

2018 Census data release delayed

Work on the first release of 2018 Census data is taking longer than expected due to the complex nature of the task, Stats NZ said today.

Stats NZ had previously reported that they had full or partial information for around 90 percent of individuals and indicated further analysis would be required that would delay the first release.

“We now know this is going to take us a bit longer, but by April 2019 we will be able to announce when census data will be available,” Government Statistician Liz MacPherson said.

“I would like to thank the public for their patience. I know how important census data is to so many people and I apologise for the inconvenience caused by the further delay. It is precisely because the information is so important that we need to take the additional time.”

Stats NZ is developing and extending a range of statistical methods to adjust for limitations in the data collected and to understand the quality of the results produced. This includes using other government data about real people (such as births, tax, health, and education records) to compensate for the information it is missing.

“We know we have good coverage of the population from the wide range of government data we hold, and we can use that data to build a more complete picture,” Ms MacPherson said.

However, Stats NZ's research shows that government data has strengths and weaknesses. There are some gaps and inconsistencies in what other data sources can tell us, for example, who lives together in a household, and Māori descent and iwi information.

“We are exploring how to address this issue and we need more time to evaluate the approaches we are developing. Where there are gaps that may be more difficult to fill, we are also considering other ways to find the information users need with complementary strategies.”

An external data quality panel are providing advice and guidance throughout this process, alongside support from international colleagues who have faced similar challenges.

Over the coming months, Stats NZ will continue to work closely with stakeholders and customers to ensure their needs are understood and to lessen any impacts of the delay. This includes preparation of population data required for the electoral boundary review, due to be conducted by the Representation Commission ahead of the next general election in 2020.

Stats NZ will also be working with iwi and Māori-focused organisations as the impact of the lower response on Māori descent and iwi data becomes clearer.

Stats NZ knows that it didn't make it easy enough for everyone to take part in the census. This and a number of other factors are being investigated as part of the independent review that is currently under way. The reviewers are due to report their findings in July 2019.

“While the majority of New Zealanders were able to take part without a hitch, we know that some people did not have a good experience this year,” Ms MacPherson said. “Our goal is to ensure that the next census is as inclusive as possible.”

“I remain committed to meeting the data needs of New Zealand and working with partners to find ways of providing the information they need, now and into the future, to support them to make informed decisions.”

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