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Statistical Note **A TALE OF TWO CITIES**

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) residential population growth statistics for 2024-25 puts Cairns LGA growth at 1,761 behind Townsville LGA growth of 2,288, a set-back to claims that Cairns is overtaking Townsville in population. In fact, analysis of residential population growth over the past 24 years indicates that the two cities' Local Government Areas have both grown by 64,000. Townsville led only marginally more by 287. In fact, of the 24 years, each city has led in twelve of the years. Of course, because Cairns started from a smaller base, it has recorded the faster growth in percentage growth terms of 55% as against Townsville at 45%. (See following Table.)

Cairns has continued to be behind Townsville in residential population by 27,000.

Of course, in on-the-ground population that includes visitors, Cairns closes the gap to some degree. Unfortunately, the 2021 Census was during the Covid period. However, the 2016 Census indicated that visitor population in Cairns with 28,000 visitors counted exceeded Townsville's 15,000 visitors by 13,000. And, if you add in as being effectively in the Cairns city area, the Yarrabah and Kuranda population of about 7,700 residential population, the relative size of the two cities becomes closer still.

However, whereas one commentator puts it, "Cairns is leaving Townsville in the rear vision mirror", is in Cairns' immediate hinterland catchment area's population. The population of the remainder of the ABS Cairns Statistical Area Level 4 that includes Cassowary Coast, Douglas and the Mareeba/Tablelands area have, since 2001, grown by 15,000 to 92,000 residential population, while Townsville's immediate hinterland residential population that includes Burdekin, Ingham and Charters Towers has actually fallen marginally to 42,000, to be less than half the size of the Cairns' immediate hinterland population. Even in distant regional population that in Townsville's case includes Mt Isa, the Cairns region has caught up and passed in recent decades with population in the Peninsula, Torres and Gulf areas now standing at 39,000. This compares with the equivalent remote region based on Mt Isa of 26,000.

The wider Cairns region, including both immediate and distant regional populations, has clearly outgrown the wider Townsville region to now stand at over 300,000 and about 35,000 ahead in residential population.

Against this background, there is an obvious question of concern. "Why is Cairns' growth not outpacing that of Townsville?" In most regions of Australia, the regional city is outpacing its hinterland population in growth. But if you look at recent figures, this is not the case in the Cairns' region.

The question is, "Why is Cairns not performing better as a regional servicing city? Why has Cairns' population growth, over the past decade, been so low compared with previous decades?" The situation is not satisfactory and some review of policy and approaches is needed.

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**Table: Estimated Residential Population Growth 2001-02 to 2024-25
Cairns and Townsville Local Government Areas Compared**

	Cairns LGA		Townsville LGA		Cairns SA4		Townsville SA4		Cairns Hinterland		Townsville Hinterland	
	Population	Growth	Population	Growth	Population	Growth	Population	Growth	Population	Growth	Population	Growth
2001	115,373		142,012		191,842		186,618		76,469		44,606	
2002	117,266	1,893	145,115	3,103	194,271	2,429	189,410	2,792	77,005	536	44,295	-311
2003	120,286	3,020	147,964	2,849	197,786	3,515	191,955	2,545	77,500	495	43,991	-304
2004	123,392	3,106	151,172	3,208	201,005	3,219	194,686	2,731	77,613	113	43,514	-477
2005	127,336	3,944	155,330	4,158	205,080	4,075	198,566	3,880	77,744	131	43,236	-278
2006	131,843	4,507	159,482	4,152	209,763	4,683	202,542	3,976	77,920	176	43,060	-176
2007	136,251	4,408	163,509	4,027	215,261	5,498	206,976	4,434	79,010	1,090	43,467	407
2008	141,403	5,152	168,503	4,994	221,566	6,305	212,343	5,367	80,163	1,153	43,840	373
2009	145,962	4,559	173,067	4,564	226,923	5,357	217,244	4,901	80,961	798	44,177	337
2010	148,943	2,981	176,528	3,461	230,368	3,445	220,868	3,624	81,425	464	44,340	163
2011	150,992	2,049	180,114	3,586	232,781	2,413	224,678	3,810	81,789	364	44,564	224
2012	154,041	3,049	183,612	3,498	236,699	3,918	228,179	3,501	82,658	869	44,567	3
2013	156,764	2,723	186,519	2,907	240,213	3,514	230,806	2,627	83,449	791	44,287	-280
2014	158,574	1,810	188,777	2,258	242,627	2,414	232,778	1,972	84,053	604	44,001	-286
2015	159,944	1,370	190,011	1,234	244,399	1,772	233,543	765	84,455	402	43,532	-469
2016	161,573	1,629	191,348	1,337	246,684	2,285	234,310	767	85,111	656	42,962	-570
2017	163,806	2,233	192,475	1,127	249,681	2,997	235,135	825	85,875	764	42,660	-302
2018	165,716	1,910	193,105	630	252,209	2,528	235,458	323	86,493	618	42,353	-307
2019	167,149	1,433	193,687	582	254,139	1,930	235,745	287	86,990	497	42,058	-295
2020	168,710	1,561	194,679	992	256,262	2,123	236,652	907	87,552	562	41,973	-85
2021	169,250	540	195,457	778	257,065	803	237,383	731	87,815	263	41,926	-47
2022	171,646	2,396	197,694	2,237	260,197	3,132	239,780	2,397	88,551	736	42,086	160
2023	175,010	3,364	200,930	3,236	264,837	4,640	243,206	3,426	89,827	1,276	42,276	190
2024	177,573	2,563	203,972	3,042	268,688	3,851	246,548	3,342	91,115	1,288	42,576	300
2025	179,334	1,761	206,260	2,288	271,408	2,720	249,097	2,549	92,074	959	42,837	261
Total Gwth	63,961		64,248		79,566		62,479		15,605		-1,769	

Source: Cummings Economics from Australian Bureau of Statistics data.