



## Review of 2021 Census Topics: Submission Form

On completion, check and submit your form via

- **Email:** [census.content@abs.gov.au](mailto:census.content@abs.gov.au)
- Or
- **Mail:** Census Topic Review, GPO Box 9817, Brisbane QLD 4001

## Consent to Publish

While all responses received will be included in the analysis of this consultation, the ABS intends to make submissions publicly available after the closing date of 30 June 2018 to share views about the data needs of the Australian community.

If your submission identifies or names an organisation you have collaborated with, please consider obtaining their consent prior to agreeing for the ABS to publish your submission.

**Can we publish your submission after the consultation period closes? (see below for details of what each option represents)**

- Yes
- Yes, but do not publish any parts that are identifiable
- No

After the closing date of 30 June 2018, submissions received will be available on this consultation where your approval has been given.

- **By selecting Yes:**  
You give permission to publish your responses to the assessment criteria as well as who you are representing and organisation name (if applicable). Contact details, including name, phone number and email address will not be published.
- **By selecting Yes, but do not publish any parts that are identifiable:**  
You give permission to publish your responses to the assessment criteria only. Who you are representing, organisation (if applicable) and contact details will not be published.
- **By selecting No:**  
No part of your submission will be published.



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## Contact Details

Should we need to communicate regarding this submission, please provide details of the appropriate contact. We will contact you only if we have questions regarding your submission.

The [ABS Privacy Policy](#) outlines how the ABS will handle any personal information that you provide to us.

**Contact name:** Jack Thornton

**Email address:** [research@shelterwa.org.au](mailto:research@shelterwa.org.au)

**Phone number:** (08) 9325 6660

### Who you are representing:

(please select applicable)

- Commonwealth government department
- State/territory government department
- Local government
- Business
- Industry body/association
- Community group
- Educational institution
- An individual
- Other

If other please specify:

Homeless Statistics Reference Group

### Name of your organisation (if applicable):

Shelter WA

### Please list any other organisations you have collaborated with on this submission.

Please consider obtaining their consent prior to agreeing for the ABS to publish your submission.

Dr. Paul Flatau – University of Western Australia: Centre for Social Impact

Dr. Shae Garwood – Anglicare

Julie Considine – Department of Communities

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## What is your submission about?

Below is a list of topics related to data currently collected on Census.

**Choose one that is the most closely related to your submission.**

- Population
- Sex and gender
- Households and families
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Income and work
- Unpaid work and care
- Education and training
- Disability and carers
- Housing
- Location
- Transport
- Cultural diversity
- Religion
- Other topic (Veterans, homelessness)

If Other topic please specify:

Please note: If you would like to submit ideas on more than one area of interest, please complete separate submissions.

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## Please provide a brief summary of your submission

The crux of this submission is to more clearly identify the data collection process the ABS undertakes towards homelessness census data. It is acknowledged that the 2016 census made improvements on previous years in its enumeration strategy and how to best collect homelessness data, notwithstanding this population often being diverse and difficult to reach.

However, there still needs to be more public transparency and further improvements regarding these processes for the 2021 census. Extensive collaboration with the Homelessness Service Sector, including the national and state-based peaks, has and should continue to be vital to the development and implementation of these enumeration strategies.

It should be noted that a number of the observations and recommendations within this submission have previously been proposed by the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group (HSRG), but not implemented.

### **ABS Homelessness Data Collection Process**

The ABS homelessness enumeration process needs to be broader to ensure accurate, comprehensive and quality data.

#### **On-The-Ground Enumeration:**

It is acknowledged that the ABS regional staff liaise with state and territory organisations to gain their assistance in correctly identifying locations and accommodation likely to cater for people experiencing homelessness. Where possible, people who were experiencing homelessness were engaged to enumerate 'difficult' areas where significant numbers of homeless people were likely to spend Census Night.

It is also acknowledged that the ABS has engaged with specialist homelessness service providers, however, this is somewhat limited. For example, local government rangers often have a strong awareness of where rough sleepers are camping in areas they are responsible for.

Hence, we recommend that the ABS engage more broadly 'on the ground' with other community based organisations, such as local governments, rangers, people with responsibility for national parks and other community groups.

Other jurisdictions such as the United States utilise these groups to ensure accurate and comprehensive enumeration of homelessness at lower costs.

These additional groups are a useful source of providing insight, assistance and information into the process of collecting data regarding rough sleepers. In the previous Census, it was calculated that Kings Park in Perth had a count of no rough sleepers despite it being well-known that is not the reality. The groups mentioned (rangers particularly in this example), can support the ABS in extending its range on the ground for best data capture.

### **Standard Household Census Form**

As observed in previous census years, there has been success in using the Standard Household Census form for rough sleepers in the Northern Territory. It is recommended that preferential use of the Standard Household Census form be used for rough sleepers in the 2021 Census and carried out. Proven collection methods for the use of the standard form with complex and hard to reach homeless populations should routinely adopted by the ABS, field collectors and homelessness support staff during the 2021 enumeration; this will provide much richer data.

Critical data that is utilised in service delivery and policy development regarding these respondents is not being collected when the short form is provided. The short form should only be used by default, when it is impossible to use the standard form.

### **Veterans**

Within the ABS census form, there is no question or option to select whether the respondent is an Australian Defence Force veteran.

The 2018 State of Homelessness in Australia Cities study found that 6 per cent of homeless respondents were classified as veterans.

It is critical to delineate the characteristics of respondents who are experiencing homelessness. The United States have made progress in tackling veterans experiencing homelessness due to the data collected regarding this cohort.

It is recommended that a selection for respondents to identify as veterans be implemented within the 2021 census.

### **Couch-Surfing**

Respondents who may be 'couch surfing' is highly estimated. It is recommended that more precise questioning is required in the census form to identify this accurately.

'Couch-surfing' has become more prevalent, particularly for young people and children, those fleeing domestic violence and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. These people may not be being successfully counted as couch-surfers due to some confusion over the 'usual address' question. This question asks: "Where does the person usually live?" (and asks for an address where the person has or intends to live for 6 months or more during 2016). However, if the person has just commenced couch surfing (July/August), they may have already lived somewhere prior for the six months. One way around this would be to add an option to question 5 which asks, "What is the relationship of this person to Person 1"? Adding the responses "Person staying temporarily (not cotenant or flatmate)" would allow a clearer picture of those that are potentially couch surfing.

### **Overcrowded Accommodation**

There is currently a limit of 6 people per household that can be entered on the census form. To capture important homelessness data regarding those living in overcrowded dwellings there should be no limit within the form (especially on the e-census platform) as the statistics do not determine if overcrowding is present in households.

### **Boarding Houses & Supported/Institutional Accommodation**

It is unclear if the ABS collate a list of boarding houses and institutional accommodation (i.e. correction facilities, hospitals, mental health accommodation etc.) and how exactly that information is collected.

Homelessness services in some jurisdictions, particularly capital cities, report an increase of registered and unregistered boarding houses, including suburban houses where individual bedrooms are sub-let to individuals/households. These unregistered boarding houses can be difficult to identify as they look like private dwellings. While some homelessness service providers/researchers can readily identify these dwellings in areas

where they work, their expertise has not necessarily been drawn upon to assist with homelessness enumeration in the Census.

To enumerate homeless persons living in boarding houses it is critical to have up to date lists of these registered and un-registered establishments. Some Local Councils States and Territories have up to date lists, others do not.

It is recommended that a strategy for working with Local Councils and local service providers to develop more accurate lists of both registered and un-registered boarding/rooming houses in their areas needs to be developed and implemented very early in the implementation process for the 2016 Census. This will be particularly important given the ABS strategy to develop the digital approach to Census data collection.

It is recommended that for the 2021 Census, the ABS (including relevant State and Territory government departments) in close collaboration with the Homelessness Sector, needs to develop a clear and consistent approach to the development of the lists and the information collected through this process. Work on these lists in each jurisdiction will need to occur early in the lead up to the 2021 Census.

### **Enumeration Framework & Strategy**

As previously proposed, it is recommended that continuing collaboration between the homelessness sector and the ABS is vital to achieving consistent, reliable and robust enumeration and estimation of the homelessness population. It will be vitally important as the ABS moves towards the progressive implementation of an E-Census. Arguably the homeless population will be the most difficult to capture in an E-Census format.

The ABS will require expert advice from the homelessness sector as well as extensive and co-coordinated on the ground support to achieve robust enumeration of the homeless population.

At present there is no external homelessness committee with oversight of the ABS Census Homelessness enumeration strategy, methodology and implementation. The HSRG should undertake this role into the future to develop and oversee the development and implementation of:

- A National Homelessness Enumeration Framework/ Strategy for Census
- A National Homelessness Enumeration Implementation Plan for Census
- An Evaluation of the Enumeration Framework and Implementation Plan post-Census

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### **Assessment criteria 1**

**The topic is of current national importance.**

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- data is required for an electoral or legislative purpose
- data is needed to support policy development, planning or program monitoring
- data is used for research purposes

Homelessness is one of the most potent examples of disadvantage in the community, and one of the most important markers of social exclusion. This data is essential to guide policy development, sector response, service planning and resource allocation with a robust evidence base.

It is necessary to understand the characteristics of the homeless populations and changing trends over time, the Census remains the single most important data source to assess the scale of homelessness in Australia. Progress against these targets relies on the prevalence estimates of homelessness provided by the Census.

Without modifications and improvements to the Census and ABS processes it will be very difficult to achieve reliable data for these population groups. The proposed modifications will improve ways of enumerating and estimating the overall prevalence of Homelessness in Australia and particularly the homelessness prevalence for young people, those fleeing domestic violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Improved estimation will allow for greater planning location and distribution of services and other policy reform strategies to address the needs of these and other homelessness groups. It will also enable comparative work between homelessness service population and the homeless population identified in the Census. This can be used to report trends and to target services to prevent or ameliorate the circumstances of homelessness through knowing the locations of the homeless.

The ABS have acknowledged that homelessness estimation through the Census is undermined by the inability of determine if visitors to households are homeless or merely visiting and able to return to a usual address. This issue undermines the credibility of the ABS homelessness statistics with consequence for policy development, and service planning and implementation. There is a strong case for improving on this topic.

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## Assessment criteria 2

### **There is a need for data from a Census of the whole population.**

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- data is needed for small population groups
- data is needed for small geographic areas
- the value of the topic is enhanced through combining with other characteristics collected in the Census

LGA and SA2 data is required for these homelessness sub-populations to inform policy and allow for targeted service planning and service delivery in local Council areas.

This issue of collection transparency and estimation of couch surfing (rather than direct collection) undermines the credibility of the ABS homelessness statistics with consequence for policy development, and service planning and implementation. There is a strong case for improving on this topic.

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### Assessment criteria 3

**The topic can be accurately collected in a form which the household completes themselves.**

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- the topic is likely to be easily understood by respondents
- the topic can be collected in a simple question or questions
- respondents will easily know the answer to the question(s)
- The question(s) is easy and quick to answer

The topics mentioned are improvements in ensuring the census is more easily understood by respondents.



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## Assessment criteria 4

### **The topic would be acceptable to Census respondents.**

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- the topic is not likely to be considered intrusive, offensive or controversial
- respondents are likely to be willing and able to answer accurately
- are there other considerations for specific groups?

None of the topics mentioned would be unacceptable for respondents to answer.

Regarding overcrowding, some homelessness agencies and service providers report that some people completing the Census form are reluctant to identify the number of persons living in their private/public dwellings due to fear that they may be evicted for breaching house lease conditions.

It is recommended that a strategy needs to be developed to identify these dwellings and reassure people potentially living in over-crowded conditions that information provided through the Census is anonymous and will not result in negative consequences for these people. Homelessness and other welfare agencies have an important educative role in advance of the Census to reassure people about the purpose and anonymity of Census data.

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## Assessment criteria 5

### The topic can be collected efficiently.

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- the topic or question will not present major difficulties for coding the information
- the topic or question will not require extensive processing
- the topic will not significantly add to the overall cost of the Census
- the topic will not require a lengthy instruction or explanation
- the collection of data on the topic will not require a large number of response categories or multiple questions

It is acknowledged that the costs of modifying of the census form is high. The recommendations proposed do not present significantly increased costs for the ABS. What is more, any costs that are incurred do provide a return in value in quality data.

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## Assessment criteria 6

**There is likely to be a continuing need for data on this topic in the following Census.**

You may wish to consider the following points in your response.

- there is a need for time series data on the topic
- the topic is likely to remain relevant in the future

There will be an ongoing need for accurate data on homelessness. As the population increases, it is likely that the numbers of homeless persons will also increase. This will require a greater policy response, further investment by government and a strengthening of the homelessness support sector. Having a sound evidence base on which to base funding levels and locations will be imperative in ensuring government spending is efficient and effective.

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## Assessment criteria 7

**There are no other alternative data sources or solutions that could meet the topic need.**

You may wish to consider the following possible data sources and identify any barriers to access in your response.

- data which is collected for administrative purposes
- the topic is collected in an ABS survey or by another organisation
- data is produced through integration of existing data sources

There are no alternative sources of population level homelessness data in Australia that can provide the data needed as accurately or extensively as the ABS Census.

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## Any further comments?

If you would like to tell us anything else about your submission, please comment below.

You can also provide additional documentation to support your submission.

- It would be highly useful if the ABS made their enumeration processes for all groups and areas of homelessness publicly available, and if not, if training seminars could be held – to detail methods for interested policy makers and practitioners within this sector.

This submission has covered a number of important topic areas:

- Veterans
- Transparency on the collection methodology for homelessness persons
- Broadening the scope of the “on-the-ground” contacts to improve the homelessness counts
- Direct collection instead of derivation for Couch surfing
- Broadening the definition of boarding houses to include those that aren’t registered
- Use of the long form for homelessness (to collect richer data than what is possible on the short form)

All of these items are critically important to policy makers, government, and providers of services within the homelessness sector.

We call upon the ABS to carefully consider the recommendations put forward within this submission. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss this submission to clarify any content which may not be clear.

We look forward to hearing from the ABS regarding this submission.

Shelter WA (represented by Jack Thornton)

08 9325 6660

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