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Counting for change

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

Submission to Census 2026 consultation (phase 2)

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A Census for contemporary Australia

Drawing on the existing body of work, consultation with relevant bodies, and making use of our recent research, we outline potential opportunities for Census 2026 to better collect ethnicity data for Australia. We offer several evidence-based suggestions for the collection of ethnicity information in the Australian Census.

This document builds on our submission made under Phase 1 of the Census 2026 consultation.

In compiling the work presented here, we consulted with representatives from the following: researchers from universities and research bodies using relevant Census data; public events with Belconnen/Northside U3A and academic conferences; Australia Council for the Arts; Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority; Australian Public Service Commission; Community and Public Sector Union; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; Diversity Council Australia; Australian Human Rights Commission; Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia; Media Diversity Australia; Reserve Bank of Australia; Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector; and the Workplace Gender and Equality Agency. Additionally, we presented our intended work to Minister Andrew Giles and preliminary findings to Assistant Minister Andrew Leigh.

We acknowledge 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. Indeed, there is overwhelming evidence to support the addition of an ethnicity question in the 2026 Census for Australia. We have previously provided a proof-of-concept in the opportunities for such a question.

We ask that ethnicity replace ancestry in national censuses commencing 2026.

As the nation moves away from traditional census taking¹, it is vital that ethnicity data be collected in Census 2026.

Background

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. 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

The hangover of avoiding matters of ethnicity is clear throughout the history of the Australian Census, which in part contributes to a reluctance to consider identity as

¹ For example, a move toward administrative data
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/administrative-data-snapshot-population-and-housing-experimental-housing-data/30-june-2021>
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/administrative-data-snapshot-population-and-housing-experimental-population-data/30-june-2021>

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>

anything other than the problematic notion of race.³ 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.'⁴

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.

Australians (including the corporate sector, researchers, governments, and not-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 government 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 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 ABS⁵, 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 Australia⁶, Media Diversity Australia⁷, Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia⁸, Workplace Gender and Equality Agency⁹, and the Australian Human Rights Commission¹⁰.

³ 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>

⁴ Allen 2021a, *op. cit.*, p 56.

⁵ <https://www.abs.gov.au/about/our-organisation/corporate-reporting/abs-corporate-plan/2022-23/priorities-and-activities>

⁶ 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

⁷ 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

⁸ Federation of Ethnic Communities Council 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>

⁹ See <https://www.wgea.gov.au/gender-equality-and-diversity>

¹⁰ 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>

on cultural or ethnic diversity, following much backlash concerning related inadequacies in the data collection¹³. The question – which was reportedly well understood by respondents, and drew on prior work – used the relevant ABS standard as follows:

Table 2: Cultural background question, APSC census 2023¹⁴

<p><u>Question:</u> How would you describe your cultural background? [Please select all that apply]</p> <p><u>Explanatory text:</u> Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic group(s) to which you feel you belong or identify. This background may be the same as your parents, grandparents, or your heritage, or it may be the country you were born in or have spent a great amount of time in, or feel more closely tied to.</p> <p><u>Response options:</u> Fourteen¹⁵ radial tick box options drawing on categories from the ASCCEG¹⁶, incorporating select broad and narrow categories as well as cultural and ethnic groups.</p>
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We understand that the ABS will need to make the difficult decision to remove the current ancestry question from the Census if ethnicity were to be included in the national questionnaire. The risks of not taking action on the inclusion of ethnicity in the Census, though, are great.

Recommended question options

We recommend that further testing of the best fit of an ethnicity question be conducted by the ABS to determine appropriateness for Census 2026. Testing is especially required to determine whether an ethnicity question captures similar data to the pre-existing ancestry question, and if not identify the basis of divergence to inform trend data use.

The following Tables 2 and 3 provide the gold and sub-gold standard recommendations for the collection of ethnicity data.

¹³ Refer to https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8084526/long-time-coming-aps-employee-census-to-ask-cultural-background-of-staff/?utm_source=ground.news&utm_medium=referral

¹⁴ APSC, 2023 APS Employee Census: 8 May to 9 June 2023. Provided to author by email.

¹⁵ Categories as follows: 1. Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander); 2. Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 3. New Zealander (excluding Maori); 4. Maori, Melanesian, Papuan, Micronesian, and Polynesian; 5. Anglo-European; 6. North-West European (excluding Anglo-European); 7. Southern and Eastern European; 8. South-East Asian; 9. North-East Asian; 10. Southern and Central Asian; 11. North American; 12. South and Central American and Caribbean Islander; 13. North African and Middle Eastern; 14. Sub-Saharan African.

¹⁶ See <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/classifications/australian-standard-classification-cultural-and-ethnic-groups-ascceg/latest-release>

Table 2: Proposed census question format for ethnicity, Australia 2026 Census – gold standard

<p><u>Question:</u> Which ethnic groups do you belong to/identify with? [Select all that apply]</p> <p><u>Explanatory text:</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 religion¹⁷.</p> <p><u>Response options:</u> Nine most common ancestry groups drawing on cultural and ethnic categories from the ASCCEG, including Australia, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Other (open text with ASCCEG autofill in the online form).</p>
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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 ASCCEG.

Testing by the ABS, as part of Census 2026 review, could determine the exact phrasing of the question in Table 2 to incorporate the need for one householder to respond for all. It should be noted that the current ancestry question already assumes one member of the household can respond for all. Further, testing should pay particular attention to the inclusion (or otherwise) of the words belong to/identify with.

Table 3 demonstrates that there are a multitude of options that could be considered for an ethnicity question. Question wording could use more readily understood or used terms such as cultural groups or ancestry.

Table 3: Proposed census question format for ethnicity, Australia 2026 Census – sub gold standard

<p><u>Question (silver standard):</u> Which cultural or ethnic groups do you belong to/identify with? [Select all that apply]</p> <p><u>Question (bronze standard):</u> Which ancestry or ethnic groups do you belong to/identify with? [Select all that apply]</p> <p><u>Explanatory text and response options</u> as per Table 2.</p>

¹⁷ 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.

Closing remarks

Changes being considered by the ABS as part of Census 2026 review reflect the most progressive updates to the national stocktake in Australian Census history. We hope the Bureau can in the very least advance an ethnicity question to testing to provide evidence of the appropriateness of such an inclusion. If in the event ethnicity does not move beyond testing researchers will still have greater understanding of what might be best included in survey instruments. Such data will help advance the knowledge of what it means to be Australian in contemporary society.

We at The Australian National University Centre for Social Research & Methods and Centre for Asian-Australian Leadership once again offer our support and expertise to the ABS. We are keen to assist in any national education campaign on the addition of an ethnicity question in Census 2026, should this be the outcome.