



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Senate Economics Reference Committee

Inquiry into the 2016 Census

Submission from the
Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Introduction

The Australian Institute of Family Studies conducts original research to increase understanding of Australian families and the issues that affect them. We routinely draw on the data collected through the Australian Census of Population and Housing (the Census) to undertake this research. We therefore wish to briefly respond to areas within the terms of reference in the Inquiry into the preparation, administration and management of the 2016 Census by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Purpose of the Census data

First, to comment on “(g) Australia’s Census of Population and Housing generally, including purpose, scope, regularity and cost and benefits”, we would like to stress the importance of this information for policy and planning purposes, given that data as collected from the Census are not available in other forms. Some key points, identified by researchers within AIFS are:

- Up-to-date census data are extremely important for our research on the nature and rapidity of changes in household forms and family transitions that have taken place over the 20th century and more recently. Our research on family employment patterns has also relied heavily on the census data, with which we can analyse trends, and explore differences across groups within the population. For these and other topics, we have been able to measure the extent to which the size and direction of change varies across each five-year intercensal period. Accurate monitoring of these and analysis of their implications are important for proactive policy development.
- The five-year censuses have provided reliable and reasonably complete data regarding the location of people at the small area level, which we have used to: (a) develop representative samples in specific low-income areas; (b) map the availability of service types vis-a-vis the apparent needs of residents in disadvantaged locations across the nation; and (c) identify demographic and economic characteristics of locations of respondents in national samples. The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), derived from each census, have been invaluable resources for these various studies. With the advances of information and communication technology, some services are delivered online. As a result, on-site service outlets increasingly focus on those who have greater service needs. Identification of locations with a greater concentration of people with particular service needs relies on up-to-date and reliable data and census data is vital for this purpose.
- The census is the only way in which to obtain good estimates of the incidence, distribution, and characteristics of so-called “rare populations”, such as same-sex families. Small populations are often of key policy relevance. The more diverse we become as a nation, the more important it is that we have ways of identifying the characteristics of these populations, including their household/family structure, number of dependents, workforce participation and household income. Such information provides insight into the needs and challenges they experience.
- The census underpins survey sampling. Whether they are national, state or small-area surveys, the quality of our survey samples and those conducted by the ABS (on which we also rely) would be severely compromised in the absence of up-to-date Census data. This, in turn, compromises the robustness of our findings and their capacity to inform policy decisions.
- Though typically incomplete and often out-of-date, we sometimes use administrative datasets as sample frames when they cover all or a large proportion of the target population. Where the latter is the case, reasonably up-to-date Census data enable us to identify segments of the national population that are under-represented or not represented in the derived sample.

Use of the Census data

We also wish to comment on issues related to the way in which the Census data are made available to researchers, which touches on “the use of data” in terms of reference (b) and relates to privacy concerns (f).

Our researchers draw upon the confidentialised unit record data from the Census, in order to undertake the types of research described above. Access to the unit record data is essential to be able to do research such as this. The ABS provides these data in a form that protects the identity of individuals, yet contains sufficient detail to enable research to be undertaken. There are strict protocols about how these data are to be stored, how they can be used, what they may be used for, and who can access these data. The ABS provides training and support to ensure data users have a very thorough understanding of their responsibilities in using Census or other ABS data. Just as the ABS takes these issues seriously, so do our researchers who understand the value of these data, and the need to use them responsibly.

Our researchers also use the census data in its entirety at aggregated levels at different levels of geographical classifications or to focus on specific subgroups. ABS has specific protocols to prevent users accessing such data when the number of counts for a subgroup or an area becomes too small to have the risk of identifying individuals.

Conclusion

It is our considered view that no survey, or combination of surveys, can replace the Census, and that a five-yearly Census ensures that policy is based on reasonably up-to-date information. It is imperative that research conducted by Australia’s social research communities (including AIFS) is based on up-to-date information, given that the findings feed into policy and therefore planning. We look forward to using the Census 2016 data to update our research, and to answer questions about emerging issues for Australian families.