Opinion

Using data to drive policy

The Australian Census can provide a clear picture of Australia's future older population and a solid foundation on which to base plans for service delivery, writes **Dr Helen Barrie (Feist)**.

ON 9 AUGUST Australia once again participated in the national Census of Population and Housing. As a social scientist and geographer, the Census year is always an exciting one!

In particular this year I have been reflecting on the Baby Boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1964; as they continue to grow older, and have all moved into later life by 2031, redefining what ageing looks like in Australia.

The projected growth over the next two decades shows that 65-plus population will grow more than twice as fast as the total population. Moreover, the fastest growth will be in the 75-plus age groups as the Baby Boomers continue to move through the life cycle. It is these older age groups which typically have the highest level of demand for aged care and other services, especially health; highlighting the need to plan for future service provision needs now.

Thanks to the accuracy of the Australian Census data this shift in population is not crystal ball gazing; we not only know their numbers but also quite a lot about their economic, social, family and cultural characteristics. Comprehensive data such as this can provide us with a clear vision of the size and characteristics of Australia's future older population and provide a solid foundation on which we can base plans for service delivery, housing, and aged care policy moving forward.

One, often overlooked, dimension of contemporary population ageing in Australia relates to the varying demographic characteristics of any population cohort. Baby Boomers are not a homogenous group; they will have quite different social characteristics than earlier generations of older people. They are entering

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older age with different life course experiences in terms of education, employment experiences, world views, cultural exposure, family structure and familiarity with technologies.

Their values and attitudes will bring different expectations of society, the ageing experience, and expectations of aged care housing and services. And being such a large cohort of older people there will also be a lot of heterogeneity within this population cohort as well, and this needs to be taken into account when planning for the future.

This scenario of Australia's future older population is often portrayed as a national crisis, both fiscally and socially. With unprecedented numbers living to old age the prospect of overwhelming increases in age related disease, frailty, disability, reduced mobility and all the associated costs and social burdens dominates much of the discourse about our ageing population.

There can be no doubt that an ageing population does present a series of significant challenges to the economy, the health system and the aged care sector; as well as for individuals, families and communities.

However, Australia is well placed to meet these challenges, and we have the advantage of knowing what that population will look like and where they are located.

There is no single solution, policy or program focus to offset the social and economic impacts effects of an ageing population. Action is needed across a range of fronts but that action must begin now, not when the full impact of Baby Boomer ageing becomes apparent in the 2020s and 2030s.

The Baby Boomer generation represents a quarter of the national population and a

huge repository of knowledge, experience, wealth, resources and productivity which potentially, with innovative policy approaches, can continue to contribute in a major way to national prosperity and sustainability.

While not minimising the challenges of demographic ageing it is important to also identify the opportunities that are offered by these ageing assets.

So, hopefully you all dutifully and accurately filled out your Census form, as it is this data that is utilised for the next five years to inform policy, plan services and workforce needs, understand the complexities and nuances of our population cohorts, and ensures that Australia is well positioned economically and socially in years to come. ∎

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