

Relaxed and middle-aged

YOU knew we were getting older, but were you aware the median age of Mr and Ms Australia jumped nearly 20 per cent in just 20 years?

Peter Costello's plea for more procreation aside, did you know we are repopulating naturally at a rate equal to the rest of the West, and our population is growing twice as fast as China's?

We're richer, but depend on credit – domestically and internationally – to afford our lifestyle. The poorest 20 per cent of households own just 1 per cent of household wealth,

while the richest 20 per cent own 59 per cent.

Women are better educated than men, but are still paid less.

And the best paid of all? Miners, with men earning \$1729 a week on average and women \$1318 – about double the weekly average for hospitality and retail workers.

Mothers are giving birth later, the divorce rate has plateaued and we are marrying later and staying married longer.

Despite war deaths, 50 years ago men outnumbered women. Women now outnumber men.

We are contented, but the most satisfied of all are wealthy couples without dependent children, suggesting that money may buy happiness after all.

We feel safe in our homes, but less so at night, and neighbour disputes worry us as much as concerns about illegal drugs and drug-related crime. Noisy and dangerous driving is much more worrying.

And there is no hypochondria epidemic. Generally, we regard ourselves as a healthy lot.

These are just a few of the snapshots of Australia captured in the 2007 year book, published by the Bureau of Statistics and launched this week by the Governor-General, Major General Michael Jeffery.

The book weaves together statistical knowledge of where we are, and sometimes where we have been and where we

may be going. It does not include the results of last August's national census, which have not yet been published.

So where are we? We're a nation of more than 20 million – twice as many as half a century ago. But we're producing fewer children – 1.8 per woman, compared with a "replacement" rate of 2.1, and 3.5 in baby-boom 1961 – and living longer, meaning it is possible Australia's fertility rate will fall below zero by the middle of the century.

This pincer of low birthrate and increased longevity has pushed the median age – the point at which half the population is younger and half older – to 36.6 years, up 5.8 years over two decades.

Under the most generous bureau prediction, Adelaide would reach 1.2 million people in 2021 (it had 1.1 million in 2004), Sydney 5 million (4.2m), Melbourne 4.4 million (3.6m), Brisbane 2.6 million (1.8m), and Perth 2 million (1.5m).

Queensland would overtake Victoria as the second most populous state but NSW, even though it has been losing residents interstate for nearly 30 years, would remain No. 1.

In 1984, the median age of first-time mothers was 27 – the age at which a woman's fertility begins to decline. It is now 30.6.

Overseas migration has had to fill the gap. In 1947, 10 per cent of Australians were born overseas; now it's a quarter. And that's a statistic that is likely to increase.

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