first was where lone parents were being attracted to a growth area like the Gold Coast at a greater rate than couple families. A second possible route might be in more depressed areas marked by low or declining population growth, such as the La Trobe Valley in Victoria. In such locations, lone parents may be less likely to leave the area than couple families because of the greater reliance of the former on the availability of cheap housing. In other words, they may be trapped in these locations.

An assessment of these possibilities required an analysis of the relative contribution of movement in and out of the selected locations over the 1991–1996 period of both lone-parent and couple families. This analysis provided counts of net movements for both lone-parent and couple families over the five-year period by location. The proportion of



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In order to explore the issue, an analysis of the movement of families with dependent children between 1991 and 1996 was undertaken, the main focus of which was female-headed lone-parent families. The objective was to determine how much of the growth of lone-mother concentrations was attributable to migration.

This analysis was based on a customised 1996 census matrix which detailed the movements of such families to and from selected areas of high and low concentrations of lone parents. The data are based on family status as of 1996; no information was available about their family status in 1991. The selected areas were chosen from locations across Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, with particular emphasis on regional locations.

The research has nothing to say about the growth of lone-parent concentrations in the years before 1991. Thus it may be the case that migration before 1991 to places like the Gold Coast contributed to the high concentrations of lone parents resident in that location by 1991. It may also be the case that some of the intact families migrating to the area prior to 1991 may have been vulnerable to family breakdown after 1991.

However, the research still constitutes a powerful test of the migration hypothesis, because during the 1991–1996 period there was a sharp increase in the proportion of families headed by lone mothers across Australia, from 13.6 per cent to 17.3 per cent (ABS, CDATE96). As Table 3 shows, there was even

lone parents in each location as of 1996 that would have existed without the impact of net movement over the 1991–1996 period was then compared with the actual proportion of lone-parent families in 1996.

Table 2 provides an example for the Sunshine Coast. Over the 1991–1996 period there was a net movement into the area of 1265 lone mothers and 3943 couples. The effect of this net migration was to add 0.7 per cent to the concentration of lone-parent families resident in the Sunshine Coast as of 1996. This outcome was largely a consequence of a higher rate of in-movement of lone parents than of couples.

Table 3 shows the concentrations of lone mothers in 1991 and 1996 and a column showing the results of similar calculations to Table 2 for a range of selected locations. In the case of the Sunshine Coast, it shows that between 1991 and 1996 the percentage of families who were headed by a lone mother rose from 16.0 per cent to 21.6 per cent, or by 5.6 percentage points. Thus the 0.7 contribution of net migration constituted only 12.5 per cent of the overall increase in the proportion of families with lone mothers in this location.

Table 3 shows that there are two clear patterns. One applies to all the large and small towns listed, and the second to the other rural areas. In the former, migration does contribute to the observed growth in lone-mother concentrations, but only to a minor degree. The primary reason (not shown in

Table 3, but evident from the Sunshine Coast experience shown in Table 2) is that there was a higher rate of in-migration of lone-parent families than couple families to the locations listed. However, with the exception of Toowoomba, the net migration factor accounted for 7 to 38 per cent of the increase in lone-mother concentrations in the regional centres listed. In Toowoomba's case there was also a relatively high net inward movement of lone parents. But unlike most of the other regional centres, there was an actual net loss of couple families from Toowoomba over the 1991–1996 period, thus generating an unusually strong migration effect (Birrell and Rapson 2001: 50).

In the case of the second pattern, which applied to the other rural areas, the effect of migration was to reduce lone-mother concentrations. In most of these areas there were net losses of lone-mother families, presumably reflecting the difficulties lone mothers found in accessing appropriate housing and family services in areas often remote from these needs. On the other hand, most of these other rural areas experienced at least small net gains of couple families (Birell and Rapson 2001: 51). Thus the concentrations of lone mothers were lower than they would have been in the absence of migration over the 1991–1996 period.

The analysis provides qualified support for the migration hypothesis in that migration did contribute to some of the growth in lone-parent concentrations in areas like the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast which are often thought to be magnets for such families. However, in these places, as well as the other large and small regional centres examined, the migration contribution was quite small relative to the overall growth in the proportion of families headed by lone parents. Thus other, “home grown” factors are likely to be involved.

#### *Where do lone parents who move come from?*

One final point before exploring these “home grown” factors concerns the contribution of metropolitan sources to the net migration gains of lone parents shown for regional centres. Table 4 describes the scale of the net inflow of lone mothers into the other metropolitan areas, large and small regional centres in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and the sources of these net inflows. It shows that the other rural/remote areas of these states are more important contributors than are the metropolitan capitals. For example, while the large rural centres of Victoria only gained 188 lone mothers from Melbourne, they gained 388 from other rural areas of the state. They also lost 15 lone

**Table 3 Contribution of net migration to concentrations of female lone parents, selected areas, 1991-1996**

Classification of areas	Per cent of families (with at least one child aged 0-14) headed by a female lone parent		Growth in concentration of female lone-parent families 1991-1996	Amount of growth explained by net movement of families 1991-1996	Proportion of growth in female lone-parent concentrations attributable to net movement 1991-1996
	1991	1996			
<b>Other metropolitan areas</b>					
Wollongong and Newcastle	14.6	19.1	4.5	0.5	11.1
Geelong	14.2	18.8	4.6	1.1	23.9
Gold Coast/Tweed	16.8	22.4	5.6	0.9	16.1
Sunshine coast	16.0	21.6	5.6	0.7	12.5
Townsville	15.5	19.5	4.0	0.3	7.5
<b>Rural large centres</b>					
NSW Coast – Hastings	15.4	20.3	4.9	0.4	8.2
NSW inland	17.6	21.6	4.0	0.7	17.5
Victoria	17.1	20.7	3.6	1.4	38.9
Queensland coast	16.3	21.1	4.8	1.5	31.3
Queensland inland – Toowoomba	18.0	21.9	4.0	3.3	82.5
<b>Rural small centres</b>					
NSW north coast	16.5	21.2	4.7	0.3	6.4
NSW south coast	16.0	20.9	4.9	0.7	14.3
NSW inland	16.2	19.4	3.2	0.8	25.0
Victoria	15.2	19.6	4.4	1.2	27.3
Queensland	15.0	19.4	4.3	0.8	18.6
<b>Other rural and remote areas</b>					
NSW rural other north coast	17.2	22.5	5.3	-0.4	-7.5
NSW rural other south coast	14.6	18.9	4.4	-1.1	-25.0
NSW rural other	11.8	14.8	2.9	-1.6	-55.2
NSW remote other and centres	14.3	17.3	3.0	-2.2	-73.3
Victoria rural fringe of Melbourne	10.1	13.8	3.7	-1.2	-32.4
Victoria other rural	10.1	13.6	3.5	-1.1	-31.4
Queensland rural fringe of Brisbane	11.6	14.8	3.1	-1.9	-61.3
Queensland rural other	9.8	13.1	3.2	-1.7	-53.1
Queensland remote	12.8	16.9	4.1	-2.1	-51.2

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

mothers to the other metropolitan areas of Victoria (Geelong).

These findings for the 1991–1996 period also confirm previous findings derived from the 1991 Census (Wulff and Bell 1997) which showed that the net outflows of lone parents from Australia’s metropolitan centres were relatively small.

### “Home grown” explanations

If migration is not an important factor in the explanation of high lone-mother concentrations in regional centres, what does explain the phenomena?

It seems that the dominant explanation – more liberalised family values and changing gender roles – is also unlikely to be the key, given the allegedly more conservative nature of regional Australia, and the lower attachment of women to the labour market (relative to the metropolitan centres).

There is little doubt that the institution of marriage is under pressure on account of these changes, as well as from the spread of individualist values which justify the ending of relationships that do not meet the parties’ expectations. However, in considering spatial variations in the incidence of family breakdown, there is a crucial intermediary variable. This is the extent of socio-economic disadvantage. The “home grown” hypothesis is that the lower the employment opportunities and income levels of a locality, the more difficult it will be for couples to handle contemporary partnership stresses.

There are two routes to lone parenthood. One is where a woman decides to have a child despite not being married or in a stable de facto relationship. The other is the breakdown of an established relationship.

In the case of the former, in locations with few job opportunities, women would have less incentive to stay on in school or post-school training. In these circumstances the attractions of partnering and child-rearing would look relatively better than they would were the location to be full of employment opportunities. Men, for their part, assuming that their job prospects were also poor, would not be in a strong position to take on the fatherhood or household/provider role. In such circumstances, there exists (in theory) a potent mix of willingness to take on the housewife/mother role, yet men relatively poorly placed to reciprocate.

This predicament is likely to be most severe for men with limited post-school training, and especially those whose employment prospects have deteriorated as a consequence of the structural changes currently transforming Australia’s economy. This is a phenomenon evident elsewhere (for the United States, see Oppenheimer 1994). From the point of view of the mother, the option of staying single and surviving on the low but stable lone parent and family assistance welfare support package may seem preferable to partnering a man who cannot provide adequate financial support for the family.

The environment for married or de facto couples, too, would appear to be unfavourable in areas with limited job prospects. All the contemporary stresses on marriage would be likely to be magnified where men struggled to meet their marital financial obligations on account of low incomes. This expectation is

supported by evidence showing that, other things being equal, the lower a married male’s income is, the more likely he is to be divorced or separated (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 22).

### Socio-economic disadvantage and lone parenthood

Table 5 provides data designed to begin an indirect testing of these ideas. It details the family characteristics of women in three areas of Sydney, the New South Wales coastal centre of Hastings, and the large inland regional centres in New South Wales where the proportion of lone-parent families with children aged less than 15 are relatively high. Campbelltown, Blacktown-Penrith and Gosford-Wyong are all relatively poor outer urban areas of Sydney. The rest of Sydney, which is, in aggregate,

**Table 4 Net flows of female lone parents by state and type of area, 1991-1996**

		NSW & ACT	Victoria	Queensland
<b>Metropolitan area of state</b>				
Intrastate	Other metropolitan	-656	-119	-271
	Large rural centres	-238	-188	63
	Small rural centres	-418	-109	38
	Other rural/remote	-280	-196	353
Intrastate total		-1,592	-612	183
Interstate total		-1,602	-955	1,848
Total net flow		-3,194	-1,567	2,031
<b>Other metropolitan areas of state</b>				
Intrastate	Metropolitan	656	119	271
	Large rural centres	45	15	79
	Small rural centres	-13	34	58
	Other rural/remote	229	86	400
Intrastate total		917	254	808
Interstate total		-379	12	1,951
Total net flow		538	266	2,759
<b>Large rural centres of state</b>				
Intrastate	Metropolitan	238	188	-63
	Other metropolitan	-45	-15	-79
	Small rural centres	-39	55	19
	Other rural/remote	485	388	639
Intrastate total		639	616	516
Interstate total		-202	-140	541
Total net flow		437	476	1,057
<b>Small rural centres of state</b>				
Intrastate	Metropolitan	418	109	-38
	Other metropolitan	13	-34	-58
	Large rural centres	39	-55	-19
	Other rural/remote	360	251	174
Intrastate total		830	271	59
Interstate total		-238	-143	226
Total net flow		592	128	285
<b>Other rural/remote areas of state</b>				
Intrastate	Metropolitan	280	196	-353
	Other metropolitan	-229	-86	-400
	Large rural centres	-485	-388	-639
	Small rural centres	-360	-251	-174
Intrastate total		-794	-529	-1,566
Interstate total		-533	-290	120
Total net flow		-1,327	-819	-1,446

Large rural centres have populations of 25,000+, small rural centres 10,000+. Metropolitan refers to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Other metropolitan includes Newcastle, Wollongong, ACT/Queanbeyan, Geelong, Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Townsville.  
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

relatively affluent, provides a comparison. The rest of Sydney was chosen for this purpose because an exploration of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage required a comparison with an area of low lone-parent concentrations. There are very few such locations in the large and small towns of regional Australia.

**Table 5** Measures of family characteristics related to female lone parenthood, selected aggregated areas, 1996

Age	Total women 1996	Per cent of women partnered	Per cent of women who have borne a child	Lone parents with child(ren) aged 0-14 as per cent of women who have had a child	Per cent of lone parents with child(ren) aged 0-14 who have never married
<b>Campbelltown</b>					
15-24	11,815	16	17	45	89
25-29	5,691	62	60	28	61
30-34	6,128	73	80	19	36
35-39	6,473	76	87	16	18
40-44	5,986	75	89	12	10
Total 15-44	36,093	53	59	20	45
<b>Blacktown and Penrith</b>					
15-24	31,570	19	16	40	87
25-29	17,162	65	57	22	59
30-34	16,634	74	78	17	35
35-39	16,822	77	85	14	19
40-44	15,123	77	88	10	10
Total 15-44	97,311	56	57	18	44
<b>Gosford and Wyong</b>					
15-24	15,080	8	14	39	88
25-29	8,219	64	55	23	59
30-34	9,809	73	79	19	33
35-39	10,535	74	86	17	19
40-44	9,325	73	88	12	11
Total 15-44	52,968	56	60	18	38
<b>Rest of Sydney</b>					
15-24	214,261	13	7	30	80
25-29	123,662	51	30	17	52
30-34	122,646	66	57	13	32
35-39	117,972	71	72	12	18
40-44	108,780	72	78	10	11
Total 15-44	687,321	48	42	13	32
<b>Large rural coastal centre (Hastings)</b>					
15-24	2,834	18	15	31	85
25-29	1,339	63	58	23	62
30-34	1,724	72	80	19	32
35-39	2,112	74	87	17	19
40-44	2,003	72	89	13	8
Total 15-44	10,012	56	62	18	34
<b>Large rural inland centres</b>					
15-24	19,001	17	14	40	89
25-29	8,691	58	53	24	63
30-34	9,052	69	76	19	37
35-39	9,868	72	85	17	22
40-44	9,096	71	88	12	13
Total 15-44	55,708	50	55	19	44

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

In all of the areas included in Table 5 that show high lone-parent concentrations, there is a high proportion of women who by age 25–29 have had a child. Some 60 per cent of women aged 25–29 living in Campbelltown fall into this category (with similar levels in the other high lone-parent concentration areas) compared with just 30 per cent in the rest of Sydney. This in itself would not lead to high lone-parent concentrations, except for the fact that a higher percentage of mothers are lone parents in these areas compared with in the rest of Sydney. In the case of 25–29 year old women who had borne a child, 28 per cent of those living in Campbelltown were lone parents compared with 17 per cent in the rest of Sydney.

These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that young women living in areas with relatively few educational and local job options are more likely to be mothers than those living in areas like the rest of Sydney where the economic circumstances are better. And they are more vulnerable to relationship breakdown than mothers elsewhere in Sydney.

Table 5 also indicates that a higher proportion of the single mothers aged 25–29 living in Campbelltown (and the other high concentration areas) had never married than was the case for single mothers living in the rest of Sydney. As suggested above, these outcomes are likely to be linked to the relatively poor financial circumstances of their male partners.

One way to test this idea is to explore the labour market situation of the men in the locations in question. Unemployment levels among young men (aged 15–24) are relatively high in Campbelltown, Blacktown and Penrith, and Gosford and Wyong in Sydney, and among young people and young adults in the regional areas where lone-parent concentrations were high (Birrell and Rapson 2001: Table 6.4). For example, the unemployment rate for males aged 20–24 in the rest of Sydney in 1996 was 11 per cent compared with 15 per cent in Campbelltown and 30 per cent in Hastings, and 25 per cent in the small coastal towns of New South Wales.

### *The crucial role of early school leaving*

Data on the ages women left school were also used to test the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and lone-mother concentrations.

The hypothesis was that in locations where there were limited job prospects for youth, young females would be most likely to leave school early. The result would be that they had less investment in education and fewer incentives to stay in the workforce than young women located in more prosperous areas. They would therefore have much less to lose in terms of employment rewards and more interest in taking on a partnering and associated motherhood role. But having taken on this role they could well find themselves vulnerable to relationship breakdown if, as seems likely given the data shown in Table 5, the young men available for partnering in their locality were also up against difficult economic conditions.

This thesis was tested via a study of the situation in Victoria, using the same geographical classification of the regional areas cited earlier but with rural centres of 5000–10,000 people also identified separately. Women were divided into two groups, those who left school before age 17 and those who left school at a

later age. It was assumed that women who left school prior to age 17 would be motivated, at least in part, by an awareness (relative to those who left school at age 17 or older) that there would be little financial pay-off from further schooling. The expectation was that the early school leavers would have greater interest in motherhood yet, if they lived in disadvantaged areas, be more likely subsequently to become lone parents.

These expectations were confirmed (Figures 1 and 2). Women in regional Victorian locations were much more likely to leave school early than their counterparts in Melbourne (Figure 1). Very high proportions of these early school leavers who were aged 25–34 in 1996 (nearly 20 per cent in large and small regional centres) were lone parents. By contrast, less than 10 per cent of those who left school at age 17 or above were lone parents (Figure 2).

This contrast applies to all the locations listed. However, it is notable that the early school leavers living in Melbourne were less likely to become lone parents than early school leavers living in the Victorian regional centres. The combination of higher percentages of early school leaving and a greater propensity for early school leavers to become lone parents in regional centres provides much of the explanation for the higher lone-parent concentrations in regional Victorian centres.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that this study will help remove some commonly held misapprehensions about the lone-parent issue. The relatively high lone-parent concentrations in regional Australia centres as of 1996 cannot be explained by migration from the so-called sinful cities. There was relatively little movement of lone parents from the cities to these regional centres over the 1991–1996 period. Migration movements did explain a small proportion of the growth in lone-parent concentrations in regional centres over the period 1991–1996, but most of this migration effect derived from migration from non-metropolitan sources.

Although metropolitan Australia is usually associated with images of breakdown in conventional family norms, the incidence of relationship breakdown leading to lone-parent situations is actually higher in regional Australian centres.

The Census data examined in this study indicates that the explanation for this growing disparity was associated with “home grown” factors in the regional centres. These appear to be linked to the relative socio-economic disadvantage of young men and women living in regional Australia.

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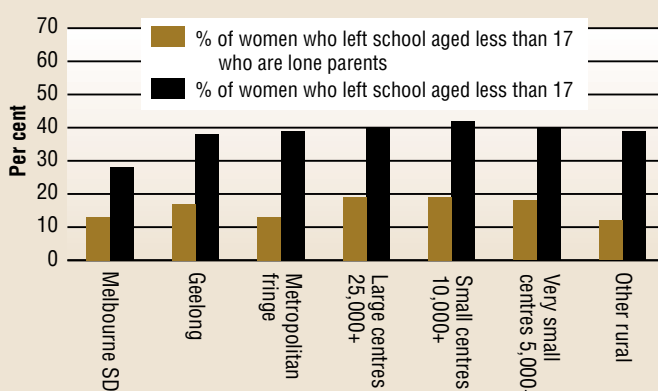
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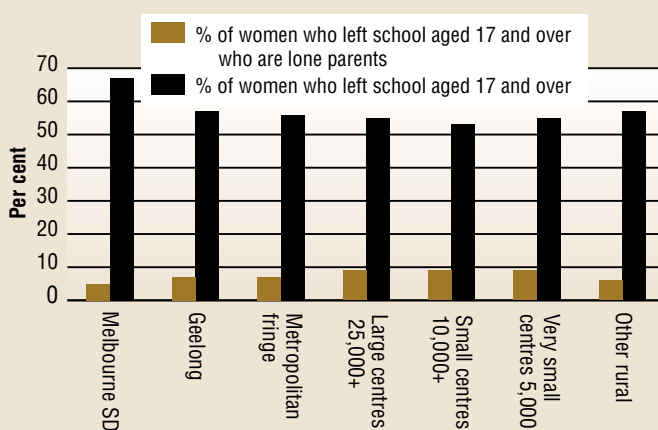
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**Figure 1** Percentage of women aged 25–34 who left school before age 17, and percentage of these women who are lone parents, Victoria, 1996



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.

**Figure 2** Percentage of women aged 25–34 who left school aged 17 and over, and percentage of these women who are lone parents, Victoria, 1996



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, customised census matrix, 1996.