



Pacific islander migration to Australia: the 1980s and beyond¹

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The 1981 Census of Australia counted 34,826 persons born in Melanesia and Polynesia; by 1986 this figure had increased by 39 per cent to 48,536. Prior to 1981 those born in Papua New Guinea were not distinguished from Australians in the census. However, if the Papua New Guinea-born are excluded from the figures for 1981 and 1986 the increase is even more striking. In 1976 there were 9663 Pacific-born (including the catch-all category 'Other Oceania' but excluding Papua New Guinea and New Zealand). By 1981 there were 16,129 from Melanesia and Polynesia alone, and by 1986 there were 27,185; an increase of more than 180 per cent in the ten-year period. This paper considers the implications of this change and whether migration from this source can be expected to accelerate or decelerate in the next twenty years.

Table 1 shows the place of birth and age group of Pacific-born persons in Australia in 1981 and 1986. The Australian census figures refer only to life-time migration, that is, persons born in the Pacific islands who were in Australia when the census was collected. There is no attempt to distinguish visitors from others, and even if it were made such a distinction would not allow for the changing intentions of potential migrants. However, Table 2 shows that in every case more than 50 per cent of those counted had been resident for five years or more; it is also reasonable to as-

sume that a large proportion of those in the category 0-4 years were residents.

Most of the Papua New Guinea-born are children of Australians or others born outside Papua New Guinea. Connell² estimated that only about 10 per cent were Papua New Guinea nationals in 1981. In 1986 only 12 per cent did not have Australian citizenship, and hence could have been Papua New Guinea nationals. Similarly, many migrants born in New Caledonia, where the Melanesian Kanaks are now in the minority, could be children of French settlers. However, most of those born in other Pacific states can be assumed to be of Polynesian, Melanesian, Indo-Fijian or Micronesian descent. In Fiji, the Melanesians are predominantly Christian, compared with only a small percentage of the Indo-Fijians. It is assumed, therefore, that the 5650 Fiji-born Hindus and Muslims (38 per cent of the Fiji-born population) is a minimum figure for Indo-Fijians in Australia in 1986.

Table 3 shows that in 1986 almost four out of five of those classed as 'Pacific-born' were born in Melanesia (Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu). Almost one-fifth were born in Polynesia (Cook Islands, Nauru, Tonga and Western Samoa). Column 5 in the table shows the ratio of those counted in Australia in 1986 to the total population in that year multiplied by 1000 (called here 'the emigration ratio'). These

1 In this paper, 'Pacific-born' signifies 'born in Melanesia or Polynesia', unless otherwise stated. Micronesia has been excluded because many of its countries have a special relationship with the United States. The exception, Kiribati, was recommended for favourable treatment in the Jackson Committee report, but had a population of only 66,000 in 1986.

2 J. Connell, *Migration, Employment and Development in the South Pacific: Australia*, Country Report No. 23A, New Caledonia, South Pacific Commission, 1985.

Table 1 **Ages of Pacific born residents in Australia, 1981 and 1986 (0-14 — 35-39 years and 40-44 — 60+ years)**

Age group	0-14		15-19		20-24		25-29		30-34		35-39	
	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986
Males												
Melanesia												
Fiji	716	1034	460	711	559	862	722	852	586	1008	449	782
New Caledonia	46	79	26	43	39	40	17	34	32	32	15	39
Papua New Guinea	3999	3006	1556	2175	1300	1528	853	1257	478	886	158	488
Solomon Islands	101	98	61	58	43	78	30	63	30	47	16	19
Vanuatu	81	85	41	43	44	68	33	42	29	42	20	22
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	29	75	28	47	45	152	55	126	37	91	30	68
Nauru	90	70	47	66	19	37	17	26	18	25	6	19
Tonga	177	267	78	171	149	267	269	273	201	357	141	261
Western Samoa	34	126	20	70	54	139	61	214	72	217	49	208
Total males	5273	4840	2317	3384	2252	3171	2057	2887	1483	2705	884	1906
Females												
Melanesia												
Fiji	699	1015	386	675	665	930	716	1193	585	1064	476	777
New Caledonia	46	69	30	44	35	53	44	57	25	55	32	49
Papua New Guinea	3973	2937	1436	2168	1216	1498	1010	1282	601	1071	239	659
Solomon Islands	102	92	68	61	63	77	51	79	33	49	20	32
Vanuatu	70	68	34	36	49	42	37	57	23	48	21	34
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	30	82	32	47	74	118	67	163	44	91	44	72
Nauru	68	60	48	54	20	23	17	38	16	24	9	29
Tonga	185	249	78	196	176	293	246	326	211	326	118	269
Western Samoa	43	113	22	82	55	158	97	228	65	269	55	216
Total females	5216	4685	2134	3363	2353	3192	2285	3423	1603	2997	1014	2137
Total	10489	9525	4451	6747	4605	6363	4342	6310	3086	5702	1898	4043
Males												
Melanesia												
Fiji	378	568	188	434	168	235	120	213	274	391	4625	7092
New Caledonia	17	43	12	24	22	19	21	30	94	106	368	491
Papua New Guinea	275	172	166	303	126	167	119	138	148	263	9178	10385
Solomon Islands	24	14	17	25	5	19	8	10	5	25	336	452
Vanuatu	22	23	12	26	7	21	9	7	28	56	327	434
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	20	48	15	28	8	18	12	17	13	33	283	706
Nauru	7	2	4	8	8	2	6	4	1	8	222	262
Tonga	91	199	64	131	53	76	37	76	48	144	1318	2225
Western Samoa	46	142	8	116	12	55	3	44	6	113	373	1445
Total males	880	1211	486	1095	409	612	335	539	617	1139	17030	23492
Females												
Melanesia												
Fiji	293	583	209	387	135	281	123	175	449	582	4736	7664
New Caledonia	28	49	23	36	35	32	41	35	191	206	529	690
Papua New Guinea	334	266	214	361	164	219	127	171	200	333	9519	10966
Solomon Islands	27	24	12	28	6	15	2	9	10	15	389	482
Vanuatu	21	25	19	23	12	27	10	16	98	58	349	432
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	19	62	12	34	11	27	8	14	22	43	354	751
Nauru	3	5	12	5	3	14	5	7	12	12	216	273
Tonga	74	149	57	99	52	82	29	87	74	172	1296	2248
Western Samoa	24	151	16	80	8	50	4	47	13	142	408	1538
Total females	823	1314	574	1053	426	747	349	561	1069	1563	17796	25044
Total	1703	2525	1060	2148	835	1359	684	1100	1686	2702	34826	48536

Sources: J. Connell, *Migration, Employment and Development in the South Pacific: Australia*, Country Report No. 23A, New Caledonia, South Pacific Commission, 1985, p11; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *ABS 1986 Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra, Micrographics Bureau, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987.

Table 2 *Duration of residence of Pacific islanders in Australia, 1986*

Years Birthplace	0-4		5-9		10-14		15+		Not stated		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Males												
Melanesia												
Fiji	2389	34	1640	23	1204	17	1673	23	225	3	7131	100
New Caledonia	126	24	68	13	70	13	221	42	36	7	521	100
Papua New Guinea	1493	14	1597	15	3156	30	3645	35	498	5	10389	100
Solomon Islands	116	26	88	20	80	18	150	33	16	4	450	100
Vanuatu	90	21	69	16	57	13	197	47	10	2	423	100
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	348	48	217	30	45	6	70	10	38	5	718	100
Nauru	75	29	44	17	40	15	97	37	4	2	260	100
Tonga	753	34	826	37	379	17	170	8	108	5	2236	10
Western Samoa	640	44	315	22	90	6	366	25	36	2	1447	100
Total males	6030		4864		5121		6589		971		23575	
Females												
Melanesia												
Fiji	2729	36	1825	24	1171	15	1710	22	222	3	7657	100
New Caledonia	162	23	93	13	68	10	350	50	30	4	703	100
Papua New Guinea	1406	13	1773	16	3500	32	3750	34	517	5	10946	100
Solomon Islands	75	15	111	23	99	20	174	35	34	7	493	100
Vanuatu	73	17	77	18	60	14	207	48	18	4	435	100
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	342	46	216	29	60	8	100	13	27	4	745	100
Nauru	88	32	41	15	37	14	94	34	13	5	273	100
Tonga	860	38	754	33	315	14	228	10	96	4	2253	100
Western Samoa	690	44	359	23	82	5	384	25	49	3	1564	100
Total females	6425		5249		5392		6997		1006		25069	
Total	12455		10113		10513		13586		1977		48644	

Note: Totals on the source for this table differed from those for the other tables, possibly due to ABS introduced random error and the inclusion of 'not stated'.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *ABS 1986 Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra, Micrographics Bureau, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987.

figures are striking in that, with the exception of Fiji, the emigration ratios for Polynesia are generally much higher than for Melanesia. The table also shows that Polynesian countries tend to be smaller than Melanesian, and tend to have slower annual growth rates.

The lower growth rates in Polynesia are in a large part due to a sustained pattern of out-migration to Pacific rim countries, including the United States. Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau have free access to New Zealand. Most of the difference in growth rates has been achieved by large-scale population transfers. This point is borne out by the emigration rate and growth rate for Fiji which are more like the Polynesian than the Melanesian pattern.

The possible implications of this for Australia are considerable: if Melanesian emigration rates increase to levels prevailing in Polynesia, Australia could find itself the intended destination for greatly increased numbers of Pacific-born migrants.

As mentioned above, until now a large

proportion of Melanesia-born migrants have been children of Australians and others born outside Melanesia. This has kept Melanesia-born numbers well above those of Polynesians, and given the smaller population sizes of the Polynesian countries and their already high emigration ratios, it is unlikely that Polynesia will ever become the main source of Pacific-born migration to Australia. Rather, the potential is for very substantial increases in the numbers of Melanesian nationals migrating to Australia.

Population pressure is only one of the factors affecting the flow of migrants. Other factors include political stability; economic conditions in the individual countries; and access to alternative destinations. Since the 1986 Australian Census was collected, destabilizing events have occurred in Fiji and New Caledonia, two countries where the indigenous Melanesians have become minorities as a consequence of past immigration, largely from India in the case of Fiji, and from France in the

Table 3 Projected population size and emigration ratio, 1986

Country	(1) Mid 1986 population (000)	(2) Projected population 2010 (000)	(3) Annual growth rate %	(4) Number in Australia 1986	(5) Emigration ratio (4)/(1) x 1000
Melanesia					
Fiji	705	909	1.7	14755	21
New Caledonia*	152	198	1.6	1180	8
Papua New Guinea	3547	5753	2.3	21352	6
Solomon Islands	280	573	3.7	935	3
Vanuatu	137	274	3.3	866	6
Polynesia					
Cook Islands	18	22	1.0	1455	81
Nauru	8	10	1.0	535	67
Tonga	114	155	1.9	4474	39
Western Samoa	161	191	0.6	2982	19
Total	5122	8085		48534	

*Figures for New Caledonia are for 1985 and 2000.

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *ABS 1986 Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra, Micrographics Bureau, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987; ESCAP, *1987 Population Data Sheet*, Bangkok, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; South Pacific Commission, *1987 Statistical Report*, Noumea.

case of New Caledonia. Political change could also increase emigration from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Another likely trigger of increased migration is the increasing demand for wage and salaried employment, in particular for skilled and white collar jobs. As increasing numbers of Pacific islanders attain secondary or higher education the demand for such jobs could outstrip the opportunities provided by their economies.

During the early 1970s the flow of Polynesians to New Zealand was quite marked, with substantial net gains of Tongans and Samoans, but this subsided in the late 1970s.³ The adverse economic situation in New Zealand may have diverted some Polynesian migration to Australia. New Zealanders, including Cook Islanders, have free access to Australia. It was only in the 1980s that New Zealanders entering Australia were required to produce passports, so that New Zealand could have acted as a bridge or step for migrants from Polynesia to Australia.

Unlike New Zealand, Australia has never favoured 'guest worker schemes', so an alternative means of immigration is to become an overstayer, either for a few years or perhaps more permanently with the benefits of an am-

nesty to legitimize one's status. The main beneficiaries of the 1976 amnesty included Fijians, of whom 438 applied for residential status.

Legal access to Australia can also arise through marriage to an Australian or New Zealander. For example, on 9 September 1988, the *Sydney Morning Herald* described 'the first female to play Rugby League at Sydney Football Stadium'. She was in a primary school team, and had arrived from New Zealand two years earlier with her Maori mother and Samoan father. Table 4 shows an excess of married Pacific island females over males for all countries, implying that women in particular have come to Australia through marriage.

Undocumented migration to Australia from all continents could well increase in the coming decades, thus making the general debate about migration targets much less relevant. In the United States between 1975 and 1980, undocumented migrants enumerated in the 1980 census outnumbered legal aliens by more than two to one.⁴ Australia is an island, but very close to Papua New Guinea, so perhaps such a situation could also occur here. It is already difficult to repatriate illegal immigrants and overstayers. One enforcement officer of the

3 Population Monitoring Group, *The New Zealand Population: Patterns of Change*, Wellington, New Zealand Planning Council, 1984.

4 R. Warren and J. Passel, 'An account of the uncountable', *Demography*, 24(3), 1987, pp. 375-93.

Table 4 Marital status of Pacific Islanders in Australia, 1986

Birthplace	Never married		Married		Separated		Divorced		Widowed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Males												
Melanesia												
Fiji	3045	43	3541	50	211	3	226	3	70	1	7092	100
New Caledonia	200	41	239	49	16	3	18	4	16	3	491	100
Papua New Guinea	7513	72	2534	24	123	1	168	2	49	-	10385	100
Solomon Islands	275	61	167	37	4	1	4	1	3	1	452	100
Vanuatu	225	52	187	43	3	1	9	2	11	3	434	100
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	410	58	233	33	30	4	26	4	6	1	706	100
Nauru	185	71	62	24	8	3	7	3	1	-	262	100
Tonga	803	36	1211	54	105	5	70	3	39	2	2225	100
Western Samoa	511	35	831	58	39	3	47	3	15	1	1445	100
Total males	13167		9005		539		575		210		23492	
Females												
Melanesia												
Fiji	2516	33	4131	54	321	4	312	4	382	5	7664	100
New Caledonia	198	29	310	45	19	3	49	7	116	17	690	100
Papua New Guinea	6839	62	3387	31	245	2	273	2	224	2	10966	100
Solomon Islands	252	52	200	41	8	2	9	2	14	3	482	100
Vanuatu	169	39	204	47	15	3	23	5	22	5	432	100
Polynesia												
Cook Islands	373	50	278	37	34	5	30	4	25	3	751	100
Nauru	139	51	109	40	6	2	10	4	8	3	273	100
Tonga	725	32	1275	57	74	3	63	3	114	5	2248	100
Western Samoa	425	28	890	58	63	4	64	4	97	6	1538	100
Total females	11636		10784		785		833		1002		25044	
Total	24803		19789		1324		1408		1212		48536	

Note: Totals in tables may not agree due to ABS introduced random error.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *ABS 1986 Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra, Micrographics Bureau, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987.

Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs who raided the house of a suspected illegal immigrant found himself labelled as 'like a Nazi' in a subsequent court submission that he 'and the department were biased against Melanesians, and Tongans in particular'.⁵

Recent controversy over the immigration issue has focused on the possible restriction of migrants from Asia, but little has been said about the future of Pacific migration. On the one hand it may be argued that this is perhaps because the numbers involved are small, but it may also be that Pacific migrants are less conspicuous and less threatening in the Australian environment. Most speak good English and adapt readily to Australian culture. They are often church-goers, and tend to enjoy partying and playing football. Rhoda Roberts, an Aboriginal actress, claims that she was treated better when believed to be Fijian than when it was known she was Aboriginal.⁶

In addition to being less conspicuous, Pacific

migrants also have more opportunities to come to Australia as undocumented migrants. Papua New Guineans who choose to cross Torres Strait by boat could say they were Torres Strait islanders or Aborigines; perhaps even Australian-born descendants of Pacific islanders who had worked in the cane fields. Polynesian overstayers could say they were Maoris who arrived before passports were required to be produced by New Zealanders entering Australia.

To summarize, the numbers of Pacific islanders counted in Australian censuses have shown a steady increase since 1921, and a rapid increase since 1976. The emigration ratio from Polynesia is already high, and as population numbers are relatively small it is unlikely that future Polynesian migration will have any great impact on Australia. Although the population of Melanesia is much larger, so far only Fijians and children of Australian expatriates have come in substantial numbers.

⁵ Canberra Times, 'Official "acted like a Nazi"', 30 January 1987.

⁶ S. O'Grady, untitled article, Good Weekend - The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine, 2 July 1988.

Much higher rates of Melanesian migration to Australia are quite possible, both documented and undocumented. As shown in Table 3, the projected population for Melanesia could be almost 8 million by 2010. Even with an overall

low ratio of 10 emigrants to Australia for every 1000 population this could mean 80,000 per year. Moreover, if Melanesian emigration rates were to approach the 1986 rates for Polynesia, this number could quadruple.