

Chapter 5

Research value of name-identified census records

Many claims have been made about the usefulness of name-identified census records for various medical, social and genealogical research purposes. As the timing of the release of the information is more significant for some research uses than for others, the value of the records for some research depends, in part, on when the records are released.

The Committee reviews the topics for which it is planned to collect information in the next census.

Many genealogical researchers consider that name-identified information from the census would help them to trace their ancestors and compile their family trees. Medical researchers argued that the information contained in census records would be useful for compiling family trees for genetic research. Academic researchers in the fields of demography, sociology, history and epidemiology also claimed the records would benefit their research. While statistics extracted from the census are already used for many research purposes, including epidemiological and various kinds of social research, the whole census is regarded as a prime source of potentially useful data because it captures a wide range of name-identified personal information about virtually all Australians at the same point in time. Many research uses for census records have drawn on the census as a de facto 'population register'.

Researchers might find practical difficulties when undertaking large scale research of census records. The format in which records are stored would affect their usefulness for larger scale research applications.

Introduction

5.1 Statistical information from the census is already used for many research purposes, including epidemiological and various kinds of social research. Census data can be customised for research by generating statistical tables from the electronic files held permanently by ABS.

These files contain the characteristics of persons and households (other than names and addresses) reported on census forms.¹

5.2 Some evidence stated that name-identified census records would be valuable for research purposes.

5.3 Many people interested in genealogical studies told the Committee that name-identified information from the census would help them to trace their ancestors and compile their family trees. Medical researchers told the Committee that the information contained in census records would be useful for compiling family trees for genetic research or for tracing the relatives of a person affected by a certain disease to enable them to be screened for that disease.

5.4 Collections of personal information are very valuable for academic researchers. The census is regarded as a prime source of potentially useful data because it captures a wide range of personal information about virtually all Australians at the same point in time.

5.5 Name-identified census records would be particularly useful because:

- particular individuals could be studied,
- selected groups of people sharing a particular characteristic or characteristics could be studied,
- studies of particular individuals or groups of people could be conducted over successive censuses (longitudinal studies), and

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S378.

- information from the census could readily be linked to other kinds of information about people, such as death records.

5.6 Census records have been used as a de facto population register from which researchers can select people or groups of people. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) provided an example of such a use:

Census records from the 1971 census could provide full details of the population of the town of Wittenoom ... By linking subsequent death records, the extra mortality suffered by this population could be comprehensively charted, and many confounding social characteristics allowed for ... in the analyses of these data, so that the direct impact of asbestos could be determined.²

5.7 The Advisory Council on Australian Archives, which provides advice to the Minister responsible for the Archives, has argued that name-identified census material should be retained for future research purposes. The then Chairman, Mr Rodney Cavalier, told the Committee that the council would like census records preserved, with a closed access period of 100 years. He said he did not think it necessary for genealogical or historical purposes to preserve every census, but that:

to get a portrait of each generation, we would submit that to preserve it every 20 or 25 years would be a tremendous service to history.³

5.8 The Australian Society of Archivists stated that the role of archivists is to ensure that records which have value as authentic evidence of administrative, corporate, cultural and intellectual activity are made, kept, and used.⁴ The Society believes that the census as a

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S700.

3 Mr Rodney Cavalier, *Transcript*, p. 364.

4 Australian Society of Archivists, *Submissions*, p. S465.

regularly taken comprehensive survey of Australian society is unparalleled as a potential research resource. The Society commented that the peculiarly valuable aspect of name-identified census records is that they enable an individual to be placed in a context and related to other individuals.⁵

5.9 The Committee was advised that there would be some practical difficulties in using census records for large scale research. Storage of the records in electronic format would make them more useful for larger scale research applications.

5.10 This chapter commences with an inspection of the information that it is expected the next census will collect.

The content of the census

5.11 The information collected by the census changes over time. Since the first national census in 1911, the content of censuses has varied to reflect contemporary data needs. Many topics have consistently been included in each census since that time (for instance, age, marital status and religion) but others have not.⁶

5.12 It is not yet certain what information will be asked for in the 2001 Census. The consultation process for the nature and content of the 2001 Census has just commenced with the release of a publication by ABS

5 Australian Society of Archivists, *Submissions*, pp. S466–S467.

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S352.

asking for public comment on the proposed content and procedures of the 2001 Census.⁷

5.13 The topics which ABS has suggested be included in the 2001 Census are:

- address on census night
- name
- sex and age
- family relationship
- registered marital status
- usual residence at census time
- internal migration
- religion⁸
- birthplace
- year of arrival
- Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander origin
- main language spoken at home/proficiency in spoken English
- attendance at an educational institution
- education qualifications
- age left school
- income (including family and household income)
- labour force status

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2001 Census of Population and Housing, ABS Views on Content and Procedures*, Catalogue no. 2007.0

8 The question on religion is optional.

- occupation
- industry
- hours worked
- journey to work (destination zone coding)
- mode of travel to work
- number of motor vehicles garaged
- number of bedrooms
- type of tenure (nature of occupancy)
- housing loan repayments
- rent
- structure of private dwelling (classification)
- location of private dwelling (classification), and
- non-private dwelling (classification).⁹

Medical research

Genetic research

5.14 Medical researchers told the Committee that the information contained in census records would be useful for compiling family trees for genetic research or for tracing the relatives of people affected by certain diseases to enable them to be screened for those diseases.

5.15 Professor Garth Nicholson, Professor of Medicine and Director of the Molecular Medicine Laboratory, University of Sydney, told the

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2001 Census of Population and Housing, ABS Views on Content and Procedures*, Catalogue no. 2007.0

Committee that his research involves trying to map the genes for a disease.¹⁰ Genetic research involves mapping genes to a chromosome.

5.16 Professor Nicholson explained to the Committee that:

The way we go about mapping genes – and by mapping them we mean mapping them to a chromosome rather than to a country – we require large families and we run markers, which are not unlike blood group markers only they are DNA markers. We then go and look for an association between our marker and the disease.¹¹

5.17 Professor Nicholson told the Committee that name-identified census records would be useful for compiling large family trees. He explained that in any disease, there will be a small proportion which runs in families.¹² Professor Nicholson said that before he can find the gene connected to the disease, he has to plot the family:

Starting from an affected individual, that person might say that an aunt, an uncle and so many grandfathers had the problems, so you can trace that far and speak to those people.¹³

5.18 He said that people know their family connections:

to a certain distance and then you could take it further than that by exploring [census] information ... You can extend your genealogy beyond that known to the people involved themselves. This means that you are entering a group of people who do not know that they are related to the people you are picking up.¹⁴

10 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 244.

11 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 244.

12 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 244.

13 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 246.

14 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 245.

5.19 Professor Nicholson told the Committee that for the purpose of genetic research census information would be required well before a 100 year release period. He suggested that information would be required for living persons:

We cannot make use of 100-year-old information – particularly obtaining blood samples – because all those people are dead. What we need to do is get to the living members of families that we know are connected through the historical records. That might mean that we go back through this material or other material which would connect them and then we would say, "You are a living descendant of this person."¹⁵

5.20 Professor Nicholson argued that access to name-identified census records should be provided to bona fide researchers:

The normal test for that is that you are peer grant supported; that is, your work is supported by government grants and other grants and you have to go through the peer review process, which means that your work has to be top quality and probably world quality to get support.¹⁶

5.21 Professor Max Nicholls, Honorary Visiting Fellow, University of New South Wales, told the Committee that he had been a long-term geneticist prior to his retirement.¹⁷ He emphasised the importance of genetic research:

nearly all the diseases, all the cancers, all the rheumatic diseases, the susceptibility to infection ... and even the susceptibility to AIDS or HIV might be genetical.¹⁸

15 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 246.

16 Professor Garth Nicholson, *Transcript*, p. 249.

17 Professor Max Nicholls, *Transcript*, p. 253.

18 Professor Max Nicholls, *Transcript*, p. 253.

5.22 Professor Nicholls agreed with Professor Nicholson that the most important use of name-identified census records is in the compilation of family trees:

The most important use of the data is to be able to trace a family back to discover things about the past.¹⁹

5.23 Professor Nicholls suggested a 30 year closed period before access to the records is granted for genetic research purposes, subject to ethics committee approval.²⁰ He told the Committee that 30 years was an appropriate period for genetic research purposes because “matters will arise which are of urgent concern to people in genetics which may well be less than 70 years”. He recommended a closed access period of 50 years for historians, again, subject to approval processes, and a 70 or 100 year closed access period for lay people.²¹

5.24 Mrs Sarah Francis of the Cancer Foundation of WA, told the Committee that the Familial Adenomatous Polyposis Registry would find name-identified census information useful in the compilation of family trees.

5.25 Mrs Francis explained that Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (FAP) is a type of hereditary bowel cancer which is autosomal dominant – that is, it will not miss a generation. If left untreated, it leads to cancer.²²

19 Professor Max Nicholls, *Transcript*, p. 254.

20 Professor Max Nicholls, *Transcript*, p. 256.

21 Professor Max Nicholls, *Transcript*, pp. 256–257.

22 Mrs Sarah Francis, *Transcript*, p. 75.

5.26 Mrs Francis told the Committee that once a person has been detected as having the disease, she will contact the person that has the condition, if he or she is alive, and compile a family tree. She will then contact other family members or their doctors.²³

5.27 Mrs Francis told the Committee that early access to census records would make the task of searching out and contacting family members easier than it is now. Mrs Francis currently uses Western Australian electoral rolls in compiling family trees but she believes census records would provide better information. For example, the census would identify how many children are in a particular family, and many people are not on the electoral roll or may have moved since enrolment.²⁴ Mrs Francis reasoned that access to the forms after 70 or 100 years would be too late for this purpose.²⁵

Epidemiological research

5.28 Aggregate information from the census is already used for epidemiological research purposes. Statistical tables can be generated from census data to determine the target 'at risk' populations used in epidemiological research.²⁶

5.29 The AIHW was not in favour of release of name-identified census records for general public research purposes, even after a substantial period of time, for fear that data quality of the census would

23 Mrs Sarah Francis, *Transcript*, p. 74.

24 Mrs Sarah Francis, *Transcript*, p. 80.

25 Mrs Sarah Francis, *Transcript*, p. 76.

26 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S378.

decline.²⁷ Instead, the AIHW proposed that name-identified census records, or a sample of these records, be retained within ABS itself, but only for research purposes. Researchers could pass a data set of their choice to ABS to match against electronic census records. Researchers would receive the results of the comparison processes undertaken by ABS but would not have access to the name-identified census records themselves.

5.30 The AIHW stated that information from name-identified census records would permit:

- health and social record linkage to census records for population health monitoring and analysis of disease risk factors by population groups or by selected areas, and
- intercensal linkages of data to examine changes in social status, and, when linked to health records, the health status of cohorts of people.²⁸

5.31 Health and social researchers could reap major benefits from the information in census records and its combination with other databases. AIHW advised that the essential element to achieve this was record linkage.²⁹ Record linkage enables researchers to match census records to other sources of information such as death records or records of previous censuses.

5.32 Dr Colin Mathers, Principal Research Fellow, AIHW, told the Committee that:

27 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S698.

28 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S699.

29 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S700.

the potential from linking identified census data ... to health data collections, like death registration data, cancer incidence data, hospitalisation data and so on, is that you get a longitudinal picture of the outcomes, in health terms, for earlier experiences of people, particularly in terms of socio-economic conditions, place of residence and a whole range of factors related to the environmental circumstances of the person.³⁰

5.33 Dr Mathers said further that the advantage of using census linked data is that “you have a series of points in time where you have a description of characteristics of the individual, the family, the household and the place they are living, which can be linked to health outcomes later”.³¹ He explained that quite a lot of the health data collections that the AIHW uses have quite inadequate information on personal characteristics “and that is one of the big advantages that census linkage could offer”.³²

5.34 The AIHW considered that the benefits of longitudinal studies in addressing the issue of disease causality could be achieved at a much lower cost using record linkage rather than mounting new cohort studies.³³

5.35 ABS explained to the Committee that in the United Kingdom the Office for National Statistics selects a sample of identified census records, based on birth dates and upgraded for losses in the sample over time. This sample is matched over time with various administrative files such as birth, death and medical records. All linkage to other

30 Dr Colin Mathers, *Transcript*, p. 338.

31 Dr Colin Mathers, *Transcript*, p. 338.

32 Dr Colin Mathers, *Transcript*, p. 340.

33 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S699.

records is conducted entirely within the Office for National Statistics. The resulting file of unidentified individual records is available for epidemiological research.

5.36 The Committee understands that the AIHW proposal involves the very early use of name-identified census information held by ABS in electronic form, commencing soon after the census. The Committee believes that this suggestion has considerable merit and notes ABS's response that despite its objections 'ABS can accept that there could be some value to such epidemiological research'.³⁴ An option like this would meet the information needs of many academic researchers who have stated that they are not interested in name-identified records in their own right but only in their potential for matching to other records for aggregate analyses. A particular strength of this proposal is its value to researchers who require contemporary data, while at the same time raising fewer privacy concerns because personal information about people would remain confidential within ABS.

Social research

5.37 A number of social researchers, including historians, demographers and sociologists, told the Committee that the information contained in census records would be useful for their research.

5.38 Dr Jennifer Harrison encapsulated the views of many historians when she said that the importance of census records for historical research could not be underestimated:

34 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S875.

The records will give us the people. History, I always say, is made up of three elements; it is made up of people and time and events, but the greatest of all these are the people. When we actually look at movements of people, it is the individual cases that give lie to the myths that have been created. It is only by looking at lots and lots of case studies and building up the actual individual experiences that we get the overall experiences.³⁵

5.39 Dr Harrison told the Committee that the census “gives you in one document so many different facets of people”.³⁶ She said further that the fact that the census is held so regularly makes it a very valuable document. Dr Harrison believes that “whereas the 19th century is quite well documented, the 20th century particularly, despite technology, will be relatively unrecorded as far as people go”.³⁷

5.40 The Royal Australian Historical Society argued that name-identified census records would benefit many areas of historical research including biographical studies, historical studies of families, communities and social networks, and local and regional studies. The Society also commented that census records would facilitate studies of the history of indigenous Australians, for whom there is only a small amount of historical information available.³⁸

5.41 Professor Donald DeBats, Professor of American Studies, Professor of Politics and Head of American Studies, Flinders University of South Australia, told the Committee that he makes extensive use of early US and Canadian census records for historical research. He

35 Dr Jennifer Harrison, *Transcript*, p. 161.

36 Dr Jennifer Harrison, *Transcript*, p. 164.

37 Dr Jennifer Harrison, *Transcript*, p. 164.

38 Royal Australian Historical Society, *Submissions*, pp. S475–S476.

believes that the social history of Australia would be different if census forms had been preserved:

It would be much more focused on the lives of ordinary people – men and women, black and white, immigrants and native-born – if the census of the past had been preserved. Not only would this be a different history but I believe it would be a history in which ordinary men and women ... would be engaged in and involved in, to a much greater degree than they presently are. They would see that the real history of their nation is not what happens in parliaments, in Canberra, on battlefields or in the diaries of famous men, but what happens in the ordinary lives of ordinary citizens each day.³⁹

5.42 Professor DeBats told the Committee that “the census creates a people’s history because the census is the only record of the people. It is the only record in which the people – all the people – speak.”⁴⁰

5.43 Associate Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, President of the Australian Sociological Association, also argued that census records would be very valuable for sociological research. She told the Committee that social scientists – a broader category than sociologists – are not interested in individuals’ personal identity per se:

but it is a means to an end. We are interested in an individual’s attributes – for example, occupation, family status ... and its association with other individual level attributes, and in looking at how they change over time. The only way of being able to look at these changes over time is having access to some identifying information which can allow us to look and measure those individual level attributes. Aggregation and anonymity loses that capacity.⁴¹

39 Professor Donald DeBats, *Transcript*, pp. 109–110.

40 Professor Donald DeBats, *Transcript*, p. 110.

41 Associate Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, *Transcript*, p. 145.

5.44 Professor Roach Anleu said further that social scientists are also concerned with doing longitudinal research in order to document and decipher pattern, changes and shifts in the population.⁴² She said that it would be very useful to be able to cross-link census data with other large data sets such as birth and death material, crime statistics and health.⁴³

5.45 Professor Roach Anleu told the Committee that although data that is 75 or 100 years old would be of interest to historical sociologists, from the point of view of the social researcher “it is most advantageous to get early access to information so that the data is somewhat recent, not from 20 or 30 years ago”.⁴⁴

5.46 Professor Peter McDonald of the Demography Program at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, considered that among the various uses of name-identified census records of interest to demographers, the health uses raised by the AIHW are the most important. He told the Committee about other uses of records, for example, a study currently being undertaken on the demographic history of Tasmania, analysing historical issues relating to fertility decline. This has been possible through the use of computerised records, including names, of all births, deaths and marriages in Tasmania in the 19th century.

5.47 Professor McDonald told the Committee that:

It would be extremely useful to us if we had Tasmanian census records in the 19th century ... It would enable us to locate people

42 Associate Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, *Transcript*, p. 145.

43 Associate Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, *Transcript*, p. 145.

44 Associate Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, *Transcript*, pp. 147–148.

much better. You could look at the poor areas of Hobart and know what was the mortality situation. There are items which are not in the vital records that we could get from the census if we are able to link with the census. We could look at family change, a very important aspect. We know little about 19th century Australian history and the retention of [census] records would enable us to do that.⁴⁵

5.48 Professor McDonald said that people who experience events could be followed through time to see what happened in the future. He said that “you can follow up people’s experiences – such as unemployment, divorce, migration – through linking census records”.⁴⁶

5.49 Professor Dean Forbes, Head of the School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, argued that name-identified census records would be an invaluable data source for the following types of research:

- historical demography
- longitudinal studies of population migration, occupational mobility and the intergenerational transmission of poverty
- longitudinal studies of individual data which link census data with vital registration data
- longitudinal studies in the field of fertility analysis, which link individual census data on occupation, education, household income and migration history with birth registration data, and
- longitudinal studies into the relationship between changes in marital status and fertility and mortality rates.⁴⁷

45 Professor McDonald, *Transcript*, p. 353.

46 Professor McDonald, *Transcript*, p. 354.

47 Professor Dean Forbes, *Submissions*, p. S296.

5.50 Dr Steele, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, told the Committee that longitudinal data could be used also in many fields of social science research.

5.51 Dr Steele said that longitudinal studies have been conducted in the United Kingdom since the 1971 census:

The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys does the matching of these individual data with successive censuses and with the national health service central register to identify births and loss of individuals through death or migration. In this way it has eliminated [privacy] concerns because it is the actual census authority that does the matching.

In the UK the individual researchers are provided only with the tapes of the records of the matched individuals. Information about other household members and all individual name and address identifiers have been removed.⁴⁸

5.52 Dr Steele told the Committee that the availability of longitudinal data from successive censuses, plus the opportunity to link these data with other specialised data sets, would greatly increase the worth of the census as a valuable resource for researchers in Australia and would minimise the need to fund expensive special purpose longitudinal surveys.⁴⁹ He suggested that a one or two per cent longitudinal sample might be drawn from each census.⁵⁰

5.53 Dr Liesel O'Dwyer, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia told the Committee that name and address data is important in social

48 Dr Ross Steele, *Transcript*, pp. 133–134.

49 Dr Ross Steele, *Transcript*, p. 134.

50 Dr Ross Steele, *Transcript*, p. 134.

research using geographic information systems (GIS). GIS integrate and analyse spatial data, that is, any kind of data that has some kind of spatial distribution and physical location. She told the Committee that the capabilities of GIS are not being fully utilised because the social, health and demographic data provided by ABS is only at very coarse spatial levels.⁵¹

Issues associated with using census records for large scale research

Sample selection

5.54 Evidence has suggested that there could be some practical difficulties in sample selection for large scale research applications if census records are stored in microform or paper form without indexing. For cost reasons, studies are usually done on a sample of records chosen from a population. Selection can be based on a particular characteristic – for example, geographic location – or on a combination of characteristics – for example, school age children who live in Wollongong and who speak English as a second language.

5.55 Evidence also suggested that electronic storage, with searching facilities, is preferred by some researchers interested in larger scale research applications.

51 Dr Liesel O'Dwyer, *Transcript*, p. 135.

Record linkage

5.56 There may be some difficulties in matching census records to other records in the absence of some sort of unique personal identification number.

5.57 The AIHW believes that high levels of accuracy can be achieved in record linkage based on a combination of deterministic and probabilistic matching using descriptors such as name, date of birth and last contact, sex and a geographical locator.⁵²

5.58 ABS believes that names are an inefficient key for matching, particularly for research involving census forms over a number of censuses or generations.⁵³ Some people do not provide their name on the census form. Some people provide only their first name. People can use different names at different times.

5.59 Date of birth is not requested in the census.⁵⁴

5.60 Matching records using combinations of household address and name could be problematic. There is a high mobility of Australia's population, with 50 per cent of Australia's population changing addresses every five years.⁵⁵

5.61 The Committee notes that any difficulties in record linkage processes will reduce the cost-effectiveness of using the census

52 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Submissions*, p. S700.

53 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S377.

54 The census asks for age last birthday.

55 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submissions*, p. S377.

records. At a statistical level, it could reduce the quality of the sample eventually chosen.

Information in the census

5.62 It was suggested to the Committee that researchers interested in a particular field would need to conduct special purpose surveys to obtain more detailed or comprehensive data than the census provides. The census is conducted on a self-enumeration basis⁵⁶ which imposes considerable constraints on the types of questions that can be included in the census and how they are asked.⁵⁷

5.63 Nevertheless, many researchers told the Committee that the information in census records would be extremely valuable and have pointed to the census's theoretically complete coverage as a priceless asset in its own right regardless of any deficiencies in the data.

5.64 Dr Gordon Carmichael of the Demography Program at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, has advised that special purpose surveys are often beyond the capacity of individual researchers to mount in terms of cost, time and, sometimes,

56 Each householder, or one householder on behalf of other members of the household, writes responses to questions on the form. This contrasts with surveys where trained interviewers question respondents and record their answers.

57 The self-enumeration method used in the census requires that questions asked be readily understood by all householders. In general, census topics do not need more than one or two questions to obtain the required information. Questions do not need a long explanation or instruction to ensure an accurate answer. Questions must also be easy to code and must not need extensive manual processing.

expertise. They are also not suitable research vehicles when the interest is in populations of small geographic areas or in minority populations.⁵⁸

Genealogical research

5.65 Much evidence argued that name-identified information from the census would help genealogists to trace their ancestors and compile their family trees.

5.66 The Genealogical Society of Victoria argued that genealogical and family history researchers use many varied records to construct an account of the development and progress of a family over a number of generations. The Society advised that the census returns for other countries are major records used by genealogical researchers. The Society suggested that Australian census data would be extremely valuable to family history researchers and would be a valuable addition to the other census and public records available for research studies.⁵⁹

5.67 Mrs Diane Jarvie stated that:

Genealogists use Census information to pinpoint individuals, family and social groups at a particular place in time. Usually this data either corroborates other information found elsewhere or fills in the gaps between other events such as birth, marriage, migration or death.⁶⁰

5.68 The Society of Australian Genealogists advised the Committee that the published 1841–1891 British census records are amongst the

58 Dr Gordon Carmichael, *Submissions*, p. S661.

59 Genealogical Society of Victoria, *Submissions*, p. S580.

60 Mrs Diane Jarvie, *Submissions*, p. S104.

most valuable and sought after of its resource materials.⁶¹ The Society believes that name-identified census records:

must be seen as being amongst the most important records we have of our society at a particular time. From a genealogical point of view this information constitutes the only official records which provide us with a 'snapshot' of each family in the country at the time of each census. ... From the census records ... we are able to build up an excellent picture of how our ancestors lived; the structure of families, the educational and vocational qualifications of individual family members, languages spoken; and much more. The growth or contraction of family units and their development in other ways can, moreover, be plotted from period to period. What other records constitute such an important research resource for genealogists and for others concerned with areas such as social and local history?⁶²

5.69 Many genealogical associations and individuals have stated they were only interested in basic demographic information. This information is name, household address, age, sex, marital status, relationship, birthplace, birthplace of parents, internal migration and occupation.⁶³

5.70 Other evidence has sought the comprehensive information contained in census records because it could provide a picture of many aspects of the daily lives of people's ancestors. For example, the Queensland Family History Society is interested in gaining information about individuals which:

can be extremely diverse ranging from knowing the names and places of birth of ancestors and their siblings to social situation, health, education standard, places lived in during life etc ... This

61 Society of Australian Genealogists, *Submissions*, pp. S302–S303.

62 Society of Australian Genealogists, *Submissions*, p. S303.

63 For example, the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, *Submissions*, p. S624. The Committee received a large number of form letters from the members of this and other genealogical associations seeking basic demographic information.

information is needed to give a more objective view of history and insights into the lives of our forebears.⁶⁴

5.71 The WA Genealogical Society (Rockingham Branch) advised the Committee that its reasons for wishing to retain census records were:

- identifying direct line or collateral line forebears in a particular place at a particular time
- identifying individuals within family/relationship/social groupings
- corroboration of other recorded information, and
- pinpointing individuals' vital statistics before, between and after other known events.⁶⁵

5.72 The Society believes that current genealogical research practices tend to rely upon the existence and accuracy of vital statistics – birth, death and marriage records. It stated that there is no way other than the census of pinpointing a person's whereabouts between birth and marriage, or between marriage and death:

A family could move around Australia or even leave the country without a lead to its whereabouts.⁶⁶

5.73 The Genealogical Society of the NT has stated that in some cases Aboriginal relatives have found it difficult to trace ancestors because of the lack of records kept about Aboriginal people in the past.⁶⁷

5.74 The Committee received evidence that there are many alternative sources for much of this information. A number of

64 Queensland Family History Society, *Submissions*, p. S88.

65 WA Genealogical Society (Rockingham Branch), *Submissions*, p. S202.

66 WA Genealogical Society (Rockingham Branch), *Submissions*, p. S204.

67 Genealogical Society of the Northern Territory, *Submissions*, p. S249.

genealogical researchers have advised that much of the information contained in census records that is required for genealogical studies can be obtained elsewhere, although possibly with more effort. For example, the South Australian Genealogy and Heraldry Society advised that:

One issue ... in stressing the value of these records is that it brings together material that is currently available (without any problems being suggested regarding confidentiality) but into a single source. The electoral roll provides full names, address and until recently, occupation, birth and marriage records are available from civil registration authorities, information relating to property is available from local government and state land record repositories. People publicise the birth of their children in newspapers. However while these discrete pieces of information are available currently the census brings it together in a single document within a social and community context.⁶⁸

5.75 Mr Rodney Cavalier, the then Chairman of the Advisory Council on Australian Archives, told the Committee that:

we have a black hole [from not having kept census records in the past], but it is not an absolute black hole in the astronomic sense because, with a lot of diligence, you can fill in large parts of it by the very records I have said—from bills of lading and private business organisations and through other records of state governments and the Commonwealth. It is a damnably difficult task to do it, if you are tracking down an ancestor or you are doing a biography of someone, but you can do a fair measure of it.⁶⁹

5.76 Mr Napoleon Trujillo, Area Manager of the Genealogical Society of Utah, told the Committee that there would be duplication of births, deaths and marriages and other records.⁷⁰

5.77 Other evidence reflected different views. The Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations argued:

68 South Australian Genealogy and Heraldry Society, *Submissions*, p. S273.

69 Mr Rodney Cavalier, *Transcript*, p. 366.

70 Mr Napoleon Trujillo, *Transcript*, p. 459.

We reject the assertion ... that there are other records which can adequately supply historical data about our culture ... It is not true historically and there is no indication it will be so in the future – especially with the advances of computer technology making paper records more and more obsolete.

Civil registration records across Australia are not uniform and are full of gaps and inconsistencies. These records are maintained by individual states with varying historical and current information collection policies.⁷¹

5.78 Mr Nick Vine Hall, Chairman of the Census Working Party of the Australasian Federation of the Family History Organisations, expressed concern that many people fall through the net of existing civil registration records. He told the Committee:

Forty per cent of Australians are not getting married any longer. There are test-tube babies walking around all over the place. Many of the immigrants from overseas come from countries where their records have been lost.⁷²

5.79 The Federation believes that census records in many countries of the world have been proven to be an invaluable source of family history information, especially for people who were immigrants and whose births were not recorded by a country's local civil registration system.⁷³

5.80 The Federation also argued that there are large gaps in other Australian historical records:

these include information about changes of name, adoptions and foster children, not to mention children conceived using donor gametes. Millions of children do not appear in electoral rolls or telephone directories. Aboriginal people do not appear in electoral rolls in some cases until the 1980s, if at all. The so-called

71 Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, *Submissions*, p. S629.

72 Mr Nick Vine Hall, *Transcript*, p. 297.

73 Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, *Submissions*, p. S629.

‘substitute records’ are not maintained according to any organised national plan, but are kept or destroyed in an inconsistent fashion by various state, commonwealth and private organisations.⁷⁴

5.81 Many genealogical researchers told the Committee that their research relies heavily on Australia’s vital statistics – birth, death and marriage records. Mr Trevor Stacey, Acting Registrar of the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, told the Committee that the amount of information that is collected and contained in these records in Australia is comprehensive, more so, for example, than what is collected in the United Kingdom or in New Zealand. He told the Committee that Australian registry records also contain relationship links.⁷⁵

5.82 Some researchers have found deficiencies in these records. For example, the WA Genealogical Society (Rockingham Branch) believes that while there exists in Australia a high level of information recorded at each of these events, the genealogical information present in these records depends on the veracity and accuracy of the informant, making death records in particular, somewhat unreliable. Similarly, the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations and other researchers suggested problems with death records.

74 Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, *Submissions*, p. S629A.

75 Mr Trevor Stacey, *Transcript*, pp. 217–218.