Measuring Small Populations with an Ancestry Question in the Census

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DAVID LUCAS

Abstract

A question on ancestry was included in an Australian census for the first time in 1986, and included again in the 2001 census. There were some differences in the format of the question between the two censuses and in the guidelines given to people on how to answer the question. This paper examines the enumeration of small ethnic groups using the ancestry question and considers the impacts of the differences in question format and instructions on the identification of ethnic origin. It also discusses the effectiveness of the census ancestry question in the enumeration of small ethnic groups and the usefulness of the data collected. While many small ethnic groups were identified, they accounted for a very small percentage of the total population. Specific mention of an ancestry group on the census form appeared to boost its size.

An ancestry question was asked in the Australian census for the first time in 1986 and was asked again in 2001. The question was included in the census in response to "a high level of interest expressed by a wide range of individuals, communities and organisations" (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1984:iii). Australia's long history of immigration has resulted in an ethnically diverse population and with 23 per cent of its population being foreign-born, there is considerable interest in its ethnic composition. The Australian census has normally asked questions on each individual's country of birth, the country of birth of each person's father and mother, language spoken at home and religion.

However, it has been argued that the information collected from these questions is not sufficient to identify some ethnic groups that are diasporic and do not come from their original homeland or are ethnic minorities in their country of origin (Khoo and Lucas 2004:28). Two examples of the

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former category are Chinese or Indians who have migrated to Australia from a number of countries; an example of the latter category is Maori. The ancestry question also provides information on the ethnic background of Australians who are of third or more generation. However, since they are born in Australia and their parents are also Australian-born, the questions on birthplace and parents' birthplace would not give any information on where their ancestors had come from originally.

The ancestry question was also useful in enumerating small ethnic groups in the population, because of the detailed ancestry coding that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) adopted for the 2001 census. When the question was first asked in 1986, the ancestry classification comprised 94 specific ancestries and a total of 99 categories including “Other” ancestry, “Mixed”, “Not known” “Inadequately described”, and “Not Stated”. A new ancestry classification, the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups, that had nearly 200 specific groups was developed for use with the 2001 census (ABS 2000) and as a result, many more small ethnic groups were recorded compared to the 1986 census.

The aims of this paper are to discuss the effectiveness of the ancestry question in enumerating small minority groups in the Australian population and the usefulness of the data gathered. The issues of minimum group size, question format, and the effectiveness of the guidelines are considered. The focus is on groups with fewer than 20,000 people.

The Ancestry Question in the 1986 and 2001 Censuses

The ancestry question in the 1986 Australian census was: *What is each person’s ancestry?* For example: Greek, English, Indian, Armenian, Aboriginal, Chinese, etc.

The following guidelines were given in a separate booklet distributed with the census form:

“Ancestry” means the ethnic or national group from which you are descended. It is quite acceptable to base your answer on your grandparents' ancestry. Persons of mixed ancestry who do not identify with a single ancestry should answer with their multiple ancestry. Persons who consider their ancestry to be Australian may answer “Australian”.

The 2001 Australian census asked the ancestry question in the following format: *What is the person’s ancestry?* For example: Vietnamese, Hmong, Dutch, Kurdish, Australian South Sea Islander, Maori, Lebanese.
Provide more than one ancestry if necessary.

- English
- Irish
- Italian
- German
- Greek
- Chinese
- Australian
- Other – please specify ________________________________

The guidelines given with the 2001 census were as follows:

When answering this question consider and mark the ancestries with which you most closely identify. Count your ancestry back as far as three generations, if known. For example, consider your parents, grandparents and great grandparents. If you are a descendant of South Sea Islanders brought to Australia as indentured labour around the turn of the century, please answer “AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER”.

In both censuses, the first two ancestries specified were coded. While the wording of the question in the two censuses remained more or less the same, there were differences in the format, guidelines and examples provided on how to answer it. Ancestry was defined only in the 1986 census but in 2001 people were only asked to identify the ancestry with which they most closely identified. There may, therefore, be a greater degree of self-perceived ethnic identification in people’s responses in 2001 compared to the previous census. In addition, when considering their ancestry, people were asked to go back three generations in 2001 but only two in 1986. Finally, in response to the Australian South Sea Islander community who felt that they had been under-enumerated by the 1986 census, a specific prompt was given in the 2001 census to people with claims to this ancestry so that they might identify themselves.

**Classification of Small Groups**

The ABS states that its *Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups* (ASCCEG) “recognises the self-defined and self-reported ancestries of all Australians and includes ancestries which refer to nations (eg. French), to groups within nations (eg. Maori, Singhalese) and to groups or regions which cross national boundaries (eg. Kurdish, Jewish)” (ABS 2000:12).

In the Oceania region, the main sub-regional groups are the indigenous ancestries including Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders for Australia
and Maori for New Zealand. European sub-national groups include ancestries such as Breton, Flemish, Walloon, Catalan and Basque. The North Africa/Middle East region included Arab and Assyrian besides Kurdish. Many African countries have a diverse range of ancestries and the classification included ethnicities such as Akan, Fulani, Yoruba and Oromo, which can be sub-national as well as cross-national if they are present in more than one country. Many of the sub-national groups are small and only one per cent of Australia’s population fall into the sub-national or cross-national groups (Khoo and Lucas 2004:6).

Identification of Small Ancestry Groups

Over 200 ancestries were recorded in the 2001 census compared with less than 100 in 1986 because of the expanded classification used in 2001. Table 1 shows the number of ancestry groups according to size and the percentage of total population that fell within that group size. While there was not much difference in the number of large or medium size ancestry groups recorded in the two censuses, it was evident that many more small ancestry groups were recorded in 2001 than in 1986. The difference in number increased as the group size decreased. There were 25 ancestries with 10,000-19,999 people in 2001 compared with just 11 in 1986 and 51 ancestries with 1,000-9,999 people in 2001 compared with 31 in 1986. The increase in the number of ancestries identified was even larger for groups with fewer than 1,000 people: 68 in 2001 compared with just 6 in 1986. Thus the use of the new classification of ethnic and cultural groups in 2001 with its detailed 4-digit codes enabled many more small groups to be separately identified.

While many more small groups were recorded in 2001 than in 1986, there was not much difference in terms of population coverage. The ancestry groups with fewer than 20,000 people comprised less than four per cent of Australia’s population in 2001 and less than three per cent in 1986. Less than two per cent of the total population in both census years belonged to ancestry groups with fewer than 10,000 people.

Since there was no difference in terms of population coverage even though a greater number of small ancestry groups were identified in 2001, the benefits of identifying them depend on the extent to which they are of interest to the public. Some ancestry groups in the 10,000-19,999 range may be of policy interest because of the circumstances of their migration, Bosnians and Iraqis for example, may have special needs because they were refugees or other humanitarian migrants. A number of ancestry groups in the 1,000-9,999 range are also of similar interest such as Timorese, Somali
and Sudanese. However, groups with just a few hundred people are usually of less interest from a policy perspective, no matter the circumstances of their migration, because their small size makes it inefficient for the provision of any culturally specific programs of assistance such as interpreting services.

### Table 1: Number of ancestry groups by size and population, 1986 and 2001 censuses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Size</th>
<th>Number of ancestry groups</th>
<th>% of population*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 million+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000-99,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000-499,999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000-99,999</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000-49,999</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-19,999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-9,999</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Customised tables from 1986 and 2001 censuses provides by ABS.
* Total percentage exceeds 100 because group size is based on first two ancestries. Excluding regional groups such as South Asian ndf (not further defined), "Other ancestry", "Not stated", "Inadequately described" and "Overseas visitors". Group size based on the first two ancestries recorded.

#### Loss of Ancestry Counts and Its Effect of Small Groups

In an evaluation of the quality of the 2001 ancestry data, Kunz and Costello (2003:22) reported that “the issue that had the most impact on data quality for Ancestry was the decision to code the first two Ancestry responses only, for each person.” About 7 per cent of the population reported more than two ancestries and these additional ancestries were not coded. Although in absolute numbers the lost ancestries tended to be those of the larger groups, in percentage terms some small groups were affected quite significantly.

Table 2 shows the extent of loss suffered by ancestry groups with less than 50,000 people, as estimated by ABS (Kunz and Costello 2003). Nearly 60 per cent of the very small groups - those with fewer than 1,000 people - did not lose any people due to coding only two ancestries, which was an encouraging result. But 17 per cent lost more than 30 per cent of their count. These included European ancestries such as Flemish (46 per cent to
173 cases), Breton (45 per cent to 60 cases), Walloon (78 per cent to 14 cases) and Roma/Gypsy (53 per cent to 603 cases). They also included two Pacific Island ancestries, New Caledonian (53 per cent to 173 cases) and Ni-Vanuatu (53 per cent to 311 cases) and the Asian ancestries, Javanese (43 per cent to 597 cases), Mongolian (42 per cent to 415 cases) and Malayali (35 per cent to 91 cases) (Kunz and Costello 2003). While the percentage loss may be large, the actual numbers are still small and most of the groups would still have fewer than 1,000 people even if there were no loss in the ancestry counts.

Table 2: Loss of ancestry counts in ancestry groups with fewer than 50,000 people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestry group size</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1-9.9%</th>
<th>10-19.9%</th>
<th>20-29.9%</th>
<th>30+%</th>
<th>Number of groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-9,999</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-19,999</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000-49,999</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kunz and Costello 2003

Few of the ancestry groups with more than 1,000 but fewer than 20,000 people lost more than 30 per cent of their counts, which was also encouraging. Those that did included British (40 per cent), Norwegian (42 per cent), Jamaican (51 per cent), Native North American Indian (50 per cent) and Polynesian (45 per cent) (Kunz and Costello 2003).

About one-quarter of all groups with 20,000-49,999 people lost over 30 per cent of their counts. These included three western European ancestries, Danish (45 per cent), Swedish (47 per cent), Swiss (31 per cent), and American (33 per cent) (Kunz and Costello 2003). The effect of this loss for these groups is quite significant, with actual numbers ranging from 20,000 to 32,000.

Impact of Examples and Guidelines

Examples of ancestries indicated on the census form or mentioned in the guidelines given out with the forms can have an impact on ancestry counts because they may prompt people to identify with a given ancestry. Farley (1991) in his analysis of the ancestry data from the 1980 census in the United States suggested that many people were prompted to state English ancestry because the ancestry question was preceded on the census form by
a question on language that asked whether English was spoken at home. Analyses of the ancestry data from the 1986 and 2001 Australian censuses using a cohort approach have also indicated that the ancestries appearing on the census form in 2001 have all shown little change or an increase in size between 1986 and 2001 (Khoo 2005). The seven ancestries that were specified on the 2001 census form with boxes for people to check all recorded counts that were about the same or greater than expected based on their 1986 counts according to three age cohorts and whether people were born in Australia or overseas (Table 3). This was a clear indication that people were prompted to check off the box against that ancestry if they considered the ancestry to be part of their heritage.

It was believed that the substantial increase in the number of people identifying as Irish in the 2001 census (1.9 million) compared with the 1986 census (902,000) was due largely to Irish being the second ancestry listed on the census form with a tick box. In contrast, ancestries such as Scottish and Welsh, which were not listed on the 2001 census form, suffered a 27 and 29 per cent decline in numbers respectively between 1986 and 2001.

Table 3: Ratio of observed to expected ancestry counts in each age-birthplace cohort for ancestries shown with tick boxes on the 2001 census form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestry</th>
<th>Australian-born</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Overseas-born</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age 0-14</td>
<td>15-29</td>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>Age 0-14</td>
<td>15-29</td>
<td>30-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kunz and Costello 2004:73–83

The impact of specification as an example or reference in the guidelines on a small group is best illustrated by the case of the Australian South Sea Islanders. This group, as mentioned in the 2001 census guidelines, was descended from South Sea Islanders who were brought to Australia as indentured labour in the early 20th century to work in the cane fields of Queensland. After the 1901 Pacific Islands Labourers Act, the entry of South Sea Islanders was prohibited and 7,262 were deported. This left only 1,654 who were exempted (Evans 2001:48), and although some of these
maintained a separate identity, many were absorbed into Aboriginal communities (Gray 2001:91).

Only 521 persons identified as having Australian South Sea Islander ancestry in 1986. The Australian South Sea Islander community thought this number was a gross underestimate of the size of the ancestry group and requested that specific efforts be made to remind people to identify with this ancestry the next time the ancestry question was asked in the census. Thus, Australian South Sea Islander was one of the examples listed on the 2001 census form and a special prompt was included in the guidelines for people who were descendants of South Sea Islanders to identify their ancestry as Australian South Sea Islander. The result was nearly a six-fold increase in the 1986 count to 3,442 in 2001.

“Aboriginal” was an example listed on the 1986, but not on the 2001 census form. Partly because of this, the Aboriginal ancestry count decreased by half between 1986 and 2001, from 186,594 to 94,950. Cohort analyses indicate that less than 40 per cent of the people who identified as having Aboriginal ancestry in 1986 did so in 2001 (Khoo 2005). The decrease in Aboriginal ancestry counts was also due to the inclusion of “Australian” ancestry with a tick box on the 2001 census form, prompting many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to check off “Australian” in 2001. A tabulation of the ancestry responses of people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to the census question on Aboriginality showed that more than half stated Australian ancestry, to which of course, they had a valid claim. Only about one-quarter stated “Aboriginal” or “Torres Strait Islander” as their ancestry (Table 4). In contrast, in 1986 with “Aboriginal” listed as an example on the census form and Australian ancestry not specified with a tick box, over 81 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people stated “Aboriginal” or “Torres Strait Islander” as their ancestry and only 8 per cent specified “Australian” (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1990).

The British moved from a large ancestry group of 339,627 in 1986 to 14,049 in 2001, a massive decline of 96 per cent (Khoo and Lucas 2004:12-13). The pre-coded ancestry categories used in 2001 appeared to have had an impact, with people identifying as “English” because it was first on the list with tick boxes. There was also a greater number identifying with “Australian” ancestry, which was also on the list.

Clearly, the specification of an ancestry on the census form can increase the size of the group. Thus small groups could benefit significantly by being among the list of examples on the census form. They could, however, also be vulnerable to significant undercounting if ancestries that were specified on the form could be regarded as alternative responses.
Table 4: Indigenous Australians stating Australian ancestry, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to census question on Aboriginality</th>
<th>Ancestry response</th>
<th>Ancestry response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Australian” %</td>
<td>Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (TSI) %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torres Strait Islander</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal and TSI</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Aboriginal or TSI</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


African Ancestries

Africans are a fast-growing category in both Australia and New Zealand. The number of people born in Africa in Australia increased by about one-third between 1996 and 2001 to about 120,000, while the number in New Zealand more than doubled to 36,000 over the same period (Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003:3-7; Statistics New Zealand).

Africans are of interest here because there are several thousand ethnic groups in Africa. In spite of this, the 2001 Australian ancestry question showed that most Africans fitted into national groupings with South African as the largest. However, there were around 7,500 in the "Saharan African, not further described" category while many small ancestries such as Fang, Tutsi and Zulu had disappeared into the “Not elsewhere classified” categories. Only a few African countries such as the Somali Republic, Lesotho and Swaziland have one dominant ethnic group. The 2001 Australian census showed 5,007 people with Somali ancestry (Khoo and Lucas 2004:13). In contrast, Somalia's neighbour, Sudan, has many ethnic groups such as Dinka, and Nuer. The Sudanese numbered 3,788 in 2001 and perhaps realise that many Australians cannot appreciate their ethnic affiliations. Indeed, some Australians believe that their language is "Sudanese". Prior to the inflow of refugees from Southern Sudan in the 1990s, the Sudan-born were mainly Arabic speakers, many of whom were Muslims or Copts.

Because of its ethnic diversity South Africa is known as the Rainbow Nation and has eleven official languages. Since Australia and New Zealand have a non-discriminatory immigration policy, it presumably has little interest in whether these migrants are from the White, Coloured, Asian or
Black population groups, or whether the whites are Afrikaners or "Anglos". However, South African writers such as van Rooyen (2000) are interested in this issue, partly because of the nature of the brain drain from South Africa. Louw and Mersham (2001:313) have forecast that the current wave of emigration from South Africa "has consisted of Anglos, Indians, coloreds, and, for the first time, significant numbers of Afrikaners."

Afrikaner is an interesting small ancestry group of around 1,600 persons in Australia given that the stereotypical emigrant from South Africa was alleged to be an English-speaking white (see, for example van Rooyen 2000:36), and that around 8,000 people spoke Afriekaans at home (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2003:20). The 2001 Australian ancestry data show that the Afrikaners are considerably outnumbered by about 30:1 by those giving South African as their ancestry. Furthermore, around two thirds of the Afrikaners spoke English at home (Khoo and Lucas 2004:91) and about one fifth reported English/Afrikaner ancestry. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Afrikaans speakers are sufficiently numerous in Auckland for them to have contemplated having their own school but their numbers cannot be easily calculated from the New Zealand data because Afrikaans is not shown as a separate language in the published statistics.

**Usefulness of Census Data for Small Ancestry Groups**

Considering that less than four per cent of the total population in 2001 was in the 144 ancestry groups representing fewer than 20,000 individuals, how useful was it for them to have been identified and how useful were the data collected?

As mentioned earlier, there were a number of ancestry groups with fewer than 20,000 people who might be of policy interest because of their migration background, for example, because they had been refugees and might need special settlement assistance. These groups, as noted earlier, included Bosnians, Iraqis, Somali and Sudanese.

Ancestry groups with fewer than 20,000 people also included sub-national or cross-national groups such as Assyrian, Armenian, Jewish, Kurdish, Bengali, Tamil and Punjabi, and who would not have been identified from census questions on birthplace or parents' birthplace. Some of these groups, Bengali or Tamil for example, might have been identified by the question on language spoken at home. However, if not everyone of these ancestries speaks the ethnic language at home, then the language question would underestimate the size of the ethnic group. The ability to identify
diasporic groups such as Jewish and Kurdish is useful in the measurement of diasporas and in studies of transnational communities.

In undertaking analyses of the ancestry data from the 2001 census, Khoo and Lucas (2004) reduced the number of ancestries from over 200 to about 130, often by merging small sub-national groups into the national group. Groups with fewer than 1,000 people were usually grouped with others from the same country or region of origin. In analyses by generation, which involved dividing each ancestry group into three sub-groups by generation – first, second and third or more generations – the authors had examined only the major ancestry groups, defined as those with 50,000 or more people. Small group size clearly hinders the disaggregation of the group into sub-groups for more detailed analyses by socio-economic or demographic characteristics.

Loss of Small Groups in the Sample File

While the 4-digit coding and classification of ancestry has allowed many small ethnic groups to be separately identified in the census, these groups were “lost” to analysis when the one per cent household sample file was used. To maintain adequate cell sizes and ensure confidentiality in data analysis, the sample file allowed only the top twenty ancestries to be identified. The file is therefore of no use for examining small ancestry groups, which requires the use of full census counts. This would normally involve a request to ABS for special tabulations which are not carried out free of charge.

Large or Small?

Demographers like large numbers for their cross-tabulations and multivariate analysis. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for reasons of confidentiality, produces the tables where some cells have been randomly confidentialised, that is, given a value of 0 or 3. In contrast, service providers such as those dealing with refugees, may seek more detail.

As shown above, reducing the number of ancestry categories made the analysis easier to handle, while the questionnaire design pushed respondents into the larger pre-coded categories. Multiple responses also increased the numbers since people reporting two ancestries were counted twice and the responses were not ranked (English/Irish is the same as Irish/English for example).

If changes over time are to be measured it is important that detailed information be retained in the event that a small group increases and
requires separate analysis at a later date. Some (small) groups were not identified separately in 1986 and so their growth in the period 1986-2001 could not be measured, even though they had become more important by 2001. Ancestries that were separately identified and coded in 1986 but increased in size over the 1986-2001 period included Samoan, Bosnian and Afghan.

Conclusion

The ancestry question in the 2001 Australian census together with the use of a detailed 4-digit classification of ethnic and cultural groups has been effective in identifying small ethnic groups in the Australian population. The number of small ethnic groups – those with fewer than 20,000 people – recorded in the 2001 census far exceeded that in the 1986 census. However, these small groups accounted for less than four per cent of the total population and groups with less than 10,000 people accounted for less than two per cent. While many more small ancestry groups were identified in the 2001 census, the proportion of the total population falling into these groups in 2001 was the same as in 1986.

It is unclear at this time how useful the data on small ancestry groups have been. For the first time there is information about the size of several small ethnic groups. This is important because small groups may grow rapidly if, for example, the composition of the humanitarian migration intake changes. However, further analyses of these groups or any disaggregation by geographic location, demographic or socio-economic characteristics is also hindered by their small size. Groups with fewer than 1,000 persons – and there were 68 identified in the 2001 census – have usually been combined with others from the same country or region for data analyses.

ABS’s decision to code only the first two ancestry responses has led to nearly 40 per cent of groups with fewer than 1,000 people and 50 per cent of groups with 1,000-9,999 people losing more than 10 per cent of their counts, although only a small minority lost more than 30 per cent.

On the other hand, specific mention of an ancestry as an example on the census form helps to boost counts. Therefore, it helps small groups to mention them on the census form as examples. When this is combined with specific guidelines, as in the case of Australian South Sea Islanders in the 2001 census, the result can be quite a significant count increase.

The specification of seven of the largest ancestry groups with tick boxes on the 2001 census form has ensured that they have maintained their counts, as indicated by cohort analyses of the 1986 and 2001 census data. However,
the inclusion of Australian ancestry as one of the seven with tick boxes appeared to have boosted this count at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestries. More than half of all people who identified as indigenous in the question on Aboriginality in 2001 ticked the Australian ancestry box rather than specifying their ancestry as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This resulted in a substantial decrease in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry counts in 2001 compared with 1986. The implications for small groups of the format of the ancestry question in future censuses should be carefully considered.

Note

The Australian census data on which this paper is based have been provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics through its Australian Census Analytic Program. We thank the ABS ACAP team for their assistance with the data tables. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the IAOS satellite meeting on Measuring Small and Indigenous Populations, 14–15 April 2005, Wellington, New Zealand.

References


