

Muslims in Australia

Comprehensive Geography Readings

Important Note About the Data

The latest published Australian Census data is from the **2021 Census**. Although the 2026 Census was held on 11 August 2026, most of its results will not be released until June 2027. Therefore, all Census figures in these readings are from 2021 unless another year is stated.

The Census question about religion is voluntary. In 2021, 93.1% of Australians answered it. Census figures describe people who **reported Islam as their religious affiliation**. They do not measure how frequently a person practises their religion.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics also makes small random adjustments to Census figures to protect privacy. As a result, some totals may differ slightly across tables.

Reading 1: What Is Demography?

Demography is the study of human populations. Demographers investigate the size, characteristics, distribution and movement of populations.

Demographic information can include:

- Age
- Place of residence
- Country of birth
- Ancestry
- Languages used at home
- Religious affiliation
- Education
- Employment
- Income
- Family and household composition

In Geography, demographic data helps explain where people live and how populations change over time. It also allows geographers to examine the relationships between people, communities and places.

A population does not simply occupy a place. People construct homes, establish businesses, attend schools, use transport and create community organisations. These activities shape the human features and functions of places.

Governments and organisations use demographic data to decide where services are needed. For example, a growing population of children may require additional schools and recreation facilities. An ageing population may require more health and aged-care services.

Studying Muslim demographic data can help students understand:

- Australia's religious and cultural diversity
- Population growth and change
- Migration
- Urban settlement
- Population distribution
- Cultural landscapes
- Connections between people and places

Demographic data reveals broad patterns. It cannot fully explain the identity, experiences or choices of every individual.

Reading 2: Understanding the Australian Census

The **Census of Population and Housing** is Australia's largest collection of information about its population. It is conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, usually every five years.

The Census records information about people and households throughout Australia on Census night. This produces a national snapshot that can be studied at different geographical scales.

Geographical scales

Census information can be organised for:

1. Australia
2. States and territories
3. Greater capital-city areas
4. Local government areas
5. Suburbs and localities
6. Smaller statistical areas

Comparing different scales allows geographers to identify patterns. For example, Muslims represented 3.2% of Australia's population in 2021. However, they represented 4.3% of the NSW population and 23.6% of Canterbury-Bankstown's population.

Why is the Census important?

Census information helps governments plan:

- Schools
- Hospitals
- Roads
- Public transport
- Housing
- Community services
- Emergency services
- Translation services
- Recreation facilities

The religion question

Religion is one of the few voluntary Census questions. In 2021:

- 93.1% of Australians answered the religion question.
- 6.9% did not state their religion.
- 813,392 people reported Islam.
- Islam represented 3.2% of Australia's population.

The Census records **religious affiliation**, not how often or in what ways a person practises their religion.

[ABS: 2026 Census data-release plan](#)

Reading 3: Religion, Ancestry, Birthplace and Language

Religion, ancestry, birthplace and language are different demographic characteristics.

Religious affiliation

Religious affiliation identifies the religion with which a person associates. Islam is a religious affiliation.

Ancestry

Ancestry refers to the cultural or ethnic groups with which a person identifies through family heritage. Census respondents can report up to two ancestries.

Country of birth

Country of birth identifies where a person was born. It does not necessarily identify their ancestry, citizenship, language or religion.

Language used at home

This identifies the language a person uses within their household. Language cannot be used to determine religion.

Citizenship

Citizenship is a person's legal membership of a country. A person born overseas may later become an Australian citizen.

Separating the categories

A Muslim Australian may:

- Have been born in Australia or overseas
- Have Australian-born or overseas-born parents
- Speak only English
- Speak English and another language
- Have Pakistani, Lebanese, Turkish, Bosnian, Indonesian, Indian, Afghan, African or another ancestry
- Be an Australian citizen
- Live in a metropolitan, regional or remote area

Likewise:

- Not every Arabic speaker is Muslim.
- Not every Muslim speaks Arabic.
- Not every person from a Muslim-majority country is Muslim.

- Not every Muslim Australian was born overseas.
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Reading 4: Religious Diversity in Australia

Australia contains people with many religious and non-religious identities.

Religious affiliation in Australia

Religious affiliation	Percentage of population, 2021
Christianity	43.9%
No religion	38.9%
Islam	3.2%
Hinduism	2.7%
Buddhism	2.4%

The category **No religion** is not itself a religion. It includes people who reported no religious affiliation and some people with secular or other spiritual beliefs.

In 2021, **813,392 people reported Islam as their religion**. They represented **3.2% of Australia's population**.

Islam was the second-largest religion after Christianity when the different Christian denominations were grouped together.

Diversity within Muslim Australia

Muslim Australians are not one cultural or ethnic group. Muslim communities include people with connections to:

- Australia
- Lebanon
- Türkiye
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Pakistan
- Bangladesh
- India
- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- Afghanistan
- Iraq

- Iran
- African countries
- Many other places

Some Muslim families have lived in Australia for several generations. Others have arrived more recently. Muslim Australians also use many languages and have diverse cultural traditions.

[ABS: Religious affiliation in Australia](#)

Reading 5: Growth of Australia's Muslim Population

The number of Australians reporting Islam increased considerably between the 2016 and 2021 Censuses.

Census year	People reporting Islam	Percentage of Australia
2016	Approximately 604,200	2.6%
2021	813,392	3.2%
Change	Approximately 209,150 more people	0.6 percentage points

The number of people reporting Islam increased by approximately **34.6%** between 2016 and 2021.

Causes of population change

The size of a religious population may change because of:

1. **Births:** New children are added to the population.
2. **Deaths:** People are removed from the population.
3. **Immigration:** People move into Australia.
4. **Emigration:** People leave Australia.
5. **Changing identification:** People may change how they answer the religion question.
6. **Census participation:** More or fewer people may answer the voluntary question.

Students should not assume that the entire increase resulted from immigration. Australia's Muslim population includes many Australian-born Muslims.

Effects of population growth

Growing populations may increase demand for:

- Housing
- Schools
- Places of worship
- Youth programs
- Community organisations
- Shops and businesses
- Health services
- Public transport

Reading 6: The Age Profile of Muslim Australians

The Australian Muslim population had a median age of **28 years** in 2021. The median age of Australia's total population was **38 years**.

Population	Median age
Australians reporting Islam	28 years
Total Australian population	38 years

The **median age** is the age that divides a population into two equal groups. Half the population is younger than the median and half is older.

A lower median age does not mean that every Muslim Australian is young. Muslim communities include children, adults and elderly people. It means that the overall Muslim population has a greater concentration of younger people than the Australian population generally.

How age affects places

A relatively young population may create greater demand for:

- Preschools and schools
- Playgrounds
- Sporting facilities
- Youth programs
- Family health services
- Tertiary education
- Employment
- Family-sized housing

As the population ages, its needs will change. Governments may need to plan for future employment, housing, health care and aged-care services.

Reading 7: Where Muslim Australians Live

Population distribution describes where people live. Muslim Australians are found throughout the country, but the population is unevenly distributed.

New South Wales and Victoria contained the largest Muslim populations in 2021.

Area	People reporting Islam	Percentage of area
Australia	813,392	3.2%
New South Wales	349,240	4.3%
Victoria	273,028	4.2%

Together, NSW and Victoria contained **622,268 Muslims**. This represented approximately **76.5% of Australia's Muslim population**.

Change in New South Wales

Census year	Number reporting Islam	Percentage of NSW
2016	267,654	3.6%
2021	349,240	4.3%

The number increased by **81,586 people**.

Change in Victoria

Census year	Number reporting Islam	Percentage of Victoria
2016	197,029	3.3%
2021	273,028	4.2%

The number increased by **75,999 people**.

The concentration in these states is connected to the importance of Sydney and Melbourne as major centres of population, migration, employment and education.

[ABS: NSW QuickStats](#) and [ABS: Victoria QuickStats](#)

Reading 8: Urban Settlement Patterns

A **settlement pattern** describes how people are distributed across cities, towns, rural communities and remote areas.

Many Muslim Australians live in metropolitan areas, particularly Sydney and Melbourne.

Metropolitan settlement may be influenced by:

- Employment opportunities
- Housing availability
- Universities
- Hospitals
- Public transport
- Airports
- Schools
- Places of worship
- Family connections
- Community organisations
- Cultural businesses

Population concentration

A population concentration occurs when a relatively high number or proportion of a group lives in a particular area.

Population concentrations may develop gradually. Earlier residents establish homes, businesses and organisations. These human features can support later residents and migrants.

Chain migration

Chain migration occurs when people move to a place where relatives, friends or community members already live.

Community networks may help new residents:

- Find housing
- Seek employment
- Access education
- Understand services
- Communicate in familiar languages

- Maintain family and cultural connections

Census information shows where people live, but it does not explain why every person selected that location. Geographers should therefore describe these as possible influences rather than definite reasons.

Reading 9: Muslim Migration to Australia

Migration has played an important role in the growth and diversity of Muslim Australia. However, Muslim migration does not come from one country or region.

Muslim migrants have arrived from countries including:

- Lebanon
- Türkiye
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Pakistan
- Bangladesh
- Afghanistan
- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- India
- Iraq
- Iran
- Somalia
- Sudan
- Other parts of Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East

People have moved to Australia through:

- Skilled migration
- Family migration
- Humanitarian and refugee programs
- Education
- Employment
- Other migration pathways

The reasons for migration vary. Some people seek employment or education, while others reunite with family or escape war, persecution and insecurity.

Migration is only one part of Muslim Australia. Many Muslims were born in Australia and have families who have lived in the country for several generations.

Reading 10: Pakistan as One Example of Muslim Diversity

Pakistan is one of many countries connected with Australia's Muslim population.

In 2021:

- 89,633 Australian residents were born in Pakistan.
- 97,593 people reported Pakistani ancestry.
- 28,423 Australian-born people reported Pakistani ancestry.
- 82,603 Pakistan-born residents reported Islam.
- 92.2% of Pakistan-born residents reported Islam.

Category	Population
Born in Pakistan	89,633
Reported Pakistani ancestry	97,593
Australian-born with Pakistani ancestry	28,423
Pakistan-born and reported Islam	82,603

The figures are different because birthplace, ancestry and religion measure different characteristics.

Most Pakistan-born residents reported Islam, but not every Pakistan-born Australian was Muslim. Likewise, some Muslims with Pakistani ancestry were born in Australia.

Pakistan-born Muslims represented approximately **10.2% of Australia's Muslim population**. Therefore, Pakistan is one important part of Muslim Australia, but it does not represent the entire Muslim population.

[ABS: People in Australia born in Pakistan](#)

Reading 11: Canterbury-Bankstown—A Local Case Study

Canterbury-Bankstown is a local government area in south-western Sydney. In 2021, it had approximately **371,000 residents**.

It provides a useful geographical case study because its religious and cultural characteristics differ considerably from Australian averages.

Religious affiliation

Religious response	Number	Percentage
Islam	87,423	23.6%
Catholic	79,642	21.5%
No religion	64,750	17.5%
Eastern Orthodox	31,423	8.5%
Not stated	29,649	8.0%

Islam was the largest individual religious response in Canterbury-Bankstown. However, Christianity remained the largest **broad religious group** when the different Christian denominations were combined.

Comparing geographical scales

Area	Percentage reporting Islam
Australia	3.2%
New South Wales	4.3%
Canterbury-Bankstown	23.6%

Approximately **10.7% of all Australian Muslims counted in 2021 lived in Canterbury-Bankstown**.

The proportion reporting Islam in Canterbury-Bankstown was approximately:

- 7.4 times the national proportion
- 5.5 times the NSW proportion

This makes Canterbury-Bankstown a clear example of a local population concentration.

[ABS: Canterbury-Bankstown QuickStats](#)

Reading 12: Birthplace and Ancestry in Canterbury-Bankstown

Canterbury-Bankstown contains Australian-born residents and people born in many overseas countries.

Country of birth

Country	Number	Percentage
Australia	182,532	49.2%
Vietnam	21,972	5.9%
Lebanon	21,434	5.8%
China, excluding SARs and Taiwan	19,510	5.3%
Bangladesh	7,334	2.0%
Greece	7,072	1.9%

In addition:

- 66.3% of residents had both parents born overseas.
- 16.8% had both parents born in Australia.

Ancestry

Ancestry response	Number	Percentage
Lebanese	52,287	14.1%
Australian	51,641	13.9%
Chinese	42,900	11.6%
English	42,043	11.3%
Vietnamese	26,994	7.3%

People could report up to two ancestries. Therefore, ancestry percentages cannot be added together to calculate 100%.

Pakistan was not among the five largest birthplace or ancestry responses shown in Canterbury-Bankstown's QuickStats. Students should not invent a local Pakistan-born figure or assume that most Muslims in the area are Pakistani.

Canterbury-Bankstown's Muslim population includes people from many birthplaces and ancestries.

Reading 13: Language Diversity

Muslim Australians use many languages, including:

- English
- Arabic
- Urdu
- Bengali
- Turkish
- Indonesian
- Dari
- Persian
- Bosnian
- Somali
- Punjabi
- Pashto
- Other languages

No single language is spoken by all Muslims. English may be a person's first language, an additional language or one of several languages used at home.

Languages in Canterbury-Bankstown

Language used at home	Number	Percentage
Arabic	63,655	17.2%
Vietnamese	27,916	7.5%
Mandarin	19,049	5.1%
Greek	17,394	4.7%
Cantonese	13,588	3.7%
English only	125,243	33.8%

A non-English language was used in **67.8% of households**.

Arabic was the most common language other than English, but Arabic use must not be treated as proof of Islamic affiliation. Arabic is used by Muslims, Christians and people of other or no religious affiliations.

Likewise, Pakistani communities may use Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, English and other languages. Not every Urdu speaker is Muslim, and not every Muslim speaks Urdu or Arabic.

Reading 14: Muslim History in Australia

Muslim connections with Australia existed before the formation of the Australian nation in 1901.

Makassan contact

Muslim seafarers from Makassar, in present-day Indonesia, travelled to northern Australia before British colonisation. They traded and interacted with Aboriginal communities, particularly in Arnhem Land.

These interactions influenced:

- Trade
- Language
- Technology
- Art
- Cultural exchange

Muslim cameleers

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cameleers from Afghanistan, British India and surrounding regions worked in inland Australia.

Although they were often collectively called “Afghans”, they came from different places and cultural backgrounds. Some came from regions that are now part of Pakistan.

Camels were suited to the dry Australian interior. The cameleers transported:

- Food
- Water
- Mail
- Mining equipment
- Construction materials
- Supplies for remote communities

Their work supported exploration, transport, communication and the development of inland settlements.

Later migration

Later Muslim migration included people from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This history demonstrates that Muslim Australia has never had only one ancestry or migration story.

Reading 15: Australian-Born Muslims

Muslim Australians should not be described only as migrants. The population includes:

- Recent migrants
- Refugees
- Skilled migrants
- Australian-born children of migrants
- Families established for several generations
- People who became Muslim
- People with mixed cultural backgrounds

In 2021, the Census recorded **318,422 Australian-born people who reported Islam**. This represented approximately **39.1% of Australia's Muslim population**.

The Census also recorded **488,151 overseas-born Muslims**, representing approximately **60% of the Muslim population**. The remaining small difference included responses where birthplace was not stated or could not be classified.

These figures show that a substantial part of Muslim Australia was born in Australia.

A person may therefore be:

- Australian-born
- An Australian citizen
- English-speaking
- Muslim
- Connected to one or more ancestries

These characteristics can exist together.

Reading 16: How Muslim Communities Shape Places

The **cultural landscape** consists of human-created features that reflect the identities and activities of the people living in a place.

Areas with established Muslim communities may contain:

- Mosques and prayer spaces
- Islamic schools
- Halal restaurants and food businesses
- Community organisations
- Welfare services
- Multilingual signs
- Eid celebrations
- Ramadan activities and markets
- Cultural clothing and book businesses

These features are not necessarily used only by Muslims. Restaurants, markets, schools, organisations and public celebrations may create connections between people from different backgrounds.

People–place interconnection

The relationship between population and place operates in both directions:

1. People choose areas because of housing, employment, transport and services.
2. Residents establish businesses, institutions and community facilities.
3. These human features change the identity and functions of the place.
4. The changed place may attract additional residents, visitors and investment.

This process is an example of an **interconnection** between people, communities and places.

Reading 17: The Contribution of Muslim Australians

Muslim Australians participate in all areas of Australian society, including:

- Education
- Medicine and health care
- Business
- Technology

- Trades
- Transport
- Law
- Government
- Emergency services
- Sport
- Arts and media
- Charitable work
- Community leadership

Demographic information should not reduce people to a religious label. Muslim Australians are also students, parents, employees, employers, professionals, volunteers, neighbours and citizens.

Community organisations may provide:

- Food assistance
- Youth programs
- Employment support
- Education
- Family services
- Disaster relief
- Fundraising
- Sporting activities
- Interfaith events

These activities strengthen social connections and contribute to the functioning of Australian places.

Reading 18: Interpreting Census Data Responsibly

Geographers must distinguish between a fact, a reasonable interpretation and an unsupported generalisation.

Factual statement

In the 2021 Census, 813,392 Australians reported Islam as their religion.

This statement is supported by ABS data and identifies the year.

Accurate comparison

The proportion reporting Islam was 23.6% in Canterbury-Bankstown, compared with 4.3% across NSW.

This compares the same Census variable at two geographical scales.

Reasonable interpretation

Employment, housing, transport, family networks and community facilities may have influenced the concentration of Muslim residents in parts of Sydney.

The word **may** is important because the Census does not explain why every resident selected their location.

Unsupported generalisation

All Muslims in Canterbury-Bankstown are Lebanese and speak Arabic.

This is incorrect. Religion, ancestry, birthplace and language are different Census variables.

Another unsupported generalisation

Every Pakistani Australian was born in Pakistan and is Muslim.

This is also incorrect. Some people with Pakistani ancestry were born in Australia, and not every Pakistan-born resident reported Islam.

Responsible research principles

Students should:

- Identify the Census year.
- Name the geographical area.
- Attribute information to the ABS.
- Distinguish numbers from percentages.
- Compare equivalent categories.
- Separate religion, ancestry, birthplace, language and citizenship.

- Recognise diversity within Muslim communities.
- Avoid stereotypes.
- Identify interpretations and inferences.
- Remember that statistics represent real people.

Essential Census Data Summary

Indicator	2021 Census result
Australians reporting Islam	813,392
Muslim proportion of Australia	3.2%
Median age of Muslim Australians	28 years
Australian-born Muslims	318,422
Overseas-born Muslims	488,151
NSW residents reporting Islam	349,240
Muslim proportion of NSW	4.3%
Victorian residents reporting Islam	273,028
Muslim proportion of Victoria	4.2%
Canterbury-Bankstown residents reporting Islam	87,423
Muslim proportion of Canterbury-Bankstown	23.6%
Pakistan-born Australian residents	89,633
People reporting Pakistani ancestry	97,593
Pakistan-born residents reporting Islam	82,603

All Census statistics are drawn from the [Australian Bureau of Statistics Census](#).