Len Cook

The Next Population Census

assessing its fitness for purpose and provenance

Abstract

New Zealand is witnessing a population storm. Existing policy settings, according to the Treasury, are leading to unsustainable fiscal imbalances. Public welfare programmes of all forms, and the tax base that funds them, are facing major changes. Any such policy changes need to be informed by comprehensive and reliable population statistics. With that context in mind, this article highlights why it is vital to retain a periodic national census that generates information not only about individuals, but also about the dwelling units within which families and community groups are clustered. Without the latter information, researchers and policymakers will lack the capacity to connect individuals to the places, institutions and persons of relevance to them with knowable reliability.

Keywords census, trust, enumeration, workforce planning, policy interdependence, labour market

Len Cook served as New Zealand's government statistician between 1992 and 2000, and subsequently as the national statistician of the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2005. Since 2006 his involvement in official statistics has included membership of the 2018 Census External Data Quality Panel and co-leadership in preparing a ten-year development plan for a Pacific statistical system (2013).

Moving beyond the current stalemate

In 2023 Statistics New Zealand made known a plan to discontinue the long-standing practice of conducting a regular census of population and dwellings, and to rely instead on information accumulated in various administrative records held within government departments. Subsequently, in June 2025, the government announced its intention to enact legislation to implement this change. These moves followed the costly failure of a hybrid model implemented in 2023 – a model that ministers had been assured would improve upon the enumeration failure of the 2018 census. In March 2026, the New Zealand Parliament voted to approve the first reading of two bills to amend the Data and Statistics Act 2022 and the Electoral Act 1993 with the aim of discontinuing the regular census of population and dwellings. The bills were duly sent to the Justice Select Committee for consideration.

While statisticians had, wisely, been thinking for nearly a decade about making greater use of administrative records in population statistics, there was deep concern over the idea of relying solely on such records to inform policymaking and undertake research. Nearly 200 submissions were received by the Justice Committee, many of which were extremely critical of the proposed reforms. Among other things, the submitters highlighted the many inadequacies in the consultation process undertaken by government officials prior to seeking ministerial agreement on the proposed legislative changes. Above all, ministers had not been adequately informed about whether those who depend on the scope and integrity of the population statistics system had confidence in the reliability of the proposed 'administrative data first' method. The statutory independence of the government statistician on methodology issues meant that ministers had to depend on a mix of economic arguments, a mantra of 'modernisation', and incomplete advice on international comparisons by the government statistician to explain where this would place New Zealand.

The Justice Committee concluded that Parliament was unlikely to pass either the legislation to support replacing the five-yearly census of population and dwellings, or the Electoral Act amendments, which required the support of 75% of MPs. Consequently, the existing statutes oblige the government statistician to undertake a census of population and dwellings in 2028, with statistical attributes of the form that have existed since 1851. Given that the 2026 population census of Canada obtained a 98.4% response rate, there must be a good prospect of returning the response rates of any 2028 population census in New Zealand to the levels obtained before 2018, if the enumeration were to be properly managed. Nevertheless, the situation regarding population statistics in New Zealand beyond 2028 remains uncertain. That uncertainty is unfortunate and needs resolution.

This article highlights the unique and vital contribution of a five-yearly census of population and dwellings to an understanding our evolving societal dynamics and the critical role of the information thereby generated for prudent planning and policy-making. At the same time, it underscores the fundamental limitations of an alternative statistical approach (i.e. the proposed 'administrative data first' method) that relies solely on administrative data. In so doing, this article illuminates how the structure, properties and content of a regular population census assists in disclosing our society's complex and evolving interdependencies, along with the nature, scope, scale and future shape of the policy challenges we face.

Why the long series of population censuses underpins planning and policy

The five-yearly census of population and dwellings counts everyone in New Zealand, through connecting them to where they are found on census day, as well as where they usually live. The statistics, analyses and policies that are informed by a population census affect everyone. Population censuses tell us not only who we are, but how we have changed, and how we will most likely change again. Each population census evolves from the previous ones, so that each census can help to identify what trends and issues are emerging.

Over the period to 2046, the shifting balance in the population of people of working age will lead to increased government expenditure and reduced market incomes (see other contributions to this special issue of *Policy Quarterly*). The net effect on the fiscal capacity of the current tax system means that taxes will fund barely 70% of the public spending that we have become used to, particularly for health, education, retirement incomes and welfare benefits (Cook, 2024).

Accurate population statistics are key to informing prudent policy responses. Population projections are the most reliable predictions we can make of the long-term future, and, unlike most predictions, we know their limitations. The rich analysis enabled by the breadth, depth and quality of population censuses and surveys will always be essential for evaluating policy options – especially when simplistic policy responses result from some supposed imperative to act. Trust in population statistics will be vital for the scale of policy change that has already become inevitable.

A decline in fiscal capability of such significance will inevitably prompt a major rethink of the welfare state, affecting the balance between family, community and market provision of services and support, the extent of working-life support from both training and retirement policies, and the nature of the tax base. The fiscal consequences of demographic change are already constraining health, education and housing policy options. Whether to change the policy settings of New Zealand Superannuation (NZS) is just one issue generated by an ageing population. As it stands, expert comment and political reactions tend to give primacy to reconsideration of eligibility and entitlement to NZS (Lala et al., 2026).

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Unless account is taken of the full scope of our policy challenges, we risk ignoring the options that might best address them, and their direct and indirect effects on who makes up the labour force and how they contribute. We need to understand where the continued and predictable ageing of the population can generate flexibility in managing such challenges. While the main changes to population structures and underlying dynamics were foreseen prior

to this century, the extent to which key thresholds might change (e.g., when people expect to retire) was less well understood.

The special importance of workforce, families, communities and places

The scale of the pressures on resources will require greater understanding of our complex and evolving societal interdependences and connectedness, such as the interdependence between the paid and unpaid work that occurs in families, across the community and over generations. Importantly, communities differ by place and ethnicity, by generational mix, and in the kinds of investment that are the most important to sustaining their economic base. Retirement provision, accident and injury insurance and unemployment benefits are collectively workforce enablers, in that how they are integrated determines how much they contribute to the efficiency of the labour market as an economic engine.

In health, education, housing and income support, the multiplicity of policy interactions is often ignored in one-off policy responses. Examples of where these sectors interact with not only labour market policy but with other policy domains include:

- health: ACC, eligibility criteria (benefit options, benefit unit), forms of care, access to care;
  education and training: access, dependence on family support, entrance criteria for programmes, tertiary fees, loan repayment thresholds and charges, apprenticeship models;
- housing: home ownership, family formation, family dissolution, the family economy, public housing eligibility, housing costs, housing stability;
- income support: eligibility criteria, including for retirement provision, form of benefit unit (individual, household, inclusions), abatement thresholds and rates, rehabilitation support.

In these and other policy domains, the interdependence of family, community, occupation and employment status may vary with generation, place and gender. Hence, the labour market, family, community and place are instruments of policy as much as they are the targets of policy.

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Recognising and valuing the connection between paid and unpaid roles

Given the scale of challenge, we will need to draw on the capabilities of all age groups over the next few decades. Investment in both human and social capital becomes a major lever in mitigating the economic effects of population ageing. Importantly, Māori and Pacific peoples now have age structures capable of delivering a strong demographic dividend, while the European population is rapidly ageing.

Traditionally, women have long been more experienced than men at managing the complexity of balancing family and community activity with paid workforce participation; this is generally the case for all in Māori and Pacific communities (Cook, 2024). A future labour market strategy would aim to facilitate the transition to and from such different forms of economic contribution. It would involve recognising as resources those practices that connect paid and unpaid work, whether work done in the formal labour market, in the community or in the household. These connections, directly or indirectly, enable the fullest economic and social contribution of the population at any time. They can involve high levels of reciprocity, which is usually at its strongest in communities defined by place or by a common societal characteristic. The way in which public organisations relate to the communities relevant to their activities and responsibilities will itself influence reciprocity within communities.

Informing an active workforce strategy

The nature of the population changes we now face is increasing the differences in the age mix of people among towns, cities and rural areas, so that decisions based on national averages and policies are of limited relevance in many places (Jackson, 2011). The diversity and scale of local economic change is becoming a more significant indicator of population change in some places than demographic drivers. For example, there was a sharp decline in sheep numbers on farms in the decades following the mid-1970s, but in some cases local populations have grown (e.g. because conversion to dairying has added to workforce demand), whereas in other cases the population has fallen (e.g. because of conversion to pine forestry).

Population projections and estimates for local authorities risk becoming less reliable unless traditional measurement approaches are revised. In particular, there is a need to integrate population measures for any locality with other measures, of different granularity, frequency and quality. These might include sources not yet rigorously connected, such as global weather effects, sea level rise, ecosystem integrity, transportation, and implementing a geospatial frame.

An active workforce strategy should span all types of work, and forms of reward that contribute to a person's welfare. This must range from informal childcare, to harnessing the potential of artificial intelligence, to ensuring equity of access to education wherever children live. In the face of static birth numbers and a series of economic shocks during the past three decades of growth in the workforce, the interdependence between population dynamics and labour supply has been managed by varying immigrant flows to counter the volatility of

emigrant flows and the domestic labour supply (see Cook, 2024, Figure 7).

The recent inquiry into pay equity (People's Select Committee on Pay Equity, 2026) put a spotlight on the extent to which the labour market has also increasingly become characterised by short-term, low-paid employment. At the same time, the workforce has become more highly qualified over the past three decades, not least because of the significant increase in workforce qualifications particularly of women (see Figure 1).

In increasing the capacity for wealth creation, the workforce is a major anchor point for a coherent wider policy framework. As noted above, such a framework must embrace taxation, health, education and housing, as well as NZS and the other income support options that apply across a person's lifetime.

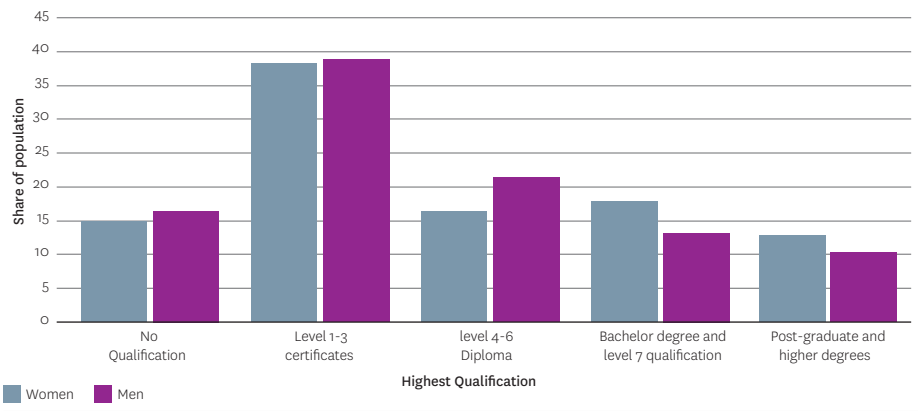
Raising investment in both the human and social capital of younger generations is potentially a major lever in mitigating the effects of ageing on the economic contribution of the paid workforce. A coherent strategy about this will require leadership akin to that of the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission, which has quickly become a powerful model for infrastructure oversight and planning. Another approach is Australia's National Skills Taxonomy (Job and Skills Australia, 2026), a new, evidence-based framework that provides a common language for describing the skills Australians gain, develop and use across education and employment.

The workforce transformation that is already under way

For some four decades the labour force has changed in capability and size without any articulated strategic direction. Alongside the net contribution of heightened immigration and emigration, we have seen the growth in the proportion of women, as well people aged 65 and over, remaining in the workforce, as well as the transformation in investment in education of women. Of particular significance:

- The number of women in the labour force now has come close to that of men, at all ages under 60 years.
- Women aged 20–59 years are now more highly qualified than men in this age group (see Figure 1). This followed the rapid growth since the late 1980s in the breadth of qualifications held by women when leaving high school.
- The increasing participation of men and women aged 65 and over in the labour market and in the community since the 1990s has been facilitated by the nature of NZS.

Figure 1: Highest Qualification by Men compered to women, 2023



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Despite these major changes in labour supply, migration flows have increased in volatility. This is the result of dysfunction in major health and education labour markets, along with a lack of recruits for semi-skilled basic jobs, such as truck drivers. Uniformed services, including the police, prison service and the military, have experienced recruitment and retention issues on a scale not seen for decades. Contributing to the imbalances in particular labour markets is the growing share of young people not in employment, education or training. Also, between 2013 and 2023 a majority of local authorities experienced a decline in the proportion of the population of usual workforce age.

The expanding mix of vulnerable occupations in the workforce is not limited to those which require years of training or experience. The recent pay equity inquiry outlined the huge interdependence between low-paid support staff and the skilled professionals they support.

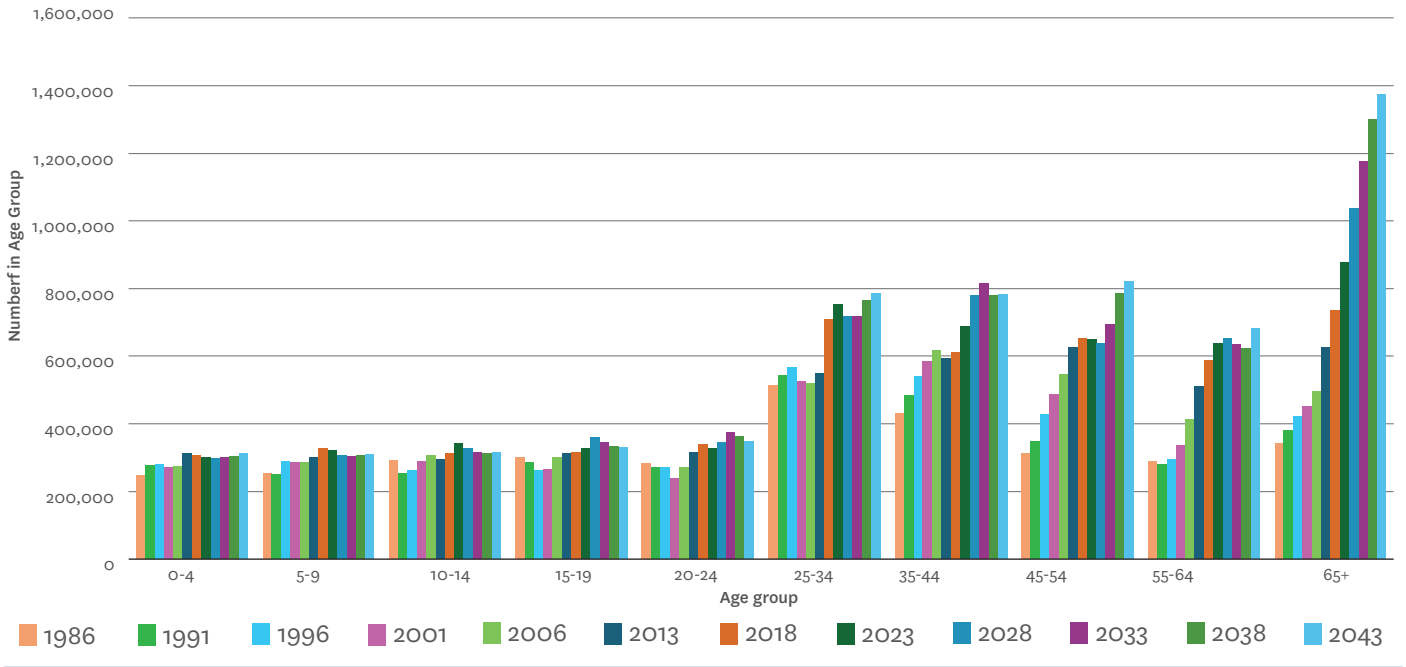
Population size, geographic location, age and family structure, education and population composition are all important influences on the future labour supply, whether it be for paid work or unpaid work, within the community or family. Consequently, no single demographic ratio is sufficient for predicting the effect on labour supply of population changes. An understanding of fertility patterns, including the age and geographic distribution of childbearing and mortality (including health and life expectancy), is also relevant. The rate of change in each of these elements is critical because they interact directly with the flexibility and resilience within the system. Over recent decades, for those parts of the labour market that have had to adjust to the growing need for people in paid and unpaid roles, adjustment has been enabled by large, volatile migration flows rather than planning.

Investing in the Māori and Pacific demographic dividend

While the non-Māori, non-Pacific population aged 15–39 years has stopped growing, the share of Māori and Pacific people in this age group is continuing to increase. From being 29% of 15–39-year-olds in 2026, they will rise to 32.5% by 2048 (see Figure 3). Hence, investing in the education and training of Māori and Pacific communities will be critical to the future prosperity of the country. The age distribution of Māori now is similar to the European age distribution in 1966. In the context of a rapidly ageing European population, Māori and Pacific peoples have age structures capable of delivering a future demographic dividend.

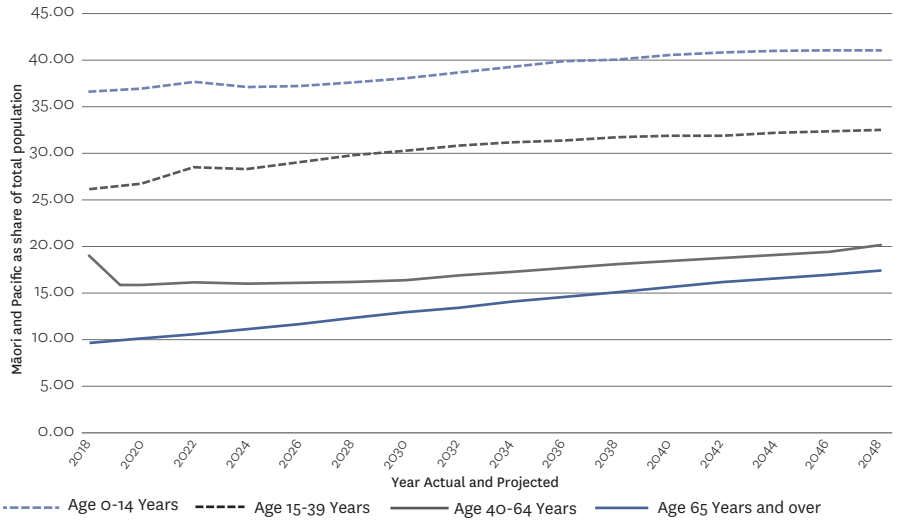
As Jackson (2011) noted, for this potential to be realised, the population structure must be matched by investment in education, training, employment, infrastructure, and regional opportunities. But the inequities in the distribution of education and training resources suggest that we are underinvesting in the education of many young people. Accordingly, to what extent governments invest in ensuring greater equality of educational

Figure 2: Change in aged structure 1986 to 2043



Source: Statistics New Zealand, author calculations

Figure 3: Proportion of the population which identifies as Māori and/or an ethnicity within the Pacific grouping of ethnicities



Source Statistics NZ and author calculations

opportunities will significantly affect the long-term performance of our labour force.

Placing retirement provision within a labour market framework

NZS was introduced to provide certainty of an income in retirement, regardless of gender, life expectancy, family form, and how materially successful people's working life outcomes had been. Eligibility is determined by age and length of residency. NZS provides a de facto annuity that the retirement savings schemes in both Australia and New Zealand (i.e. KiwiSaver) cannot. NZS improves fairness for women because it resolved the issue of women's longer life expectancy which affects savings schemes such as KiwiSaver, and because the entitlement has become to the individual, not the "head of household".

The adaptability of NZS to fiscal pressures was greater when there was a more progressive tax scale. While the progressiveness of the personal income tax scale has the power to be an effective means of targeting NZS, this is not the case currently.

The case for measuring connections among people and places

The census of population and dwellings records not only whom people live with and how those people relate to each other, but where they work or attend education centres, and how they get there. This variety of connections between people and place is a result of the methodology of the census. The enumeration of all dwellings by census day ensures that all the places where people live or could be is known by census night, and that wherever they are, they have a personal census form to complete. How people connect with each other, socially, economically and in the community, as well as with employers and educational organisations is recorded. For example, where people are mobile, census collection can include any enumerated dwelling whether this is a de facto residence of the person on census night or the person's usual residence, and will record how they relate to the residents who are usually present. Explicit efforts to make contact at census time with people who are not at their usual place of residence enable them to provide personal information, and to link back to their usual residence.

As with any statistical survey, the content of a census of population and dwellings will evolve every five years to meet needs that are foreseeable.

Administrative records are quite different from those obtained from people grouped in households and families, because they atomise the information that

is gathered about individuals at unrelated periods. There is generally no requirement to enquire about connections between individuals in the way that the census of population and dwellings can. It would be impractical for such information to be consistently obtained and recorded about all persons by any government department.

Without a field-based census as backbone, usable information on place and community structure drawn from administrative records, however integrated by a common personal identity, will be necessarily limited. For instance, the connections that people have amongst each other, with school and work, with the places they live and the communities around them are not ascertainable. In addition, administrative records adapt slowly to change that is required as policy needs and settings change.

These differences mean that the cessation of the regular census of population and dwellings will significantly affect all forms of information gathering that underpin the ability to develop policies appropriate for managing and responding to the evolving challenges and opportunities of ongoing population change.

Key concerns about the 'administrative data first' model

As argued above, the functioning of our welfare state rests on a coherent understanding of the interconnection between family, work, earnings and income support, and age, sex and generational shifts. To this end, and to ensure reliability and relevance, official statistics must meet clearly specified, internationally agreed, protocols and standards, including comparability over time, place, among communities and across countries. Any substitute for the current census as the central knowledge base that underpins population statistics will have to be constructed anew from administrative files. But relying on administrative data poses serious problems. The key concerns, as summarised in Cook & Gray (2026), include:

- an inability to apply common definitions and other methods that are key to designing in advance the effective integration of diverse statistical sources
- reducing the existing rich array of small area information
- ceasing using methods common to Australia, Canada and the UK which enable collective benefits from continuing innovation (e.g., propensity indexes)
- damaging the comparisons between past and future population and social statistical measures through statistically critical changes to methods and operational practices, particularly shifting from a household sampling frame to that of persons (Haslett & Seber, 2026).

Several of these concerns deserve amplification.

The vital importance of dwelling-based data

First, as noted earlier, the dwelling is the central statistical unit of an enumerated census of population and dwellings, and of most social surveys. Individuals in this context constitute sub-units. Not only does the dwelling enable a much richer survey frame compared with that of the individual, but the dwelling questionnaire content can identify the family and community groups that people are clustered in. Consequently, the connections identified at the same date with place and between people are of much richer and measurable quality than the administrative records of the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) can provide. In comparison, what administrative records can do at present is simply to connect those who have in common their last known address.

Without the dwelling as the core statistical unit for population surveys and censuses, there is no way to directly connect individuals once every five years to the places and persons of relevance to them, with known reliability. Without this direct connection, regular, exact comparisons between censuses, for even small groups in the population, can no longer be made. In this context, the Deprivation Indexes are of special significance, as they depend on multidimensional analyses of surveyed variables being available at a finer level than the proposed alternative methodology could provide. These indexes also require variables that are not available in administrative records.

In short, without a census of population and dwellings, the following information will cease to be available in its current form and of the current quality:

- small area (meshblock) statistics
- deprivation indexes (Salmond & Crampton, 2001)
- a significant share of family, household and housing statistics
- information about occupation, and the workplace connection with residence;

In addition, the next electoral boundary review will have to fit electoral boundaries around population groups that are much larger chunks of the population (2,000+ people) than the meshblocks previously used enable (200–300 people).

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The absence of common standards across administrative records

A second concern relates to the lack of common design standards by the agencies whose records make up the IDI. The integrity of IDI-based statistical measures cannot be established by design but must be retrospectively determined. The population censuses of 2013, 2018 and 2023 are the only data sources in the

IDI designed to span all individuals in the population. This is why, in countries without a regular census, ensuring representativeness requires a population register, against which the percentage coverage of relevant groups can be validated. Representativeness will only result from administrative records if a population register, or some comparable registration system, were to be made compulsory by Parliament (RANZ, 2026).

For any individual in the IDI, the data that describes them at any particular point is formed by placing at that date the information of varied currency that is dispersed over a changing mix of reference periods. This lack of synchronicity, which is inherent in the IDI, means that the measure it provides for any specific period will be continually revised as the recency of contributing observations improves with each regular data update. The continued applicability of models and their fitness for purpose will need to be uniquely validated retrospectively for each application.

The integration of each five-yearly census of population with other IDI records has enabled a periodic uplift in the IDI's representativeness and a significant uplift in the meaningfulness of the content. Without this, the relevance and reliability of the IDI must generally reduce, and it will capture less of the life of peoples' families, places and communities. The current 'all or nothing' approach to change has missed opportunities from the more immediate capability of the IDI to support innovation seen elsewhere which improves enumeration of the existing census model, including response propensity indexes and a geospatial frame, and population estimates and projections.

Submitters to the Justice Committee noted that survey practices and standards for official statistics require that integrity is prospectively determined, and fitness for use known in advance of any application (Haslett & Seber, 2026). This is done by meeting tests of representativeness (being representative of target populations), randomness (knowledge of reliability and bias) and realism (obtaining information that meaningfully reflects individuals' societies and organisations). Because official statistics are measures that meet defined specifications and are of known quality, for many official statistics, the concepts, standards and definitions have been agreed internationally through the United Nations or the OECD.

The Statistics New Zealand protocols for tier 1 statistics, last revised in 2007, are the New Zealand standard. They note:

> Official statistics adhere to protocols for quality; frameworks, standards and classifications; respondent management; confidentiality, privacy and security; release practices; and management, documentation and preservation of statistical records.
>
> ...
>
> Administrative records are generally for operational purposes and not primarily for statistical reasons. However, when administrative data records are transformed into aggregate statistics, the principles and protocols apply in the production of those statistics. (Statistics New Zealand, 2007)

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The absence of a proper independent review of the issues and options

Finally, the proposal to adopt an 'administrative data first' regime occurred in the absence of a rigorous independent review (i.e. external to StatsNZ) or a proper cost–benefit analysis. Similarly, there has been no independent review of why the 2023 population census was so costly when compared with previous censuses (i.e. about twice the cost per person in real terms). It is unclear, therefore, whether these costs were justified.

Aside from this, it is evident that the extraordinarily poor responses to the 2018 and 2023 censuses were avoidable; they resulted from inadequate planning, poor monitoring and weak quality assurance (Gray & Heron, 2024). The fundamental elements of a properly run census of dwellings were ignored (including legal obligations). Before major and potentially irreversible changes are made to the way in which official statistics are collected and generated in New Zealand, a proper independent review of the issues and options is imperative.

Conclusion

The proposed cessation of the census of population and dwellings and its replacement with an 'administrative data first' regime would constitute the largest change in New Zealand official statistics since at least the 1970s. Understandably, this proposal has generated deep concern on the part of experts in demography, survey methods and survey practice. As argued in this article, the proposed change runs the risk of seriously impairing the scope, quality and reliability of population statistics (Cook & Gray, 2026). Currently, New Zealand is facing significant challenges from population change, not least fiscal ones. These challenges will require informed and robust policy responses. Such responses, in turn, will depend heavily on reliable population data and projections. Given this context, it would not be prudent to place the quality of such data at risk.

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