

Risk Assessment: Scrapping Census and Māori Data Sovereignty

Critical Risk: Violation of Rangatiratanga and Whakapapa Principles

The decision to replace the traditional census with administrative data effectively undermines Māori data sovereignty by breaching two fundamental pillars of Te Mana Raraunga framework.

Rangatiratanga (Authority/Control) is compromised because Māori lose direct input into the collection and definition of their data. The Census allowed Māori to self-identify their ethnicity, iwi affiliation, and descent critical identity markers that administrative datasets cannot comprehensively capture. Transitioning to government-held data removes Māori authority over their demographic representation.

Whakapapa (Context/Relationships) suffers because administrative data erodes cultural context. Census questions about te reo Māori use, marae connections, and iwi relationships provided rich relational data that revealed community wellbeing. Administrative datasets, on the other hand, typically only measure contact with government services, primarily deficit focused interactions that misrepresent Māori reality.

Impact

This approach risks creating a surveillance style data ecosystem where Māori are primarily visible through their interactions with justice, welfare, and health systems. This reinforces negative stereotypes and undermines self determination aspirations.

Solution

Before implementing this change, Stats NZ must establish genuine partnership structures with Māori data governance entities. This requires developing culturally responsive data collection methods within the new system, ensuring Māori maintain authority over identity definitions, and incorporating annual surveys that capture cultural connectedness metrics beyond administrative touchpoints. The Mana Ōrite agreement provides a foundation, but it needs substantial strengthening to address these sovereignty concerns.

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