

## Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives

The project, which received funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Program (DP170100573), the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals, and the Co-operative Research Group at the University of Sydney Business School, aims to investigate the development of co-operatives in Australia and provide other researchers with a tool to investigate the co-operative sector in interactive and visual ways. The three researchers are Associate Professor Nikola Balnave (Macquarie University), Professor Olivera Marjanovic (Macquarie University) and Emeritus Professor Greg Patmore (The University of Sydney).

Specifically, the project aims to:

- Develop an online visual database of co-operatives, the Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives (VHAAC), that enables its users to explore co-operative development both over space and time in a visual and highly interactive way.
- Fill major gaps in the existing literature on co-operatives in Australia by undertaking detailed case studies of co-operatives.
- Develop a theoretical framework based on the atlas/database that attempts to explain the growth, decline and revival of co-operatives in Australia since their first appearance in the 1820s.

The project focuses on all forms of co-operatives in Australia including retail co-operatives, agricultural co-operatives and financial co-operatives, such as credit unions, and co-operative building societies. It also includes co-operative federations and auxiliary organisations such as co-operative women's guilds. The project draws upon a range of data sources. It is the first to use the National Library Trove newspaper database to develop a long-term picture of the development of a business model, particularly for the nineteenth century. The general data relating to the development of Australia co-operatives is obtained from a variety of sources including the limited surviving records of various state and national bodies relating to the movement. This material can be found at the National Library in Canberra, Mitchell Library in Sydney, the Newcastle University Archives, the Battye Library in Perth. This material is supplemented by public sources such as newspapers, particularly at community level, published co-operative histories, parliamentary papers and debates, and material sent to the various Registrars of Co-operative Societies. While the research primarily focuses on Australian sources, it also examines the records of the English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in Manchester for obtaining further information on nineteenth century Australian co-operatives. One significant English source, *The Co-operator*, published reports and correspondence relating to Australian co-operatives and the CWS developed a commercial relationship with Australian co-operatives, both as an importer of agricultural goods and an exporter of consumer goods. The CWS also established for varying periods, manufacturing facilities and an office in Sydney. CWS officials visited Australia on several occasions. At least one Australian consumer co-operative, the Adelaide Co-operative, affiliated with the CWS.

Another dimension of the project is a series of case studies to allow greater insights into the growth and decline of co-operatives. These case studies involve an examination of the records of the co-operative, such as reports, minutes and publications, from their formation. There are co-operatives with considerable surviving records that have operated for long periods. One of the earliest examples was the Adelaide Co-operative, which operated from 1868 until 1962. There is also a major credit union archive in Sydney with the records of a significant number of organisations. Oral histories of participants in these organisations supplement the written records. The project has fourteen detailed long term case studies with coverage of significant regions for co-operative activity such as the Riverina, the Hunter Valley, the North Coast of NSW, the Queensland Darling Downs and the WA wheat belt.

The data collected is organised on a Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives. As of April 2024 (Version 34) it currently has the historical data of 10,802 co-operatives at 2,654 locations (ABS Suburbs) plus additional data for many more currently being processed. There is data on 1,265 co-operatives currently active. Major types of co-operatives included 5,005 financial co-operatives, 1,574 agricultural co-operatives, 1,641 community co-operatives, such as registered clubs, and 861 consumer co-operatives. Other co-operative types include business co-operatives (391), housing co-operatives (318), workers co-operatives (including producer co-operatives, 179), indigenous co-operatives (157) and co-operative community settlements (93). The Visual Atlas is implemented using a state-of-the-art data visualisation software called Tableau. The main data inputted include location, date of operation, type of co-operative, membership, employment and finances. The financial data includes assets, turnover, liabilities and surpluses/losses. Locations include, for example, branch stores and produce handling facilities. The information is inputted from data sets, such as Trove and Registrars reports, that examine co-operatives over long periods, rather than short term data that may cover only one or two years. Each co-operative has its own Excel file. The data highlights trends and allow patterns of growth and decline to be visible with only a small proportion of the population of co-operatives. As more data is inputted in the Atlas these patterns will become clearer. The Atlas currently contains data up to the present. It enables the analysis and visualisation of data by the researchers to develop explanation for changes in size of the co-operative movement over time and space. The Atlas can locate co-operatives based on ABS suburbs, ABS regions, local government areas and federal electorates over time. Researchers can use the Atlas to highlight where co-operatives are concentrated geographically, provide estimates the average life span of co-operatives and examine issues such as demutualisation over time and space. The attached graphs from the current version of the VHAAC, which is constantly expanding as new data is added, highlight co-operative numbers over time, their average life span, agricultural co-operatives, financial co-operatives, indigenous co-operatives, worker co-operatives, housing co-operatives, social co-operatives and selected locational data. The dramatic fall in the number co-operatives in 1981-82 reflects a dramatic restructuring in NSW of terminating co-operative building societies into co-operative housing societies that did not terminate. While the data is still being entered, the 3,015 co-operative building societies was reduced to 224 co-operative housing societies by 2 June 1982.

We are interested in attracting financial sponsors for the project. We also would like to hear from co-operatives interested in having their historical data included in the Atlas. For any further information about the Atlas and possible funding support, please contact Emeritus Professor Greg Patmore at [greg.patmore@sydney.edu.au](mailto:greg.patmore@sydney.edu.au)

Figure 1 – Australian Co-operatives 1827-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

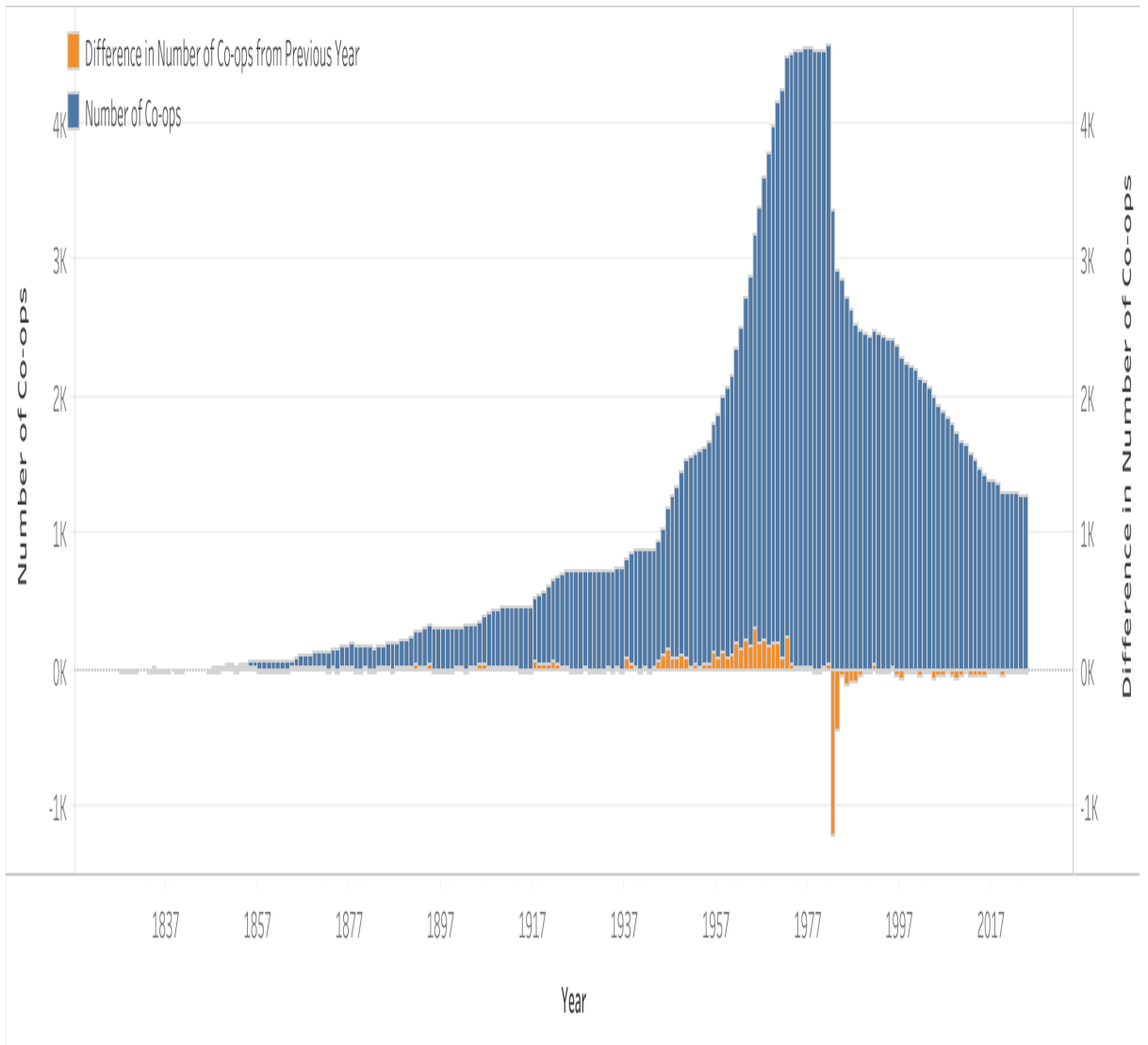


Figure 2 – Average Life Span of Australian Co-operatives 1827-2024

Aggregate, State, Territory and Selected Types

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

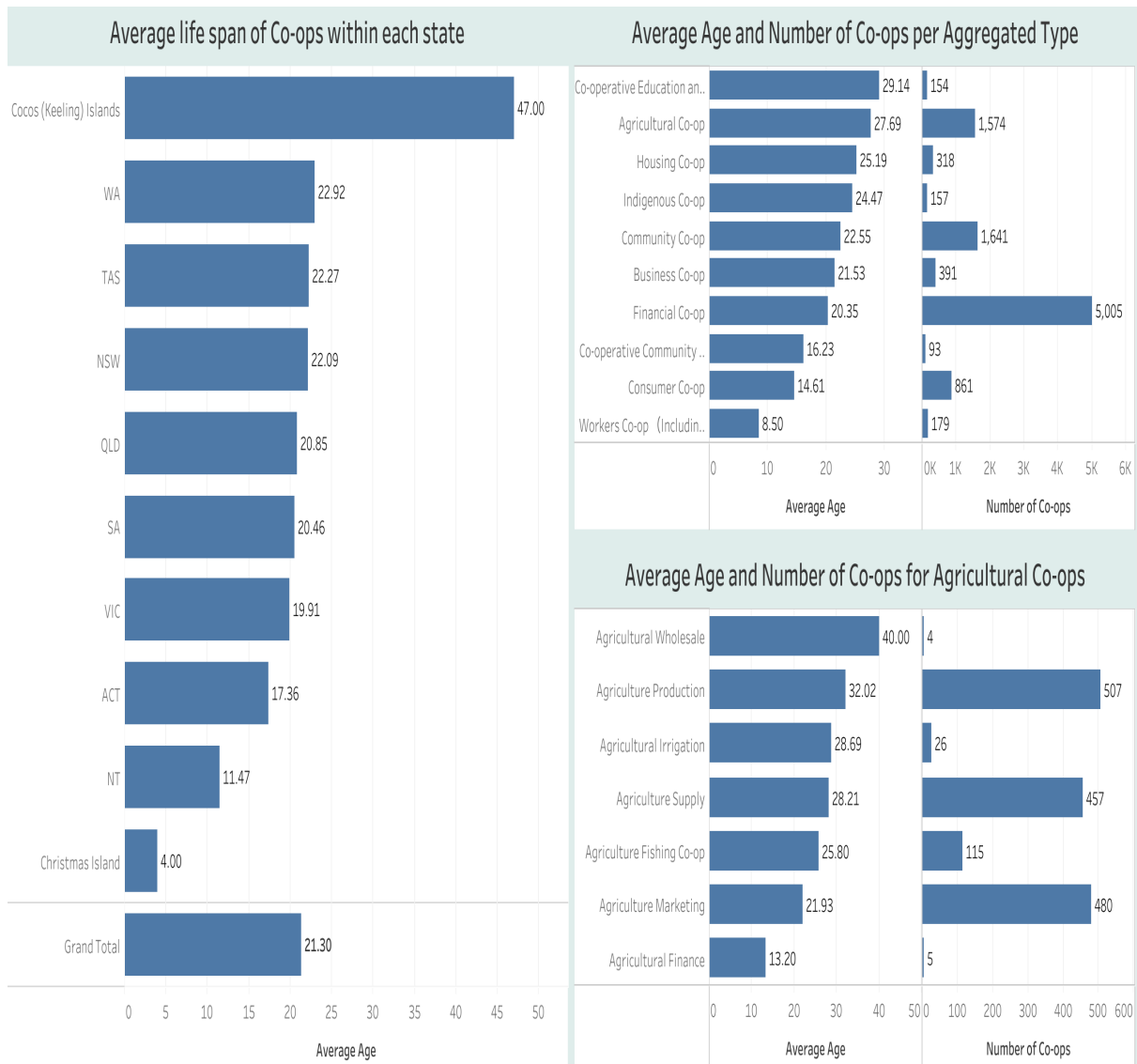


Figure 3 – NSW Co-operatives 1827-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

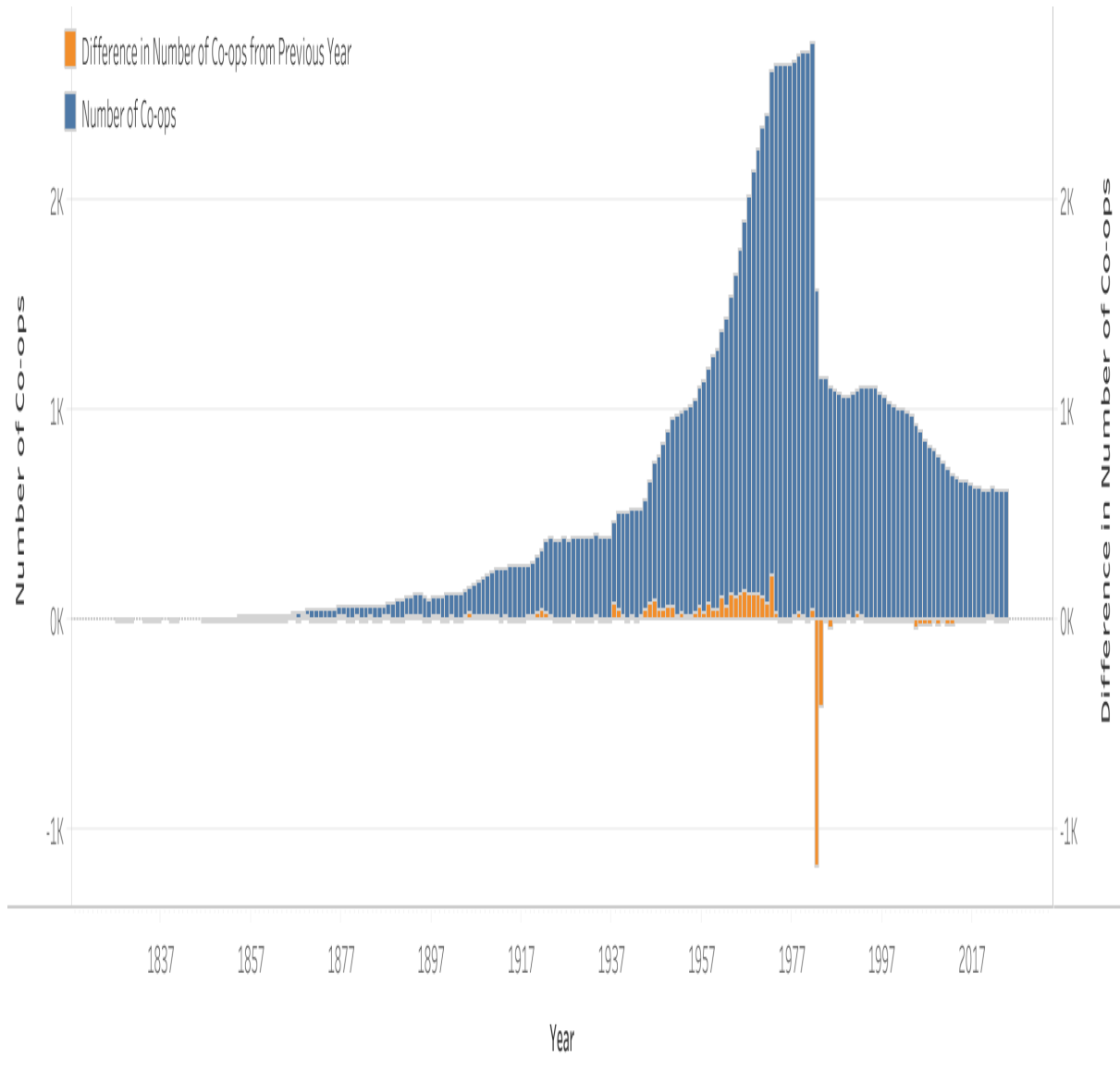


Figure 4 – WA Co-operatives 1837-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

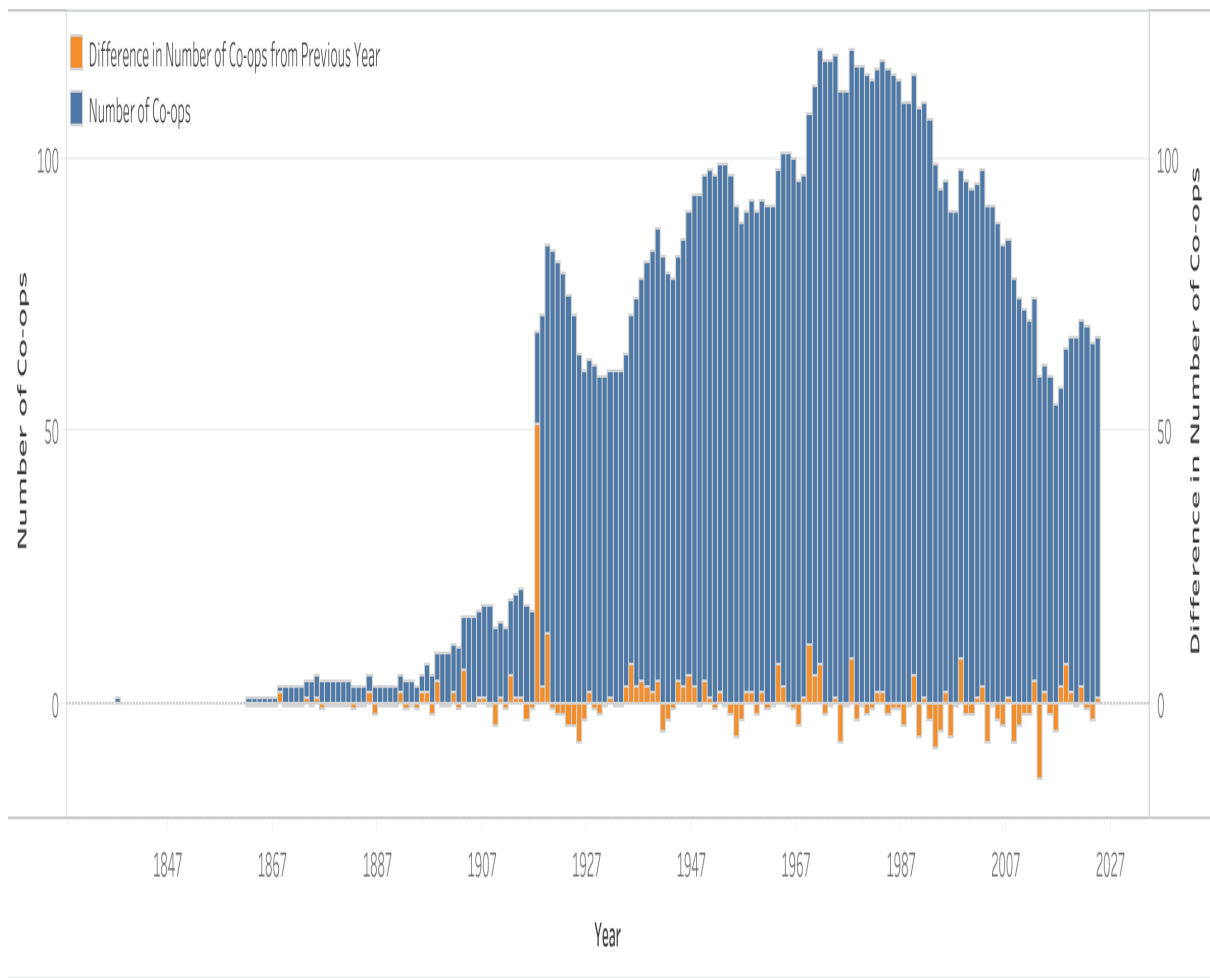


Figure 5 – Agricultural Co-operatives 1868-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

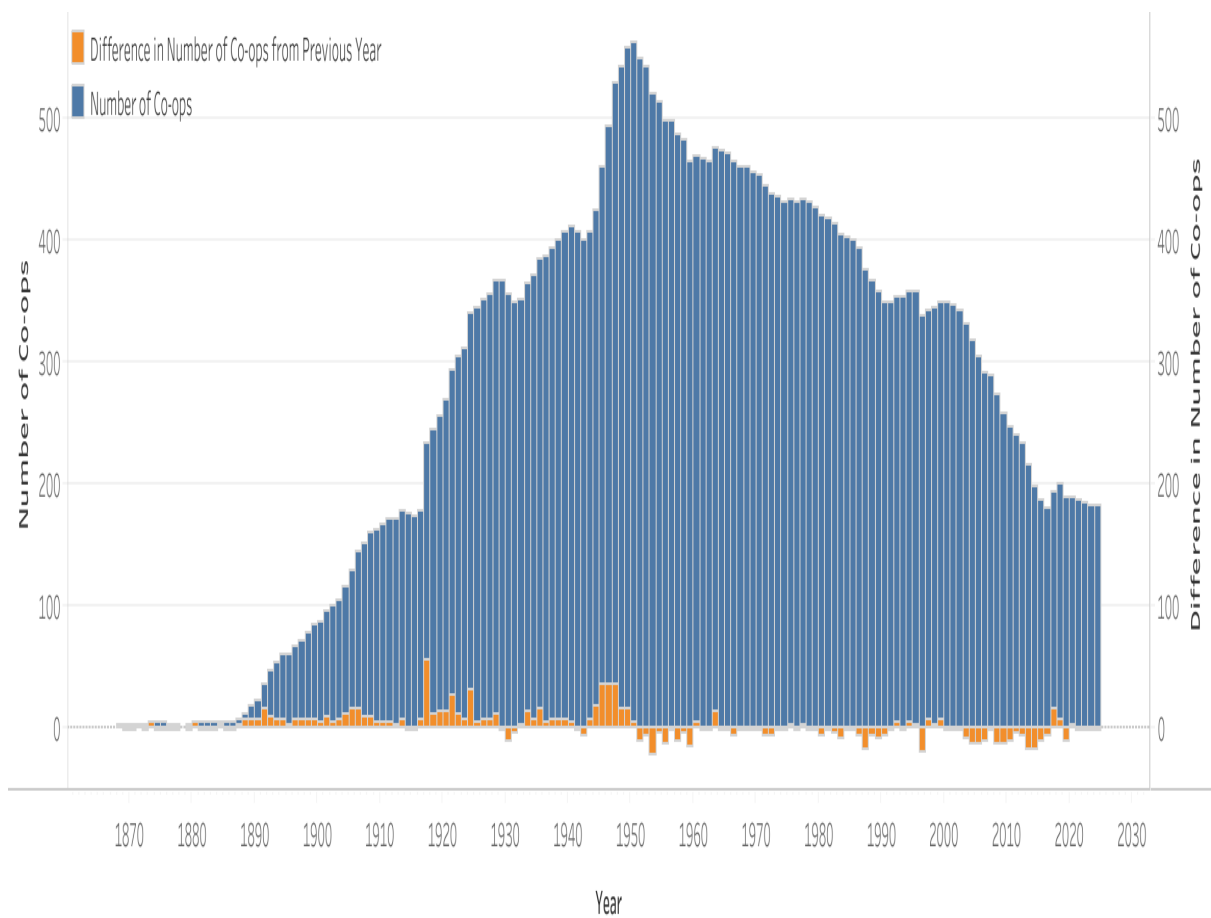


Figure 6 – Financial Co-operatives 1847-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

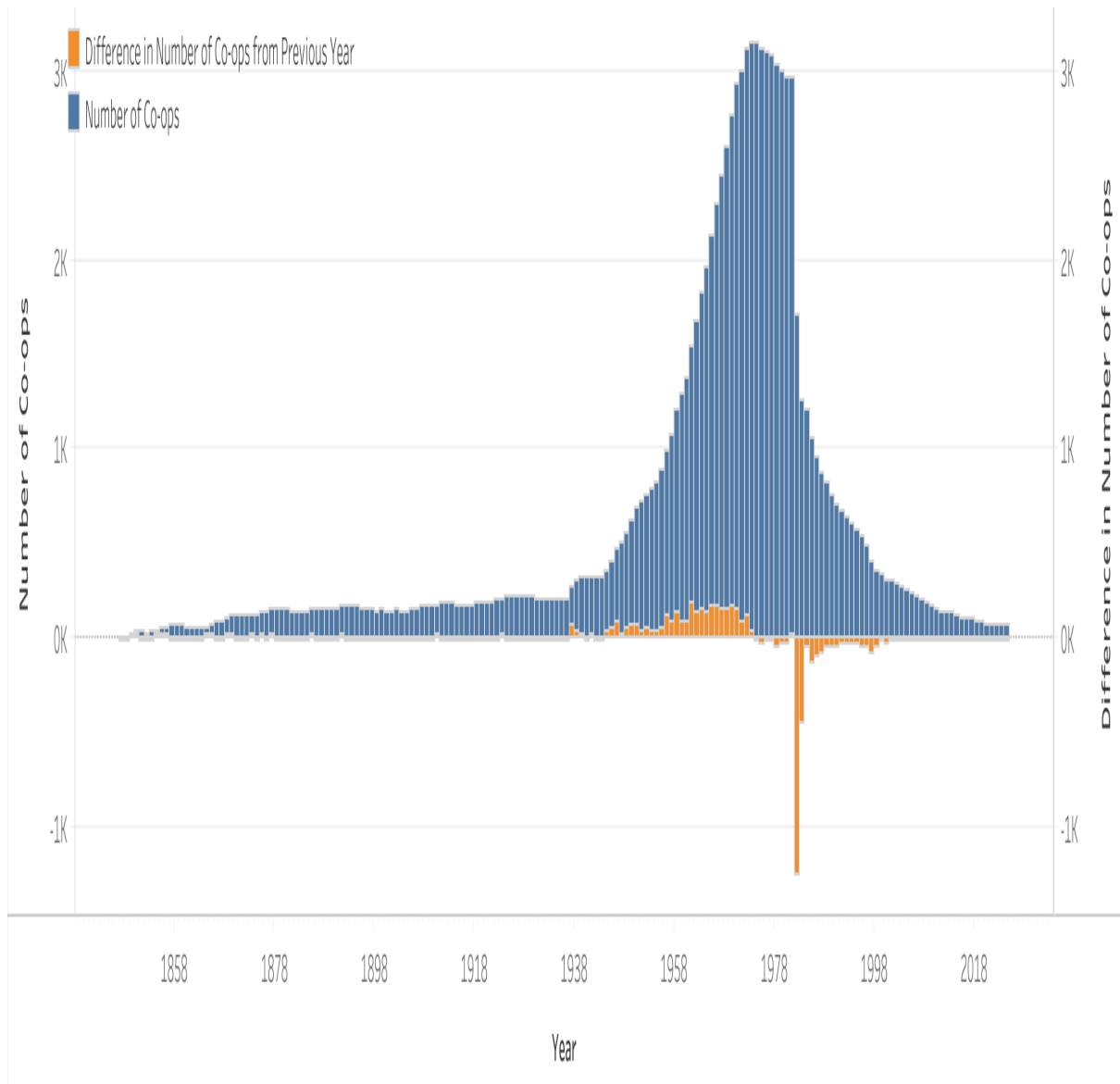




Figure 7 – Indigenous Co-operatives 1894-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

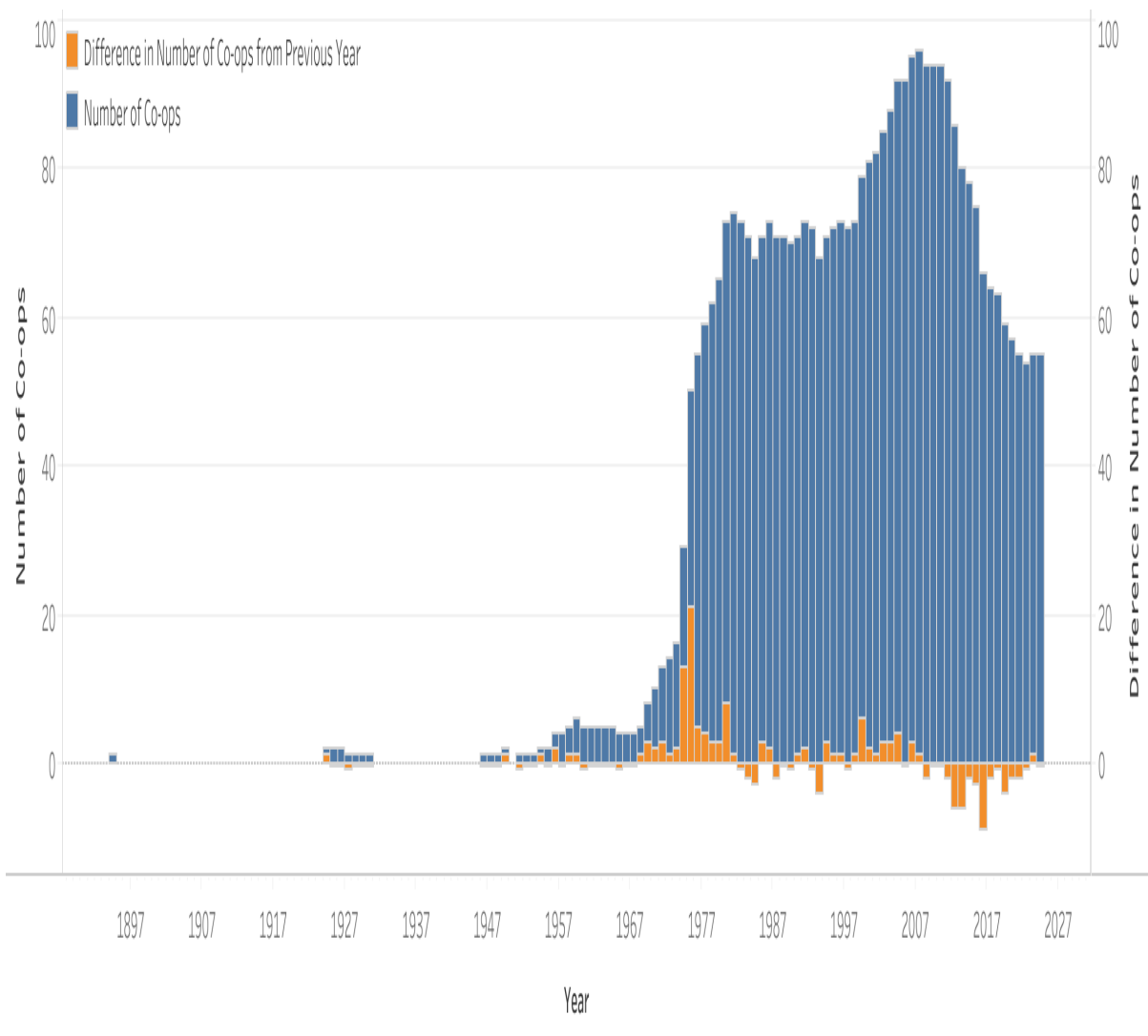
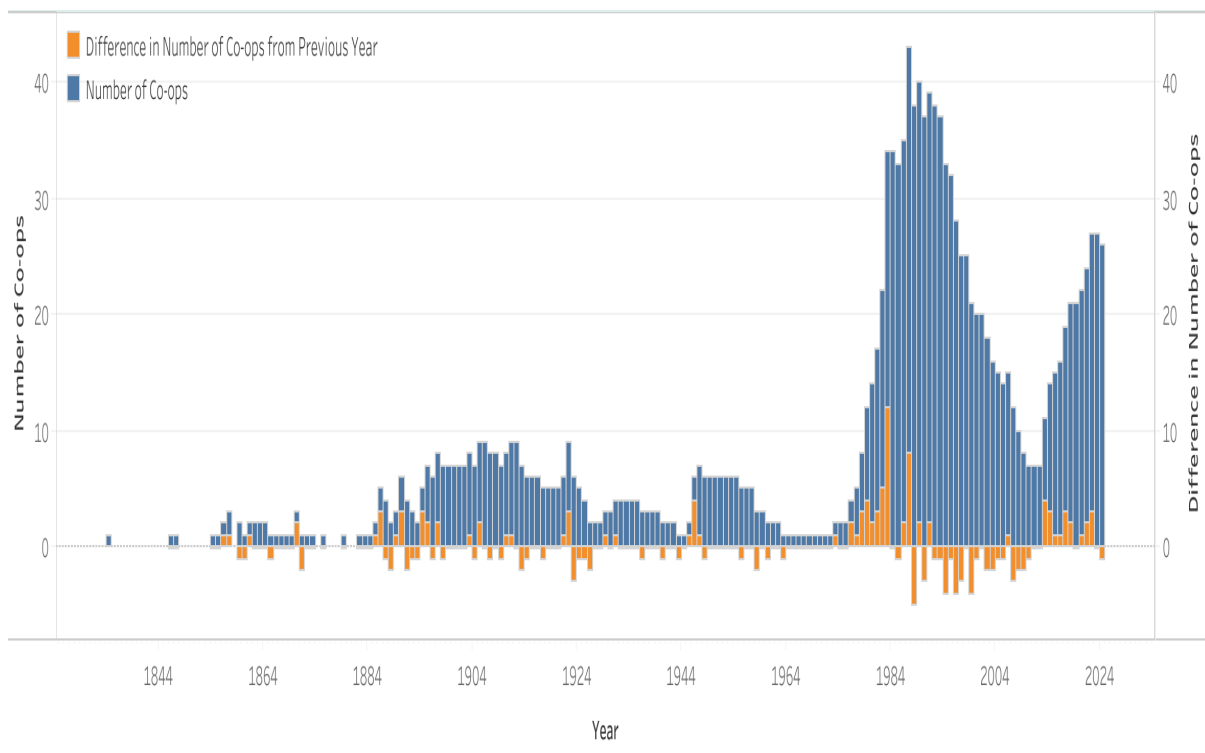


Figure 8 Worker (Including Producer\*) Co-operatives, 1834-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024



Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh define producer co-operatives as “a producer/industrial organization owned at least partly by the workforce, which shared the profits of the organization after meeting essential commitments like interest on loans, wages and other costs.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilson John, Anthony Webster and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh. *Building Co-operation. A Business History of the Co-operative Group*, 1863-2013. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 44.

Figure 9 Housing Co-operatives, 1889-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

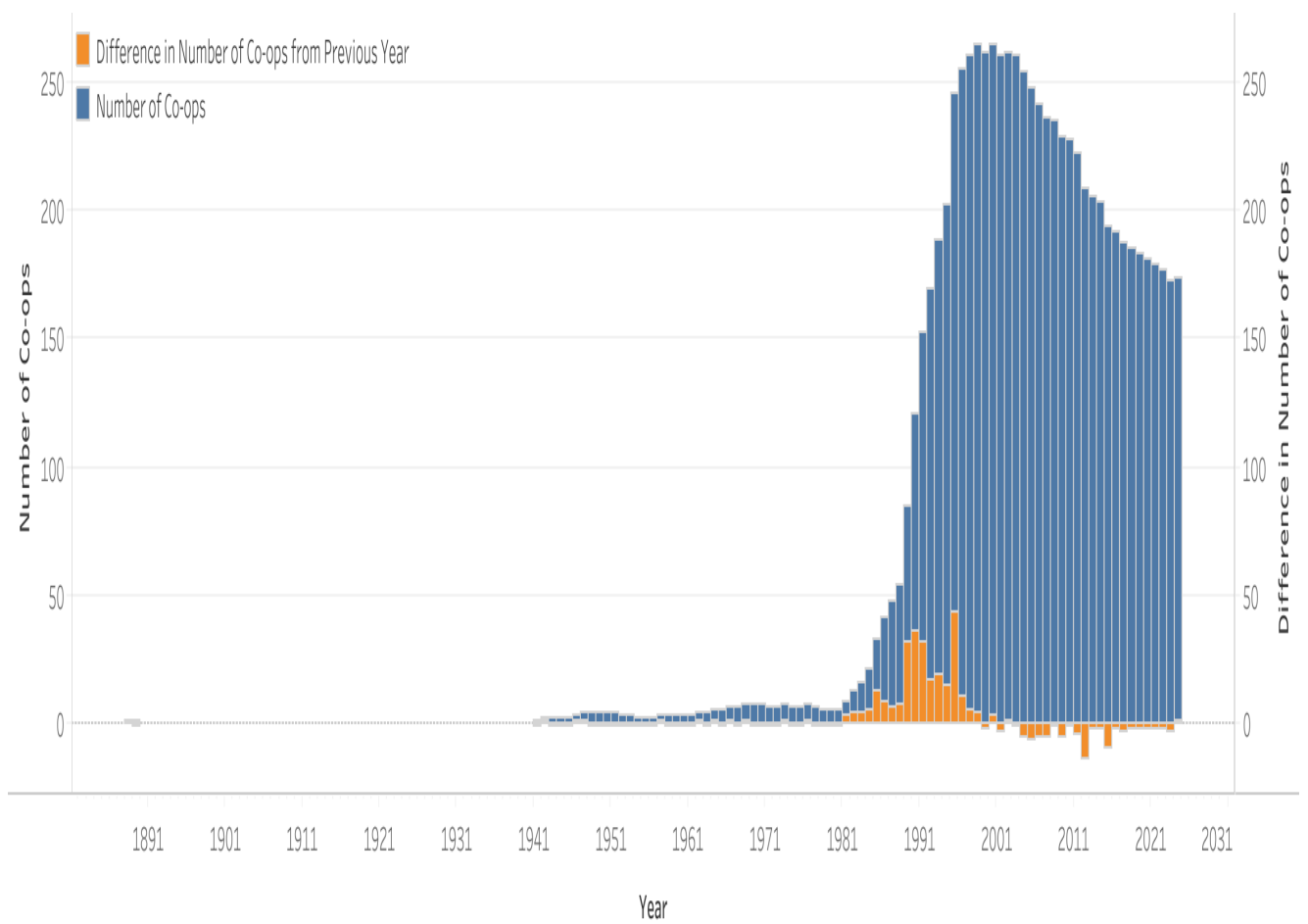


Figure 10 Social Co-operatives – 1971-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

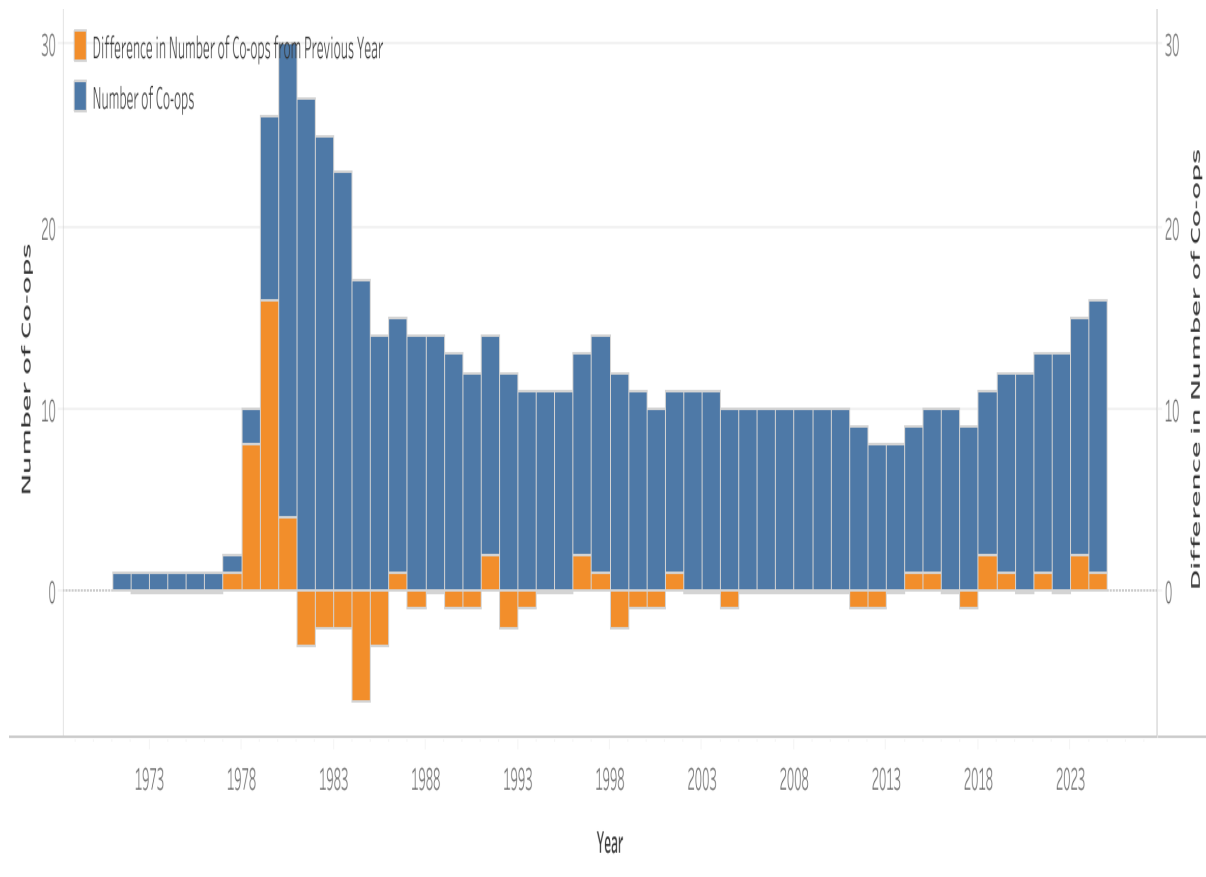
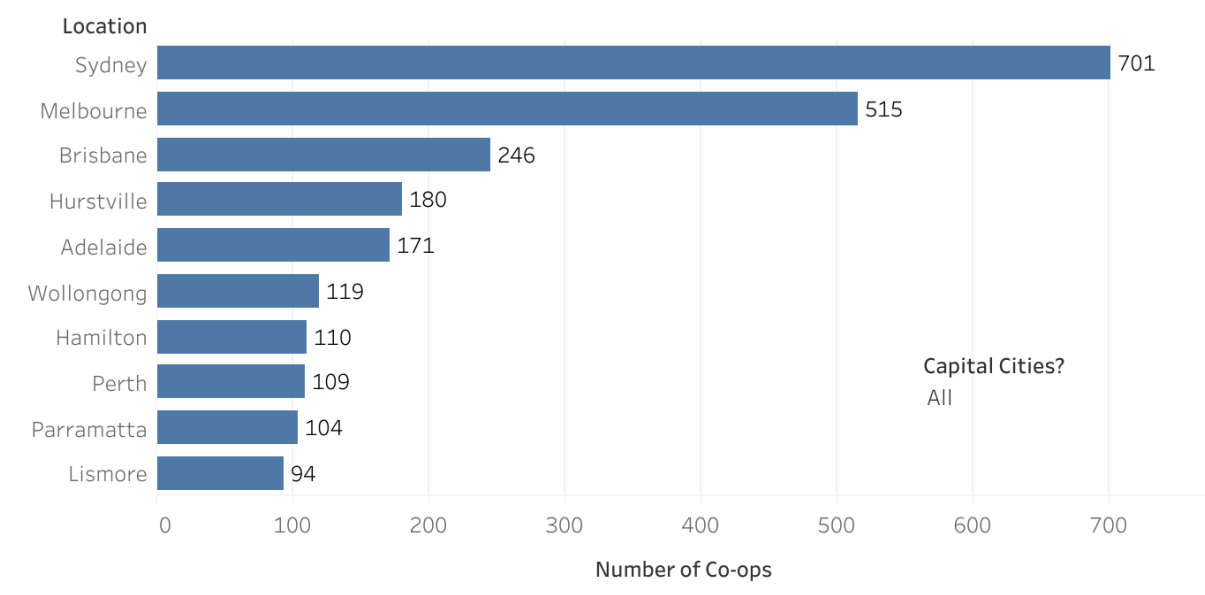


Figure 11 – Top 10 Locations 1827-2024\*

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024



\* Please note Hamilton refers to Hamilton, NSW

Figure 12 – Top 10 Regions 1827-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

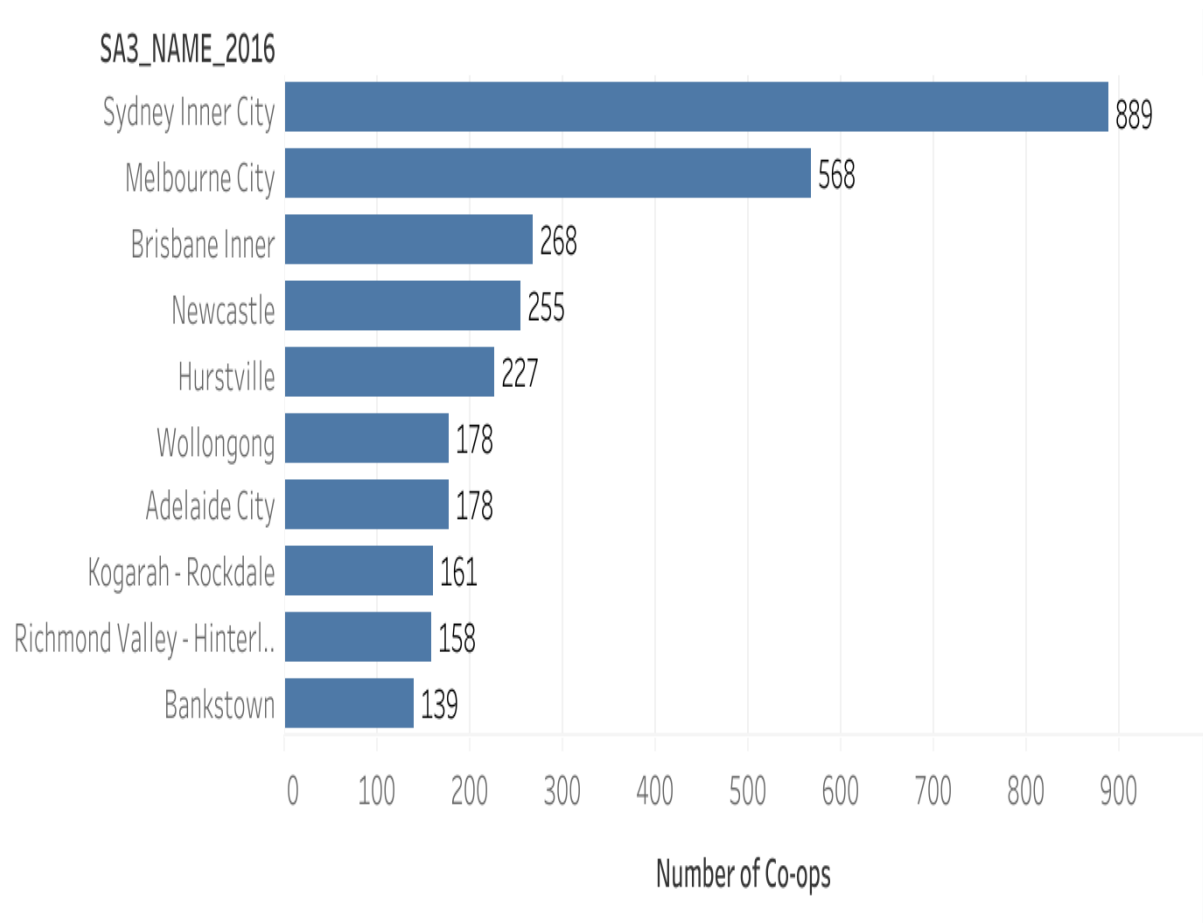


Figure 13 – Sydney 1833-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

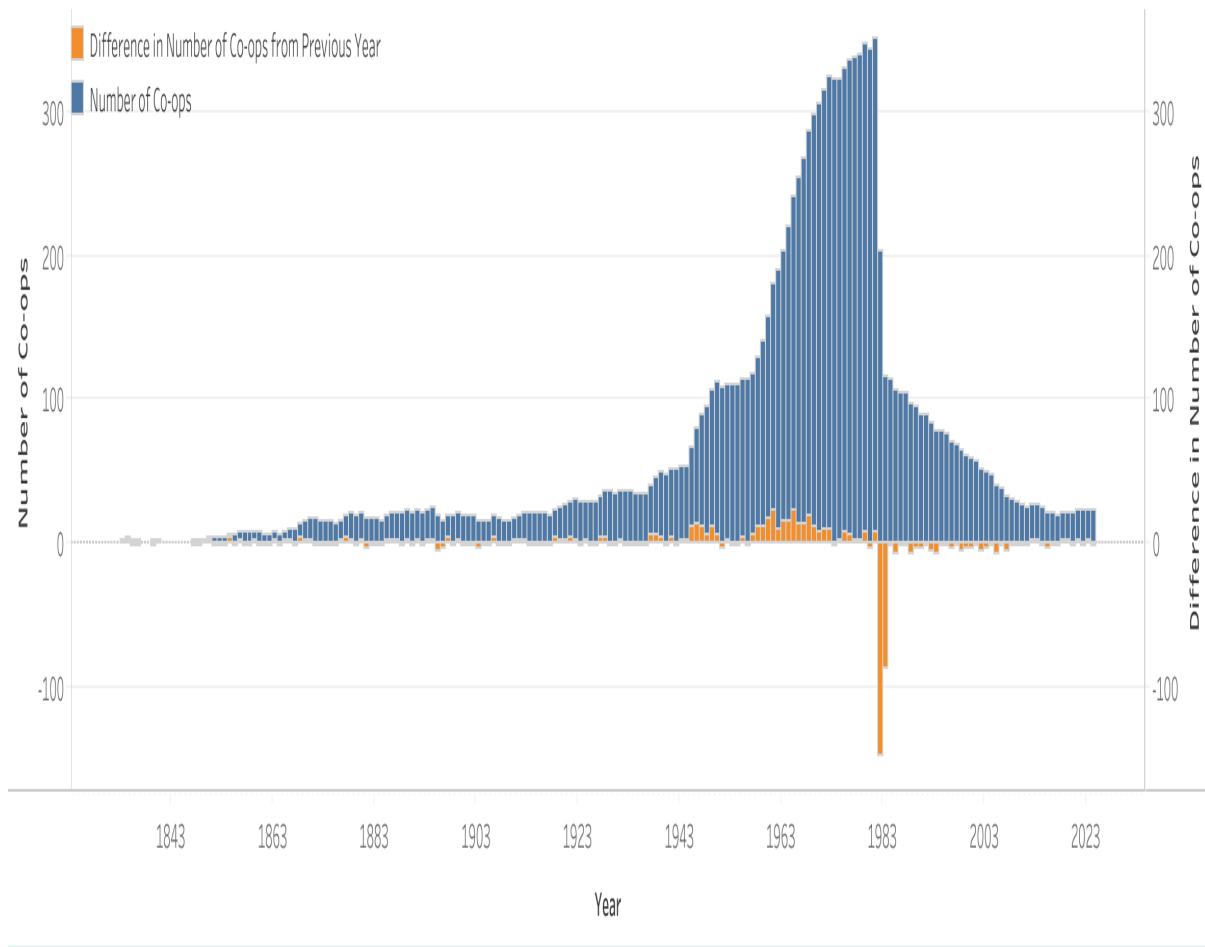


Figure 14 – Bathurst, NSW 1854-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

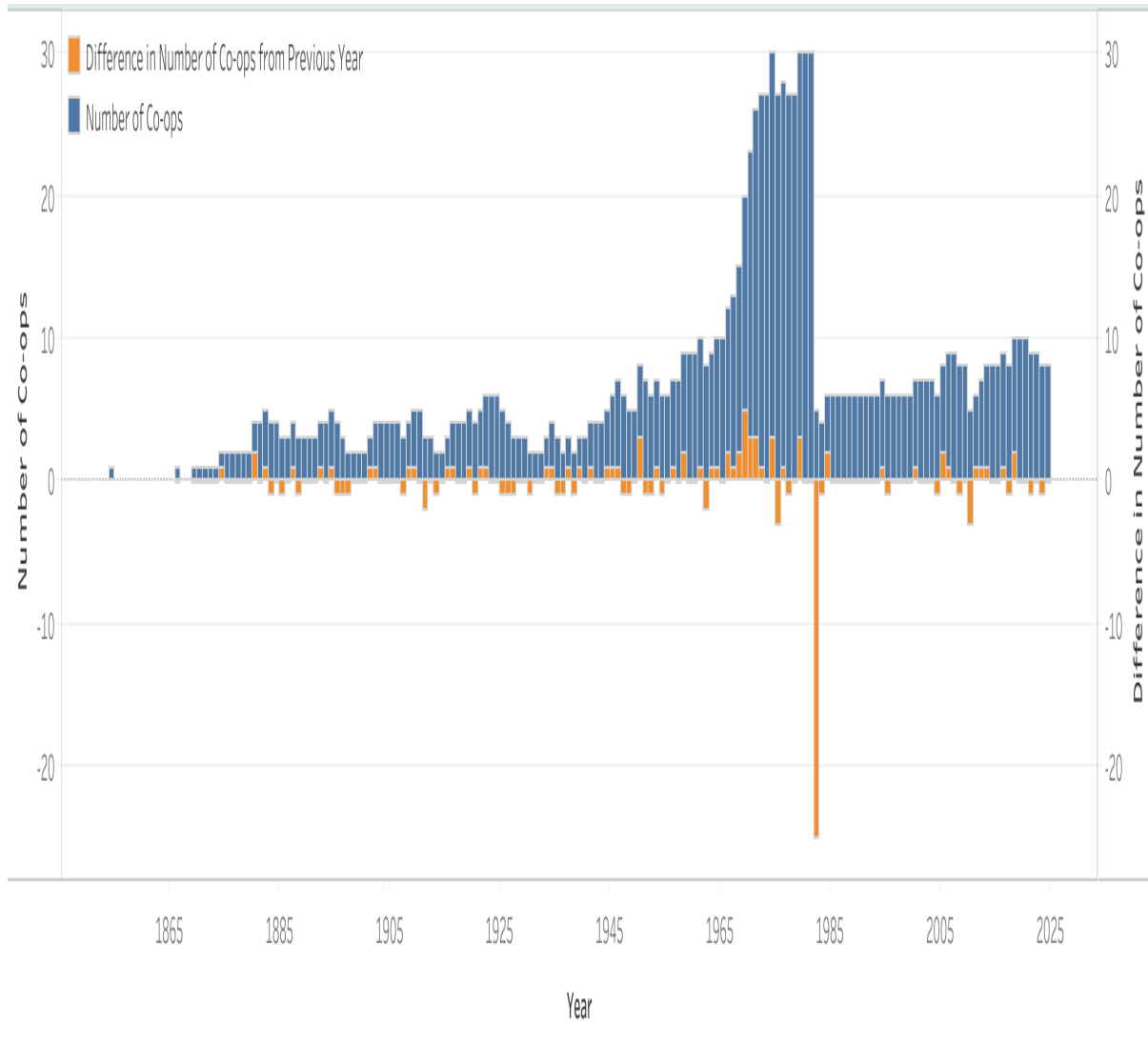




Figure 15 – Newcastle, NSW 1860-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

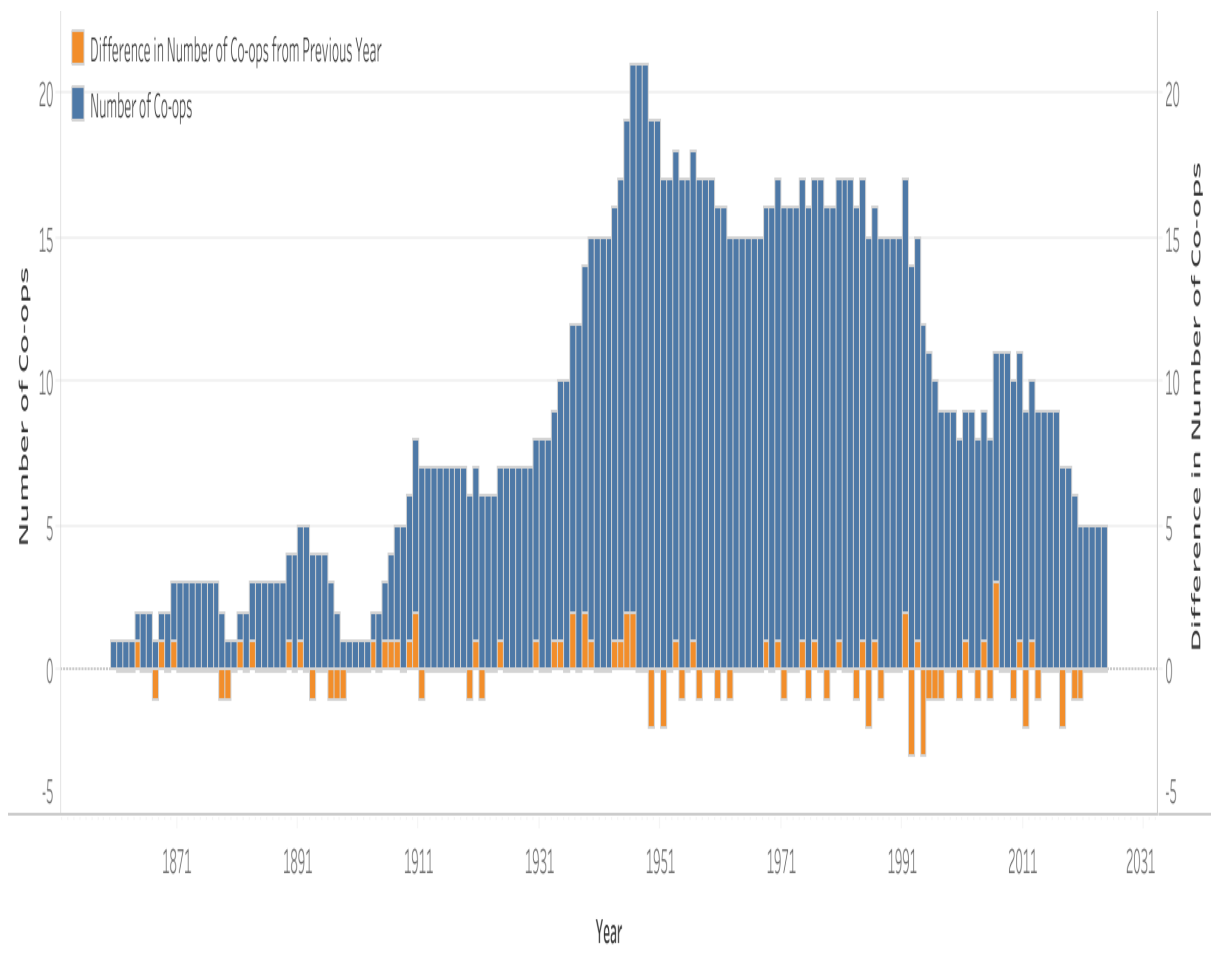


Figure 16 – Geelong, Victoria 1847-2024

Source – VHAAC Version 34.0 April 2024

