

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Additional Estimates – 25–26 February 2009

Question: aet 80

Topic: Census – Northern Territory & the Kimberley

Hansard Page: E8-9 (26 February 2009)

Senator PRATT asked:

Senator PRATT—Thank you very much. It has been put to me that at the last census there was a substantial undercounting of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory and that projections accounting for things like birthrates demonstrated that there should have been more people on the census. I think that represents some challenges for benchmarking things like the government's closing the gap policies. You might need to take this on notice, but could you report to me the extent of that problem and what may be being done by the ABS to rectify it.

Mr Ewing—Yes. I will ask Denis, who is across the detail of the census more than I am. You are correct: there was an undercount, though overall the census achieved a very high response rate. The undercount overall was about 2.5 per cent in the census in total. But, Denis, you might comment on the Indigenous situation.

Mr Farrell—It is very difficult to comment in general terms because it varies from area to area as to what the undercount measured was. I think taking the question on notice and getting a more specific understanding of the area that you are interested in would be useful. It is true that the undercount varies dramatically across Australia. Some areas are more difficult in terms of census operations than others and the undercount does vary from area to area. As Mr Ewing said, overall across Australia it was about 2.5 per cent, but it can range up to around about 30 per cent in some parts of the country.

Senator PRATT—Can I also ask then to what extent such an undercount is most apparent in marginalised groups about whom it is therefore probably more important that we collect information? Is there a correlation in a general sense? I appreciate that there can be wealthy people who are overseas or whatever and that they are naturally expected to be missing because they are not there on the night, but when you are looking at your source of data about your population, is it marginal groups that are most likely to be missing?

Mr Farrell—Marginal groups are affected, but it is not necessarily just marginal groups. An example is that often some quite wealthy areas are very difficult to enumerate because they are behind such strong security arrangements. There are a whole range of issues to do with the underenumeration. As I say, I think it is important to understand more precisely the area that you are interested in, in order to be able to hone in directly on what the specific issues are.

Senator PRATT—Okay. In a general sense I am interested in remote Indigenous communities that have quite transient populations and quite young populations as well.

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Mr Farrell—In a general sense I can comment that it is more difficult to enumerate in those circumstances. We need to put more resources, and we do put more resources, into the enumeration in those areas. In the last census we also extended the post-enumeration survey, which measures the level of undercount. We extended it in order to be able to better enumerate the undercount in areas such as the ones you are talking about. We are constantly trying to improve the methodologies and the operational arrangements associated with those sorts of areas.

Senator PRATT—Have you been able to significantly correct the data you did have, to make it more real in that sense?

Mr Farrell—The main population data used in Australia for total population is estimated resident population. It is not actually the census count. The census count is a contribution to that. We routinely produce estimated resident population information and that is adjusted for the net difference between people overseas, people absent on census night and underenumeration. So, yes, those estimated resident population numbers incorporate adjustments to take account of underenumeration and other factors.

Senator PRATT—Okay. Any further information you can provide on notice would be appreciated. Thank you.

Answer:

The ABS conducted a Post Enumeration Survey (PES) following the 2006 Census. Based on the results of the PES, the net undercount for the Australian population was 2.7%.

The ABS has estimated the national net undercount in the Census for the Indigenous population to be 11.5%. The adjustment to the 2006 Census count of the Indigenous population in Western Australia was 16.6% and for the Northern Territory was 16.0%. It is not possible to provide details specific to the Kimberley area, or any other sub-state or sub-territory area based on the PES.

Action being taken by the ABS is in three main areas:

- a Indigenous population estimates take account of this net undercount,
- b The ABS is working with Federal, state and local government agencies and relevant community organisations to assist in the planning and operation of the 2011 Census, and
- c Indigenous liaison staff are being employed to help in the planning and operation of the 2011 Census.