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Risks of Scrapping the Census for Māori Data Sovereignty and Governance

The decision to replace traditional Census data with administrative data puts Māori Data Sovereignty and Governance (MDS/G) at serious risk. A core principle of MDS/G is Rangatiratanga, Māori control over the collection, definition, and use of their data. In order to support Māori decision-making, administrative datasets are typically not made to explicitly reflect Māori priority items such as iwi affiliation, descent, and ethnicity. Additionally, the imperatives of the day-to-day activity of government agencies are built into administrative sources, and could easily distort, erase or misrepresent Māori identities, compared to the Census that is co-designed to ask the questions that matter to Māori.

There are two consequences of this: Māori miss the opportunity to influence data governance processes, which would impact confidence in Stats NZ, and Māori become less visible in official statistics, which would compromise the accurate measurement of the population. In both scenarios, Māori may find themselves being colonially practised upon again, as information is extracted about Māori, without their consent or authority.

Stats NZ ought to actively engage Māori in co-designing the new Census methodology to ensure that it adheres to MDS/G protocols and lessen this risk. That means working with Māori, hapū, and iwi organisations to identify the relevant information, the method of collection, and how Māori have ownership concerning the distribution of information. The administrative Census risks failing Māori in totality without this.