

## Coming back from #censusfail: reflections on the 2016 Australian Census, Marriage Equality Survey and rebuilding at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Epilogue)

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### Rebuilding at the ABS

By the time senior officials from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) fronted the Senate Committee inquiry into the 2016 Census in October 2016, the caravan of outrage had moved on. Response rates had rebounded, the data was expected to be high quality and Australians' privacy had not been breached. Talk of sackings subsided as it became clear that pulling the census form had been a reasonable precaution and that long-term underfunding was a major factor behind the events of Census Night. Ironically, the agency's strong culture of professionalism may have contributed to a false sense of confidence that they would somehow pull through again: 'One thing that we did pride ourselves on at the ABS,' recalled agency head David Kalisch, 'was that, despite funding cuts, we still delivered Australia's official statistics.'

### Organisational changes

Although the ABS had already begun reconfiguring the organisation prior to the 2016 Census, there was still a massive task ahead – now with the added challenge of restoring the ABS' reputation. Kalisch believed that they had been heading in the right direction but needed to implement changes faster. As he saw it, 'The organisation needed to have more partnership arrangements with other agencies across government. It needed to have a stronger understanding and relationship with government ministers. It needed people with not just good statistical skills, but also an improved understanding of how data was being used by a range of stakeholders, and to properly engage with them around the emerging challenges they were facing.'

From 2016, the ABS introduced many innovations to improve its capability and effectiveness. New statistical systems allowed the ABS to be more flexible and timely in the deployment of household and business surveys. The ABS was better able to use large data sets from the Australian Taxation Office and Services Australia. Major improvements were made to labour force statistics, the consumer price index and population estimates. The ABS also broadened its series of environmental-economic statistics.

At the same time, the ABS championed development of the Data Integration Partnership for Australia (DIPA) which worked to improve linkages between data assets drawn together from different government agencies. This facilitated new insights into complex policy questions. The agency also pioneered use of the Five Safes risk-assessment approach in Australia to enable greater (but safe) use of microdata for policy and research uses.

Reforms to governance arrangements included a revamped organisational structure and internal committee arrangements. Recruitment policies, meanwhile, were geared towards ensuring there was a good mix of personnel with internal experience and outside perspectives. Management launched further initiatives to improve internal collaboration and external service orientation. Parliament, key stakeholders, and the community were regularly updated about the transformation journey with details about the key innovations and reforms.

One significant change, involved a shift in mindset. ‘We had to address a bit of a cultural resistance within the organisation,’ said Census Program leader Duncan Young who had been seconded to the Marriage Survey (Easton, 2019). The ABS had to get comfortable preparing for failure, not just success. This meant realising that mistakes would likely attract attention on social media, requiring immediate public responses from agencies. Communications need to be ready to be delivered in near real time, with no tolerance for the usual government clearance processes or dropping bad news at 5pm on Friday afternoons. Choosing the right spokespeople was important too.

A related insight for the ABS was that moving surveys online wasn’t simply about digitising forms – people had different expectations and concerns – and the ABS needed to account for this. The ABS also recognised the need to downplay “Census Night” in its messaging and emphasise “the census period” to allay anxiety if members of the public encountered difficulties submitting their information. Another realisation was that the ABS should do more to communicate the value of its work to both government and the public – and not just at census time. To date, the importance of ABS data for government and the nation had not been adequately prioritised in budget processes which Kalisch considered a ‘bit of a blunt instrument for delivering best value to the community from use of taxpayer revenues.’

### The Marriage Law Survey

Just one year on from the Census reference night of 9 August 2016, the Australian Statistician was directed by the Treasurer to undertake a voluntary postal survey of the Australian electoral population about their views on changing the marriage law (Morrison, 2017; amended by Cormann 2017). ABS staff had only one day’s notice.

The government allocated \$122million for the project, based on the estimated costs for the Australian Electoral Commission to undertake a voluntary plebiscite. The ABS had to produce the results within 100 days, so the Australian Parliament could consider the matter before the end of 2017. This was the first time a Ministerial Direction had been given to the ABS to conduct such a survey, under the auspices of the Census and Statistics Act 1905. Although the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) would be enlisted to assist, it was still an extremely tight deadline.

Same-sex marriage (SSM) had been an ongoing issue in Australia, gathering pace over the past decade as more western democracies equalised their marriage laws. The Turnbull Government, at an impasse on SSM, decided controversially to turn the matter over to a non-binding, non-compulsory survey (instead of introducing legislation directly to parliament). Both SSM advocates and opponents resisted the idea. The legality of the Ministerial Direction to the ABS (and the associated funding) was challenged but ultimately affirmed by the High Court of Australia (Psycharis, 2017). Internally, some ABS staff felt that the survey compromised the Agency's independence and that the ABS was being misused to solve the government's political problems (Howard, 2021, p.2). However, there was little choice but to proceed.

The response to news of ABS' involvement was not encouraging (Exhibit A). One Sydney Morning Herald journalist warned that the Marriage Equality Survey 'could break the ABS' and opined that 'the ABS is the worst-placed organisation to conduct such a postal plebiscite' (Martin, 2017). A Canberra Times piece declared that the ABS was 'prostituting its reputation with same-sex marriage survey' (Waterford, 2017). There was, it cautioned, the danger that the plebiscite could produce unreliable results and lasting harm to many people. For instance:

*It is generally assumed, on the basis of opinion polling, that support for same-sex marriage is of a proportion of about two to one, and that, generally, the younger you are, the more likely you are to be in favour. But a voluntary poll, conducted by post, raises a real prospect of a turnout skewed towards the elderly (Waterford, 2017).*

### Making it happen

'The marriage law survey was a high-risk project, where many things could go wrong,' Kalisch reflected, 'Given the very short timeframes, ABS had to design detailed elements of the survey while it was already implementing various components.' David Crisp, responsible for orchestrating the project's technical side said, 'The marriage survey was a lot of things for a lot of different people, but for us in the ABS it was first and foremost an exercise in rebuilding trust...we needed to build trust in ABS' capability, and we also wanted to build trust in the Australian public service overall. So to do this we needed to provide a positive user experience for all of Australia through the survey, in addition to integrity of the result and security of the data,' (Crozier, 2018).

Though the survey would be largely paper based, the ABS would still have to deliver alternative options. As Crisp noted, 'Malcolm Turnbull described the survey as a chance for everyone to have their say so this meant inclusive strategies for people overseas, with disabilities, remote and indigenous communities, and people who spoke different languages. It was clear that a paper-only survey was not going to cut it. We needed multiple ways for people to be able to respond, including online and on the phone,' (Crozier, 2018).

Despite the risks, the high-profile survey was also an early opportunity for ABS to demonstrate what it had learned since 2016 and refine its approach further before Census 2021. Success would rely on many aspects, including process innovation, agile management, internal collaboration, expert risk management, effective public communications, and a comprehensive approach to privacy.

The ABS moved quickly to establish effective cross-government relationships with the Minister for Finance (the minister responsible for the plebiscite), the Australian Electoral Commission (for logistical support), and the Department of Human Services (for community outreach and enquiries). ABS senior management created a Survey Taskforce comprising 100 different people from a total of 13 different agencies and conducted twice daily meetings, recalled Young, to keep abreast of progress and any emerging issues.

Within 36 hours of the announcement, the ABS began an advertising campaign encouraging all eligible Australians to ensure they were listed on the electoral roll (a requirement to participate in the survey). The response was outstanding, noted Kalisch, with more than 90,000 additions to the electoral roll, predominantly comprising 18–24-year-olds. The Bureau also developed a range of strategies targeted at groups that might otherwise struggle to participate. Though far from ideal, the situation encouraged a genuinely collaborative and consultative project.

‘I’ve done Canberra co-design before,’ Young said. ‘Canberra co-design, as I rudely put it, is we come up with a solution, then we go out and consult on it, and then convince the people that they’re wrong and go forward with our solution and call it co-design.’ However, he noted, ‘We didn’t have the liberty, with this, of enough time to come up with our own solution, so I actually called some of the key stakeholder groups on August 10 and said, “Hey we’ve got a problem here, we’ve got this survey to run. I don’t know how it’s going to work in nursing homes. Can you help me out with that? What’s the best way to do this?” And it really changed that relationship in a way that we actually ended up with a better experience,’ (Easton, 2019).

Suppliers and contractors, meanwhile, had to be lined-up rapidly. Young wasn’t even sure there would be enough paper in Australia available at short notice. The main tasks were to find a company to scan millions of paper forms, as well as one to set up the online survey. ‘There are allowances under our procurement guidelines which say, this is an emergency, you can go out and directly source,’ Young said, ‘but coming from the Census experience where we had directly sourced with IBM and been widely, and reasonably, criticised for that, we felt we were between a bit of a rock and hard place,’ (Easton, 2019).

They managed, however, to assemble a panel of representatives from different agencies to rapidly assess supplier submissions. Amazon Web Services (AWS) was selected to host the Marriage Survey website, in essence to: provide reliable information; enable overseas Australians to participate using secure cloud infrastructure; and ultimately host the final results which would be in great demand. Less than two weeks after starting work, and less than three weeks after the postal survey was announced, they had the first iteration of the survey to test. ‘Any outage of the online form would have drawn comparisons back to that 2016 online census, so we put the AWS form through a rigorous load testing and DDoS battery of tests,’ Crisp said (Crozier, 2018). In the end, they subjected the survey form to the demand equivalent of 400 Australian censuses.

## Managing risk

Online survey forms weren’t the only concern, however. The Bureau took a proactive and systematic approach to risk management to ensure potential and actual problems were properly identified and well communicated. ‘We understood that issues were inevitable in a

project of this size and nature,' said Young, 'We also understood that our handling of issues would really impact levels of trust,' (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018d). To that end, the ABS made sure that risk-management efforts weren't focused solely on preventing problems but also on dealing with issues that had already occurred.

When damaged envelopes were found in Mona Vale (NSW) during the survey, for example, the ABS survey taskforce quickly retrieved the damaged mail, Young recalled. Staff then contacted affected participants to issue new forms while invalidating old ones, averting a serious incident escalating further. (ABS, 2018a, pp.45-49; ABS, 2018d). Keen to 'make sure that there weren't bottlenecks in our service flow' Young and his team also, 'really focused on how to automate the process of requesting a new survey form ... or an online access code if you needed one,' (Easton, 2019). 'To get a system in place and up and running within about 30 days out of a 99-day period, was pretty remarkable,' he noted, 'What we saw was ultimately, 95% of all of the requests for a replacement form were done automatically, without any manual clerical intervention,' (Easton, 2019).

The relationships forged with external stakeholders, such as community groups at the early stages also helped the ABS head-off problems and deal with emerging issues more effectively. 'One of the innovative things we did,' said Young, 'was [think about]: What are the areas where we might get criticised and run into issues? How do we get some external spokespeople, get them embedded in the team, and get them to make some independent statements?' (Easton, 2019). That led the team to enlist Malcolm Crompton, former federal privacy commissioner, to audit the privacy aspects of the process and comment publicly on the survey design. In the end, there was high confidence in the integrity of the voluntary process.

Once the survey launched, the ABS provided regular updates to the community on progress. This included weekly bulletins on the scale of the public response and information on replacing lost or missing survey forms. Senior ABS staff also participated in many media commitments. The ABS had already set up an issues management room, equipped with communication and collaboration technology plus support staff on stand-by. The Bureau also had the Department of Human Services run the phone line for public enquiries, managing an average wait time of 12 seconds by the end of the survey (Easton, 2019).

### Australia says 'Yes'

Despite the hurdles and constraints, the ABS delivered the marriage law survey and its results on time, without any significant mishaps. In response to the question: 'Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?', the answer was a clear 'Yes'. Completed by almost 80 per cent of eligible Australian voters, close to 62% of respondents voted in favour of same-sex marriage (Exhibit B). 'Yes' voters were the majority in all Australian states and in all but 17 federal electorates. The results, announced on 15 November 2017, were judged to be sound and readily accepted for their veracity (ABS 2018a, p.9; 2018b, pp.19-20).

Despite the emotive and often unpleasant tenor of the marriage equality debate, the respective Yes and No campaigns commended the ABS for their transparent and expert conduct of the survey, Kalisch noted. In his view, the ABS would not have delivered the survey so successfully without the lessons of the 2016 Census (Kalisch, 2019). Reflected

Young, 'As a public servant, it was one of those moments where you really do think about your own role. And our role was quite clear that it was to deliver the best possible survey for Australia that we could. One that is trusted, inclusive, respectful. And so that's what we went about [doing],' (Ziolkowski, 2021).

### Census time again

Both the 2016 Census and 2017 Marriage Equality survey provided invaluable lessons for the entire organisation as the 2021 census approached. Planning, as usual, commenced in the wake of 2016, even though the experience was still very raw. 'Some of the key lessons I think that we took from the census was a real understanding of the paramount importance of public trust,' said Young, 'Public trust is really the fuel that feeds into our kind of public programs. Also the real focus on partnerships and the fact that, in today's complex world we're all better when we're working together,' (Ziolkowski, 2021). Though he wouldn't recommend the experience, Census 2016 had the silver lining of forging a tight-knit team. It also had the unexpected benefit of focusing public attention on the value of ABS work.

Core personnel were selected for the 2021 Census program and Kalisch convened a census governance committee to monitor progress and manage risks. The Deputy Australian Statistician was designated as the Senior Responsible Officer for the program in the early planning stages. External members were added to the Census Board, to reduce the likelihood of internal groupthink and bring additional expertise. External program assurance was properly funded, together with timely and open procurement processes. There was an increased focus on risk management and privacy plans, alongside external testing of the census system.

Cyber threats had taken on a new and more disturbing dimension after revelations of interference in the 2016 US election. The ABS sought and received additional funding for the 2021 Census, primarily to strengthen cyber security. The Australian Signals Directorate and the Australian Cyber Security Centre also took a more proactive stance, supporting the ABS with preparations. The ABS announced a more conservative approach to name retention for the 2021 Census alongside extensive privacy consultations. This time, names would be retained for 18 months and addresses for 3 years, instead of 4 years for both in 2016.

The ABS conducted an open competitive tender process for an external supplier of the main Census systems. Other government agencies assisted with key assessments during the tender process. Given IBM's experience with the 2016 Census, there was a risk that there would be few bids to run the systems for the 2021 Census but this did not eventuate. In the end, the ABS selected a consortium led by Price Waterhouse Coopers, including Amazon Web Services (used for the 2017 Survey).

The ABS progressed early consultations about new 2021 census topics, with the Government deciding in late 2019 to include two new topics on chronic health and defence force participation, with one previous topic removed on home internet access. Helpfully, the offices of ABS Minister and Treasurer had also been more stable during 2021 preparations. In the 2020 Budget, Government provided a substantial funding injection to ABS of \$240 million over three years from 2021-22 to 2023-24 (Frydenberg, 2020), representing an increase in base annual funding of around 25 per cent.

When Kalisch stepped down as Australian Statistician in December 2019, he was confident he was leaving the ABS well placed to conduct a successful 2021 Census. Although the stigma of #censusfail still lingered over the organisation, community and informed expert trust in ABS had not been significantly impacted. Response rates to ABS household and business surveys were little changed with the ABS continuing to receive world-leading response rates to its important monthly labour force survey, of over 90% (ABS, 2020).

Former Treasury official David Gruen took on the role of Australian Statistician in 2020 with census preparation in full swing. However, the ABS was still taking nothing for granted with rigorous testing and re-testing of its online systems. 'We have to be prepared for everything,' Gruen said, 'including kids in their parents' basement who would think it would be a great idea if they could get into the system. That [and] state actors,' (Taylor, 2021). A November 2020 Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report concluded that the ABS had made progress since 2016 but further improvements were needed in order to be ready for the 2021 census, particularly in relation to cybersecurity (ANAO, 2020, pp.6-11).

As extra insurance against system overload, the ABS would open the online form on 28 July 2021 with households able to start filling out the census as soon as they received their unique login ID via mail. Communications noted that the form could be completed at any time during the census collection period, not just on the census reference night of 10 August 2021. The ABS anticipated that approximately 75% of households would submit their details online.

The ABS also participated in a series of ABC documentaries called 'Why we count' explaining the census and its value to the Australian community. Census advertising reinforced the importance of participation and reassured users of data security (Exhibit C). With regard to social media, the ABS partnered with micro-blogging platform Twitter to launch a new tool to combat misinformation. It was designed so that whenever someone searched for certain census keywords on Twitter, a prompt would then direct them to the official Census website with information available in 25 different languages.

### Census 2021 results

After all the angst of #censusfail and patient rebuilding, Census Night 2021 unfolded without incident. Although there was the customary controversy surrounding question inclusions or omissions, people were able to submit their forms without difficulty at the ABS end. While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted plans somewhat, the Bureau was able work around the constraints it imposed.

On Monday 6 September 2021, the ABS reported that it had received over 9.3 million completed forms, almost 7.5 million of them digitally – putting the census on track to exceed the projected 75% online responses (ABS, 2021a). Official statistics on the overall participation rate were not due until June 2022, however towards the end of the census period, the ABS had received responses from over 90% of Australian households with many postal forms still to be counted (ABS, 2021b).

Yet even as ABS staff chased up the last outstanding forms, preparations were already underway for Census 2026. Some of the new challenges the Bureau would face were likely still unknown but in some parts of the world governments had essentially dispensed with census taking. The Nordic nations, for example, gather their statistics from population

registers and more recently the Netherlands moved to a virtual census model which also draws from existing government data. Although this is considerably cheaper and simpler than a mass data gathering exercise, there is still something unique about the collective act of filling out a census, not least the ability to capture the nation at a moment in time.

## **If it gets up, the same-sex marriage postal plebiscite could break the ABS**

*Sydney Morning Herald*, (8 August 2017). smh.com.au.

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## **Census bunglers make a comeback with hopeless Bureau of Statistics to run plebiscite**

*The Australian*, (9 August 2017). theaustralian.com.au.

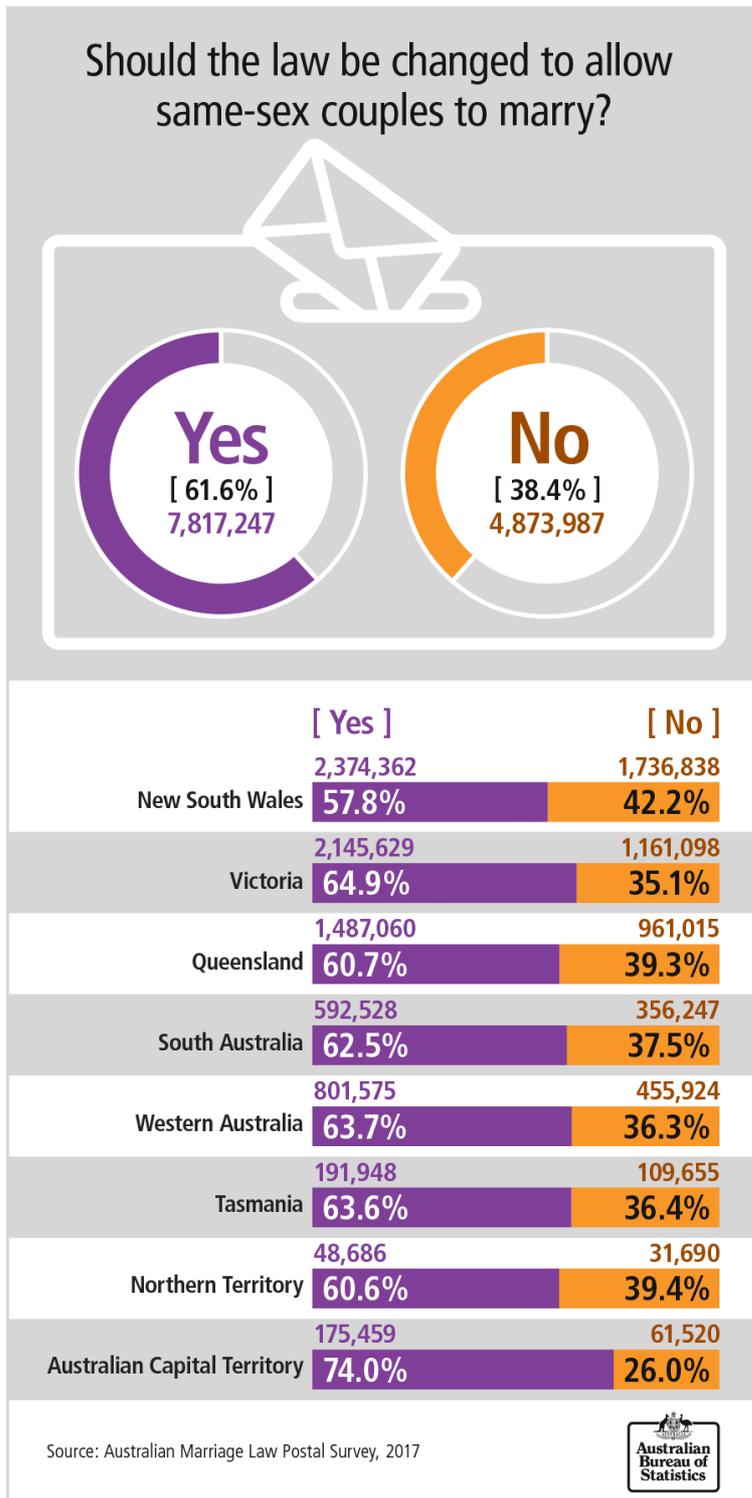
## **The ABS is prostituting its reputation with same-sex marriage survey**

*Canberra Times*, (11 August 2017). canberratimes.com.au.

## **'Rush job': grave doubts at ABS over same-sex marriage survey**

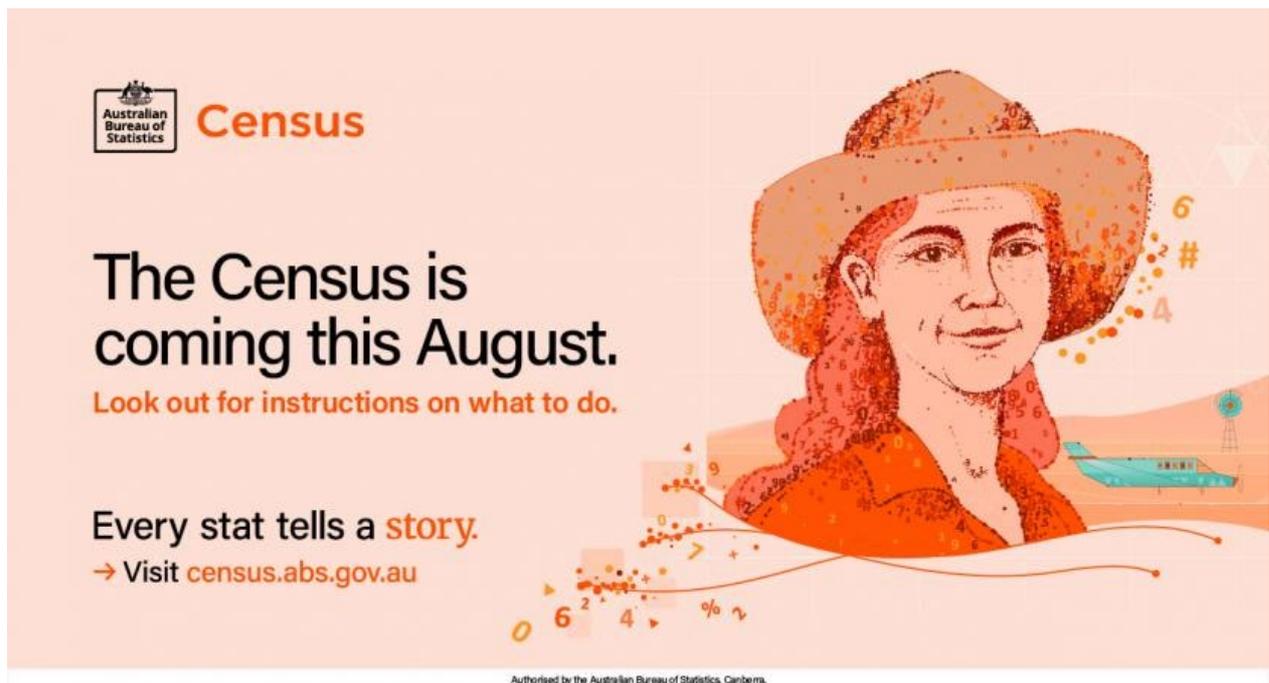
*Sydney Morning Herald*, (16 August 2017). smh.com.au.

Exhibit B: Marriage Equality Survey Results



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), (2017, December 11). 1800.0 - Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey – Infographics, Commonwealth of Australia (Canberra). abs.gov.au

Exhibit C: Census 2021 advertising



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). 2021 Census overview, Commonwealth of Australia (Canberra). abs.gov.au



# Census

Every stat tells a story.

## How to complete your Census



The next Census is on  
**Tuesday 10 August, 2021.**



You can  
complete online.



by  
paper.



or with help  
from us.

This year, you can start as soon as you get your instructions if you know where you'll be on Census night.  
*Instructions will be delivered to households in early August.*

To complete online:

1

GO TO  
[www.census.abs.gov.au](http://www.census.abs.gov.au)



Start your Census

2

ENTER  
the Census number and  
temporary password.

You'll find these on the  
letter delivered to your  
household.

3

COMPLETE  
the form



and click

Submit

To complete by paper:

1

Complete  
your form



2

Return to ABS  
in the reply-paid  
envelope provided



If you received a letter to complete  
online and would prefer a paper  
form, call our automated paper form  
request service on **1800 130 250**

Where to go for help:



Fill in the form sessions and pop-up hubs.  
Search [www.census.abs.gov.au/find-us](http://www.census.abs.gov.au/find-us)  
for locations near you.



[www.census.abs.gov.au](http://www.census.abs.gov.au)



1800 512 441



For help in your language, call the Translating and  
Interpreting Service (TIS National) on **131 450**.



Your personal information is protected  
by law and isn't shared with anyone.



You can't be identified by the information you share  
about yourself and your family in your Census.



For more information [www.census.abs.gov.au](http://www.census.abs.gov.au) 1800 512 441

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Infographic: How to complete your Census, Commonwealth of Australia (Canberra). [abs.gov.au](http://abs.gov.au)

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