

## 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.







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.

## Questionnaires

## Legislation

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 Statistics Act 1955 clearly defined the duties 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.

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



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.

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 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.

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