

Australian Bureau of Statistics INFORMATION PAPER

OS CATALOGUE NO. 2152.0

NOON 5 JULY 1982

CENSUS 81—LANGUAGE

PHONE INQUIRIES for more information about these statistics—contact Mr Fred Dawes on Canberra (062) 52 5848 or any of our State offices.
other inquiries including copies of publications—contact Information Services on Canberra (062) 52 6627 or in any of our State offices.

MAIL INQUIRIES write to Information Services, ABS, P.O. Box 10, Belconnen, A.C.T. 2616 or any of our State offices.

Introduction

The aim of question 15 on the 1981 Census schedule was to determine levels of proficiency in English of those persons who speak a language other than English at home.

The information collected from responses to this question is intended as a broad indication of the potential demand for English language tuition and has been collected in preference to information on 'languages regularly used' (as asked in 1976).

The question

The first part of the 1981 Census question ('Does the person speak a language other than English at home?') was asked of all persons in order to separate the population into two groups, those speaking only English at home and others. The others were then asked 'How well does this person speak English?'. The responses to the second part of the question provided the information on proficiency in spoken English. Literacy is a separate skill and is not measured by this question.

The question format was—

15. Does the person speak a language other than English at home?	No, only speaks English <input type="checkbox"/>
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
How well does the person speak English?	
Very well <input type="checkbox"/>	1
Well <input type="checkbox"/>	2
Not well <input type="checkbox"/>	3
Not at all <input type="checkbox"/>	4

History of the language question—

In the Censuses of 1921 and 1933 a question on foreign language reading and writing ability was asked of those persons who did not read or write English. It was not until 1976 that a question on language was again included in the census.

The 1976 Census language question was included in response to requests at that time for information on 'languages regularly used' and also served as an indicator of migrant assimilation into the Australian community. However, inaccuracies in the 1976 data and requests for information on the extent to which people are proficient in English led to the change in emphasis of the question for the 1981 Census.

Accuracy and limitations of language data

Testing prior to the census compared responses to the question with assessments of language proficiency for a sample of respondents interviewed for the purpose. These results showed that those who responded 'not well' or 'not at all' were correctly identified as prospective 'clients' for English language tuition. However, some who responded 'well' or 'very well' did not rate highly in the interview assessment. Responses to the 1981 Census question therefore may underestimate the number of people who were not proficient in English.

The main problem associated with the data on proficiency in English is the subjective nature of responses to the question, as is inevitable in a situation where each household fills in its own census form, without the help of an interviewer. Part of the problem of subjectivity is different interpretations by respondents. For example, a respondent can communicate well enough to do the

shopping and hence answers 'well' to the second part of the question but in fact may not be able to hold a social conversation.

As well, errors may occur if a friend or a relative answers the question on behalf of a respondent. The respondent's actual proficiency in English may be underestimated or overrated.

For these reasons, census results should be interpreted as only a broad indication of the levels of proficiency in English of persons who speak a language other than English at home.

Data release

The data item 'use of English' (mnemonic 'ENG') in the 1981 Census has been derived from the two parts of the language question. While information on proficiency in English was asked of all persons who speak a language other than English at home, irrespective of age or place of birth, responses for persons aged 0-4 years have been coded to 'not applicable'.

The classification available is:

Code	Descriptor
0	Not applicable (persons aged 0-4 years)
1	English only
	Other language, English—
2	Very well
3	Well
4	Not well
5	Not at all
6	Competency in English not stated
7	Not stated (i.e. no response to question 15)

Related publications

Statistics on the language topic are available in statistical publications, on microfiche and in magnetic tape summary files.

A general discussion of the statistics planned from the 1981 Census is contained in *Census 81—Data Release Plans* (2142.0)(a) and Addendum(a).

Other related publications are:

Catalogue of 1981 Census Tables (2139.0)(a)
Making Sense of Census 81 (2140.0)
Geographic Code List (2141.0)(a)
Census 81—Magnetic Tape Summary Files (2143.0)
Census 81—Statistical Publications (2144.0)(a)
Census 81—Microfiche (2145.0)
Census 81—Maps (2146.0)(a)
Census 81—Industry (2147.0)
Census 81—Occupation (2148.0)
Census 81—Education Qualifications (2149.0)
Census 81—Dwelling, Household, Family (2150.0)
Census 81—Income (2151.0)(a)
Census 81—Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (2153.0)
Census 81—Journey to Work (2154.0)
Census 81—Usual Residence and Internal Migration (2155.0)
Census 81—Effects of Introduced Random Error (2156.0)

(a) already available.

Further information

If you require further information about the census, please contact any of the ABS Offices listed in the Appendix.

APPENDIX

INQUIRIES

NEW SOUTH
WALES

Information Services
St Andrew's House
Sydney, NSW. 2000
(Box 796 GPO Sydney 2001)
Phone (02) 268 4395-6-7
Telex AA20819

VICTORIA

Information Services
Commonwealth Banks Building
Cnr Elizabeth & Flinders Streets
Melbourne, VIC. 3000
(Box 2796Y GPO Melbourne 3001)
Phone (03) 652 6192
Telex AA30086

QUEENSLAND

Information Services
345 Ann Street
Brisbane, Q.L.D. 4000
Phone (07) 335 482
Telex AA40271

SOUTH
AUSTRALIA

Information Services
City Mutual Centre
10-20 Pultney Street
Adelaide, SA. 5000
(Box 2272 GPO Adelaide 5001)
Phone (08) 228 9439
Telex AA82106

WESTERN
AUSTRALIA

Information Services
1-3 St George's Terrace
Perth, WA. 6000
Phone (09) 323 5140
Telex AA92041

TASMANIA

Information Services
Australian Government Centre
10th Floor
188 Collins Street
Hobart, TAS. 7000
(Box 66A GPO Hobart 7001)
Phone (002) 20 4437 or 20 4495
Telex AA58098

NORTHERN
TERRITORY

The Statistician—Northern Territory
7th Floor MLC Building
81 Smith Street
Darwin, NT. 5790
(Box 3796 PO Darwin 5794)
Phone (089) 80 2717
Telex AA85075

AUSTRALIAN
CAPITAL
TERRITORY

Information Services
Australian Bureau of Statistics
Box 10 PO
Belconnen, ACT. 2616
Phone (062) 52 6627
Telex AA62020

12. DEC 1991