Multiculturalism in Focus – Migrants' sense of belonging study 2025

Belonging, social connection and civic participation

SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs

Contents

How to cite this report

Prentice, Trish, Link, Rouven, Johnston, Phoebe, & Hancocks, Anthea. "Multiculturalism in Focus – Migrants' sense of belonging study 2025". Melbourne, Australia: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2026.

1. Executive summary

The Multiculturalism in Focus – Migrants' Sense of Belonging Study 2025 was commissioned by the Department of Home Affairs and conducted by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute to deepen understanding of how migrants, from Australia's fastest growing communities, experience belonging, social connections and civic participation in Australia.

Purpose and Context

The study represents the first in a new annual series of *Multiculturalism in Focus* reports, aiming to provide the federal government with more detailed information and analysis pertaining to the settlement and integration experiences of migrant Australians. This study particularly focused on the experiences of individuals from China, India, Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines and Iraq, six migrant communities identified to have grown substantially, albeit it at different rates, between the most recent census points. It captures the experiences of both recent arrivals and longer-term residents, and provides insights, where relevant, into the different experiences of men and women and younger and older migrants from these cohorts.

Methodology

The study brings together qualitative data from semi-structured interviews conducted with 65 individuals, as well as quantitative insights from the 2025 Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) survey in a mixed-methods design.

The following sections describe the study's main findings.

Key Findings

Sense of Belonging

The 2025 MSC survey results highlight notable differences in the domain of belonging between individuals born in Australia and those born in the study's focus countries. Australian-born respondents reported a stronger sense of belonging overall, with nearly half (49%) indicating they felt a great sense of belonging, compared with 32% of respondents from the focus countries. Patterns of belonging also varied by length of residency, with longer-term residents reporting levels of belonging similar to those of the Australian-born population, while more recent arrivals expressed a significantly lower sense of belonging.

Sense of Community Belonging

The majority of interviewees reported a sense of community belonging. Central to this was their social connections or relationships in their local area. Another element of belonging, for several interviewees, was involvement in their local neighbourhood (typically, in a formal sense, through volunteering). Contributing to the community, and specifically to the lives of others in that community, made them feel like they belonged to it. Related to this, many interviewees spoke of their sense of belonging as coming from living in a community where people provided help and support to each other (mutual assistance). Both receiving this support and being able to provide it made individuals feel as though they belonged. This exchange of support again served to strengthen their social relationships in the neighbourhood and to build trust.

Valued characteristics of the local neighbourhood

Positive social dynamics were a frequently mentioned and highly valued characteristic of the local area for many interviewees. Some interviewees highlighted the multicultural makeup of their community as a valued characteristic. Similarly, several interviewees emphasised that having members of their own cultural community living nearby was an important characteristic of their neighbourhood. One practical outcome of this was access to culturally familiar and appropriate food. These connections also helped to create a sense of social safety that mitigated extended family living overseas. Usable transport links and safety in the local neighbourhood were also considered valued characteristics of the local community.

Valued community facilities

Libraries, playgrounds, sporting clubs, community centres and places of worship were mentioned by interviewees as valued and frequented community facilities in their local area. For the interviewees, these spaces played a key role in fostering a positive sense of place and strengthening social relationships within their neighbourhood.

Sense of belonging to Australia

Many (but not all) interviewees described feeling a sense of belonging to Australia. The language they used to express this was notably different from how they spoke about community belonging and there was more variety in the responses given to this question. The interviewees identified feeling settled, familiarity with the country, emotional connection to Australia, a sense of loyalty, their legal status and a sense of being shaped by Australian cultural values as contributing to their feeling of belonging.

Social connection

The MSC survey indicates that migrants from the study's focus countries tend to have more culturally diverse friendship networks than the Australian-born population. They are more likely to report having five to nine friends from different cultural backgrounds and less likely to have none or only one such friend. The interviews reinforced this finding, with most participants reporting friendships across cultural groups.

Those interviewees who had mainly formed friendships within their own cultural community represented all focus countries, age groups and lengths of residency. Barriers to cross-cultural friendships included limited English proficiency, low personal confidence, cultural unfamiliarity and time constraints.

Friendships were commonly formed in workplaces, educational settings, schools, places of worship, sporting clubs, volunteer activities and local neighbourhoods. Many interviewees had developed strong connections with other migrants, including those from different countries, due to the shared experience of migration and settlement. Only a small number of participants reported having no friendships.

Informal cultural networks — especially family and friends already in the country and other cultural community contacts — played a significant role in supporting newcomers with housing, services and early settlement needs. Those without such networks often experienced loneliness and greater challenges upon arrival.

Discrimination

According to the MSC survey, individuals from the study's focus countries were far more likely to report discrimination based on skin colour, ethnicity or religion in the past year, with 45% experiencing discrimination compared with 13% of Australian-born respondents. This disparity was greater for women, with 51% of women from focus countries reporting discrimination, compared with 12% of Australian-born women. The interviews also recorded experiences of discrimination, with just over one-third of interviewees reporting experiences of racism or discrimination. Among those affected, women and longer-term residents were more commonly represented.

Civic Participation

Most interviewees had provided unpaid help or volunteered — either formally through organisations such as social service agencies, emergency services, cultural or environmental groups, or more commonly, informally, through cultural associations, places of worship, schools and children's sporting clubs. Around one-third had supported other new migrants with unpaid help, often offering practical assistance like accommodation, transport, or advice on services, employment and settlement processes, to assist them in their settlement journey.

The MSC survey results showed no significant differences between Australian-born respondents and those from the focus countries in terms of participation in social or religious groups. The interviews revealed that about half of participants were involved in groups, most commonly religious, followed by cultural, sporting, parents', university, women's, arts and environmental groups.

Many interviewees had attended community events, including cultural, religious, council-run and local festivals. Participation often extended beyond individuals' own cultural or faith groups. Those who had not attended events cited either a lack of events in their area or lack of time.

Other findings

Nearly half of interviewees reported that securing meaningful employment was their greatest challenge after arriving in Australia. Common barriers included non-recognition of overseas qualifications, extensive registration requirements and the disadvantage of lacking local work experience. Some interviewees spent several years attempting to enter their professional fields, and many relied on strategies such as drawing on social networks, undertaking internships or unpaid work and enrolling in further training to facilitate employment opportunities. Despite these efforts, a significant number became employed in roles below their previous skill level, with several shifting from professional occupations overseas into lower-skilled or unrelated work in Australia.

However, overall, it was evident that the interviewees had demonstrated strong motivation and agency in addressing the challenges they had faced during settlement, with many having adopted proactive attitudes to overcome obstacles related to employment, isolation, language and adjustment.
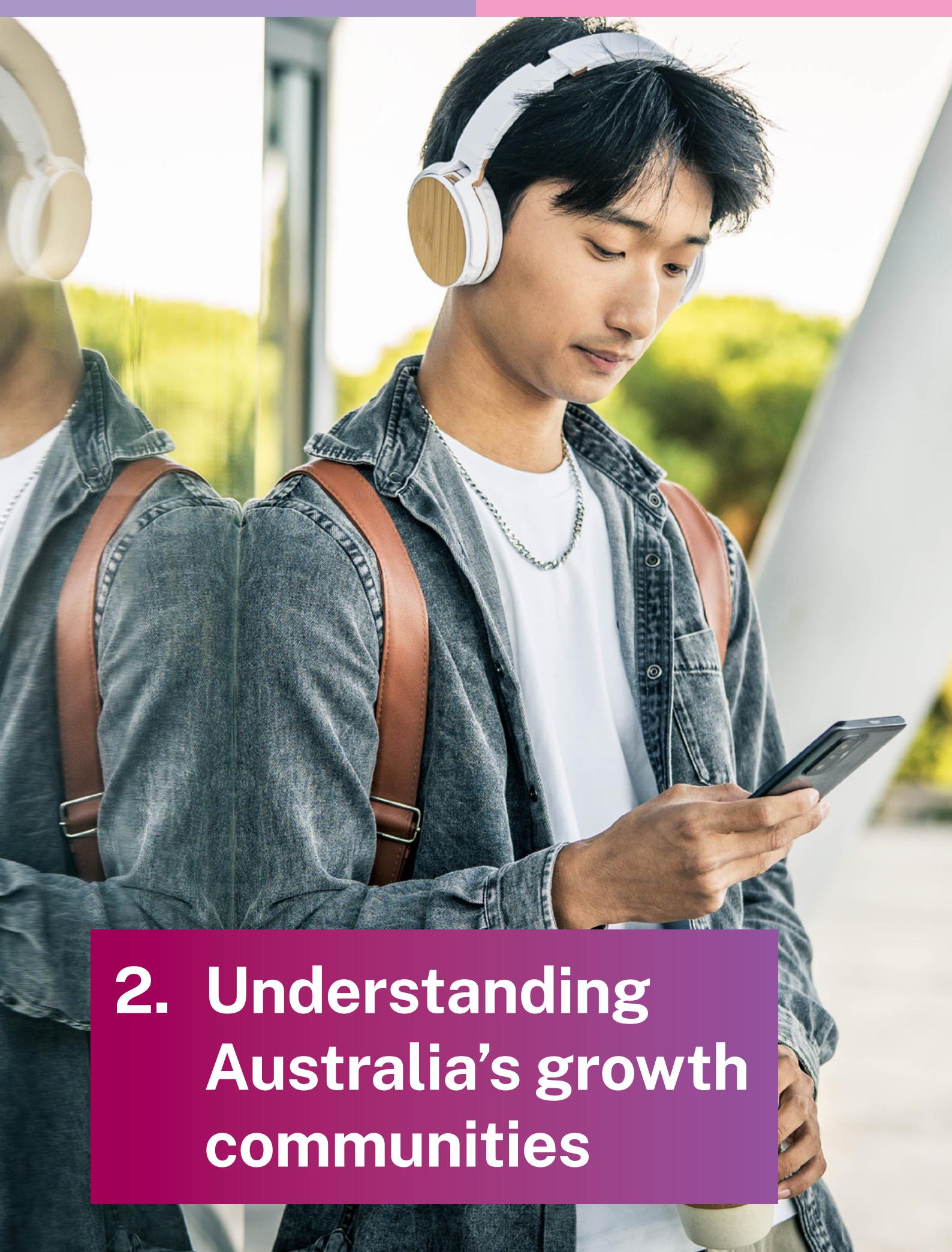
2. Understanding Australia's growth communities

Population growth

According to the 2021 Census,[1] people born in India represent the largest overseas-born cohort in Australia with a population of about 712,040, followed by people born in China (584,660). About 308,000 people were born in the Philippines (**Table 1**). While the numbers of people born in Pakistan (96,170), Iraq (101,020) or Nepal (130,290) are comparatively small, these populations have grown considerably in size over the past two decades.

The Nepali population increased from a small base of about 1,400 in 1996 to over 130,000 in 2021, recording the largest relative growth out of the six focus countries of this study. On average, the Nepali population in Australia grew by 20% every year over that period, ahead of the Pakistani population, which, on average, increased by about 10% annually between 1996 and 2021.

Growth among the Chinese and Indian populations has slowed since 2006 and 2011, respectively. Disruptions to international migration caused by the Covid-19 pandemic particularly affected migration from China, as evidenced by a mere 5% increase in the size of the Chinese population in Australia between 2016 and 2021, compared to a 44% increase between 2011 and 2016. Downward trends were similarly pronounced for growth rates in the Pakistani population in Australia, from 104% between 2011 and 2016 to 38% between 2016 and 2021.

Table 1 – Estimated resident population (ERP) in Census years and Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR)

Country of birth	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	CAGR
China	118,640	153,360	251,960	387,420	557,690	584,660	7%
India	80,470	98,070	169,720	337,120	489,410	712,040	9%
Philippines	104,820	114,260	141,890	193,030	252,690	308,240	4%
Nepal	1,410	2,440	4,350	27,810	58,980	130,290	20%
Pakistan	8,710	12,290	18,320	34,150	69,660	96,170	10%
Iraq	16,400	28,480	39,500	54,980	74,680	101,020	8%

Note: ERP is based on place of usual residence. Estimates in source data have been rounded to nearest 10 for confidentiality.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimated resident population by country of birth, Australia - as at 30 June, 1996 to 2024

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1   ABS Census of Population and Housing data presented here is based on place of usual residence rather than place of enumeration. We chose place of usual residence over place of enumeration because place of usual residence counts exclude overseas visitors from the population total. It is also less likely to be affected by seasonal factors affecting population counts. Finally, place of usual residence counts provide more appropriate information about local populations (ABS 2022).

The population growth trends described above are consistent with the distribution of recent arrivals (**Table 2**). For example, the large growth in the Nepali population between 2016 and 2021 is reflected in the 59-percent share of Nepali people who arrived in Australian since 2016. In this sense, the Nepali population is the least established of the six growth cohorts. In contrast, the Chinese and Filipino populations are much more established, with about three in four people born in either country having arrived in Australia in or before 2015. Among the Indian, Pakistani and Iraqi populations, between three in five and two in three people arrived in Australia in or before 2015.

Table 2 – **Focus country populations by year of arrival**

| Country of birth	Year of arrival				Total
	In or before 2015		In or after 2016		
	count	% of total	count	% of total	
China	401,083	73%	137,407	25%	549,618
India	428,505	64%	234,426	35%	673,352
Philippines	222,168	76%	65,744	22%	293,892
Nepal	48,664	40%	71,718	59%	122,506
Pakistan	56,249	63%	31,934	36%	89,633
Iraq	62,650	67%	28,670	31%	92,922

Note: Percentages for year-of-arrival cohorts are based on total person counts for each country of birth. Totals include "Not stated" and "Not applicable" categories for Year of arrival, which are not shown. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

Place of residence

As of the 2021 Census, most of the Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Nepali, Pakistani and Iraqi migrant populations live in New South Wales and Victoria (**Figure 1**). For each of these populations, at least 59% live in either New South Wales or Victoria. While the concentration is most pronounced for the Iraqi population, of which about 88% live in either state, the Filipino population is more dispersed, with 18% living in Queensland and 13% living in Western Australia. New South Wales is home to the majorities of the Iraqi and Nepali populations in Australia, with about 60% of Iraqis and 53% of Nepalis living there. Except for the Indian population, 38% of which live in Victoria, New South Wales is also home to large parts of the Chinese (45%), Pakistani (38%) and Filipino (36%) populations.

There are differences across more recent and more established cohorts. For example, 10% of Iraqis who arrived in or after 2016 live in Queensland, compared to 4% of those who arrived prior. Among the Chinese population, while 36% of those who arrived more recently live in New South Wales, 48% of those who are more established do. Proportionately, more recently arrived Chinese people live in Victoria or Queensland than their more established counterparts.

Figure 1 – Share of people born in focus countries living in each state/territory

Legend: New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory
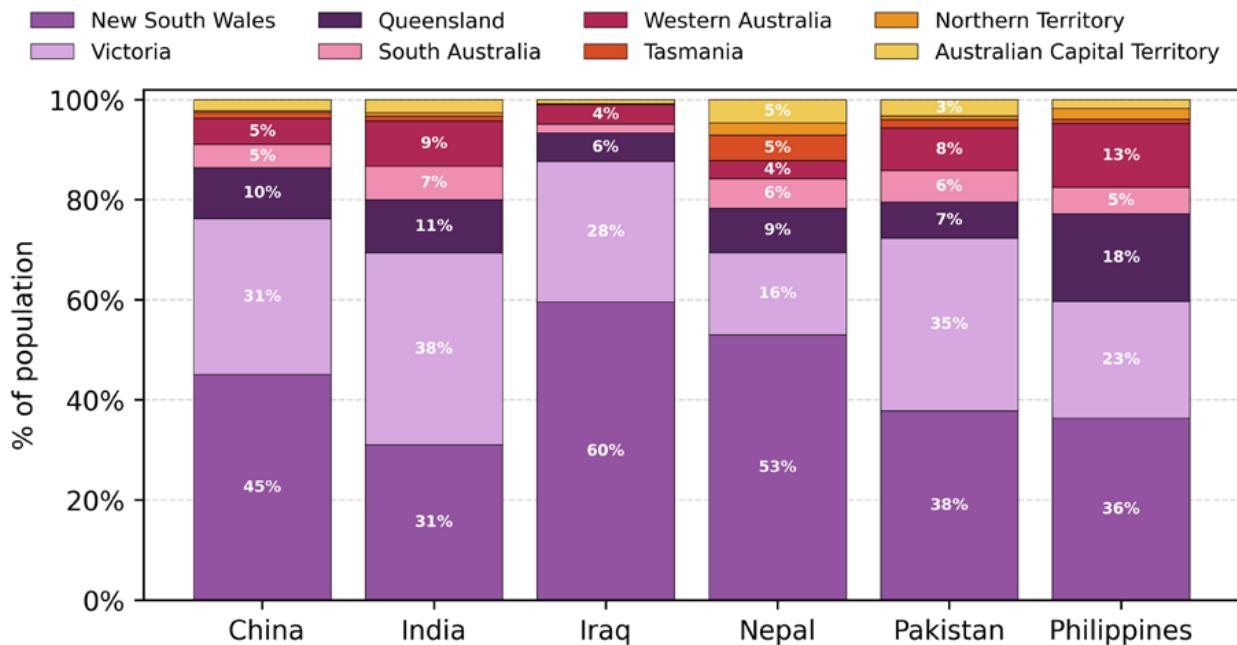
Note: Percentages are based on total person counts for each country of birth. "Other territories" category is not shown. Value labels of less than 3% have been suppressed to improve legibility. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not add up to totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

Demographics

The Chinese, Indian, Iraqi, Nepali, Pakistani and Filipino migrant populations are all heavily concentrated in prime working ages (between 25 and 44 years; Figure 2). Overall, the Nepali population has the youngest age structure, with large cohorts of 20-to-29-year-olds, while the Iraqi population is fairly evenly distributed between the ages of 25 and 59 years.

Gender distributions vary, with the Chinese and Filipino migrant populations skewing female, and the Pakistani, Indian and Nepali populations skewing male. The Nepali population skews towards male between the ages of 15 and 54 years, except for the age group of 25-to-29-year-olds (who are more commonly female). Across all six populations, the cohorts that arrived in or after 2016 tend to be younger than those who arrived before 2016. The differences between cohorts are particularly pronounced for the Nepali and the Pakistani populations.

Figure 2 – Age-sex distributions by country of birth
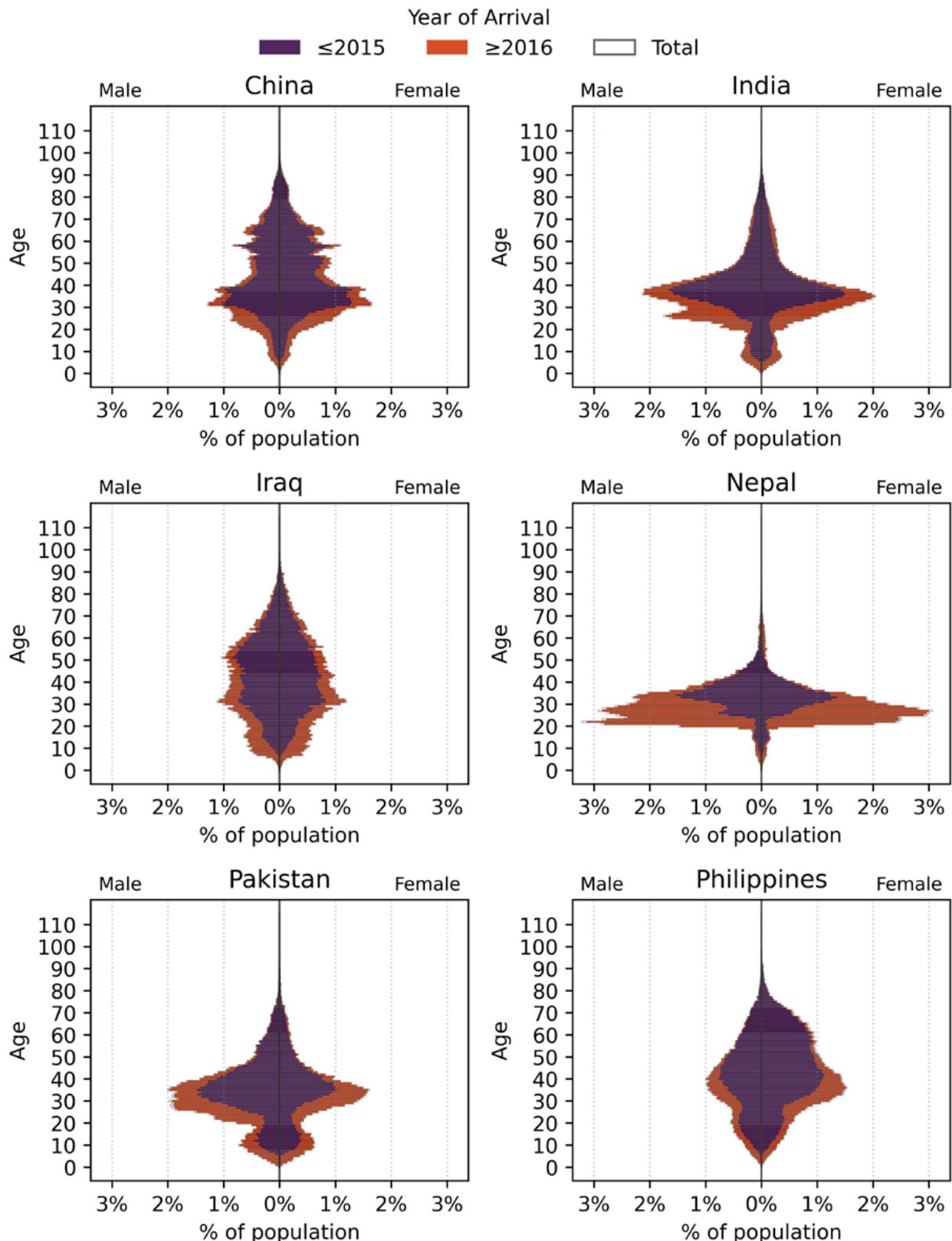
Note: Percentages for each age-sex combination are based on total person counts for the respective country of birth. Total includes"Not stated" and "Not applicable" categories for Year of arrival, which are not shown. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population bnd Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

Employment and education

Information about employment and education is based on each focus country's population of people aged 15 years and older rather than the total population.

Engagement in employment, education and training (EET) varies across the focus country cohorts (Appendix 1). The Iraqi migrant population has the highest rate of non-engagement in these activities, with more than half of Iraqi-born people in Australia not engaged in employment, education or training. Non-engagement was higher among the more established than the more recently arrived Iraqi-born cohort (56% and 47%, respectively). A similar trend that non-engagement is lower among recent (18%) than among more established arrivals (23%) can also be observed among the Filipino population. Non-engagement is also common among the Chinese population (33%). Of all the focus cohorts, non-engagement was lowest among the Nepali population (10%).

Employment to population ratios range from 28% among the Iraqi-born population to 53% among the Chinese-born population, to 80% among the Nepalese-born population. Employment to population ratios are higher among more established cohorts than among more recently arrived, especially among the Iraqi-(32% vs 18%) and Chinese-born (59% vs 38%) populations. The Iraqi population has the highest share of working age people not in the labour force (65%) among the focus country cohorts, followed by the Chinese-born population (41%; Appendix 1). Full-time employment is highest among the Indian (47%) and Filipino (42%) populations. It is also higher among more established than among more recently arrived cohorts across all of the focus countries.

Over half of the Iraqi population's main source of income are government benefits and allowances (Appendix 1).[2] For all other growth cohorts, employee wages and salaries are most commonly the main source of personal income, ranging from 47% among the Chinese population to 81% among the Nepali population.

Except among the Iraqi population, government benefits and allowances are more commonly the main source of personal income among more established cohorts than among more recent arrivals, largely because of eligibility criteria tied to residency status and length of time in Australia.

Income distributions vary widely across the focus cohorts, as well as across more recent arrivals compared to more established cohorts. Almost 75% of the Iraqi population earn $799 or less – less than the national median weekly income of $805. Among the Indian population, that proportion is about 38%. Income distributions between more recently arrived and more established cohorts are similar among the Iraqi, Filipino and Pakistani populations. Chinese people who arrived in or after 2016 have the highest rate of reporting nil income (36%). About 73% earn $799 or less per week. Among Nepali and Indian people who arrived in Australia since 2016, about 51% and 46%, respectively, earn $799 or less.

Except for the Iraqi population, the share of university-educated people among the focus countries is high (Appendix 1). It ranges from 46% with either a bachelor's degree, a graduate diploma or graduate certificate, or a postgraduate degree among the Filipino population to about 65% among the Indian population. While about 18% of the Iraqi population are also university-educated, about 47% have secondary- or post-secondary-level education, with no specific information about education levels for almost 16% of the cohort. Among the Chinese and Nepali populations, a higher share of those who arrived in or after 2016 have a secondary education equivalent to Year 10 or above, compared to those who arrived prior (31% compared to 21% and 23% compared to 13%, respectively.). Among the Chinese migrant population, this shift is mirrored in the decline of university-educated people in general, whereas among the Nepali population, there was a decline in the proportion of people with a bachelor's degree from 37% to 24%, but not of those with a postgraduate degree.

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2   Information about people's main source of income in the 2021 Census is derived from administrative data obtained from the Australian Taxation Office and Department of Social Services in the Person-Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA).

English proficiency

Proficiency in spoken English varies across the focus populations (Appendix 1). In general, it was lower among more recent arrivals than among more established cohorts. Over 90% of the Nepali migrant population speak English either well or very well, as do over 80% of the Pakistani and Indian migrant populations. The Filipino and Indian migrant populations have the largest proportions of high proficiency in spoken English, with about 25% of the Filipino population and 13% of the Indian population speaking English only. In comparison, proficiency in spoken English was lower among the Iraqi and Chinese migrant populations, with just over 30% in each of the populations speaking English either not well or not well at all.

Citizenship

Citizenship rates are lowest among the Nepali population, at about 21%, and highest among the Filipino population (69%; Appendix 1). About 61% of Iraqi people hold Australian citizenship. Citizenship rates among people who arrived in or after 2016 are much lower than among those who arrived prior, in large part owing to residence requirements for citizenship. Differences in citizenship rates among more recent arrivals across the focus countries therefore largely reflect visa patterns. For example, while less than 1% of Nepali people who arrived in or after 2016 hold Australian citizenship, about 10% of Filipino people who arrived during the same period do.

Level of socio-economic disadvantage

The level of socio-economic disadvantage of the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in which people born in the focus countries live varies (Figure 3). About 70% of the Iraqi migrant population lives in highly disadvantaged LGAs (IRSD Decile 3 or lower), with 27% living in the most disadvantaged LGAs across Australia. Among Iraqis who arrived in or after 2016, the proportion of those living in the most disadvantaged LGAs is 32%. Just over 30% of the Pakistani and about 25% of the Nepali migrant population live in highly disadvantaged LGAs (IRSD Decile 3 or lower). In contrast, about 70% of the Chinese migrant population live in LGAs with relatively low levels of socio-economic disadvantage (IRSD Decile 8 or higher). Overall, there are only small differences between more re-cent and more established cohorts in terms of the LGA where they live and levels of disadvantage.

Figure 3 – **Settlement patterns of people born in focus countries by level of socio-economic disadvantage of Local Government Areas**
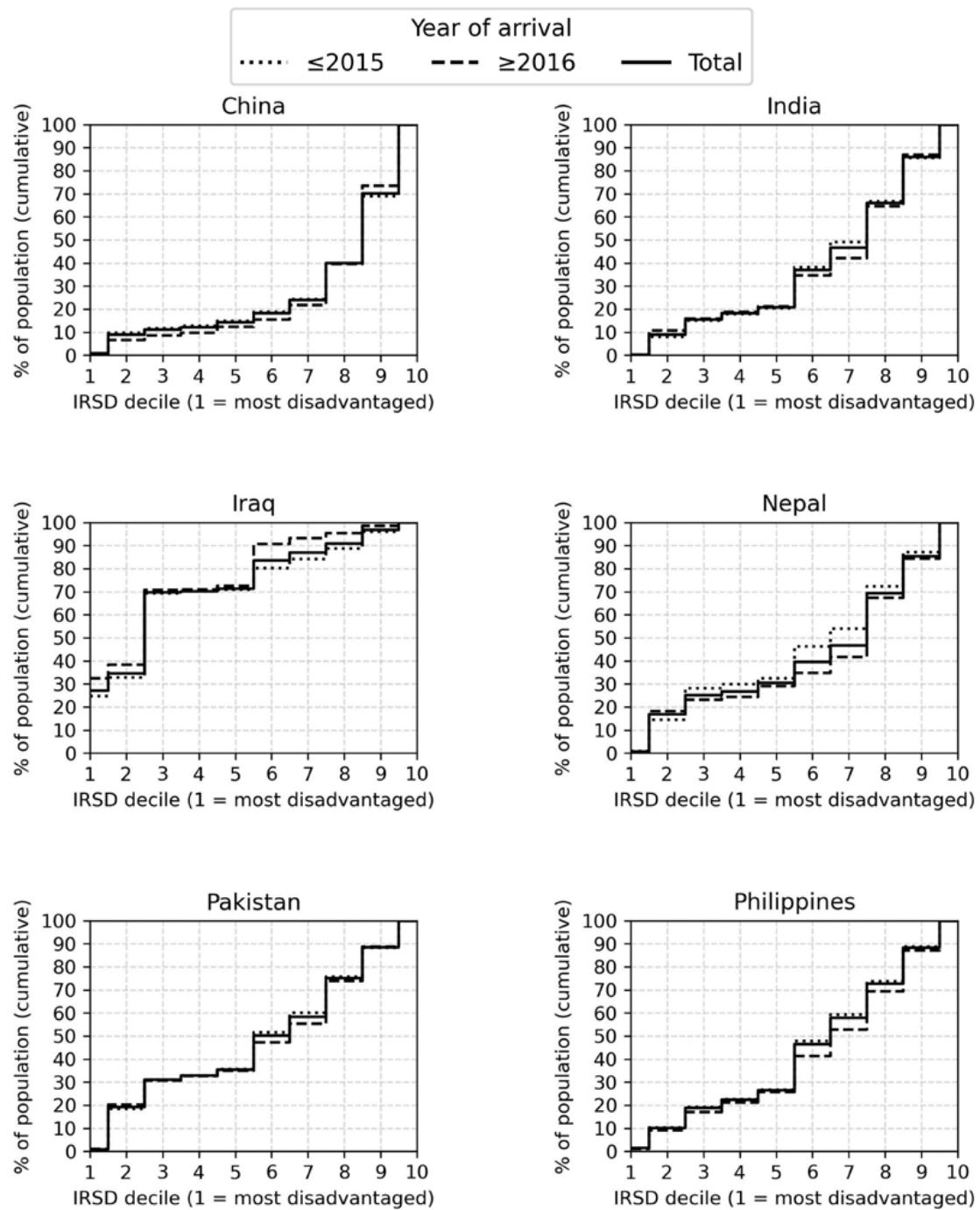
Note: Step line charts show cumulative percentages of populations living in Local Government Areas grouped by their level of socio-economic disadvantage based on the ABS SEIFA IRSD deciles. Total includes "Not stated" and "Not applicable" categories for Year of arrival, which are not shown. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

Common visa trajectories

About 85% of permanent migrants from Iraq hold a permanent humanitarian visa, while about 12% hold a permanent family visa (**Figure 4**). About 93% of permanent migrants from Iraq did not hold any other visa to Australia prior to their permanent visa.

Among permanent visa holders from China, India, Nepal, Pakistan or the Philippines, most hold a permanent skilled visa, followed by permanent family visas. The share of permanent skilled visa holders is highest among permanent migrants from India (81%) and Nepal (78%), whereas the share of permanent family visas is highest among permanent migrants from China (40%) and the Philippines (38%). Permanent humanitarian visa holders are much less common, making up 10% and 7% respectively, of Pakistani and Nepali permanent migrants.

Among the growth communities, except the Nepali, most permanent visa holders did not hold a visa to Australia prior to obtaining permanent residency. Most Nepali permanent migrants (64%) held temporary student visas as their first visa to Australia, and about 60% of permanent migrants from Nepal transitioned from a temporary student visa to a permanent skilled visa.

Among Pakistani and Indian permanent migrants, 38% and 36%, respectively, transitioned from no prior visa to a permanent skilled visa, making it the most common pathway to permanent residency for them. In comparison, among Chinese and Filipino permanent migrants, the transition from no prior visa to a permanent family visa is the most common (31% and 35%, respectively), although many Chinese permanent migrants transitioned from a temporary student visa to a permanent skilled visa (28%).

Figure 4 – Visa transitions from first (temporary) visa to permanent residency among permanent residents born in focus countries
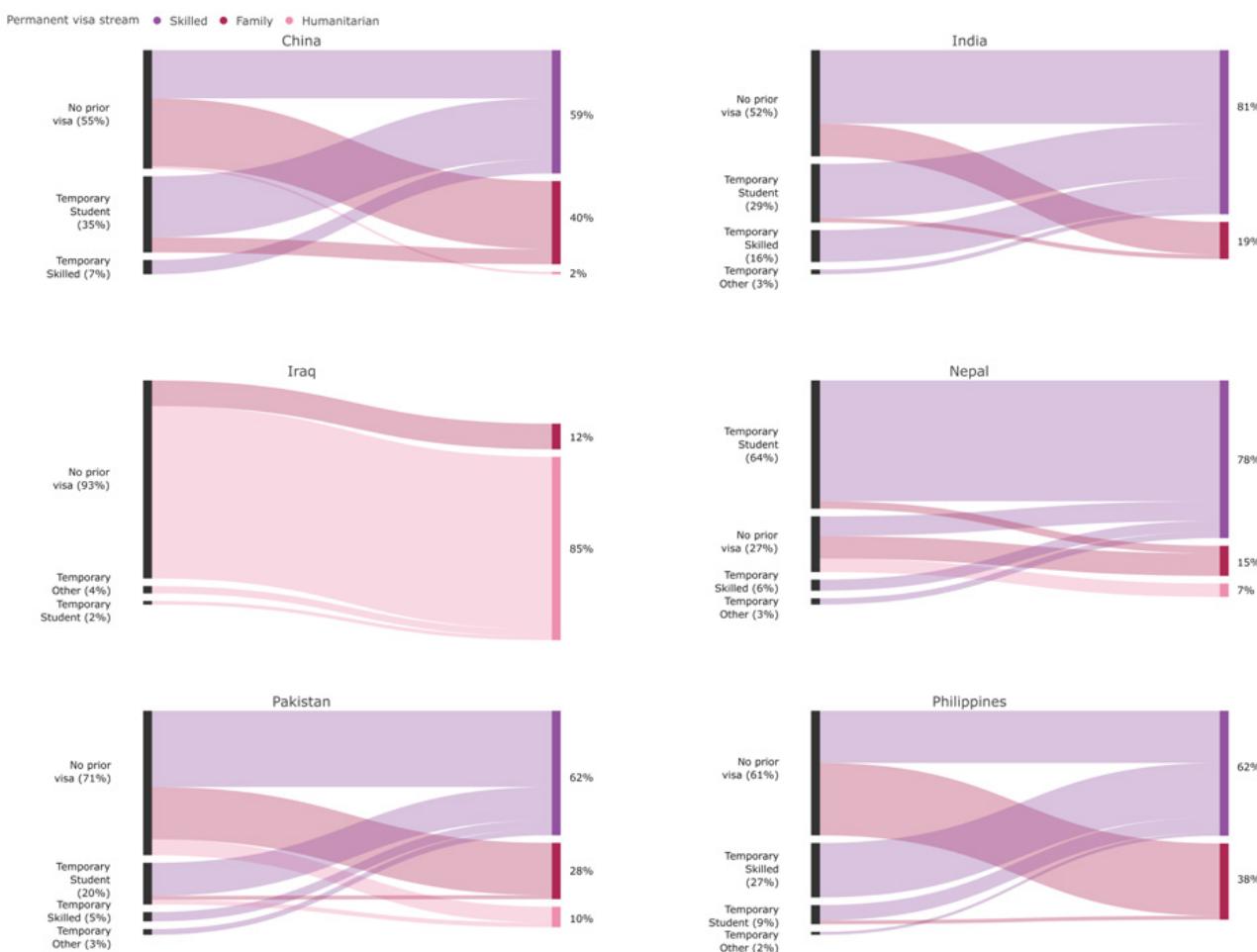
Note: Percentages in Sankey diagrams based on total weighted person counts for each country of birth. Small flows have been suppressed to improve legibility. Origin visa categories shown thus vary, and percentages for origin visa categories may not add up to 100%. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset (ACMID), 2021, TableBuilder

3. Belonging: its meaning, significance and implications

This study sheds light on the experiences of belonging of individuals from specific growth communities in Australia.

Understanding belonging has become an area of focus in psychological and sociological research over recent decades. There is growing recognition that a sense of belonging is associated with positive outcomes for individuals, including physical and mental health,[i] academic and vocational achievement[ii] and social and financial progress.[iii] On the other hand, individuals who experience a low sense of belonging seem to experience greater challenges in educational environments and the workplace, and generally demonstrate less ability to respond to adversity or setbacks.[iv] For this reason, a sense of belonging has drawn interest across many sectors interested in and attempting to ensure human wellbeing and progress.

Yet, the question of what belonging is and how to foster it has remained elusive. As there are many disciplinary approaches to understanding belonging, many definitions have emerged; however, most focus on the way in which an individual experiences connection to and acceptance within a group. Some conceptualisations focus solely on psychological factors, such as feelings of connection,[v] acceptance[vi] or a sense of membership,[vii] while others include social aspects like shared values,[viii] or mutual recognition among group members.[ix] Other perspectives see belonging as not only influenced by individual or interpersonal factors but external factors as well. These perspectives have considered and found evidence of the influence of external factors like physical spaces; institutions or systems[x] (such as political or economic structures)[xi] and other perceptions, like safety. These later studies, for instance, established a link between feeling safe and the frequency that individuals (particularly women) visit public spaces,[xii] a key place for establishing and fostering social connections. Some studies have found intergenerational differences in belonging, stemming from diminishing social connections over time,[xiii] changing relationships to people and place,[xiv] the salience of cultural reference groups, [xv] or differences in national identity or values.[xvi] Financial factors are thought to play a role in belonging too, with various studies suggesting a link between financial

pressure and an individual's ability to take part in social activities or to develop and maintain social connections.[xvii]

In an attempt to bring clarity to understandings of belonging, several review studies have sought to identify commonalities across definitions and perspectives. In a 2013 study, which examined 40 research papers,[xviii] five core aspects of belonging were identified. Firstly, belonging is a perception,[3] which centres around a person feeling valued, respected and that they 'fit in.'[xix] Secondly, a sense of belonging requires a referent group[xx] — something to 'feel belonging' to. However, belonging is not confined to a single reference point. Individuals may feel a sense of belonging to more than one referent at any one time. [xxi] They may also experience belonging and lack of belonging in parallel; for instance, feeling that they belong to one group, while feeling they don't belong to another. Third, there must be a sense of connectedness (or reciprocity) between the individual and the group to feel a sense of belonging. These feelings can evolve from shared history, understandings, feelings or beliefs.[xxii] Fourth, belonging is dynamic. At any one time there may be factors (either physical or social) that contribute to or detract from feelings of belonging.[xxiii] Finally, belonging involves a sense of self determination: the individual must have a sense of power in their interaction with the reference group, meaning a sense of the ability to have some influence over it.[xxiv]

In another review, similarly based on a broad range of research studies about belonging, the authors found that belonging was a dynamic feeling and experience that comes from four interrelated elements: a person's competencies for belonging (their skills and abilities[xxv]), their opportunities to belong[xxvi] (enablers of belonging or the reduction of barriers), their motivation to belong,[xxvii] and their perceptions of belonging (a person's subjective feelings about whether they fit in with those around them).[xxviii]

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3 As opposed to something objective, like formal group membership or physical participation.

As these studies suggest, belonging is complex, dynamic and individual. It is influenced by both internal factors (within a person) and factors outside a person, and it is through the interaction of the two that a person develops feelings about their sense of value to and acceptance by the group.

In the context of migration, developing a sense of belonging is considered an essential element of the settlement process. In leaving their home country, migrants rupture their existing physical and social ties. Establishing life in a new country therefore not only involves meeting various practical challenges (finding housing, employment or education, becoming familiar with local places, systems etc.) but creating new connections with places and people who can contribute to the person's sense of emotional and social security. [xxix] For migrants, belonging evolves in different contexts: at the neighbourhood level and at a national level; in the different social contexts they participate in and through legal and political recognition ("I belong as much as you do..."[xxx]). When there is an unmet need to belong, individuals can experience increased stress, decreased physical and mental health and reduced capacity to participate in various spheres.[xxxi] This, in turn, can impact the process of social integration, connection with broader society and the development of the shared identity that is foundational for social cohesion. [xxxii]

4. Measuring belonging in Australia

Since 2007, the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Mapping Social Cohesion study has mapped belonging as part of its annual survey. Belonging constitutes one of the core domains of the Scanlon Index as it is believed to function as an instrumental component of Australia's social cohesion. Through this measure, belonging can be compared to previous years and we can gain a sense of trends over time. Since its baseline measure in 2007, belonging domain scores have tended to trend downwards, with the lowest domain score (77) recorded in 2024.[xxxiii]

By breaking down the belonging domain into its constitute survey questions, we can examine more closely different elements of belonging. The domain currently consists of responses to the following questions:

Domain 1: Sense of belonging

- To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture?
- To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?
- Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
  - > 'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood'
  - > 'My neighbourhood has a strong sense of community'
- How often do you feel isolated from others?
- How safe do you feel at home by yourself during the day?

These questions allow us to measure respondents' sense of belonging to Australia (question 2) and sense of community belonging (question 3a/b), along with their reported social isolation/ connection (question 4), sense of safety (question 5) and extent of shared values (question 1).

As the sample of survey respondents is so significant (about 8,000 respondents in the main sample in 2025), statistical analysis can allow us to identify and compare responses from Australian-born respondents to overseas-born Australians (migrants) as a cohort, and to those from specific countries of birth. Responses can also be delineated by gender, age group and length of residency in Australia. Relevant analysis, based on the 2025 survey results is provided in the findings section below.

Who belongs?

The breadth of data provided by the Mapping Social Cohesion survey also allows us to identify associations between belonging and other aspects of social cohesion. From recent survey results we know that:

- Overseas-born Australians tend to have a lower sense of belonging to Australia than the Australian-born population.[xxxiv]
- Among migrant Australians, those from non-European backgrounds are significantly less likely to have a sense of belonging to Australia, although this tends to reduce after controlling for the number of years migrants have lived in Australia, as non-European migrants tend to have lived in Australia for a shorter period of time on average.[xxxv]
- Recently arrived migrants have a somewhat weaker average sense of belonging.[xxxvi]
- Financial stress is the single most important factor associated with an individual's sense of belonging.[xxxvii] People experiencing financial hardships are much less likely to trust in government, institutions and other people in society, feel a substantially weaker sense of national pride and belonging and experience a greater sense of social isolation.[xxxviii]
- People who experienced the greatest degree of loneliness also report a much weaker sense of belonging.[xxxix]
- Trust of others, a sense of shared values and national unity are important for individuals' sense of belonging and for participation in the social, civic and political spheres.[xl]
- Those who experience discrimination report a significantly weaker sense of belonging and personal wellbeing.[xli]

Belonging by age and gender

By age, of those who were born overseas, sense of belonging increases as respondents age. In the 2025 sample, each age group had a statistically higher sense of belonging than the younger group. That is to say, those aged 25 to 44 had a higher sense of belonging than those aged 18 to 24; those aged 45 to 64 had a higher sense of belonging than those aged 44 and under; and so on (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – **Sense of belonging of those born overseas by age group**
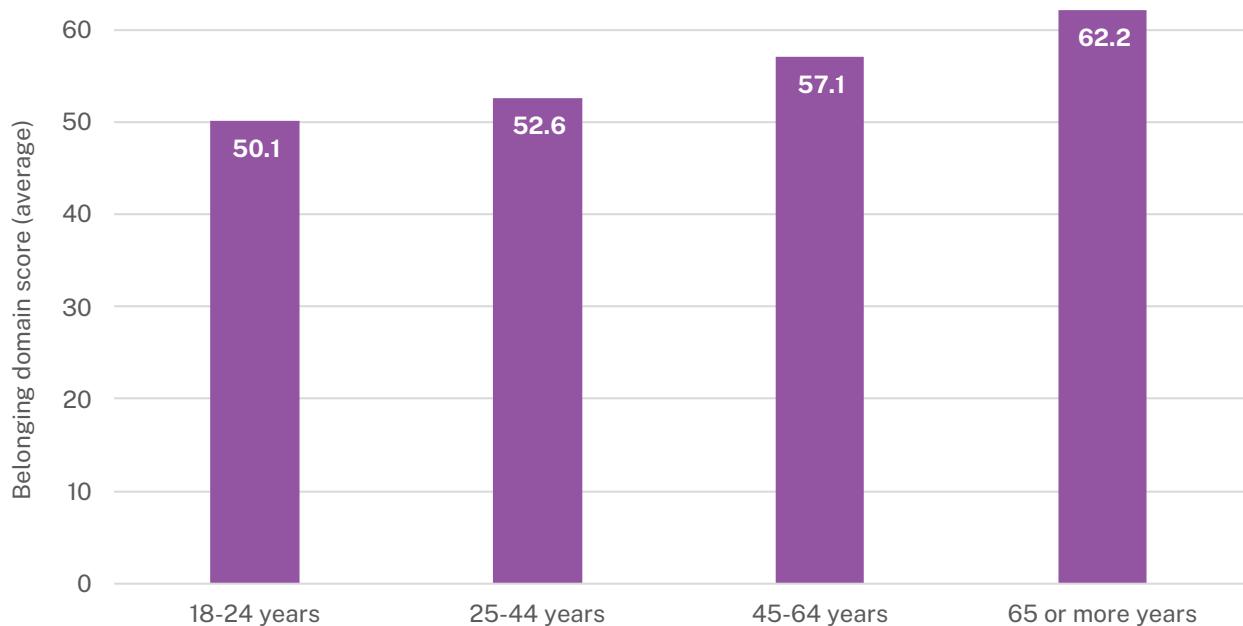
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

This same pattern emerges in the Australian born population.

Furthermore, for those born overseas, men have a statistically significantly higher sense of belonging than women. As with age, this pattern is not unique to those born overseas, as Australian born men have a higher sense of belonging than Australian born women (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – **Sense of belonging of those born overseas by gender**
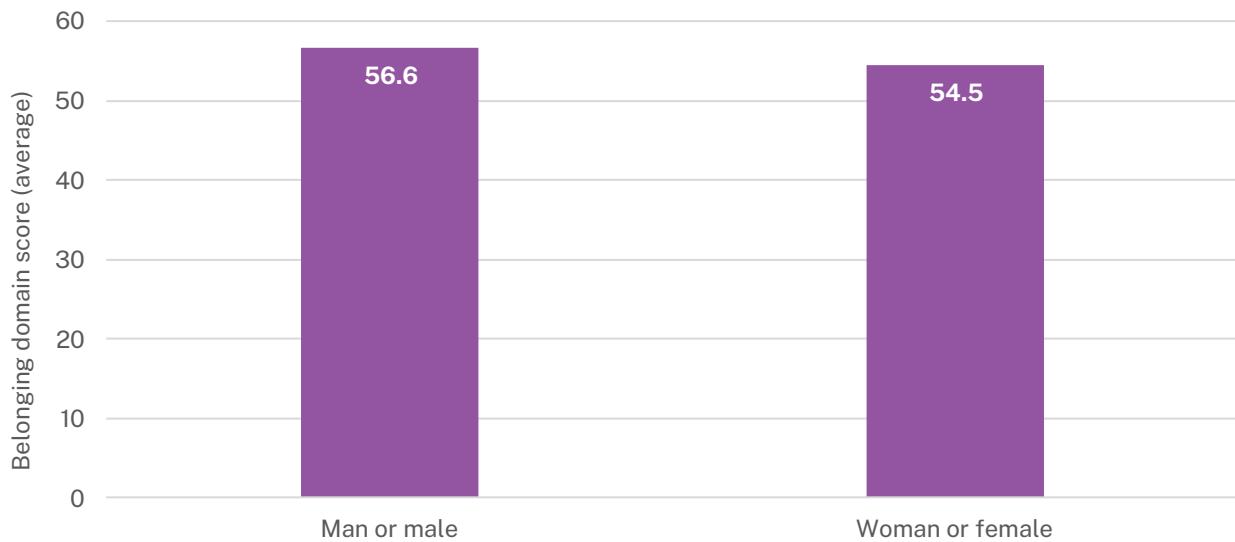
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

Generational belonging

The following figure depicts generational belonging using the Mapping Social Cohesion survey data from 2025. First generation is defined as those born overseas; second generation is defined as those born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas; and third generation is defined as those born in Australia with both parents born in Australia. We do not collect data on grandparents' country of birth.

Figure 7 – **Sense of belonging by migrant generation**
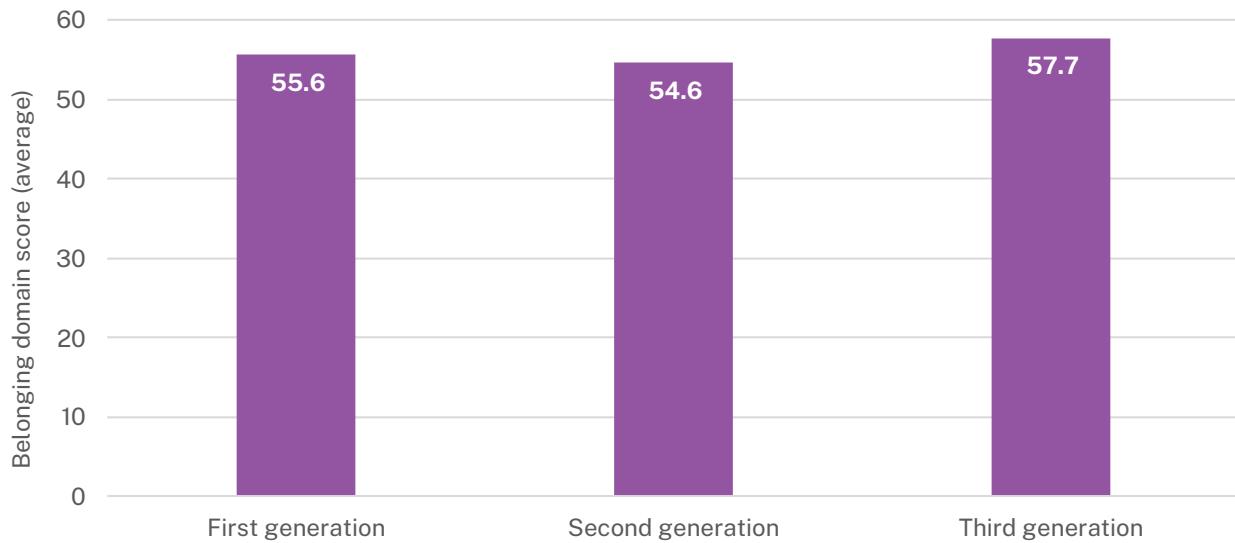
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

While there was no statistically significant difference between first- and second-generation migrants, third generation migrants had a higher average sense of belonging than both first and second-generation migrants (**Figure 7**).

5. This study

a. Approach

This study brings together both qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed methods approach to provide insights into migrants' sense of belonging.

Mixed methods research is often used to provide insights into complex social issues that cannot be easily understood using a single methodology alone.[xlii] By combining qualitative and quantitative data sources, we can gain a broader understanding of a research question, as qualitative and quantitative research provide different forms of data, with different strengths and weaknesses.

Quantitative research allows large amounts of data to be gathered quickly and efficiently. As samples sizes are often relatively large and the data collected is relatively precise and standardised, it is easier to generalise such findings to a broader group of people. At the same time, it is difficult to extrapolate the cause of peoples' behaviour from this source of data alone. At best, associations can be identified from which we can infer conclusions. However, those associations may be hiding other variables that sit behind what is being explicitly measured.

Qualitative data, on the other hand, is inefficient. It takes large amounts of human resources and time to ask questions and gather insights. Its value comes from allowing unstructured responses to questions, which can uncover insights that were unknown, unpredicted or unexpected. Issues can be explored in more depth and people can explain their behaviour or perceptions in their own words, without being given a structured way in which to respond. However, qualitative sample sizes are always necessarily small, which means that findings may be limited to the specific characteristics of those who participated in the research.

Together, a mixed methods approach provides a stronger evidence base for conclusions because both data sources have the potential to converge and therefore to corroborate each other's findings. This study therefore brings together data from the MSC study, alongside insights from qualitative interviews, to provide robust findings that can be used to guide further research, targeted programming or policy development. Where the two data sources are inconsistent with each other, this is noted in the findings section below.

b. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative

Sixty-five semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes in length were carried out between 10th June and 31st July 2025 by three researchers from the Institute.

A discussion guide was prepared to guide the interviews, which can be found in Appendix 2.

All interviews were conducted remotely (via MS Teams or Zoom). Interviewees were offered access to an interpreter if they required it, but the majority of interviews were conducted in English. Each interviewee was given a $100 reimbursement (either by electronic transfer or as a gift voucher) to thank them for their time.

Analysis

Each interview was recorded, then a written transcript was created subsequently. If a translator was used, the English version of the transcript was used for data analysis purposes. All transcripts were deidentified to protect individual identities and to ensure anonymity. At several points during the interview fieldwork period, meetings were held between the Institute's interviewers to ensure consistency in the interviewing process and to discuss key themes emerging for analysis.

Qualitative data analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out thematically once fieldwork was completed, using NVivo software — a widely used program for qualitative research. Each transcript was systematically coded, with relevant sections of text assigned to emerging themes. This process enabled themes to be traced directly back to their original raw data sources, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the interviewees' words. Alongside the coding, detailed analytical notes were produced and stored, providing a transparent record of how thematic decisions were made, strengthening the overall rigour of the analysis.

Sample

Sixty-five individuals participated in the semi-structured interviews. The sample demographics are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3 – Overview of interviewee characteristics

Interviewees by country of birth

India	Pakistan	China	The Philippines	Iraq	Nepal
15	11	10	10	9	10

Interviewees by gender

Female	Male	Non-binary
40	24	1

Interviewees by age

18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45 years +
13	32	20

Interviewees by recency of arrival

2016 onwards (more recent arrivals)[4]	2015 or earlier (longer term residents)
36	29

Effort was made to ensure that interviewees came from different states of Australia, although geographical representation was not a primary focus of the sample selection.

Interviewee recruitment and selection

A two-pronged recruitment strategy was used to identify interviewees for the study, utilising both a commercial market research recruiter and a recruiter specialising in grassroots community connections with Australian migrant communities. The rationale for this approach was that by solely using a community-focused recruiter, the study would necessarily only recruit those with strong networks or organisational ties to cultural community groups. By using a commercial recruiter in tandem with a community-focused approach, the sample could be created from those with different levels of connection to their cultural communities, widening the breadth of the study and ensuring greater representation.

Recruiters distributed invitations to a pool of potential interviewees, which included a summary of the research study. Those who expressed interest were then provided with a Plain Language Statement (PLS) with detailed information about the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits, source of funding and the intended use of the information collected. From the group of individuals who consented to participate, the recruiting organisations selected participants in accordance with the study parameters, using demographic characteristics as a guide. Importantly, the Institute had no role in the direct recruitment process and was not given any identifying information about participants prior to the interviews (only relevant demographic details). To ensure further anonymity, each participant was assigned a unique interview code, which was used to store their interview recording and transcript.

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4   Nine of these interviewees arrived in the past five years

Quantitative

Each year the Mapping Social Cohesion survey is administered to the Life in Australia panel, a national probability-based panel[5] of approximately 10,000 members. In 2025, data for the MSC survey was collected between 30th June and 14th July (concurrently with the interviews). 8,029 individuals provided responses to the survey.

Sample

In 2025, 31% of the Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) survey respondents were born overseas. Of this group, 529 were born in either China, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, or the Philippines. As the results for each of these countries of birth were too small for meaningful statistical analysis, respondents born in the aforementioned focus countries were combined into a single cohort for analytical purposes (Table 4).

Table 4 – **MSC survey responses by country of birth**

	Australian born	Overseas born	Focus countries
Number	5,569	2,460	529
Percent	69%	31%	7%

Note: Numbers are unweighted counts. Percentages are weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population. "Overseas born" includes respondents born in focus countries. Focus countries include China, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

As the focus countries cohort was too small to allow for further meaningful sub-group analysis, the findings presented that are based upon length of residency in Australia draw on the full sample of overseas-born MSC survey respondents. Within this group, 78% were classified as 'longer-term residents,' having arrived in Australia in or before 2015, while the remaining 22% were 'recent arrivals,' arriving in 2016 or later.

Analysis

The MSC survey data was analysed using SPSS, a statistical software package commonly employed in social science research. Survey responses related to belonging were categorised for targeted analysis according to key variables of interest, including country of birth, year of arrival and gender. Statistical significance was assessed using two tests: Pearson's Chi-square, to examine the strength of association between variables, and the Bonferroni correction, to reduce the likelihood of Type I errors (false positives). A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was applied in line with standard social science practice. All results presented in the findings section meet this criteria and are therefore considered statistically significant.

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5 This means every Australian has a chance of being invited to the panel.

6. Findings

a. Sense of belonging

The 2025 MSC survey results highlight notable differences in the domain of belonging between individuals born in Australia and those born in the study's focus countries. Australian-born respondents reported a stronger sense of belonging overall, with nearly half (49%) indicating they felt a great sense of belonging, compared with 32% of respondents from the focus countries. Conversely, respondents from the focus countries were more likely to report only a slight sense of belonging (17%), compared with 12% of the Australian-born population.

Respondents from the focus countries expressed a lesser sense of belonging, in comparison to respondents born in other overseas countries (Figure 9).

Patterns of belonging also varied by length of residency. Longer-term residents reported levels of belonging similar to those of the Australian-born population, with domain scores of 56.6 and 56.7 respectively. By contrast, more recent arrivals expressed a significantly lower sense of belonging (Figure 8).

Figure 8 – Sense of belonging among more recent and more established overseas-born residents compared to people born in Australia

Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

Sense of belonging also varied according to gender. Men tended to feel a stronger sense of belonging, regardless of whether they were born in Australia, born overseas or born in one of the focus countries of this study (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – **Sense of belonging by birthplace and gender**
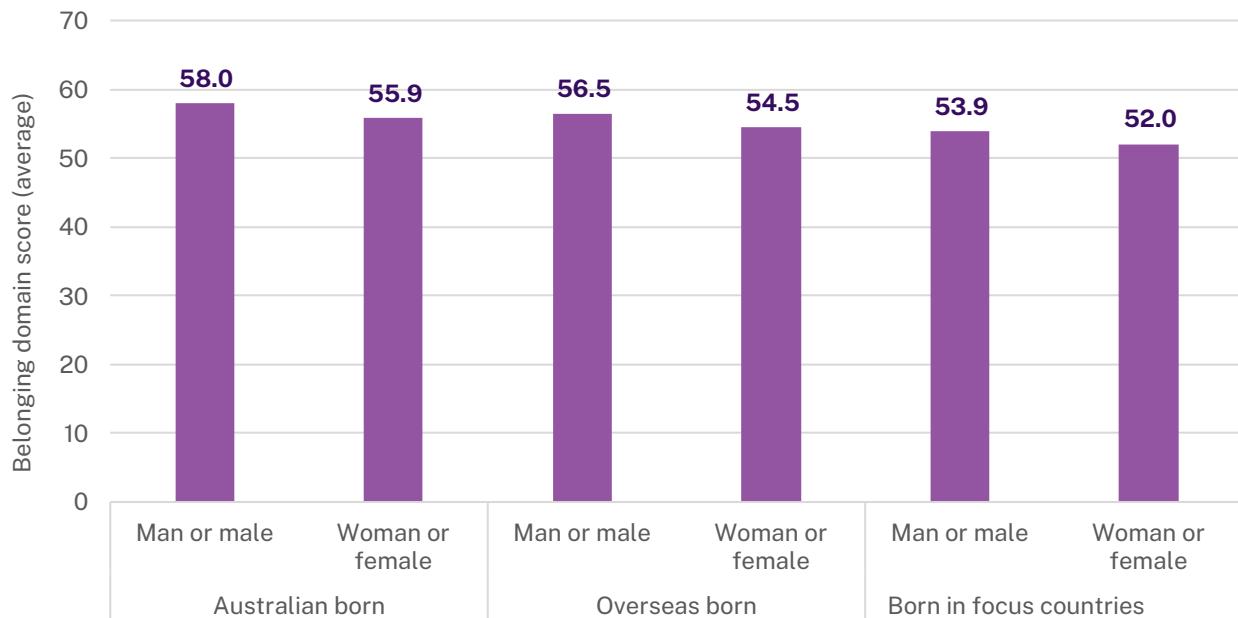
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

Patterns of belonging tended to follow a similar trend, regardless of whether the respondent was born in Australia, overseas or in one of the focus countries of this study. In general, younger people tended to experience a lesser sense of belonging than those in the older age cohorts, with those aged 65 years or older tending to experience the highest sense of belonging relative to the other age cohorts from the same place of birth (**Figure 10**).

Figure 10 – Sense of belonging by birthplace and age
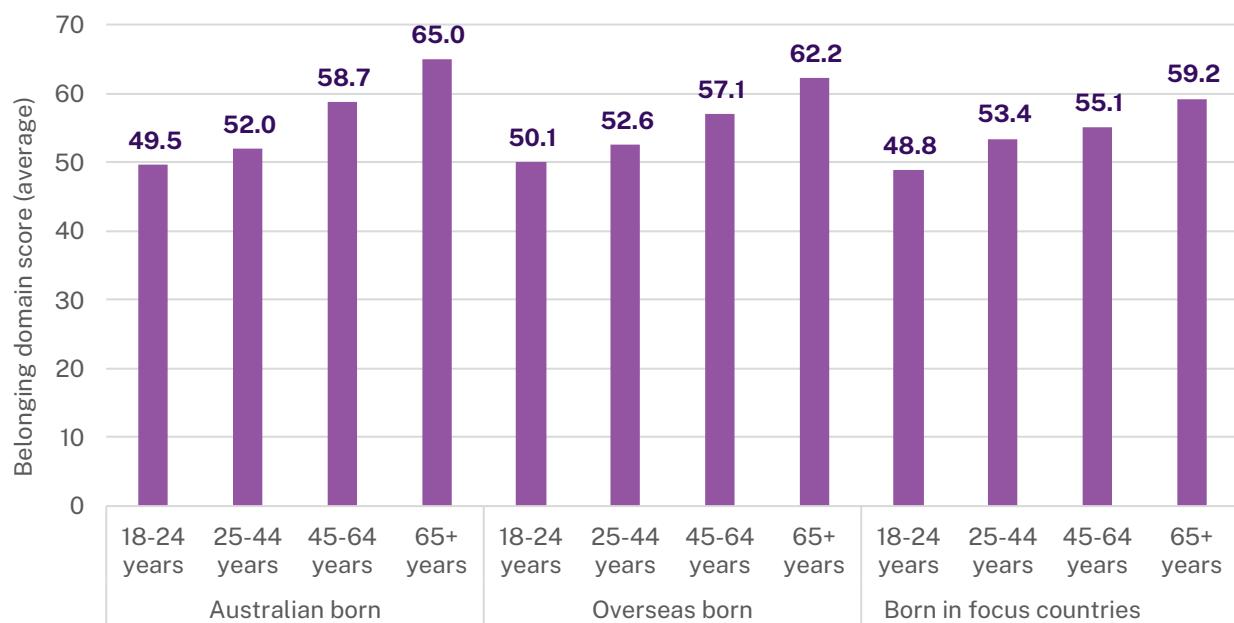
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

Experience of belonging also varied according to reported financial status for Australian-born, overseas-born or individuals born in one of the focus countries of this study. Those reporting their financial status as prosperous and very comfortable experienced a higher sense of belonging than those reporting 'just getting along' or struggling to pay bills/poor. This trend was consistent regardless of place of birth (**Figure 11**).

Figure 11 – Sense of belonging by birthplace and financial circumstances
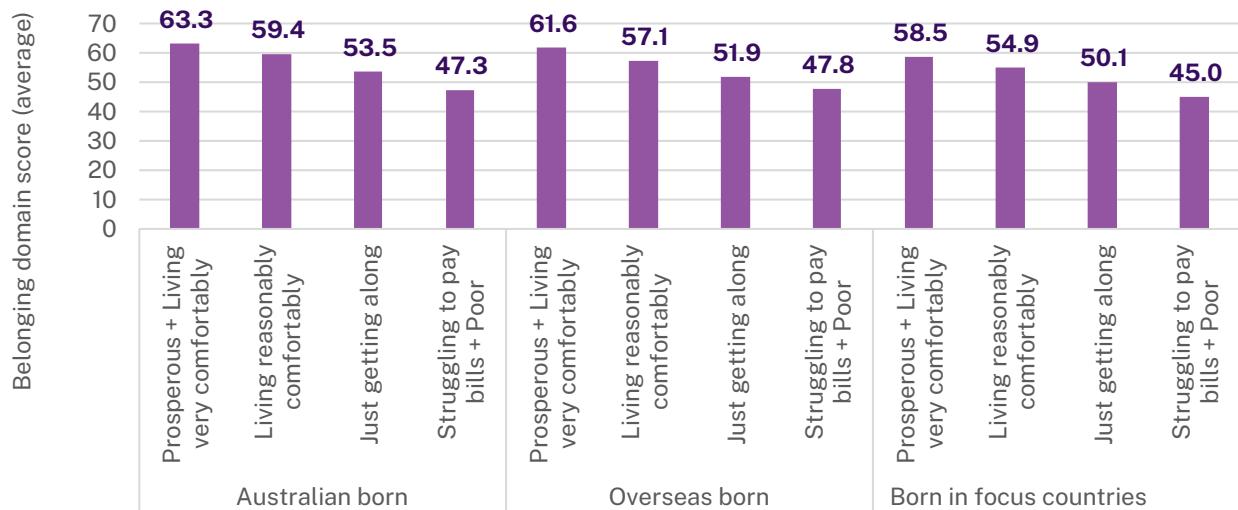
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

By occupational status, retirees born in Australia or born overseas reported a higher experience of belonging, compared to other occupational groups; however, this trend did not hold for those born in the focus countries of this study. For this cohort, those employed, whether in full time or part time work, reported a higher experience of belonging than other occupational cohorts (**Figure 12**).

Figure 12 – Sense of belonging by birthplace and occupational status
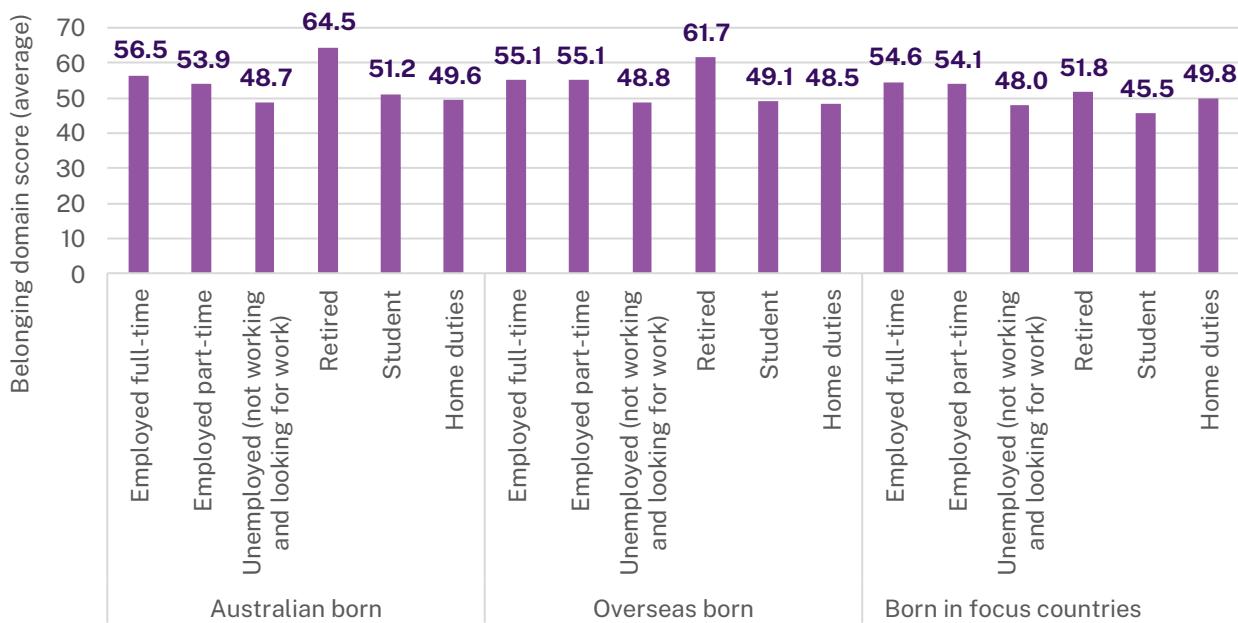
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

The following sections report findings on belonging in greater detail, focusing specifically on two dimensions: belonging at the local community or neighbourhood level and belonging to Australia as a whole.

b. Sense of community belonging

The majority of interviewees reported a sense of community belonging. When asked to elaborate where this sense came from, most interviewees referred to their social connections or relationships in the local neighbourhood as being central to their feeling of belonging. They used words or phrases like having "friends here" (INT02P), having connections with others, of feeling that people were friendly, welcoming or accepting, feeling comfortable with others or knowing (or being known by) others. In the latter case, that sense of familiarity contributed to a sense of belonging.

Another element of belonging, for several interviewees, was involvement in their local neighbourhood (typically, in a formal sense, through volunteering). Contributing to the community, and specifically to the lives of others in that community, made them feel like they belonged to it. There was a sense of emotional connection and shared purpose in their acts of giving and contributing. They were not just receiving value and positive input from living in their community but actively "giving back" to it (INT21P, INT24P). One interviewee described her life as "worth living" (INT11P) because she felt she was making a difference to others. Contributing also helped to facilitate relationships, which in turn added to interviewees' social connections in the neighbourhood.

Related to this, many interviewees spoke of their sense of belonging as coming from living in a community where people provided help and support to each other (mutual assistance). Both receiving this support and being able to provide it made individuals feel as though they belonged. This exchange of support again served to strengthen their social relationships in the neighbourhood and to build trust. Common acts (either given or received) included watching each other's properties when going on holidays, mowing another's nature strip, helping with the garden, minding pets, washing the garbage bin, helping to move furniture, giving gifts, sharing food or just knowing there was someone there who could be called upon if needed. This young Nepali woman described her relationships with her neighbours in this way:

> When we first came here, I think they just introduced themselves or we'd just meet on the road. My Indian neighbour, I think they just moved this year anyway, but they came and introduced themselves. But my other neighbours, the Lebanese neighbours, usually look after our home when we're going overseas. Even these days with so many of the crimes that are happening, they have their window open so they can see if there's any issues. For example, if we've left our garage open or something by accident, they'll let us know. They will look after your property, or something like that (INT29P).

Several individuals also spoke of belonging as coming from reaching a point where they felt competent enough to give assistance. For them, the ability to contribute signified that they were no longer outsiders but had gained the experience and knowledge needed to support those around them. One interviewee commented:

> Going to the community centre, going to different parks, wherever you go and especially to Coles as well… When you go and you're doing something and somebody asks for your help, you feel, 'Oh, okay, this was me at some time. I was asking for somebody's help and now life has come to a full circle that somebody is asking for my help.' So you're like, 'Okay, yeah, I can help you out' (INT05P).

Twelve interviewees[6] reported not feeling a sense of belonging in their community, most often attributing this to a lack of strong social connections in their neighbourhood. Some explained that they felt unwelcome, describing local residents as unfriendly, or said they felt they were perceived as "outsiders" (INT07F). Others acknowledged having formed local ties but characterised these relationships as superficial, which reinforced their sense of disconnection. A few interviewees linked the absence of deeper social connections to specific factors, such as cultural differences. For example, one interviewee from China, who had lived in Australia for six years, explained that the absence of a shared social and cultural background created barriers to forming relationships. She reflected, "the TV shows, the sports they talk about, I have absolutely no idea with" (INT18F).

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6   These individuals came from different cultural backgrounds: India (2), China (5), Iraq (3), Pakistan (1), Philippines (1). Eight of these individuals had immigrated to Australia recently (between 2018 and 2022) and can be considered new arrivals.

Another interviewee pointed to language barriers that made it difficult to build connections outside his own cultural group. Two interviewees had only just moved to their neighbourhoods and attributed their lack of belonging to the fact they had yet to put down 'roots' in the local area.

A majority proportion of the interviewees who reported not feeling a sense of community belonging were recent arrivals, having migrated between 2018 and 2022. These interviewees represented all of the study's focus countries, suggesting that the absence of community belonging was not associated with any particular national cohort.

Similar differences in feelings of belonging according to length of residence were apparent in the 2025 MSC data. 71% of migrants who had lived here for longer agreed that they felt they belonged in their neighbourhoods, compared to 64% of those who had arrived in Australia more recently.

c. Valued characteristics of the local neighbourhood

In addition to describing their sense of belonging to their local community, the interviewees were asked to identify the qualities of their neighbourhood they valued. Although not always framed explicitly in terms of belonging, these characteristics were commonly identified as positive aspects of the community environment that fostered connection to people and place and reinforced positive sentiment about the local area.

Social connections

Again, positive social dynamics were a frequently mentioned and highly valued characteristic of the local area for many interviewees. They described their neighbourhood as being friendly; of people being nice, caring, connected or "close knit" (INT29P); that people were "open" to others (INT19F) or willing to have a "chat" (INT21F). For the interviewees, social connections ranging from incidental gestures of warmth to deeper relationships communicated acceptance and inclusion in their neighbourhood. One Nepali interviewee described her feelings about her local area in this way:

> I feel very sad when I go on holiday. People feel very happy to go on holiday, I feel very sad to leave this place because this is so connected. It has made me alive. Before, I was not really a very community person. I was just going to work and study and come back. But after coming here, I work Monday to Saturday and Saturday evening and Sunday, the whole day is my community day and the friends day (INT06P).

Cultural diversity

A few interviewees highlighted the multicultural makeup of their community as a valued characteristic. For example, an interviewee from India observed that the openness of her local community was closely linked to its diversity:

> The major population is Vietnamese based, and then comes English, and then comes Indians, but when you go to the cafe, the way people talk to each other, or they're like, 'Okay, where are you guys from? Where in this suburb do you live?' It feels that everything is mixed, and they don't want to have the specific relationship only with a particular culture or anything. People are open (INT19F).

Several interviewees emphasised that having members of their own cultural community living nearby was an important and valued characteristic of their neighbourhood. One practical outcome of this was access to culturally familiar and appropriate food — such as specific grocery stores or halal butchers — in close proximity. Beyond convenience, these cultural connections often created relationships and a sense of social safety that mitigated having extended family living overseas. For some, this meant having others to share and celebrate important cultural or religious traditions with.

Interviewees also noted that the presence of others from their cultural community nearby made it easier for visiting family members, particularly older parents with limited English, to navigate daily life with minimal assistance. In one case a young man from Nepal explained that his parents' ability to connect with others from their community not only supported them but helped him to form social relationships within the neighbourhood:

And my mom and dad, they were here a couple of months ago as well, so while they were here, they made a lot of friends because they walk around the neighbourhood a lot. And then there's a Nepalese community here as well, so they've made a lot of friends. And now I know mostly all of them, but maybe before that I just don't have time to go around and then meet people because when my mom and dad were here, they're free. They're not working. All they could do is just walk around and make friends (INT40P).

Transport links

Another valued feature of the local community mentioned by the interviewees was transport links, particularly public transportation, although central road linkages were also appreciated. Among the interviewees, several did not drive or own a car, so public transport was imperative for getting to work or study. Conversely, inconsistent or cumbersome public transport links were described as a negative characteristic of some neighbourhoods. Transportation was essential for individuals to connect to important spaces for daily life or community involvement, including

shops, community centres, the CBD and the beach. It also facilitated social bonds with those living in other suburbs.

Safety

Safety emerged as another valued characteristic of the local area. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of living in a community where they felt secure — whether by deliberately choosing a neighbourhood perceived as safe, valuing the absence of high levels of crime, or knowing there were neighbours they could rely on if needed. Women, more often than men, highlighted safety as a particularly important feature of their local community. At the same time, concerns about safety did not appear to be concentrated within any specific country group.

From the MSC data, we know that individuals coming from the focus countries of this study tend to feel less safe at home during the day compared to Australian-born individuals (Figure 13). Almost half of the survey respondents who were born in one of the focus countries of this study reported feeling fairly or very worried about being a victim of crime, compared to 29% of those born in Australia.

Figure 13 – Sense of safety among people born in focus countries and people born in Australia
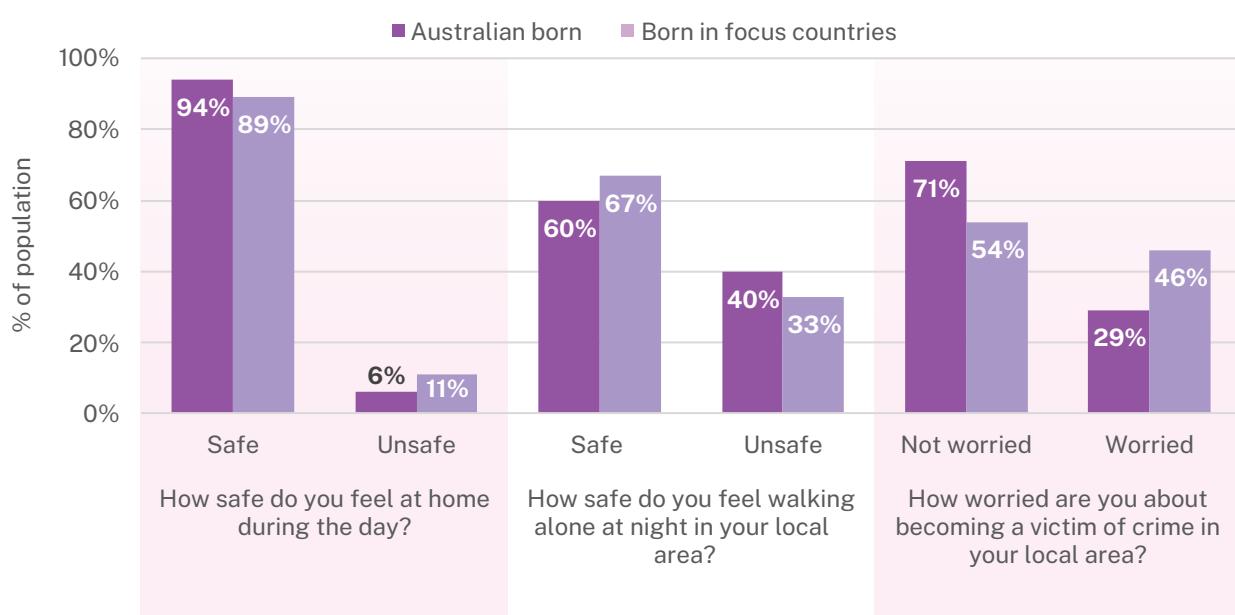
Note: Percentages are weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population. Response options are aggregated. "Safe" combines response categories "Very safe" and "Fairly safe" and "Unsafe" combines "A bit unsafe" and "Very unsafe"; "Worried" combines "Very worried" and "Fairly worried" and "Worried" combines "Not very worried" and "Not at all worried". Focus countries include China, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

d. Valued community facilities

Community facilities like libraries, playgrounds, sporting clubs, community centres and places of worship can play a central role in fostering a positive sense of place and strengthening social relationships within a neighbourhood. They provide shared spaces where individuals can meet, interact and participate in activities with others, which in turn can help to build trust, reciprocity and local social networks. Community facilities also help to foster attachment to a local area, making it more liveable and enjoyable and by providing places and spaces to build memories and have experiences.

Among interviewees, the library was the most frequently used community facility. Individuals described visiting libraries to study, read or borrow books (including in-language books), attend courses or workshops, use the computers or printers or practice their English. For several, the library also served as an affordable outing — somewhere to take the children, enjoy a change of scenery and access comfortable facilities at no cost. One woman from Pakistan highlighted the importance of her local library for her:

> For libraries, definitely it was my need. Because I have nothing and my children have to watch something. So I was taking them and there were so many programmes all the time and I have no money, honestly. So that was the best place (INT10P).

Sporting facilities were the next most frequently used community spaces, most commonly the local swimming pool, tennis and badminton courts, cricket grounds, ovals, basketball and netball courts and skateparks. Interviewees described using these facilities for a variety of purposes, including to maintain physical fitness, pursue hobbies, provide outings for their children or for social interaction:

> So that's how I meet my husband's friends… I accompany him in the cricket ground as well. I go with the kids, and the kids play in the playground and play around, and then I just sit down and interact with some of the friends who come in to play with him and things like that (INT03P).

Local parks and playgrounds served a similar purpose, particularly for interviewees living in apartments or townhouses with limited outdoor space. One participant noted that playgrounds were a completely new experience for her children, offering opportunities they had not had in the Philippines:

> Yeah, seeing that your kids are happy, just playing in a playground. Of course I will feel happy too and just giving them time to play, which is what the kids need… Actually, my eldest always says, 'Mommy, why school in the Philippines doesn't have any playground?' Honestly, because every school here has a playground. So I said, 'I don't know…' but here, yeah, they're happy that there is a playground also in the school where they are able to play before and after school. It's a big help for the kids actually having a playground (INT12P).

Less frequently, community centres were also used by the interviewees, usually as places to attend short courses.

e. Sense of belonging to Australia

Many interviewees described feeling a sense of belonging to Australia. The language they used to express this was notably different from how they spoke about community belonging. For some, belonging to Australia stemmed from a sense of being settled: from familiarity with the country that had developed over time or from recognising the significant years they had spent here. Others associated belonging with a deep emotional connection to Australia or from a sense of loyalty that extended beyond their ties to their country of origin. For some, belonging was linked to their decision to make Australia home, while for others it was grounded in their legal status — holding permanent residency or being afforded rights.[7]

Several interviewees spoke of their sense of belonging to Australia as having come from their adoption of Australian cultural values, such as exposure to and acceptance of multiculturalism. In this sense they were demonstrating 'Australian-ness' by adopting these values and therefore belonged. Related to this, two interviewees spoke of their sense of belonging as having come from recognising they had been (and were

7 This was particularly important for several interviewees who had come from refugee backgrounds.

continuing to be) shaped by Australia's peoples and values and by the experiences they had lived through here.

Interviewees who did not feel a sense of belonging to Australia often attributed this to not feeling 'Australian,' having different cultural values or lifestyles or lacking familiarity with local culture and language. Others cited stronger ties to their country of birth — through family, friends or the length of time they had lived there — or challenges related to their visa status. No clear patterns emerged among this group in terms of country of birth, recency of arrival, gender or age. However, the MSC data found that longer term residents tended to feel a greater sense of belonging to Australia, compared to those who arrived here more recently. This difference may be attributed to the survey asking respondents to record their *extent* of belonging to Australia, whereas the interviewees were only asked about whether they felt they belonged.

Notions of home

A more common experience among interviewees than not feeling a sense of belonging to Australia was feeling connected to both Australia and their country of birth. Several participants described a dual sense of home — of being settled, comfortable and established in Australia, while still longing for their country of origin. Some referred to this as having a 'divided heart' or 'two hearts:' one for Australia and one for their birthplace. Family ties in their country of origin often contributed to this sentiment, but several interviewees also described a more intangible connection to their home country. An interviewee from India illustrated this by reflecting on how his own attachment to Australia differed to that of his children:

> … my neurons are programmed in different way… The same way if I take my kids today to India, let's settle out there, we'll have a farm there… They will never be 100% there because they're born and brought up looking at the flora and fauna here, they've smelled the air from here. Like my DNA is made of a different kind — my feelings are there. My half heart will be here, and half heart will be in India again (INT02P).

An interviewee from Pakistan described a similar feeling:

> But you can't forget your birthplace. We are still very emotional about our birthplace and when there were cricket matches and all that, we always support our country Pakistan. But when there's Australia and Pakistan, we are a bit confused. And at that time, we say, okay who will win? But we can't leave Pakistan by heart, yeah, obviously (INT15P).

f. Social connection

Social connections are an important component of individual wellbeing and community cohesion. They provide emotional support, practical assistance and a sense of security for individuals and are crucial for community connection. Social connections are crucial for a sense of belonging and for building supportive and connected communities.

Social connections across cultural groups

According to the 2025 MSC data, respondents born in any one of the focus countries of this study are significantly more likely to have more friends from national, ethnic or religious backgrounds different to their own, compared to the Australian-born population. Specifically:

- 25% of respondents born in one of the focus countries had five to nine friends from a different cultural background, compared to 18% of the broader population.
- Only 11% of those born in one of the focus countries had either none or only one friend from a different cultural background, compared to 25% of those born in Australia.

The interviews revealed similar trends. Most interviewees reported having friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds to their own.

Individuals with friendships primarily from the same cultural community

Interviewees who had relationships predominantly within their own cultural group came from all of the study's focus countries, indicating it was not a trend confined to any particular cohort. Nor was it associated with a specific age group or length of residency, as it was observed among different age groups and among newer arrivals and longer-term residents.

Participants gave varied reasons for primarily forming relationships within their cultural community. Many described it as easier to connect with those who shared a common language, cultural background, traditions and celebrations, noting that these shared elements created a deeper sense of understanding and familiarity. However, this was not always the case. One interviewee explained that for him, social connections within his cultural community could be more difficult, as long-standing in-country divisions and barriers had carried over into the Australian context:

> I don't know how well you know about India, but I'm from the north, and so north Indians are very different to south Indians or east Indians or even from different states, even from a neighbouring state… So there isn't really that sort of cohesion, and I'm just going to say it, I think it's a function of the fact that the British ruled India for so long and they created divisions within India, which have existed through generations. But I mean, I go to the Sikh temple, I'm Sikh, I was born Sikh, my religion is Sikh. So, I go to the Sikh temple now and then. When I meet people and greet them, there's no strong connection there… And that's true for any friends that you have — it's a personal relationship. And yes, definitely when you meet somebody who's like-minded and so on and if they're from the same culture that you are, it's that much easier for you to become friends than it is from another culture (INT02F).

Another facilitating factor was proximity. Several interviewees noted they had found it easier to make friends with others from their cultural community because there were many individuals or families from the same cultural background already living in their area. A similar dynamic occurred with those working in sectors or workplaces that tended to be dominated by a particular cultural cohort — it was simply easier to make friends with those with whom they had regular contact.

Interviewees also mentioned barriers to developing friendships with those from other cultural backgrounds. These included personal factors such as their own lack of English proficiency, self-confidence or social skills, perceived cultural differences (i.e. not knowing about Australian TV shows or having other points of connection), or lack of time (due to work or family pressures). Several interviewees said they wished to build relationships with a more diverse group of friends but had not yet found an opportunity.

Where are social connections forged?

The workplace emerged as one of the primary settings where the interviewees had built friendships. Many described valued social connections with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, which often extended beyond work hours into weekend activities and online contact.

Educational institutions were also important spaces for forming relationships. These included high school, university (through classes and student groups), TAFE courses and English classes. Social connections were not limited to the students themselves: several parents of school-aged children reported making friends with other parents at school drop-off and pick-up, through volunteering at school or via their children's friendships. Similar opportunities were noted in kindergartens, childcare centres and playgroups, which provided informal spaces for parents to meet others.

One interviewee, who had recently arrived from the Philippines, described how she met her first and only friend through a school connection:

> Actually, no, I just have one. They're Samoan and my kids and their kids are schoolmates, yeah, and their house is just in front of ours. That's why we became friends. So, whenever we have occasion here in our house, we invite them and they're so nice (INT12P).

Another interviewee, who had been here much longer, described the importance of school-based relationships to her family:

> Well, they are my children's classmate's parents. Yeah, we got along and then we made an effort so that all our children play together, they grow up together. Essentially, they became a family. We go to Christmas with them. So, we do a lot of events with them (INT36P).

Places of worship, sporting clubs and volunteering offered interviewees further opportunities to meet and develop relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. These spaces typically brought together people from diverse backgrounds around a common interest, which facilitated connection that often led to friendship.

Several interviewees also spoke of meeting people in their local neighbourhood who had become their friends. These connections were most commonly between neighbours, but some interviewees had just met people in local public spaces, such as parks or playgrounds. For adults who were more reserved, their children often served as facilitators of new interactions. Neighbourhood group chats were also useful for building social connections.

A connecting factor - the migrant experience

A notable trend in the responses related to social connections was the number of interviewees who had developed close friendships with others from migrant backgrounds. The shared experience of being 'new' — navigating settlement, adjustment and challenges — created a strong sense of connection, often equal to or even less complicated than that based solely on shared cultural background. In some cases, these relationships formed pragmatically; for example, by studying within an international student cohort or attending English courses at TAFE, where individuals had the opportunity to naturally connect with others in similar circumstances. However, interviewees suggested that the bond forged through the shared experience of migration often extended well beyond these initial contexts. One interviewee from India illustrated this in his response:

> There was one person, a good close friend to me, he himself was a migrant from Vietnam... I always respected his views because I found naturally that the guy was not exaggerating and showing a beautiful picture all the time, rather he was giving real feedback of what he felt when he came to Australia and then how he brought all his family to migrate here. He was my close friend, and he helped me to settle here in Canberra... (INT01P).

A young woman from the Philippines recounted similarly, noting that this shared experience even extended to those from second generation migrant backgrounds:

> Whereas one of my good friends, he actually had a very similar experience to me. He came from Spain and he came to Australia when he was 12. He came from Spain when he was 12, so we had similar experiences. Even my partner actually also has had a very similar experience. My partner is English. So, he moved from London when he was also 12, actually. Moved here, went to high school... Now that I think about it, we actually have had very similar experiences. And I guess one of my friends, she's half-Aussie and half-Viet, so she was born and raised here but her mum moved to Australia. So, I guess there is a common denominator between all of us now that I think about it... (INT15F).

Social isolation

Only a couple of interviewees mentioned they had not developed any friendships in Australia. These individuals were all coupled (in a married or domestic partnership, with or without children). Similarly, according to the MSC data, only a small proportion of individuals from the focus countries of this study reported experiencing social isolation.[8]

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8 14% of those born in one of the focus countries reported they never feel isolated, compared to 20% of the Australian-born population.

The role of informal and formal cultural networks in settlement and integration

Cultural networks were clearly central to the settlement and integration process for many interviewees. These networks offered a wide range of support, from providing accommodation — either by directly housing newcomers for weeks or months or helping them secure rental housing — to making introductions within the cultural community, linking individuals to government services such as Centrelink and Medicare, explaining public transport, sharing information about English courses and offering general advice. In most cases, this support came not from formal cultural associations but through informal networks, including extended family members who had migrated earlier, friends already settled in Australia, work colleagues, schoolmates from their home country or acquaintances from the same cultural background met incidentally. For those without such networks, however, the initial period of arrival and settlement was described as particularly difficult.

A recently arrived interviewee from Iraq described her experience:

> …loneliness. It was like you don't know anything. The shopping, where to go… No one is around to help. It was so hurting (INT32P).

g. Experiences of discrimination/racism

Experiences of discrimination or racism have the power to significantly undermine a sense of belonging by creating feelings of 'otherness.' Such acts have the potential to disrupt an individual's feelings of being accepted or valued as part of a community or nation. They can erode trust, weaken social connections and discourage participation in community life.

According to the MSC data, respondents born in one of the focus countries are significantly more likely to have experienced discrimination because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the last 12 months. In 2025, 45% of those born in one of the focus countries of this study stated they had experienced discrimination, compared to 13% of Australian born respondents (Figure 14).

Figure 14 – **Reported experiences of discrimination in the past 12 months among people born in the focus countries and people born in Australia**

Legend: ■Yes ■No

- Australian born: Yes 13%, No 87%
- Born in focus countries: Yes 45%, No 55%

x-axis: % of population (0% to 100%)
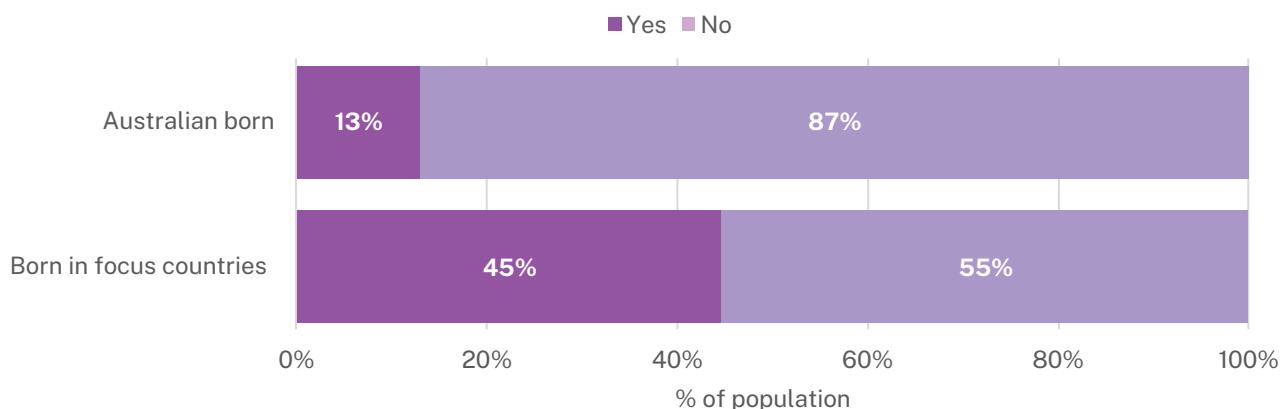
Note: Percentages are weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population. Focus countries include China, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

The rate of discrimination reported by those in one of the focus countries of this study was very similar to the rate reported by overseas-born respondents in general (Figure 15).

Figure 15 – Sense of belonging by birthplace and experiences of discrimination
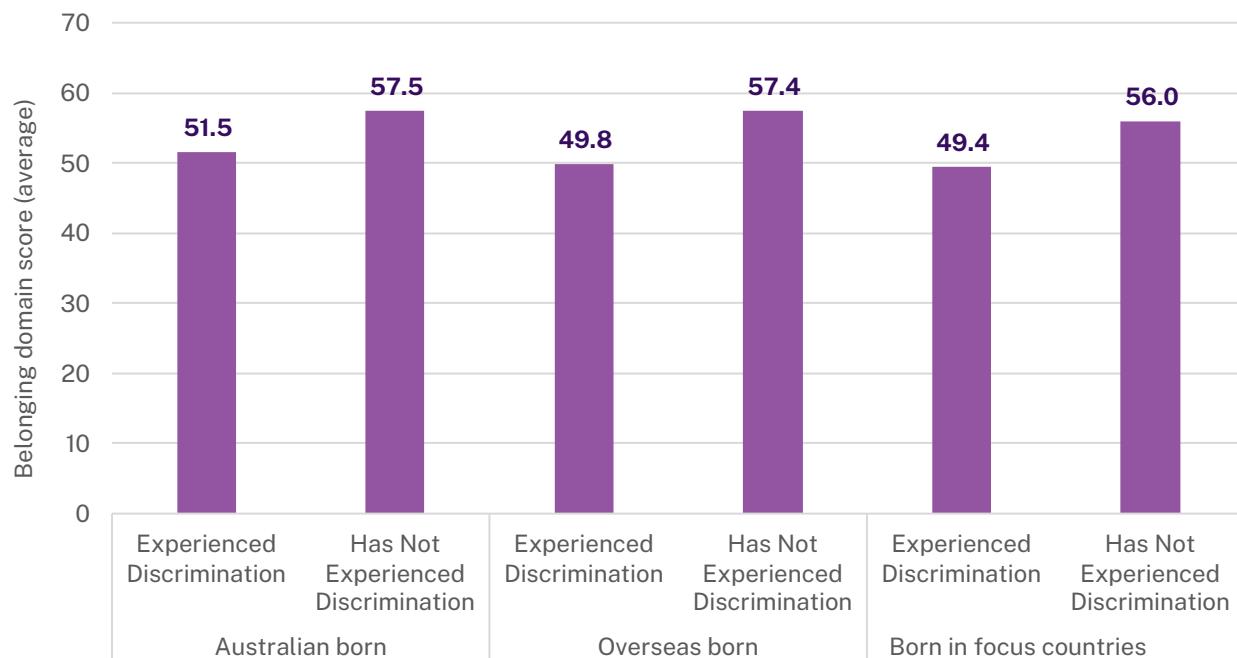
Note: Domain scores are based on the redeveloped Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and weighted to be representative of Australian adult population.
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2025

When the results are broken by gender, it is evident that women are disproportionately impacted by experiences of discrimination. 51% of women who were born in one of the focus countries reported experiencing discrimination in the past 12 months, compared to 12% of women who were born in Australia.

Similar to the MSC results, many of the interviewees reported having experienced racism or discrimination since arriving in Australia (just over a third of the individuals interviewed). Out of these individuals, a larger proportion were longer term residents[9] and female. There were no clear trends in terms of country of origin or age group.

The experiences reported by the interviewees included: being subjected to derogatory comments or insults, being told they were taking away opportunities from Australians or should 'go back to their country,' being stared at, being bullied, physical assault or feeling as though they were not being taken seriously when dealing with authorities.

Some of the interviewees made efforts to contextualise what had happened, either downplaying what they had experienced or reasoning that what had occurred should not change their view of all Australians. For instance, an interviewee from India reflected:

> In my case, because I have a beard and I wear a turban, I suppose was travelling somewhere, people will point at me and say Osama. Osama meaning Osama Bin Laden... That happened quite a lot of times, but I didn't feel that bad at all because I know if people don't know about something, they assume something. And maybe some people were not saying Osama [as in Bin Laden] but maybe they want to relate to me as a Muslim person. I'm a Sikh person but that's not an issue at all for me because anyway, I respect them.

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9   This particular finding was not replicated in our analysis of MSC data. About 44% of respondents born overseas who arrived in or after 2016 reported having experienced discrimination in the past 12 months compared to 22% of respondents born overseas who arrived in or before 2015.

He went on to say:

> So nothing was too big, too big a challenge to deter me or to put a bad feeling in my mind. I knew most of the people are much nicer because there's some very small people who are narrow-minded and they're too narrow-minded because they don't have exposure. Like my Caucasian friends also, they don't even know much about Christianity because they don't go to church, how would they know about my religion? So, because my bar was too high, nobody could raise anything to come to the level to break my heart (INT02P).

Still, for some interviewees, the experiences had stayed with them for many years and they still felt emotional when relating their story. A young woman from the Philippines, who had come to Australia as a child, recalled:

> I guess, with my parents, they didn't really share anything. But I guess for me being emotional now, I did grow up, I guess, back in those days... It was a really Australian kind of school environment... I think they didn't know any better. So clearly I was bullied, and because of that environment we were just taught to, I don't know, bear with it. It was definitely difficult living in those days because I guess we didn't have the parental support because they didn't know any better to handle those issues. Also, we didn't express being bullied, because I think we didn't know what that was. But looking back, I know that I definitely was. And I know when I do think about my high school period, particularly, I blocked it out (INT10F).

h. Civic participation

Civic participation is a key component of social cohesion, as it enables individuals to contribute to the collective life of their local community and to society more broadly. Participation in activities like volunteering, joining community groups or contributing to local decision-making not only strengthens democratic processes but fosters social networks, trust and a sense of belonging at both the community and national levels. For migrants in particular, this form of engagement can provide pathways to integration by building skills, expanding social connections and affirming their role as active community members.

Unpaid help and volunteering

The majority of interviewees reported that they had provided unpaid help to others or undertaken volunteer work — either formally or informally — since arriving in Australia.

Several had engaged in formal volunteering, most often through social service organisations such as the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre or St Vincent's, emergency service organisations like St Johns Ambulance, community organisations such as the Lions Club or environmental groups involved in recycling and sustainability. Other formal activities included volunteering in aged care centres, domestic violence support services and animal shelters.

More commonly, however, interviewees described informal volunteering. Many supported cultural groups or associations by taking on administrative tasks, teaching skills (such as language, dance or technology), helping to organise community events or producing radio or other media. Others contributed within places of worship by cleaning, playing music, undertaking administrative roles, serving food or assisting elderly community members. Parents often supported their children's sporting clubs by running barbecues, setting up grounds or umpiring. Schools were another frequent site of informal volunteering, where interviewees assisted with tutoring, maintenance, classroom support or fundraising.

Notably, around one-third of the interviewees reported providing unpaid help specifically to other new migrants. Importantly, this support often extended beyond their own cultural group. For example, one Filipino interviewee described why she chose to provide assistance:

> I just remember now that we had two Chinese students that rented with us a room because we went to do the student exchange... Yeah, yeah. I think once I landed my foot strong and steady, I just gave a hand to the other person as well because they don't want to face the same issue I had... Just sharing of knowledge and just helping out when they're in need (INT12F).

The forms of unpaid assistance described by interviewees ranged from very practical support — such as offering accommodation or transportation to newcomers — to providing advice on matters like setting up bank accounts, sourcing furniture, navigating public transport, finding employment, building networks, or completing visa documentation.

Although interviewees were not specifically asked about their motivations for providing unpaid help or volunteering, several shared their reasons. These included a wish to pass on knowledge, a desire to support those in need, the opportunity to gain vocational skills or expand social networks, the appeal of a cost-free social activity, and a feeling of empathy stemming from having once been in the same situation themselves. In many instances, participants noted that they had no prior social connection to the individuals they assisted:

> There will be a friend who'll be like, 'My cousin's here,' or just someone who's like, 'Oh, someone told me about you,' and they've messaged me and I'm like, 'Yeah, okay. Cool. How can I help?' (INT31P).

Involvement in community groups

The 2025 MSC data did not show any statistically significant differences between those born in the focus countries and the Australian-born population when it came to participation in social or religious groups or the frequency of socialisation. Almost half (41%) of those born in Australia had been actively involved in a social or religious group in the past 12 months, compared to 42% of those born in one of the focus countries. There were no further significant differences between involvement by gender or recency of residence.

About half of the interviewees reported involvement in social, religious or other groups in their community. The most common group individuals were involved in was religious groups, followed by cultural groups, sporting groups (or gyms), parents groups, university groups, women's groups, art groups or environmental groups. Involvement in groups served primarily social purposes: as a way to meet new people, make friends or socialise. A young woman from India described how proactive involvement in groups had facilitated her social relationships at university:

> I'm an extremely extroverted person. I could talk a leg off a chair, so I think that made it very easy for me. I met a lot of friends through law school. I was super actively involved in uni, so I did a lot of society stuff there. The clubs... I got involved in student politics, attended a lot of events, did all of that. Played a lot of sport. So everything I could do and then some more, I did that. That's how I met a lot of friends... (INT31P).

Barriers to involvement in groups

Among interviewees who reported no involvement in community groups, women and longer-term residents were more common. Reasons for non-participation varied, but the most frequent were lack of time or energy due to work commitments, followed by family responsibilities. Only a small number expressed a genuine lack of interest in joining groups; rather, several individuals indicated they hoped to participate in the future when circumstances allowed.

Participation in community events

Around half of the interviewees reported attending a community event or festival in their local area. The most common were cultural celebrations (such as Refugee Week, multicultural festivals and Lunar New Year), followed by council-run events (including fireworks, Australia Day celebrations and outdoor movie nights), religious celebrations (Eid, Diwali, Holi, Christmas, Teej), and a range of private or local festivals (such as beer or oyster festivals, kite festivals, car racing events, or Easter egg hunts).

Interviewees gave varied reasons for attending, including opportunities for socialising, building relationships within the local community, and general entertainment. One Nepali interviewee described how taking part in a community event had opened the door to further involvement in local activities:

> Whenever I see any event happening, and especially if it's out of work time, I do like to take the ticket and go and see how it goes. I went one time to [the local area] for Refugee Week. So in that time, they connected me and one of my police friends, she's from Iraq, and she introduced me to the [local] interfaith network. Then I got the membership and now I [have a prominent role], which is really great... I have friends from Iran, Iraq, so whenever they do an event, they invite me and also I also invite them to the programmes (INT06P).

Among interviewees who had attended religious or cultural events, several noted that their participation was not limited to their own cultural or faith-based celebrations. For example, one participant from the Philippines, who identified as Catholic, described attending Eid festivities:

> There was one recently, I forgot what they're celebrating, but it's a Muslim event and they closed that side of Guildford and they have concerts, they have stalls, they had food events. They would close off the main street and they would have stalls there as well. It's June, July because I would be wearing a jacket. Sorry, I forget the name of the festival but, definitely, when there's food, we would attend (INT11F).

Another interviewee from Pakistan explained that she participated in the events of a different cultural community as there were no celebrations specific to her own culture available nearby:

> There are not many events for Pakistani community, but sometimes...not sometimes, most of the time, they're creating so many events for Indian communities. So, though we are different, still, we have some similarities. So yeah, I have attended few events like that (INT10P).

Many of the interviewees saw community events as forums to learn about or share cultural knowledge and information in the community. This young man from China described his observations at a local Chinese cultural festival:

> I will see some other countries people will come to this event, to come to Chinese festival events. And they also want to know Chinese culture. And I see many Chinese people happy to tell them and they are very happy to know, to learn the Chinese culture, to make friend with many people (INT25P).

There were two reasons given for why individuals had not attended events in their community. The first was that there were none available in their local area. The second was that they were too busy to attend (due to work or family pressures).

Places where individuals seek information about their local community

The interviewees described a range of ways they had come across or sought information about community events. Social media was by far the most commonly mentioned source. Individuals followed platforms such as local Facebook groups and digital noticeboards, recognising these served as central hubs for community announcements. Many participants also relied on curated feeds like a *What's On in* [local city] Instagram page or culturally specific platforms such as Chinese TikTok and Red Book for such information.

Word of mouth was also highly influential. Friends, neighbours, cultural community members and co-workers often passed on information about events, sometimes inviting individuals directly. These personal recommendations not only helped to convey information about what was happening in the local area but facilitated trust and provided a social incentive to attend. One newly arrived individual from Nepal described his experience:

> Some of the friends, they refer, 'oh we got these things over here, let's go and try.' Then, we were exploring. [So] word of mouth (INT20P).

Many of the interviewees perceived their local council to be an important source of information about what was happening in the local community. Several had subscribed to the local council newsletter or their social media page or browsed their website regularly to seek out local event information. Others had seen advertisements in public spaces, such as in the local library. From this, the interviewees perceived the local council positively, as a body contributing to social opportunities in their neighbourhood. An interviewee from the Philippines commented:

And in terms of local activity, they do a lot of cultural ones. So say, for example, they'll have one themed for Thai people, Japanese, or one across all Asian countries. And they also do lots of activities during summer. So they have a whole six-week programme in terms of these are all the free things that you can attend, as well as weekend events that they host at some parks, which it's really great. I've been to most of it, and they do free open-air cinema during the summer nights. And it's really good just because, I guess, you can then just connect with the same people you connected with before and go, "By the way, we're going here. We might see you." But yeah, it's been really good. I feel like they do a lot for the community (INT10F).

i. Other emerging themes

The challenge to find meaningful work

Close to half of the interviewees stated that their greatest challenge, upon coming to Australia, was obtaining meaningful work. Some put the challenge to secure decent work down to lack of recognition of their prior qualifications, others mentioned the significant paperwork required to meet registration requirements to practice their vocation in Australia, others referred to the disadvantage, in the job market, of not having local experience. In some instances it had taken individuals several years to secure work in their field, even in known sought-after skilled areas:

… it was a rough time getting the job in the IT market as well. So three and a half years, and after that I've done a couple of internships and recently I've landed a job, which was pretty tough, especially because of the whole market, especially in the IT department. It is quite hard to get into (INT40P).

Interviewees used different strategies to facilitate entry into the skilled workforce. Some reached out to their existing social or cultural networks to seek opportunities, others pursued internships, voluntary work or other unpaid opportunities to build up local contacts or experience. Those who had a spouse or family member with them who could support them benefited from a financial safety net. Still, they found the emotional element of lacking meaningful work very difficult:

And he set up the company and everything, but creating the contacts to actually have a successful business takes a long lead time. And then obviously having grown up in Dubai, he had that existing network and all of that. And in Australia, he had nothing. So it took the better part of five years, I would say, for him to really get to a level where even he thought was acceptable for him. But my husband doesn't share a lot, he just gets on with the job. And so I think, in a way, at least if I cry or whatever, I have an outlet. Whereas for him, he doesn't have that. We were obviously supporting each other, but I think we were both not in the best place either. So it was really, really difficult (INT02F).

Frequently, individuals chose to enrol in local training or further education to enhance their employability. However, many interviewees found themselves training for and securing work at a lower skill level than they had previously enjoyed. The following table illustrates the de-skilling that a significant proportion of interviewees seeking work in Australia had experienced (Table 5).[10]

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10 While this number is only a small proportion of the sample, not all individuals interviewed came to Australia as skilled adults seeking work. Of the employment trajectories known, seven individuals had come to Australia as children and had gained their education entirely in Australia; two were current students and six had come on spousal visas and were engaged in family duties. Of the remaining individuals, 35 had come to Australia to work: three had come to Australia on professional transfers from multi-national companies, nine had undertaken university qualifications in Australia and were now working in their field and seven had come to Australia as skilled migrants and were working in their field without having done any further education onshore. Sixteen therefore constitutes a relatively large proportion of the individuals coming to Australia for employment purposes (35 individuals from the sample).

Table 5 – **Interviewees by vocation and current field of work**

Interviewee	Overseas field/area of qualification	Current field of work
INT39P	Physicist	Translator/interpreter
INT32P	Doctor	Attempting to be qualified to practice
INT24F	High school teacher (wife)	Adult education (casual)
	Special needs teacher (husband)	Disability support worker
INT35P	English teacher	Teacher of TAFE-level English
INT12F	Banking (Assistant Manager)	Disability support (part time)
INT17F	Bachelor of Commerce	Unemployed (studying Business Administration)
INT08P	Chemistry degree	Quality Safety Officer
INT06P	Teacher	Hairdresser
INT09P	Accountant/CEO	Teacher's aide
INT07P	Civil Engineer	Unemployed (recently studied a Certificate in Food Technology)
INT05F	Economics degree	Bank lender
INT03F	Associate Professor in Political Science	Unemployed
INT03P	Public health degree	Studying a Masters of Social Work
INT04P	Disability/aged care	Unemployed
INT02F	Finance/Business consultant	Small business owner
INT01P	Geographical science degree	Community connector

The following quote describes one interviewee's journey:

> I didn't get the degree here in accounting from when I come to Australia and they tell me, you must take the certificate from the uni or the TAFE to allow you to work here, because it is a different role, different procedures in Australia, different than in Iraq. I told him I work as accountant 15 years and I am a CEO, manager. He tell me, 'Okay, it's no problem. But here is a different role, different things. You can't work depending on your bachelor degree that you take from the University of Iraq.' Therefore, I study other things businesses, community services, teacher aid, and I work sometimes in it (INT09P).

Difficulties in securing meaningful employment often had negative effects on individuals' wellbeing, contributing to feelings of frustration, loss of purpose or fulfilment and a sense of moving backwards. For many, working in low-skilled and therefore low-paid jobs also created financial stress, making it difficult to meet their costs of living.

Motivation and agency

Many of the interviewees described employing a considerable amount of agency in the process of overcoming hurdles and challenges in the migration or settlement process. The most common challenge encountered was securing meaningful work, followed by navigating feelings of isolation or cultural differences, language acquisition, meeting their costs of living and sourcing culturally appropriate food. As mentioned previously, many interviewees proactively sought retraining, volunteer work or internships in an endeavour to obtain or demonstrate skills or qualifications that were more readily recognisable in Australia.

Considerable motivation and agency was also evident in interviewees' attempts to build social connections. Many interviewees reported attempting to address social isolation by seeking out ways to build relationships, like joining groups, volunteering, inviting neighbours over for meals or preparing and sharing food with colleagues.

Other interviewees reported adopting a positive or 'can do' attitude when encountering hurdles. They were not content to admit defeat or to feel powerless but instead focused on proactively seeking a solution to the challenges they were experiencing. One interviewee from India commented on her approach:

> the only thing expected of you is to ask a question, what you need. There are solutions everywhere. Different platforms, different people, they can help you out anywhere. It's just that you have to ask them. That's what I've encountered (INT05P).

Another Iraqi interviewee described her attitude to the challenges she had experienced since arriving in Australia:

> I always say to myself, every day is a learning journey. I'm always learning. I'm always studying and doing something. There's always something I'm doing... (INT35P).

7. Discussion

This study provides a detailed picture of individuals from the focus countries' sense of belonging.

The findings reveal that at the neighbourhood level, social connections are a primary factor in individuals' sense of belonging. From these interactions and relationships in the local community, individuals derived feelings of membership and inclusion. Being able to contribute in tangible ways, to give (or receive) support also contributed to individuals' perceptions of being accepted, as well as strengthening their trust and connection with others.

At a national level, a sense of belonging is more complex. The findings suggest belonging is derived from a greater set of factors as there was more diversity in individuals' responses. Adoption of Australian cultural values, feelings of loyalty, time spent and a decision to stay all contributed to feelings of belonging to Australia. Visa status was also mentioned as a factor, both as a driver of belonging and as an impediment to achieving it.

In terms of social connections, the study found little evidence of cultural insularity among individuals from the countries of focus. Individuals, by and large, tended to have diverse social relationships, to a greater extent than Australian-born individuals. Reasons for not forming more diverse friendships appeared to be largely pragmatic, rather than by intent. For those who had more friendships from their own cultural group, the cultural familiarity and connection they sought and valued in those relationships did not appear to be exclusive of other, more diverse connections.

Civically, most individuals from the focus countries are contributing to their local communities through informal opportunities (rather than via formal volunteering). It was noteworthy the number of individuals who had or were providing unpaid assistance to other migrants, particularly new arrivals to Australia. In many cases, those who had received such help went on to provide it to others, creating an expanding network of assistance. As such, the contribution of these (often) informal networks in the settlement process for new migrants should not be underestimated, particular for those who come via visa pathways that do not have a formal infrastructure of settlement assistance in place.

The study found no clear patterns of difference between individuals from the country cohorts that were the focus of this study in terms of their experiences of belonging, social connection or civic participation. There was more in common, in fact, between these cultural cohorts than dissimilarities in these areas. However, differences were evident in the experiences of Australian-born individuals compared to individuals born in one of the focus countries (or to overseas-born individuals in general), particularly in terms of their experiences of discrimination, extent of belonging, feelings of safety, and diversity of social connections. Among the individuals from the focus countries (and overseas-born individuals), there was some evidence that recency of arrival can influence feelings of belonging, particularly at a community level, which could arise from the fact that it takes time to build social connections in a new place. Women born in any one of the focus countries appear particularly vulnerable to experiences of racism and discrimination.

While cultural background does not appear to be a driver of difference in terms of sense or experience of belonging, this does not mean that individuals from these countries fare similarly on all outcomes. Non-engagement in employment, education and training is more pronounced for the Iraqi migrant population (and to a lesser extent, the Chinese population) compared to the other focus cohorts, and both groups are less represented in the labour force. Given the study found that workplaces and educational institutions are primary spheres where individuals build social connections with others, these findings are important.

Notable proportions of each of the focus cohorts also earn less than the national median weekly income. MSC data suggests that how individuals are faring financially is strongly tied to their sense of belonging and that people experiencing financial hardships are much less likely to trust in government, institutions and other people in society, and feel a substantially weaker sense of national pride and belonging. As such, these financial indicators are significant vis-à-vis the focus cohorts, not only because they intersect with belonging but in their relevance to Australia's social cohesion in general.

Given that individuals from the focus countries coming to Australia are heavily concentrated in prime working ages and that finding meaningful work was mentioned as a significant challenge by almost half the interviewees, further work should be done to better understand employment trajectories for individuals from these cohorts (including whether de-skilling is widespread), along with understanding other barriers to labour force participation.

Strengthening facilitators of social connection in the local neighbourhood should also be considered a priority, given its importance in contributing to a sense of community belonging. Forums for interactions (community events, festivals), places and spaces for interaction (playgrounds, parks, sporting facilities), opportunities for interaction (groups, volunteering opportunities) and an environment conducive for interaction (safety) are all critically important for building a sense of belonging. The local council has a clear role to play here, along with civil society.

In summary, belonging is a complex and dynamic process, shaped by both external and internal factors that can strengthen or weaken an individual's sense of acceptance and membership to a group. Personal characteristics also influence this process, including the motivation to belong. For the cohort interviewed, this motivation was especially evident. Having uprooted their lives in their countries of origin and begun anew in Australia, many had invested deeply — personally, emotionally, socially, and financially — in making their settlement successful. This investment, in turn, had fostered a determination to overcome the challenges they faced on the journey and a sense of agency towards establishing a meaningful and connected life in Australia.
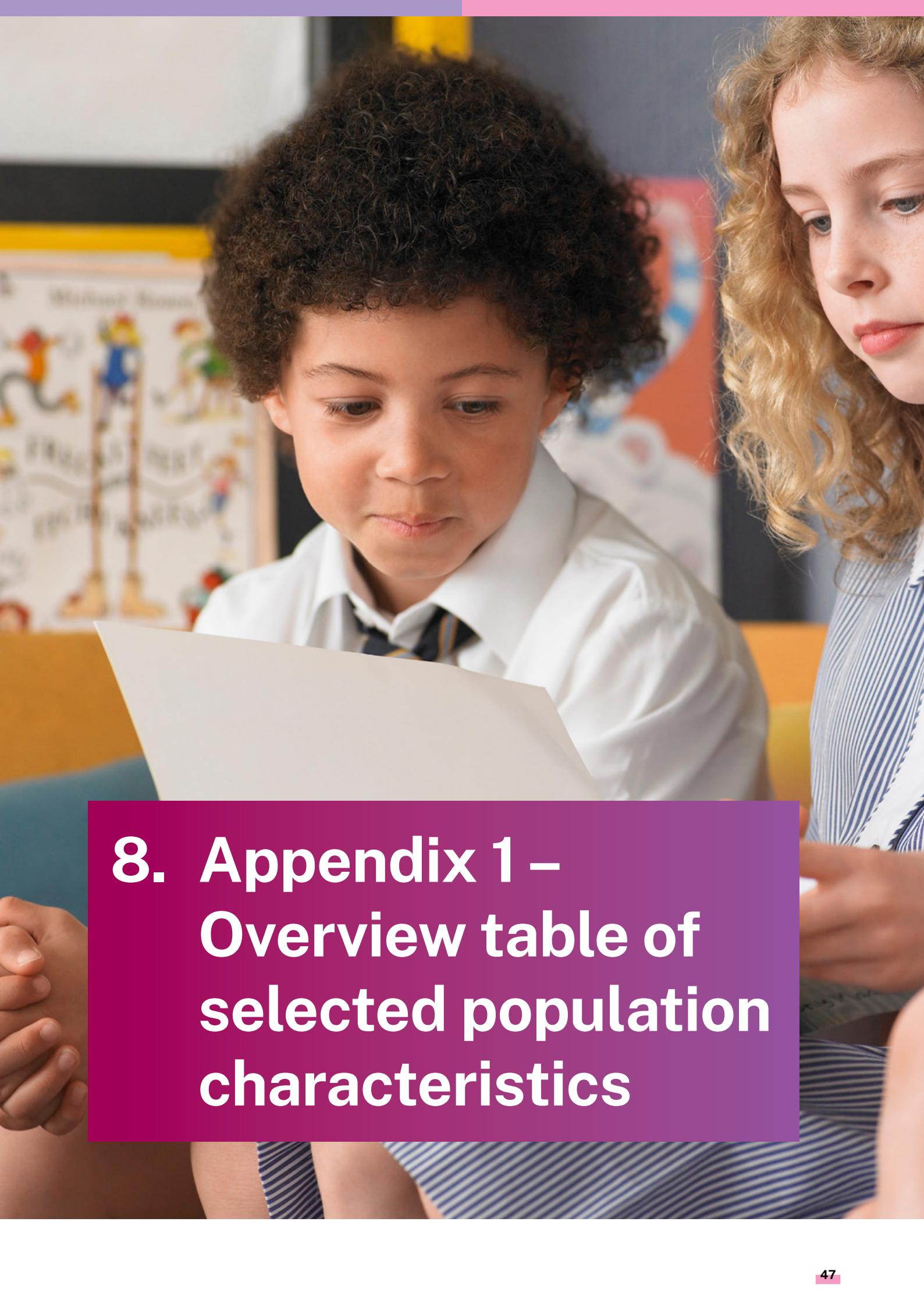
8. Appendix 1 – Overview table of selected population characteristics

| | | Iraq | | | | | | Philippines | | | | | | China (excludes SARs and Taiwan) | | | | | |
| | | ≤2015 | | ≥2016 | | Total | | ≤2015 | | ≥2016 | | Total | | ≤2015 | | ≥2016 | | Total | |
		count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Citizenship	Australian Citizen	53940	86	2040	7	56855	61	193593	87	6520	10	203938	69	218278	54	5234	4	227414	41
	Not an Australian Citizen	8521	14	26494	92	35552	38	27896	13	59019	90	88643	30	182071	45	131927	96	320385	58
	Total	62650	100	28670	100	92922	100	222168	100	65744	100	293892	100	401083	100	137407	100	549618	100
Proficiency in spoken English	Speaks English only	2802	4	317	1	3216	3	60536	27	10771	16	73525	25	15537	4	2743	2	18717	3
	Uses other language and speaks English: Very well	23870	38	6583	23	30805	33	111177	50	32086	49	144955	49	127813	32	26485	19	155883	28
	Uses other language and speaks English: Well	19739	32	9161	32	29272	32	46689	21	20606	31	68435	23	139346	35	53192	39	195163	36
	Uses other language and speaks English: Not well	12145	19	8087	28	20494	22	3113	1	1882	3	5204	2	84349	21	34486	25	121779	22
	Uses other language and speaks English: Not at all	3911	6	4410	15	8455	9	153	0	157	0	359	0	33415	8	20065	15	55397	10
	Total	62650	100	28670	100	92922	100	222168	100	65744	100	293892	100	401083	100	137407	100	549618	100
Engagement in employment, education and training	Fully engaged	15529	26	7632	34	23345	28	113170	53	33343	59	148171	54	170510	43	65703	53	238508	45
	Partially engaged	7651	13	3670	16	11385	13	39609	19	10300	18	50537	18	67700	17	16251	13	84786	16
	At least partially engaged	2539	4	425	2	3021	4	9086	4	1934	3	11595	4	20384	5	3495	3	24722	5
	Not engaged	34059	56	10560	47	45118	53	50060	23	10302	18	61902	22	130781	33	38478	31	172790	33
	Total*	60615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100

	Iraq ≤2015		Iraq ≥2016		Iraq Total		Philippines ≤2015		Philippines ≥2016		Philippines Total		China (excl. SARs and Taiwan) ≤2015		China ≥2016		China Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Highest level of educational attainment																		
Postgraduate Degree Level	2771	5	335	1	3121	4	8894	4	2669	5	11639	4	93003	24	23191	19	116734	22
Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate Level	722	1	83	0	805	1	3624	2	749	1	4402	2	8002	2	1469	1	9548	2
Bachelor Degree Level	8290	14	2241	10	10598	13	82649	39	27200	48	110814	40	105303	27	31310	25	137914	26
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	6645	11	1571	7	8258	10	18857	9	4258	8	23370	8	39761	10	10942	9	51174	10
Certificate III & IV Level	4971	8	1110	5	6133	7	28884	14	4547	8	33933	12	15820	4	2403	2	18473	4
Secondary Education–Years 10 and above	18761	31	6613	29	25665	30	49628	23	11751	21	62747	23	84134	21	38717	31	125473	24
Certificate I & II Level	157	0	70	0	229	0	108	0	13	0	120	0	170	0	30	0	196	0
Secondary Education–Years 9 and below	9286	15	6131	27	15553	18	6098	3	1623	3	7997	3	21964	6	8360	7	30966	6
Total*	61615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100
Labour force status																		
Employed, worked full-time	9515	16	1724	8	11327	13	93677	44	21415	38	116321	42	134598	34	21952	18	157670	30
Employed, worked part-time	7327	12	1916	9	9291	11	47202	22	16422	29	64395	23	73461	19	20602	16	94871	18
Employed, away from work	2795	5	451	2	3304	4	10278	5	2697	5	13582	5	22687	6	5182	4	28774	5
Unemployed, looking for full-time work	1764	3	726	3	2515	3	3026	1	944	2	4050	1	8633	2	3290	3	12070	2
Unemployed, looking for part-time work	1299	2	836	4	2151	3	2849	1	1158	2	4061	1	7175	2	4377	4	11676	2
Not in the labour force	37143	61	16615	74	54525	65	55161	26	13256	24	70238	25	142978	36	68481	55	216220	41
Total*	61615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100

Personal income	Iraq						Philippines						China (excludes SARs and Taiwan)					
	≤2015		≥2016		Total		≤2015		≥2016		Total		≤2015		≥2016		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Negative income	1156	2	458	2	1651	2	1596	1	871	2	2550	1	2249	1	1507	1	3897	1
Nil income	6038	10	2574	11	8710	10	19716	9	9643	17	29951	11	53201	14	45282	36	100667	19
$1-$149 ($1-$7,799)	1668	3	1304	6	3006	4	5686	3	1485	3	7267	3	13350	3	6644	5	20285	4
$150-$299 ($7,800-$15,599)	6714	11	4705	21	11499	14	8301	4	1742	3	10252	4	24247	6	8870	7	33531	6
$300-$399 ($15,600-$20,799)	10813	18	4213	19	15133	18	13089	6	1826	3	15266	6	33733	9	8209	7	42473	8
$400-$499 ($20,800-$25,999)	7310	12	2625	12	10021	12	11946	6	2502	4	14797	5	26662	7	6602	5	33711	6
$500-$649 ($26,000-$33,799)	5793	10	2373	11	8233	10	13149	6	4388	8	17847	6	27479	7	8589	7	36532	7
$650-$799 ($33,800-$41,599)	4048	7	1153	5	5235	6	16601	8	5226	9	22197	8	28185	7	7263	6	35849	7
$800-$999 ($41,600-$51,999)	3915	6	981	4	4951	6	23657	11	6773	12	30852	11	33335	8	8774	7	42600	8
$1,000-$1,249 ($52,000-$64,999)	3691	6	665	3	4389	5	27510	13	7463	13	35396	13	37886	10	8750	7	47068	9
$1,250-$1,499 ($65,000-$77,999)	2368	4	328	1	2723	3	20050	9	4251	8	24546	9	26780	7	4214	3	31256	6
$1,500-$1,749 ($78,000-$90,999)	1790	3	241	1	2054	2	16340	8	3469	6	19987	7	23449	6	2708	2	26336	5
$1,750-$1,999 ($91,000-$103,999)	1152	2	155	1	1320	2	11116	5	2219	4	13437	5	16437	4	1817	1	18376	3
$2,000-$2,999 ($104,000-$155,999)	1460	2	182	1	1657	2	16652	8	3021	5	19777	7	27918	7	2785	2	30898	6
$3,000-$3,499 ($156,000-$181,999)	345	1	59	0	407	0	2800	1	376	1	3206	1	6033	2	638	1	6715	1
$3,500 or more ($182,000 or more)	811	1	75	0	891	1	3093	1	313	1	3455	1	7700	2	914	1	8691	2
Total*	60615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100

	Iraq ≤2015 count	%	Iraq ≥2016 count	%	Iraq Total count	%	Philippines ≤2015 count	%	Philippines ≥2016 count	%	Philippines Total count	%	China (excludes SARs and Taiwan) ≤2015 count	%	China ≥2016 count	%	China Total count	%
Main source of personal income																		
Nil or negative income	3297	5	2178	10	5559	7	15004	7	5776	10	21113	8	43432	11	33065	26	78219	15
Employee wages and salary	16719	28	2955	13	19835	23	147431	69	37791	67	187365	68	201522	51	43067	34	246803	47
Government benefits and allowances	33985	56	15342	68	49865	59	33705	16	1955	3	36699	13	72647	19	4524	4	78615	15
Own unincorporated business income	3120	5	514	2	3665	4	3725	2	1006	2	4810	2	25542	7	4622	4	30578	6
Superannuation income	59	0	4	0	63	0	562	0	0	0	566	0	457	0	8	0	479	0
Investment income	998	2	41	0	1051	1	3879	2	291	1	4223	2	27686	7	6320	5	34392	7
Other income	16	0	0	0	15	0	103	0	19	0	131	0	1441	0	698	1	2154	0
Admin not available	2431	4	1498	7	4376	5	9487	4	9449	17	20689	8	19512	5	32742	26	56288	11
Total*	60615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100
Volunteering																		
Not a volunteer	56380	93	20907	93	78040	92	192091	90	51687	92	247755	90	357787	91	112337	90	477127	90
Volunteer	3221	5	1280	6	4539	5	19360	9	3924	7	23570	9	30463	8	11054	9	41885	8
Total*	60615	100	22537	100	84435	100	213890	100	56298	100	275582	100	392234	100	125047	100	527537	100

Note: % columns show column percentages based on respective "Total" rows for each variable. "Not stated", "Not applicable" and "Supplementary codes" categories have been omitted from rows to improve legibility. Except for "Total" rows marked with an asterisk (*), these categories are included in the totals. "Total" rows marked with an asterisk (*) include counts for "Not stated" and "Supplementary codes" categories but not those for "Not applicable" categories. This is because the latter comprise of persons aged under 15 years, who do not form part of the in-scope populations for the respective variables. "Total" columns for each country of birth include "Not stated" and "Not applicable" categories for Year of arrival, which are not shown. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

		India ≤2015		India ≥2016		India Total		Nepal ≤2015		Nepal ≥2016		Nepal Total		Pakistan ≤2015		Pakistan ≥2016		Pakistan Total	
		count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Citizenship	Australian Citizen	332857	78	9251	4	346222	51	25070	52	528	1	25865	21	43704	78	3481	11	47749	53
	Not an Australian Citizen	94727	22	224803	96	325332	48	23433	48	71013	99	96229	79	12414	22	28366	89	41579	46
	Total	428505	100	234426	100	673352	100	48664	100	71718	100	122506	100	56249	100	31934	100	89633	100
Proficiency in spoken English	Speaks English only	68938	16	18889	8	89952	13	1717	4	1917	3	3819	3	4965	9	1737	5	6878	8
	Uses other language and speaks English: Very well	276193	64	141496	60	421541	63	30787	63	38273	53	69861	57	36621	65	18319	57	55529	62
	Uses other language and speaks English: Well	71841	17	57079	24	130873	19	14878	31	28637	40	44207	36	11741	21	9290	29	21354	24
	Uses other language and speaks English: Not well	8738	2	11277	5	20725	3	936	2	1771	2	2792	2	2451	4	1922	6	4491	5
	Uses other language and speaks English: Not at all	2115	0	4663	2	7155	1	191	0	770	1	1015	1	336	1	515	2	902	1
	Total	428505	100	234426	100	673352	100	48664	100	71718	100	122506	100	56249	100	31934	100	89633	100
Engagement in employment, education and training	Fully engaged	247579	61	132391	64	382349	61	28302	60	47344	67	76422	64	27104	53	14767	58	42228	54
	Partially engaged	69838	17	30081	15	100506	16	10792	23	13679	19	24642	21	8151	16	3124	12	11355	15
	At least partially engaged	15426	4	6528	3	22780	4	2647	6	2284	3	5165	4	2033	4	599	2	2751	4
	Not engaged	71220	17	35703	17	109025	17	5298	11	6213	9	11713	10	13515	26	6761	26	20534	26
	Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51340	100	25516	100	78041	100

	India ≤2015 count	%	India ≥2016 count	%	India Total count	%	Nepal ≤2015 count	%	Nepal ≥2016 count	%	Nepal Total count	%	Pakistan ≤2015 count	%	Pakistan ≥2016 count	%	Pakistan Total count	%
Highest level of educational attainment																		
Postgraduate Degree Level	112052	27	71182	34	184233	30	10389	22	15404	22	25986	22	13614	27	7612	30	21349	27
Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate Level	12931	3	4680	2	17700	3	870	2	936	1	1818	2	1155	2	309	1	1478	2
Bachelor Degree Level	129279	32	68375	33	198933	32	17387	37	16953	24	34602	29	15266	30	8309	33	23771	30
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	52838	13	13606	7	66879	11	6830	14	12895	18	19879	17	4092	8	1085	4	5208	7
Certificate III & IV Level	22194	5	7053	3	29590	5	3286	7	3124	4	6451	5	2233	4	703	3	2975	4
Secondary Education–Years 10 and above	51914	13	28212	14	81526	13	6008	13	16366	23	22745	19	10319	20	5231	21	15786	20
Certificate I & II Level	37	0	4	0	48	0	10	0	7	0	13	0	23	0	4	0	37	0
Secondary Education–Years 9 and below	6489	2	3376	2	10121	2	528	1	514	1	1067	1	1564	3	650	3	2247	3
Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51340	100	25516	100	78041	100
Labour force status																		
Employed, worked full-time	211932	52	81872	40	295189	47	21957	46	19454	28	41646	35	20288	40	7151	28	27597	35
Employed, worked part-time	83485	20	59576	29	143884	23	14155	30	31196	44	45668	38	9522	19	5898	23	15529	20
Employed, away from work	17487	4	9436	5	27887	4	3182	7	4423	6	7937	7	2409	5	1053	4	3601	5
Unemployed, looking for full-time work	8580	2	6544	3	15255	2	950	2	1625	2	2595	2	1844	4	1127	4	2999	4
Unemployed, looking for part-time work	5975	1	5062	2	11128	2	756	2	2340	3	3129	3	1306	3	1130	4	2458	3
Not in the labour force	76791	19	42120	20	121648	20	6023	13	10377	15	16852	14	15448	30	8890	35	24768	32
Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51340	100	25516	100	78041	100

Personal income	India ≤2015 count	India ≤2015 %	India ≥2016 count	India ≥2016 %	India Total count	India Total %	Nepal ≤2015 count	Nepal ≤2015 %	Nepal ≥2016 count	Nepal ≥2016 %	Nepal Total count	Nepal Total %	Pakistan ≤2015 count	Pakistan ≤2015 %	Pakistan ≥2016 count	Pakistan ≥2016 %	Pakistan Total count	Pakistan Total %
Negative income	1674	0	1074	1	2859	0	104	0	140	0	256	0	379	1	198	1	596	1
Nil income	37645	9	32812	16	71855	12	2921	6	3730	5	6806	6	8212	16	6882	27	15286	20
$1-$149 ($1-$7,799)	8423	2	3108	1	11637	2	639	1	371	1	1019	1	1483	3	700	3	2202	3
$150-$299 ($7,800-$15,599)	11158	3	4901	2	16219	3	870	2	859	1	1749	1	2694	5	1040	4	3773	5
$300-$399 ($15,600-$20,799)	14264	3	7579	4	22066	4	1015	2	2301	3	3359	3	2661	5	1015	4	3701	5
$400-$499 ($20,800-$25,999)	15804	4	12459	6	28582	5	1538	3	5969	8	7591	6	2271	4	1259	5	3565	5
$500-$649 ($26,000-$33,799)	20136	5	16898	8	37363	6	3034	6	10802	15	13962	12	2897	6	1859	7	4809	6
$650-$799 ($33,800-$41,599)	27003	7	18083	9	45467	7	4701	10	12633	18	17516	15	3462	7	1920	8	5426	7
$800-$999 ($41,600-$51,999)	40470	10	24149	12	65080	10	8097	17	14949	21	23270	19	4843	9	2391	9	7308	9
$1,000-$1,249 ($52,000-$64,999)	49418	12	23567	11	73504	12	9480	20	10507	15	20139	17	5486	11	2500	10	8077	10
$1,250-$1,499 ($65,000-$77,999)	37937	9	14467	7	52744	8	5876	12	3980	6	9925	8	4035	8	1493	6	5561	7
$1,500-$1,749 ($78,000-$90,999)	33329	8	10993	5	44545	7	3592	8	1512	2	5131	4	2972	6	866	3	3869	5
$1,750-$1,999 ($91,000-$103,999)	25433	6	7934	4	33547	5	2005	4	648	1	2665	2	2143	4	654	3	2822	4
$2,000-$2,999 ($104,000-$155,999)	47787	12	18195	9	66206	11	2369	5	590	1	2964	2	4161	8	1589	6	5772	7
$3,000-$3,499 ($156,000-$181,999)	13030	3	4029	2	17134	3	340	1	97	0	442	0	1119	2	374	1	1497	2
$3,500 or more ($182,000 or more)	18889	5	3499	2	22510	4	380	1	91	0	477	0	1754	3	361	1	2132	3
Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51430	100	25516	100	78041	100

		India						Nepal						Pakistan					
		≤2015		≥2016		Total		≤2015		≥2016		Total		≤2015		≥2016		Total	
		count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Main source of personal income	Nil or negative income	29523	7	18232	9	48415	8	1671	4	1714	2	3453	3	6003	12	4810	19	10948	14
	Employee wages and salary	281720	69	125900	61	410407	66	39947	84	55914	80	96689	81	26645	52	10897	43	37824	49
	Government benefits and allowances	36665	9	4731	2	42158	7	2424	5	559	1	3007	3	9948	19	3149	12	13259	17
	Own unincorporated business income	24979	6	17555	8	42896	7	1121	2	2101	3	3245	3	4839	9	2538	10	7446	10
	Superannuation income	1143	0	0	0	1173	0	13	0	0	0	13	0	53	0	0	0	59	0
	Investment income	14545	4	1982	1	16671	3	350	1	147	0	502	0	1375	3	303	1	1694	2
	Other income	759	0	203	0	976	0	0	0	4	0	8	0	53	0	17	0	70	0
	Admin not available	18344	4	38628	19	60930	10	1901	4	9868	14	12786	11	2426	5	3821	15	6737	8
	Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51340	100	25516	100	78041	100
Volunteering	Not a volunteer	357668	88	182814	88	545563	88	43394	91	64405	92	108963	91	44897	87	22580	88	68219	88
	Volunteer	43901	11	19572	9	63877	10	3310	7	4207	6	7569	6	5564	11	2362	9	7968	10
	Total*	407676	100	207228	100	623622	100	47429	100	70308	100	119698	100	51340	100	25516	100	78041	100

Note: % columns show column percentages based on respective "Total" rows for each variable. "Not stated", "Not applicable" and "Supplementary codes" categories have been omitted from rows to improve legibility. Except for "Total" rows marked with an asterisk (*), these categories are included in the totals. "Total" rows marked with an asterisk (*) include counts for "Not stated" and "Supplementary codes" categories but not those for "Not applicable" categories. This is because the latter comprise of persons aged under 15 years, who do not form part of the in-scope populations for the respective variables. "Total" columns for each country of birth include "Not stated" and "Not applicable" categories for Year of arrival, which are not shown. Cell counts in source data have been randomly adjusted. Sums of counts and percentages may not equal totals. No reliance should be placed on small values. Person counts are based on place of usual residence. China excludes SARs and Taiwan.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

**9. Appendix 2 –
Interview Discussion
Guide**

Interview Discussion Guide Multiculturalism in Focus:

Migrants' sense of belonging study

The SFRI has been engaged by the Australian government, Department of Home Affairs to conduct qualitative research that explores the sense of belonging of migrants to Australia from particular cultural groups (specifically, the fastest growing migrant populations in Australia).

1. Explanation to participants

- Introduce the purpose of the research, the researcher and where they are from. State that the work is being funded by the Department of Home Affairs.
- Purpose of interview: To better understand how individuals from specific migrant backgrounds develop a sense of belonging as part of establishing their new life in Australia.
- Explain the importance of honest opinions, no right or wrong answers. Explain presence/ role of third party (if applicable) to help with interpretation. Explain that they do not have to participate and are able to withdraw from the research at any time. Emphasise that they do not need to answer questions if they don't want to.
- Explain audio recording and seek all parties consent to be audio-recorded. Explain how data will be used and stored.
- Explain participants will receive $100 to thank them for their time.
- Housekeeping matters – duration of session (~60 mins), need for breaks, etc.
- Any questions before starting?

2. Introduction (5 minutes)

The purpose of today's discussion is to learn more about people's experiences of coming to live in Australia. We want to hear about your experience of settling in Australia. Firstly, it'd be great to learn a little more about you.

2.1 Can you tell me a little about yourself? How long have you lived in Australia? In what country were you born?

2.2 Do you have family in Australia? When did they arrive? Do they live near you?

2.2.1 What was their experience like of migrating to Australia? [Prompt – what were the challenges, do they feel they 'belong' in Australia now?]

3. Initial experience of migration to Australia (5 minutes)

We'd like to hear about your experiences coming to live in Australia

3.1 Firstly, what kinds of expectations did you have about moving to Australia? [Probe – did you have concerns about the transition, did you think it would be straightforward? How did you expect to be welcomed?]

3.2 What were your hopes for yourself and/or your family when you first arrived?

4. Neighbourhood/local community connections and sense of belonging (15 minutes)

I'd like to ask you next about your local community and your neighbourhood

4.1 Can you tell me a bit about your local community? [Prompt – the area near where you live] What is it like?

    4.1.1 What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?

4.2 Have you tried to connect with people in your local community? What has that experience been like for you?

4.3 In your local community, are there people who have a similar background to you? [Prompt: migrants, people with a similar cultural background, religious background or demographic similarities - age/stage of life]

4.4 Do you feel you belong in your local community? What makes you feel that way? Are there any things that make your feel like you don't belong?

4.5 Do you feel you belong here in Australia? What has made you feel this way?

4.6 Is Australia the place that you would call home now?

5. Social connections (15 minutes)

5.1 Did you know anyone in Australia before you arrived?

5.2 Do you have friends in Australia now?

    5.2.1 How did you first meet these friends?

    5.2.2 How often do you see each other? What do you do together?

5.3 Have these relationships helped you in any way? How so?

5.4 Do you know your neighbours? [Prompt – the people who live in the houses near you or on your street].

5.5 If you had a family member or friend coming to Australia, what advice would you give them to help them build relationships here?

6. Civic connections (15 minutes)

6.1 Are you involved in any local groups? (prompt: sports groups, social groups, religious organisations, clubs, volunteer groups, political groups?)

    6.1.1 If not, why not? If yes, how did you find out about these groups?

    6.1.2 Do you have plans to join any groups in the future? Why/why not?

6.2 Since you arrived in Australia, have you ever helped anyone? For example, by providing transport or running errands, teaching, coaching or providing practical advice or emotional support?

6.3 Have you ever been to a community event in your local area? [Prompt – festival, street party, exhibition, cultural or religious celebration…]? If so, can you tell me about it?

    6.3.1 Where did you hear about the event?

    6.3.2 What did you like about it?

    6.3.3 Were there any things you didn't like about it? If not, why not?

6.4 Have you used any community facilities in your local area [Prompt – the local library, a playground, sports facility, the neighbourhood house…].

    6.4.1 If so, could you tell me more about your experience?

    6.4.2 Where did you find out about the facility?

    6.4.3 If not, why not.

7. Wrap up (5 mins)

7.1 Lastly, thinking about what we've discussed today, is there anything that you've reflected on that you would like to share or discuss?

10. Appendix 3 – Ethics approval

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the full board of Bellberry Limited's Human Research Ethics Committee (Application no. 2025-04-513) on 15 May 2025.

11. Endnotes

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