



Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society: Submission to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2026 Census Topic Review

Submitted by: The Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society,

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Overview

About ARCSHS

The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), based in La Trobe University, conducts world-class research and education on the social dimensions of sexuality, gender, health and human relationships. We work collaboratively with other researchers, communities, community-based organisations, government and professionals to advance knowledge and promote positive change in policy, practice and people's lives, by advancing new knowledge and learning, maximising research impact and enhancing our capacity for world-class research. ARCSHS welcome the opportunity to contribute our unique voice and expertise to this national topic review process.

About this Submission

As one of Australia's leading research centres specialising in LGBTIQ+ research, ARCSHS posit that there is a robust case for the inclusion of questions relating to sexual orientation, gender diversity and intersex variations in our national census. For the purposes of this submission, gender diversity relates to the inclusion of additional questions on gender that allow for people to identify if they now affirm a gender different to the gender they were assigned at birth. ARCSHS will use this opportunity to highlight the importance of collecting such data in the national census, and how it will improve our capacity for national, regional and local research and effective, evidence informed policy-making and service provision.

Scope and Limitations

As per the call for submissions, this submission does not make recommendations on the specific questions that should be asked or variables that should be included in the census, but rather supports the evidence-informed, collaborative approach taken to date by the ABS in developing the *Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables (1)* that should inform the census content in this regard.

1) Introduction

The population of Australia is diverse in terms of gender, sexual identity and sex characteristics, yet population surveys, including the Census, rarely include questions that accurately or sufficiently collect data about these individuals. There is currently no conclusive picture of how many people in Australia are LGBTIQ+, nor where they are located, or what their specific circumstances are, including information on essential demographic characteristics, such as age, income, occupation, housing, and family structures. There is a shift towards national data collection on this population in many other countries, and increasing calls for the absence of these data to be rectified as a matter of priority in countries where they are not yet collected, as detailed in the first section in this submission. There is also considerable support for inclusion of these data from organisations throughout Australia, also referenced in this submission.

There is an impressive body of research continually being developed in Australia in relation to LGBTIQ+ populations, however, as this submission highlights, existing data are inadequate in terms of ensuring fair and efficient use of resources, effective data for policy-making, and accurate

benchmarks for social and economic research. **This submission asserts that the data from existing and on-going research, combined with national census data on population distribution and other key socio-demographic characteristics of the LGBTIQ+ community, would facilitate evidence-informed, efficient and egalitarian policy-making, resource allocation and service provision at local, state and national levels.**

Finally, there may be concerns in relation to how data pertaining to sexuality, sex and gender diversity can be collected effectively, and while ARCSHS recognises the capacity of the ABS to undertake appropriate steps in the next phase of consultation to identify and address these, this submission highlights learnings from precedents in other countries of collecting data from minoritised or stigmatised populations.

It should be noted that as a research centre with expertise in relation to gender and sexuality, we acknowledge and defer to the expertise of community members with intersex variations, and the stated position of our colleagues in Intersex Human Rights Australia (IHRA) in relation to the inclusion of data on intersex variations. In their submission to the 2021 census (2) IHRA have provided a detailed statement on challenges in the most recent census questionnaire, noting that it is ‘othering’, that it forces many intersex people to misgender themselves, and that it may be discriminatory. Their recommendations for inclusion of questions on variations in sex characteristics are:

“We recommend that the ABS recognise that it already collects data on gender (on personal identification) rather than sex. The ABS should implement the gender standard in place of the sex standard. Ideally, a gender standard would provide the specified range of choices in a non-hierarchical (and perhaps random, if online) manner, and permit respondents to add additional information on their identity. We recommend that the ABS ask respondents a separate question on whether or not they were born with an intersex variation”.

ARCSHS support the inclusion of these data as recommended by IHRA, and believe this is adequately accounted for in the ABS Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables (1)

2) The imperative to collect LGBTIQ+ data in the census

Overview

This section details widespread support for the inclusion of LGBTIQ+-related data in the census. This ranges from international guidelines that highlight the importance of including data on minoritised populations in national household surveys, to specific calls for the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ data collection by international bodies, as well as by organisations, and in strategies, in different states and territories in Australia.

Support in international research

The United Nations, in their guidance on national household surveys (3) identifies three primary functions of a census, namely:

- To provide data to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth, funding, services and political representation
- To provide demographic information for public decision making and consensus or support for such decisions
- To provide reliable official statistics, sampling frames and benchmark data for economic and social research

They highlight the specific importance of producing detailed statistics for small population groups:

Evidence-based decision-making is a universally recognized paradigm of efficient management of economic and social affairs and of overall effective governing of societies today. Generating relevant, accurate and timely statistics is a sine qua non of this model; producing detailed statistics for small areas and small population groups is its foundation. (3)

Despite the importance of such data collection for policy-making, the World Bank have observed an absence of these data on a global scale:

A major barrier to addressing this stigma and SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity]-based exclusion is the lack of data on the lives of LGBTI people. (4)

International organisations such as the OECD (5) and the European Union (6), have highlighted the absence and importance of data on minority communities to support effective policy-making.

Strategic imperative

The peak body, LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, has observed that ‘current data collection does not accurately or adequately count LGBTIQ+ people and communities... Without adequate data and research, LGBTIQ+ communities are left out of health policy and program planning’ (7). This has been noted in several state and territory LGBTIQ+ strategies, including in:

- **New South Wales:** The *NSW LGBTIQ+ Health Strategy 2022-2027* observes that ‘the absence of relevant questions about sexuality, gender and intersex variation in population-level data collection, including the Australian Census, makes it difficult to determine the number of LGBTIQ+ people’ (8). The Strategy notes that ‘ensuring the visibility of LGBTIQ+ people in health data is vital... to understand how need varies... and to measure service access and health outcomes for different groups’ and includes, as one of its priority areas, capturing ‘data on sexuality, gender, and intersex variations at the point of care and population level’ (8).
- **Australian Capital Territory:** The *Capital of Equality Strategy* observes that ‘much of the population research and data collections at the local and federal levels do not include sexual orientation, gender identity or variations in sex characteristics. To develop effective policies, programs, and services, and to inform social, political, and legislative reforms, accurate population data is needed’ (9). The Strategy includes a commitment to ‘the collection of information and data about LGBTIQ+ people... to inform the design and implementation of policy, programs and services (9).

- **Victoria:** *Pride in Our Future: Victoria's LGBTIQ+ Strategy 2022-32* includes, as one of its priority areas, 'improving LGBTIQ+ data collection to build evidence [that] will enable us to get a better picture of how LGBTIQ+ Victorians experience all parts of their lives'(10). In 2017, the Victorian Population Health Survey collected data on the adult LGBTIQ+ population. In its report on findings from this survey, the Victorian Agency for Health Information has observed that 'evidence about the health and wellbeing of [LGBTIQ+ people...] is crucial for the development and delivery of appropriate and inclusive health system and policy responses'(11), and that 'Victoria is leading the nation in the collection of LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing information at a population health level'(11).

There have also been calls for improved data collection on LGBTIQ+ populations by the Productivity Commission (12) and The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (13).

What this points to is that there are discrepancies in data collection at a state-based level. National, state/territory and local data are all important for understanding needs of and improving services for people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

Legal imperative

There may be a legal imperative for the inclusion of questions on these populations in future censuses in Australia. Equality Australia, in their submission on the 2021 census (14), detail a compelling legal case for the inclusion of questions on gender identity, sexual orientation and intersex variations. They note that:

- The failure to collect these data may be in breach of section 26 of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* which forbids discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (among other traits) by anyone exercising duties in relation to any Commonwealth law or program.
- Omission from the census meets the criteria for indirect discrimination.
- The criteria for direct discrimination may have been met in the omission of the questions from the 2021 census, if this was done to avoid political controversy related to discriminatory attitudes to LGBTIQ+ communities by some members of the public

3) Current practice in other jurisdictions

This section presents a summary of current practice on the collection of data on LGBTIQ+ populations in national data collection programs, including censuses, in a number of other English-speaking countries, specifically in relation to gender diversity and sexual orientation. This section highlights a recent shift internationally towards a cohesive approach to data collection on LGBTIQ+ populations. There is a dearth of collated cross-jurisdictional comparative information on census questions, however, there is information available on national statistics agency websites. The following table summarises what is known in relation to several other English-speaking countries who are, to some degree, implementing questions on either sexual orientation or gender diversity in their national data collection systems, such as censuses and household surveys.

Country	National data collection on gender diversity	National data collection on sexual orientation	Being considered for inclusion in next census
England and Wales (15)	Included in the 2021 census	Included in the 2021 census	Both be included in future census
Aotearoa New Zealand (16)	Will be collected in 2023 census	Included in 2018 census and will be collected in 2023 census	Both to be included in future census
Canada (17,18)	Introduced in 2021 census	Enumerated through same sex cohabitation Included in other smaller / pulse surveys ¹	There are reports that the government will consult again on inclusion of sexual orientation
United States (19,20)	Introduced to pulse surveys in 2021	Introduced in pulse surveys in 2021	Some reports that consultation on this for national census may be forthcoming
Ireland (21,22)	Not collected	Introduced in pulse surveys in 2021	Both gender diversity and sexual orientation are being considered for inclusion in 2026 census
Northern Ireland (23,24)	Included in household pulse surveys	Introduced into the national census in 2021	No indication that gender is being considered for census

While it is still too early to assess the impact of the inclusion of these questions in census in other jurisdictions, the developments have been welcomed by affected communities in Canada(25), in Aotearoa New Zealand (26) and experts in the UK (27).

4) What is currently known about LGBTIQ+ populations in Australia

Overview

This section provides a high-level summary of what data are currently collected relating to LGBTIQ+ populations in Australia and how the data are collected.

Where or how is information on LGBTIQ+ populations currently collected?

Patterns of data collection in Australia in relation to LGBTIQ+ populations align with those in many other jurisdictions.

¹ Surveys included in this category are those undertaken by national statistics agencies to glean data on special topics on once-off or regular bases, and are separate to the national census. While robust sampling methodologies are usually employed, these surveys do not provide the same whole population dataset provided by the national census.

- **Limited census data:** Since 1996, the Census has enabled cohabiting same-sex couples to record their relationship status via a question clarifying the relationship between household members. This reveals the number and geographical distribution of same-sex couple households, along with socio-demographic details (28–30). The limitations of these data are discussed further below.
- **National household or nationally representative surveys:** Data on gender, sexual identity, and intersex variations are currently collected in a range of national surveys of the general population, alongside several surveys specifically focused on LGBTIQ+ communities at a national level. As previously noted, while these surveys usually involve representative sampling and estimation methodologies (31), they do not provide the same robust dataset gleaned through the whole population approach in the census. Nor do they typically provide a sufficient sample of LGBTIQ+ participants to enable disaggregation by gender and sexuality as well as other intersectional characteristics (which risks homogenising the needs and experiences of LGBTIQ+ people). Examples of these include:
 - The General Social Survey (GSS) (31)
 - The Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA) (32)
 - The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (33)
 - The Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships (34)
- **Research surveys utilising community sampling or other opportunistic sampling approaches:** A range of national surveys of LGBTIQ+ Australians provide a more targeted and detailed picture of their lives, usually undertaken by universities. These include:
 - Private Lives 3 (35)
 - Writing Themselves In 4 (36)
 - Australian Trans and Gender Diverse Sexual Health Survey (37)
 - Trans Pathways (38)
 - Gay Community Periodic Survey (39)
 - Rainbow Ageing (40)
 - Scrolling Beyond Binaries (41)
 - Pride and Pandemic (42)
 - Australia’s Generation Zs Study (43)

What does current research tell us?

Population estimates:

- The various studies to date currently estimate that LGBTIQ+ people make up between 3.5% to 11% of the Australian population, or between 900,000 to 2.8 million people (44,45). This significant variation in estimates arises from the lack of cohesive definitions and variations in terminology of what is being researched and whether the focus of study is attraction, behaviour or identity (46).
- The 2021 Census counted 78,425 same-sex couples living together in Australia, 1.4% of all couples living together (47). This information is considered insufficient to estimate the number of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia. Apart from the fact that data on gender diversity or intersex variations are not represented here, current census data do not provide an accurate estimate of LGB+ adults in Australia. For example, the fact that it does not estimate people in same-gender relationships who do not live together or people who are LGBTIQ+ who live with partners of another gender, means data provided on the community are very limited.

- Census data on same-sex couples and families reveal a broad geographical distribution of gay men and lesbians throughout the country, with higher concentration in urban areas (28), although as detailed elsewhere in this submission, this only captures data on cohabiting couples of the same gender.

Experiences of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia:

- Existing research shows that LGBTIQ+ people in Australia experience stigma, leading to social and health disparities compared with the wider population, including:
 - Poorer general and physical health (48)
 - Poorer mental health, including greater psychological distress and suicidality (35,49,50)
 - Experiences of discrimination and violence (51)
 - Higher rates of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use than observed in the general population (52,53)
 - Homelessness and housing insecurity (29,35,54)
 - Lower average incomes and high rates of poverty, particularly among trans and gender diverse people as well as lesbian and bisexual women (35)
- There are also key differences in health and wellbeing among subpopulations within LGBTIQ+ communities (35) including between:
 - Cisgender and transgender people
 - Endosex and people with intersex variations
 - Gay and lesbian people and bisexual, pansexual, and queer people
 - People with and without disabilities
 - Anglo-Australians, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders.

The inclusion of gender diversity, sexuality and variations in sex characteristics in the census presents an opportunity to develop a more expansive and nuanced understanding of these differences and intersections among sub-populations, and therefore more effective health and social policy interventions.

- Importantly, for the purposes of policy and service planning, ARCSHS have previously summarised research in relation to LGBTIQ+ access to health and social services, noting the following (55):
 - There is underutilisation of services and delayed treatment seeking amongst LGBTIQ+ populations evidenced in both Australian and international research
 - LGBTIQ+ people are less likely to be able to afford care, where they need it due to higher rates of unemployment and lower wages
 - Isolation or distance from services is particularly pronounced among the trans community, who may essentially remain invisible to services providers due to a lack of recognition or capacity to engage on the part of providers, or fear of stigma or discrimination and reluctance to engage, on the part of trans people.

Having an improved understanding of the population distribution of these communities could provide crucial information to increase earlier engagement with, and retention in social and health services. Such information could, for example, support localised targeted, nuanced strategies to engage particular communities if there is perceived to be a low engagement proportionate to population estimates.

5) Why is this current body of data and research insufficient, and how would Census data complement it?

Overview

In this section, the limitations of existing practice in data collection on LGBTIQ+ populations are highlighted, pointing in particular to the lack of nationally representative data, datasets and benchmarks, as well as to some of the methodological challenges presenting for existing systems of data collection. The absence of effective national data collection in relation to LGBTIQ+ communities means that Australia does not collect sufficient data to fulfil basic functions of a census in relation to this group, namely, to ensure equitable distribution of funding and services relating to these communities, to support effective public decisions relating to them, or to develop effective sampling frames or benchmark data for economic and social research. ARCSHS have addressed the challenges with the absence of demographic data gleaned from national household surveys in 'Research Matters', a briefing on this topic, referenced and summarised here:

- **Smaller sample sizes and estimates of whole population:**
 - Existing Australian LGBTIQ+ research relies on smaller, targeted samples. For example, LGBTIQ-specific surveys range from 859 participants in the Trans Pathways research (38) to 6,835 participants in the most recent Private Lives study (35).
 - Current research, policy, and service provision rely on estimates of the LGBTIQ+ population, rather than accurate and consistent data. This is a problem because while we can share information showing that large percentages of LGBTIQ+ survey respondents face certain challenges, it is unclear how many people this equates to in the general population, with ramifications for resource distribution.
 - Collecting detailed information about gender, sexuality, and intersex variations in the national census will enable a significantly larger and more accurate data set, therefore providing a more representative picture of the LGBTIQ+ population which can inform associated decisions around policy and resource allocation.
- **No data over time:** There are, at this time, no recurrently funded studies of LGBTIQ+ populations in Australia, which stands in contrast to data collection and evidence generation for other marginalised populations. We therefore lack reliable, quality data to measure differences in LGBTIQ+ Australians' experiences over time. Given that the census is conducted every five years with consistent questions, this provides an important opportunity for longitudinal analyses, which can track changes in the characteristics and needs of the LGBTIQ+ community over time. This provides a variety of opportunities in terms of policy-making, ensuring that policies, services and resource allocation are informed in up-to-date population data from the census, and LGBTIQ+ targeted research extrapolating from this.

6) What are some challenges and solutions for data collection?

Under-reporting

The census is often completed by a single member of the household on behalf of others. The completer may not know, acknowledge or affirm another household members' gender, sexual orientation or sex characteristics and thus may report these details incorrectly (36,51,56). In addition, there is ample literature highlighting the common practice of people with 'concealable stigmatised identities' choosing not to disclose this in a variety of contexts (57), meaning underreporting may not just be associated with the form being completed by another household member. Some considerations and mitigation strategies relating to this include:

- The census offers the option for individuals to complete their own details in the household census form online, or in an individual paper form, affording better confidentiality than a single household paper form completed by the head of the household. Nonetheless, there remains a risk of underreporting where the head of household collects the data, or where the data relates to membership of a stigmatised minority group.
- Underreporting does not undermine the value of data collection: collecting LGBTIQ+ identity information will allow for more accurate estimates of the proportion of the sample population. Additionally, while the resulting numbers may be underreported, they nonetheless provide an opportunity to compare the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people in the census to the general population in ways that have not been available previously, as has been observed from the Canadian census' inclusion of LGBTIQ+ identities (58)
- It is also important to highlight that some of these data are already collected in the census to some degree, in relation to cohabiting same-gender couples. The current methods do not facilitate robust data collection; this proposal simply seeks to build and improve on existing systems.
- Under-reporting in the census of other minorities, such as Travellers and Roma (ethnic minorities) in European countries, has been identified as a challenge. Mitigation strategies employed to increase accuracy included sensitivity training for census enumerators and consultation with community groups (5). Moreover, the management of non-sampling errors through well considered survey design and promotion, and the Census Post Enumeration Survey, as is standard practice by the ABS would help to mitigate the implications of underreporting of LGBTIQ+ identities (59,60).
- It is also important to note that underreporting is likely to decrease over time. The number of same-gender couples reporting in the census has increased significantly since this data collection began (47), far in excess of the growth of the general population or mixed-gender couples (61). While it is possible that this represents an increase in the number of same-gender couples, it is reasonable to assume that it represents an increase in comfort in reporting on this, and that this same pattern may also be observed in the future in relation to the additional variables relating to sexual orientation, gender diversity and intersex characteristics.

Respondent burden

Increased respondent burden due to perceived length of the survey and sensitivity of the questions could impact the quality and completeness of the data collected (62). Considerations and mitigation strategies for this include:

- As with underreporting, sensitivity training of enumerators and appropriate survey design and promotion, as is practiced by the ABS, help to mitigate the impact of respondent burden on the quality of the data (59,60).
- Importantly, a test of the Canadian census in 2019 found very low rates of non-responses or invalid responses for the newly introduced gender questions (63), and in the UK, there were high response rates to voluntary questions relating to gender diversity (64).

Potential for continuity of data

With the introduction of new questions, there may be concerns about the impact of this on continuity of previous census data. Some considerations in relation to this include:

- **Improved quality of data from previous census rounds regarding sex:** The ABS standard for identifying gender utilises two questions regarding sex at birth and gender identity. The use of both items would improve the quality of this data by minimising concerns identified in the previous census relating to confusion with the intent of this question. Results from the 2021 census suggest that the non-binary option for sex did not yield meaningful data and may have compromised data for male and female, due to confusion of sex and gender responses (65).
- **Continuity of sex data from previous census rounds:** The inclusion of sex assigned at birth will allow for continuity of data from previous census rounds regarding population sex.
- **Need for ongoing collection and continuity of LGBTIQ+ data:** Identities within the LGBTIQ+ community can change over time (66–68), making time series data critical for tracking changes in the prevalence of different identities over time. Census data will enable the tracking of these changes and provide insights into the evolving nature of the LGBTIQ+ community as well as the impact of social and political movements on the LGBTIQ+ community.

7) How would ARCSHS use census data?

Given that the majority of Australian research focuses on LGBTIQ+ people separately from the wider population, capabilities for reliable comparative analyses are currently limited. Census data can be used to compare the characteristics of the LGBTIQ+ community with the wider population and to identify patterns of social, economic and health experiences and disparities, discrimination and disadvantage, which will in turn support more effective policy-making and resource allocation.

Were more detailed questions relating to gender diversity, sexual orientation, and intersex variations to be included in the national Census, ARCSHS staff would be able to use these data, in conjunction with our own and others' research, to conduct analyses of:

- LGBTIQ+ health conditions (compared to non-LGBTIQ+ people in Australia, and capturing nuances within the LGBTIQ+ population)
- LGBTIQ+ family structures, relationships, and caring responsibilities
- LGBTIQ+ income and labour market participation (compared to non LGBTIQ+ people in Australia, and capturing nuances within the LGBTIQ+ population)
- Geographic distribution and migration patterns of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia
- Patterns of diverse intersecting identities for LGBTIQ+ individuals, including cultural and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, etc.

Such data would also enable us to:

- Have increased confidence in our existing surveys, and ensure the information is more widely utilised by state/territory governments.
- Undertake more robust targeted sampling and recruitment strategies for our research, ensuring that our outputs provide the highest quality data to support policy development and decision making.

Our colleagues in Shine SA have noted in communication with us about potential use cases, that from a public health perspective:

- Having whole population data would enable the effective modelling, and more efficient use of resources for prevention/response strategies to public health issues such as HIV, MPox and other communicable diseases, as well as non-communicable diseases and health conditions for gender and sexually diverse populations.

8) Conclusion

There is strong international momentum towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and sex and gender diversity in national household surveys and censuses. There is also a growing recognition across statutory and NGO agencies in Australia about the importance of collecting data on sexual orientation, gender diversity and variations in sex characteristics, and indeed a strong legal case made for implementation of this in the 2026 census. While there is a rich body of research in relation to LGBTIQ+ people, the current schedule of national research is not sufficient for fair, egalitarian resource distribution and policy-making or for the setting of benchmarks for economic and social research in relation to LGBTIQ+ communities. While there may be some challenges in effectively collecting any new set of data, particularly collecting data from, or in relation to, stigmatised communities, this should not preclude the data from being collected, and there is precedent and learning on mitigating such challenges from other jurisdictions. This submission has detailed a broad and varied range of use cases for census data on the LGBTIQ+ community. This information would not only be useful, but is indeed essential for evidence-informed, effective, efficient policy-making and resource allocation, that can help to improve the lives, experiences and outcomes of LGBTIQ+ people throughout Australia.

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