

Why the Census matters

From Rebecca Huntley, Bernard Salt, Tim Harcourt, David Chalke, Katie Bayley, Ivan Motley, John Wynne

There's lots of talk about the need for savings in the federal budget but some budget cuts could end up costing the nation more. For instance, the idea has been floated that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shift the census from five- to ten-year cycles and running sample-based surveys to augment the dataset. We think this is a retrograde step. The value of the census is that it provides five-yearly snapshots of the Australian nation back to 1961. In its current form the census delivers a long view of where Australia has been and therefore it offers a perspective as to where we might be headed.

In particular, we think this would be a short sighted measure because:

1. The census is the vital source of information on how we understand Australia. It's a census not a sample.
2. The census is vital to how we inform public policy: on schools, healthcare, ageing, intergenerational equity, immigration etc.
3. Survey data is always open to dispute: what was the sample size; how was it conducted? No-one can argue with a census; everyone was asked; it delivers better certainty to resource allocation for schools, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure.
4. The census supports an open society and information sharing so important to democracy. It reduces the risk of citizens having to operate with asymmetric information
5. Experiences in Canada of cutting back the census have had adverse effects on economic and social policy in Canada, a jurisdiction with some similarities to Australia.

The ABS collects a number of economic and social indicators - many on a monthly basis. This data is mainly used by the economists of the major banks for short term forecasts in the financial markets at substantial expense to the ABS. By contrast the census is used by everyone, demographers, and social scientists, public policy makers who have to analyse and plan for the long run future of the nation. Only the census can provide the accurate data, down to local community level, that is so vital for practical infrastructure planning and management.

We are a small nation in a vast continent; we need to get resource allocation right. Survey data might be useful for some but for demographers and social scientists more generally the census in its current form is irreplaceable; it is an asset of the Australian nation. We ask the ABS to reconsider its recommendation to shift the Australian census to the Canadian model of census-&-survey, and which we understand has been a less than resounding success.

The census: if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

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