

Census 2018 is an organisational debacle,
a leadership debacle, an equity debacle
and a transparency debacle.

Census 2018

A multi-fold debacle

Dr. Jian Yang
National Spokesperson for Statistics

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Executive summary

The importance of census cannot be overstated. Census data is used extensively by a wide range of stakeholders.

Census 2018 has not achieved universality, comprehensiveness and simultaneity.

The decision to move the census online was a sound decision domestically and internationally and the digital-first census is likely to be here to stay.

The 2018 Census was never underfunded. Statistics NZ (Stats NZ) underspent in the census year.

Census 2018 is a preventable organisational debacle. Stats NZ failed at crucial stages surrounding Census Day.

The Government failed to lead at the crucial stages. The Minister of Statistics showed little interest in Census 2018.

Census 2018 is an equity debacle and an enormous blow to the Government's priority of achieving equity and addressing wellbeing.

Census 2018 is also a transparency debacle as Stats NZ consistently refused to answer this author's questions about the partial response rate and its change of the definition of response.

The Government should consider moving the next census forward.

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Introduction

It is now clear that the 2018 New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings (Census 2018) is a debacle. With a historically low response rate of approx. 90 percent and a partial response rate of five percent, over 700,000 or one in seven New Zealanders either did not partake in the Census at all or did not fully complete the Census.

Stats NZ has postponed the first release of the census data twice. It initially announced that it would have to postpone its first release of Census 2018 data from October 2018 to March 2019. Then, on 27 November 2018, it said that it would not be able to say when the first release would be until April 2019. Finally, on 29 April 2019, New Zealanders were told that the first release of 2018 Census data would be on 23 September 2019 – almost a year after the first deadline.

The prolonged delay of the first release of the census data indicates that the problem is worse than we might have thought. Stats NZ claims that it now has records for approximately 4.7 million people in the census dataset. However, only 89 percent of the total number of records come from 2018 Census forms. The other 11 percent comes from other government data. The quality of this data is questionable. What is more, the data will be already outdated when it is finally released and will have missed the 2019 Budget.

How did all this happen? The Labour-led Government, including the Prime Minister and the Minister for Statistics, has so far not accepted any responsibility other than to blame the previous National Government. Stats NZ did acknowledge that it had made mistakes. It has now appointed independent reviewers reporting to the Chief Statistician to conduct an independent review and the report is expected to be published in July 2019.

As the Opposition's Spokesperson for Statistics, this author feels it imperative to make an effort to investigate the causes of the debacle. This report is an attempt to shed some light on the debacle of Census 2018.

The importance of census

The importance of census cannot be overstated. Census is even more important in New Zealand than some other countries, because there is no direct measure of internal migration in New Zealand. The accuracy of population statistics decreases rather rapidly in New Zealand, due to the high mobility of New Zealand's population. For instance, over half of New Zealand's population changed residence between the 2001 and 2006 censuses.¹

¹ Stats NZ, [Transforming the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings: Issues, options, and strategy](#) (2012), p. 8.

Census is our only source of detailed socio-economic information about local communities and small population groups, such as Māori, iwi, migrants, children, older people and single-parent families. No other sources could provide reliable and consistent information about the socio-economic characteristics of these communities and groups, for instance, ethnicity, religion, family, education, occupation, and housing.

Census data is used extensively by a wide range of stakeholders, including central and local government, businesses, academics and researchers, non-profit organisations, international bodies, community groups, iwi, and the general public. As emphasised by the National Institute of Demographic and Economic Analysis at the University of Waikato:

Censuses form a critical component in processes of planning for, and responding to, issues that are fundamental to political participation and social and economic wellbeing: electoral boundaries, the planning of health, education and other social services, and the work of researchers seeking to address social, economic and environmental challenges.²

Stats NZ has grouped the uses of census data into the following broad categories:

- adjusting electoral boundaries for Parliament and determining the number of general and Māori electorate seats
- reviewing local government representation arrangements
- allocating resources and targeting investment by government
- costing government programmes
- monitoring outcomes of small populations
- informing social and market research.³

The scale of the problem

While many had observed that Census 2018 was running into trouble well before Census Day of 6 March 2018, few people had realised that the scale of the problem would be so staggering.

Stats NZ announced on 1 June 2018 that the response rate for Census 2018 was 90 percent, which was a 4.5 percent drop from Census 2013. Census 2018's 90 percent and Census 2013's 94.5 percent are comparable as both are response rates before the Census Coverage Survey (often referred to as the Post-Enumeration Survey or PES).⁴

People have been alarmed by the drop of 4.5 percent in the Census response rate. The reality is actually much worse.

² Science Media Centre, [Census delays and missing data – Expert Reaction](#), 11 April 2019.

³ Stats NZ, [Transforming the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings Issues: options, and strategy](#) (2012), p. 9.

⁴ The 2013 Census response rate after PES was 92.9 percent, compared with 94.8 percent in 2006, 95 percent in 2001 and 95.6 percent in 1996.

Stats NZ uses a “new measure” or new definition of census response in Census 2018, which “will include each individual where the census forms provided us with answers to two or more of the following fields: name, date of birth, meshblock.”⁵ This means a person who is listed on a census dwelling form, but did not submit a census individual form, will be counted as a *response*, as name and meshblock are already included in the census dwelling form.

This is a drastic change from the definition/measure of census response in the past. In previous censuses, a person who was listed on a dwelling form, but did not submit an individual form, was considered a *non-response*.

If the past definition/measure of response were applied to Census 2018, the response rate of Census 2018 would drop to 85 percent. This is because the whole five percent “partial responses” in Census 2018 refer to “individuals for whom Stats NZ did not receive an individual form, but who were listed on the paper dwelling form or online household summary form.”⁶ These people would have been counted as non-responses in previous censuses.

In its “Quick guide to the 2018 Census” released on 29 April 2019, Stats NZ states that there are two measures of census response, the “current measure” and “new measure”. This can be confusing to the public. The “current measure” is actually the past measure and the “new measure” is the current measure.⁷

Stats NZ is now using other government data to fill the gaps for each individual who did not complete an individual form. However, government data cannot replace the census individual form, at least at this stage. It is very unlikely that government data will be able to answer all the 50 questions in the 2018 Census individual form, such as the individual’s religion, the one main way the individual usually travels, the difficulties the individual may have doing certain activities because of a health problem, the ways the individual looked for paid work in the last four weeks, and things the individual did in the last four weeks without pay.

Experts are alarmed by the scale of the problem with Census 2018. In a statement, the National Institute of Demographic and Economic Analysis at the University of Waikato claims that “To be effective, censuses must be universal, comprehensive, simultaneous and regular in frequency.” They point out that in New Zealand there is already a problem with frequency, because the Christchurch earthquakes delayed the 2011 Census to 2013 in an effort to sacrifice frequency to maintain the other three principles. However, the 2018 Census has not achieved universality, comprehensiveness and simultaneity, as the participation rate is low with a high partial response rate and these gaps are being filled with data from other sources not captured simultaneously nor designed for census use.⁸

The statement further states:

⁵ Stats NZ, [Quick guide to the 2018 Census](#), 29 April 2019, p. 3.

⁶ Written parliamentary question, [13995 \(2019\)](#).

⁷ Stats NZ, [Quick guide to the 2018 Census](#), 29 April 2019, p. 3.

⁸ [2018 Census: technical support information](#), 1 June 2018, p. 2.

StatsNZ are confident that they will be able to produce high-quality census data through the extensive use of government administrative data. However, such data is collected for different purposes, under different circumstances with different categories and substantial inaccuracies. StatsNZ will also be using individuals' information from their 2013 Census forms. It is unclear whether New Zealanders are comfortable with, or even aware of, how StatsNZ are using their personal data to address missing data in Census 2018.⁹

Such concerns are widely shared among New Zealand academics and beyond. Massey University Professor and Pro Vice-Chancellor Paul Spoonley is "very, very sceptical" of the replacement data.¹⁰ Similarly, Dr Richard Arnold from Victoria University of Wellington's School of Mathematics and Statistics emphasises that "You just don't know because you haven't measured." He points out: "The problem is that whenever you have undercount you've got some risk of error; risk of bias...But when it gets out to this kind of level (Census 2018), it's a really big problem."¹¹

The Māori community is deeply worried about the undercount and incomplete data of the Māori population. Tahu Kukutai and Donna Cormack note that Stats NZ may use Census 2013 data to impute who is Māori and who is not, and that "this potentially undermines rights of Māori to self-identify, which includes the right to refuse, or choose not to, identify to the Crown".¹²

In the end, Stats NZ decided not to count its iwi affiliation data as official data, "because of the level of missing iwi affiliation data, and the lack of alternative government data sources to fill the gaps."¹³ This is a major setback as such information is important in various aspects, including for us to understand the socio-economic differences within Māori and to facilitate ethnic reconciliation.

Not only is the accuracy of the census data a concern, the timeliness is also a major problem. Stats NZ will not complete the release of the 2018 Census data until mid-2020, almost two and a half years after Census Day. Given that over half of New Zealanders change their residence in a five-year census cycle, over one million New Zealanders will have moved during the two and a half years. That means much of the data will be outdated already by the time Census 2018 data is fully released.

Was digital-first census a wrong decision?

Instead of taking responsibility for the failure of Census 2018, the Labour-led Government has continued to blame the previous National Government for the shambles. It has repeatedly reminded the public that the National Government made

⁹ Science Media Centre, [Census delays and missing data – Expert Reaction](#), 11 April 2019.

¹⁰ TVNZ, [Massey University official calls on Stats NZ head to 'front' on 'failed' 2018 Census](#), 9 April 2019.

¹¹ David Williams, [Census 'disastrous', but not useless](#), 11 April 2019.

¹² Tahu Kukutai and Donna Cormack, [Census 2018 and Implications for Māori](#), *Zealand Population Review*, Vol. 44 (2018), p. 144.

¹³ Stats NZ, [2018 Census – real data about real people](#), 29 April 2019.

the decision to move the 2018 Census online, implying that it might have been the wrong decision.

The decision to move the census online was made in 2014 after a thorough study. A Cabinet paper prepared by Stats NZ officials states:

The census model needs to change if it is to be sustainable over time. Transforming the census to a model based solely on administrative data is under investigation for longer term change. In the short to medium term, modernising the survey based census model will significantly improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the census.¹⁴

The Cabinet Economic Growth and Infrastructure Committee considered options for the next census on 19 February 2014. Three options were presented: a “status quo” census in 2018, a “modernised” census in 2018, and a “modernised plus” census in 2021. A single stage business case was submitted, with a modernised 2018 Census as Stats NZ’s preferred option.¹⁵ In association with Budget 2014, the then Minister of Statistics Hon Nicky Wagner announced, on 19 May 2014, that a modernised census would be held in 2018.¹⁶

Stats NZ developed a focussed detailed business case on the 2018 Census in close consultation with monitoring agencies. The business case demonstrated that a modernised 2018 Census:

- was supported by a robust case for change - the “strategic case”
- optimised value for money - the “economic case”
- was commercially viable - the “commercial case”
- was financially affordable - the “financial case”, and
- was achievable - the “management case”.¹⁷

It was also noted that the 2018 Census was part of a planned, incremental and disciplined modernisation of an existing business process. Indeed, online completion of the census had been used in New Zealand since 2006, increasing from a seven percent online completion rate in 2006 to a national online completion rate of over 34 percent in 2013. Of note in 2013 was a 65 percent online completion rate in the Oamaru district, where the mail out model for 2018 was piloted.¹⁸

Internationally, the 2018 Census model was “in line with international census developments”.¹⁹ Good examples were Canada and Australia who were running censuses in 2016. Stats NZ later noted that “countries with administrative censuses

¹⁴ Cabinet paper: [The 2018 Census – Submission of detailed business case and release of tagged contingency funding](#), June 2014, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

¹⁶ Hon Nicky Wagner, [Modernised census to be held in 2018](#), 19 May 2014.

¹⁷ Cabinet paper: [The 2018 Census – Submission of detailed business case and release of tagged contingency funding](#), June 2014, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Cabinet paper: [The 2018 Census – Submission of detailed business case and release of tagged contingency funding](#), June 2014, p. 6.

produce census information at much lower cost, and information can be produced more frequently.”²⁰

An increasing number of countries are adopting online censuses and their response rates have been satisfactory. As a matter of fact, online censuses have the potential to increase the response rate.

The table below shows a selection of OECD countries that have an online element to their census. It includes the countries that seem to be the most comparable to New Zealand.

Table 1. Proportion online and response rates of censuses in some OECD countries

Country	Note	Proportion (% of private dwellings)	Response rate of private dwellings (%)	Proportion online (% of persons)	Response rate of persons (%)
Australia	First offered in 2006. First digital-first Census in 2016	2006: 10.6 2011: 34.3 2016: 58.8	2006: 95.8 2011: 96.5 2016: 95.1	2006: n/a 2011: n/a 2016: 63	2006: 95.8 2011: 96.3 2016: 94.8
Canada	First offered in 2006. Online questionnaire promoted in 2011 and 2016.	2006: 18.3 2011: 53.9 2016: 68.3	2006: 96.5 2011: 97.1 2016: 97.4	2006: n/a 2011: n/a 2016: n/a	2006: 96.5 2011: 98.1 2016: 98.4
New Zealand	First offered in 2006. Digital-first in 2018.	2006: 7.5 2013: 35.6 2018: 88.7*	2006: 97.1 2013: 96.0 2018: n/a	2006: 7.1 2013: 34.3 2018: 86.2*	2006: 94.8 2013: 92.9 2018: 90*
United Kingdom (England and Wales only)	First offered in 2011.	2011: 16.4	2011: 95	2011: n/a	2011: 94

*Interim information as at 16 April 2016. Stats NZ announced that the interim proportion of online completion of the 2018 Census was 82 percent, lower than the proportions of private dwellings and individuals. This may be due to the fact that a much smaller proportion (24.7 percent) of non-private dwellings completed the Census online (Written parliamentary question 13987 (2019))

Sources:

1. Census Independent Assurance Panel to the Australian Statistician, [Report on the Quality of 2016 Census Data](#) (June 2017) p. 21.
2. Written parliamentary questions, 13980 (2019), 13982 (2019), 13983 (2019), 13984 (2019), 13986 (2019), 13987 (2019).
3. Denise McGregor, [2011 Census: Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales, March 2011](#), 12 July 2012.

Table 1 shows that the response rates in Canada’s last three censuses increased along with the increase of the proportion of online responses. The Australia case is somewhat different. The person response rate in Australia’s first digital-first census in 2016 dropped by 1.5 percent. It is believed that the higher non-response rates for non-private dwellings (78.5 percent) would have been a contributing factor to the lower

²⁰ Statistics New Zealand, [2018 Census strategy](#), September 2016, p. 6.

person response rates in 2016.²¹ Some would see the census website crashing on the census night as a reason for the modest drop.

Despite the neighbouring Australia's somewhat underwhelming response rate in 2016, Stats NZ continued to express its confidence in New Zealand's first digital-first census in 2018. Having observed the difficulties of Australia's 2016 Census, the previous National Government's last Minister of Statistics, Hon Scott Simpson, sought Stats NZ's views on New Zealand's Census 2018 on different occasions. Stats NZ consistently assured Mr Simpson that they were confident with Census 2018.²²

Was Census 2018 underfunded?

The Labour-led Government has concertedly accused the previous National Government of underfunding Census 2018, saying that the National Government decided to shift the Census to a mostly online survey and, at the same time, directed Stats NZ to cut costs by five percent over two census cycles.

This accusation is not true. It may well be deliberate misinformation. What the then National Government anticipated was that the modernised census model would be more cost-effective and therefore produce savings. The 2014 Cabinet paper says: "The modernised census model is estimated to produce savings (compared to 2013 costs) of at least 5% over the 2018 and 2023 census cycles."²³ This is not a cut in funding. The budget for the 2018 Census was substantially more than the 2013 Census.

There is much confusion about the 2018 Census budget. Treasury documents show that the previous National Government budgeted a total of \$113.088 million for Census 2018 for the five-year period from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019.²⁴ Additional funding was allocated later, bringing the total multi-year operating budget for Census 2018 to \$117.337 million.²⁵ By 30 June 2018, \$105.754 million had been spent on the 2018 Census.²⁶ This means that Stats NZ should have a total of \$11.246 million for the 2018-19 financial year. In comparison, just \$1.2 million was left after the 2013 census year.²⁷

Compared with the spending for Census 2013, the spending for Census 2018 is substantially more. The previous National Government allocated \$90 million for Census 2011. However, due to the Canterbury earthquakes, Census 2011 was postponed to 2013. The Government then allocated \$72 million for Census 2013. It is fair to say that Stats NZ could use some of the preparation done for Census 2011.

²¹ The overall response rates of non-private dwellings were: 2006: 91.7%; 2011: 88.4%, 2016: 78.5%. Census Independent Assurance Panel to the Australian Statistician, [Report on the Quality of 2016 Census Data](#), (June 2017), pp. 19, 34.

²² This author's interview with Hon Scott Simpson, 11 April 2019.

²³ Cabinet paper: [The 2018 Census – Submission of detailed business case and release of tagged contingency funding](#), June 2014, p. 1.

²⁴ Treasury, [The Estimates of Appropriations 2018/19 – Finance and Government Administration Sector](#), V.5 Vol.5, p. 338.

²⁵ Annual Review of Stats NZ 2017/18 – Responses to the Annual Review questionnaire, p. 26.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ [Vote Statistics – Estimates of Appropriations 2013/2014 – Budget 2013](#), p. 268.

If we compare the budget of \$117.337 million for Census 2018 with the \$72 million budget for Census 2013, the former is a whopping 62.9 percent higher than the latter. Even if we include the spending in preparation for Census 2011 and take the \$90 million allocated for Census 2011 as the actual total spending for Census 2013, the \$117.337 million for Census 2018 is still 30.3 percent higher.

Stats NZ spent generously on Census 2018. Although it was a digital-first census, Stats NZ spent \$3.75 million on paper packs in Census 2018, more than the \$3.5 million in Census 2013. Even so, in the 2018 Census year, namely the 2017-18 financial year, Stats NZ underspent its funding for Census 2018 by \$758,000, plus \$13.527 million of capital injections.²⁸

It is therefore clear that funding was not an issue for Census 2018. Funding became an issue only because, as discussed below, Stats NZ botched the Census at the crucial stages surrounding Census Day.

A multi-fold debacle

Census 2018 went wrong on a number of fronts. It is a tale of multiple debacles.

An organisational debacle

The preparation for Census 2018 went rather well until the crucial stages surrounding Census Day. Census 2018 was poorly organised and disastrously executed on the ground.

Instead of a census collector delivering paper forms before Census Day, and then returning to collect them after the day, Stats NZ would send all households an access code letter. It would contain all the information a household needed to take part in the census online. Paper forms would still be available for those who preferred them. Once a household received their letter, they could dial an 0800 number to request paper forms, which would be posted to them. Also, instead of sending teams to knock on the door about the census, as they did in the past, field teams would work directly with places like hotels, hospitals, and camping grounds to help people in those places obtain and fill in the census. There would be teams working in remote rural areas and with the homeless population.²⁹

Unfortunately, Stats NZ ran into trouble at almost every step and quickly panicked. Many people did not receive their access codes until very late. Then the demand for paper forms became too much for Stats NZ to handle. The extremely important 0800 number provided did not work properly. Field workers were confused, frustrated and exhausted. Non-private dwellings were not properly engaged with only 24.7 percent of them completing the Census online.³⁰

²⁸ Annual Review of Stats NZ 2017/18 – Responses to the Annual Review questionnaire, p. 26.

²⁹ Stats NZ, [More than half a million fill in census online – Media release](#), 1 March 2018.

³⁰ Written parliamentary question 13987 (2019).

and many remote rural areas seemed almost forgotten or abandoned by Stats NZ and its field workers.³¹

Stats NZ underestimated the workload to help the large number of low users, non-users or ex-users of the internet. They did not have a well informed and calculated plan. Field officers were not given paper forms for those without internet access. Instead, they were told to direct people to a helpline where they could ask to be sent paper forms.

It is unrealistic to expect all those who prefer paper forms to contact Stats NZ and request one. Many of those who were motivated found it extremely difficult to get through to the 0800 number. "I had people who were ringing up for days, trying to get on the helpline, and it was always busy or they were told to ring another number," said a field officer.³²

Things did not work like Stats NZ had hoped and "there was a complete sense of panic toward the end".³³ Field workers were supposed to leave no stone unturned and find every person possible to complete the census. In reality, they were advised not to bother with some hard-to-reach properties at the end of long rural roads. For the properties without letterboxes, field workers were told to leave envelopes under a rock on the doorstep, or ram them under doorways or under pot plants.³⁴

Stats NZ has admitted that the 2018 Census was not made easy enough for people partake in. It said that approximately 765,000 census paper packs were hand delivered or posted to approximately 510,000 households. However, many of these paper packs arrived too late, which had led to many households not feeling compelled to respond, as the number of days after Census Day elapsed.³⁵

Stats NZ has also admitted that it had left it too late to directly contact households. It did not have enough field staff, down 20 percent on expected numbers, on the ground after Census Day for follow up visits. This, it believes, was due to recruitment problems, low unemployment and high attrition rates.³⁶

Stats NZ also acknowledges that field teams were not always in the right places at the right times. They were not able to respond quickly enough to meet the expectations of some households. Not only did Stats NZ not have enough people to mobilise, it also did not have an efficient process in place to make sure that people were ready to go with the right equipment, so that they could visit households that had not taken part as close to Census Day as possible.³⁷

³¹ New Zealand Herald, [Census chaos: Field workers skipped hard-to-reach houses in remote areas](#), 8 August 2018.

³² New Zealand Herald, [Census chaos: Field workers skipped hard-to-reach houses in remote areas](#), 8 August 2018.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Stats NZ, "November 2018 census update: communications plan – Questions and Answers", pp. 1-2, 11-12 (document this author OIA from Minister of Statistics). An email OIA by this author dated 27 November 2018 says that approximately 675,000 census paper packs were hand delivered or posted to approximately 485,000 households.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 2, 11.

³⁷ A 27 November 2018 email OIAed by this author from Minister of Statistics.

To make things worse, too many household partial responses resulted in longer field staff follow up visits to households. Stats NZ believes that the high household partial response rate is partly because some households misunderstood the process of completing the census.³⁸

In addition to the media reports about the chaos of Census 2018, this author also received a large number of complaints about the difficulty and the lack of awareness of participating in Census 2018. Below are some examples.

Example 1: Christchurch

When I raised this issue (under reporting low users, non-users or ex-users of the internet) with the person at the end of census' 0800 number last Saturday (who answered after about 20 rings, I think a lot of people would have given up by then) he said that a large number of people had been calling in for paper copies. While this may be true, this will be a self-selecting group of motivated people who actively want to participate. There is still an awful lot of people who can't or will have difficulty accessing the internet who won't engage with the process to this extent.

...

This matter is a particular concern for many of the vulnerable people groups we work with. For example one of the Bangladeshi ladies at the playgroup we run was quite upset when she found out how the census would be run. She is well-educated and highly literate and understood the importance of the census and being counted. But she also knows of many Bangladeshis in Christchurch who are almost illiterate in English and won't understand the importance of the census and will not push through the considerable barriers to get their census forms in. She knows that she cannot personally help each and every one of them so many so fall through the cracks and not have their voices heard.

Our cultural community worker has also been concerned about this issue: She notes:

I have worked very hard to get paper copies sent out to my English class for last Wednesday so that there would be a group of advocates that could help the students in our class to do the census but the census people could not manage to get the forms to us. They were inflexible and unwilling to help on the phone saying that each individual person would need to ring up with their access code in order to get a paper copy sent to them. I told them that the people that I knew would not be capable of doing this by themselves and most of them did not have an advocate who would be willing to do it. Many of them had not received a letter or had already thrown it away, not understanding what it was. Even when we went through the draft

³⁸ Ibid.

form with them it was extremely hard work, both for the trained English teacher and the student. Some of them are from very big families and are expected to do the form for every member. To be honest, they probably won't bother. It's in the too hard basket.

--A member of Social Equity and Wellbeing Network, Christchurch, 5 March 2018

Example 2: Wairarapa

Census issue was first highlighted by a local library who had many people coming in requesting assistance. Our local electorate office also had people coming in, including business owners seeking clarification, and fielded a number of phone calls from frustrated constituents who were having connectivity issues, no access codes arrive, papers not arrive, those who were not computer literate and feeling overwhelmed by the process, and long wait times on the 0800 assistance number.

Our office has phoned Census a number of times. Many times we couldn't get through, or had the phone drop out after 20 minutes on hold. We have also been given different information on the times we did get through.

Our office ended up communicating with Census Communications team to try and get answers.

This morning we have been put in touch with the Area Manager.

We have been given conflicting information regarding the dates of cut off and the delivery times in the past two days. Yesterday the operator said a paper form would be with resident in a couple of days and they had till 17 March to complete and return. Today, after phoning about another resident have been told forms have 5 to 7 working days delivery and residents have until mid-April.

Also, some of the details haven't been thought through e.g. what to do residents who use a PO Box (common rurally). From what we can see, the address was completely missing of the database.

A motel owner (rents rooms to beneficiaries) also didn't fit the mould and has had trouble filling the form with accuracy.

There has been a lack of common sense application for a transition to online processing – failing to consider the elderly, illiterate and disabled and those with factors a little outside the norm. Why haven't local libraries and electorate offices been given hard copies and facilities to assist people?

--- Wairarapa MP Alastair Scott's office, 6 March 2018

Example 3: Northland

So as the census was publicised as requiring a web linked device such as a home computer, laptop, etc., and since a number of our locals do not have access to computers, and many also do not have service reception for mobile phones at their homes nor are connected to the power network, not to mention that there are homes that simply are not easily accessible for a knock on the door from manual data gatherers, so we took the decision to ask our volunteers to open the library for extended hours on the 3rd through 6th March inclusive and we put up notices locally to advise locals that we were providing extended hours for access to the library computers and would be available to provide support to users so that those without such facilities would be able to complete their census returns on line.

I now find that many of the community members I have spoken to today have not even received the letters providing the access code to enable us to complete this process, so thus far even those of us like myself with a home computer and web access cannot make our returns.

--- Lesley Emmett, Chair of the Kohukohu Library Trustees,
2 March 2018

Firstly most of those in the Far North, at least, did not get census forms before the 6th March.

People still do not have census forms - 4 days after the event.

...

-- Jean McIver, Kaitaia, 10 March 2018

Because my wife and I use a post office box for our mail, with no letter box at our property, we received no communication about the census, and importantly did not receive a login code to enable us to go online and complete the census questionnaire. Prior to the information due date, we phoned the number advertised to advise we had been overlooked. We were advised that a personal delivery of the login code and instructions would be made to our residence. This did not happen, so our information won't be captured in the census data.

-- Jim Makaweo, Northland, 17 March 2018

[Redacted] who is a recent resident of Oakridge Village called into the office at 11.10 am this morning (she has lived there for 2 months, previously lived at [address] and has her mail forwarded to her new address – [previous address]). She and the other 4 residents who live down [street name] still haven't received their census code details and aren't able to complete the census. She has contacted the 0800 # and all she got back from them was to say the street doesn't exist.

--Northland MP Matt King's Office, 29 March 2018

The organisation debacle was preventable. Demography Professor Tahu Kukutai at Waikato University has observed that in planning the 2018 Census, “there needed to be a robust risk analysis and then risk mitigation and residual risk strategies – basically they needed a back-up plan and a back-up for the back-up. The situation was entirely avoidable...”³⁹ Stats NZ did have a rather comprehensive risk management strategy for Census 2018.⁴⁰ However, the strategy failed miserably on the ground.

A leadership debacle

Census 2018 is also a leadership debacle. While the Labour-led Government and Minister of Statistics Hon James Shaw have repeatedly refused to accept any responsibility for the failure of Census 2018, it is apparent that a lack of Government leadership for Census 2018 was a major factor for the failure.

Since becoming Minister of Statistics, Mr Shaw showed little interest in Census 2018. In the months leading to Census Day, Mr Shaw issued only one press release about census and it was not directly about Census 2018. In his press release dated 11 February 2018, Mr Shaw said that he had written to the Chief Statistician “making clear his expectation that work to include census questions on, not just biological sex, but also sexual identity and sexual orientation will be a priority for the next national census in 2023.” He was disappointed to learn that the 2018 Census was not going to include questions that would take into account the diverse gender and sexual identities of New Zealand.⁴¹

In comparison, in the final month leading to the 2013 Census Day, the then Minister of Statistics Hon Maurice Williamson issued seven press releases, including “One month until the Census” on 5 February 2013, “One week until census day” on 26 February 2013, “Census Data Vital For New Zealand” on 4 March 2013 and “2013 Census: Today’s the day” on 5 March 2013.⁴²

By 2 March 2018, four days before Census Day, there had been various signs that Census 2018 was running into trouble. It appeared that Mr Shaw had no such sense and was not concerned. He was still aiming at a response rate of 95-99 percent.⁴³ More astonishingly, as “the man ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the Census”,⁴⁴ Mr Shaw joined the Prime Minister’s delegation touring the South Pacific on Census Day. Clearly Census 2018 was not his priority.

³⁹ ‘Failed’ Census – a preventable public health policy ‘disaster’, 14 August 2018.

⁴⁰ See “2018 Census Programme Risks Summary” in Cabinet paper: [The 2018 Census – Submission of detailed business case and release of tagged contingency funding](#), June 2014, p. 23.

⁴¹ Hon James Shaw, [Gender and sexual orientation census priority](#), 11 February 2018.

⁴² The other three press releases were “Census forms delivered from tomorrow” on 15 February 2013, “Census important for all communities” on 21 February 2013 and “Online saves time for 2013 Census”, 28 February 2013.

⁴³ James Paul, [Statistics Minister James Shaw delivers census to Wellington retirement village](#), 2 March 2018.

⁴⁴ Megan Gattey and Maddison Northcote, [Census complaints: vague questions, delays in paperwork](#), 7 March 2018.

The leadership debacle has continued after Census Day. On 6 March 2019, the anniversary of the failed 2018 Census, this author was told in the House that Mr Shaw had not taken advice on key risks surrounding Census 2018.⁴⁵

An equity debacle

What should be particularly concerning to the Labour-led Government is that poor census data will inevitably compromise its priority of achieving equity and addressing wellbeing. Stats NZ has indicated that “household and family information is likely to be of lower quality than in previous censuses”.⁴⁶ This is a major concern because it is accepted that “the sectors who have the greatest responsibilities to achieve equity—health, education, social support—will not have the information they need to assess and respond to current and future needs” and “the impacts of a significant undercount that feeds into government activity will be felt most sharply by Māori and Pacific peoples.”⁴⁷

An equity debacle was inevitable if necessary support was not given to the large number of low users, never-users or ex-users of the internet. Research in 2015 found that 40 percent of New Zealanders under 65 and earning less than 35k per annum are low users, never-users or ex-users of the internet. Over 65, the situation gets worse with 70 percent of people with the same income level falling into this category, including 37 percent of never-users. Even for over 65 year olds earning up to 100k a year, 47 percent still fall into this category. Additionally Māori and Pacific Islanders are also disproportionately low internet users.⁴⁸

In addition, members of the disabled community also found it hard to participate in Census 2018. Mr Jonathan Mosen, a Wellington IT professional who has been blind since birth, called Census 2018 an “accessibility debacle”.⁴⁹ So much so that Mr Mosen launched a petition for an inquiry into the 2018 Census, citing “widespread reports of people experiencing problems completing it.”⁵⁰

A transparency debacle

Stats NZ used to be proud of itself for being more transparent than other Government agencies. One may argue that Census 2018 is so bad that damage control has become Stats NZ’s default response and defence. Their responses to questions about Census 2018 constitute a transparency debacle. This is highlighted by Stats NZ’s handling of this author’s two questions.

Stats NZ experienced an extraordinary stand-off with the Governance and Administration Select Committee over this author’s question about the partial response rate of Census 2018. The question about the partial response rate was first raised by this author on 17 December 2018 as a parliamentary written question to Minister for Statistics Hon James Shaw. Mr Shaw confirmed that the partially completed online

⁴⁵ Hansard report, [Oral questions – Questions to Ministers](#), 6 March 2019.

⁴⁶ Stats NZ, [2018 Census – real data about real people](#), 29 April 2019.

⁴⁷ Science Media Centre, [Census delays and missing data – Expert Reaction](#), 11 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Charles Crothers et al., “[World Internet Project New Zealand: The Internet in New Zealand](#)”, The Institute of Culture Discourse & Communication, Auckland University of Technology, 2015, pp. 35-37.

⁴⁹ Sally Murphy, [Census an 'accessibility debacle', blind man says](#), 5 March 2018.

⁵⁰ [Petition of Jonathan Mosen - Inquiry into the 2018 Census](#).

and paper form responses for Census 2018 were counted as part of the total 90 percent response rate.⁵¹

To get more details, this author asked the question to the Chief Statistician at the Stats NZ's 2017-18 financial review hearing on 23 February 2019. The Chief Statistician made it very clear that she did know the rate, but could not give it to this author as she just did not "have that written down."⁵² This author then followed up with an additional question in the name of the Governance and Administration Select Committee. Stats NZ, however, declined to share the information with the Committee. When called back by the Committee on 3 April 2019, Stats NZ continued its refusal to share the information with the Committee. It finally released the partial response rate to the Committee on 9 April 2019 after facing a potential Parliamentary contempt complaint from National Spokesperson for State Services Hon Dr Nick Smith.

The other question that this author has not been able to get an answer for from Stats NZ is about the time when the decision to change the definition of response was made. In his answer to this author's question, Mr Shaw says that he was advised the decision was made in November 2017 for operational reasons.⁵³

However, this does not match with Stats NZ's key documents for understanding Census 2018. In its "2018 Census: technical support information" published on 1 June 2018, the definition was unchanged.⁵⁴ It appears that this change took place between June and December 2018, because the change is mentioned in the revised version of the document published on 20 December 2018. The change was also mentioned in Stats NZ's November 2018 census update for Mr Shaw.⁵⁵

Stats NZ officials have been tight-lipped about this. At Stats NZ's Governance and Administration Select Committee hearing on 3 April 2019, this author asked Stats NZ four times the question: "When was the decision made to make the change?" The Chief Statistician and her colleagues responded with a total of 721 words, but did not answer the question at all.⁵⁶

Stats NZ may argue that the change of definition is related to their new methodology in conducting Census 2018. However, the facts that the change has improved the response rate of Census 2018, and the public were not informed of the change at the time when the response rate was released, and that Stats NZ repeatedly dodged this author's straightforward question about the time when the decision was made, have not helped their case. The lack of transparency on this particular matter leads to the suspicion that Stats NZ changed the definition to make the response rate look better.

⁵¹ Written Parliamentary Question [39862 \(2018\)](#).

⁵² Corrected Hansard transcript "2017/18 annual review of Statistics New Zealand, Governance and Administration Committee", 13 February 2019, p. 4.

⁵³ Written parliamentary questions [10985 \(2019\)](#) and [10984 \(2019\)](#).

⁵⁴ [2018 Census: technical support information](#), 1 June 2018, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Stats NZ, "November 2018 census update: communications plan – Questions and Answers", p. 5 (document this author OIA from Minister of Statistics).

⁵⁶ Corrected Hansard transcript, 2017/18 Annual review of Statistics New Zealand, Governance and Administration Committee, 3 April 2019, pp. 10-13.

Conclusion

The debacle of Census 2018 is evident. The Labour-led Government's consistent effort to blame the previous National Government for the digital-first census decision and to accuse the National Government of underfunding the Census is irresponsible. To move the Census online was a sound decision both domestically and internationally and the digital-first census is likely to be here to stay.

With a substantially higher budget than the 2013 census, the 2018 Census was never underfunded and Stats NZ had been confident all along. Although this was a digital-first census, Stats NZ spent \$3.75 million on paper packs, more than the \$3.5 million in Census 2013. Even so, Stats NZ underspent in the census year.

The debacle of Census 2018 is largely a preventable organisational disaster. Clearly it failed miserably at crucial stages surrounding Census Day. Chaos and confusion overshadowed the execution of the 2018 Census on the ground.

The Government failed to lead at the crucial stages. While Stats NZ's Executive Leadership Team was not fully engaged, Minister of Statistics Hon James Shaw was not genuinely committed. Mr Shaw never showed any particular interest in the 2018 Census. This is in sharp contrast to his predecessors.

The impact of the Census 2018 debacle will be felt for years to come. A widespread concern is the equity issue as a result of the inaccurate and incomplete census data. This will seriously compromise the Government's priority of achieving equity and addressing wellbeing.

Census 2018 also constitutes a transparency debacle for Stats NZ. Their handling of this author's genuine questions about the census was simply astonishing and has tarnished the reputation of Stats NZ.

The Labour-led Government should stop blaming the previous National Government for the debacle on the one hand and talking up the quality of the census data on the other. For the interest of New Zealanders, it is time for the Government to face up to the debacle and make an earnest effort to ensure the quality of the census data and consider moving the next census forward.

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