

Blaks and Stats in Aboriginal Victoria: Census resistance and participation

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Abstract:

There are growing calls within the social sciences for Indigenous peoples to assume sovereignty over data that are about them and for analysis of these data to be led, or be inclusive of, an Indigenous perspective (Walter and Andersen 2013; Kukutai and Taylor 2016; Walter 2016). In this paper I present data based on interviews with Aboriginal people in Melbourne and Victoria as a whole that provides an Aboriginal voice to show there are degrees of both constraint and choice in the formulation of Indigenous data. The results show that the census as a social instrument needs to be viewed as a dynamic interplay between the state and Indigenous people, and that Indigenous community awareness of their role in this process needs to be further explored. Although volatility of Aboriginal census data is one of key focus areas of this paper there has been attempts by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to investigate from time to time why the census counts should be so volatile yet their investigations have been undertaken as an outsider on what makes people (as they put it) 'change their identity'. In this paper I examine the issue of census volatility from the unique position of being 'within' the Indigenous community and getting people to openly provide their perspectives on census engagement and census utility as an expression of Indigenous data sovereignty. This approach has not been adopted before in relation to the issue of census volatility but the views of Indigenous people on the ground on such matters are likely to become more prevalent as the issue of Indigenous data sovereignty gains ground.

Blaks and Stats in Aboriginal Victoria: Census resistance and participation

Aboriginal people have always been counted (whether colonial or Commonwealth) the repeal of section 127 of the Constitution brought about by the 1967 referendum that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were counted and identified as a group within the Australian population. Prior to this it had not been possible to fully account for the whole Indigenous population because many were absorbed into the general count on racial grounds without separate identification. Since 1971 the numbers reported in the census data have increased dramatically and somewhat erratically. This increase is because people are now allowed to self-identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and also because those who claim Indigenous identity is naturally growing due to out-marriage.

Despite this, there remains a substantial undercount of Indigenous people in Victoria, and the size of this is estimated by the ABS after each census. In 2011, the Census count of Indigenous population in Victoria was 37,989 while the final estimate was 47,333 - an increase (or an undercount) of 25%. In 2016, the Census count of Indigenous population in Victoria was 47,787. At the same time, the 2016 national net undercount rate for the Indigenous population was 17.5% (Harding et al. 2017). There is every likelihood, therefore, that the final Indigenous estimate for Victoria will again be much higher than the census count.

My point above is the basis for this paper, which focuses on exploring why a final Aboriginal population count should be viewed as volatile. I do this by analysing twenty interviews by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Melbourne, their unique voices will illustrate the dynamic interplay between the state and Indigenous people¹. Most importantly, it

¹ The data is based on research completed for my Doctoral thesis submitted in 2016. The research was approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics committee.

is bringing an 'Indigenous viewpoint' or 'standpoint' to the discussion of census counts and how they are derived. Joe Boy Morgan (40+ years old) stated:

So what I see of them, like the census and these statistics, it's just part of a social experiment. My brother and myself, I was about 7-8 years old when we were first placed in a so-called orphanage. I got in trouble for telling them "we ain't orphans, we've still got our mum and dad" – they took me out the front and then, bang bang, gave me two cuts on each hand".

People I interviewed stated that the census could be useful but it does not ask the right questions and therefore Aboriginal people won't be interested in it. For example, Richard Kennedy (50+ years) stated the following:

Well, the census is very important because if they done it properly and they went around and found out actually how many kids at school, how many kids actually achieve VCE which is quite a lot, how many actually get full time jobs or are in traineeships or in universities around Australia, how many lawyers and how many doctors and whatever we've got, if they portrayed that back to the Aboriginal people it'll lift their spirits enormously, because people know that there's people that have achieved a lot, not just in sport, sport goes in the newspaper. You do a census and record all the stuff Aboriginal people have done and education wise and everything else, it's going to lift everybody's spirits. I know if I saw the right stats, you know, I'd be excited about it because I know it exists.

There are now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Melbourne who have inside knowledge of the census process because they have been employed to work on the census, as John Harding (50+ years) stated:

I actually worked for twelve months for the ABS in 2008, but the reason I think it's important is you see how the ABS works but it's also that if you don't stand up and be counted then you're not helping justify service delivery in your area, so if they don't think you exist how can they help you, you know, how can you lobby them for program funding or support in any way if you're not in their official figures. You should look at it as evidence and a weapon to be able to attract support especially from the government for programs and any services you think your area needs.

The Importance of Indigenous Demography

I recruited the participants I interviewed from the Melbourne Aboriginal community because I had known them most of my life and had their trust to speak to me openly because of our shared common experiences of growing up in the Aboriginal community. I also chose to have a wide representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were employed, unemployed, had a history of incarceration and homeless, for the true Aboriginal voice within census participation and substantial data analysis all levels of Aboriginal society are important. This provided a range of voices from different life experience. All participants are aware of their statements in this paper. I provided the participants with a list of questions and advised them they did not have to answer all questions if they did not feel comfortable. They were provided with consent forms to agree to have their interviews used for my thesis research but also to use for additional publications. The responses were that they wanted to have a chance to state their opinion. Everyone agreed to answer the questions. There was a focus group interview where participants humorously pointed out to me to change reference to them as 'informants²' stating that this term sounded like they were 'talking to the cops'. The same group expressed mutual agreement that overall the questions 'were different, good— they are

² This term is used in the academic disciplines but I now no longer use it.

about us, our culture'. I asked all twenty participants what their perspective was on participating in the Australian census. Their answers were varied; some believed it was important and wanted to do it for their family and be counted as citizens. Others had political beliefs of an Aboriginal nation and to participate would dismiss their sovereign rights, whilst others who have experienced institutionalisation believed it was another extension of government control and surveillance over their lives (Foucault 1979).

Whatever the reasons for not participating, an incorrect count affects the purpose of the census and what it aims to do. Biddle argues that increases in population constitute an argument for extra funding to provide services, including Aboriginal liaison staff, police, ambulances and hospitals (Taylor and Kinfu 2002:58). Biddle also points out that population change can be more easily managed if it can be predicted (Biddle 2013:1). However, as asserted by Taylor, compiling a statistical profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations of Australia is not straightforward and the exact characteristics of size, composition and distribution will probably be unknowable (Taylor 2011:286). Extremely high mobility or homelessness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, regardless of urban and remote locations, also have an influence on exact population figures. As John Harding stated:

We're probably the most itinerant people and so, you know, you can't knock on someone's door if they haven't got one. [laughs] You know, a lot of our people also very, um, or used to be very frightened of telling the census people how many people lived in their house because, you know, a lot of their houses say if they were public housing and you're only allowed to have four people and they might have eight because relatives will come and stay, so you can lose your house so they'll lie to the census people and that kind of stuff. So I think that it's getting better now because more Aboriginal people are being more honest and actually filling out the censuses and that helps increase your service delivery and program funding.

Indigenous organisations provide programs and services which depend on government funding; realistic population numbers are important for ensuring adequate funding and services. For example, in order to house Aboriginal people in Melbourne it is necessary to know how many need housing, and how they are living right now. To provide health service delivery, statistical analysis on which health problems are most common to gender and age groups is required. To provide adequate employment and education programs with realistic outcomes for the Aboriginal workforce is imperative to address and overcome poverty and high unemployment. Yet, there is uncertainty of numbers. If the actual numbers are higher than reported, it is likely to add stress for catering to the real Aboriginal population. Darren Smith, the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Housing Board stated:

Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) uses census data to compare with our own information on tenants and applicants to understand the needs of our tenants and applicants but also to build a bigger picture of the housing needs of Victoria's Aboriginal communities. We are particularly interested in population projections from the census data as this assists us to understand how housing needs will grow in the future and change as the Aboriginal population transforms and changes. AHV has a large portfolio of over 1,500 properties which if it is to align with future needs must be planned now to maximise the large investments required in building and renewing housing. As a very practical example, our wait list identifies that demand for housing is growing fastest in the outer northern and western suburbs of Melbourne consistent with information on Aboriginal population growth across census periods. This in turn influences decisions regarding where AHV builds new houses.

Strength in Numbers

The 1967 Referendum became the turning point for Indigenous demographic data. This event is heralded by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as a significant part of Australian political history (Attwood 2007: vi). By offering a vote to extend full citizenship

rights to Aborigines and to give the Federal Government powers to override state policies and legislation affecting Aboriginal wellbeing, the 1967 Referendum indirectly became the first major step towards Indigenous Reconciliation.

Prior to the 1967 Referendum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were governed by individual state and territory governments, whose policies differed. Supporters of the 1967 Referendum believed a Federal Government policy for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would alleviate the distress caused by the disjointed, and often archaic and racist, state and territory governance, which had no plans for future development, only laws and regulations. The Referendum campaign involved support and participation from all Australians. It is now part of the history of Aboriginal campaigns in Australia and generally viewed as a proud moment in race relations.

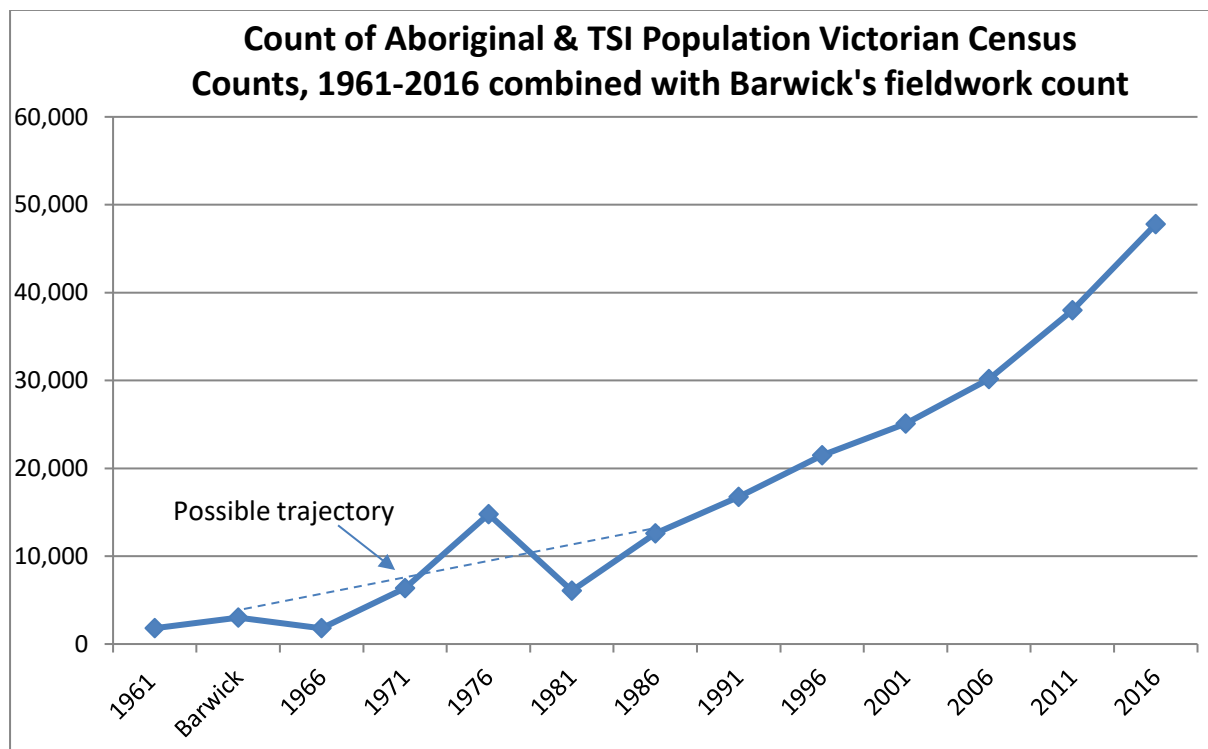
However, some do not hold this view. In the documentary *The People's Struggle Continues: Aboriginal voices of the 70s* (Andrews and Fraser 2004), some Indigenous Victorians stated that the 1967 Referendum has done nothing to benefit them. One elder in the documentary Margaret Wirrpanda, said that the 1967 Referendum has made it worse for Aborigines because of further government surveillance and government policies that do not service the Indigenous community at the community level, while the problems experienced before the 1967 Referendum still exist today. Aboriginal activist Gary Foley states that apart from including Aboriginal people in the Census, there was inaction from the government to address Aboriginal inequality (Foley 2001:9) and the only benefit he received from the 1967 Referendum campaign was learning how to use a roneo, a manual duplicator that printed onto paper before photocopiers were invented (Andrews and Fraser 2004).

Demographic research over the last 20 years has been instrumental in putting demands on the Commonwealth to make Indigenous people more statistically visible and conducting research

that has pursued a complete count of the Indigenous population (Rowse 2006:1). The necessity to be ‘visible’ in the statistics stems from being invisible.

Taylor notes that researching Indigenous demographic change is important in order to see the “transformations” of the society (2000:1) which is why population demographics is important for those working within Aboriginal communities. Working within the Aboriginal community provides daily observation and insight to understanding the needs of the Aboriginal community. Barwick’s (1963) fieldwork included residing within the homes of Aboriginal people of Melbourne, which assisted in recording a higher population count than the government census as shown in Figure 1. Barwick’s data is important as a baseline for identifying transformations within the Aboriginal community since 1963.

Figure 1 Melbourne Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 1961–2016



Source: ABS Census data 1961 - 2016 and Barwick (1963)

In 1963 the total Indigenous Melbourne population was 2989 people. In 2016 the total Indigenous Melbourne population was 47,787. In Figure 1 the 1961 and 1966 censuses before and after Barwick's count clearly show an undercount of the Aboriginal Victorian population. Censuses from 1986–2016 show a continual population increase. The trajectory line indicates the accuracy of Barwick's figures and in line with the continual growth in the Indigenous population from 1986 onwards. The possible reasons for this increase are, firstly, that the population is growing naturally by birth and marrying out, and, secondly, that employment and education increased in-migration from other states. There is also the possibility that the 'invisible' Indigenous people are still emerging (Rawlinson 2015). Smith attributes the increase in the Victorian Aboriginal population in the 1966–1971 censuses as the emptying of the "reservoir of invisible Aborigines in Victoria" who camouflaged themselves as non-Aboriginal in mainstream society (1980:109).

The 1971 Census was the first to replace the original race question about Aborigines of mixed descent or "full blood" with a general question of "Aboriginal" or "Torres Strait Islander", and this resulted in a significant increase in the Indigenous population (Smith 1980; Rowse 2006). It was also the first to adopt an interview-based enumeration (1971 Census of Population xvii). Figure 1 shows, the 1971 count marks the beginning of a consistent methodology in data collection from which analysts could identify changes in Indigenous demography. The 1971 Census was the first census where Aboriginal people could self-identify – in effect, the combination of visible and "invisible Aborigines" from the mainstream community (Smith 1980:109) merged together. The sudden rise and decline between the 1971 and 1981 Censuses as shown in Figure 1, demonstrates that efficient processes for both censuses were still undeveloped.

Aboriginal interpretations of the 1967 Referendum are varied. The most common belief is that the 1967 Referendum granted citizenship to Indigenous Australians or the right to vote. Gray (1998) states that Aboriginal people were always citizens because they were regarded as British citizens but were unable to exercise their rights as citizens and were limited in how they could participate as a citizen because the state and territory governments made their own laws and interpretations relating to Aboriginal people. The Commonwealth *Merchandise Act 1902* barred Aboriginal people from obtaining social welfare benefits and drinking alcohol. Government policies managed their lives and forced them to live on Aboriginal government reservations and restricted their freedom. Yet some were able to enjoy full citizenship because they did not fit the government category of 'full blood' or were able to move away from government control and merge with the main population (Gray 1998:63).

Some Indigenous interpretations of the 1967 Referendum also regard it as a human rights achievement. As Richard Kennedy stated:

The most important thing was the referendum, I mean, why would 90% of the Australian population vote for Aboriginal people to have the same rights as them, so what's that say? They could've voted 'no' and leave us back there with the flora and fauna. So is Australia a racist country? No. The government is. The government's got to recognise us and compensate us and give us land back.

It is common for Australians to believe that the Referendum was the turning point for Aboriginal people, that their lives then improved and they became an accepted part of Australia's population. However, there was not much improvement to Aboriginal people's everyday life. The success of the Referendum contributed to increased attention to the population count of Indigenous people in the census (Rowse 2004; Smith 1980; Taylor 2002). In the next paragraph I discuss different layers of Indigenous people in Melbourne, which impacts on the population count.

There are several layers within the Indigenous population of Melbourne that deserve mention. There are Indigenous people who are descended from the families from the Aboriginal missions and trace their lineage to those missions and those tribal groups without any confusion. There are those in the Indigenous community who arrived in Melbourne during the 1900s but do not descend from the missions, yet have associated themselves with the Indigenous community. There are those who are known by individual Indigenous people who endorse their Aboriginality. Gardiner and Bourke argue the Bringing Them Home report estimated that “between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were removed between 1910 –1970” and that the Stolen Generations by self-identifying in the Aboriginal count has contributed to the increase in the Aboriginal population (Gardiner and Bourke 2000:49). Then there are those who have emerged in the Indigenous Melbourne community recently, or even 20 to 40 years ago, who state they are Indigenous although this was never discussed in their family. Yet the census does not distinguish between these groups on census night. It is a self-identification process. Mistakes are also possible - that non-Indigenous Australians have also ticked the box indicating they are Indigenous Australian.

Blaks and Stats – Indigenous Identity

Since Native Title came out I reckon in Victoria the population has grown at least 20,000 alone and many who are now “Indigenous” never acknowledged or identified as Indigenous people before. Leon Atkinson (56 years)

‘Blacks’ was the term used by white settlers and in early literature and reports when referring to Indigenous people. In the ‘Koori English’ (Brown 1989) used by urban Aboriginal people this is rendered as ‘Blaks’, as a reappropriation of historical racial categories. These categories were based on blood quantum, such as quarter-caste, quadroon, half-caste and full blood, and have been used since colonisation. They were included in censuses from 1901 (Gardiner and Bourke 2000:48). Early government counts of ‘Blacks’ were used as a means of control and

often had negative consequences; for example, government surveillance (Foucault 1979) for the purpose of removing Aboriginal children from their families. In this section I will illustrate the Aboriginal perspectives on the interplay between Indigenous people and the state and demonstrate that the Aboriginal community life experiences and understanding of government processes influences an individuals' decision to participate or not in the census.

Gardiner and Bourke (2000) argue that Indigenous identity is fluid, that is, people will appear and disappear depending on how they see their Aboriginality at the time, and this fluidity can affect the population count in a census. Although they did not provide any specific examples, my immediate deduction based on my own research and experience is that Aboriginal people's identity can be both confident and proud, which in turn influences them to identify as such but identity from the self is very different to identity in the census.

The majority of the people I interviewed were aged from 40 years upwards and whilst some indicated a mixture of suspicion and resistance to participating in the census others participated without a concern because they believed it was better to be counted with the rest of Australia. Adding the category of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' persons on the census questionnaire has ensured that those wanting to identify will do so and their identity will not be challenged and as a result the population has increased.

A theme that emerged is that census participation by Indigenous people can be inconsistent. Some interviewees had completed a census but would no longer do so, because no benefit was perceived from completing the first census. Not all the people in one family participated in censuses. Several parents of adult children stated that their children did the census but the parents did not. One father stated that although he did not complete the census, his adult son and his partner did. It was not until the son had separated from his wife and then resided with

his father that the son ceased doing the census, indicating that a settled family unit might participate but if separated some members might not.

Participants were asked about their views on the usefulness of the census to Indigenous people. Their responses were varied. Some participate at each census and others are not regular: “I do the Census sometimes but not all the time – nuh” (Rex, 57 years). John Harding had experienced working on a Census campaign and had a commitment to it:

I think it's important as you see how the ABS works but it's also that if you don't stand up and be counted then you're not helping justify service delivery in your area, so if they don't think you exist how can they help you, you know, how can you lobby them for program funding or support in any way if you're not in their official figures? You should look at it as evidence and a weapon to be able to attract support, especially from the government for programs and any services you think your area needs.

Leon Atkinson (54 years) explained the benefits and why he chose to participate:

Why did I participate? Because I reckon the Indigenous people should fill that form out, I think it's a very important thing that the Federal government knows what's out there exactly. You know, its gunna be of benefit to the Indigenous people in the long run. At the end of the day that might not benefit us immediately but it will certainly help out our kids, and it's going to determine how good the government is working from, you know, '70s, '80s, '90s, 2000s, whatever it is. The government has its own statistics to say whether this has been improved or that's improved or that government has been slack or they've come (done) good.

Jason Briggs (42) recalled how he assisted his mother with the Census:

Mum bought a house in 1985 in Kennedy Street, Robinvale, and it wasn't long after that that this census stuff turned up and I ended up sitting down with her and we did it together. We did everything on a Monday night. Everybody that was in that house

on that night, there was about fifteen of us, it [the number of people] was huge, that's why I didn't want to do it, [laughs]. Mum knew the importance of making sure our numbers were there and putting it out what kind of lifestyles that we were living. Because she knew, she was part of that chasing for funding and all that kind of stuff, she did all that for the Aboriginal co-op – she worked in amongst the health services.

“Would the Government get it right even if we participated?” – Census Resistance

Several of the people interviewed shared a common history over the past 40 years – this group is still reeling from the impact of being forcibly removed from their families when they were children and placed in orphanages, children's homes or children's detention centres, commonly known as 'jail'. Many of these people and those with staunch political views appear to have pledged never to participate in any government information-gathering process. One participant, Selwyn Burns 50+ years of age reflected upon his grandmother, Margaret Tucker when discussing the census, he said had participated twice and I asked why:

I don't know, because they were saying it's like compulsory if you didn't. Well I don't vote on the morals that, you know, my grandmother - Margaret Tucker - being enslaved and lived in the atrocities of government policy, so the main reason I don't vote is because they stopped me from being black or even knowing my language. And it's the same sort of thing with census I suppose because it's a government document, you know, the government should wise up and start looking after the Indigenous people better and they might vote, but they're not gunna vote for people who, um, they just get walked upon by every other nationality.

Those who resist censuses know what a census is but are not interested because they do not believe there are any benefits. Additionally, they believed the Australian Constitution, Australian voting, census participation are only government processes that do not accommodate Aboriginal political thoughts and the process acts as assimilation and abolishes Indigenous rights, for example, when I asked a why one male in his 60s did not participate in the census he stated:

It's like the elections, the State elections and the Federal elections, I just can't be bothered. I give up voting because I see Labor and Liberals who have been in charge for a long, long time as a waste of time. The census because they're not accurate.

Why aren't they accurate, what do you mean by that?

Well, because if you look at the population of Aboriginal people and what people say that we've got the census count is a long way off it.

You think we've got more?

Yeah, not just me but a lot of people from Western Australia think the same and around Victoria and New South Wales. With the actual voting, well since they locked me up for not voting I don't vote no more.

How did they know you didn't vote?

Through the fine system.

The fine system?

You know, like they fine you when you don't vote.

Yeah, and you wouldn't pay the fine so they came around and arrested you?

Well, I didn't know there was a fine 'cause I'd moved and what happened was back in them days they said look we're arresting seven thousand people in Albury so don't worry about it too much, but I was locked up and not one person was locked up with me. So out of the seven thousand they could've at least got, you know, at least a hundred people or at least ten or twenty but I was the only one there. But the census, I mean the census say there's a certain amount of Aboriginal people but we know there's a hell of a lot more, so when they do a census they should be going around all the Aboriginal communities, and, you know, and doing it properly.

Other participants were not interested in the processes as much as their Aboriginal social justice and land rights and argue for separateness for example: “Well, we’re not part of the Constitution so why should I be part of the census and part of the voting system?” (Joel, age 60 years). Tracey Briggs (49 years of age) and her siblings had experienced being state wards as children. Known as a ‘Parkie’ Tracey accommodates many Aboriginal street people at night in her inner Melbourne small flat, the reality and life changing experiences of being an invisible young girl in the government system has made her resist participation instead of wanting to be counted – I asked her:

Have you ever done a census?

No.

Do you know what a census is?

Not really.

It’s when the government comes and gives you papers and you fill out one night where who’s in your house.

Yeah, I’ve been given them but I’ve never filled them out, just threw them in the bin tell you the truth. [laughs]

What do you think about census counting Aboriginal people on that government paper?

I don’t like it, it’s like, um, I don’t know, to me I don’t like it. It’s like, um, how many cows you count to a paddock, I don’t know, like that you know. How many people do you know - you can’t count people, can’t, it’s wrong to count people.

Rex (57 years of age) stated that he knew Indigenous people in his community did not participate, even his own family: “Maybe my eldest son does the census, the other blokes just throw it in the bin. This is why they’re not accurate ‘cause the majority of Aboriginal people just throw them in the bins”. When asked why Indigenous people ignore the census, Rex stated that the government and its procedures are disliked:

Because they've [Indigenous people] got no respect for the Australian government and what the government wants. They're sick of the Australian government saying 'you've got to do this', so they say 'we don't have to do this, bang, out they go, straight in the bin, that's what they do.

Rex also expressed cynicism about the outcomes of the census: "I don't see how the censuses change anything because I haven't seen any improvement out of the censuses that have been done". Daphne 60+ years of age stated she does the census but the aims of the census did not make sense to her:

Well I don't see the sense- ... well I mean I'm thinking there should be some sense in it to get a gauge of Aboriginal people but I don't think they get a real honest gauge of how many Indigenous people, I don't think most Aboriginal people would do it.

What makes you think that?

Well it's too long, you know, it's too tedious and people don't want to sort of be identified living here, there or anywhere if they sort of think the government's gonna be onto them, and it's sort of a bit of a tricky question isn't it, do you know what I mean? You know, you're ticking the boxes and you're sort of thinking "Oh do I want to say that?"

So do you think it helps make change for Aboriginal people the census, is there a purpose to it?

Well it's supposed to but I mean they give you the money to set things up on one hand but then they take it away with the other, you know, they sort of put money in one area where they sort of prop it up and then when there's cuts they cut it, so it's of no benefit so if they're ...

You're talking about organisations now?

Yeah organisations, you know, jobs, creating jobs specific, you know, targeted at Aboriginal positions, give it to you in one hand and then two years down the track, three years down the track take it away.

In my interviews I asked people what they did with the census form on census night. Their views were quite direct and they had not regrets about their decision as one male (50+ years of age) stated:

This is why they're not accurate 'cause the majority of Aboriginal people just throw them in the bins.

So you mentioned that you know for a fact Aboriginal people in Robinvale throw them in the bins?

Course I do and when they get the mail from the electoral commission they all throw that in the bin.

Why do you think they do that?

Because they've just got no respect for the Australian government and what they want. They're sick of the Australian government say you've got to do this, they say we don't have to do this, bang, out they go, straight in the bin, that's what they're doing.

However, there is a different perception when Aboriginal people are actually working with statistics from the census as John Harding expressed:

I participate in the census because I know from my previous work in Government that it is used by Governments to allocate resources to service delivery programs for Aboriginal people. Analysis of census data is also extremely powerful in reinforcing Aboriginal community understandings of difference which is fundamental to designing policies and programs that are effective. Aboriginal participation in the census produces valuable evidence for Aboriginal advocates and service delivery organisations that influences decision-makers in Government and community.

This illustrates Indigenous ways of knowing and the importance of interpreting the census data back to the Indigenous community so they understand the benefits of demography (Caldwell et al. 1987). I found no evidence of government departments consulting with Indigenous organisations about census outcomes, although it is possible that Indigenous

managers do discuss census numbers with funding agencies as my participants illustrated above. Perhaps if the data was conveyed back to communities, they would participate more; as an interviewee stated: “I mean, would they [the government] get it right even if we participated, would Aboriginal people be better off?” This cynicism is based on the relentless problems of homelessness (Morgan 2006), poverty (Altman 2007) and children being removed or dying through suicide. However, census data can be accessed by welfare agencies that provide services to assist with poverty and homelessness in the Indigenous community (ABS interview), which raises the question – how does the Indigenous community become aware of the usage of census data by welfare agencies? Darren Smith, Chief Executive Officer, of the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria stated:

Aboriginal homelessness and the numbers of Aboriginal people seeking social housing in Victoria is overwhelming. While independent measures of (the overwhelming) current unmet demand are available through Aboriginal Housing Victoria’s wait list and the count of Aboriginal people on the public housing wait list, it is the high growth rate of the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander population, evident across multiple censuses, that is intimidating. If existing population growth continues Aboriginal demand for social housing and homelessness will grow without further investment in housing. Estimating the quantum of need and the scale of investments required to address the need can only be underpinned by accurate population projections which in turn relies on reliable and accurate census counts.

Gardiner and Bourke (2000:49) argue that because of generations of “hostile officialdom” Aboriginal people avoid the census count for years, even decades, after the historical impact of negative government policy. I found Indigenous suspicion of census and government processes evident in the interview data. Several interviewees felt census information would be used against Indigenous people and they used this as a reason for ignoring the census. Murray said: “I just don’t trust it, maybe that’s inherent from the folks [parents]. They’d say never trust the system or trust the government because they’ll rip you off every chance they get”.

John Harding, who had worked on the 2001 Census campaign, considered that in the past it was fear of being exposed to the government that caused Indigenous people to avoid the census; however, avoiding the true number of people in their household does not help overcrowding:

A lot of our people are, or used to be, very frightened of telling the census people how many people lived in their house because, you know, a lot of their houses say if they were public housing and you're only allowed to have four people and they might have eight because relatives will come and stay, so you can lose your house so they'll lie to the census people and that kind of stuff. So I think that it's getting better now because more Aboriginal people are being more honest and actually filling out the censuses and that helps increase your service delivery and program funding.

Harding's above analysis demonstrates Aboriginal awareness of the census as a social instrument between the government and the Aboriginal community but also demonstrates the fear and suspicion within the Aboriginal community. These fears and suspicions could be minimised if the ABS provided feedback to Indigenous communities about what information is being gathered and how it could be used by the communities for advancement. In addition, the ABS could provide information about how different government agencies use the data and also initiate open consultation with the community, rather than having closed meetings with Indigenous organisations. Public access to ABS results is possible through the ABS website, but this is mainly useful for research for scholarly use and grant application purposes for welfare organisations or consultants. There is an argument about ownership here from the Indigenous perspective; these are their statistics, so they should be co-managed or reciprocated.

Reservations about the census could also be attributable to the ABS being active and involved with the community pre-census but not so active post-census. Concern for ensuring accurate

population counts was not evident in the interviews, but participants did indicate knowledge of the size of their 'community', their immediate community in which they reside, interact and socialise, and have established relationships.

Looking after our own - Indigenous Ways of knowing their population

I think that the census data confirms my personal observations that the Aboriginal community in Melbourne and in regional Victoria has grown significantly in the last twenty years. I think it is really difficult to judge in metropolitan Melbourne whether the census count of Aboriginal people is accurate because the Aboriginal population is so widely spread and Melbourne is so vast. In regional towns I think the Aboriginal community has a much greater sense of the size of the Aboriginal population and generally suggest that Aboriginal population is undercounted. (Darren Smith 40+ years)

For Indigenous people in Melbourne there is a community understanding and kinship knowledge underlying it, whilst formal government processes are often fraught with barriers to completing a realistic population count. The Aboriginal method is strictly speaking not a count at all; rather, it is impressionistic or an 'instinct' that is developed over time growing up in the community and knowing where people are when they come together. A person needs to understand that mixing within the community regularly and working in the community at a later stage in one's life, helps in understanding the demographics. Other ways of knowing are observed with the younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who also have a perception of their number population number of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders through social networking, whilst the older generation use their kinship knowledge of births to estimate an Aboriginal person's number of descendants.

Aboriginal people usually have a sense of the number of people in their community; they gauge this through the high mobility of relatives and community members arriving for gatherings for funerals or National Aboriginal and Islander Week (NAIDOC). I have observed in regional Victoria large numbers of people arriving to visit a family member who is gravely ill, or family members accompanying each other for medical treatment. In contrast the situation can be different in Melbourne because Melbourne has so many organisations and hospitals large numbers of Aboriginal people are not noticeable by the Melbourne Aboriginal community. For example, the Aboriginal organiser of the 2014 Aboriginal Expo hosted by Richmond Football Club on the day of the ‘Dreamtime at the G’ football match between Richmond and Essendon, states:

If the community comes to the expo they get a free ticket to the game. Last year we had 500 tickets and we had about 40 left over even though we had 1200 people turn up: We give them a quiz; they go around the expo stalls and fill it out, take it to the booth and get a ticket. Not everyone needs a ticket because they get tickets from community organisations or from Essendon or the Michael Long Foundation – Essendon and the Long Foundation get more tickets than us. This year we expect the same numbers but you never can tell – come to the expo, look at opportunities available to the community and get a ticket. (Aboriginal event organiser, 2013)

Aboriginal social events are another way that the community estimates its population; organisers have insight into community numbers when preparing for community functions. These include Christmas celebrations such as the ‘Christmas Tree’ for children, a community practice established by the Melbourne Aboriginal community since the 1960s (Barwick 1963), sports gatherings, National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) events and fundraising for funerals. Early 1960s was the peak of Aboriginal migration to Melbourne post Aboriginal mission and reservation (Andrews 2016) where self-identification and a localised pan-identity began to form, the organising of weekly Aboriginal

community dances were important to ‘keep the people in Melbourne together’ (Barwick 1963:332), yet there was no aim to count the people just provide a forum where they could just be.

I mentioned earlier Indigenous people’s estimates of the size of their community for catering and service delivery; however, the Indigenous interviewees provided mixed knowledge of the exact size of the Indigenous population because many rely on their own personal networks or community gatherings of Indigenous people. Melbourne has an extensive geographical area that spans more than 100 kilometres and Indigenous people are now scattered across the metropolitan area Unless Indigenous people meet regularly as a community, it is difficult for them to gauge their numbers. During Barwick’s research time, it was much easier to estimate the size because the population resided much more densely and interacted regularly. This analysis supports my earlier argument that if ABS Census data was made known, there would be more of a consensus on population knowledge.

Bruce expressed concern that the population was shrinking because of the number of funerals:

I think it’s grown but also at the same time it’s declined because we, you know ... I mean every week we’re burying in Victoria ... some of them might be old people but a lot of them are dying young.

This view is based on Bruce’s experience; he has many young adult children, which means his networks include young Aboriginal people, and through these networks he is aware of youth mortality. There are also older adults living in his home who would share further information from their community networks about deaths in the community. Throughout the interview, he had a guarded outlook on

many points relating to the advancement of Indigenous people and a cynical view of government processes.

Tracey identified the population size, albeit from her own generation, entwined with the birth and death cycle of the Aboriginal population in Fitzroy:

Yeah it's getting smaller and smaller and sadder 'cause we're losing too many people. We've been to how many funerals in the last ... since twelve months, we've buried too many and it's getting smaller, but then babies are getting born too.

Other perspectives on the size of the Indigenous community from other interviewees showed more ways of knowing population numbers and mobility. When asked about the size of the Indigenous community of Melbourne, Lenny (63 years) answered: "All depends on the weather, if it's hot you get the blackfellas come from the cold areas. If it's cold in, say, New South Wales and it's hot here, they'll come here. Same as they do for seasonal work". This statement demonstrates the high mobility within Aboriginal communities and links to the earlier discussion of volatility with Aboriginal enumeration.

Conclusion

My Aboriginal participants clearly showed that Aboriginal people are accustomed to being pawns in the game of enumeration and government funding, but some considered it important to be counted for a better future for the next generation and thereafter. Those working in Aboriginal organisations consider the census as a reliable source to argue for government funding for important community programs. However, Aboriginal participants questioned the census relevance if it is not connected to realistic outcomes for the Aboriginal community if important social and economic programs to advance Aboriginal people were short term whilst the community needs were long term, this analysis was linked to the question what were the real benefits of the 1967 Referendum to Aboriginal people?

Resistance from Indigenous community members to being counted cannot be overlooked. The Aboriginal voices in this research has shown that there is a large number of people in Aboriginal Melbourne who reject being counted by the census and it is likely that successive generations will do so too. While some Indigenous interviewees have completed censuses, other participants have either stopped doing them or have never done one. The participants indicated that they considered themselves the original land owners and placed their arguments as so by referring to their sovereign rights. Others held their unique experiences of being forcibly removed from their parents and incarcerated as children and then later as adults. Most of their lives were spent under government control and they will most likely never participate in a government voluntary process such as a census. Aboriginal ways of knowing the Aboriginal community is based upon a network of knowing. Those who did not see the real accuracy of the census count is because they themselves did not participate and know others who have never participated.

It has taken the government over fifty years to develop a process that can apply to an Indigenous people count. However, it would be a step backwards should the Indigenous demography undertaken by the ABS, with its specific details of Aboriginal disadvantage (Altman and Gray 2000; Altman 2011b), be merged with the mainstream count, as in the past. The research in this paper indicates that the Indigenous population is highly mobile and this affects the count of the Indigenous population of Melbourne. The census as a social instrument needs to be seen as an interplay between the state and Indigenous people, and that way the ironies of accommodation and resistance to the census will have a larger political context.

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