



Australian
National
University

Counting for Change

Toward a nationally consistent approach
to the collection of ethnicity data in
Australia

Submission to Census 2026 consultation

April 2023

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TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University)
CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

A Census for contemporary Australia

Census does not adequately reflect the ethnic identity of the nation and its people, and this is increasingly problematic.

Cultural diversity in the Australian population is celebrated as among the highest, if not highest, in the world. With almost half¹ (48%) the Australian population reporting one or both parents born overseas it is not surprising the nation's multiculturalism is so boldly professed. But beyond religion, citizenship, country of birth (and that of parents), language, and two lines of ancestry, Australia knows little to nothing about the ethnicity of its people.

Multiculturalism might be proclaimed, but it appears not to be practised. Lack of ethnicity information for Australia establishes the country as an international laggard when compared to the likes of New Zealand (NZ), Canada, the United States of America (US), and the United Kingdom (UK).²

Ethnicity is not a concept well-defined in the Australian context, largely because the nation has not been adept at reckoning with its history.³ This historical hangover of avoiding matters of ethnicity is clear in throughout the history of the Australian Census, which in part contributes to a reluctance to consider identity as anything other than the problematic notion of race.⁴ In reality, 'ethnic identity is a self-defined concept and can be a complex articulation of one's biological background and social experiences and practices, especially as it relates to migrant and mixed-race populations. Ethnicity is further complicated by the dynamic nature of individual articulation; self-reported identification can change over time, reflecting expanding experiences.'⁵

While the issue of ethnicity is a vexed one in Australia, a migrant nation such as ours cannot continue to view itself through the narrow prism of country of birth or migrant versus non-migrant. Historically, the term ethnic has been used in Australia to determine otherness,⁶ yet this has changed especially among younger generations. Additionally, mixed parenting has challenged the way Australians view themselves and the histories of its people.

The role of the Australian Census is to reflect the nation in data; much like a family photograph. A family photograph, after all, is only as good as its frame of inclusion. Accordingly, Census must keep pace with the ever-changing characteristics of the Australian people and the way they live. An up-to-date Census is fundamental to the purpose of national enumeration, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) more broadly.

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/AUS>

² Allen, L. 2021a. 'Understanding ethnicity in contemporary Australia using the census'. *Australian Population Studies*, 5(1):56-64.

<https://www.australianpopulationstudies.org/index.php/aps/article/view/82/49>

³ Allen, L. 2020. *The Future of Us: Demography Gets a Makeover*. Sydney, Australia: NewSouth Publishing.

⁴ Allen, L. 2021b. 'Promoting representation through data: the case for more comprehensive ethnicity data in Australia'. *Law in Context*, 37(2):54-61. <https://journals.latrobe.edu.au/index.php/law-in-context/article/view/144>

⁵ Allen 2021a, *op. it.*, p 56.

⁶ See <https://freilich.anu.edu.au/news-events/blog/dago-wog-remembering-stinging-slurs>

Inadequacy of Australian Census data is no better highlighted than in the inability during COVID-19 to understand infections, impacts of lockdowns, and uptake of vaccinations by ethnicity⁷. Analysis of COVID-19 impacts by ethnicity, enabled by respective censuses, was a strength in understanding and formulating approaches to COVID-19 in NZ, Canada, US, and UK.

Australians (including the business community, researchers, governments, and non-for-profit organisations) rely on the national enumeration to not only take a statistical snapshot of the country, but to provide leadership on the collection and reporting of statistical insights. Businesses and governments use the Census to determine and assess the representativeness of their workforce and to identify shortcomings. In this context of informing workforce needs, and parity leadership targets, the Census has proven significantly lacking. Unfortunately, the Australian Census has not kept pace with the wider social changes that have occurred since the first national population stocktake in 1911. Australia's laggard Census contrasts with the priorities of the ABS⁸, namely: the production of high-quality statistics, timely insights, minimised respondent burden, and data leadership.

Substantial evidence shows the importance of and need for the Australian Census to address the lack of ethnicity information for the population. Shortcomings of the Census are particularly exposed when trying to understand diversity among population subsets and using the Census for benchmarking. Examples of such work include that by Diversity Council Australia⁹, Media Diversity Australia¹⁰, Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia¹¹, Workplace Gender Equality Agency¹², and the Australian Human Rights Commission¹³.

Essential leadership and benchmarking for innumerable data collections and comparisons is provided by the Australian Census. Limitations of the Census have flow-on impacts to crucial functions of Australian society that rely on Census for parity comparisons. Recommendations from a recent Australian Law Reform inquiry made the case of the need to collect and report on diversity statistics, specifically gender and ethnicity, of the federal judiciary to help guard against bias in the nation's legal system¹⁴. Such data is informed by the Census to understand departures of

⁷ Jakubowicz, A. 2021. 'We need to collect ethnicity data during COVID testing if we're to get on top of Sydney's outbreak'. *The Conversation*, 22 July. <https://theconversation.com/we-need-to-collect-ethnicity-data-during-covid-testing-if-were-to-get-on-top-of-sydneys-outbreak-164783>

⁸ <https://www.abs.gov.au/about/our-organisation/corporate-reporting/abs-corporate-plan/2022-23/priorities-and-activities>

⁹ D'Almada- Remedios, R., Groutsis, D., Kaabel, A. and J. O'Leary. 2021 *Counting Culture: Towards a Standardised Approach to Measuring and Reporting on Workforce Cultural Diversity in Australia*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2021.

https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_counting_culture_2021_synopsis_online_final.pdf

¹⁰ Media Diversity Australia. 2022. *Who Gets to Tell Australian Stories*

https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Who-Gets-to-Tell-Australian-Stories_2.0_FINAL_pdf.pdf

¹¹ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia. 2020. *If we don't count it...it doesn't count: Towards Consistent National Data Collection and Reporting on Cultural, Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity* <https://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CALD-DATA-ISSUES-PAPER-FINAL2.pdf>

¹² See <https://www.wgea.gov.au/gender-equality-and-diversity>

¹³ Human Rights Commission. 2022. *National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report 2022*

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/national-anti-racism-framework-scoping-report>

¹⁴ Australian Law Reform Commission. 2021. *Without Fear or Favour: judicial impartiality and the law on bias*. ALC report 138. <https://www.alrc.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ALRC-Judicial-Impartiality-138-Summary-Report.pdf>

representation and to highlight potential bias. A comparable collection of data would be needed within the judiciary, which would look to the Census and ABS for a measure. The Census unfortunately does not currently allow for this type of data. Accordingly, inclusion and fairness are impeded.

The Australian Government has also expressed the need for more effective data collection to understand ethnicity. The Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Giles MP, said about the Census: ‘The data...we have...is imprecise, because place of birth doesn’t really tell us the full story about who someone is, how they identify, and that’s why we do need to get better data.’¹⁵

Drawing on the existing body of work and making use of our recent research, we outline potential opportunities for Census 2026 to better collect ethnicity data for Australia.

Proposed ethnicity question

Data collection conducted as part of the Australian National University’s (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRSM) and Centre for Asian-Australian Leadership (CAAL) *Counting for Change* research project was undertaken in late January 2023 via the ANUpoll Life in Australia panel¹⁶. In total, 3,370 surveys were completed either online or by telephone with people who did not have access to the internet. Questions were designed to capture respondent’s understanding of ethnicity among Australians, in addition to gauging ability to respond to direct questions on ethnic identity. Preliminary (unpublished) findings are used here to inform recommendations.

The concept of ethnicity for a minority (2.8%) is not one easily understood, when asked what it means for them. Most people, however, had a working knowledge of the concept of ethnicity, as Figure 1 summarises. Indeed, for people with identifying with an ethnicity other than solely ‘Australian’, the concept of ethnicity is more readily comprehended, perhaps due to its everyday application in personal lives.



Figure 1: What does ethnic identity mean to you?

¹⁵ Yussuf, A. and Walden, M. 2022. ‘Multicultural group welcome federal government’s move to collect ethnicity data.’ ABC News, 16 June. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-16/federal-government-to-measure-ethnicity-data-multiculturalism/101158038>

¹⁶ See <https://srcentre.com.au/our-research/life-in-australia-study>

Respondents were able to offer insights into how ethnicity is conceptualised in contemporary Australia. History featured substantially throughout respondent's definitions of ethnicity, as did heritage, background, and community.

Based on the tried and tested ethnicity questions in the NZ and Canadian censuses, we asked respondents to indicate their ethnicity. The introduction text, question, and instruction were as set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Proposed census question format for ethnicity, Australia 2026 Census¹⁷

<p><u>Introduction:</u> Ethnic identity is defined as a sense of belonging, based on an individual's ancestry, cultural heritage, values, traditions, rituals, and often language and religion¹⁸.</p> <p><u>Question:</u> Which ethnic groups do you belong to/identify with?</p> <p>Select all that apply to you.</p>
<p><u>Instruction:</u> For examples, refer to this list of ethnic or cultural origins¹⁹.</p> <p>Specify as many origins as applicable.</p>

Responses to the question outlined in Table 1 were promising, providing strong evidence that this type of question could be answered at the population level. We are also buoyed by the findings of work by Professor Naomi Priest (and colleagues) showing that school-aged children can identify their ethnicity with minimal instruction²⁰.

Question format based on the above could be adapted to be implemented in other public-facing services (like hospitals) to enable comparison with the Census. For example, responses could be coded to a more aggregate form, as described in the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG).

¹⁷ We also did some experimentation with the question phrasing and introduction and will provide findings from this analysis in due course.

¹⁸ Adapted from Green E, Sarrasin O and N Fasel (2015) Immigration: social psychology aspects. In: Wright J D (ed) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, 2nd edition, volume 11. London: Elsevier.

¹⁹ A hyperlink to the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG) would assist in the selection of ethnicities here. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/classifications/australian-standard-classification-cultural-and-ethnic-groups-ascceg/latest-release#overview> This is in line with the approach taken in the Canadian census.

²⁰ See <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/evaluation-speak-out-against-racism-soar-program-pilot>

Recommendations

There are risks involved in any data collection – especially the collection of new items – but on the balance of things there are greater risks associated with not collecting ethnicity data. We are not proposing the replacement or removal of the current suite of Census data items on cultural diversity. Rather, the addition of an ethnicity measure will complement the existing questions and enable an examination of the effectiveness of a new variable.

Moving toward a contemporary measure of ethnicity in the Australian Census would provide historic data leadership from the ABS and enable a much richer understanding of the nation in data and society. A nationally consistent approach to collecting ethnicity data is well overdue and the ABS has a vital role here.

There is overwhelming evidence to support the addition of an ethnicity question in the 2026 Census for Australia. We have provided proof-of-concept in the opportunities for such a question. Further testing of the best fit of an ethnicity question in the Census suite, alongside community education, will assist in bringing the Australian enumeration in line with international comparators.

We offer our support and expertise to the ABS and are keen to assist in any national education campaign on the addition of an ethnicity question in Census 2026.