

Review of the Measurement of Ethnicity

Classification and Issues

Executive Summary

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Ethnicity is recognised as an important measure of differences between groups of people. Statistics New Zealand is bound by the Statistics Act 1975 to ask a question on ethnic origin in the Census of Population and Dwellings. The definition of ethnicity used by Statistics New Zealand is that ethnicity is self-perceived and people can belong to more than one ethnic group.

Responses to ethnic group questions are influenced by people's understanding of the term ethnicity, and by factors such as their ancestry, nationality, culture and religion. People's reported ethnic group(s) can change over their lifetime, either because of a change in perception or change in understanding of the mode of collection or a change in the forms used. The context in which the ethnicity question is asked, and questionnaire response categories, influence people's responses. With these issues in mind, ethnicity is not considered to be as robust a variable as some others.

There are problems with some terms used for categories within the classification. There is a lack of agreement of what term best describes the largest ethnic group in New Zealand. For example, some people prefer 'Pākehā' and others prefer 'New Zealand European'. Across all ethnic groups, an increasing number of people answering an ethnicity question refer to themselves as 'New Zealanders' or 'Kiwis'. While everyone can identify with New Zealand during collection by writing in this response, at output only the categories for Māori, and New Zealand European are identified with New Zealand.

The structure and content of the ethnicity classification has evolved to include a mixture of conceptually defined ethnic groups and commonly reported responses, causing inconsistencies in the way groups are named and classified. Changes in the New Zealand population through immigration, has resulted in the classification not clearly distinguishing some ethnic groups, and there is a problem of identifying groups classified in large 'other' categories. There are also problems with mutual exclusivity within some categories. Considerations and constraints when producing a revised classification are that categories need to be robust, exhaustive, mutually exclusive and consistent with the concepts being measured.

There are problems associated with how ethnicity data are output. 'Total response' output counts all those who indicate they belong to an ethnic group; therefore overall percentages are greater than 100 percent. 'Sole/combo' output allocates everyone to a single category of sole or multiple ethnic groups. When the priority recording system is used, each person falls into just one group. By prioritising the data at output some groups lose members, and it causes some bias in reported data. Prioritisation is contrary to the self-perceived definition of ethnicity and to multiple group identification. Although not a standard output, household and family ethnicity has often been requested, but defining it to give meaningful and useful data is difficult.

Producers and users of ethnicity data require a measure that is not only relevant to their needs, but will endure to produce consistent time series data. With any revision, the differing data collection methods (interview, self-administered) need to be taken into account, as well as questions used and classification coding procedures. Also, there needs to be a commitment by collectors and users of ethnicity data to implement a revised standard and classification. The ability to meet

the various needs of producers and users places constraints on any revision to the measurement of ethnicity.