

Chapter 2

A short history of the census in Australia

2.1 Every five years in August, Australia conducts a Census of Population and Housing (census). The census provides information on the number of people living in Australia, their ancestry, and how they live and work.

2.2 Coordinated accounting of populations and other statistics for public administration purposes dates back to the late 18th century in Australia in activities called musters. Before federation, each state conducted its own censuses, with the first held in New South Wales in 1828.¹

2.3 On 8 December 1905, the federal *Census and Statistic Act 1905* was passed. The Act provided:

(a) that the census shall be taken in the year 1911, and in every tenth year thereafter; and

(b) the census day shall be a day appointed for that purpose by proclamation.

2.4 The first Statistician of the Commonwealth of Australia (the Australian Statistician) was appointed on 18 June 1906 and in the same year the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics was formed; later to be re-named the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1975.²

2.5 As set out in the Act, the Australian Statistician conducted the first national census in April of 1911.³ The ABS, in a later reminiscence, provided an insight into the scale and challenges faced by the earlier censuses:

Around 7300 collectors and enumerators were appointed for the collection work on the first census. Collectors were mainly on foot, or used horses to cover their areas. Some collectors also used bicycles...Most collectors were able to undertake their work in the specified time with no major difficulties. However flooding and bogs stranded some collectors in Queensland, while a drought in Western Australia meant that some were unable to find feed for their horses...In all states police provided details of tramps and campers.⁴

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 75.

2 Australian Data Archive, *The history of census taking in Australia*, <http://assda.anu.edu.au/census/c86/hatac86/section1.html> .

3 Early censuses were authorised by the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*, which was later replaced by the *Census and Statistics Act 1977*.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, pp. 77–78.

2.6 Over four million census cards were counted by hand in 1911, the Australian Statistician having eschewed the use of the available tabulating machines due to fears of delays and concerns that 'most of the machinery he saw was still at an experimental stage'.⁵ Twenty-one years earlier, tabulating machines produced by Herman Hollerith—whose company would later become International Business Machines Corporation, better known today as IBM—were used successfully in the 1890 census in the United States of America. Partly as a result of the interruption caused by war in Europe, the final Statistician's Report was not released until 1917.⁶

2.7 Further censuses were conducted in 1921, 1933, 1947, 1954 and 1961. The censuses in 1933 and 1947 were delayed by the depressed economic conditions of preceding years and later the war.⁷

The modern era

2.8 The 1966 census was the first to be held five years after the preceding census, marking the commencement of a pattern that continues to today. The 1966 census marked the beginnings of the use of electronic computers for census purposes in Australia:

For the first time a computer was used for processing of the census, including for editing and coding of the data. The use of the computer appears to have had no impact on the number of staff required nor on the time taken to complete the processing. However the computer did have a significant impact on the quality of the data as it enabled quality control checks to be built into the processing system. It also made a significant difference to the analysis of the data, with capability to produce far more complex tables than were previously available.⁸

2.9 As well as the increased flexibility of analysis by computers, 1966 also saw the introduction of the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) which provided an important tool to improve the accuracy of the census. The PES allows the ABS to correct the collected data to determine the number of people who were not counted, and how many people who were counted twice.⁹

2.10 A final change of note to the 1966 census was the demise of the Statistician's Report (report). The report summarised and analysed the census results

5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 78.

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 82.

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, pp. 83–86.

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, pp. 90–91.

9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2011 Census coverage – the Post Enumeration Survey*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/factsheetspes?opendocument&navpos=450> (accessed: 14 September 2016).

and was published as a volume of analysis. Due to the amount of work required, the report took between five and eight years to complete; clearly too slow a turn-around given the census was now to be conducted every five years.¹⁰

2.11 The 1971 census saw, for the first time, a serious discussion regarding privacy and the government's collection of information. Concerns appear to have been stirred by a television program which aired one month before the census investigating the supposed privacy invasions of government information collection.¹¹

2.12 The 1976 census witnessed even greater concerns regarding privacy, at the same time the census was extended to cover more areas of people's lives to inform the major social changes the Whitlam government envisaged.¹² The ABS' official history reports:

In the two months before the census date there was considerable public debate about the census, with privacy a big issue. The Bureau faced attacks from many quarters. With the limited pre-census publicity, the Bureau was unable to clear up all misunderstandings based on inadequate information that arose during the debate.¹³

2.13 The PES revealed that fewer people had responded to the census than for previous censuses. This meant that for the first time the ABS adjusted the results of the 1976 census based on benchmarking rather than using the direct population count of the census data.¹⁴ Partly as a consequence of the privacy concerns surrounding the 1976 census, the ABS began to make it publicly clear that census forms were always destroyed once the data from them had been processed.¹⁵

2.14 Following the 1976 census, the ABS increased community engagement in the development of the census and encouraged a greater understanding of the value of the census data in the population at large. In 1979, the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) tabled the report *Privacy and the Census* in Parliament. Key recommendations of the report included:

- The public should be informed both about the need for census information and about the measures taken to protect confidentiality;

10 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 93.

11 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 95.

12 Although the census was administered after the Whitlam government was dismissed, the census questions had been approved by Parliament during the Whitlam years.

13 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 96.

14 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 96.

15 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 96.

- census information should not be destroyed but should be transferred to security in the national archives;
- access to census information should be forbidden for most purposes for 75 years; and
- highly sensitive information should not be sought on a compulsory basis unless there was a highly compelling need.¹⁶

2.15 The ABS generally accepted the recommendations of the ALRC, but continued to destroy census records after the data had been extracted.

2.16 The 1981 census did not suffer from the same privacy concerns as those in the 1970s, with the PES finding an improvement in the response rate.¹⁷ In 1991, the census date was moved to August to be clear of all school holiday periods. The 1991 census also marked the start of regular consultations with the Privacy Commissioner on operational procedures.¹⁸

2.17 Due to concerns regarding the cost of conducting the census, in 1993 the Australian Government established an interdepartmental committee to consider ways of reducing the costs of administering the census. The committee identified two options: reduce the frequency of, and number of questions in, the census. The committee recommended the continuation of the census in its current format.¹⁹

2.18 Public support for the census appears to have hit a modern peak in 1996 with a non-response rate of only 1.6 per cent.²⁰ The Adelaide Advertiser provided an enthusiastic endorsement of the census, opining:

The five yearly census is one of the best public investments Australia makes. It pays for itself many times over in the information it provides for planners in both the public and private sectors. At the everyday human level its findings are engrossing, especially when tracked over time.²¹

2.19 The 2001 census saw privacy concerns again being considered in the lead-up to the census. The issue was whether the census forms should be destroyed or kept for posterity. The ABS was reportedly wary of retaining the forms. As the ABS official history reports:

16 Australian Law Reform Commission, *Privacy (1976–83)*, <https://www.alrc.gov.au/inquiries/privacy-1976-83> (accessed: 14 September 2016).

17 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 98.

18 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 103.

19 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 103.

20 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 104.

21 Adelaide Advertiser, 17 July 1997.

The experience of the 1970s taught the Bureau to believe that any suggestion that the census was less than completely confidential could have a profound impact on the quality of the data collected.²²

2.20 In 1998, the government decided on a compromise, giving people the opportunity to opt-in to allow their personal details—including name identification—to be retained for release in 99 years. Slightly more than fifty per cent of respondents agreed to have their details kept in the 2001 census. The remainder of the census forms were destroyed in accordance with past practice.²³ The number of households opting to have their census forms retained has increased in every subsequent census, with 56.1 per cent and 60.6 per cent opting-in in 2006 and 2011 respectively.

2.21 In 2006, for the first time, the census was available to be completed online by the general public, with 10 per cent of households submitting their data using this method. In 2011, the take-up rate for the online census was 33 per cent following on the back of digital engagement and endorsement strategies undertaken by the ABS in the lead-up to the census.²⁴

Importance of the census

2.22 The census has been a long-standing part of Australian public life. It is easy to forget the importance of the census, and the importance of the statistics that result from it.

2.23 The ABS provides a useful summary of the census, and its purpose:

A [census] is an official count of the complete population and the dwellings in which they live. A census provides a detailed snapshot of the population and dwellings, at a point in time.

...

The Australian Census provides a reliable basis for the estimation of the population of the states, territories and local government areas, for use in: determining the number of seats allocated to each state and territory in the House of Representatives; distributing billions of dollars of annual goods and services tax revenue to the states and territories; and influencing grants to states and to local government areas.²⁵

2.24 Census data is used to determine electoral boundaries, distribute tax revenue fairly, and model the need for services. Governments, non-government organisations, community groups and businesses all rely on the census. The committee heard that the

22 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 105.

23 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a Nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905-2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 105.

24 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submission 38*, p. 37.

25 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submission 38*, p. 34.

true power of the census comes from the low-level data that allows informed decision making and research.²⁶

2.25 The Department of Social Services highlighted the importance of census data to the government in providing services to Australians:

The Census is vital for understanding the characteristics and behaviours of vulnerable populations of policy interest for DSS, including newly arrived migrants, people with a disability and jobless families.²⁷

2.26 The Australian Institute of Family Studies informed the committee that the census is the 'only way in which to obtain good estimates of the incidence, distribution, and characteristics of so-called "rare populations"'.²⁸ The Executive Council of Australian Jewry Inc. pointed out that for a community of their size:

...only a national census has sufficiently broad coverage to deliver data at the level of detail required to make even basic assessments about our community...the Jewish community has little alternative but to rely on the census to provide accurate data to help plan for our social, welfare, care, educational and security needs.²⁹

2.27 Similarly, the National Catholic Education Commission highlighted that 'the data derived from [the census] are an integral component of the Australian education infrastructure' as it is used to anticipate demand and allocate funding.³⁰

2.28 The Life Course Centre (LCC) highlighted that although governments are collecting increasingly large quantities of administrative data, the census is the only 'definitive data source that provides universal coverage of the Australian population in its entirety'.³¹ As the LLC explained:

The Census is the cornerstone for important social and economic research analyses in Australia, since it produces official statistics that can be used to benchmark population, mortality, and other statistics.³²

2.29 Volunteering Tasmania noted that in an environment of declining funding for many areas of research, the census remains 'a source for consistent, longitudinal data for the volunteering industry'.³³

26 ID Consulting Pty Ltd, *Submission 39*, p. [2].

27 Department of Social Services, *Submission 63*, p. 1.

28 Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Submission 8*, p. 2.

29 Executive Council of Australian Jewry, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

30 National Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 69*, p. 2; Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Submission 44*, p. [1].

31 ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course, *Submission 32*, p. [1].

32 ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course, *Submission 32*, p. [5].

33 Volunteering Tasmania, *Submission 50*, p. 1.

2.30 The data from the census is also used to underpin survey sampling as it allows researchers to identify segments of the population that are under-represented or absent in a sample.³⁴

34 Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Submission 8*, p. 2.

