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#### Introduction to the Census

# History of the Census in New Zealand

1858

## Origins of the census

Census-taking began in China and the Middle East, with one of the earliest recorded censuses taking place in the Babylonian Empire nearly 6,000 years ago. These early censuses are mentioned widely in early Middle Eastern literature, and there are also references to them in a number of places in the Bible. According to tradition, Jesus was born while his parents were returning to their home village to be counted in the census.

Censuses of population were first taken in England and Scotland in March 1801, Ireland in 1811 and Australia in 1828. The first New Zealand census was undertaken in 1851, although this census excluded Māori.

## Milestones of census-taking in New Zealand

- 1840 Counts of the European population were undertaken sporadically in various settlements throughout New Zealand.
- 1851 The first population census in New Zealand was conducted. Māori were excluded. The census was conducted on a three-yearly basis until 1874.
- 1858 The first collection of statistics on the Māori population was undertaken.
- 1867 The 1867 Franchise Act gave Māori separate parliamentary representation and made it mandatory to collect statistics on the Māori population in the census.
- 1874 The second official census of the Māori population was undertaken.
- 1877 The Census Act was passed. This set the requirement for a census to be held every five years.
- 1886 In the 1886 Census, details were obtained of numbers, sex, age, principal tribes and county of residence of Māori.
- 1906 A "Census of Natives" was undertaken.
- 1916 The Post Office assisted with the distribution and collection of census forms.
- 1921 The range of questions in the census was expanded. This was also the first time that automatic sorting and counting machines were used in New Zealand.
- 1926 A separate Māori census was conducted.
- 1931 The census was abandoned, as the New Zealand economy was in the height of the Depression.
- 1941 The scheduled census was abandoned during World War II.
- 1951 The Māori and general population censuses were combined and a question included about race.
- 1966 Sorting machines used to process the census forms were replaced by computers.
- 1976 An automatic, electronically based system was introduced to replace the use of punchcards in the census form processing.
- 1981 The 1981 Census was the last census in which the Post Office was involved.
- 1996 Scanning and imaging of census forms was introduced. A question on iwi (tribal) affiliation was added to the census form. Māori/English forms were reintroduced.
- 2001 Web-based dissemination was used for the first time. Māori/English forms were used in targeted areas.
- **2006** Online census forms were introduced. Text messaging was used in the field to assist with form collection. Automated web products were used to disseminate some of the census data.

# Early census-taking in New Zealand

Before 1840, counts of the European population in the various settlements were made sporadically. From 1840 onwards, these became reasonably regular but were not coordinated or comprehensive enough to be called censuses.

To comply with a royal injunction, Blue Books (which were basically books of tables) were: "to be annually filled up with certain returns relative to the revenue and expenditure, militia, public works, legislation, civil establishments, population, schools, course of exchange, imports and exports, agricultural produce and other matters in the said Blue Book, more particularly specified to the state of our sociology". Blue Books were issued annually from 1840 to 1847, after which time they were no longer officially required.

They were, however, still produced from 1848 to 1852 by both of the provinces when New Zealand was split into New Ulster and New Munster. Subsequently, they were also produced by the six provinces that were in existence from 1852 to 1876. The Blue Books were not intended for publication, but three copies were to be prepared for the Colonial Secretary's Office, the New Zealand desk in the Colonial Office and the House of Commons Library.

In 1851, the first population census in New Zealand was held. A Census Ordinance was announced that year, making provision for a triennial census. A census was then carried out every three years until 1874.

In 1877, the Census Act was passed, repealing previous legislation and setting a requirement for censuses to be held every fifth year. Censuses still took place in 1878 and 1881 but, thereafter, they have been held every five years with only two exceptions:

The 1931 Census was abandoned due to the New Zealand economy being in the height of the Depression.

In 1941, the scheduled census was abandoned due to World War II.

The 1946 Census was taken earlier than scheduled. In 1945, an electoral 'Country Quota' system was in place under which a loading of 20 percent was added to rural populations. This resulted in more country electorates in relation to population than urban electorates. The Labour Government of the time, wanting to introduce legislation abolishing this inequitable situation, brought forward the census to September 1945 in order to have available the redefinition of electorates for the 1946 election. The subsequent census still occurred in April 1951 as if the previous census had been taken in 1946. This change disturbed the five-yearly time series of the statistics. In addition to this, since the 1945 Census took place while World War II was ending, thousands of young men were still overseas and the economy was geared to wartime conditions.

#### Census of Māori

The 1858 Census was the first attempt to collect comprehensive statistics on the Māori population. Sixteen years passed before the second official census of Māori took place in 1874, which collected data on age and sex at the hapu (subtribe) level. In 1886, details of numbers, sex, age, principal tribes and county of residence of Māori were obtained, while livestock particulars and details of land under cultivation were included in later censuses. In 1906, a "Census of Natives" took place as part of the census, but the information was still limited and was roughly classified into two age groups: those under 15 years and those 15 years of age and over. In this census, a distinction was made between Māori still living as members of tribes and those who lived in 'European' communities as individual families.

By 1921, the range of questions had been expanded to include sex, age, current residence, usual residence, trade or occupation, whether or not married to a European, and whether full-blood or half-blood Māori.

In 1926, a separate Māori census was conducted in a similar way to a general census, although a special Māori questionnaire remained in use until 1951. However, Māori in the North Island were able to use schedules printed in Māori on request. The 1926 Māori schedule contained greater detail than previous schedules, but there were still considerably fewer questions than the European version.

A trial was undertaken in the South Island in 1936 in which the same schedule was distributed to both the general population and Māori families. In 1945, schedules in both Māori and English were offered to all Māori families but only 25 percent of the Māori population chose to use the Māori language schedules. In 1951, Māori families were issued with the same schedules as those distributed to the rest of the population. Although no schedules in Māori were printed for the 1956 Census, interpreters accompanied sub-collectors where necessary. Māori/English questionnaires were available for the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses. Only specific areas were targeted for the 2001 Census.

The 1867 Franchise Act gave Māori separate parliamentary representation and made it necessary to collect statistics on the Māori population in the census. Until 1951, the Māori and general populations were counted in separate censuses. In 1951, the two censuses were combined and a question was included that asked people what their race was. A question on race/descent/ethnic origin has been asked in every census since then. Since the 1991 Census, the question has been asked specifically on Māori descent. An ethnicity question based on self-identification or cultural affiliation, rather than racial descent, has been included since this time. Ethnic group is determined by a self-identification process. It has a social and cultural base, as opposed to the biological base used in defining ancestry or ethnic origin.

A question on iwi (tribal) affiliation was included in censuses up to 1901 but was not asked again until the 1991 Census. Statistical information on Māori tribal populations is needed in order to monitor the performance of Treaty of Waitangi obligations by the Crown and iwi (tribes), and to assist the Waitangi Tribunal in decisions relating to land ownership and fishing rights. Iwi also use the data for social and economic planning. For these reasons, a question on iwi affiliation was included in the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses.

The Census of Population and Dwellings has been the only source of data on the size and distribution of the population of Māori descent. This data is needed to meet the statutory requirements of the Electoral Act 1993.

#### Census collection

New Zealand's first census was taken on a 'settlement' basis, and the local census authority was the armed constabulary or the Resident Magistrate. During the time of the six provincial governments, the Provisional Superintendents organised the collection in each province. Once the provinces were abolished, the Registrar General became responsible for carrying out the collection process. In these earlier years of the census, illiteracy was common among Europeans (in fact, more so than among the Māori population at that time) and the census collector was required to fill in the schedules if the householder was unable to do so. In the early days of poor communication infrastructure, the task of the sub-collectors in the country areas, especially in the more remote regions of New Zealand, must have been very difficult, particularly when the weather was bad. There was even a casualty; in the 1911 Census a sub-collector was drowned while crossing a swollen river on horseback.

In 1916, the Post Office agreed to assist the Statistics Office in the physical collection of information about the population, and this dramatically improved how the census was carried out. Districts were redefined to suit the new system of collection. Postmasters of towns centrally located within the new districts were appointed as collectors. They, in turn, appointed sub-collectors and organised the collection routine in their own areas. This system had two significant advantages: firstly, postmasters had good local knowledge; and, secondly, since postmasters were well-known and respected figures in their districts, the major part they played created a favourable atmosphere for the census to be conducted in. The 1981 Census was the last census in which the Post Office was involved. To reduce costs and have greater management over the collection process, Statistics New Zealand has carried out the collection phase of the census since 1986.

#### Questionnaires

Personal schedules were issued to occupants of private dwellings for the first time in 1926. Prior to this, they were for the "use of inmates of hotels, boarding houses, clubs, ships, trains ..." The primary census form was the householder's schedule. The head of the household had the responsibility for completing the particulars relating to each member of the household, a method of collection that meant there was little or no privacy for individuals. In 1926, in addition to special dwelling and family schedules, personal schedules were circulated for all individuals included in the European census. The head of the household was still responsible for completing the dwelling schedule, for filling in the forms for the children of the household and for seeing that every person in the household complied. Individual schedules could be enclosed in an envelope to ensure privacy. Since 1945, only personal and dwelling schedules, or questionnaires, have been used.

## Legislation

There are several Acts of parliament that have formed the legal basis for the collection of statistical data and census-taking as it has developed over the years.

The Census and Statistics Act 1910 created the Office of the Government Statistician, which was seen as recognition of the special skills and expertise required in statistical work. Under the Act, however, the Government Statistician was to be appointed within the office of the Registrar General. A considerable improvement in status occurred in 1915 when the Government Statistician was moved from the Registrar General's Office and up several places in the departmental hierarchy. At this time, the government had the power to direct the Government Statistician to collect or cease to collect particular information.

The Census and Statistics Act 1926 took the place of the 1910 Act and brought about a major improvement regarding the collection of census information. The duty of the occupier or person in charge of the "dwelling, store or apartment" to fill out the householder's schedule for all people in the household on census night was restricted to his/her own family. For the first time, a relative or boarder in the household was given the opportunity to preserve the confidentiality of his/her personal information, enabling more sensitive questions, such as income, to be included within the scope of the census. Unfortunately, however, the Act also removed the Government Statistician's right to present his/her observations on the statistics directly to Parliament without any departmental vetting.

The Statistics Act 1955 clearly defined the dufies of the department and the Government Statistician for the first time. The office of Deputy Government Statistician was created as a result of this Act and it also substantially tightened up the secrecy provision. Employees of the department were required to subscribe to an oath of secrecy concerning the disclosure of information from individual returns, no particulars regarding the individual supplier's return could be published without that person's prior consent, and statistical tables were arranged to render the identification of an individual impossible from the published data.

The Statistics Act 1975 clarified that the information contained in returns is to be used for statistical purposes only. It also specified which particulars it is mandatory to collect in the census and which particulars are able to be collected if the Government Statistician considers it in the public interest to do so. This Act also established the independence of the Office of the Government Statistician. Cabinet interference with regard to the collection of specific information has now been effectively prevented, as this Act also enabled the Government Statistician to use the powerful sanction of making public, without comment, any ministerial direction should the need arise.

For a full copy of the Statistics Act 1975, Part III, refer to appendix 3.

## Technology use

The 1921 Census marked the first occasion on which automatic sorting and counting machines were employed in New Zealand, enabling the major portion of census compilation to be carried out mechanically. The system installed for this census was purchased from the United States, which had been employing mechanical tabulation for census work since 1870.

For the 1966 Census, sorting machines were replaced by computers. Statistical tables were also produced by computer for the first time and results became available much earlier, with a large number of additional cross-classifications of the census data being possible. The use of punchcards for each individual and dwelling was continued until 1976, when an automatic, electronically-based system was introduced. Mechanical tabulation has been replaced by electronic data capture and handling, as the speed and capacity of computing technology has improved.

In 1996, the scanning and imaging of census forms was introduced with analytical tools and information at a level incomprehensible to the department of earlier years.

The 2006 Census saw the introduction of online census forms for the first time and the use of text messaging in the field to assist with the collection of forms. The online forms were developed to meet both e-government objectives for delivering services via the Internet and public expectations for an electronic means to complete census forms. Traditional paper census forms remained available.

The online form option also provided an opportunity for visually impaired people to take part in the census. As the 2006 Census was the first time that an online census form was offered, the expected level of uptake was unknown. Overall, online form submissions resulted in an uptake of more than 7 percent of all collected forms. A data collection system was developed that integrated the online response option into overall census processes. The online option has positioned Statistics New Zealand to take advantage of technology for the 2011 Census and for following censuses.

The use of text messaging enabled collectors to be notified of any forms that had been mailed directly to Statistics New Zealand or completed online. This meant that it was not always necessary for the collector to return to all households. Text messaging also enabled messages to be sent to field staff explaining where people needed additional census forms.

A further technological advancement was the use of automated web technology to disseminate some of the census data.