Stability and Change in Ethnic Identification: An Aggregate Level Analysis

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Extended Abstract

This paper examines which groups of people are likely to have changed their answer when responding to the ancestry question in the 1986 and 2001 Australian censuses. A cohort analysis is used to compare the ancestry responses of the Australian population in three age groups in 1986 with their responses fifteen years later in 2001 when they were fifteen years older.

A cohort analysis of ancestry groups

Cohort analysis is a standard demographic method used to follow and study the same group of people over a period of time to examine their life experiences and survivorship. In this paper, cohort analysis was used to compare the ancestry response of people in a particular age group in 1986 with their ancestry response in 2001 when they were fifteen years older. The population in 1986 was divided into three age groups corresponding broadly to three life cycle stages: 0-14 years, 15-29 years and 30-44 years. People in each age group were divided into males and females and whether they were born in Australia or overseas. Tabulations of these age cohorts were obtained from the 1986 census showing their first and second ancestry responses.

Age-sex-specific survival ratios were applied to the ancestry groups in each age cohort to estimate the number that would have survived over the fifteen-year period to 2001. The survival ratios were those based on life tables for Australia 1993 published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1993 being the mid-point of the fifteen-year period between 1986 and 2001. In preliminary analyses, the same age-sex survival ratios were applied to the Australian-born and overseas-born populations. (Most migrant groups have standard mortality ratios that are about 0.8-0.9 compared

to the Australian-born population. Further analyses will be undertaken that will apply age-sex survival rates, adjusted for the differences in mortality between the Australian-born and overseas-born populations, to the migrant populations.) Since the Australian Aboriginal population has significantly lower life expectancies than the Australian population as a whole, separate survival ratios based on the Experimental Life Tables of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, 1991-96, published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1999, were used in surviving people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry from 1986 to 2001.

The survivors of the three cohorts aged 0-14, 15-29 and 30-44 years in 1986 would be aged 15-29, 30-44 and 45-59 years in 2001. They were compared with the actual 2001 census counts of people aged 15-29, 30-44 and 45-59 years. Those who were born in Australia were compared with the number of Australian-born in 2001. Those who were born overseas were compared with the number in 2001 who were born overseas and had arrived in Australia before 1986. The difference between the 1986 survivors and the 2001 census count would be the estimated number of people who had left Australia during the intervening period either permanently or temporarily and were not enumerated in the 2001 Census. (Underenumeration was about the same in both censuses: 1.9% in 1986 and 1.8% in 2001).

The cohort analyses could provide only an indication of stability and change in ancestry between 1986 and 2001 because a number of assumptions were made in surviving the 1986 age cohorts to 2001. One assumption was that all persons with the exception of people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ancestry were subject to the same mortality rates of the Australian life tables of 1993. The second assumption was that the same adjustment factor was used to adjust for emigration and under-enumeration in all ancestry groups, with the exception of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations for whom no emigration was assumed. It was likely that persons of particular ethnic origins in 1986 might be more likely than others to have emigrated or were temporarily overseas in 2001 and were not enumerated.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results of the cohort analyses appeared to provide useful comparisons of the expected Australian-born and overseas-born

populations in the three age groups in 2001 by ancestry with the actual ancestry counts in the 2001 census.

Discussion of findings

Findings are discussed for the Australian-born and overseas-born populations in each of the three age cohorts. A ratio of actual to expected counts by ancestry is presented for each ancestry group. A ratio close to 1.0 indicates a close correspondence between the 1986 and 2001 numbers. Ratios much less than 1.0 indicate a decline in identification with that ancestry in 2001 compared with 1986, while ratios greater than 1.0 show an increase in identification with that ancestry in 2001 compared with 1986.

Some ethnic groups appeared to demonstrate remarkable consistency in their ancestry response in the two censuses fifteen years apart. The number of people, both Australian-born and overseas-born, stating Greek, Maltese, Dutch or Polish ancestry in 2001 was very similar to the estimated number based on cohort analyses of the 1986 figures. Other groups showing stability in their ancestry reporting were overseas-born residents of Asian-Pacific origins such as Vietnamese, Filipinos and Maoris.

The increase in the propensity to state Australian or Irish ancestry was observed in all three age cohorts examined, both Australian-born and overseas-born, with the number stating Irish ancestry nearly doubling in all age cohorts. The increase was likely to be related to the provision of tick boxes for Irish and Australian ancestries on the 2001 census form but not on the 1986 census form.

There were also increases in the number of people in all age groups, both Australian and overseas-born, stating Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian ancestries in 2001 compared with 1986, with a corresponding decline in the number of people stating Yugoslavian ancestry. These changes in ethnic identification were likely to be related to the break-up of the former Yugoslav republic and the formation of separate Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian nation states.

The cohort analyses showed that many people who stated Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ancestry in 1986 did not do so in 2001. There was a greater propensity for the Indigenous population (who were separately identified by the question on Indigenous status) to state Australian ancestry in 2001 than in 1986. In contrast, many people who did not state their ancestry as Australian South Sea Islander in 1986 did so in 2001, most likely in response to specific guidelines in 2001 to do so. Australian South Sea Islander was also one of the specific examples of ancestry provided on the 2001 census form.

The coding of two ancestries when people provided more than two responses appeared to have contributed to the decrease in a number of European ancestry groups such as Scottish, Welsh, French, Danish and Swedish.

It was interesting to note that all the ancestries listed with tick boxes or as examples on the 2001 census form showed either little change or an increase in all age cohorts between 1986 and 2001. None showed a decline in numbers between the two censuses. Those that showed stability within each age cohort included English, Dutch, Greek, Vietnamese and Maori. Those that showed an increase included Irish, Italian, German, Chinese, Australian and Australian South Sea Islander.