

We need to save the census

Pension Commentary 2026-1¹

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31 March 2026

Submissions on the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and the Electoral (District Boundaries) Amendment Bill close 15 April 2026.

Both Bills have already passed the first reading although both Bills ignore important constitutional issues. Members of Parliament should be advised that this deficiency obliges them to demand a properly constituted independent expert review of the proposals from Statistics New Zealand (StatsNZ). No independent professional review was commissioned by any recent Minister of Statistics, and none was available to Cabinet Ministers when they agreed to the proposals.

Members of Parliament have a duty of care to be properly informed on the proposals to cease the five yearly Census of Population and Dwellings. Ministerial responsibility is a fundamental principle underpinning parliamentary systems of government. It establishes that Ministers are accountable to the Parliament and ultimately to citizens for the conduct and actions of their departments.

From the available documents, no recent Minister of Statistics has sought independent expert advice on the proposals initiated by StatsNZ. Testing the fitness for purpose of the changes proposed by StatsNZ has not been given the importance it should have, given the uses made on behalf of New Zealanders of population statistics. We cannot really know the value of what is being destroyed.

Recently, Ministers, Government Statisticians, and even the Public Service Commissioner have been sidetracked into changing StatsNZ into a data warehouse for implementing ideas of social investment, making the continued production of trustworthy official statistics and access to them of secondary importance.

Apart from reporting on demographic, geographic and socio-economic change, the Census data is used for the design of social and household economic surveys; model assisted estimation of both probability based samples with frame bias or high non response, and non-probability based samples which increasing use online panels which are often recruited from reward programs and offer rewards for participation in surveys, compromising their accuracy.

¹ PIE Commentaries are opinion pieces published as contributions to public debate, and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Pensions and Intergenerational Equity Hub.

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We will have lower quality information about Māori and Pacific communities despite them providing nearly 40% of the people of workforce age in twenty years' time. Language and religion will not be collected. The richness and diversity of migrant communities is not going to be measured to the extent we will need.

The Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) which underpins the proposed changes and has been around for a good decade, is anchored in a de facto population register, and enables the joining together of personal records that historically have required legislative change to link. Neither the IDI nor the existence of a de facto population register are recognised in the proposed legislation changes.

A further concern arises from the plan to place the IDI on a cloud computing environment. Given that the possible vehicles for this are likely to be American, this highly confidential information about the lives of all New Zealanders will be subject to the US Patriots Act 2001. This Act obliges any American company to provide whatever records it is in custody of, wherever in the world, to US Federal authorities should they seek it.

Administrative records are vulnerable to policy change, which can be quite dramatic, as seen with the removal of the requirement to complete an annual tax return from 2024. Practicalities mean that administrative records cannot be certain to meet statistical standards, exemplified by the inability to separate capital from operating expenses in GST returns. This limits the use of such administrative records in economic monitoring and as a source for national accounts.

Australia, Canada, USA, Ireland, and the United Kingdom use administrative data in the Census to correct for non-response or measurement error. They do not use administrative data to replace the Census. Nor should we.

Full discussion at [Arguments for independent review of census proposals March 2026](#)

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