

The Impact of Prioritisation on the Interpretation of Ethnicity Data

This report is intended to inform users of time series ethnic data of the impact of prioritisation on the size of ethnic populations. It outlines a rationale for using alternative output methods.

Prioritisation is a classification which assigns the ethnicity of a person who has given multiple responses to just one ethnicity. This process ensures that the total number of responses equals the total population. In doing so, prioritisation conceals diversity within and overlap between ethnic groups by eliminating multiple ethnicities from data. This form of expressing ethnic data is now being discontinued across official statistics.

Two other methods are available. 'Total response' records all responses and results can exceed the total population if people have recorded multiple ethnicities. Another method is 'single and combination responses', which outputs ethnicities into single or combination groups. People are counted once, according to the ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups they have reported. For example, a person reporting just one ethnic group is counted once in the relevant 'only' group (ie single ethnic group) and a person reporting two or more ethnic groups is counted once in the relevant 'combination' group. This means that the total number of responses equals the total number of people who stated an ethnicity. Single and combination data can result in a large number of categories, which may make analysis more complex.

The impact of prioritisation on all ethnic groups can be seen by examining ethnicity data from the 1991, 1996 and 2001 censuses. Table 1 compares the difference in size of each grouping of ethnicities when total responses are used and when the data has been prioritised. For example, in 2001 the Pacific population is 15.8 percent larger than prioritised data would suggest. The table also shows a difference across all age groups for each ethnic group except Māori, which is accorded the highest priority. The difference in numbers is a result of people who gave multiple responses.¹ The greatest loss is experienced in the two youngest age groups and reflects the increasing number of children/younger people with multiple ethnicities due to ethnic intermarriage.

¹ *Understanding and working with ethnicity data* (Didham (2005)), pp 5-7.

Table 1

Percentage Understatement of Prioritised Ethnic Counts compared with Total Responses
1991, 1996 and 2001 censuses

Ethnicity	Census	Age group (years)								
		Under 15	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45+	Total
		Percent								
European	1991	11.6	8.1	5.4	4.4	3.5	2.8	2.0	1.1	4.7
	1996	24.4	19.4	14.7	11.8	10.1	8.2	6.6	3.3	11.0
	2001	24.0	17.2	15.4	12.4	9.1	7.4	5.9	2.6	10.0
Māori	1991	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	1996	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2001	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Pacific peoples	1991	18.4	9.5	5.0	4.4	4.1	2.5	1.7	1.0	9.2
	1996	30.0	20.9	12.8	8.7	7.8	7.8	5.6	4.4	16.8
	2001	29.5	18.5	14.4	9.1	6.4	6.4	5.8	2.6	15.8
Asian	1991	10.7	9.6	6.3	3.8	2.7	2.9	3.6	3.1	6.1
	1996	13.3	8.5	9.2	8.2	5.3	4.2	4.0	4.7	8.0
	2001	10.5	4.5	4.8	5.2	4.1	2.7	2.4	2.5	5.1
Other	1991	13.9	9.9	5.1	4.9	3.0	2.3	1.2	2.6	6.5
	1996	19.8	16.9	12.6	8.1	6.7	8.9	7.4	5.3	12.0
	2001	14.4	8.1	7.8	5.5	3.4	4.5	4.1	3.8	7.7

The recognition of multiple ethnicities is important in making comparisons between different ethnic groups as people reporting several ethnicities may have different characteristics from those who do not.

While prioritisation may have been a useful analytical tool in the past, it is no longer considered viable in reflecting the changing face of ethnic diversity in New Zealand. Valid analysis of a group depends on the consideration of all its members, taking into account differences within and between groups.

Bibliography

Didham (2005), *Understanding and working with ethnicity data*, Statistics New Zealand, Wellington.