

Sri Lankan Australians

- Sri Lankan immigrants were recruited to work on the cane plantations of Northern Queensland in the late 19th Century². Some worked in gold-mining fields in NSW and as pearlers in Broome in Western Australia². By 1901, there were 609 Sri Lanka-born people living in Australia².
- Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon when under British rule) gained independence in 1948. As a result of the political ascendancy of the Sinhalese, the dominant ethnic group, many members of minority groups, including Tamils and Burghers (people of Sri Lankan and European descent), felt threatened, resulting in increasing numbers migrating to other countries^{2,4}.
- As a result of migration restrictions to Australia during the 1960s, the majority of Sri-Lankan migrants to Australia were Burghers². In 1973 when Asian migrants were again admitted to Australia, Sri Lankan migrants were mostly Sinhalese professionals⁵.
- In 1983, civil war broke out between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. The war continued for 26 years until 2009. Sri Lankan Tamils increasingly settled in Australia as refugees or skilled migrants. Sinhalese Sri Lankans continued to migrate to Australia, along with Sri Lankan Moors (also known as Muslim Sri Lankans)^{2,4,6}.
- **Ethnicity:** There are three main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka: Sinhalese (73.8 per cent), Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils (8.5 per cent) and Sri Lankan Moors (7.2 per cent)^{2,4}. Burghers make up around 0.2 per cent of the Sri Lankan population⁷.
- **Language:**
 - Sinhala is the official language of Sri Lanka and is spoken by 74 per cent of the population (mostly Sinhalese)

Population of Sri Lanka-born people in Australia (2006 Census): 62,257¹

Population of Sri Lanka-born people in Queensland: 4808

Population of Sri Lanka-born people in Brisbane¹: 3603

Gender ratio (Queensland): 99.7 males per 100 females¹

Median age (Australia): The median age of Sri Lanka-born people in Australia in 2006 was 43.1 years compared with 46.8 years for all overseas-born and 37.1 for the total Australian population².

Age distribution (Queensland)¹:

Age	Per cent
0-19	9.6%
20-39	24%
40-59	40.6%
60+	25.8%

Arrivals – past five years (Source – Settlement Reporting Database³)

Year	Australia	Queensland
2006	3703	337
2007	3842	275
2008	5187	372
2009	5039	368
2010	3997	300

- Tamil is spoken by 18 per cent of the population
- English is commonly used by government and spoken by 10 per cent of the population⁴.

- **Religion:**

- Sinhalese: The majority of Sinhalese are Theravada Buddhists
- Tamil: Most Tamils are Hindus, but some are Muslims or Christians. The majority of Christians are Catholics
- Sri Lankan Moors: The majority are Muslim
- Burghers: The majority are Christian^{2,4,8}.

Ancestry, language and religion in Australia (2006 Census for Sri Lanka-born)²:

- The top four ancestry responsesⁱⁱ of Sri Lanka-born people in Australia were:
 - Sinhalese – 69.5 per cent
 - Tamil – 8 per cent
 - English – 5.3 per cent
 - Dutch – 5 per cent.
- The main languages spoken at home by Sri-Lanka born people in Australia were:
 - Sinhalese – 38.8 per cent
 - English – 35 per cent
 - Tamil – 23.3 per cent.
- The main religions of Sri-Lanka born people in Australia were:
 - Buddhism – 31.1 per cent
 - Catholic – 26.9 per cent
 - Hinduism – 18.6 per cent
 - Anglican – 7.7 per cent.

Communication

- Sri Lankans have various naming conventions dependent on their ethnic group. In most cases the family name comes first, and given name second⁹.
- When addressing a person from Sri Lanka, particularly the elderly, it is important to use the appropriate title (e.g. Mr, Mrs) followed by their family name^{10,11}.
- Younger Sri Lankan Australians generally shake hands and are socialised towards soft rather than firm handshakes. A firm handshake may surprise a newly arrived Sri Lankan Australian¹².

- Sri Lankan Australians usually avoid eye contact in interactions where they feel deference or respect¹².
- Although many south Asians nod their heads to indicate *yes* and shake their heads to indicate *no*, this is not always true¹². A horizontal head swing can mean *yes* for some Sri Lankan Australians¹².
- The following communication issues are particularly important for Sri Lankan Buddhists:
 - It is disrespectful for legs to be stretched out with feet pointed towards a person¹³
 - The head is considered the spiritually highest part of the body and sensitivity is advised if it is necessary to touch the head¹³
 - Using both hands to give and receive an object is a sign of respect, particularly with older people¹³.

Health in Australia

- Average life expectancy in Sri Lanka is 75.3 years (male 73.2, female 77.5) compared to 81.7 years for all people living in Australia (male 79.3, female 84.3)⁴. This relatively high life expectancy for a country with a low income level appears to be related to a highly efficient use of curative services by Sri Lankans¹⁴.
- A recent population-based survey in Colombo showed considerably lower rates of depression in Sri Lankans compared to rates in Western countries¹⁵. However, Tamil refugees living in South India have been shown to have poor mental health, including high rates of depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)¹⁶.
- Tamil asylum seekers in Australia have been shown to have higher levels of anxiety, depression and PTSD compared to Tamil refugees and immigrants¹⁷.
- Vitamin D deficiency is a common health problem and Asian women are at high risk for osteoporosis¹⁸.

Health beliefs and practices

- Many Sri Lankan Australians value and use Australian medicine in conjunction with traditional remedies including traditional medicines and spiritual practices such as *Ayurveda* and *Sinhala*^{10,14,19}. *Ayurveda* places emphasis on herbal medicines, aromatherapy, nutrition, massage and meditation to create a balance between the mind and body¹⁰.
- The involvement of family in major and minor medical decisions is crucial for many Sri Lankans¹². Disclosing a serious or terminal diagnosis is best undertaken with the consultation and help of family members. It may be appropriate to ask a patient his or her wishes about confidentiality and privacy before discussing any sensitive issues¹².
- A Sri Lankan cultural practice that may influence health care is the designation of left and right hands for specific tasks. The right hand is typically used for sanitary tasks such as eating while the left hand is reserved for unsanitary tasks¹². This may affect a patient's comfort with the use of one arm or the other for drawing blood or for the insertion of an IV¹².
- Mental illness has strong negative connotations and stigma¹². Shame and denial may be the normal response to any suggestion of mental illness¹².

Social determinants of health

- Literacyⁱⁱⁱ rates in Sri Lanka are high at 90.7 per cent (male 92.3 per cent, female 89.1 per cent) based on a 2001 census⁴.
- Many Sri Lankan Tamils have experienced numerous traumatic events including unnatural death of family or friends, forced separation from family members, witnessing the murder of strangers, being close to death and witnessing the murder of family or friends²². More than one in four Tamil asylum seekers reported exposure to torture²².
- Asylum seeker status, difficulties in adapting to life in Australia and loss of

social and cultural support have been shown to contribute to PTSD symptoms of Tamil refugees²².

- Proficiency in English (2006 Census)^{iv,1}:
 - 97 per cent of Sri Lanka-born men and 92 per cent of Sri Lanka-born women reported that they spoke English well or very well
 - three per cent of men and seven per cent of women reported that they did not speak English well
 - Less than one per cent of men and one per cent of women reported that they did not speak English at all.
- At the time of the 2006 Census, 64.8 per cent of Sri Lanka-born people in Australia aged 15 years and older had some form of higher non-school qualifications^v compared to 52.5 per cent of the total Australian population².
- The participation rate in the workforce (2006 Census) was 70.9 per cent and unemployment rate was 6.5 per cent compared to the corresponding values of 64.6 per cent and 5.2 per cent in the total Australian population². The median weekly income for Sri-Lanka born people in Australia aged 15 and older was \$555 compared to \$466 for the total Australian population².

Utilisation of health services in Australia

- Due to the strong negative attitudes towards mental illness among Sri-Lankan Australians, seeking help for psychiatric problems usually only occurs in chronic cases and may start with the pursuit of traditional treatment options¹². Sometimes a patient will agree to treatment by a family physician or a psychologist in a primary health care setting but will refuse to go to an external psychiatrist or mental health clinic because of the strong stigma involved¹².
- Young Asian migrants tend not to seek professional help for mental health problems and instead use personal support networks including close friends and the religious community²³.

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It should be noted that there is great diversity within communities and people do not fit into a pre-determined cultural box or stereotype. The information presented here will not apply to all Sri Lankan Australians and this profile should be considered in the context of the acculturation process.

ⁱ Brisbane is defined as Local Government Area of Brisbane in ABS Census data.

ⁱⁱ At the 2006 Census up to two responses per person were allowed for the Ancestry question, count is therefore total responses not person count.

ⁱⁱⁱ Literacy is defined as those aged 15 and over who can read and write.

^{iv} Missing and not-stated responses to this question on the census were excluded from the analysis.

^v Non-school qualifications are awarded for educational attainments other than those of pre-primary, primary or secondary education.