Submission to Statistics New Zealand
2018 Census content

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To: Statistics New Zealand

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the topic of sexual orientation in census 2018.

The Gay Men’s Sexual Health research group (GMSH) is based in the School of Population Health, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, University of Auckland. Our funders include the Ministry of Health, the Health Research Council and the New Zealand AIDS Foundation.

We conduct behavioural and epidemiological research into HIV and sexual health/sexually transmitted infection (STIs) with a focus on gay and bisexual men.

We have a long standing interest in official statistics, having made multiple submissions on the topic of sexual orientation\(^1\) and having published census data on the geographic clustering of same-sex cohabiting couples. \(^2\)

Statistics New Zealand has recommended that sexual orientation again not be included in the census for 2018. We strongly disagree with this recommendation and believe that a question on sexual orientation in census is well overdue.

Our view is shared by the Human Rights Commission which has stated that “lack of official data collection, including any census question on sexual orientation, [was] a serious impediment to advancing the rights of sexual and gender minorities” (2010: 314).\(^3\)

We also highlight the findings of the Sexual Orientation Data Collection Study that “identified measurement and data collection issues relating to sexual orientation data are all amenable to resolution to a degree that would ensure the collection of timely, accurate, reliable, comparable and high-quality sexual-orientation data in New Zealand” (Pega et al. 2010: 2).

We summarise our views below then respond to specific questions posed in the Statistics New Zealand Criteria to determine content of the 2018 census.

\(^1\) [https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/assets/fmh/eph/sch/gmsh/docs/combined-submission-with-supplementaries-on-nzsh-from-sexual-orientation-stakeholders.pdf](https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/assets/fmh/eph/sch/gmsh/docs/combined-submission-with-supplementaries-on-nzsh-from-sexual-orientation-stakeholders.pdf)


\(^3\) [https://www.hrc.co.nz/files/1913/2388/0525/HRNZ_10_rightsofsexualandgenderminorities.pdf](https://www.hrc.co.nz/files/1913/2388/0525/HRNZ_10_rightsofsexualandgenderminorities.pdf)
Summary

1. Census is the only definitive source of basic demographic information for a population group, particularly for small populations such as gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals.

2. Everyone has a sexual orientation meaning it is relevant to everyone completing the census. Such information would be used to:

3. **Enumerate** non-heterosexual individuals, both in the overall New Zealand population and in specific sub-populations (e.g. lower income groups; aged over 65);

4. **Identify geographic areas** with disproportionate non-heterosexual populations, both to improve sampling efficiency in health and social research, and to allocate funding and target the delivery of health and social services;

5. **Provide demographic benchmarks** of the non-heterosexual population which are essential to assess the representativeness of other survey samples of non-heterosexual individuals (e.g. New Zealand Health Survey data), and to apply statistical weightings to probability surveys;

6. **Monitor progress** on social, health and economic indicators over time for the non-heterosexual population.

7. A question on sexual orientation in the census would therefore be of high value to the state, the economy and to civil society.

8. We endorse Pega et al’s (2010) recommendation of a single question on sexual identity for use in census 2018. This should be developed into a statistical standard with great urgency.

9. Evidence suggests that non-heterosexual individuals would find a question on sexual orientation in the census acceptable. Positive social attitudes towards homosexuality in the general population, and marriage equality law reform, suggest the majority are likewise comfortable with official reform in this area.

10. Sexual orientation is a multifaceted concept like ethnicity and religiosity. We submit that a question on sexual identity, being one dimension of sexual orientation, is similar in quality, comprehension, conceptual clarity, intrusiveness and acceptability to several questions that are already included in census (e.g. ethnicity, income, religion). In other words we submit that it is discriminatory in principle to exclude sexual orientation when it is no more imperfect than many existing questions.

11. Data collected on sexual identity in the census can be triangulated with more comprehensive data on sexual orientation (e.g. sexual identity, sexual behaviour, sexual attraction, sexual partnering) in the New Zealand Health Survey to assess the quality of both data sources. This is consistent with existing practice regarding several census questions given the multifaceted nature of many topics and finite space in the census instrument.

12. Although our submission focuses on the topic of sexual orientation, we strongly encourage Statistics New Zealand to seek the views of transgender individuals on the topic of gender identity.
Does the proposed change add value to New Zealand’s society and economy?

Can the data be used by a wide range of decision-makers?
13. Data on sexual orientation will be used by Government policy makers, District Health Boards (DHBs), The Human Rights Commission, NGOs, social and health researchers and gay communities.

Will the data be used to inform decisions of national significance?
14. A permanent minority of every nation’s population is non-heterosexual. These populations often experience greater discrimination, and poorer health and wellbeing, than do the majority. Sexual orientation is a ground protected from discrimination in the Human Rights Act 1993 and Bill of Rights Act 1990. All New Zealand governments have a duty to act in a manner consistent with the Human Rights Act, meaning that data monitoring the situation experienced by non-heterosexual individuals should be collected to inform decision making.

Will the information support New Zealand’s key uses of data?
15. Benchmark demographic data on sexual orientation from census is critical for planning, executing and interpreting research involving non-heterosexual individuals. It is also critical for allocating and delivering health and social services for non-heterosexual individuals, for example by DHBs, on issues of high need for this population. A current example is Auckland DHB’s proposal to cut sexual health services by 50% in Auckland Central, which is home to a disproportionate population of gay and bisexual males with high sexual health needs.

Is the census the most appropriate information source?
Is there wide geographical relevance across New Zealand?
16. Although a minority, non-heterosexual individuals live throughout New Zealand. Understanding patterns of migration from rural to urban centres, and overrepresentation in certain urban areas are needed to inform social policy.

Is there wide relevance across the New Zealand population?
17. Non-heterosexual individuals come from all ethnic, socio-economic and religious backgrounds. It is important to understand better the socio-demographic profile of non-heterosexual populations, and how this may be changing in response to greater societal inclusion.

Is small area or small population data needed?
18. Non-heterosexuals are a minority in society. Our own research (Hughes and Saxton, 2006) suggests this population is also geographically clustered in certain urban areas and with those, within certain suburbs. As with other minority groups (for example some ethnic minorities), this residential pattern may be changing, partly in response to greater social inclusion, and also due to reduced affordability in suburbs traditionally home to large gay and lesbian communities (e.g. Ponsonby and Grey Lynn in Auckland). Geographic micro data is necessary to plan research and to deliver targeted health information and services, for example HIV and sexual health services and social marketing to gay and bisexual men. Census is the only source of such detailed data for small populations.

Does the census provide information quickly and often enough?
19. No official survey provides data on the non-heterosexual population in New Zealand, other sources (for example the Dunedin and Christchurch Birth Cohorts, the Youth ‘12 study of secondary school students) do not do so from a representative sample of the whole population, and sexual orientation data are not routinely collected elsewhere. The New Zealand Health Survey is currently collecting data on sexual orientation, however this is the first time comprehensive information will have been available on the whole population since the 1991
New Zealand Partner Relations Survey almost 25 years ago. Furthermore the Government has not committed to an analysis of non-heterosexual respondents, and the small sample size will likely prohibit detailed analyses of this group. Census offers the only reliably repeated opportunity to examine the characteristics of non-heterosexual individuals in this country.

Does the census provide the kind of information required?
20. No one question is likely to offer complete information on all facets of any topic. A single question on sexual identity will provide useful information in the simplest way. Census data on sexual identity can be compared to data on sexual orientation collected from surveys such as the New Zealand Health Survey.

Is census the best data source to meet customer needs?
21. See #19 above. Sexual orientation data are scarce, and surveys usually contain a small number of non-heterosexual individuals which limits the ability to analyse the experiences of this population in detail. Census is the best source of data on small populations like this.

Will the census provide data of sufficient accuracy?
22. A question on sexual identity will provide accurate information on sexual orientation as it is easiest to understand. Census data will provide more accurate estimates than other sources as it will have more respondents, narrowing confidence intervals and increasing their precision.

Will the census provide data of enough depth?
23. Sexual identity is a widely used measure of sexual orientation internationally and will provide sufficient depth for end-users. The benefits and limits of asking about sexual identity are well described in the literature.

Does the proposed change reflect an enduring information need?
24. Sexual orientation data are not routinely collected elsewhere (e.g. from administrative data sources, NHI) meaning census is a critical opportunity to fill this information need.

Will the proposed change produce quality information?
Are there minimal or no quality problems?
25. There is no evidence that sexual identity data would be of poor quality. Responses to such questions in New Zealand and in international surveys yield high completeness and response rates. For example, less than 0.1% of respondents to the New Zealand Mental Health Survey refused to answer the sexual identity question (Wells et al. 2010).

Will the proposed change give better quality data?
26. Census information on sexual identity will provide better quality data. The only data currently available on non-heterosexual populations in census are data on same-sex cohabiting couples, civil union partnerships or same-sex marital relationships. As these are data on couples they are not representative of all non-heterosexual individuals.

Is there continuity with previous census data?
Is it consistent and comparable with previous census data?
27. A question on sexual identity will provide the first data on sexual orientation for all adults in the census.

Is data consistent with other data collections?
Is it consistent with other data collections (concepts, definitions, classifications)?
28. A census question on sexual identity will be readily comparable to other data collected on sexual identity. The Pega et al. (2010) report on sexual orientation in probability surveys has an in-depth discussion of sexual orientation concepts, definitions and classifications.

Is there general acceptance of the proposed change?

Are there particular concerns for specific groups?

29. Evidence from probability surveys in New Zealand and internationally suggests that a question on sexual identity is acceptable to non-heterosexual individuals and heterosexuals alike. Focus groups conducted by Statistics New Zealand have in the past indicated that some individuals have concerns, for example older New Zealanders and individuals from some religious and ethnic backgrounds. However, this has not been quantified, and other census questions (e.g. ethnicity, religiosity, income) are also met with resistance by some people yet are included.

Is it non-intrusive?

30. Like ethnicity, income and religiosity, sexual orientation is a personal issue but one that has important public consequences in terms of prejudice, discrimination and wellbeing. High response rates to items about sexual identity from voluntary probability surveys indicate that most people are willing to answer this accurately, so long as there are clear confidentiality protections, as is the case for census. The recent ability for individuals to complete the census online now provides an additional layer of privacy. Extra responses such as “don’t know” and “decline to state” would offer further options.

Is it non-offensive?

31. High response rates to items about sexual identity from voluntary surveys indicate that most people are willing to answer this and do not consider it offensive.

Are respondents willing and happy to answer?

32. See #25, #29 and #30. As long as definitions, guidance and explanations are offered with census help notes, there is no evidence that most respondents will not be willing to answer a question on sexual identity less well than several existing census questions.

Do respondents feel the proposed change is of value?

33. There is considerable demand for a question on sexual orientation in the New Zealand census by non-heterosexual individuals. This is witnessed by multiple calls for the inclusion of a sexual orientation question over many years, supported by the Human Rights Commission (2010). Recent changes to marriage legislation suggest that most New Zealanders understand the value of progress on sexual orientation issues.

Would the proposed questions be easy for respondents to complete?

Are they easy to understand and interpret?

34. A sexual identity question is the simplest way to measure sexual orientation, as recommended by Pega et al. (2010).

Are they easy (simple) and quick to answer?

35. Adults aged 16 and over will understand what the terms “gay”, “lesbian” and “bisexual” mean and will not find this difficult to answer.

Do people know the answer?

36. Sexual identity, like age, is specific to the individual completing their own census form so people will know the answer.
References


