

THE BACK-TO-THE-FUTURE FACT SHEET

A VISUAL HISTORY OF DEMOGRAPHIC PROJECTIONS IN AUSTRALIA

ABOUT THIS FACT SHEET

How have official demographic projections changed over time and to what extent have these conformed with real-world outcomes?

This fact sheet compares historic demographic patterns and central projections from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, various years) and the Australian Treasury (various years).

Treasury figures are of particular interest since they form the basis for the Intergenerational Report (IGR), an analysis of fiscal sustainability of existing policy.

The fact sheet shows how outcomes can differ based on different assumptions and how it is not uncommon for projections and assumptions to stray from reality.

WHAT IS A PROJECTION?

A projection is different from a prediction or forecast. It is a hypothetical exercise that asks: what will be the outcome if given assumptions hold?

For example, how would the total population change if every woman had three children (all else equal)? So a projection is a mechanical calculation and cannot be incorrect unless there is a calculation error.

WHAT IS A FORECAST?

By contrast, a forecast is a speculative exercise that attempts to predict the future using the most realistic assumptions possible.

For example, a forecast would look at the most likely future population and number of children per woman.

ASSESSING PROJECTIONS

Both the ABS and Treasury emphasise that in describing Australia's future demography (as well as the related long term fiscal impacts) their figures should be seen as projections, not forecasts.

But the two are commonly conflated in public and political discourse and the projections have an impact on policy decisions. So the reasonableness of official projections should be subject to scrutiny, evaluated against actual experience and compared to each other. Any differences and inaccuracies can serve as a guide to users of the data.

Transparency is all the more necessary given that the Treasury sets its own demographic assumptions for long-term fiscal reporting rather than using those produced by an independent national statistics office – the usual approach among OECD countries.

The comparisons here are in chart form. For a detailed assessment of projection 'errors' see, for example, Abbas (1992), Wilson (2007) and Wilson (2012).

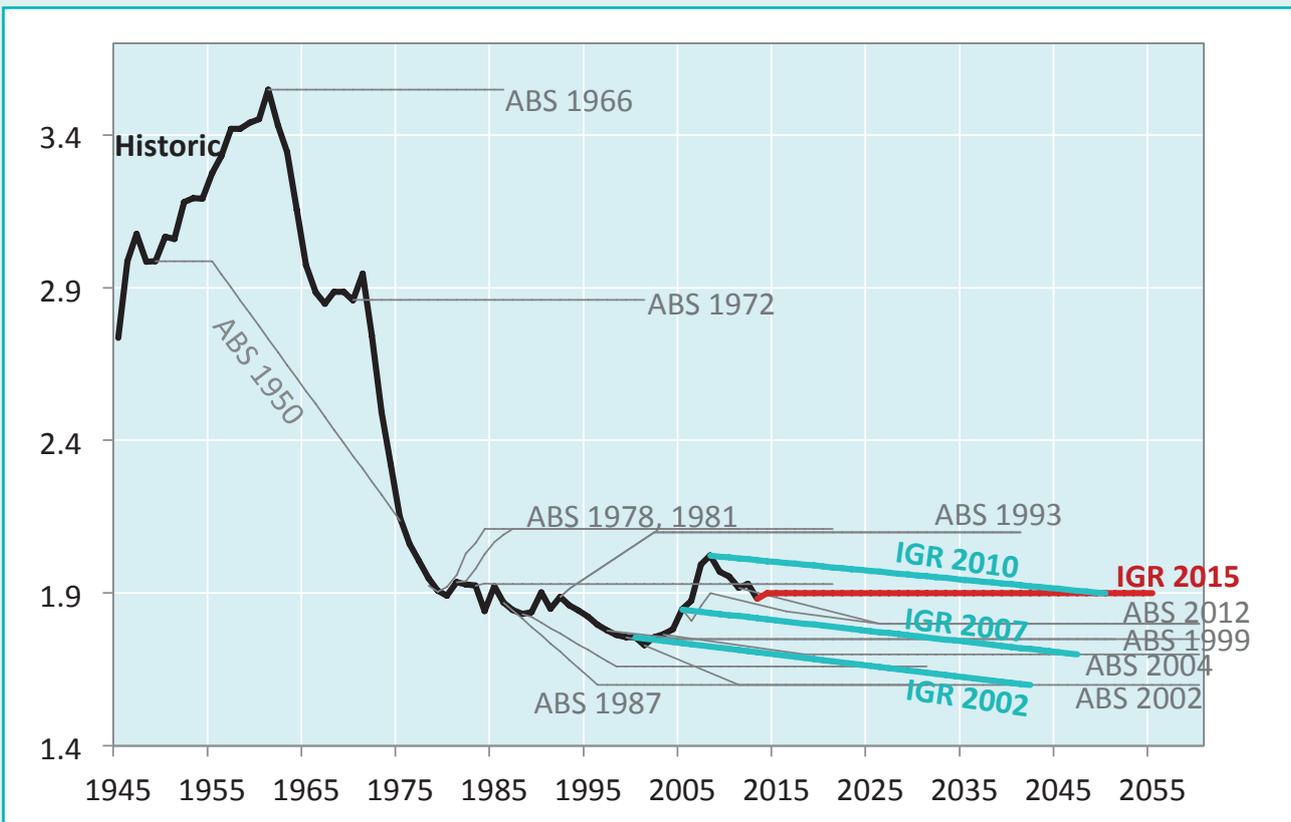
WHICH PROJECTIONS?

Of interest here are the central population and the implied ageing projections as well as the underlying demographic components: fertility, migration and life expectancy.*

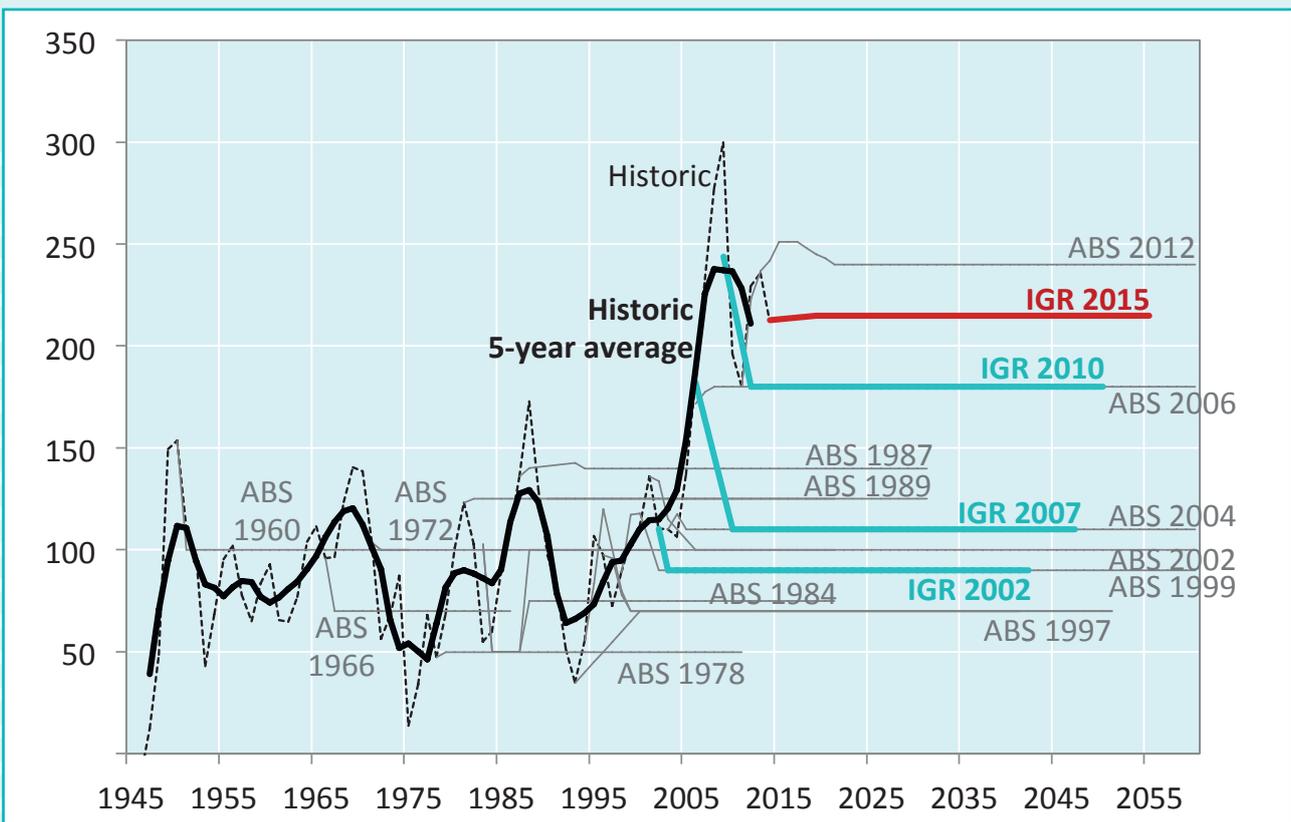
The ABS publishes several projection variants and Treasury produces accompanying sensitivity analyses.

These are important but could be enhanced by applying stochastic methods to produce confidence intervals around projections, such as those published recently by the Productivity Commission (PC 2013) and regularly in countries such as New Zealand (Dunston 2011).

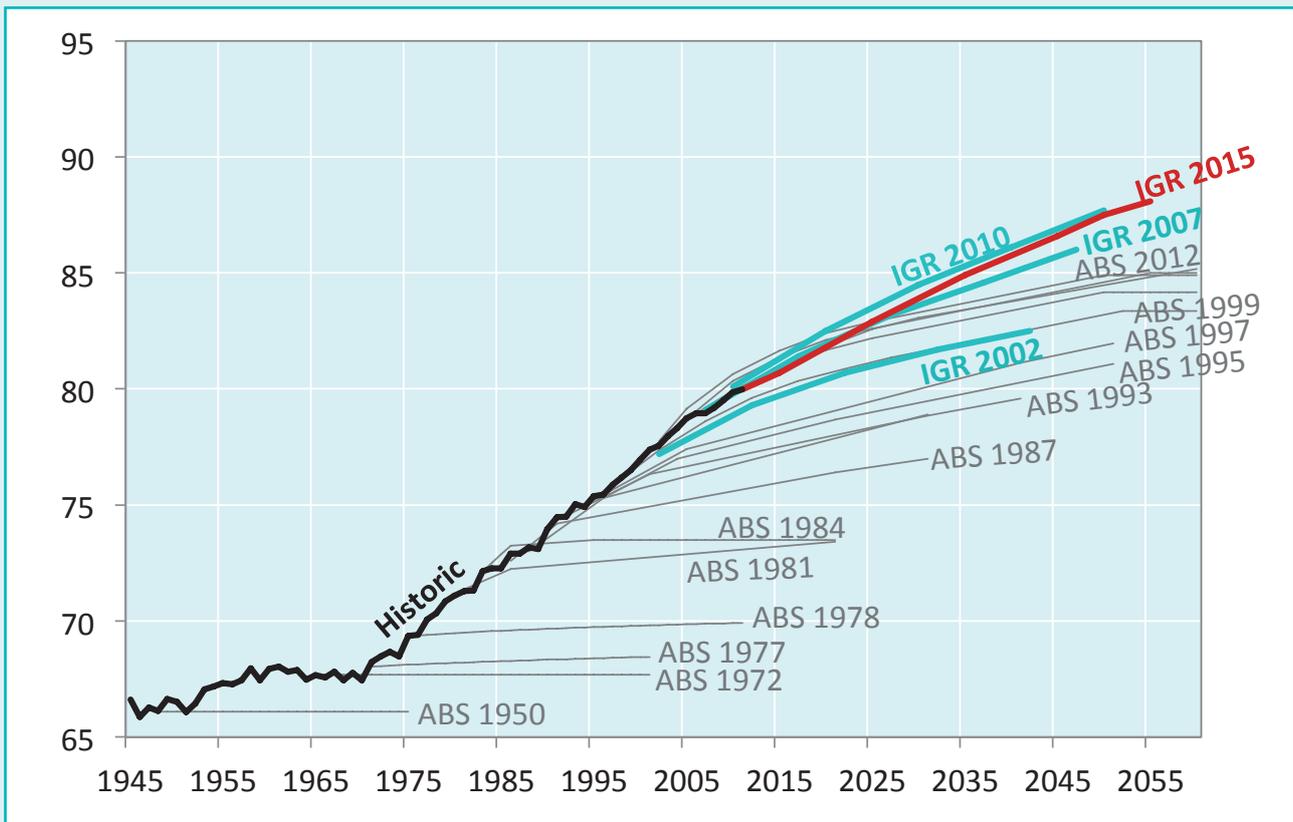
TOTAL FERTILITY RATE (children per woman)



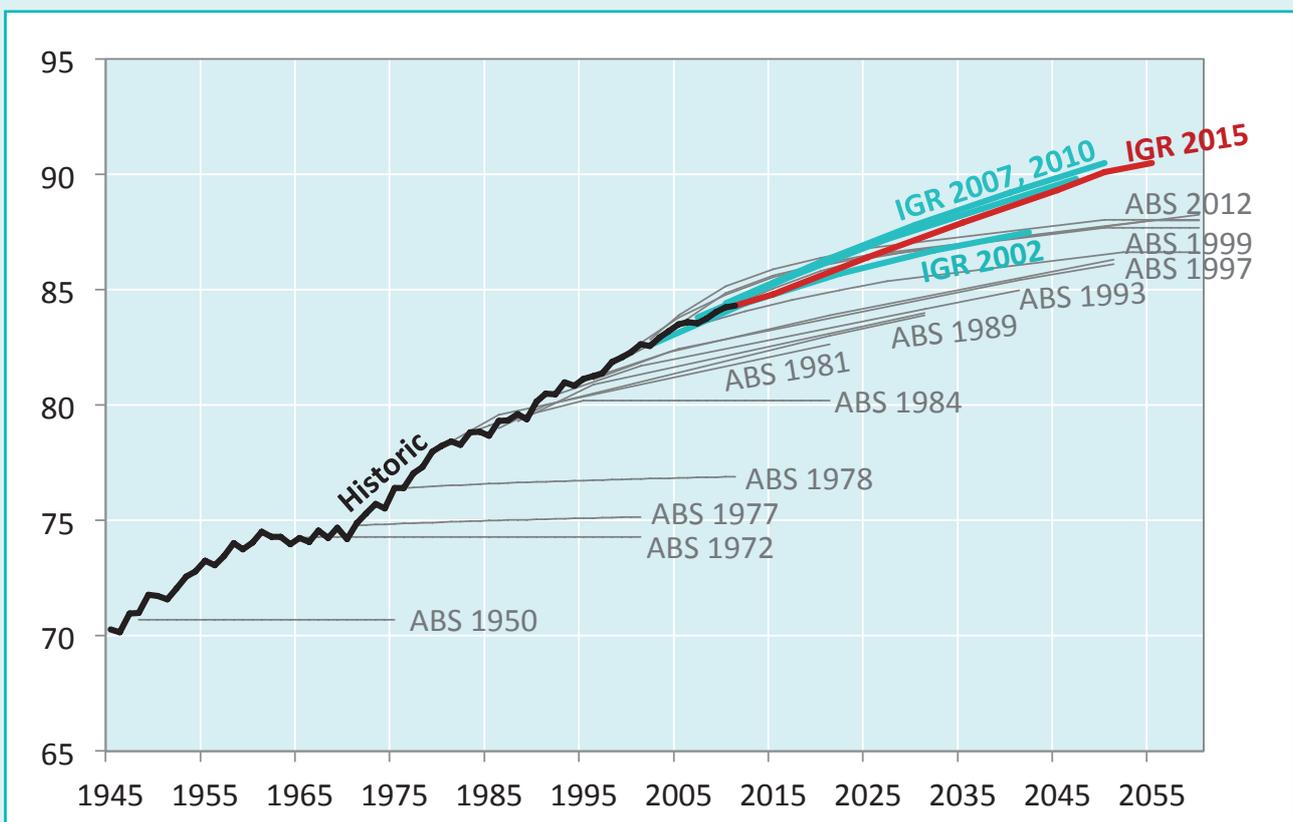
PERMANENT NET OVERSEAS MIGRATION (thousand persons)[†]



MALE LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH (years, period measure)



FEMALE LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH (years, period measure)



LIFE EXPECTANCY

Charts relating to life expectancy are perhaps the most striking in showing bias. Demographers in Australia and elsewhere (OBR 2014) have systematically underestimated life expectancy increases. Assumptions typically anticipated no further improvements in mortality, or, at best, that trend improvements would decelerate. In practice, life expectancy has been rising more or less linearly for over four decades.

Period life expectancy at birth is the most common measure. To construct it, demographers look at population-wide survival probabilities at each age in a given year; then they hypothesise how long a child born in that year would live if all those probabilities applied over their lifetime. So it takes account of improvements up to the year of birth but not in future years of life.

Period life expectancy has been increasing by about three months per year to reach 81 and 85 years for men and women born in 2015.

Until 2002, ABS included a single assumption for mortality rates. Since then, projections include a medium variant where life expectancy increases decelerate and a high variant where trends are expected to continue.

Treasury models a deceleration in future mortality improvements that sees an average increase in period life expectancy of only about two months per year between 2015 and 2055.

Treasury and others (e.g., PC, 2013) have sensibly begun reporting cohort life expectancy, which represents the years an average individual is actually expected to live since it includes mortality improvements within their lifetime. Though implicitly included in demographic modelling, the measure is seldom published. According to Treasury, it is about 92 years for men and 94 for women born in 2015, and projected to rise to 95 and 97 for those born in 2055.

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ENDNOTES

- * The focus, including in all series shown in charts, is on the central, medium, or middle projection. In recent years this refers to ABS series B. In years with an even number of series, the middle projection is one that is closest to the average of population projections in the final projection year.
- † Series break in historical estimates in 2007 due to a methodological change in measuring migration. Notable changes to the series also took place in 1983 and 2000.