



Falling response rates hit the 2018 Census

Conducted every 5 years, the Census of Population & Dwellings is the official count of New Zealand's population and dwellings. The main advantage of a census over other types of surveys is that a census provides detailed information at a neighbourhood level and for small population groups.

This and information at a regional and national level is used by government, businesses and community groups to make informed decisions affecting policy development, government funding, service provision, and investment in business. The census counts also help to determine general and Māori electorate boundaries, as well as the number of general and Māori electorates.

However, reflecting trends being experienced by private research companies and institutions, Table 1 below shows how the net coverage and response rate for the census has been falling.

Table 1: Census 1996 – 2018: Net coverage and response rate

| Census Year | Net Coverage % | Response Rate % |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1996 | 98.4 | 95.6 |
| 2001 | 97.8 | 95.0 |
| 2006 | 98.0 | 94.8 |
| 2013 | 97.6 | 92.9 |

The 2018 Census is no exception. Interim results based on this year's census suggest this downward trend has continued, with full or partial information collected for at least 90 percent of individuals compared with 94.5 percent for the 2013 Census.

This is despite the 2018 Census using a digital-first approach aimed at encouraging respondents to complete the census online, and Statistics New Zealand's online participation target of 70 percent being surpassed.

As a result, Statistics New Zealand is now looking at modifying its imputation approach, which is the statistical process of inserting a value when a respondent has not provided a valid response, to improve the quality of census data.¹

¹ The rate of unit imputation has increased steadily over time, from 2.9 percent of the total number of people counted in the 2001 Census, to 3.3 percent in 2006, and 4.8 percent in 2013.



The extent to which these modifications are successful may have a number of potential effects, including:

- The continuation of some census time series.
- Statistics New Zealand's ability to publish information for some variables and geographic areas (e.g. small area counts). In this regard, note that there is no administrative data for imputation purposes, for some existing and new content/variables.
- The ability to cross-tabulate attribute data for people and dwellings in some small geographic areas.

We will continue to provide updates on this situation, as Statistics New Zealand continues its investigations and provides more information.

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