



What the public needs to know about the decision to stop the five -yearly census

PIE Commentary 2025-2

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Analysis of issues that concern PIE around ageing pressures, pensions policy and intergenerational equity demand the best possible, timely and accurate data from a variety of sources. The Census has been a critical element in the array of available population data to date. We are therefore concerned that the decision to abolish the Census has not been driven by sound economic argument, nor wide consultation nor transparency. We are delighted to promote the views of experienced Statistician Len Cook, in this PIE commentary.²

The problem

A Public Health Communication Briefing May 2024, *Counting what matters: Rethinking Aotearoa's population statistics without a census*³ explained the challenge:

Our statistical tools need sharpening to meet current and future challenges. Population data sources, estimates, and projections are having to evolve to meet the needs of climate change, large scale infrastructure investments, housing, health and care in circumstances that they were not designed for. Ethnic diversity and a rapidly ageing population combine with volatile migration flows to give each place a distinctive challenge in balancing population focused services with who lives there. Patterns of ageing now differ across places and within population sub-groups around the country. The regular population census has long been the window on places, communities and families that monitors such change. Statistics NZ now wish to change our key window on the population dynamics that drive population change in many parts of Aotearoa New Zealand. This Briefing proposes that before such changes, the scientific implications be transparent.

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² 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.

³ Len Cook, Lisette Burrows, Barry Milne, Kate Prickett, Philippa Howden-Chapman, Nevil Pierse, Tahu Kukutai, Alistair Gray, Polly Atatoa-Carr, Peter Crampton, 2024, [Counting what matters: Rethinking Aotearoa's population statistics without a census](#).

In a surprise move on the 18th June 2025, Statistics Minister Shane Reti announced far-reaching decisions on the future of the Census had been made, including the abolition of the 2028 census.

The changes

*.... the Census which has existed in a similar format for more than 70 years - will be replaced with a combination of administrative data from other government agencies and smaller annual surveys that a sample of the population will complete. The change follows [a major review carried out last year](#), after the 2023 Census.*⁴

Commentary

To have confidence in these aspirational proposals that replace a normal census enumeration, there must be transparency and validation by independent experts. Statutory obligations of transparency have not been met, which is especially worrying given, for example, the constitutional implications for the conduct of elections.

The Government Statistician must establish a process for identifying the full range of matters critical for public confidence in the proposed census change. The process should be led by key users, population experts and statisticians.

To date, the Government Statistician has failed New Zealanders in the lack of openness of process about the most enduring and fundamental information gathering activity that the government undertakes. The fundamental operational and evaluation failures of 2018 census and 2023 census have not yet been transparently discussed. Without this key knowledge, the department risks failing to uphold the responsibility of the Executive to Parliament when it seeks consequential changes to legislation.

The Royal Society Te Apārangi should be requested to lead such an independent review of the scientific integrity and validity of what is proposed, with expert advice from the Australian Statistician.

The key questions for urgent response:

- 1. What information will we have after 2030 that we did not have before, and for what purpose will it be used?*
- 2. What information do we need now that we still will not have?*
- 3. What information that is used regularly but will no longer be available, or be of reduced quality?*

The population storm of growing ethnic diversity, a rapidly ageing population, volatile migration flows, evolving household and family living arrangements makes key indicators even more critical than before. What is the effect of changing the way that people are counted in population statistics?

Those whose work and decisions depend on high quality population statistics and forecasts need to know immediately:

- a) How will the quality be assured of fertility rates, mortality rates, productivity statistics and population forecasts, all of which rely on population censuses to underpin nationally critical statistics.*

⁴ [Goodbye census, Govt scraps five-yearly survey - The Bay's News First](#)

- b) What plans are there to meet the gaps in national and place-based population statistics that will emerge long before 2031?*
- c) How will electoral processes be affected by the delayed of at least two years in the five yearly review of electoral boundaries due for 2028?*
- d) After consecutive failures in the census of 2018 and 2023, what is the "Plan B", and will we have to wait again until 2030 to learn of a third failure?*

A conventional census enables coherence and consistency within and between peoples' responses because of the fixed common reporting period. In contrast, administrative data traces peoples experience with agencies that can date back many years and will mostly not refer to the census date. Address changes will be recorded with mixed delays, making statistics about people and place less reliable in places where there is a high population turnover, and for groups who connect rarely with agencies.

The enumeration of a population census in New Zealand has always been founded on an area frame, while the proposed census relies on a de facto population register. The shift in the type of frame will involve unknown discontinuities that might be able to be estimated in advance. All methods of observation have limits to quality, but this change in method will result in one-time errors of a larger than usual magnitude. The focus overall of administrative records is on those who received public services, connect to justice system or receive benefits.

It is important to know:

- Where NZ statistics will not continue to meet international standards in quality, classifications and definitions.*
- Which resident measures will not be able to be produced, generating a one-off change in census coverage.*
- What plans there are to meet the gaps in population statistics that will exist long before 2031.*

In addition:

- Fertility rates, mortality rates, productivity statistics, population projections all rely on population censuses. These are even more critical indicators than before. How will their quality be assured?*

We lack the processes for ensuring that the future fitness of the system of population statistics has been properly scrutinised in light of what we will need population statistics for.⁵ Statistics New Zealand must show users of population statistics that they are fully aware of current and future user needs.

Government Statisticians are often unaware of most of the ways that the statistics they produce are used. There is poor recognition of the scale operational uses of population statistics and projections, for example, in policy regarding infrastructure placement, climate change, housing, health, income maintenance, land use change, and population ageing. To plan such a massive change in our most important statistical source, we not only need to know about the world we have lived in, but how to inform preparations for a world of change on scale we cannot fully imagine. Integration of information other than about people is of increased importance as places now have their own distinct demographic dynamic.

Under the last two Government Statisticians the servicing of government has displaced the traditional reporting to the public via statistical publications, access to experts and

⁵ It is noted that the Ministerial Advisory committee on statistics was cancelled.

frequent media releases. Instead, the public have been expected to glean this information from a poorly organised, almost unusable and inaccessible website.

The proposals presented to date will not address the overdue need to greatly increase the capacity to integrate a greater range of knowledge about locality, which is an increasingly important gap in population statistics. Topology and other geographic characteristics will necessitate enriching the capacity to integrate information across areas regardless of population size. Need to integrate information about the causes, influences, instruments and targets of change, place by place, across critical populations. Influences on habitation, pollution and nutrition by urbanization, ageing, land use, climate extremes, etc will be mitigated or amplified by topology, infrastructure investment and connectivity. The value of decisions we make using robust population statistics in any five-year period could greatly exceed the five yearly cost of census.

Fiscal implications of the population storm

Falling fertility, rising life expectancy and volatile migration flows mean that the fiscal impact of demographic change from static policy settings will impact government revenue and expenditure.

Almost all publicly funded services will face pressures of a far greater magnitude than currently. In order to plan ahead we need regular knowledge we can trust of the population, living arrangements, families and communities, not only for the country as a whole, but for each territorial authority.

New Zealand will be out of step with other countries

The other countries we compare ourselves with (Australia, Canada, UK) have no commitment to changing their next census to be like the proposed New Zealand model.

The countries which do use the records that trace the connections of people by the state in its health, welfare, taxation, policing and enforcement activities all began with a compulsory population registration process (Israel, the Netherlands, the Nordic Countries).

The New Zealand census has meant less need for population registers and identity cards, as seen in countries without such censuses. Is compulsory registration the first step in this direction to ensure full coverage of the population?

Conclusion

We need to have strong independent validation that information gathered by bodies that have service, health, enforcement and surveillance roles can meet current needs and adapt in the future. Few of these bodies are leaders in managing information.

What is the "Plan B" if the aspirations cannot be met? What key elements of this experimental model have not yet been proven?

Unlike my experience as Chief Statistician in the United Kingdom, while Chief Statistician in New Zealand I found those for whom official statistics are critical to their work rarely invested time in challenging their form or reliability. There are three key elements in the way that this disconnect must be managed:

- *high levels of expertise and continuous improvement*
- *A high degree of transparency*
- *A very high commitment to quality management and engagement with end users.*

These elements give users of statistics confidence in the production of official statistics, without requiring that they themselves have the statistical expertise of those who produce and develop them.

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