

Professional  
Historians  
Australia



2 March 2015

The Australian Statistician  
Locked Bag 10  
Belconnen ACT 2616

Dear Mr Kalisch,

Professional Historians Australia Inc., the peak body for professional historians across the nation, views with grave concern any suggestion that the census should be abandoned. We are also alarmed at the proposition that the frequency of census taking by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) should be reduced from five-year to ten-year intervals.

Professional historians are just some of the many groups and individuals who make extensive use of this valuable resource. Amateur and family historians also access the riches contained within this vital longitudinal datasets, stretching back more than 100 years.

There are a myriad of ways in which census information is vital to the work of historians. One example is the study of migration patterns in a local government area (LGA). Census data revealing the percentage of a LGA population born overseas allows historians to trace the effect of legislation and social changes in a defined cohort. The statistical impact of policies such as the 'White Australia Policy' and the 'Bring out a Briton' campaign after World War II is revealed in census data. This is an essential primary source to corroborate information from other sources such as council reports, newspapers and oral accounts. Regular and frequent censuses also allow the histories of smaller communities and groups often omitted from traditional sources (e.g. indigenous people) to be explored and explained, in contrast to the broader sweep more likely to be provided if data mining, sampling or less frequent censuses are substituted for five-yearly whole-of-nation census-taking.

Information on migration is one aspect of a vast repository of demographic data contained in the census. This is a simple example of the riches readily available to historians which illuminate patterns of population. Aspects of Australian life such as

religious affiliation, occupations, housing, income and many more can be accessed through the regular taking of the census.

Less frequent censuses would compromise the standard of accuracy required in professional history. This includes the Australian Bureau of Statistics' own occasional papers, extremely valuable resources which are based on and supported by regular census data.

Such information, collected via free, anonymous and universal process, is a basic building block of historical inquiry which leads to further investigation allowing the historian to 'drill down' into a range of other historical sources. The interrogation of such sources leads to a fuller more nuanced history of Australian peoples, communities and institutions, which is vital in informing public debate and assists in the shaping of public policy in a democracy.

Professional Historians Australia urges government to commit to continue taking the Australian census on a five-yearly pattern, rather than focussing on short-term savings at the expense of longer-term benefits.

Yours sincerely,

Judith Nissen MPHA  
President