



## Review of 2021 Census topics

### Sex and Gender

The ABS has collected data on sex since the first National Census in 1911. Within the general community, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably. However, although related, sex and gender are distinct concepts.

The ABS is consulting to seek views on the information to be collected in the next Census, and this topic brief provides a discussion on the collection and use of data on sex, and the difference between the concepts sex and gender.

The opportunity to participate in the consultation will be available from 3 April to 30 June 2018 via [consult.abs.gov.au](https://consult.abs.gov.au)

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#### How is information on sex used?

Almost all decisions made by governments, businesses and local community groups depend on knowing the age and sex of the population located in each part of Australia. This data has been used for a range of purposes including population projections, estimates of life expectancy, family structure and gender comparisons.

Special procedures were introduced in the 2016 Census, marking an important step on a journey to collect representative statistics on sex and gender diversity in Australia. Our 2016 experience, along with further community consultation, will inform future practices around collection, classification, processing and release of sex and gender data.

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#### Collecting sex data on the Census

In 1911 the Census questionnaire identified sex as the topic being collected. This continued until 1996 when the question was changed to ask 'Is the person male or female?' For a majority of the population this question has been easy to answer, however the response categories make it difficult for some respondents to comfortably self-identify in a way they feel is accurate.

Collecting accurate information on either sex or gender in the Census context has many challenges. In the years leading up to the 2016 Census, the ABS worked with interest groups and agencies, as well as other countries, to consider and test how sex or gender might be collected in the Australian Census.

For the 2016 Census, special procedures were introduced for the first time to enable a respondent to complete an alternative online form containing three response options to the Sex question: Male, Female and Other (please specify). This online form was available to households or individual respondents on an opt-in basis by contacting the Census Inquiry Service or submitting an online assistance request. This special procedure was implemented because of uncertainty about how the general public would respond to a question with an explicit 'other' option.

Some 1,260 people were considered to have provided a valid and intentional sex/gender diverse response (sex/gender because many did not give enough information to determine which). This is a rate of 5.4 per hundred thousand people - a very small proportion, and unlikely to be an accurate number of people with sex/gender other than male or female. While this count was not considered statistically representative, it was recognised as an important step forward and has provided insights which will help inform options for the 2021 Census.

The 2016 data showed a mix of write in options by Australians who identified as sex and/or gender diverse, as follows:

- 35% - did not provide a more descriptive term ('other, not further defined')
- 18% - another gender
- 17% - non-binary
- 13% - trans male or trans female
- 13% - trans or transgender
- 3% - intersex or indeterminate sex

For more information on procedures, limitations and additional data on sex and gender in the 2016 Census, refer to [2071.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016: Sex and Gender Diversity in the 2016 Census](#).

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## Drivers for the changes made in the 2016 Census

In November 2015 the Attorney-General's Department updated the [Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender](#). The focus of the guidelines was on personal identification of individuals in records kept by Australian Government departments and agencies. Definitions and principles were outlined on the collection, use and amendment of sex and gender information in individual personal records. The guidelines recommended that where sex and gender information is collected, people should be given the option to select a sex or gender other than male or female if they wanted to.

In February 2016, the ABS released the [Standard for Sex and Gender Variables \(cat. no. 1200.0.55.012\)](#). The standard aligns with the Guidelines and includes concept, classification, and collection procedures for sex and gender including the addition of a third response category.

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## Measuring sex or measuring gender?

While the ABS defines the Census topic as sex, the 2016 question does not specifically mention sex or gender. As a result, the ABS acknowledges that the question in its current format collects either sex and/or gender. So how do they differ?

**Sex** refers to a person's biological characteristics. A person's sex is usually described as being male or female. Some people may have both male and female characteristics, or neither male nor female characteristics, or other biological characteristics. In this instance, an individual may identify themselves as intersex or report their sex is indeterminate. Sex is assigned at birth and is relatively fixed. However, a person's sex may change during their lifetime as a result of procedures commonly referred to as a sex change, gender reassignment, gender affirmation, transsexual surgery, transgender reassignment or sexual reassignment. Throughout and after this process, sex may be recorded as male, female or using other descriptors.

**Gender** refers to the way in which a person self-identifies their masculine or feminine characteristics. A person's gender relates to their deeply held internal and individual sense of gender and is not always exclusively male or female. It may or may not correspond to their sex at birth and can be fluid over time.

Varying levels of understanding in the wider community about the difference between the concepts of sex and gender can affect how an individual may respond. We would like your input on how we collect this data in the 2021 Census. The topic is essential in assisting the ABS to meet its legislative requirement for estimating the size and profile of the population across Australia and will continue to be an important part of the 2021 Census. However, we'd like to consider whether there is a stronger driver for one concept to be collected over the other. Please consider making a submission and use the assessment criteria to share your views on the following:

- Should sex or gender be collected (or both)?
- What would be the drivers for collecting gender?
- What would be the implications of changing from collecting sex?

You can make your submission to our review of 2021 Census topics at the ABS consultation hub. Following the close of submissions, views will be summarised and options assessed via further user consultation, questionnaire development and testing. Understanding the impacts on data quality of changes will be important given the critical value of this topic.

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### Same-sex relationships and sexual orientation

The ABS has undertaken initial discussions and reviewed feedback from the 2016 Census in preparation for this consultation. The Census has been able to publish estimates of same-sex couples living together on the basis of household relationship questions since the 1996 Census. The 2016 Census counted just under 46,800 same-sex couples living together in Australia. This represents a 39% increase since the 2011 Census, which counted 33,700 same-sex couples living together, and has more than quadrupled since 1996 (10,200 couples).

Recent changes to Australian Marriage Laws allowing registered marriages for same-sex couples will enable the registered marital status of same-sex couples to be collected, along with responses to questions on household relationships.

There are currently no questions on sexual orientation collected on the Census, however the inclusion of a question on this topic has been previously raised as a potential information need. Data on sexual orientation is currently available from two ABS surveys - see [4159.0 - General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014](#) and [4326.0 - National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007](#).

To better understand the data needs in regard to sexual orientation, we encourage you to share your views. Make your submission to our review of 2021 Census topics at the ABS consultation hub via [consult.abs.gov.au](https://consult.abs.gov.au)