

Census Nightmares: The more we know, the less we trust it?

Meg Carter

Institute for Social Research
Swinburne University of Technology
Email: mcarter@swin.edu.au

Abstract

In 2006 elevated levels of non-response to the census were recorded in affluent, inner-urban areas characterised by high levels of socioeconomic status. This finding challenged the view, supported over decades by studies in Australia and elsewhere, that people of higher socio-economic status are more likely than others to participate in civic activities such as the census. Measures of socio-economic status rely heavily on indices of education and occupation, which may be taken as proxy measures for being 'well-informed'. The pattern identified in the 2006 census raises what would be for the Australian Bureau of Statistics the unwelcome possibility that the more we know about the census, the less likely we are to complete it. This paper reports on a qualitative study concerned with investigating reasons for non-response to the census. It begins by defining some key concepts and outlining a model for thinking about non-participation in the census, then discusses some ideas about non-participation as it relates to questions of trust. The paper concludes by setting out what remains to be done to investigate the possibility that, regarding the census, 'the more we know, the less we trust it'.

Keywords: census, civic participation, trust, privacy, applied sociology

In 2006 unexpectedly high levels of non-response to the census were recorded in affluent, inner-urban areas characterised by high levels of socioeconomic status. This finding challenged the view, supported over decades by studies in Australia and elsewhere, that people of higher socio-economic status are more likely than others to participate in civic activities such as the census (Costar 2008:9). Measures of socioeconomic status rely heavily on indices of education and occupation, which may be taken as proxy measures for being 'well-informed'. The pattern identified in the 2006 census raises what would be for the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) the unwelcome possibility that the more we know about the census, the less likely we are to complete it.

This paper reports on a qualitative study concerned with investigating reasons for non-response to the census.¹ It begins by defining some key concepts and outlining a model for thinking about non-participation in the census, then discusses some ideas about non-participation as it relates to questions of trust. The paper concludes by setting out what remains to be done to investigate the possibility that, regarding the census, ‘the more we know, the less we trust it’.

The concepts

Little has been written in Australia about why people may choose not to participate in the census. The proportion of the population that is counted in the census is high by international standards, and non-participation is not regarded as a serious issue. The ABS employs special measures to encourage participation among disadvantaged groups that are likely to be undercounted, and these appear to be working well (ABS 2006:11). Elevated levels of non-response in affluent inner city-areas in 2006 came as a surprise to the ABS researchers who identified them.

To think about this topic we need to understand the concepts involved. In relation to the census, ‘undercount’, ‘non-response’, and ‘non-participation’ do not refer to the same thing. The terms are used inconsistently in the literature and are rarely defined. Undercount is a statistical construct that estimates, in various and contested ways, the number or proportion of people who were not counted in the census. Non-participation is sometimes used as a synonym for undercount, but this is misleading. To define non-participation in a way that is meaningful in a statistical context I draw on definitions developed by ABS researcher John Moore. Moore distinguished between ‘coverage non-response’, ‘dwelling non-response’ and ‘incomplete

response'. Coverage non-response is the number of dwellings that were not found and so did not get a census form. Dwelling non-response is the number of dwellings that received census forms but from which none were returned: reasons may include dwelling not tenanted, forms completed but not collected, or residents choosing not to complete their forms. Incomplete response is the number of census forms that were returned with some items missing. Moore noted that in ABS publications the term 'undercount' generally refers to 'coverage non-response'. Extending this ontology I use the term 'non-participation' to refer to the number or proportion of people who received a census form but chose not to complete or return it.

While it is possible for the ABS to identify the level and distribution of dwelling non-response, the number or proportion of people who receive a census form but choose not to complete or return it cannot be determined from census data.

The level of dwelling non-response in a census may be higher than the cited level of undercount. In the 2006 census undercount was identified as 2.6%, while the level cited for dwelling non-response was 4.1% (ABS 2006:18; 2008:3). To further confuse matters, final census figures include 'imputed person records' that are created to compensate for various types of missing data.

Very little has been published in Australia about the level of dwelling non-response, and nothing about its patterns of distribution, changes over time, or relation to other factors. The data that are needed to enable this type of analysis are protected by the privacy provisions to which the census is subject, and are not in the public domain.

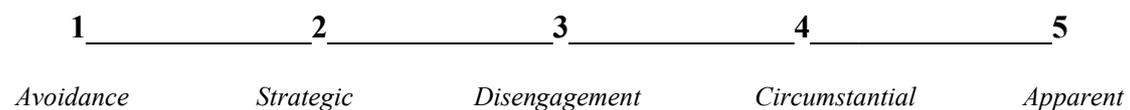
They are, however, available to ABS researchers working on the broader project with which our study is affiliated. Findings from that project will inform our work as they are cleared by the ABS for release. Considerations of confidentiality mean that in designing our study we have access only to information found in ABS publications,

supplemented by the broad statement about elevated levels of non-response in inner-city areas that was provided in the research brief that initiated our work.

This paper draws on our project's first stage, which reviewed the relevant literature and developed a conceptual framework to use in thinking about non-participation in the census.

Non-participation in the census

The topic of census participation is located in an 'understudied borderland' between the disciplines of statistics and social science (Seltzer 1998:511). Linking with several literatures, it sits at the centre of none. Studies from the fields of statistics, history, sociology, political science and urban planning suggest a variety of ways in which non-participation might be understood. One way to make sense of this diverse material is to think of non-participation in the census as falling along a continuum, like this:



At the left you would place people who actively avoid participation. At the right you would place those who would have no objection to completing the census but for some reason fail to do so. Positions along the continuum may be described as avoidance, strategic non-participation, disengagement, circumstantial non-participation and apparent non-participation.

‘Avoidance’ refers to people whose dwellings are not found by census collectors and so do not receive forms (this is Moore’s ‘coverage non-response’). This category includes people whose dwellings are ‘unofficial’, and those who are homeless.

‘Strategic non-participation’ refers to people who receive census forms at their place of residence but have reasons for choosing not to complete and return them. Reasons may include feeling that questions are intrusive, participating in activities that need to be concealed from government agencies, or having concerns about the confidentiality of the census and how data will be used. ‘Disengagement’ refers to people who feel disengaged from civic and social processes, and regard the census as irrelevant to them. Suggested reasons include disadvantage, mobility, or characteristics of residential tenure or urban form. ‘Circumstantial non-participation’ refers to people who have no objection to completing the census but fail to do so for unrelated reasons such as busyness or misinformation. ‘Apparent non-participation’ refers to situations in which people complete census forms but they are not collected, or in which forms are delivered to dwellings that are not tenanted.

To the ABS all possibilities along this continuum are of interest, as potentially contributing to the pattern of non-response observed in 2006. Sociologically, ideas around strategic non-participation and disengagement are most provocative. Strategic non-participation is interesting in part because it rests on questions of trust: trust in government in general, and in government agencies in particular, to use census data only for the purposes for which it is explicitly intended. Non-participation associated with disengagement is of interest in framing the census as a form of civic participation, analogous with voting. The focus of this paper is strategic non-participation as related to trust in government.

Non-participation and trust in government

While US studies have identified an association between reported mistrust of government and unwillingness to participate in the census (Presser et al. 2000:144), the relationship between trust in government and willingness to participate in the census has not been examined in Australia.

The proportion of Australian respondents who say they trust their government is high relative to the US. In a study comparing responses from 29 countries Australia had the fifth highest reported level of trust, with 40% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: 'Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right'. The US was number eleven, with 31% agreeing (Donovan et al. 2007:82). An Australian survey asking about *mistrust* in government found that 33% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'You can't trust the government to do what's right' (Bean and Denmark 2007:68). The levels of trust reported here may be high relative to other places, but they show a substantial proportion of respondents asserting that their government cannot be trusted.

A survey conducted in 2003 found people with post-secondary qualifications to be more likely than others to agree with questions about trust. While people with more education were almost twice as likely to agree that 'most people can be trusted', when asked about trustworthiness of government the difference was much smaller. Unlike their less-educated fellows, people with post-secondary qualifications trust their government less than they trust people in general (Bean 2005:126-129).

Non-participation and knowledge of history

Another possibility suggested by the literature is that distrust in government statistical collections may be associated with awareness of how they have been used. Americans

William Seltzer and Margo Anderson have documented an inglorious history of census collections, examining multiple instances in which population statistics have been used to identify, locate and act against members of targeted groups.

Seltzer describes how census and other administrative collections were used to enable identification, internment and extermination of people of Jewish descent in Germany and occupied countries during the Second World War. The importance of statistics was such that during this period, it was the country with the most efficient statistical system (the Netherlands) that had the highest proportion of its Jewish population exterminated. Seltzer (1998:538) notes that this history is rarely talked about among demographers and statisticians in the countries where it took place.

Seltzer and Anderson (2001:487) identify nine countries in which government statistical systems have been used to support human rights abuses. These are Germany, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Romania, where abuses were perpetrated against Jews and Gypsies during the Second World War; the US, which acted against Native Americans in the 1890s and Japanese Americans after 1940; the Soviet Union, which persecuted various minority populations between 1919 and 1939; and Rwanda, which used its census to support genocide against the component of the population that identified as Tutsi.

In Australia also, data from government statistical collections has been used to enable monitoring and detention of members of identified groups. Compulsory registration of 'aliens' was introduced during the First World War to allow identification and tracking of people who were not British subjects, and the requirement for registration continued under the Aliens Registration Act 1920. During the Second World War new measures were enacted to enable identification and monitoring of aliens. Many were interned and others had their movements restricted. The Aliens Act 1947 continued

the requirement for registration, and was later used by ASIO to generate lists of people to intern should an emergency arise. The Aliens Act ceased to operate in 1984 (National Archives Australia 2009).

People who are aware of these historical uses of government statistics may be reluctant to participate in a census.

Non-participation and knowledge of the present

In ABS publications, discussion about confidentiality is framed in terms of individual privacy. The Census and Statistics Act 1905 (2006) protects the confidentiality of individuals; it offers no such protection to identified groups. Existing legislation can enable monitoring of identified groups should the need be perceived. The Act empowers the Government Statistician to undertake additional collections pertaining to a 'specified class of persons', and to make participation in those collections compulsory (Commonwealth of Australia 2006).

Some changes proposed for the 2006 census attracted criticism from government and advocacy agencies concerned with protecting individual privacy. These included the establishment of a longitudinal data set, linking census data with other ABS collections, and using data from the 2001 census in ways that had not been intended. The Australian Privacy Foundation described these changes as 'radical and disturbing' (Australian Privacy Foundation 2005). The Federal Privacy Commission noted also the potential for de-identified data to be 're-identified' at a later date through matching with other collections. It observed that if people have doubts about how their information will be used in the future 'they may be reluctant to fully or accurately complete the Census' (Office of the Privacy Commissioner 2005:5).

The capacity of governments to monitor and share information about their populations has expanded in English-speaking countries in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001. Seltzer and Anderson (2002) noted that the US Patriot Act, introduced in October 2001, permits disclosure by government agencies of information that had previously been protected as confidential. In the UK the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 permits agencies to disclose confidential information when required for the purposes of a criminal investigation, or in the interest of national security. This bill was passed after a government MP explained in parliament that its provisions served only to regularise a situation that already existed, as confidential information had been routinely disclosed even while prohibited under existing law (Seltzer 2008:2).

Familiarity with these debates around contemporary practice may encourage some people to be sceptical about assurances of the confidentiality of census data.

Non-participation and changes over time

It is difficult to find information about how participation in the census has changed over time. One view encountered anecdotally within the ABS suggests that participation has varied in ways that relate directly to changes in culture and politics. According to this account participation can be mapped as a curve, coming from lower levels in the 1970s and increasing to its highest rates in the late 1980s and 1990s before declining again in the 2000s. Once again this account is provocative, as it holds participation to have been at its highest during periods in which Australia experienced relatively little social unrest. It was lower during times of unrest associated with government participation in actions such as unpopular wars, and the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975. This account suggests that the high levels of

participation recorded in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s may be an aberration rather than the norm.

The pattern of participation proposed here runs parallel to observed patterns of electoral participation over the same period. This correspondence is of particular interest, as analysis of voter turn-out in recent by-elections in two states found that residents of affluent inner-urban areas had significantly lower than average rates of electoral participation (Costar 2008).

Changing levels of engagement with these forms of civic participation may reflect changing levels of trust in government. Very little data exists to enable retrospective tracking of changes over time in reported levels of trust (Donovan et al. 2007:102). Levels appear to have fluctuated, following a cyclical pattern associated with the age of the incumbent government (Bean 2005:127). Mapping the relation over time between levels of participation in the census, rates of electoral participation, levels of trust in government, and changes in social, environmental, cultural, political and economic contexts would provide an additional perspective on our question.

The more we know, the less we trust it?

It appears from even this very partial dip into the literature that the possibility, in relation to the census, that ‘the more we know, the less we trust it’ is worth investigating. To do this we need to do three things.

First, we must establish to what extent the unexpected levels of dwelling non-response in 2006 in affluent, inner-urban areas are the result of factors *other* than non-participation. Alternative reasons could include forms being delivered to dwellings that were not tenanted, collectors being unable to gain access to buildings, or other operational hiccups. Detailed analysis of the levels and distribution of dwelling non-

response in 2006 is being undertaken within the ABS as part of the larger project with which our work is affiliated. When findings from this analysis are available we can look more closely at this question.

Where that process identifies localities in which high levels of dwelling non-response appear to reflect increased levels of non-participation rather than operational factors, we can investigate further by conducting in-depth interviews with residents. Finally, further analysis of existing data sources will help us make sense of what we see. This could identify how levels of participation in the census, rates of electoral participation, and levels of trust in government have changed over time. We could then consider how changes in these indicators of attitudes and behaviour are related to changes in the social, environmental, cultural, political and economic contexts in which they occurred.

When each of these steps is completed we may have an answer to our question.

Notes:

- 1 Our study is part of a larger project being conducted in partnership with the ABS that aims to develop a statistical model to explain and predict patterns of response to the census.

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