

## **SUBMISSION TO SENATE ENQUIRY ON THE PREPARATION, ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE 2016 CENSUS**

### **SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMICS**

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ID Consulting Pty Ltd is the premier demographics company in Australia, covering over 80% of Australia's population via our Local Government demographic profiles and producing population forecasts for some of Australia's largest companies and organisations including aged care providers, major retailers, educational institutions and utility companies. We are the largest disseminator of Census data outside the ABS itself, and a licensed intermediary of the ABS. We work every day with Census data, on behalf of approximately 250 Local Government Areas, and our online demographic sites receive over a million users each year. We also have over 10,000 subscribers to our demographics newsletter, .id insight, and run training in the use of demographics across all States and Territories.

Census is one of the major inputs to our work, so the conduct of the Census is extremely important to us as an organisation. ID stands for "informed decisions" and our work is focussed on using demographic information to help local governments and businesses make evidence-based decisions about their communities.

For more information about the company, please visit our website: <http://www.id.com.au/>

Prior to working at .id I worked for the Australian Bureau of Statistics for 10 years, where I worked on the 2006 Census management - and have also worked on the past 2 Censuses as an Area Supervisor, including for 2016.

Thanks for the opportunity to put a submission into this enquiry.

The Census is of vital importance to Australia and I urge the enquiry to use this opportunity to look at how the collection process can be improved for 2021. No other collection can provide the wealth of small area demographic data which our clients in Local Government need to perform their functions. Much of the rationale for running the Census is presented as a "snapshot of Australia" or "Important for Federal Government decision making". The primary reason for running the Census, which is accurate population estimates for the fair and equitable distribution of electoral boundaries, is often glossed over. But the primary

reason for running it is only a small facet of the use of Census data. True power of the Census is local area data (since surveys cannot deliver to small geographies due to sampling error) and the fact that it forms a regular time series every 5 years. This makes it indispensable for Local Government and community organisations, and this fact is often lost in the promotion of the Census itself.

Following are our main points about the running of the 2016 Census and suggestions for the future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

- In 2016, the ABS moved to a predominantly “mailout” methodology for distributing Census forms to households. This was problematic for several reasons:
  - The quality of the address register (GNAF) is poor. At .id we work with the address register on a regular basis, and have found many instances of duplicate addresses, the same location on the address register with different addresses, missing records, and dwellings in the wrong place.
  - As a result of this, many households did not receive a login code, and many others received duplicates. Thousands of business addresses were mailed to unnecessarily.
  - This method misses dwellings without a registered address, such as granny flats, an increasingly important housing type (which local councils are now encouraging via local laws, to house our ageing population, particularly in established parts of Sydney). There is a potential spatial bias here as these dwellings would not have received logins for the online Census.
  - Anecdotally, it appears significant numbers of public housing addresses may also have been missed from the address register.
  - There was confusion because ABS underestimated the demand for paper forms, and many couldn't get through on the enquiry phone number. Also, the differing methodologies (drop-off, mail-out login code, mail-out form) created confusion as people didn't know what to expect.
  - At .id during the week of Census, we took hundreds of phone calls from the public wanting paper forms, and being desperate enough to ring our number which has nothing to do with the ABS – we just blog about Census data and demographics.
  - Lack of personal contact with a collector on delivery means households are less engaged with the Census and the mailout logins were often ignored or thrown in the bin as junk mail. This is likely to be the main reason that only 60% of households responded two weeks after Census night, not the fact that the online site was down, or concerns about privacy. Response rates picked up substantially only when field officers started visiting non-responding households.

- Because field officers no longer delivered Census forms, the occupancy of the household could not be ascertained on collection, and even on followup this question was not asked by the field officer. In previous Censuses, if a form wasn't returned, ABS could fairly accurately impute records based on the number of people in the household. This is not available in 2016 due to the change in procedure.
  - There is a large segment of Australia's population who would prefer a paper Census form (particularly older residents), but the phone lines were jammed and these households were unable to get through. In any case asking a household to ring up to enable them to respond to the Census in their preferred way creates another level of impediment to responding and reduces the response rate.
  - Having mailback and online response as the preferred option rather than pickup by a Census Collector gives households an easy response to evade completing the Census. They can say "I mailed it back", and if the ABS has not received it, it puts the field officer in an awkward position with little leverage to ask the householder to re-complete. There appear to be genuinely some forms which get lost in the post, so it's hard to tell if a householder is lying about this.
  - In mailback areas, field officers only started following up non-responding households nearly 3 weeks after Census night. This is too long a time period, and it generates issues such as non-responding households have moved out of their residence and new tenants have moved in, making it impossible to get a form back for that household. Also households who haven't responded who were home on Census night have left on holiday and don't come back until after followup is finished.
  - Because of the amount of followup required it seems likely that the cost saving on moving to this model was minimal anyway.
- **RECOMMENDATION:**
    - In 2021, ABS should return to a "drop-off, pick-up" methodology, where a Census Collector (Field Officer) is responsible for ensuring that all residences in a particular area receive a Census form and have it collected after Census night. This method has worked for many years and is the most reliable way of conducting Census. It provides a sense of personal responsibility and ownership of the job - Collectors are responsible for everything within their boundaries.
    - Collectors can then ask for the number of males and females in the household on delivery and again on collection.

- Paper forms should be provided to all households with the option of completing online.
- Field follow up should commence within a few days after Census night.

## **PRIVACY**

- In 2016, the ABS announced that it would be keeping name and addresses identified records in order to link with other collections to provide better statistical output. There were several issues with this.
  - The reasons for doing so were not well explained in layman's terms. The examples around Indigenous Life Expectancy were too esoteric for most people to connect with.
  - As a result many people mistakenly thought it was about collecting private information to perform surveillance or sell to marketing companies, which is almost the antithesis of what Census is about.
  - This is still an issue with many posts on social media and online forums expressing distrust in the Census and the belief that it's about tracking individuals for government surveillance operations.
  - There is also public concern that the data can be hacked. Despite ABS assurances that the data are safe, there is a widespread belief that any computer security can be hacked.
  - This may have led to more people putting false information on their Census form or attempting to evade the Census entirely.
- **RECOMMENDATION:**
  - In 2021, the ABS should provide much better explanation of the need for linking data to other collections and longitudinally, providing concrete statistical examples that the public can relate to.
  - It should be emphasised that this is NOT a surveillance exercise and no data can be shared with anyone at any time, now or into the future.
  - Details of the security systems in place to protect data should be publicly available and well explained.
  - Field Officers should be given the option to allow householders to not put their name on the Census form if they feel it would improve response. This already happens in practice, informally, anyway.
  - Note that this should NOT be part of the public campaign – name identification improves collection by providing a sense of ownership of the information, in general, but in some cases it can work the other way, where people are suspicious, and the field officer is best placed to make this call.

- There should be a recognition that the Census snapshot of data is the first priority and the statistical data linkage is of secondary importance – a “nice to have” if people are willing to provide information that allows the linkage to happen. Where there is a public backlash against that (even when based on incorrect information), ABS may need to back down on the statistical linkage to ensure the quality of the first priority goal of Census collection.

## COMMUNICATION AND ENFORCEMENT

- The level of public awareness of the need to complete the 2016 Census was lower than in earlier years.
  - As a Census field worker, there was considerably less support from the ABS in providing services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities to complete the Census – no translators were provided and only a few language cards was included in the kits given to each field officer. Because of this I expect the CALD data in the 2016 Census to be of worse quality than previous years.
  - Communication when the online site went down on Census night was poor. The public would have been more forgiving if the ABS was more upfront about exactly what happened, why and when. The marketing arm on Social Media kept sending the message that the site was OK when it wasn't.
  - There is a widespread view that the data in the Census can be collected elsewhere. This is not the case due to privacy, and the legality of sharing data, and the inability to link data to a consistent local geographic level, but it's a common misconception. Many people say “You've already got all this info on me through the ATO/Centrelink etc.” This shows that the public's idea is that the Census is about individual details not data in aggregate. The statistical nature of Census needs to be made clearer.
  - There was poor communication from the ABS on the date for completion. The online site was always planned to be online from July 25 to September 23, to allow people a large window to complete the form, and give the last few an option to still complete online while being followed up by field officers. But this was widely publicised as “You have until September 23 to complete it”, so people were confused as to why they were being followed up before that date. ABS needs to be clearer that August 9<sup>th</sup> is the reference date and it needs to be completed as close to the date as possible. This was made more difficult by the site being offline on August 9 and 10. But there is no actual due date for Census.
  - The ABS misread the social media environment and provided stock answers to many issues which didn't address the actual question being asked. This

was particularly an issue around privacy. As an Area Supervisor I was forbidden to provide answers to people's questions on social media which was frustrating as in many cases I had much better answers to contribute than the stock answers the ABS was giving, due to years of experience with the Census.

- Our blog about the Census attracted more than 200 comments, which I was able to address, but it demonstrates the level of public concern about the Census (most of our blogs get 2-3 comments at most).  
<http://blog.id.com.au/2016/population/australian-census-2016/census-2016-questions-answered/>.
- We wrote a number of other blogs in support of the Census which can be viewed here: <http://blog.id.com.au/category/population/australian-census-2016/>
- The ABS emphasised the applicability of fines for non-completion in 2016 far more than in earlier years. It was often the first thing mentioned when talking about the compulsory nature of Census. ABS has always sought (and generally received) public cooperation with little mention of enforcement. This increased emphasis on fines resulted in a lot of public confusion and fear when the online site went down. Many elderly people with no access to a paper form were terrified of receiving fines and just wanted to do the right thing. This does not engender goodwill within the community.

- **RECOMMENDATION:**

- Awareness raising campaigns should focus less on the enforcement (fines) component and more on the value to the community.
- Value to the community should be promoted at the LOCAL level – ie. this is about making sure everyone in your place gets counted and services in your local community continue to be provided. Census is conducted by the ABS, a federal government agency, but is mainly of use by local councils and community organisations. Local Government should be engaged more in promoting the Census in their local area.
- Publicity should emphasise that this dataset is not available elsewhere, and that datasets in aggregate, not individual details are important, and these can't be sourced from elsewhere due to privacy issues.
- ABS staff working on social media should have the power and the knowledge to provide more in-depth answers about Census topics and address the public's concerns, and field staff with knowledge of the Census should be permitted to engage on social media.
- Emphasise also that it's not about individual name and address details and data is only ever used in aggregate.

## **POLITICIZATION**

- For the first time in 2016, there was a significant level of politicization of the Census.
  - The Prime Minister and Michael McCormack, the minister with the ABS in his portfolio both made statements about the Census.
  - Senators Scott Ludlum and Nick Xenophon stated that they wouldn't be including their names, encouraging non-compliance by households and generally not helping the collection at all. Members of Parliament rely on Census data for their own work, and it is disappointing to see some of them trying to undermine the work of government in this way.
  - In particular, a statement by Michael McCormack before Census night about the privacy issue was troubling, as he stated that the Census had to be compulsory *"to allow the government and the Bureau to track people"*. It was part of a larger statement, and probably taken out of context, but was construed by many as implying that the Census was about surveillance, which many people believe. Those of us with knowledge about Census know that this isn't the case, but this statement from someone many saw as in charge of the Census was problematic. Mr McCormack had only been the responsible minister for the ABS for 3 weeks at the time and was clearly not across all the issues. This was very damaging for public confidence in the Census.
  - The election, being only a few weeks before Census, focussed the public's attention on political issues and many saw the Census as an instrument of an unpopular government rather than an independent community building tool.
  
- **RECOMMENDATION:**
  - Politicians should have no involvement in the Census, other than perhaps a general statement from the Prime Minister encouraging everyone to participate.
  - Work to restore the public's confidence in the ABS as an independent, apolitical authority at arm's length from government.
  - Instigate a blackout period when an election cannot be called, within (for instance) two months of the Census date. It would be even more damaging to the Census if the election date was soon after it, with the campaign itself covering Census day.

## CENSUS CONTENT

- There is a general public perception that the questions on the Census form are out of date and some are becoming irrelevant in the modern era. There is also a need for new questions to be asked.
  - Our clients (predominantly Local Government) provide a lot of feedback about questions they would like to see on the Census. This includes questions related to health status, disability, use of recreational time, travel modes to education and other activities, pet ownership and part-time family arrangements. These topics are all worthy of consideration in a future Census.
  - The last three Censuses have had virtually the same questions with very little change.
  - The ABS runs a consultation process to take submissions on new content for the next Census, however, for the 2011 this process was cancelled due to cost cutting by the government of the day, and in 2016 the outcomes were published but shelved when it was revealed that the Census was running behind and may have needed to be cancelled.
- **RECOMMENDATIONS**
  - For 2021, the ABS should run a wide-reaching consultation process for the content of the next Census, and actually incorporate some of the feedback into the form.



**Thank-you again for the opportunity to provide a submission to this Senate Enquiry. While the 2016 Census has had its problems, I expect that there will still be considerable useful data to come out of it, and look forward to participating in the 2021 Census which should be much more robust and well managed.**