

SENATE ESTIMATES OPENING STATEMENT

Date: 27 October 2021

Presenter: Dr David Gruen

Position: Australian Statistician

Location: Parliament House, Canberra

Good evening. I would like to give a brief opening statement on the conduct of the Census.

I begin by offering my sincere thanks to the Australian public who so resoundingly supported the Census by providing their information on, or around, 10 August.

We have received 10.1 million responses, equating to approximately 25.6m people. Nearly 80% of those responses were received electronically. While it will still be some time until we can announce an official response rate to the Census, we are confident our target response rate of 95% will be exceeded.

These results are all the more pleasing because they were obtained while more than half the population, including our two most populous states, were in lockdown, meaning we could not conduct our follow up field work there in the usual way by knocking on doors to remind those who had not yet completed the Census to do so.

We set ourselves three key goals for the 2021 Census: “smooth running”, “well supported” and “high quality data”. We developed these goals cognisant of the findings of three reviews into the outage of the 2016 Census online form. Those three reviews resulted in 29 recommendations for the ABS, which were implemented in full well in advance of the 2021 Census.

The conduct of the Census, including the functioning of the online form, support processes including our contact centre, and management of correspondence and paper forms, was indeed smooth. The digital service performed seamlessly during its period of operation from early opening on 23 July to 1 October, with no unscheduled downtime. 130,000 malicious IP addresses were blocked. In total, there were nearly 1 billion attempted cyber-attacks, which were all repelled. The service scaled to enable 2.5 million households to submit forms in a 24-hour period on 10 August (Census day). At peak volume between 7:30pm and 8:30pm on 10 August, the system handled 142 submissions per second and 806,000 users. Feedback from users was strongly positive, with many commenting on how easy it was to complete the Census and receive help if they needed it.

For this, Australia's 18th Census, more than any previously, we adopted a partnership approach.

We worked with over 50 private sector providers. Most notably, the Census Digital Service and website was built by PwC in partnership with Amazon Web Services (AWS). Much of the recruitment of our short term field and processing staff was undertaken by Adecco, BMF designed our "Every Stat tells a Story" advertising campaign, and others developed a range of support systems and functions such as form printing, mail house services, security testing and so on. Australia Post did a sterling job of delivering 8.3 million approach letters, 2.7 million reminder letters and returning nearly 2.5 million paper forms to our processing centre. This partnering approach required us to hone our skills to manage these engagements, and we have been very pleased with the results.

We also had great support from a range of Government entities. In our design phase, we worked with PM&C's Behavioural Economics Team of Australia (BETA) on human centred design and with the Digital Transformation Agency (dta). The Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) and dta had strong involvement in supporting security aspects of the digital service. Services Australia ran our contact centre and ably fielded nearly 650,000 calls over the period of data collection. They also responded to 24,000 general and technical emails during this time. Our Parliamentarian hotline responded to 362 calls.

To all our partners – in both the private and public sectors – I extend my thanks for your expertise, high-quality delivery, and for sharing the excitement and challenge of delivering the Census.

In addition to the support we received from our formal partners, we are grateful to the many other organisations who have given of their time and expertise to support the Census. These are too numerous to mention but include governments at all levels, key community groups such as the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), and various bodies supporting those experiencing homelessness or living with a disability. These and many others have given us great advice and support to ensure the Census could be completed by the whole community.

In leading, designing, building and delivering this Census, the ABS took on board the lessons from 2016. We designed this Census with some key priorities or “lenses” applied across all aspects of the undertaking. These included a focus on easy user experience and privacy, security and quality of data. The Census program was professionally managed with significant attention to key “hygiene” factors such as governance, planning and monitoring as well as risk, issues and dependency management. We obtained external input and assurance on these and other aspects, including procurement, issues management, the IT build and overall program progress.

The outage in 2016 resulted from a series of distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on the online system on Census day and evening. To be as well prepared as possible, we conducted 26 separate simulated DDoS attacks in the lead-up to the 2021 Census, including the largest simulated DDoS attack conducted in Australia. These simulated DDoS attacks were conducted with much assistance from PwC, AWS and ACSC.

While data processing is now well underway, with the first results to be released in June next year, all indications are that the data we release will be of high quality. Continuing our approach of seeking external assurance of the Census, we have established an Independent Assurance Panel to consider the quality of the data from the 2021 Census – as we did in 2016. Their report will be released at the same time as the first data release in June 2022.

2021 Census data will enable us to update our population projections and provide a wealth of information to inform planning and policy by governments, businesses and community groups. Most importantly, the data from this Census will provide a snapshot of our nation at a unique time – the time of the COVID pandemic. When Australia has taken Censuses during and immediately following significant world events including the (mis-named) Spanish Flu, the Great Depression and the World Wars, that data has been instrumental in understanding the effects of these events on the economic and social fabric of Australia. This Census will be no different, and the data we progressively release will have immediate value to users and enduring value to researchers to reveal how the pandemic has changed life in Australia.

It will give us a profile of the mobility of the population, showing where population flows have changed and highlighting the absence of overseas migration. It will provide a detailed picture of changing work practices and employment patterns across industries.

While we are working on processing the data from this Census, we have already begun planning for 2026 – because there is an (overlapping) 7 years of work to deliver the Census every 5 years! For 2026, we aim to build on the success of 2021 by considering how to make it even easier to respond online, how to make more use of other data at our disposal to support the operation of the Census and augment data we collect from the public. We will again consult on topics to ensure the Census remains contemporary and consider how we configure our field force so that they can best service areas that need more personal contact.

I conclude by extending my gratitude to all 35,000 employees who worked on the Census, from our casual field force to my senior leaders and everyone in between. They have demonstrated the deep expertise, sustained dedication and hard work needed to deliver a successful Census for Australia.

Thank you.