



**Australian Government**

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**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

## **Submission to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network**

**Prepared by  
Ben Edwards, Jennifer Baxter and Sebastian Misson**

**Authorised by:  
Professor Alan Hayes, Director**

## Introduction

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network. The submission provides information on differences in Internet usage of families living in rural and remote areas compared to families living in metropolitan areas.

The material in this submission is drawn from analysis of data from the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing, the 2006–07 Australian Bureau of Statistics Multi-Purpose Household Survey and *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*.

This submission provides information on access to the Internet and type of Internet connection by the remoteness of the areas in Australia in which families reside.<sup>1</sup> It also describes differences in the types of Internet activities undertaken by families depending on their region of residence. A particular focus of the submission is on the potential of having access to a fast and reliable Internet connection to improve the life chances of children.

## What access do Australian families have to the Internet?

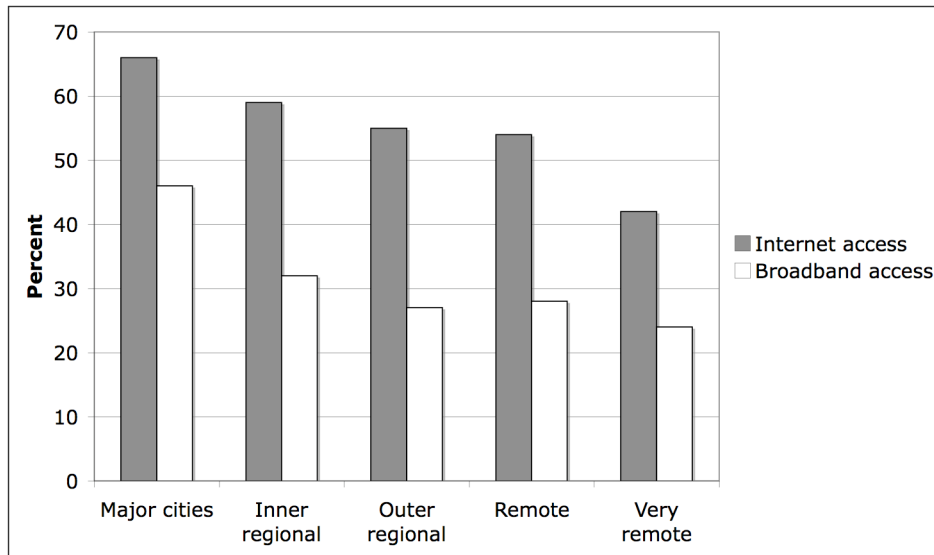
On average, Australian families who have children report they have greater levels of Internet access than those without children. According to the 2006 Census of Population and Housing, 63% of couple families without children had Internet access while 86% of couple families with dependent children had Internet access. Fifty-four per cent of single-adult households have Internet access while 65% of single-parent households with at least one dependent child had Internet access.

## Access by type of connection and region

Internet provision is generally divided into dial-up and broadband services, with the latter providing a high-speed connection to the Internet. Access to broadband is more limited in Australia's outer regional, remote and very remote areas. According to the 2006 Census of Population and Housing, 66% of households in major cities had Internet access, of which 20% were dial-up and 46% were broadband connections. In remote areas, 54% had Internet access, but only 28% had broadband connections. Even fewer families in very remote areas had Internet access (42%) and broadband access (24%). Figure 1 also shows that compared to the major cities, overall Internet access was lower in inner regional (59%) and outer regional areas (55%), as was broadband access (32% and 27% respectively).

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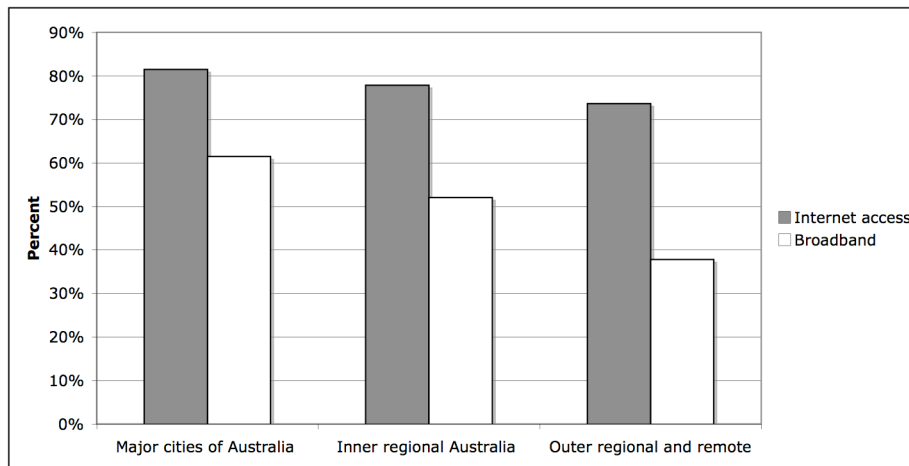
<sup>1</sup> The ABS defines "remoteness" using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Structure. The structure defines five Remoteness Areas: Major Cities of Australia, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia.



Source: ABS, 2006 Census of Population and Housing

**Figure 1 Type of Internet access by region**

Although households with a child aged 15 years or under have higher rates of Internet access and broadband than the population at large (see Figure 2), there are much lower rates of Internet and broadband access in outer regional and remote areas of Australia<sup>2</sup> (38%) than in major cities (61%).



Source: ABS, 2006–07 Multi-Purpose Household Survey

**Figure 2 Type of Internet access by region for households with children**

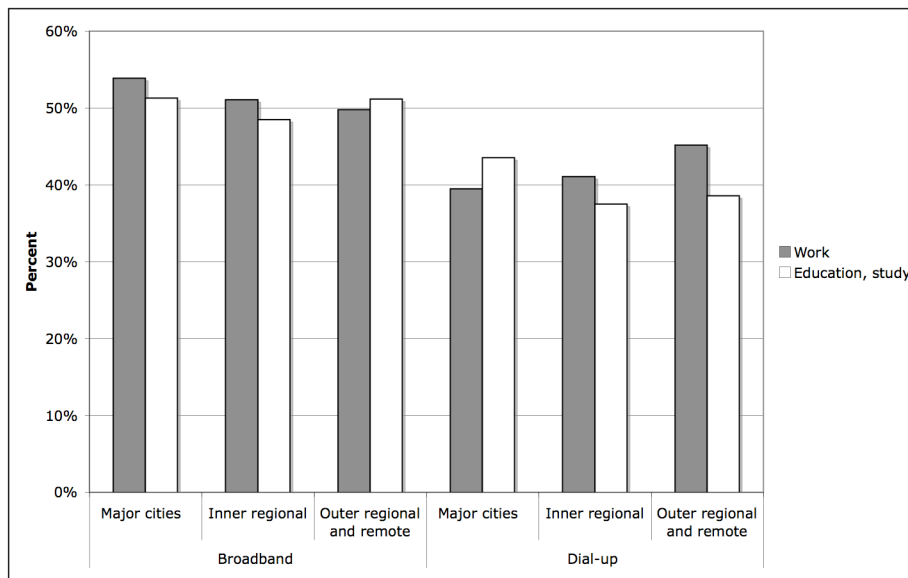
## Type of Internet use

Having access to a fast and reliable Internet connection is becoming increasingly important for supporting educational opportunities for children, including the provision of schooling to families in remote Australia. Broadband access also enables people to work from home. We investigate what families with children currently use the Internet for and whether this varies by the area in which they live. The major types of Internet use for which data were available were for education or study, work, voluntary or community activities, and personal or private use. This submission focuses on using the Internet for education/study and work.

<sup>2</sup> The ABS 2006–07 Multi-Purpose Household Survey provides area data for major cities and inner regional areas but aggregates information for outer regional, remote and very remote areas.

Of households with broadband access, Figure 3 shows there was no regional difference in the use of the Internet for education/study, with 51% of households with children in major cities *and* in outer regional, remote and very remote areas using the Internet for this purpose. For households with only dial-up access however, 44% of households in major cities used the Internet for education/study compared to 39% in outer regional, remote and very remote areas. This suggests that for families with children in outer regional, remote and very remote areas access to broadband may assist in their education or study.

Another key point to note from Figure 3 is that families with children who had dial-up and were in outer regional, remote and very remote areas used the Internet for work more often than similar families in major cities (45% compared to 39%). The pattern is reversed for families with broadband access, with 54% of families in major cities using the Internet for work compared to 50% of families in outer regional, remote and very remote areas. This may be suggestive of unmet demand for broadband access in outer regional and remote areas.



Source: 2006–2007 ABS Multi-Purpose Household Survey

**Figure 3 Internet use by region for households with children**

## Australian children’s Internet use

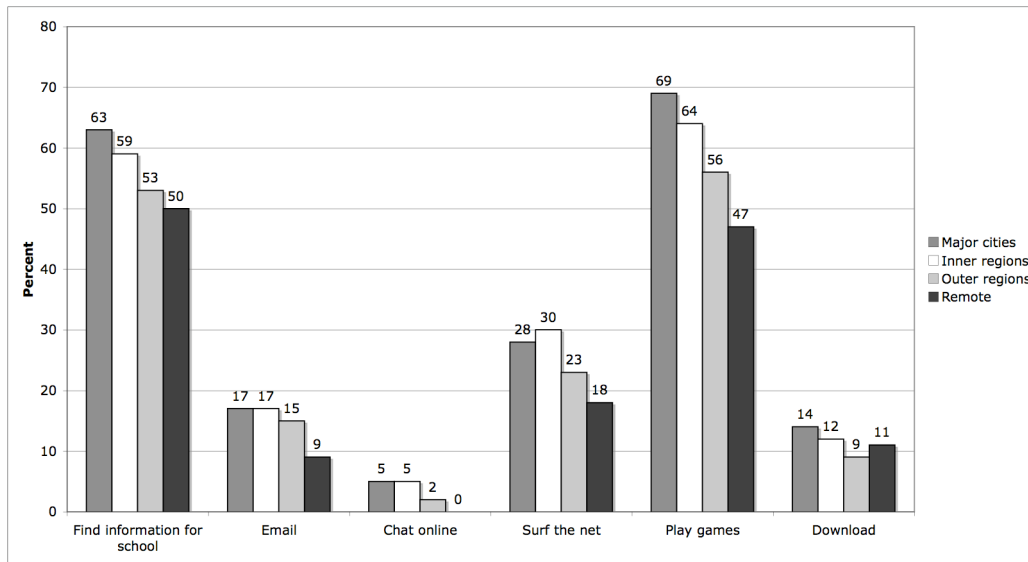
The data discussed above reveal that Australian households with children in outer regional and remote areas who only had dial-up, used the Internet less for education and study than households in major cities. There were no regional differences in Internet use for education and study when households had broadband access.

To further explore the potential impact of broadband on children’s life chances, the submission reports on analysis of information from Wave 2.5 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children that specifically focused on children’s use of technology. The findings reported were for children aged 7–8 years in 2007, the time the survey was conducted. In Wave 2.5, the questionnaire was self-completed and more than two-thirds (72%) of parents’ completed and returned the questionnaire. As a consequence, the sample is somewhat more advantaged than the population of parents of 7–8 years olds<sup>3</sup> and these differences from the general population should be kept in mind when interpreting results from Wave 2.5.

<sup>3</sup> Two-parent families, families where the mother had completed year 12 and families where the father had completed year 12, were over-represented. Two-child families and families where both parents worked were also over-represented. Families of ATSI children and families where the mother speaks a language other than English were underrepresented (AIFS, 2008).

A limitation of this analysis is that information was not collected on the type of Internet access by children's households (dial-up or broadband).

Figure 4 reports the types of Internet use in which children engaged, depending on where they lived. Across all categories of types of Internet use, the frequency of children's Internet use declined as areas became more remote. Of particular interest are the differences in children's use of the Internet to find information for school. Sixty-three per cent of children in the major cities reported using the Internet to find information for school, compared to 50% in remote areas. Less than one in ten children in remote areas used email, while almost one in five in major cities or the inner regions used the Internet for this purpose.



Source: LSAC, Wave 2.5, K cohort

**Figure 4 Internet use among 7–8 year old children by region**

## Summary

Families and families with children living in outer regional, remote or very remote areas have lower levels of access to broadband and the Internet compared to those living in the major cities. The proposed changes to increase access to broadband in these areas may enable some families the business and educational opportunities that were previously unavailable, thereby increasing their opportunities in these two vital spheres. Children living in outer regional, remote or very remote areas of Australia may also benefit, as they may more readily be able to find information for school.

## Reference

Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2008). *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Data User Guide: May 2008*. Melbourne: AIFS.