

The Sri Lanka-born Community

Historical Background

The island of Sri Lanka lies to the south of the Indian subcontinent. The island has long been inhabited by two main cultural groups, the Sinhalese (Buddhists from the south) and Tamils (Hindus from the north).

In the late 19th century, the first Sri Lankan immigrants to Australia were recruited to work on the cane plantations of northern Queensland. There are reports of Sri Lankans working in the gold-mining fields in New South Wales and as pearlers in Broome, Western Australia. By 1901, there were 609 Sri Lanka-born persons in Australia.

Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 and the political ascendancy of the dominant ethnic group, the Sinhalese, minority groups such as the Tamils and the Burghers (people of Sri Lankan and English descent) felt threatened and began emigrating abroad. During the 1960s, Burghers comprised the largest number of Sri Lanka-born migrants to Australia. Following changes to Government policies in the early 1970s, Asian migrants were admitted to Australia. Many of the Sri Lanka-born migrants included Tamils, Sinhalese as well as Burghers. By 1986, there were 22,519 Sri Lanka-born persons in Australia.

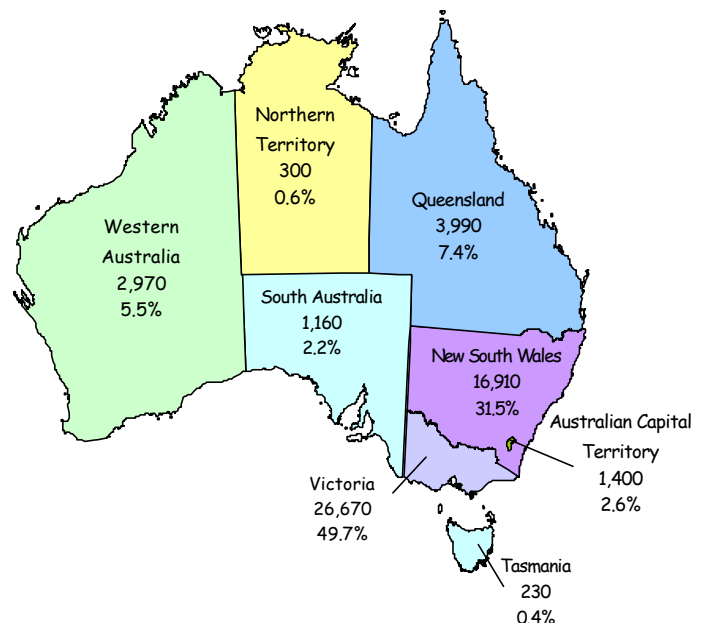
In the following decade, the number of Sri Lankans entering Australia increased. Many were fleeing the conflict in Sri Lanka between Tamil separatists and Sinhalese. Most of them arrived as humanitarian entrants under the Special Assistance Category (SAC) Class 215, introduced by the Australian Government in 1995. Additionally, there was also significant migration of Tamils and Sinhalese from Sri Lanka under the Family Migration Program, the Onshore Protection Program, and the Skilled Migration Program (mainly in the Independent Category).

The majority of Sri Lankans reside in Victoria and New South Wales. They are generally middle class, well educated, fluent in English and readily employable. Many of the Burghers had enjoyed high social and professional positions in Colombo. Some of the most recent newcomers, however, are less educated, less affluent and from rural areas.

The Community Today

Geographic Distribution

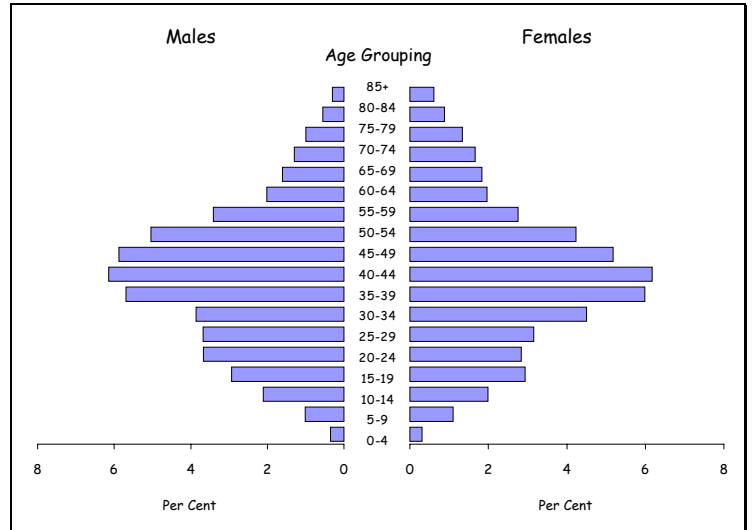
The latest Census in 2001 recorded 53,610 Sri Lanka-born persons in Australia, an increase of 14 per cent from the 1996 Census. The 2001 distribution by State and Territory showed Victoria had the largest number with 26,670 followed by New South Wales (16,910), Queensland (3,990) and Western Australia (2,970).



Age and Sex

The median age of the Sri Lanka-born in 2001 was 41.6 years compared with 46.0 years for all overseas-born and 35.6 years for the total Australian population. The age distribution showed 6.9 per cent were aged 0-14 years, 12.4 per cent were 15-24 years, 39.2 per cent were 25-44 years, 30.5 per cent were 45-64 years and 11.1 per cent were 65 and over.

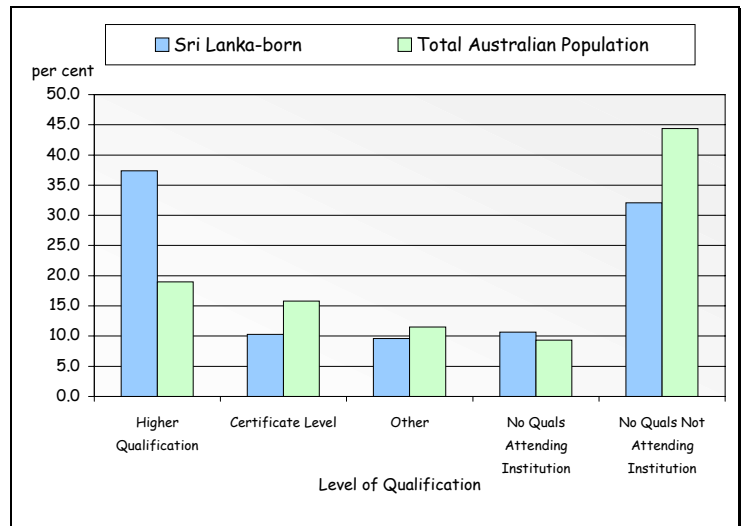
Of the Sri Lanka-born in Australia, there were 27,100 males (50.5 per cent) and 26,510 females (49.5 per cent). The sex ratio was 102.2 males per 100 females.



Qualifications

In 2001, of Sri Lanka-born people aged 15 years and over, 57.1 per cent held some form of educational or occupational qualification compared with 46.2 per cent for all Australians. Among the Sri Lanka-born, 37.2 per cent had higher qualifications* and 10.3 per cent had Certificate level qualifications. Of the Sri Lanka-born with no qualifications, 24.9 per cent were still attending an educational institution.

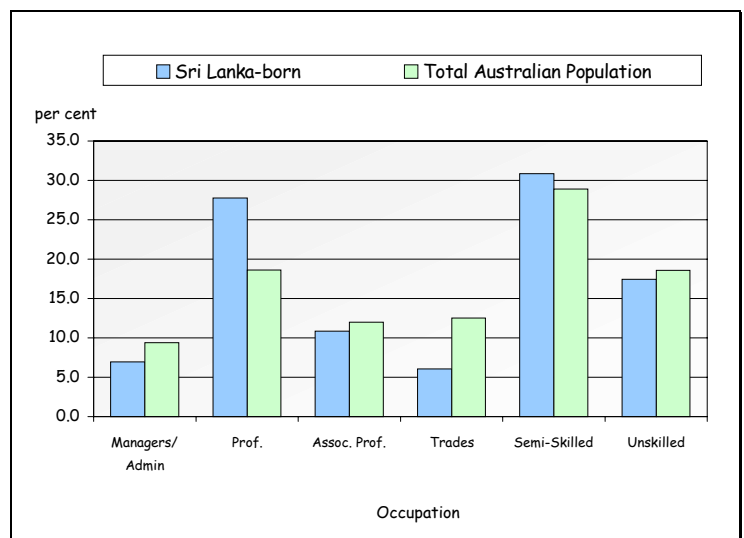
* Higher qualification includes Postgraduate Degree, Graduate Diploma & Graduate Certificate and Bachelor Degree Advanced Diploma & Diploma Level.



Employment

Among Sri Lanka-born people aged 15 years and over, the participation rate in the labour force was 67.5 per cent and the unemployment rate was 7.9 per cent. The corresponding rates in the total Australian population were 63.0 and 7.4 per cent respectively.

Of the 30,500 Sri Lanka-born who were employed, 51.7 per cent were employed in a Skilled occupation, 30.8 per cent in Semi-Skilled and 17.4 per cent in Unskilled. The corresponding rates in the total Australian population were 52.6, 28.9 and 18.6 per cent respectively.



Citizenship

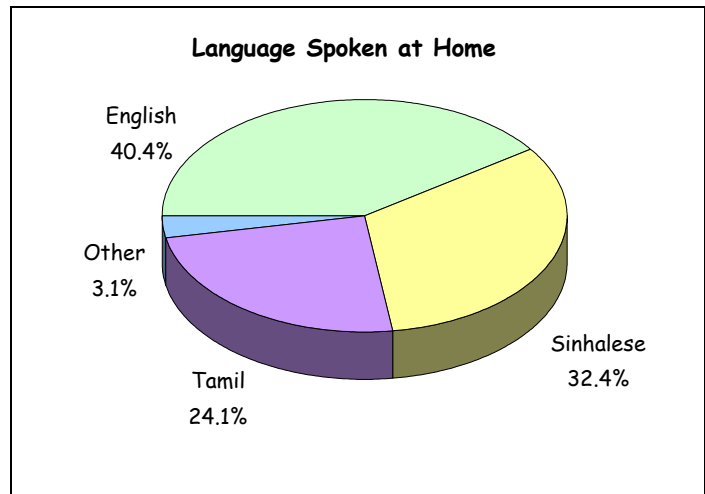
At the 2001 Census, the rate* of Australian Citizenship for the Sri Lanka-born in Australia was 81.9 per cent. The rate for all overseas-born was 75.1 per cent.

* Includes adjustments for people not meeting the residential requirement for citizenship, temporary entrants to Australia and underenumeration at the Census.

Language

The main languages spoken at home by Sri Lanka-born people in Australia were English (40.4 per cent), Sinhalese (32.4 per cent), and Tamil (24.1 per cent).

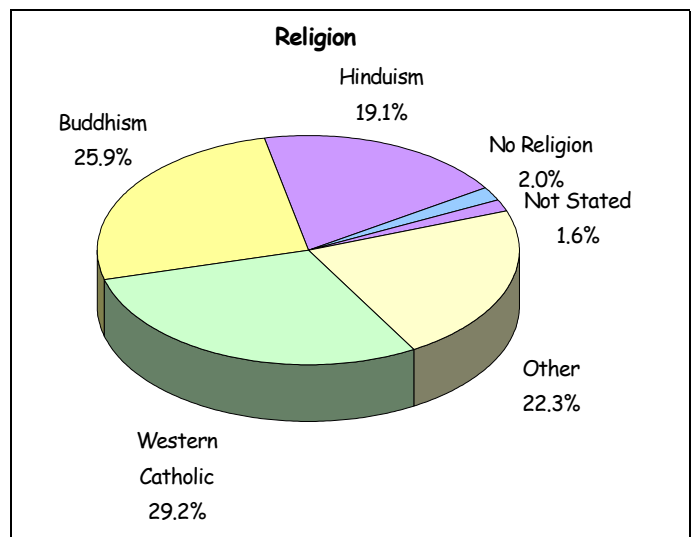
Of the 31,720 Sri Lanka-born who spoke a language other than English at home, 93.6 per cent spoke English very well or well and 5.6 per cent spoke English not well or not at all.



Religion

At the 2001 Census the major religions amongst Sri Lanka-born were Western Catholic (15,610 persons), Buddhism (13,860 persons) and Hinduism (10,210 persons).

Of the Sri Lanka-born, 2.0 per cent stated 'No Religion'. This was lower than that of the total Australian population (15.5 per cent)



Ancestry

In the 2001 Census, the top three ancestries that Sri Lanka-born persons reported were, Sinhalese (36,410), Tamil (4,150) and Dutch (1,690).

