

STATEMENT BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATISTICS COUNCIL ON CENSUS 2001

The South African Statistics Council was established in late 2000 following the passing of the Statistics Act in 1999. In terms of this Act, the Council must advise the Minister on any matter regarding the collection, processing, analysis, documentation, storage and dissemination of statistics, including the taking of a population census. The Council comprises a broad range of users and technical advisers as well one representative from each province.

1. Council recommends to the Minister that he support the release of the results of Census 2001.
2. Council commends Stats SA for its decision to make all census data available to all, free of charge. Accessibility of the results of Census 2001 to the research community and to the public will therefore be greater than for Census '96. It is desirable that the results of the census be publicised and their use promoted as widely as possible.
3. Council has been assured by Stats SA that the complete levels of confidentiality of individual responses to the census will not be compromised by the release or publication of the census results in any form.
4. Council has been monitoring the planning and conduct of Census 2001 since its inception, and through close cooperation with Statistics South Africa we have been able to make suggestions and to interact with Stats SA throughout the process. This has largely been achieved through the establishment of a sub-committee for the evaluation of the census. The committee has received and considered a great many documents relevant to the conduct of the census through to the final results. It has considered the data as it became available, and thanks Stats SA for the numerous special analyses that had to be produced for the committee's perusal. Council has received the final report of the sub-committee.
5. Council notes that Stats SA has improved the timeliness of the release of the final count in that this has been achieved within 21 months of the date of the census compared with the more usual 24 months taken by other countries and by Census '96.
6. Council is satisfied that the procedures followed during the operation of Census 2001 have been transparent, and that there has been no interference by government.

7. Council finds the content of Census 2001 to be relevant to the information and planning needs of the country, coherent and substantially internally consistent.
8. In terms of the level of methodological soundness with which the census was conducted, Council concludes that Census 2001 satisfactorily followed internationally accepted procedures in terms of demarcation, data processing, and adjustment through a Post Enumeration Survey. However, Council has some anxiety about the substantial undercount as revealed by the Post Enumeration Survey, since one in six people were missed in the census. It is also concerned about the high levels of imputation for some variables. (Imputation is a procedure used to replace a missing response by an inferred value. It is used when this can be done with reasonable certainty from other data captured or from replies by similar respondents).
9. During the processing of the questionnaires, an editing process occurs whereby obvious errors, such as of 'pregnant men', are corrected. This is done in all censuses around the world. Council commends the decision by Stats SA to make available on request a sample of the unedited and unimputed census data in October 2003, as well as the usual sample of edited and imputed data.
10. Given the nature of all official statistics in all countries, Council recognizes that the final census estimates will not completely accurately reflect the true number of people in the country when the census was taken. Preliminary analyses indicate that the published census population estimate, as adjusted for undercount according to the Post Enumeration Survey, is probably quite close to the true population, but is possibly a little on the low side.

Although the overall estimate of the South African population is substantially accurate, this hides some mutually compensating distortions in the composition of the population by gender, age and population group. The same is true of the estimates of the provincial populations. However, the division of the population in total between the provinces is considered to be reasonably accurate.

11. In order to compile accurate estimates of the population, Council recommends that a further investigative phase of the census be conducted over the next year. The findings of this process should then be used to inform the mid-year estimates of the population which Stats SA publishes on a regular basis. They can also be used to guide users as to how census information can be adjusted to provide more accurate estimates, given the distortions in the composition of the population by gender, age and population group referred to above.

12. A special warning must be given about labour market statistics. Census estimates of these statistics for October 2001 differ substantially from those contained in the September 2001 Labour Force Survey. Labour force participation rates are lower, unemployment is higher and employment levels are lower in the census. This can be attributed in large measure to differences in the questions asked, which are more detailed in the Labour Force Survey. It is not feasible to include all the Labour Force Survey questions in any census. On the other hand, the Labour Force Survey is subject to greater sampling error than the census and may also contain non-sampling errors. The census can yield estimates of labour market variables in small areas, which the Labour Force Survey cannot do. A full accounting for the differences between the census and the Labour Force Survey remains to be carried out. But preliminary investigations show that the proportion of self-employed in total employment is lower in the census. The Council believes that the census labour market estimates should be released, but recommends that analysts interpret them against the background of all sources of labour market information.
13. Given that Council is responsible for safeguarding official statistics, Council is to commission a special study to improve the Labour Force Survey and to examine the differences between the LFS and census results. This study will tie in with the study already commissioned by Council to improve the Income and Expenditure Survey, and will similarly draw on technical assistance funded by a donor country.
14. Council recommends that notes alerting users to the limitations in the results be added to all census products distributed by Statistics South Africa.
15. The split between urban and rural populations is not being released at this time since the Statistics Council is leading a process to consider alternative definitions of urban/rural, including one based on population density, in order to bring South Africa in line with other international definitions.
16. Council notes that an important lesson to be learnt from the census is the need for further improvements in planning and management, in the quality of enumerator and supervisor training, and in better supervision in the field. More effective publicity techniques need to be developed and implemented so that the public buys into the process, wants to be enumerated, and understands that it is their duty to be enumerated.
17. While the desire of Stats SA to meet international standards and to place South Africa at the forefront in world standards is commendable, Council notes that the scanners used in the Census 2001 data analysis process caused some operational problems. Council suggests that further innovation be avoided until the existing systems are functioning well and the skills' backlog within the agency has been resolved.

18. Council recommends that future census activities be thoroughly planned and the costs carefully estimated using the lessons learnt from Census 2001, and that Stats SA adhere to future resource allocations. At the same time, Council recommends that funds be approved timeously, and that census-taking activities be adequately funded.
19. Council suggests that the conducting of a census in 2006, the level of detail of the information to be collected, and the number of questions to be included, be subject to a review designed to determine whether the anticipated benefits outweigh the likely costs.
20. In conclusion, the South African Statistics Council would like to commend Statistics South Africa collectively, and the individual members of its staff, for the thorough, committed and professional manner in which it has undertaken the many phases and aspects of this enormous undertaking over the past four years. We also sincerely appreciate the patient and cooperative manner with which the organisation has dealt with our many requests, and for the implementation of many of our recommendations.
21. Finally, the Council must acknowledge the work of its sub-committee for the long hours of work and its dedication to the furtherance of the quality and use of official statistics in South Africa.