



Lesley Chenoweth
Daniela Stehlik

FACING THE
CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL
WORK IN AUSTRALIAN
RURAL AND REMOTE
COMMUNITIES

Juggling the Demands of Practice

Social Work

Collection Editor
KATE PARKINSON

LIVED PLACES
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To the many respondents who gave their time and shared their experiences so unreservedly, we remain grateful for your honesty and generosity in bringing your communities to real life. We are in awe of your advocacy as the backbone of your communities.

These are important stories. Social workers and students everywhere, we see you! We might run into you on the track somewhere.

Abstract

Living and working in rural and remote communities brings a range of different experiences for their residents. Isolation, distance from major centres, and limited access to health and other services bring challenges, while close-knit community connections and shared identity in place can be a strength. Social workers also experience these challenges and strengths. Rural practice requires being an effective ethical practitioner as well as being part of the community and place. This book brings together several decades of our experiences working in rural and remote Australian communities and listening to stories of lived experience from residents and practitioners. We offer an increased confidence in a community-focused practice that strengthens the resilience of both community members and those working alongside them.

Key words

Rural social work, communities, place and identity, resilience, strengths-based practice, community practice, ethic of flourishing, practice frameworks

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Acronyms

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CASW	Canadian Association of Social Workers
CBD	Central business district
CoP	Communities of Practice
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
DiDo	Drive in Drive out
ESW	Environmental Social Work
FiFo	Fly in Fly out
FNQ	Far North Queensland
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GP	General Practitioner
GSW	Green Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Work
Kms	Kilometres
LAC	Local Area Coordination
LACs	Local Area Coordinators
LGA	Local Government Association
NASW	National Association of Social Workers (US)
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NFCRC	Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission
NFP	Not-for-profit

NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIMBY	Not in my backyard
NRMB	Natural Resources Management Board
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
QCOSS	Queensland Council of Social Services
Qld	Queensland
PO	Professional Officer (Qld Government)
RFDS	Royal Flying Doctor Service
SBA	Strengths Based Approach
SBP	Strengths Based Practice
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WA	Western Australia
WiFi	Wireless Fidelity
WW2	World War Two

1

Rural Australia: Its places, spaces and people

Learning objectives

- Identify features of Australia: its geography and demography
- Describe key concepts that are central to this book
- Reflect on how the rural impacts on social work practice

1 Welcome

Congratulations on finding and opening this book about being a rural social work practitioner.

We have designed this book to assist you in your studies, as well as to broaden your understanding of how practice outside of cities and urban settings can be both challenging and rewarding. However, as we propose to explain here, it has different characteristics.

Social work as a discipline had its early genesis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in cities, as a response to ongoing industrialisation. As long ago as 1993, Canadian Ken Collier asked whether 'social work methods and theories [could]

be transferred successfully from the urban context, where they were first developed, to rural regions?’ (1993, p. 3). We agree with Collier that they can be, so long as we are aware of their differences, the implications of the politics of place, and make the most of the opportunities they offer.

We are pleased to present a focus on rural and remote practice from the perspective of the practitioner, you. We draw on our now several decades of experience in teaching, researching, evaluating, and advocating for social workers in several states of Australia.

While such rural social work practice has a history, which we touch on briefly in the next chapter, it is also a dynamic present-day reality that gives each practitioner a stimulating environment in which to work.

We particularly describe how place enables a deep knowledge of the strengths, resources, and challenges of these communities. Drawing on our experiences, we suggest just how the rural and remote practitioner can positively contribute to their local communities, and, in particular, how this can be done in both an ethical and professional manner.

This introduction will explain how we gathered the evidence of the lived experiences that we draw on here and how these also link to our own journey in practice. This chapter also gives an explanation of the definitions we use and the meanings of key terms such as ‘rural’ and ‘remote’, as well as others, which will guide your reading in subsequent chapters. At the end of each chapter, we offer some reflective questions. To encourage you to read further and in more depth, we have also gathered together

a significant reference list, which you will find at the end of the book. This gives further resources from our own research, as well as others.

We will discuss in more detail the ties that bind us to place in Chapter 4 and in Chapter 3, we explain the difference between ties of kin and blood and ties of association as regards community.

Here, as part of this brief introduction, it is important to note that we consider the ties that bind us to 'the rural' in this present day are likely to be by association. What do we mean by this? Attachment through some form of association, and most commonly this will be through work.

Historically, the ties that bound European Australians to the rural were most likely through kinship networks. It was once a truism that everyone in the city had a relative of some kind in the country. This relationship truism came to mean that everyone just 'understood' the rural because it was connected to us by kin and blood. For example, Lesley can trace her family origins back to the early nineteenth century and their settlement in a rural region. However, most commonly, this is no longer the case. As the post-WW2 migration boom strengthened, those who arrived in Australia (such as Daniela's parents) did not have that connection; and this is increasingly so as that migration has continued over the past decades.

As a result, if we consider our connections to the rural today, it will be through our work-related networks. This seems a good opportunity to also make the point stronger by highlighting that while a historical experience of place tends to inform present-day policymakers and politicians, they are unlikely to be born

and raised rurally (although we have some exceptions), and given their career paths, are unlikely, in many cases, to have even visited remote locations. If they do visit as part of their work association, they are likely to be 'on the ground' for a minimum amount of time, meet a few carefully selected individuals, and then return to the city. In this way, their assumptions about place, community, and the rural/remote landscape more broadly are powerfully shaped by these brief connections. For example, a policymaker in the city making a decision looks at the map and chooses a location for an aged care home that may be more than 200 km from a rural town where people live, making regular contact with their family more difficult.

It is important at the very outset that, as you read this book, you are aware that we are not seeking a utopian ideal, nor are we asking you, the practitioner, to make it your career to do so. We are asking you to consider working in rural or remote communities, and to do so with as much of a clear appreciation of the historical, ideological, and pragmatic context as you can. This book raises a number of critical issues that you will confront in your practice. Chapters 5 and 6 provide you with some resources to assist you in your practice. We also have spent some time explaining how rural practice 'works' and how, as a practitioner, you can celebrate what may appear to be small achievements, but what are, in fact, important milestones. Through a mobilisation of community, through the creation of networks and alliances, we argue that there are ways in which you can make a difference. We do not subscribe to the view that social work is a 'vocation' or a 'calling'. Instead, we suggest social work, as a values-based profession with an extensive knowledge base and

skills, can positively contribute to rural communities and those who live there.

The chapter now begins with a brief outline of the rural within an Australian context, the people, and the challenges and opportunities that they face.

2 The 'rural' in an Australian context: Myths and realities

With its history of human settlement of some 65,000 years, Australia has the world's longest surviving continuous Indigenous culture. This was dramatically changed in the late eighteenth century, with the arrival of European colonisation and settlement. The eastern coastline of Australia first became a penal colony to alleviate overcrowded British prisons, with later free settlers seeking opportunities for better lives and prosperity. As these settlers began to farm, the indigenous landscape was changed irrevocably.

We should note here that the early pioneers farmed as if they were still located in Europe, with its rich soils and milder climate. In doing so, they ignored the deep appreciation of the land held by its First Nations inhabitants, and this, associated with the many attempts by those inhabitants to challenge the newcomers, resulted in massacres, many of which are only now becoming known and recognised. For those of you interested in reading about this painful history, which continues to shape and impact how we 'deliver' human services, there are some outstanding texts available. For example, Bruce Pascoe's 'Dark Emu,' released in 2014 (Pascoe, 2014), had a powerful effect on its Australian

readership. Another publication by Bill Gammage, 'The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia,' published in 2011 is also highly recommended (Gammage, 2011)

To return now to our brief chronology. A major gold rush in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in considerable in-migration, not only of European, but also of Asian and North American settlers. For the First Nations people, this continued colonisation and its radical changes to lifestyle were to prove destructive to their long-held relationships with their landscapes and to their health and wellbeing, as they were forced further and further inland, away from their traditional homelands: a historic pattern that can be seen to be repeated in many other colonised nations during this time, including in the Americas and Africa.

Australia was federated in 1901 and for around the 60 years following this, it was largely underpinned economically by primary production: wheat, sheep, cattle, and other forms of agriculture. We were then proud to be a primary producing nation in feeding ourselves and the rest of the world. During this time, 'the rural' was lauded and even mythologised, as much of our early literature and art highlights.

This early colonisation history, and its foundation in what has been termed a 'theft' of land from its original inhabitants, has shaped the cultural consciousness in the present day. To many of us, 'the bush' continues to evoke a natural, pristine, and essentially good place that, while it may be less than the city we live in, is still morally our national conscience. We respond emotionally to the ideology of the pioneering spirit, the challenge against the unknown as essentially the concept of 'the rural' (Lockie

& Bourke, 2001). When asked, for example, to describe a 'typical Australian,' we respond with stereotypes, such as Crocodile Dundee, that revert to masculine interpretations. Despite this, most of us continue to live on the eastern seaboard and know little or nothing about the lives of those people whom we mythologise. The reality of family life in rural Australia, the lives of women and children (as well as men) in that environment, is less well understood. The mythic persona of the Australian as the tamer of 'wide open spaces' and of 'bronzed Aussies' colonising the inland with a pioneering spirit and a determined individualism tied up with 'mateship' and giving everyone a 'fair go' was well established over 100 years ago and remains essentially potent. One way we can better understand such powerful imagery is to think about the stereotypes that continue to shape 'the rural' in Australia.

Stereotypes can be understood as attributes we assign so that we can 'classify' people. What is important here is that such stereotypes can often lead to prejudices, which in turn tend to prevail as attitudes that can demean, thereby leading to discrimination. These stereotypes are continually rehearsed in all forms of media (including social media), to the point that we are often, albeit unconsciously, influenced by them. How does this impact the social work practitioner? In two ways – the first, the stereotypes associated with their clients and their communities; the second, the stereotypes associated with them as practitioners working in these environments. We return to this in further detail in Chapter 4.

As urbanisation accelerated, the city became more central to the nation's identity, and now, if we consider the rural in Australia,

our thoughts also turn to the environment, to climate change impacts, to resource extraction, to tourism, not just to agriculture. Nevertheless, we argue here that enduring stereotypes continue to cast a long shadow in rural and remote Australia by suggesting that those who choose to live outside our cities are conservative, traditional, patriarchal, and intolerant of difference.

Our work spans almost three decades, but we still find that these stereotypes continue to re-emerge and linger. Why? As we mentioned above, stereotyping leads to prejudice, both positive and negative. Importantly, human beings tend to define themselves and their sense of identity by who they are not. Practitioners will find very quickly how a sense of identity associated with place defines their clientele and their communities as well as themselves.

Over the past century, as the city became the place to be and to work, the rural declined in attractiveness. It was less a desirable place to work; people there were 'slightly weird,' and being 'sent to the country' was seen as something less than career enhancing. It follows then that working in a rural setting, whether as a nurse, a teacher, a police officer, or a social worker, was to be avoided. Those who did identify with the rural or who avoided cities and deliberately moved to the countryside were viewed as perhaps contributing much less to the great national endeavor. We return to this paradox further in later chapters.

However, we stress here that the historically powerful image of Rural Australia (capital letters) as a place only connected with agriculture continues to shape our national thinking about places other than those we can consider urban. This also tends to ignore

the lived reality of those First Nations people as displaced and living largely in the central and northern parts of the country. This by no means implies that Indigenous Australians do not live in cities, but the concept of 'rural' as an imaginary tends to elide any others than those associated with agriculture. One of the many ways in which this historical, but essentially mythological ideology has continued to be challenged is through the increasing demands for land rights by Indigenous Australians. Indigenous people constitute a higher proportion of rural, and especially remote, populations of Australia. Most recently, the relationship between Indigenous Australians (both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and the land has become the subject of both academic and popular discourse. One way in which this has entered into the national consciousness is through the increasing use of the names given by traditional owners to the land on which we live and work.

3 A 'tyranny' of distance and demography

We use the word 'tyranny' here as it has become a powerful and well-understood term associated with the large expanse of the Australian continent. This creates ongoing challenges of providing services to small, discrete geographic communities that have little infrastructure and are dispersed by large distances from urban centres. Interestingly, the concept itself was first coined by an American geographer, William Bunge, and subsequently taken up in Australia in the early 1960s. It has now become a 'shorthand' way of explaining why living outside cities results in recognition of few supports for individuals (Wedesweiler, 2025

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/second-class-citizens-the-grim-reality-of-avoidable-deaths-in-regional-australia/s5cylskf8> Accessed: 22nd February 2025).

So just how big is Australia? The continent can be crossed from east to west (a distance of some 3,290 kms) by car in about 41 hours, or by plane in just over 4 hours. Western Standard Time means that Perth is 3 hours 'behind' Sydney, a factor that impacts much service delivery decision-making in that state. From south to north (just over 3,000 kms) will take around 31 hours by car, and by plane just over 3 hours. If there is a stop-over to the north at Alice Springs (roughly halfway), the plane journey will take just over 6 hours. The continent consists of some 7.6 m. sq. kilometres, being just slightly smaller than the US at about 8 m. sq. kms. Queensland has a population of 4.6 m. spread over an area of 1.7 m. sq. kms, which is nearly seven times larger than the British Isles and larger than South Africa.

The roads between these major centres are highways, most often two lanes, and kept in a reasonable condition. A major stretch of the Eyre Highway between Western Australia and north-western South Australia was only finally sealed in 1976. Until then, it was a dirt road, a muddy quagmire in winter, and a dusty stretch in summer: an adventure to drive, to say the least. In some places, such as in Far North Queensland (FNQ), some roads are purposely left unsealed because of the regular monsoonal flooding that occurs.

The population of Australia is skewed to its coastline and to urban centres. Over 69 per cent of us live in our major cities. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) estimates that

around 20 per cent of the population live in 'inner' regional centres; 9 percent in outer regional areas, and 2.3 per cent in remote or very remote areas (1.5 percent remote and 0.8 per cent very remote). Of the total population of First Nations people, 14.4 per cent or 150,900 people, live in remote or very remote areas. There are also scattered geographic communities in Western Australia, Queensland, and the Northern Territory that are First Nations populated only (more detail can be found at: Australian Institute of Family Studies <https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/families-and-family-composition> Accessed: 3rd December 2024).

The AIFS suggests 'remote' as being determined by the road distance from services. It also makes the point that very little 'is known about families living in rural and remote areas ... compared to those living in major cities' (Baxter, 2011, p. 1). The classification 'remoteness' is officially measured by governments as the physical distance by road to the nearest urban centre and accordingly underpins policies and programs. Some 60 per cent of the nation's mining is operated in remote Australia. In 2012, mining contributed 8.4 per cent of our GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and accounted for 55 per cent of our export GDP. In addition, mining employs some 240,000 people across Australia; however, not all of these people live in remote geographic communities. Remote Australia is also home to nearly half of Australia's GDP in agriculture (4 per cent) and to over 40,000 small to medium enterprises, one and a half times more per capita than the national average (CRC for Remote Economic Participation, 2012).

Some of the major policy decisions that impact First Nations Australians are those who live rurally and remotely. This is very much about place. As this rural and remote population lives in

small communities and settlements scattered across the northern and western part of the country, they continue to be 'managed' centrally, either from Canberra, our capital city in which the Federal government has most of its public service departments, or a little more closely by state governments from the state capital cities. Place becomes identified strongly with its inhabitants, and, as we describe in more detail in Chapter 4, place becomes synonymous, positively or negatively, with those inhabitants. In some extreme cases, a place is known by shorthand; no more needs saying, as this shorthand identifies the vulnerable 'clientele'. The concern here is that such labeling adds further to derogatory connotations of the people who live there.

Our major cities are all on the coast, as are many of the regional centres. The three states in which we conducted our research (Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory) together make up about 73 per cent of the total land area, with roughly 30 per cent of the population. These states together include nearly 50 per cent of our First Nations population. (For more detail see Australian Bureau of Statistics at www.abs.gov.au). A quick example of the 'tyranny' argument can be given from Western Australia, where over 75 per cent of the population of 1.97 m live in the capital city, Perth, or in its immediate metropolitan area. It takes some 22 hours by car to drive from Perth to Broome in the far north of the state, or just over two and a half hours by plane. The north-west of the state, which includes the region of the Kimberley (from Perth 2,545 kms.), takes 29 hours to reach by car. The population of this area in June 2023 was just under 40,000, of which some 14,400 (around 36 per cent) identified as First Nations. Most Australians would agree that the

Kimberley is considered 'remote'. A quick check shows it can take up to 16 hours, at prohibitive expense, to fly from Sydney (via Perth) to Kununurra, the major centre in the area.

Remote Australia often makes the metropolitan headlines because of housing costs. Not that long ago, it was because regional councils were offering houses for as little as AUD\$1.00 if people would just come and live there and renovate. At the time of writing this, the headlines report that rental properties in some centres, such as Karratha and Port Hedland, in north-west Western Australia, can cost well over AUD\$1,000 per week. Overnight stays in motels can cost the equivalent of the capital city CBD and are often booked out by 'cashed-up' mining personnel.

These costs have a domino effect, as governments scramble to build new housing stock, while human service agencies have difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. As we write this, Port Hedland mayor Peter Carter has just been quoted as saying that '... fresh housing was needed to attract government workers [as] governments haven't invested money in housing in a long, long time. I think they realise now if you want teachers and police to come to regional areas, you must have good housing, because they won't live in a house that's 40 years old' (Kordic, Shakleton & Bidstrup, 2025).

Delivering essential health, education, and human services in rural and remote communities has been historically, and continues to remain, a critical challenge for Australia. In the past two decades, there has been a change in the quality of life for many people living in rural communities as a result of recent social and

economic disadvantage. This has emerged as a result of falling commodity prices, globalisation of markets, climate change (particularly drought), and out-migration of population to metropolitan areas (Stehlik, 2001, 2013). At the same time, the service responses to rural communities have also changed with a resultant loss of social capital (Winter, 2000). In the mid-1990s, the then federal government withdrew a number of key services from rural areas, including important services associated with caring for a family member. More recently, there have been attempts to 're-instate' such services by using different models of care support (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 1999). However, it takes time to rebuild such infrastructure and to ensure that these services are adequately staffed. For example, it has been calculated that there is one nurse for 170 people in remote Australia, compared with one nurse for every 100 people in metropolitan Australia. A recent media report cited the following:

While living in a remote area can be incredibly rewarding sometimes, the need for services for our children can make the isolation frustrating and challenging. Did you know the average wait time for a speech pathologist in remote Australia is up to four years? (Remote Australians Matter, 2024).

A recent newspaper article was headed 'A dire warning amid rural Queensland healthcare exodus' as the struggle to recruit and retain professionals continues (Simmerton, 2025). We discuss strategies that have been developed to cope with these statistics further in Chapter 5.

As a brief comparison, a recent United States report has identified that 1/5th (around 50 m.) of the population live in areas

classified as non-urban. The report highlights that these have lower incomes, less access to employer-sponsored health insurance, worse health outcomes, and have, over the past decade, experienced the closure of many of their local hospitals, particularly their maternity hospitals (Alker, Osorio & Edgar, 2025). See also Rickertts (2005) with respect to health workforce in rural areas.

Other consequences of the impact of change in rural Australia have been the diminution of volunteer effort, the fragmentation of extended families, the ageing of the population, and the changing roles of women as breadwinners (Lawrence & Stehlik, 1996). All of these factors have multiple, domino-like impacts, resulting in serious challenges to effective human service delivery in rural and remote areas. In particular, for women with caring responsibilities, such overall disadvantage is compounded even further. Their experiences include not only a lack of adequate and appropriate support services, material hardship, and social isolation but also, in many cases, marginalisation by the communities in which they live. For example, Yvonne recalls that:

Anyone that tried to humiliate me or put me down certainly never ever attempted it the second time around. I became very used to it. I expected it and I knew how to defend myself against it ... (Bowden, 1995, p. 220).

Our landscape, its geographic size and population spread, has historically demanded unique responses to the tyranny of distance, as we discuss further in Chapter 2. For example, in the past decade, a national adaptive response has resulted in a marked increase in the number of professionals who now fly-in/fly-out (FiFo) of their workplaces. Commencing initially as a response to

the mining boom of the early 2000s, and primarily then focused on engineers and geologists, it is now becoming more institutionalised in other professional settings (traditionally seen as the caring professions), including health services, social work services, and education services. The costs associated with this approach remain prohibitive. In addition, most recently, telecommunications have begun to include a trend towards ‘telehealth’ as we discuss further in Chapter 5.

To summarise, the issue of regions in Australia has a long history, from the earliest years of European settlement. The constant push/pull between the urban and the regional (and rural) remains of interest not only academically but also politically. This issue is one that challenges concepts of place, memory, and diversity, as we discuss further in other chapters. It is also a truism that ‘rural’ and ‘remote’ have more political ‘value’ during the lead-up to elections than at any other time. Those who live beyond the urban coastal settlements know this, and this explains, to some degree, the push/pull nature of their political involvement.

4 Human service delivery

The context in which human services are delivered in Australia is highly political: as both political (large scale, as in the way in which our governance operates) and political (on the ground, local, immediate).

Throughout this book, we refer to the framework that informs Australian government programs and legislation as being ‘neoliberal’: that is, the fundamental ‘... relationships between the state, market and communities ...’ have shifted, and the state has been replaced by the ‘market’ where competition is lauded as

being essential to ensure efficiency and effectiveness (Maidment & Bay, 2012, p. 226). This shift has had much impact on social work practice, including, as we discuss here, an increasing privatisation of the many programs designed to enable support for vulnerable citizens. The withdrawal of 'on the ground' government services over time has been extensive. Australia has an essentially privatised for-profit 'welfare' sector that has grown exponentially since the early 1980s, and despite many government reviews and reports, there appears to be little appetite for any fundamental change.

Social workers in rural and remote communities are not always employed by governments. As we explain in more detail in these chapters, the rural is changing, and one obvious and immediate change has been the introduction of private-for-profit business as a response to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in 2013. This major policy changed service delivery from groups to individuals. Briefly, the individual, when assessed, gets personal funding allocated that they then spend on services and supports to meet those assessed needs. It is this market-driven, neo-liberal ideology that has changed the way in which many social workers are now employed. Under this new funding model, many large service organisations struggled to provide services, and many moved from the sector, especially in rural and remote communities. The costs of travel and the difficulties with recruitment and retention all led to large services shutting regional offices, moving to FiFo (fly-in fly-out) models, or simply leaving the area. Small businesses were established quickly to meet the need: either as managers of the services the individual was entitled to or as deliverers of those services.

Physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists, and other professionals, previously perhaps employed by government agencies or the non-government sector, opened up their own small businesses and began servicing clients. This has reached rural areas. In larger centres, entrepreneurial professionals, including social workers, have established their businesses. We discuss working in these different environments in Chapter 5.

Australia has three tiers of government: federal, state, and local. Human services can be delivered from any one of these tiers. In addition, and importantly, there are other critical players such as charities, churches, and increasingly, particularly since the late twentieth century, private for-profit organisations. Those of us who work, research, and write about this sector have used the following shorthand: NGOs. These non-government organisations, which can be either private for profit or charitable, but often very confusingly, are still funded by governments.

This complex system operates without the average 'client' either understanding or wanting to understand this complexity. It is sometimes just too much to take in. Indeed, the social work practitioner may be paid by the Federal Government through a short-term grant, through the State government as part of a program that the Federal Government funds, with some State government contributions, or by local government, which, in many rural areas, is often the only significant player. What needs to be appreciated here as you read this book is that this is a layered system, very complex, very diversified. Funding can often be short-term, meaning that practitioners are often subject to much change and different policies, with