

Regional distribution

The healthcare needs of rural and remote areas have received a lot of attention in recent years due to a number of reviews, inquiries and research projects. For example, the 2002 Senate inquiry into nursing highlighted issues such as nursing recruitment difficulties, shortage of appropriately trained nurses, ageing of the nursing workforce and high attrition rates as areas of concern in rural and remote nursing (SCAC 2002).

Nurses constitute the largest group in the rural and remote health workforce and in most areas they are the first line of contact in healthcare services. In smaller, more remote areas, nurses receive very little support as there may be only an on-call or part-time doctor in the area, or perhaps no other health workers at all (see the subsection 'Community nursing'). A decline in nursing services in these areas, therefore, would have more impact on these communities than in more populated areas (SCAC 2002).

This chapter presents the characteristics of employed nurses by geographical location using the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy, and the Department of Health and Family Services in 1994 developed this classification.

Of the 224,594 employed registered and enrolled nurses in 1999, 141,216 (62.9%) worked in capital cities, 17,959 (8.0%) in other metropolitan centres, 20,284 (9.0%) in large rural centres, 16,338 (7.3%) in small rural centres, 22,679 (10.1%) in other rural areas, 2,538 (1.1%) in remote centres, and 3,579 (1.6%) in other remote areas. These proportions closely reflect the distribution of the population in the different geographical regions, although large rural centres have an over-representation of nurses of 3 percentage points and other rural areas have an under-representation of 3 percentage points (Table 3).

Table 3: Employed registered and enrolled nurses by geographic location of main job, 1993 and 1999

	Capital city	Other metropolitan centre	Large rural centre	Small rural centre	Other rural area	Remote centre	Other remote area	Australia
1993								
Registered nurses	105,439	13,321	15,801	11,019	14,713	1,592	2,367	164,252
Enrolled nurses	26,054	4,341	5,117	5,333	9,517	801	1,283	52,446
<i>Total</i>	<i>131,493</i>	<i>17,662</i>	<i>20,918</i>	<i>16,352</i>	<i>24,230</i>	<i>2,393</i>	<i>3,650</i>	<i>216,698</i>
1999								
Registered nurses	117,782	14,179	16,060	11,864	14,781	1,909	2,601	179,177
Enrolled nurses	23,434	3,780	4,225	4,474	7,898	629	978	45,418
<i>Total</i>	<i>141,216</i>	<i>17,959</i>	<i>20,284</i>	<i>16,338</i>	<i>22,679</i>	<i>2,538</i>	<i>3,579</i>	<i>224,594</i>
Percentage								
1993								
Registered nurses	64.2	8.1	9.6	6.7	9.0	1.0	1.4	100.0
Enrolled nurses	49.7	8.3	9.8	10.2	18.1	1.5	2.4	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>60.7</i>	<i>8.2</i>	<i>9.7</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>11.2</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>
1999								
Registered nurses	65.7	7.9	9.0	6.6	8.2	1.1	1.5	100.0
Enrolled nurses	51.6	8.3	9.3	9.9	17.4	1.4	2.2	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>62.9</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>7.3</i>	<i>10.1</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>100.0</i>
1999 population	63.9	7.6	6.0	6.5	13.1	1.2	1.8	100.0

Source: AIHW.

There were small increases in the number of registered nurses in all geographical areas (Table 3). In terms of the proportion of registered nurses working in different areas, there was a decrease in large rural centres (from 9.6% in 1993 to 9.0% in 1999), other rural areas (from 9.0% in 1993 to 8.2% in 1999) and a slight increase in capital cities (from 64.2% to 65.7%).

There was a slightly different pattern with enrolled nurses, showing a decrease in numbers across all areas. There was also a decrease in the proportion of nurses working in rural and remote areas, with the largest reduction occurring in other rural areas, from 18.1% in 1993 to 17.4% in 1999. Capital cities were the only geographic location in which an increase occurred, from 49.7% to 51.6%.

Age

The age profile of nurses varied across geographic locations. Nurses tended to be older in other rural areas and small rural centres, but younger in remote centres. For example, the proportions of nurses aged 25–34 years were lowest in other rural areas (15.6%) and small rural centres (18.5%), and highest in other remote areas (26.1%) and remote centres (25.9%). The proportion of nurses in the age group 45–54 years was lowest in remote centres (24.6%) and other remote areas (25.1%), and highest in other rural areas (31.0%) and small rural centres (28.9%) (Table 4).

The average age of nurses ranged from 40.7 years in remote centres to 43.5 years in other rural areas. The average age of registered nurses ranged from 40.7 years in remote centres to 44.3 years in other rural areas. The average age of enrolled nurses ranged from 39.6 years in other metropolitan centres to 41.7 years in other rural areas (Table C.22).

Table 4: Age distribution of all employed nurses by geographic location of main job, 1999

Age	Capital city	Other metropolitan centre	Large rural centre	Small rural centre	Other rural area	Remote centre	Other remote area	Total
< 25	5.0	4.3	3.5	2.6	1.9	4.3	2.6	4.3
25–34	24.5	23.5	22.8	18.5	15.6	25.9	26.1	22.9
35–44	33.5	38.4	38.4	40.4	39.6	36.5	35.5	35.5
45–54	26.9	25.5	26.7	28.9	31.0	24.6	25.1	27.3
55+	10.1	8.4	8.6	9.6	11.9	8.7	10.6	10.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Average age</i>	<i>41.3</i>	<i>41.2</i>	<i>41.3</i>	<i>42.3</i>	<i>43.5</i>	<i>40.7</i>	<i>41.5</i>	<i>41.6</i>

Source: AIHW.

Between 1993 and 1999, there was a general shift in the distribution of age such that, overall, the employed nurse labour force is ageing. This occurred in every geographic area and is demonstrated in Figure 7. At the national level the proportion of nurses under the age of 35 years decreased from 33.9% in 1993 to 27.2% in 1999. At the same time, the proportion over 45 years of age increased from 29.9% to 37.3%. The reduction in nurses under the age of 35 years was most noticeable in remote centres (from 41.6% to 30.2%) and other remote areas (from 36.7% to 28.7%).

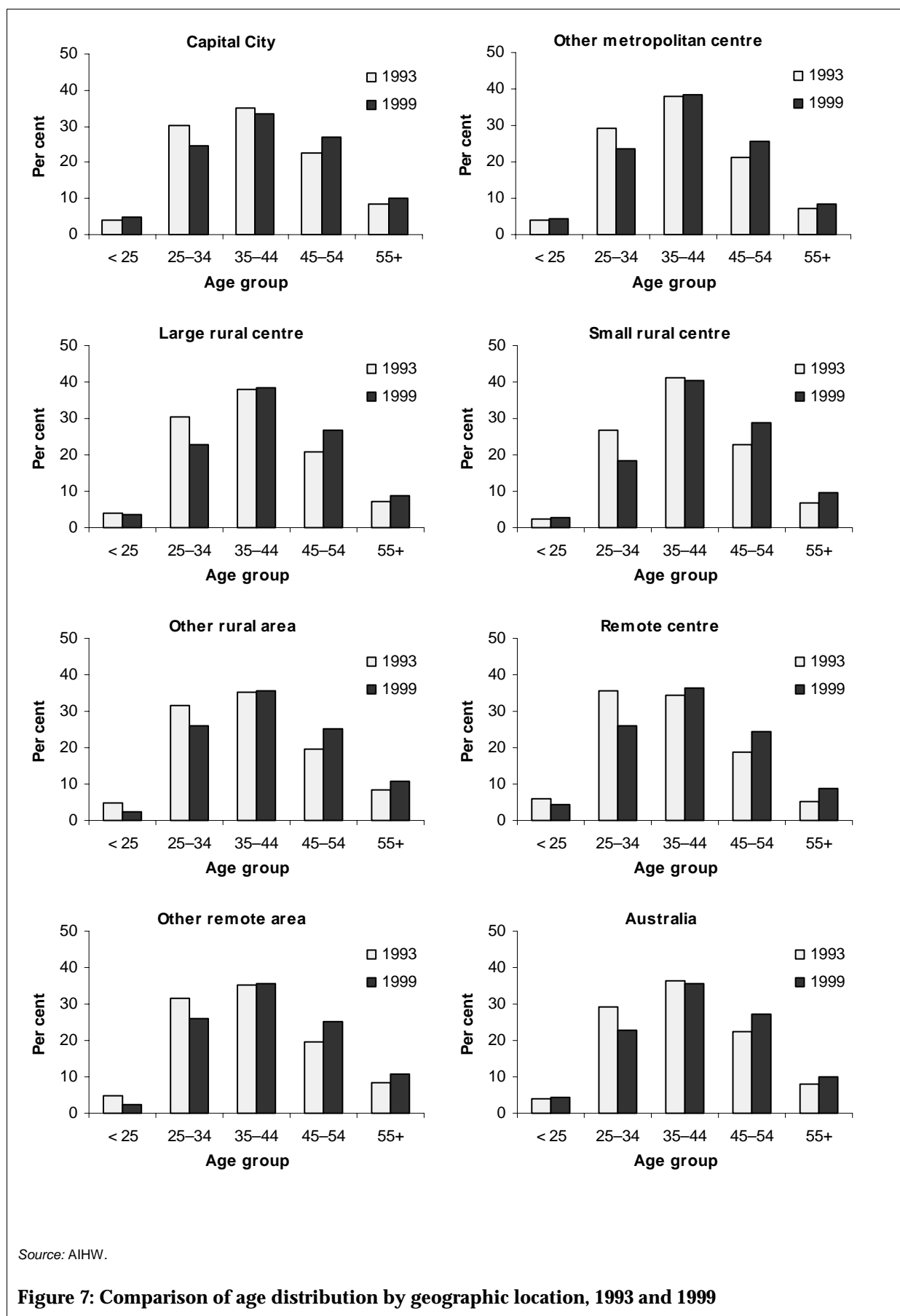


Figure 7: Comparison of age distribution by geographic location, 1993 and 1999