

# UNDERSTANDING MULTI-ETHNICITY IN AOTEAROA: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND SERVICE DELIVERY

*EEMUN CHEN, an evaluation and research specialist from MartinJenkins, looks at what happens when people of multiple ethnicities meet up with the Census and other official statistics in Aotearoa.*

As our official statisticians grapple to understand and reflect a New Zealand that's becoming more and more ethnically diverse, a particular challenge is capturing the experience of the increasing numbers of people who identify with multiple ethnicities. This is important for ensuring government has the data it needs to design effective policy and service delivery.

The Census and countless other forms now ask: "Which ethnic group do you belong to? Select all that apply to you." For many people, this is a harmless question and an easy one-second tick. But for many others, it is complicated by different conceptualisations of nationality, race, identity, and beliefs that don't necessarily line up with one or multiple boxes.

## **How we record multiple ethnic identities**

Until 2004, if you reported multiple ethnicities, Stats NZ would allocate you to one ethnic category based on an arbitrary ranking of the ethnic responses. One problem with this approach was that Pacific peoples and other minority groups were increasingly under-counted, as Māori were at the top of the prioritisation schedule. Since the 2004 review of the measurement of ethnicity, Stats NZ has been using the "Total response" and "Single and combined response" classifications instead.

"Total response" is the record of the total number of ethnic categories reported, no matter how many categories each person reported. Accordingly, the total will be more than the real number of people involved, and people of multiple ethnicity will be effectively hidden. In the 2018 Census, 11 percent of the population reported their ethnicity in more than one ethnic group. That's almost 540,000 people – 10,000 more than the population of the entire Wellington region.

By contrast, the "Single and combined response" method assigns you to a unique ethnic category that reflects the mix of responses you provide. So if you report multiple ethnicities of, say, Eritrean and New Zealander, you would be reported under African/Other Ethnicity.

The problem with using Total response – which is the approach used by most statisticians and organisations reporting ethnicity data – is that, as the number of people with mixed heritage grows, the percentages will both exaggerate European people as a proportion of New Zealand's total population *and* exaggerate the rise of minority ethnicities.

In the 2018 Census, using Total response, European were 70 percent, Māori 17 percent, and Asian 15 percent (up from 12 percent in 2013) of the population. By contrast, under Single and combined response, European-only are 60 percent (falling from 65 percent in 2013), Māori-only 8 percent, and Asian-only 14 percent.

So you can see that, in the wrong hands, poorly contextualised sets of statistics could act as a powerful tool for anti-immigration agendas.

## **Understanding multi-ethnicity**

In New Zealand, there have been some, mostly quantitative, studies on intermarriage and multiple ethnicities, mostly focusing on Māori as one of the ethnicities. The international and New Zealand literature and data shows that making ethnic choices for children is complex and that many children of ethnic intermarriage will choose to emphasise one ethnicity over another.

In Aotearoa, there is a whole new generation of people whom governments are not geared up to understand or respond to. Nearly a quarter of people under 15 years of age (23 percent – almost 120,000 kids) identify with more than one ethnic group. Government needs to understand how these young people (as well as adults with multiple cultures and diverse heritages) perceive and experience their identity and how this might affect key areas such as employment, wellbeing, housing, education, and health.

Governments have had difficulty understanding and responding to minority ethnic communities, let alone people with multiple ethnicities. The terrible events in Christchurch in March 2019 brought into sight just how much ethnic communities are removed from policy discussion. Government agencies were warned many times of the rise of alt-right groups and the growing discrimination and harassment of Muslim people.

In New Zealand today, there is increasing ethno-racial diversity and fluidity – including evidence of ethnic mobility where people's ethnicity changes between censuses. So how best can data collection, data interpretation, and data visualisation support a "true" picture of our diversity? And what might this mean for evidence-based policy?

### **From data to policy**

Census data helps government plan services, such as which health services need more funding, where schools should be built, where roads should go, and where public transport should be maintained. When the data that's collected and reported doesn't truly reflect the people it's supposed to be about, there's a significant risk that policy makers and decision makers will put funding in the wrong places or develop the wrong initiatives or programmes.

To address this, I believe we need to revisit several areas. First, we need to consider whether ethnicity, as self-identified cultural affiliation, is still relevant and important for data collection and for policy evidence. If we do think it's still relevant, then we need to rethink how we understand, report, and use ethnicity data.

I think ethnicity *is* still relevant, but we need to acknowledge that how form-fillers think of ethnicity will vary from person to person. Although scholars and policy makers are still struggling to come to a single definition of ethnicity, it does appear to be a measure that has some predictive value and can be helpful for targeting and delivering public services.

The key will be to ensure we don't think of ethnicity as one-dimensional and that we make space for the increasing number of people with multiple identities. At the very least, all users of ethnicity data should consider Single and combined response data as well as Total response data.

Single and combined response data doesn't lend itself to neat graphs of aggregate statistics, but it provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of how individuals of mixed ethnicity may encounter particular issues. Some of this analysis has been done before in New Zealand, but not as a matter of course. For example, an older paper from Tahu Kūkutai (from 2004) describes how individuals who identify with being a combination of Māori and non-Māori but who identify more strongly with non-Māori tended to be better off economically than all other Māori. On the flip side, those who identified more strongly as Māori had similar socio-economic and demographic attributes to those who were Māori-only.

That study, along with more recent research showing a high degree of mixed ethnicity among New Zealand-born Asians, challenges the popular perception of "Māori" and "Asian" as single, homogenous categories. It also shows the danger of focusing too much on simple and singular measures of ethnicity as a pathway into public policy interventions. This raises questions about how ethnicity is used in funding schools and district health boards.

## **The need for qualitative research**

Studies to date have been relatively broad-brush, driven by Census data, and exploratory. To really get at the heart of what might matter and be helpful to the increasingly large proportion of people with multiple ethnicities, we need more qualitative studies on their lived experience.

For example, how do people of different ages within this population perceive their ethnicity and to what extent do they face different levels of discrimination and racism? Answers to those questions could provide insights into, for example, unconscious bias or racism in frontline health decision making.

At the most basic level, any research into people with multiple ethnicities provides recognition and a much-needed voice for this under-studied population. And in particular, a greater focus on qualitative research will provide policy makers with a much more accurate and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and needs of this group, which now stands at more than half a million people.