

**Review of the Measurement of Ethnicity  
Background Paper  
February 2001**

***Purpose of the paper***

Statistics New Zealand is conducting a review of the measurement of ethnicity in official social statistics. The purpose of this paper is to give some background information on past and current definitions and standards of ethnicity, and to set out the objectives and Terms of Reference for the upcoming review.

***Introduction***

The last review of ethnic statistics was completed in 1988. The ethnicity classification<sup>1</sup> was last reviewed in 1996 and drew on responses to the 1991 Census ethnicity question. Since then there have been significant changes in the needs of the users of statistics, New Zealand society, perceptions of the way Statistics New Zealand measures ethnicity, and the collection and use of ethnicity data by other agencies. Classification codes have also become less relevant, with a number of new migrant groups settling in New Zealand in recent years.

It is time to re-examine the concept, definition, standard<sup>2</sup> and classification of ethnicity, and make changes where necessary. There is a need to ensure that the measurement of ethnicity is relevant to users' needs and acceptable to the public who are the suppliers of the information. Also, rules about the way the data is produced, such as the analysis of multiple responses, may need to be revised to meet current and future needs.

Ethnicity is a key variable in explaining differences in social well-being, social interaction and social change. It divides the population into groups of interest. Ethnicity is an important variable for those who work on public policy issues, particularly in the areas of health, education, employment, justice and income support. Some of the work of users has been affected in recent years by changes to the ethnicity question in the last four censuses, which have created discontinuities and made it difficult to monitor trends in the population.

The pressing need for reliable data is illustrated by the Government's proposed initiatives to reduce social and economic disparities in New Zealand. Analyses of the current and future situation of groups such as Māori

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<sup>1</sup> A classification is a list of all possible categories of whatever is being measured. For statistical use, classifications are often divided into several levels. The categories in the highest level of the current classification of ethnicity (1996) are 'European', 'New Zealand Māori', 'Pacific Island', 'Asian' and 'Other Ethnic Groups'.

<sup>2</sup> See the section headed *Scope and work required* for a list of the elements that make up a statistical standard.

and Pacific peoples will need to draw heavily from official statistics on ethnicity and will require robust time series data.

### ***History***

Throughout the history of official statistics in New Zealand, the census has been the principal source of comprehensive social statistics. Biological criteria have commonly been used to measure the race or ethnic characteristics of the population. The first census in 1851 counted only the European population, although there was a partial census of the Māori population in 1857-58. After the 1867 Franchise Act, which gave Māori separate representation, censuses of the Māori population became regular, although the two populations were enumerated separately until 1951. The only other ethnic group present in New Zealand in any large number during the 19th Century was the Chinese, who were counted separately from 1874.

From 1916, data on 'race' was systematically collected in the census and respondents were asked to state fractions of racial origin. All races apart from Māori and European were classified as 'race aliens'. People of mixed Māori-European blood were counted with the race they were nearer to in 'degrees of blood', while 'mode of living' was used to classify 'half-castes'. For example, those living in European fashion were classed as European and vice versa. From 1926 onwards, the definition of Māori was changed to half or more Māori blood (or descent).

The collection of ethnic data over the period 1926 to 1971 was based on the concept of race, with little change to the census 'fractions of blood' question over this time. However, by the 1970s, there was growing hostility towards this method of determining ethnicity. Also, as many people of mixed ancestry could not calculate their blood fractions with precision, they tended to respond to the census question by guessing their blood percentages.

The Māori Affairs Amendment Act defined Māori for the purposes of the 1974 act as any person with Māori ancestry, rather than the census definition of half or more Māori descent. An attempt was made to accommodate this legislative change in the 1976 Census by including a two-part question, first asking for fractions of blood, then Māori ancestry. However, the two-part question caused some confusion among respondents, with a significant portion giving inconsistent answers to Part 1 and Part 2, or answering only one part of the question. As a result, the reported figures understated the population and were adjusted at an aggregate level to reflect historical trends.

The 1981 Census saw a return to the traditional race-based question and the 1976 Māori descent question was dropped. This change avoided repetition of the confusion that occurred in 1976 but did not address the fact that the degrees-of-blood question had become increasingly inconsistent with the views of Māori.

### ***Previous reviews***

In December 1983, the Department of Statistics published a report, entitled 'An Investigation of Official Ethnic Statistics', which identified the range, nature, use and relevance of current official ethnic statistics and proposed changes to improve quality. This report provided a background to the department's Review of Ethnic Statistics, completed in 1988.

The review stemmed in part from concern about the relevance of basing the current ethnic classification on fractions of descent. Concern about official ethnic statistics extended beyond the population census to other areas such as health, migration and justice statistics, and related not only to issues of relevance and reliability but also to the very justification for producing these statistics.

As part of the review process, submissions from users were called for, and a range of public agencies was represented on the review committee which was set up to oversee the review. The committee considered that the relatively high rate of intermarriage and degree of interaction between population groups in New Zealand had weakened the relevance of biological concepts of ethnicity. The official definition it preferred emphasised features such as consciousness of a shared history, using a common language, having a distinctive cultural tradition, or functioning within a distinctive social structure.

The committee recommended that self-identified cultural affiliation be the method of reporting ethnicity in official statistical surveys. It also recommended that information on the number of people of Māori descent should be collected to meet the statutory requirements of the Māori Affairs Amendment Act 1974 and the Electoral Amendment Act 1980.

## ***Ethnicity questions in the census from 1986-2001***

### *1986 Census*

In 1986, following public criticism of the 1981 Census ethnic question, the Department of Statistics attempted to meet the needs of users who wanted information on both cultural affiliation and Māori descent through a single census question. The 1986 Census asked respondents their ethnic origin(s) but gave no information about whether responses should be based on ancestry or on cultural affiliation.

Ethnic communities throughout New Zealand welcomed the removal of the need to report degrees of descent. However, this change created problems for comparability of Māori data over time. Analysis of the results showed a high degree of concordance between the 'all persons of Māori descent' category of previous censuses and the category of people in 1986 who ticked the 'Māori' box either on its own or with one or more other boxes. There was also a high degree of concordance between the 'half-or-more Māori descent' category of the previous censuses and the 'sole Māori' category of the 1986 Census (ie people who ticked the 'Māori' box only).

As the births, deaths and hospital data collections used a 'fractions of blood' question until 1995, the 'sole Māori' population was used as a denominator in the calculation of health rates such as fertility and mortality between 1986 and 1995.

### *1991 Census*

The Review Committee on Ethnic Statistics felt that the 1986 question was not a good statistical measure of ethnicity as it was not clear whether it was measuring ancestry or cultural affiliation. The Department of Statistics also recognised that information on two conceptually different characteristics such as self-determined ethnicity and biological ancestry could not be obtained in a single question, so the 1991 Census asked two questions:

- Which ethnic group do you belong to?
- Have you any New Zealand Māori ancestry?

Three outputs were produced from these questions: sole Māori, Māori ethnic group and Māori descent. It should be noted that the three populations are not mutually exclusive, with a high proportion of those with Māori descent also identifying with the Māori ethnic group, while the sole Māori group is a sub-set of the total Māori ethnic group.

### *1996 Census*

While the concepts and definitions remained the same for the 1996 Census, the ethnic question differed from 1991 in the following ways:

- 'NZ Māori' ethnic group was moved to the top of the list of categories
- the wording of the 1996 question made it more explicit that respondents could tick more than one ethnic group
- there was a new tick box category 'Other European', which included six sub-groups (English, Dutch, Australian, Scottish, Irish, Other).

A comparison of 1991 and 1996 ethnicity data showed that there was a large increase in multiple responses to the question. In particular, there was a greater-than-expected increase in the Māori ethnic group population and an unexpected drop in the sole Māori population.

The decrease in the numbers of people who reported as sole Māori in 1996 has created difficulties for analysts who use the sole Māori population in the calculation of health indicators. Research carried out by Statistics New Zealand to date<sup>3</sup> has shown that differences between the wording of the census questions on ethnicity in 1991 and 1996 may have led to differences in the way people answered the question.

Other long-standing issues highlighted by the research were that:

- there are inconsistencies in the way ethnicity is collected both within and across different statistical collections
- the measurement of ethnicity is problematical because the concept is not clearly understood by respondents.

### *2001 Census*

The 2001 Census contains a question on ethnicity and one on Māori descent. Both questions use the term 'Māori', rather than 'New Zealand Māori'. The ethnicity question is the same as the 1991 Census ethnic question, apart from dropping the 'New Zealand' in front of 'Māori'.

Statistics New Zealand decided to revert to the 1991 format after research and evaluation showed that the 1991 question provides a better measure of ethnicity based on the current statistical standard (see next section for details). The main effects of this change are the removal of the word 'Pakeha' from the New Zealand category 'NZ European or Pakeha', and dropping the six sub-categories of 'Other European' (English, Dutch, Australian, Scottish, Irish, Other).

### ***Current statistical standards and practices for measuring ethnicity***

Ethnicity is defined in the current Statistics New Zealand standard as the ethnic group or groups that a person identifies with or feels they belong to. Ethnicity is self-perceived and people can belong to more than one ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Statistics New Zealand (1999), *Measuring Māori Ethnicity in the New Zealand Census* and A C Nielsen (1999), *Evaluating Variations in the Ethnicity Questions Report*.

group. An ethnic group is defined in the current standard as a social group whose members have the following four characteristics:

- share a sense of common origins
- claim a common and distinctive history and destiny
- possess one or more dimensions of collective cultural individuality
- feel a sense of unique collective solidarity.

Some respondents may not understand the meaning of 'ethnic group' and may respond on the basis of nationality, ancestry or race. Nationality is the country to which a person belongs by birth or by citizenship. People of the same nationality (eg New Zealanders) can belong to various ethnic groups.

Ancestry is a person's family descent. Race, while based on common descent, classifies people into groups according to physical characteristics. Although ethnicity is not the same as nationality, race or ancestry, these characteristics can play an important part in determining which ethnic group or groups people feel they belong to.

In the population census, information on ethnicity is collected via a self-administered questionnaire which asks respondents 'which ethnic group do you belong to? (mark the space or spaces which apply to you)'. A list of tick box categories is provided with the question and respondents can choose more than one ethnic group.

In the Household Labour Force Survey, an interviewer asks the question and respondents are shown cards with a list of ethnic group categories. Responses can be given by proxy, as one person usually answers the survey on behalf of the household. Birth and death registration forms use a similar questionnaire format to the population census, and ethnic information is also collected by proxy. For example, parents usually complete birth registrations and the deceased's next-of-kin provide information to funeral directors for the death registration form.

### ***Terms of reference***

The overall aim of the Review of the Measurement of Ethnicity is to ensure that standards and classifications meet the current and future needs of producers, users, respondents, and subjects of the measurement.

The terms of reference for the review are:

1. To evaluate the concepts of ethnicity that are used in official social statistics.
2. To define and categorise 'ethnicity', after exploring its association with variables such as nationality, 'race', ancestry, identity, and citizenship.
3. To produce a revised statistical standard for ethnicity, and for any applications of it, such as prioritisation and measuring strength of identity.

4. To take account of the need for the standard to measure all ethnic groups currently in New Zealand, and be robust enough to measure new groups arriving in the next 10 years.
5. To obtain a balance between the need for contemporary relevance and historical continuity.
6. To produce a report for the Government Statistician, which contains recommendations on the measurement of ethnicity for at least the next ten years.
7. To produce a plan for implementing the review's recommendations across all official social statistics.
8. To carry out the project with regard to Statistics New Zealand's commitment to the Crown's obligations to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi.
9. To complete the review by mid-2002, so as to contribute to the development of the 2006 Census of Population.

In order to meet the terms of reference, Statistics New Zealand will need to:

- take account of the standards set out in the Protocols for Official Statistics
- develop a clear view of the quality and fitness for use of current and proposed measures
- consult all major stakeholders
- ensure that all stakeholders who have been consulted are satisfied with the review process
- assess carefully the needs of current and future users and producers of official statistics
- produce recommendations which are soundly based, both conceptually and practically.

It is clear from preliminary work that the current Statistics New Zealand standard for ethnicity is not being consistently used across the government sector. An important part of the review will be to plan for implementation of the review recommendations across all major agencies.

### ***Scope and work required***

The review is concerned with the concept of ethnicity and how to measure it. It is not a review of statistics on ethnicity as such, and thus will not investigate the range and availability of these statistics. Although there will be a strong focus on Māori, the review is concerned with the measurement of all ethnic groups. It will cover all official social statistics on ethnicity, whether collected by survey or administrative form.

The review will cover all the elements that make up a statistical standard, namely: rationale, definitions, classification criteria, classification, coding processes, questionnaire modules, output, and related classifications and standards. Community groups will be consulted as part of the review process.

The proposed timetable for the review is partly dependent on the analysis of the 2001 Census data. While there are some elements of the statistical

standard that can be revised as soon as the consultation phase is complete in 2001, other elements are dependent on results from the 2001 Census. Consultation with producers, users and respondents will take place during 2001, and the review is scheduled for completion in June 2002.

### ***Consultation***

Submissions will be sought during 2001 from interested groups and organisations, members of the public, researchers, policy advisers, government departments and local governments. The call for submissions will go out through the Statistics New Zealand website, the review newsletter, by email, letter and word of mouth. Submissions can be made by writing or speaking to the review team. A number of hui and meetings will be arranged to discuss the measurement of ethnicity and hear submissions.

### ***Constraints***

There are many different views among producers, users and respondents on the measurement of ethnicity, and the use of the resulting statistics. It may not be possible to encompass the views of all stakeholders in the recommendations of the review.

The review's recommendations may embody different concepts, categories, questions or coding rules from those currently used. If this is so, then the changes required to implement the recommendations will cause further disruption to time series data. The implementation plan will need to consider ways in which such discontinuities can be managed.

### ***Conclusion***

The review will address some of the key issues in the measurement of ethnicity in New Zealand. It will look at how ethnicity is defined, measured and used by producers, users and respondents, and will compare this with the current definitions and practices. It is also important for the review to consider how ethnicity can be measured consistently across major data collections. In summary, the review will have succeeded if it produces a statistical standard which major users and producers of official statistics have agreed to implement.