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Colmar Brunton Social Research

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1. Executive summary

1.1. Background

As a part of the national statistical service the ABS provides, as an integral component of surveys it has traditionally collected various forms of personal identifiers (names and addresses), which are deleted as soon as practical after processing. The destruction of these identifiers after processing, has been a way of clearly protecting the privacy of the provider and provider perception of the ABS. However, the increase in the potential for data integration through improved methods, processes, technology and availability of rich administrative datasets has increased the value of personal identifiers, as these identifiers enhance the ability to accurately link records between datasets.

Commencing with the 2006 Census, the ABS began the Census Data Enhancement (CDE) project linking Census data with other datasets using such personal identifiers, in order to leverage more information from the combination of individual datasets than is available from the datasets separately. There have been no privacy or confidentiality issues, breaches or complaints throughout the 2006 and 2011 CDE projects, and focus group testing undertaken prior to the 2011 Census indicated there was strong trust in the ABS, and general support for the ABS progressing the CDE project.

Considering the benefit of retention of personal identifiers, the ABS is currently examining its policies regarding the retention and use of personal identifying information to ensure that there is the right balance between benefits and risks. Furthermore, for the 2016 CDE project, the ABS would like to build on the success of the 2011 CDE project, and expand its data integration program.

The ABS commissioned Colmar Brunton to conduct qualitative research with Australians in order to gain an up-to-date understanding of community views on the retention of personal identifiers, as well as the use of these to link datasets, in order to strike the optimum balance between benefits and risks of retention and use of this information. Two separate but related topics were explored in the study:

- Risks and issues associated with ABS retaining personal identifiers (names and/or addresses); and
- Community views on ABS plans for the 2016 Census Data Enhancement (CDE) program.

1.2. Research Methodology

A total of 16 focus groups were conducted in both metropolitan and regional locations across five states as per the following table.

Group	Audience	Location
1	26-49 CALD: personal identifiers	Sydney
2	50+: CDE project	Sydney
3	18-25: CDE project	Perth

4	26-49: personal identifiers	Perth
5	18-25: personal identifiers	Wagga
6	26-49: CDE project	Wagga
7	18-25 CALD: CDE project	Melbourne
8	50+: personal identifiers	Melbourne
9	50+: CDE project	Port Pirie
10	18-25: personal identifiers	Adelaide
11	26-49: CDE project	Adelaide
12	26-49: CDE project	Geelong
13	18-25: personal identifiers	Brisbane
14	50+: personal identifiers	Brisbane
15	18-25: CDE project	Cairns
16	26-49 ATSI: Personal identifiers	Cairns

All focus groups were 1 hour in duration and were held between Monday 26 May and Thursday 5 June 2014. Colmar Brunton worked in close consultation with the ABS to develop discussion guides both for the Personal Identifiers groups and the CDE Project groups.

1.3. Key Findings - General

The ABS is widely seen as trustworthy organisation producing important data for decision making. Most people's practical experience of the type of data the ABS collects is limited to their experiences of completing the Australian census, with the vast majority having confidence that the personal data they provide to the ABS is kept safe and secure.

Knowledge of what the ABS does now with data provided is reasonably low. There was a common view across the groups that given Census data is provided in a personally identified manner, the ABS must already use this information for analysis and reporting, either on its own or in combination with other government data (such as ATO, Centrelink or Medicare data

At the broadest level, the concept of linking data is supported and seen to yield practical value in terms of more informed decision making. At a practical level, the intricacies of how this is done at a technical level were difficult to grasp for most participants.

Some have concerns when the details of current and potential linking activities are shared, but most have not actively considered this before. For the majority, there is a presumption that this type of data linkage activity is happening already.

Specific concerns regarding data linkage centre around personal identifiers being permanently stored alongside survey data. Separation of access principles (where no ABS staff members has the power to view identified data from an individual person) are not well known but certainly serve to allay some of these concerns when communicated.

The protections the ABS has in place to secure personal information and protect the privacy of individuals were generally received well and for the majority served to assure them that the ABS would take appropriate precautions to ensure the security of people's data. Notwithstanding this,

there is a view that even the best systems and protocols cannot protect against the “rogue agent” scenario or the increasing sophistication of those intent of hacking into such information.

A recurring key concern across the groups was identified data being shared or sold to those who would use this for either illegal or marketing purposes. While ABS is seen as trustworthy, it’s obvious to many that their personal data has regularly been shared with others without their express knowledge or permission. This concern would need to be addressed in any planned change.

1.4. Key Findings – Personal Identifiers

There was strong support for the ABS to move beyond the ‘Bronze standard’ linkage level commonly used to link unique individuals across data sets using just personal characteristics. Most felt that an accuracy rate of around just 60%-70% was not good enough and that in order to produce quality research outcomes (and thus inform policy development and service delivery), an approach producing greater accuracy was warranted.

Views varied however about how the appropriateness of using either personal names (or a coded version of names), addresses, or a combination of these to provide a more accurate foundation for linking cases across data sets. Younger participants were typically much more comfortable with more personally identifiable information to be used than either middle aged or older participants.

Once explained (through the provision of several examples), most participants across the groups readily appreciated the value that a more accurate linking process can deliver in terms of being able to monitor trends more accurately over time. Participants were receptive to how data linkage was enabling advances in social domains such as health, education and migration.

The “gains” potentially provided by data linkage were tempered with the risks most people also readily identified that arise through more extensive use of personal identifiers. While the ABS was almost universally viewed as a trustworthy organisation, it was argued that breaches of privacy and security are increasingly commonplace in today’s increasingly connected world, and that the use of more personal information in the data linkage process did carry additional risks that needed to be actively considered and managed. It was almost universally agreed that there was no way the ABS could provide 100% safeguards against such risks.

The security, confidentiality and privacy protocols the ABS applies to its data linkage processes were generally felt appropriate, if not surprising (that is, the majority of participants had assumed such safeguards would govern such practices, if not being interested in or familiar with the details of these). At an overall level, the review of these protocols did serve to allay the concerns of those more worried about the use of personal information for data linkage purposes.

A key concern related to a belief that personal identifier information would remain appended to survey or other government data, such that once an individual gained access to an ABS database they would have all the details required to potentially impact on the identified individuals in a negative manner. Those from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background were typically more likely to express concern with personal information being used and retained over time, typically as a result of having experienced less trustworthy government regimes in the past.

Having appraised both the benefits and potential risks of data linkage, the majority seemed comfortable with a move to [at least] a minimum silver level linkage approach. While full names or both name and address for data linkage was endorsed for use by the ABS in data linkage

activities by a significant minority (especially among younger participants), the majority felt greater use of an encrypted form of their name was an appropriate step forward that struck the right balance between increasing the accuracy of data linkage activities while still ensuring a greater degree of protection for the security and privacy of the individuals involved.

There was a degree of unease across the groups about how long such personal records were to be used to link cases. Many suggested a finite point in time after the relevant data was collected would give additional assurance that their privacy would be maintained over the longer term. Linked to this was a concern regarding the time lapsed between data collection and linkage – several participants noted it would be ill advised to link data that may well be out of date in relation to an individual.

1.5. CDE Project

Very few participants across the groups were familiar with the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLSD) project. When the details of the project were explained to participants, some understood and were broadly supportive of the linkage of unit records across collection periods. However, the majority struggled to understand why linking specific individual cases was important as opposed to comparing the snapshots each Census collection provides.

The concerns expressed in relation to the extended use of “gold” linked data sets over time mirrored the same concerns as noted for the personal identifier groups above, namely that such practice significantly enhances the risk that an individual’s privacy and confidentiality could be breached. While the protocols governing the use and linkage of commonwealth data were viewed as relatively comprehensive, the wording of these was clearly recognised as indicating there are no 100% guarantees that the worst could not eventuate, either through a “rogue agent” scenario within the ABS or if IT systems are hacked from an external threat. While it was understood such a level of linkage delivers the best possible level of accuracy for data linkage, it was argued that this should only be kept for those projects where it is essential and subsequently destroyed within an appropriate timeframe, as opposed to being maintained indefinitely.

Topping up of the ACLSD data set over time to maintain the 5% sample was observed as not overly contentious across the CDE Project groups. There was little objection to the ABS doing this, albeit that it was evident some didn’t quite grasp what this concept actually meant at a technical level.

The issue of moving from a prescribed set of projects to be undertaken using data linkage to a more flexible programme governed by a set of principles was examined in depth across the eight CDE Project groups. Most participants understood the context behind the desire for the change and how such a move would provide significantly greater levels of flexibility for this program. However, there was a degree of concern evident among some participants about potentially giving the ABS (and by extension, government more broadly) unfettered access to, and use of, their linked data. For this group, the concept of individuals needing to provide “informed consent” to such activities was identified as something more difficult to achieve under a principles based project. A possible solution was identified in some groups whereby the principles could govern the broader program, but that the community would still be informed of planned projects (once identified), and potentially having an avenue to raise their concerns at this point. Others argued that so long as the principles were strictly adhered to, the value that this level of linkage could deliver outweighed the risks that would accompany such a change.

In line with the findings of the personal identifier groups above, the majority of participants were reasonably comfortable with a move to a ‘silver’ standard linkage for the CDE project over the

longer term. To ensure the Australian community supported such a move, participants felt that the ABS would need to showcase the benefits that can arise from this change, while acknowledging the risks (and associated mitigations) of the proposed change. Again, an encrypted version of people's name was seen as perhaps the best methodology within the options discussed with the 'silver' linkage range.

The need for how widely such a change needed to be communicated was debated across the groups. While some initially felt such a change warranted some form of public awareness campaign, on reflection it was broadly agreed that communication linked to the census completion process itself was more likely to generate appropriate 'cut through' with Australians at a time when they are focussed on the task of providing their census responses. Most felt that so long as the ABS sought to communicate these changes in a clear and transparent manner – along with a clear rationale as to how Australians will benefit from such a change – then most people would continue to complete the Census in good faith (e.g. providing complete and accurate data).

1.6. Conclusions & recommendations

Based on the above findings, Colmar Brunton provides the ABS with the following recommendations for its consideration:

- The issue of data linkage is not an issue many people are aware of or engaged with on any meaningful level. More broadly, the ABS is seen as a trustworthy and capable organisation, meaning that there is generally a degree of goodwill that can be leveraged in terms of bringing the community along in terms of any planned changes to data linkage practices.
- While there are increased privacy, security and confidentiality risks associated with greater use of personal identifiers in data linkage practices, the majority of Australians are open to a move beyond the current 'bronze' level linkage practices that yield an accuracy level of only around 60%-70% based on personal characteristics alone. Indeed, many assume current ABS practice to lie somewhere at or very close to the "gold" linkage standard.
- Across the groups, the level identified as one that strikes the best balance between allowing the ABS to make better use of existing data was a "silver" linkage level employing an encrypted or coded version of people's names. If concerns regarding the security of such personal information can be appropriately addressed, we believe there is scope for address to also be used. If such proposed change can be explained in an accessible (e.g. in a non-technical) and transparent manner – including coverage of both benefits and how increased privacy risks would be managed – we believe such a change would be acceptable to the broader community (notwithstanding some sectors of society – such as those from a CALD background – may need greater levels of reassurance than others).
- For the CDE Project, the majority were supportive of a move from a set, pre-determined programme of analysis projects to a more flexible principle based programme – especially when being able to access and digest the principles governing such activity. However, there is a perception among a minority of people that they may be ceding control of their data to the ABS for purposes they are not aware of and may subsequently not consent to. If the ABS commits to full disclosure or planned projects (prior to these being undertaken), and ideally allows the opportunity for ongoing community consultation

on proposed individual projects, then such a change is more likely to engender public support.

2. Background

2.1. Perceptions of privacy

The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner - acknowledging the very individual interpretation of what one regards as private - focuses on 'personal information' defining it as:

Information that identifies you or could identify you. There are some obvious examples of personal information, such as your name or address. Personal information can also include medical records, bank account details, photos, videos, and even information about what you like, your opinions and where you work - basically, any information where you are reasonably identifiable.

Section 6 of the Privacy Act 1988 defines personal information as:

Information or an opinion (including information or an opinion forming part of a database), whether true or not, and whether recorded in a material form or not, about an individual whose identity is apparent, or can reasonably be ascertained, from the information or opinion.

Most Australians will say that privacy of personal details and information is important to them, however, the issue of what privacy constitutes is open to individual interpretation. The increase use of the Internet and related mobile technologies socially and commercially, will test our understanding of privacy, and demands of privacy.

Community attitudes towards privacy

Results from the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner's (OAIC) 2013 Community Attitudes to Privacy survey¹, show that Australians are becoming more concerned about privacy risks. People expect the organisations they deal with to take effective steps to safeguard their personal information. Overall, 96% of Australians feel that they should be informed about how their information is handled and protected. The majority of people (around 95%) also feel they should be made aware how of their information is handled on a daily basis.

The survey found that 48% of Australians believe that online services, including social media, now pose the greatest privacy risk. Only 9% of survey respondents considered social media websites to be trustworthy in protecting privacy. This shows an increase community concern about privacy risks (most likely arising from the increase in use of social media) since this survey was last run in 2007.²

The survey indicates that the public expects data security protection to be similar in both the public and private sectors. A high majority of survey participants expect to be informed if their information is lost (96% for both government and the private sector).

¹ Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, Community attitudes to privacy survey, Research report 2013. Accessed 28th April 2014 at: http://www.oaic.gov.au/images/documents/privacy/privacy-resources/privacy-reports/Final_report_for_WEB.pdf

² The Community Attitudes to Privacy survey has been conducted periodically since 1990.

Interestingly, it is still the case that Australians have more trust in government entities (69%) than most private enterprises, with the exception of health organisations (90%) and financial institutions (74%). However, over 60% have decided not to deal with a business due to concerns as to how their personal information will be used, and 23% have decided not to deal with a government agency. This level of trust is a positive thing for the ABS, but reinforces the fact that the ABS needs to tread carefully when collecting, retaining, and using details and/or sensitive information of individuals – something the ABS is very cognisant of in all facets of their work.

2.2. Changes to the Privacy Act

The OAIC received 10,576 privacy enquiries and 1,496 privacy complaints in 2012–13, and has already received 30% more complaints in the current financial year to date.³ The loss of personally identifying information can be caused by a variety of factors, affect different types of personal information and give rise to a range of actual or potential harms.⁴ A loss of personally identifying information arising from a privacy breach can expose individuals to risks such as embarrassment, loss of employment or business opportunities, personal safety and identity theft.

Changes to the Privacy Act 1988 commenced 12 March 2014. The changes include a new set of Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) that will regulate the handling of personal information by Australian Government agencies, businesses (with a turnover of more than \$3 million or those trading in personal information), and all private health service providers. The changes primarily provide consumers and individuals with greater protection, and increased rights in terms of how much information they choose to disclose to relevant government agencies, organisations and businesses, the level of access they have to their own information, the ability to make changes to the information they've provided, and how much recourse there is if a breach of privacy occurs.

The updates to Australia's privacy legislation are responsive to contemporary information handling practices, and international data sharing. The new laws require Australian Government agencies and private sector businesses to be more transparent about how they handle personal information. Entities need to have a clearly expressed and up to date privacy policy about the way they handle personal information.

Highlighting these changes or raising issues of privacy may heighten sensitivity and potentially impact the Australian public's acceptance of disclosing their personal details. It's important for all businesses and government agencies to treat collection of personal information very cautiously, implementing privacy standards as strictly as possible to ensure public confidence. In particular, as the ABS relies so heavily on voluntary compliance of individuals to provide accurate personal information in order to efficiently and effectively conduct its business, the potential impact on the ABS of a loss of trust from the Australian general public could be disastrous – again, something the ABS is very aware of.

2.3. ABS' collection and use of personal information

Official statistics play a vital role in our society, providing government and other organisations with information on which to base general and strategic planning. The use of statistics assists and encourages informed decision-making, research and discussion within governments and the

³ <http://www.oaic.gov.au/news-and-events/media-releases/privacy-media-releases/privacy-laws-change-tomorrow>

⁴ A privacy breach occurs when an individual's personal information is accessed, collected, used or disclosed in contravention of applicable privacy legislation or an organisation's privacy policy.

community, and up-to-date information for governments as they seek solutions to challenges at both the national and local levels.

As a part of the national statistical service the ABS provides, as an integral component of surveys it has traditionally collected various forms of personal identifiers (names and addresses), which are deleted as soon as practical after processing. The destruction of these identifiers after processing has been a way of clearly protecting the privacy of the provider and provider perception of the ABS. However, the increase in the potential for data integration through improved methods, processes, technology and availability of rich administrative datasets has increased the value of personal identifiers, as these identifiers enhance the ability to accurately link records between datasets. There are also potential operational benefits and efficiencies for the ABS in retaining personal identifiers.

Commencing with the 2006 Census, the ABS began the Census Data Enhancement (CDE) project, linking Census data with other datasets in order to leverage more information from the combination of individual datasets than is available from the datasets separately. For a select few of these projects, name and address were used in the linking process, There have been no privacy or confidentiality issues, breaches or complaints throughout the 2006 and 2011 CDE projects, and focus group testing undertaken prior to the 2011 Census indicated there was strong trust in the ABS, and general support for the ABS progressing the CDE project.

Considering the benefit of retention of personal identifiers, the ABS is currently examining its policies regarding the retention and use of personal identifying information to ensure that there is the right balance between benefits and risks. Furthermore, for the 2016 CDE project, the ABS would like to build on the success of the 2011 CDE project, and expand its data integration program.

This research will assist the ABS to understand how to proceed with the retention of personal identifiers, the best way forward with the 2016 CDE project, and how best to communicate the benefits to the Australian general public.

2.4. Research objectives

The ABS sought to gain an up-to-date understanding of community views on the retention of personal identifiers, as well as the use of these to link datasets, in order to strike the optimum balance between benefits and risks of retention and use of this information.

There were two separate (but related) topics to be tested in the qualitative research:

1. Risks and issues associated with ABS retaining personal identifiers (names and/or addresses); and
2. Community views on ABS plans for the 2016 Census Data Enhancement (CDE) program.

Retention of personal identifiers

The aim of this research component was to provide the project team and ABS management with an understanding of the privacy concerns and issues relevant to the possible retention of names and/or addresses by the ABS. These findings will inform the decision as to whether names and/or address should be retained in the 2016 Census, and if so, in what form, under what circumstances, and how they should be used.

The specific objectives of this part of the project were:

1. To explore public perceptions of what constitutes a personal identifier or sensitive personal information;
2. To determine public reaction to the possible retention and use of an anonymised version of name, for use in data integration;
3. To determine public reaction to the possible retention and use of a home address; and
4. To investigate views about name and/or address retention for various periods of time.

CDE program

The aim of this research component was to provide supporting information to the ABS for it to shape its plans for the 2016 CDE project in line with community expectations. The specific objectives were:

1. To explore public perceptions/acceptance of:
 - o Moving from a CDE program consisting of pre-determined projects, to a flexible, principles-based program with a focus on statistical production;
 - o Maintaining "Gold" linked datasets⁵ over time to maximise their statistical value;
 - o Using a larger random sample of Census records to "top up" the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLD) over time;
 - o Extending the use of "Silver" linkage methodology⁶;
2. To investigate the aspects of project design that are important to people in assuring their privacy is handled sensitively;
3. To determine likely impact on Census respondent behaviour (response and data quality); and
4. To explore and recommend key communication messages that will be important to attach to this project.

2.5. Methodology

To address these twin research challenges, Colmar Brunton conducted 16 1-hour groups in metropolitan and regional locations around Australia including Western Australia, South Australia, and the eastern seaboard. This included groups targeted at Indigenous Australians and people from culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. Each group entailed discussion specifically on issues around either the CDE Program or matters concerning personal identifiers.

A more detailed explanation of the methodology used is presented in Section 5.

⁵ "Gold" linked datasets use name and address information to link records.

⁶ 'Silver' linked datasets use address information, and name information encrypted by using either a one-to-many hashing algorithm or a one-to-one unique code. This is then used along with other personal characteristics to link datasets.

3. Broad perceptions of ABS

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the ABS as an organisation and what the organisation does. To a large extent, responses across all groups were somewhat predictable and related to data, statistics, surveys, questions and information about the population of Australia. It was generally well understood that ABS collected data from individuals, aggregated it and then fed information back to those that want or need it for decision making.

“The guys who count up everything you do and spit it back to you in a little number file.”
Mid, Metropolitan

For many groups, the first word mentioned was ‘census’ as being the primary activity that was undertaken by ABS. However, this was not true of all groups where the census came second to simple notions of data and statistics. Association between the ABS and the census did not appear to vary as a function of age, location or ethnicity.

The ABS was very closely associated with Government, with many participants essentially viewing the organisation as a government department mandated with collecting and working with data. The information that the ABS provides was considered to be valuable and reliable. Some young participants thought that the ABS was a reputable source of statistics for research purposes and understood that information gathered by the ABS covered a wide range of areas.

“Gather figures for government to help make decisions” Mid, Metropolitan

Older participants typically demonstrated a deeper knowledge of the ABS and its functions and like younger participants associated terms such as employment, family, religion, consumption and production as information that was routinely collected by the ABS. Those with personal experience of ABS data (often from the public sector) perceived that the work of the ABS was essential for many organisations including government departments to the extent that some agencies/organisations could not function without it.

“Without the data they provide, the government couldn’t plan for anything they do. My department relies on ABS survey. The data runs most of our business. Many government functions rely on it.” Mid, Metropolitan

Some participants in the 25 – 49 age bracket thought that the ABS was a ‘silent partner’ in the government – the ‘backroom people’ who produced information and there was limited public involvement apart from the census.

When asked to characterise the ABS beyond simple descriptions of what the organisation does, a range of views were expressed - some positive, some negative:

- Many acknowledged the important work the ABS did in contributing to knowledge in Australia;
- All participants viewed ABS as an organisation with good intentions that worked in the best interests of Australians, with none viewing ABS as malevolent;
- Others perceived that while this was important, the work was essentially very dry and boring;

“It’s boring, it’s mundane, but it drives the economy.” Older, Metropolitan

- Participants had little idea about the inner workings of ABS down to the point of not knowing how large or small the organisation is; and
- Many also recalled how long and boring the census was to complete, though one indicated that they would not avoid completing the form because of the important role it played in Australia.

Independence and neutrality was another common theme that arose in many groups. The ABS was seen as having no vested interest in what census and other data was saying and released information based solely on statistics with no political agenda. The release of this form of information was thought to reflect the transparent nature of ABS.

“I hear that they seem to come out with things that are bad as well as good things. They’re not trying to sugar coat it and all that. And being a government agency, they are expected to be somewhat transparent”. Older, Metropolitan

While the independence of ABS was acknowledged, some expressed concerns about how the information from ABS was used. The theme of ‘lies, damn lies and statistics’ was raised in more than one group. Some felt that while the ABS’ data collection was robust, the subsequent analysis and use of the data could potentially be spurious, particularly if the information is provided by a third party in the private sector.

“People interpret it differently to as how it’s meant to be or they’re reading too far into things”. Younger, Metropolitan

“But most of the time I see data, the source from the ABS it’s being presented to me by someone else, by an advertising agency or in whatever else, which I guess.” Mid, Metropolitan

3.1. Trustworthiness

Participants across the groups, for the most part, thought that ABS was a trustworthy organisation that had a good reputation for providing reliable information. In general, the trustworthiness of ABS was not a matter that had been given much thought by participants.

“...are they trustworthy? One would hope so. I guess they are. I have no reason not to trust them.” Older, Metropolitan

“[They] kind of represent the highest standard by aiding statistics about the Australian population. I can imagine that’s really trustworthy.” Mid, Metropolitan

Some mid aged participants thought that there was no reason not to trust the ABS whilst some older participants trusted ABS as they are the “government” and there is no evidence that they have used information in a bad or nefarious way.

“There is nothing to not trust them for.” Older Regional

“Relied on by many departments of government – suggests that if they trust the ABS, then so should individuals.” Mid, Regional

Some participants across the groups were more sceptical about the ABS and its functions and said that the census is reliant on information that people put into it - therefore there is a reliance

on the honesty of the people who fill it out. Interestingly, younger participants were least likely of all the groups to think that the ABS was trustworthy. Whilst many of these participants acknowledge that the ABS is a more reliable source of information than others, they stated that people did not have face to face interaction with the ABS in the same way as other government departments.

Some concerns were voiced about potential breaches of trust, though only after the question was posed by the moderator – i.e., these concerns were not raised in general conversations about the ABS. A commonly voiced concern about breach of trust related to the potential for a rogue employee to leak data. The possibility of a ‘rogue’ employee misusing data was raised by one participant in an older group and all of the participants in this group were aware of the recent news about ABS data being used for ‘insider trading’. Recent occurrences of events such as the Snowden leaks were raised in many groups. Strictly speaking, this was not seen to be an issue with the ABS as an organisation being untrustworthy, rather than a single bad actor within ABS had the power to breach trust.

“More against the people who have leaked the information. If someone working inside the ABS, they would go to jail. Strict legislation.” Mid, Metropolitan

The one notable exception to this general theme of trustworthiness was expressed in a group of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Australians. While not a consensus across the group, a small number of participants who had migrated from countries with strict government surveillance expressed distrust. This distrust was not necessarily founded on evidence of ABS’ untrustworthiness, rather a generalisation of experiences in other countries to Australia.

“Where I come from you are watched all the time. Who’s to say this doesn’t happen here? Who knows what they (ABS) are doing with the data, who they are giving it to, whose watching?” CALD

This view was not echoed by Indigenous participants, who placed a great deal of trust in the work of the ABS and the confidentiality of their data - much the same as non-Indigenous participants.

3.2. Participation in the census and ABS surveys

Perceptions of the Australian census differed somewhat across the age groups. Participants in the mid and older groups could see the value and need to collect the depth of information that is collected in the census. There was recognition that knowing how things are changing over time across the country and identifying the needs of the country is important and that the census is the mechanism for collecting this data. Many participants in these groups commented that they were happy to provide their information as it was used for a clear purpose. Others thought that the census was overly long and invasive and there was uncertainty about what is done with their information.

“Do they need to know this much about us? Why do we give them all this information and never question where it goes and what they do with it”. Mid, Metropolitan

Whilst participants typically recognised the role of the census in providing information to assist in government planning, some were uncomfortable with the amount of information they are required to provide in the census and were concerned about how their privacy was protected. Some participants also questioned the accuracy and reliability of the information people provide in the census and thought that people would lie (albeit this was generally a minority view).

“Don’t give information that they don’t need to know. Believe government already have personal information so don’t need it again.” Mid, Regional

“If 5% don’t provide the right information, the other 95% would provide the right information. It is needed for government hospitals etc.” Mid, Regional

Most participants across the groups thought that the government, researchers, NGOs and the general public were able to access information from the census. Many participants took it on “blind faith” that the information they supplied in the census was secure, however none of them knew whether this was actually the case.

“You assume so, but there is so much paper to store for a lot of people for a lot of years. Where is it stored? Who reads it?” Mid, Metropolitan

Participants in all of the groups assumed that information collected in the census is stored digitally and assumed that the ABS would not use it inappropriately. However, there was also an assumption that no data is ever “100% secure”, and that such information could be accessible by a sufficiently good hacker (including the links to personal information). Several participants across the groups cited recent examples of large private sector or government database information being accessed inappropriately.

The high level of trust and perceived importance of ABS’ work influenced the likelihood of participants agreeing to take part in an ABS survey. Surveys conducted by the ABS were seen as being more important and of greater value than surveys conducted by market research companies, thus increasing the likelihood of participation. Further, some participants stated that they would provide more accurate and complete responses to an ABS survey compared with a survey for a private organisation due to this trust in the ABS.

“More comfortable with the ABS than someone else. More trusted. I trust the government more than private.” Mid, Metropolitan

“When I do surveys that are not government related, I’m more generalised and don’t want to give too much information. If it is government, I give more information.” Younger, Metropolitan

Participating in ABS surveys (and the census) was seen as a form of duty to ‘help Australia’. Even if most participants did not expect a personal benefit to them, most were willing to help in this manner for the betterment of Australia.

“If I can help, I will. I have nothing to hide.” Older, Metropolitan

On the whole, participants had little to no concern about the privacy of their data provided to ABS for surveys beyond the census. As was generally the case for census data, almost all participants expressed an implicit trust in the ABS to treat their data with appropriate levels of security and respect.

“You know it would be kept confidential. I wouldn’t question the ABS.” Mid, Metropolitan

4. Findings: Personal Identifiers

4.1. Evolution of the ABS

Following general discussion about ABS, its role and how it is perceived, the concept of the 'evolution of the ABS' was introduced by the moderator. This concept was explained as a transition from 'snapshots in time' featuring single data sets to 'movies' whereby data sets are linked either across time or across different data collections. Participants were asked their views on this notion. The explanation of data linking was furnished with specific examples of studies that had used data linking. Examples included studies in the areas of migration, health and education.

Participants generally understood the concept once explained. A minority had an existing knowledge of the details of data linkage, generally those who were required to work with data sets as part of their occupation. The remainder had previously understood the notion of linking data sets, though had not given the matter much thought.

It was at this point in the groups that it became apparent that many participants were struggling to differentiate individual unit records from aggregate data. This lack of understanding impeded comprehension of the example studies that required data linking. These participants could not see why data that was linked at the unit record was required where, in their perception, a simple aggregate statistic for both groups or at two points in time would suffice. This barrier to understanding could be overcome by careful and repeat explanations of how and why data linking was required (though for a few participants this took a degree of repetition).

"But why do you need to do this linking? Why not just see how many people spoke English at this time and how many spoke English at this second time? Done." Older, Metropolitan.

In the main, participants viewed this form of data linkage as a very positive approach to generating insights about Australians.

"Think it is a good idea – helps in a range of studies for better technology, agriculture, medicine. Aids research over time – you can see trends forming." Younger, Regional

The benefits of generating more detailed and robust data by data linking was generally understood and thought to be a worthwhile activity. Participants were of the opinion that linking data not only gave a clearer picture of the state of affairs in different sectors in Australia, but also provided more robust and reliable data for planning purposes.

"The source from multiple sources time could overlap and be eluded on the one assessment." Younger, Metropolitan

"This means that we can learn more from pulling data from different sources to link whatever we are trying to identify." Older, Metropolitan

"It connects all the companies that collect data and gives an overview of where the country should head and what the challenges are. Shows where the money should go." Mid, Metropolitan

Once the concept of data linking had been explained, participants generally began to view the limitations of only looking at a single data source and began to explore the idea of the power that data linking could bring using longitudinal or triangulated approaches to analysis. Some associated this with the additional power that could come from an increased sample size (noting that a linked data set does not necessarily lead to an increased sample size if different items are being linked across the sets). Others went so far as to state that data linking was essential, particularly given the speed with which Census data becomes out of date given that the Census takes place every five years. These participants saw data linkage as not only important, but essential to produce reliable and accurate time series data.

“Yes Yeah. It seems like the more legitimate sources you have the more information you’ve got, better ball-park you can play with produces the probability of getting one of the results or you know mistaking a correlation with the causation kind of thing if you are only looking at one element issue.” Younger, Metropolitan

“Could be increased yet or sample size on average as you are saying, to get rid of any flaws or any discrepancies.” Older, Metropolitan

“You can’t just do it once. You need to keep doing it.” Younger, Metropolitan

Many participants were of the opinion that this data linking was already taking place, to a far greater extent than is actually the case within the ABS at present. It was assumed by several participants that many public organisations such as ABS, Medicare and the ATO were already engaged in a web of data sharing and linking.

“Doesn’t this happen anyway? Medicare gives their stuff to other departments, the tax office knows what I earn and shares this information with the bank. Why not ABS too?” Younger, Metropolitan

“I find it hard to believe that if law enforcement agencies wanted data about certain individuals that they wouldn’t make any data available that they could.” Mid, Metropolitan

Many participants also saw the potential of linking data to generate more interesting and valuable findings. However, others were cautious about possible misinterpretation of the data (a view similar to that expressed in general conversations about ABS and the Census).

Sounds exciting and interesting. I like to follow articles about new research and findings. Sometimes people take a creative approach and find new things about data. Problems with correlation vs causation. But can have interesting results. Mid, Metropolitan

This generally positive outlook on data linking was tempered with several caveats identified across the groups. These concerns centred on the quality of the data to be linked, the way the data would be used (once linked), and the anonymity of the people whose data was to be linked.

First, the benefits bought from data linking were only thought to be available if the data sets that were to be linked were reliable in the first place. Several participants expressed concerns that unreliable findings might be generated if one (or both) data sets were unreliable. As noted in the previous section, ABS data was thought to be robust and reliable, however, other data sets were thought to be more suspect and thus linking these to ABS data was thought to be of concern. The need for reliable data for linking was also associated with the recency of the data. This sentiment was similar to other concerns raised about ABS data in general where a few participants perceived the information to be out-of-date and therefore unreliable at the time of publication.

“Yeah, yeah so it depends who they are going through, are they going through a Uni-student who is doing a survey monkey stats or are they getting them from legitimate places.” Younger, Metropolitan

“I guess it all comes down to how recent the data was. Are they using something else maybe three or four years older might not be relevant anymore and that could cause some anomalies in statistics and so on, that aren’t too current.” Younger, Metropolitan

Further, a small number of participants pre-empted the conversation about the level of data linking by stating that if data was to be linked, it would have to be done in a way that did not identify individuals.

“Yes, I can see how this works, what it can do. It would have to be anonymous, though.” Younger, Metropolitan

A similar concern was raised by a number of participants that identifiable data may fall into the wrong hands. This concern mirrored the ‘rogue agent’ concern raised in general discussions about ABS and the Census. The importance of maintaining a de-identified data set was thought to minimise the harms that could come about if data was indeed leaked.

Finally, participants re-emphasised the importance of how the data linking would be used. The value of linking data sets such as ABS and, for example, health population studies was perceived and thought to be a worthwhile activity as it would benefit Australians. However, participants were far less keen on the idea that data may be linked for a commercial purpose, or to benefit an individual or private organisation.

“...only if it used for good. It’s like a superpower, with great power comes great responsibility.” Older, Metropolitan

Some participants from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups repeated their concerns about the potential for linked ABS data to be used for nefarious purposes. Similar to concerns expressed by this group in relation to general questions about ABS and the Census, such views were typically based on experiences in their countries of origin, rather than an inherent mistrust of the ABS. Data linking was immediately associated with ‘tracking’ in the minds of these participants, with the associated negative connotation of surveillance and restrictions on privacy already identified (despite explicitly assurances provided in the groups that the aim of data linking is not to track individuals).

“See? This (data linking) is exactly what I meant. Tracking people. The thing you said before that the ABS does not do.” CALD

Again, Indigenous participants did not express these concerns and stated generally positive opinions about the potential for data linking to provide more reliable and useful insights.

4.2. Levels of data integration

As flagged, there is a challenge with engaging some people on the topic of data linking given the technical nature of what this can involve. To make the discussion about what levels of data linkage are acceptable as accessible to group participants as possible, the concepts were presented in a simplified yet factual manner as follows:

- “An informed guess”
This involves using personal characteristics only (such as age, gender, education, location) to match cases across data sets.
- “A well informed guess”
This involves using personal characteristics AND an address to match cases across data sets.
- “An almost certain link” Level 1
This involves using personal characteristics AND part of your name or a coded version of your name to match cases across data sets.
- “An almost certain link” Level 2
This involves using personal characteristics AND your full name to match cases across data sets.
- “A certain link”
This involves using your personal characteristics AND your full name AND your address to match cases across data sets.

An informed guess

Very few participants had any privacy concerns over the ‘informed guess’ approach to data linking. Similar to many other aspects of data collection and collation, many participants assumed that this was taking place in a variety of settings already. Both younger and older participants showed no concern about this approach, even if they were part of the data that was linked.

“I don’t have a problem with this at all, even if it was me. I guessed the ABS was doing this anyway? Isn’t the Census linked year on year so you can see what is happening over time?” Younger, Metropolitan

“What’s the point of the census if you can’t link it all up? Isn’t this what happens anyway?”
Older, Metropolitan

“I wouldn’t mind if the ABS did this to me. My name isn’t being used and there is confidentiality.” Mid, Metropolitan

This view was also apparent amongst Indigenous participants who were of the opinion that Government was already gathering personal data for Indigenous people, and that the Indigenous population could greatly benefit from such data capture and linkage give large gaps in health and education outcomes for Indigenous people.

“The government have been collecting ATSI data for a long time and were happy to be a part of it. ATSI people are used to the government collecting information on us, this is being used in a positive way, not a negative way.” Indigenous

Participants major concerns (at this linkage level) did not relate to privacy or security breaches at all, but rather to the low level of accuracy that could be achieved using the informed guess approach (explained to participants as being approximately 60% - 70%). The notion that it would be possible to be wrong 40% of the time using this approach led many participants to the conclusion that this exercise was not worth doing in the first place.

“It seems that the amount which you can rely on and make strong conclusions from the research is related to the percentage chance that you made a proper link. There is only a 60% chance that you can make a strong conclusion.” Mid, Metropolitan

Views on this level of accuracy were not uniformly negative. Some were of the opinion that this approach may work well but only for very general studies, thus limiting the value of the linked data. Others suggested that even at this low level of accuracy, linkages could point the way for future research.

“Depends on what you are trying to achieve. Something’s may not need the zeroing in on accurate data. They may be fine with the broader data.” Mid Metropolitan

“But I could likewise see how it would be really helpful for detection where further research is a good idea.” Younger, Regional

This concern over percentage accuracy was confounded by other concerns over the lag in linking, analysing and reporting data. Similar to previous concerns over ABS data in general, the fact that many years pass between data collection periods further limits the usefulness of this type of data linkage.

“I question the accuracy of comparing the same person 5 years apart. You can compare age to age, but if someone gives a fake age it might not be valid. The accuracy is only 60%.” Mid Metropolitan

A well informed guess

Across the groups, many participants thought that using address was an acceptable way to be able to boost the reliability on the assumption that it was stored in a secure manner. This was especially the case among younger participants.

“More detailed info the less that they need to guess. Produce more reliable information. Depends on who has access to the information – needs to be secure.” Young, Regional

However, a range of concerns about the use of address were expressed across the groups. It was noted that in some respects an actual address is more unique than a person’s name, and as such provided a more direct link to a specific individual. This led to concerns that data linked in such a manner – if accessed by a third party – could lead to unwanted targeting by both legitimate but annoying (e.g. telemarketers) and less legitimate (e.g. those who may seek to commit illegal offences using the data). Knowing where someone lived was thought to be more powerful in terms of finding an individual or targeting telemarketing, whereas a name on its own is of no use in this regard. In this way, a few believed an address was thought to have been more of a threat than a name.

“I don’t like my address being broadcasted. I don’t like it on any data base or spreadsheet.” Mid, Metropolitan

“If they have your address, they can find you. Telemarketers, outfits in India. I don’t think ABS would give this out, but what if it leaked like I said before?” Younger, Metropolitan.

It should be noted that these concerns were limited to the event of data being disclosed or leaked and not to a mistrust of the ABS itself.

“I wouldn’t mind. The government wouldn’t be using it for anything bad. It depends how much trust you put into the government.” Mid, Metropolitan

It was at this point that many participants started to talk about ‘drawing the line’. This was particularly true of older participants who questioned the value of the increase in accuracy in light of the potential for the identification of the individual or disclosure of information to an

unauthorised third party. Younger participants were far less concerned in this regard who, as in so many areas of this study, were of the opinion that the information was already available to those who wanted to find it.

“Now I draw the line. Where is the value here, a bit more accuracy, yes, but you are starting to go into big brother territory.” Older, Metropolitan

“You can get this anyway. Addresses are in the phone book, anyone can get that. It’s on the internet too, you can just search.” Younger, Metropolitan.

Younger participants also stated that matching by address would not work for their cohort anyway, given the transient nature of some younger people. Almost everyone in one of the younger groups explained that they had moved multiple times in recent years, thus rendering this approach useless in their circumstances. Essentially, their concerns were less about the potential intrusion on their privacy from the ABS using their address and more about the quality of address as a linkage tool.

“Look, I have moved four time in the last two years. Different share houses, studying then working. You’d never find me! Might work for older, more settled people.” Younger, Metropolitan

Indigenous participants expressed a similar view. While at some levels, it was thought that using address as a linking device is better due to higher accuracy, in other ways it would be less reliable given the transient lifestyles observed by many people, particularly in regional and remote settings in the northern states and territories of Australia. These participants also expressed a level of discomfort about the ‘invasiveness’ of using addresses.

“Because ATSI people live in remote areas it would be better to use this level of linkage as there is less guess. But, ATSI people are also transient so using addresses to link people to places would not be as effective in this situation as Indigenous people move a lot.”
Indigenous

Matching by location was thought to be acceptable for many participants, but only to a certain point. Many participants stated that they would be comfortable for identification to go to the suburb level or perhaps the street name. The home of the survey participant was too close for comfort for some.

“Why can’t they just settle for the suburb? What happens for the people who are on rent and don’t have the same address?” Mid, Metropolitan

Many of these concerns were allayed based on the assumption that addresses were not kept after linking the file and/or that addresses were never linked with names.

“It’s not like they are keeping my name, they can have my address.” Older, Metropolitan

“I think once you have analysed and worked out what you are trying to find, I would like the address information to be discarded so you are left with just the end information. Not necessity to keep the link at that point. With all the caveats about sending it to marketing agencies.” Mid, Metropolitan

An almost certain link (Level 2)

At this point in the discussion, the concept of using people's actual names to link data sets was introduced. Some, and particularly younger participants, had little issue in the use of names and saw it as a logical way to link data that was used elsewhere.

"It's common sense to use your name. Name is used widely in other areas." Young, Regional.

However, again, this laissez-faire attitude towards the use of names was far from universal across participants. A number of participants questioned the need for names at all and could not understand why they were required to link datasets. When the concept of names was first introduced, a few participants stated that they would start to demand more information about what studies were going to be using this data and how the data would be linked. It was also at this stage that several participants' minds started to think about notions of consent and the implication of having consented to one or more studies.

"Why do they need it? What for? Which datasets are they linking?" Mid, Metropolitan

"Presumably we have already consented to both and now they are just building up the database." Mid, Metropolitan

Some were very concerned about the use of names at all and started to relate the linking of data in this way to surveillance and the recent NSA Snowden leaks. Among these, some were of the opinion that only part of names should be used. Others had no issue with the use of names provided that the information was never disclosed to a third party. This pattern was true of younger and older participants alike.

"NO. This is not needed. We are talking about NSA-level stuff here." Older, Metropolitan

"My address: some concern, my name: more concern" Mid, Metropolitan

"First name: okay, surname: less okay." Younger, Metropolitan

Indigenous participants were cautious about the use of full names in data linking. This level of linkage - along with the 'certain link' - was the least preferred of the group. Use of names was thought to be relatively more invasive, and similar to other groups a number of participants suggested that linking through using actual names (as opposed to an encrypted form of name) could pose a greater threat to identity theft and fraud if accessed inappropriately.

Some concession was, however, given to the notion that such linking may be acceptable but only if it benefited the individual, as opposed to a group of people.

"Linkage at this level would be a disadvantage because of the level of data collected that can be linked to identify them as a person. It's too personal. Only if it was useful for me, positive linking such as lost super." Indigenous

Younger participants expressed a similar view on the benefits of providing and possibly exposing personal information. In the views of some younger participants, the risks associated with using names as identifiers were not justified by the potential benefits to the person who took that risk. ABS data and linking of data was seen to be something that largely benefited other people, not the person themselves. Connections were not made as to how participation in surveys and disclosing personal data could benefit the participant.

"All of this is about the group. How does this benefit me? This is a concern, a limit in all of this data linking." Younger, Metropolitan.

An almost certain link (Level 1)

At this point in the discussion, the possibility of the use of names in addition to personal characteristics for data linking (though either in coded, scrambled, encrypted or partial form) was introduced. This added measure of de-identification provided additional assurance for some, though others were more sceptical about whether the strategy would work at all and indeed the need for the strategy in the first place.

Some could not see the point of using encryption at all given that their full data would have to be used for linking at some stage in the process (noting that it is possible that not all participants had understood the notion of encryption). Many questioned the need for the measure at all given alternative strategies such as using a unique identifier or tag.

“But idea that if they’re going to use information anyway then why would they even bother encrypting?” Young, Regional

“If you can do that, why do you need the name?” Mid, Metropolitan

“Depending on how it’s used it could be equivalent to the same thing.” Mid, Metropolitan

Others expressed lower levels of concern, though with the caveat that the encrypted name and other identifying information was kept in separate locations. The notion that ‘all this information is out there anyway’ resurfaced at this point as a reason not to be concerned about using names encrypted or otherwise.

“I don’t mind the idea of a code so long as the name and the ID tag were kept in separate locations.” Mid, Metropolitan

“There are so many government departments that have all this information, what does it matter if another one does?” Mid Metropolitan

The benevolent and trustworthy nature of ABS surfaced once again at this stage for a number of participants, leading to increased levels of comfort in using the encrypted approach to handling people’s names.

“... so it’s obviously they are trying to positively change things or their statistics, they’re not out there to ruin everyone’s life, so it’s not really a bad thing. And those codes, that’s probably a better option.” Mid, Metropolitan

Younger and more technically savvy participants were also of the opinion that encryption is not fallible and can be broken. Examples around recent leaks of encrypted information that may have been hacked were provided, one being the recent e-bay story that had been in the media. These participants indicated that although some reassurance could be gained from the fact that any information that leaked out was encrypted, there is never certainty that it could not be decrypted. The technical prowess of the ABS was not questioned here, rather the perception that any encryption, no matter how strong, can be broken. Others were more optimistic about the use of encryption, however, reassurance was required for these participants that the data was truly ‘unhackable’.

“There is no fool-proof way. Anything can be hacked. This way will only be as strong as the encryption that is used. Encryption is just broken too easily.” Younger, Metropolitan

“If the encrypted name can’t be reversed back to my name I’m okay with it.” Mid, Metropolitan

Indigenous participants responded most positively to the notion of encryption. These participants were generally confident that the use of encryption gave rise not only to better privacy for individuals, but also as a means to reduce the risk of identity theft.

“It’s a good option ... it gives the individual protection by way of encryption ...gives the individual better security. I don’t want my name attached to linkage because of identity theft. If it was encrypted or used initials this would sit better.” Indigenous

A certain link

The final level of data linkage - ‘a certain link’ - was introduced. This level of linkage promised a very high level of accuracy by using the person’s full name and address in addition to their personal characteristics.

This very high level of data linking was thought to be acceptable, but only for studies that were perceived to be very important such as linking the census data year on year or preventing disease in the Australian population. Essentially, participants were open to this idea, though would want a very high level of reassurance that the exercise was worthwhile and that the data would remain secure, i.e., only used by the ABS and stored securely at the ABS.

“It’s optional or you’re talking about something compulsory like census, yes. ... Yeah, census is the most powerful I would say yeah.” Mid, Metropolitan

“I’m okay with it. As long as we know the data is staying within the ABS and won’t leave that department that would be fine.” Younger, Metropolitan

A number of concerns were raised about this level of data linking which were very similar to those raised for other levels of linkage (with the possible exception of the ‘informed guess’ scenario). These concerns again related to possible negative outcomes that may result if the data was leaked and the possible implications of linking very personalised data over long periods of time. Participants appeared comfortable with personalised data that is stored for short periods if a tangible benefit could be realised. However, many were uncomfortable with the unknown future where the data could be linked and used in ways that could not be predicted at the time of the study. An example given in more than one group involved the sharing of medical records with insurance companies thus effecting premiums.

“Is that data being stored for a long time? I don’t want my information to be stored forever, once you have information in someone’s pocket, you don’t know when they are going to use it. Should only have it for 5-10 years.” Mid, Metropolitan

“I think it will depend on what they are using it for, like if it’s going to maliciously affect me, like if you could tell that I had an onset of a disease and like my insurance company found out, then I wouldn’t want them to allocate that.” Mid, Metropolitan

However, once again the trend emerged that many younger participants had little or no concerns about this form of linking, citing the fact that the information was already out there having been willingly shared and accessible to anyone who wanted it. The very precise nature of this type of linking was also appreciated by these participants.

“It is a more safe/honest set of statistics. Improve the quality of the data that they are producing. Information is out there anyway – people are less wary about sharing personal information.” Younger, Regional

Indigenous participants re-emphasised the importance of encryption if such an approach would be used. Some indicated that this level of data linkage would be acceptable provided that names were encrypted; and some form of benefit could be provided the Indigenous communities as a result.

“This would be ok to use both the name and address, as long as their name was encrypted. This could be beneficial as it could lead to funding and better resources and services for Indigenous people.” Indigenous

4.3. How is privacy protected

Following discussion on the levels of data linkage, participants were asked about their knowledge of the measures that ABS took to protect the privacy of people’s data. Most participants had never considered any measures employed by ABS in this regard. Some hazarded guesses such as the following:

- Notions of a ‘privacy policy’ with little further knowledge of what such a policy could contain;
- Some considered that ABS destroyed identifying data at given points in time, though others were not so sure if this occurred:
 - Some thought that all identifiable data was destroyed at the end of each census or survey period;
 - Others though that all data was retained for all censuses to enable linking;
 - Others were of the opinion that the census was non-identified in the first place and thus no personal data was captured;
 - Others perceived that personal data was retained though was stored separately ‘in isolation’ from other data;
- Several participants described (in very general terms) restrictions of access to the data whereby only authorized personnel were entitled to view or use personalised data. However, not all participants were comfortable even with this safeguard.

“I think it’s a little bit weird that, that you have a thought in your head that someone who is sitting somewhere in office and they’ve got all your data and then that’s in like basically your personal life.” Older, Metropolitan

- A small number described penalties that would be applied for breaches of security to discourage data leaking

“There should be implications if someone was to breach that. It should be jail.” Mid, Metropolitan

In general, participants seemed satisfied that ABS is indeed safeguarding their data and were not concerned that they were only able to describe these safeguards in the most general of terms.

After polling views on what the ABS might do to protect data, participants were given a list of security protocols that described the various measures that were actually in place within the ABS to ensure both privacy of individuals and the security of data they collect and/or use. These

included penalties for disclosing data, access protocols, security checks and IT systems such as world class encryption practices.

This list of security measures came as little surprise to most participants. In their views, this list of protection strategies were in alignment with what had already been discussed and assumed by participants following the previous question. One minor point was picked up on by a small number of participants, who were surprised at the comparison between security at ABS and ASIO.

“Surprised that the level of security is the same as defence.” Mid, Metropolitan

In general, participants expressed somewhat greater levels of reassurance after hearing about the ABS security practices and protocols; however, this was not a strong sentiment given that almost none were concerned in the first place. Some participants stated that they would like for these protocols to place a greater emphasis on encryption of personal information, a notion that appealed to many during discussions about data linkage levels.

“More confident, although it still rather the use like de-identified codes for people...I don’t know, it hasn’t moved my distrust of my actual thinking.” Mid, Metropolitan

4.4. Census 2016 – Data linkage acceptability

Participants were asked to indicate their level of comfort with each level of data linkage using a pen and paper form. Participants were asked to do this alone and not to confer or have their opinion swayed by what other had stated in the discussions.

Informed guess

Very few participants opted for this level of data linkage. The reportedly low level of accuracy was the most off-putting fact, making this form of linkage to be of questionable value. However, a small number of participants and particularly older participants placed themselves as feeling comfortable with this level of linkages. In some regards, these participants would rather opt out of sharing any and all personal information.

“There is enough information to make decisions but I don’t want to think that I’m living in the big brother world.” Mid, Metropolitan

Yes, I can see the value of accuracy. However, I am never comfortable supplying all of my data just for statistical reasons. Older, Metropolitan

Well informed guess

This was a somewhat popular category for participants and was seen as striking a balance between the maintenance of privacy and accuracy of linking. However, the use of addresses was very off-putting for some, including those that viewed the use of addresses as being potentially more sensitive than names. However, others were of the opinion that the use of addresses was posed minimal threat if not linked to a name.

The addition of the address does not have so much harm. As long as there is no name or personal details it’s okay. Address is less personal: you can always move. Mid, Metropolitan

Almost certain link 1

This was probably one of the most popular options for data linkage. The notion of encryption or otherwise scrambling the names to protect privacy was greatly appealing to many participants. Not all participants were confident that this system would absolutely guarantee privacy as no system was seen to be unbreakable. However, the introduction of the concept of encryption to the mix of privacy measures was comforting to many.

“It seems like a good compromise where the ABS can identify a case with more accuracy, but the full name of the person is not being shared. It isn’t that the information would be shared by ABS, but accidents happen.” Younger, Metropolitan

“I know you know pretty like emotionally set against it like I’m just not comfortable with my full name attached and I think I’ll be a lot more comfortable with them having to ask specifically for that information rather than it just be something I give as part of the census” Mid, Metropolitan

Almost certain link 2

This was a less popular option than certain link 1 for the simple fact that a person’s full name was perceived to be out in the open. Participants who may have been comfortable with this option seemed to change their mind somewhat when presented with the option of an encrypted name.

“If you can use encryption, why don’t you? If you get the same accuracy. Just do it. Why would anyone choose this option?” Older, Metropolitan.

Certain Link

Quite a few participants - and in particular younger participants - picked a certain link. As is discussed previously in this report, the reasons for choosing this level of data linkage was generally selected because:

- Many valued the high degree of accuracy that this linkage level affords;
- The risks of having the data leaked out were perceived to be minimal and outweighed by the benefits that this accuracy can bring;
- Almost all participants trusted the ABS to keep the data secure; and
- Some perceived that this information is freely disclosed (at least for some younger participants) and available for those that invest the time to find it.

Another view expressed by a small number of participants related to the time saved and efficiencies realised by using this simple and reliable method of linkage.

“I just find that there are so many other places that have this information anyway. As long as they have the security, every other place probably has worse security. As long as they are putting the information to good use.” Mid, Metropolitan

“It provides a more accurate linkage in data information that would allow more informed decisions.” Older, Metropolitan.

“Save time and fewer surveys, maximise efficiency of resource use.” Mid, Metropolitan

4.5. Responses to levels of linkage written exercise

The responses to the pen-and-paper exercise (see below for a copy of the blank form) were collated and are summarised in the table overleaf which lists: The linkage level, the number who selected it by age and Indigenous status and the reasons given for selecting this level.

2016 Census – What level of data linkage is acceptable to you?

Level	Which means...	INSERT "X" BELOW
"An informed guess"	This involves using <i>personal characteristics only</i> (such as age, gender, education, location) to match cases across data sets	
"A well informed guess"	This involves using <i>personal characteristics AND an address</i> to match cases across data sets	
"An almost certain link" Level 1	This involves using <i>personal characteristics AND part of your name</i> or a <i>coded version of your name</i> to match cases across data sets	
"An almost certain link" Level 2	This involves using <i>personal characteristics AND your full name</i> to match cases across data sets	
"A certain link"	This involves using your <i>personal characteristics AND your full name AND your address</i> to match cases across data sets	

Why did you choose this level?

Table 1: Responses to levels of linkage written exercise

Audience	Location	Informed guess	Well informed guess	Almost Certain Level		Certain link
				1	2	
26-49 CALD	Sydney	2	1	3	0	4
26-49	Perth	2	1	4	0	1
18-25	Wagga	0	0	0	0	11
50+	Melbourne	7		1	1	
18-25	Adelaide	0	0	5	1	4
18-25	Brisbane		4	3		1
50+	Brisbane		1	3		4
26-49 ATSI	Cairns			7	2	1
Total		11	7	26	4	26

Level	Selected by	Reasons given
An informed guess		
This involves using personal characteristics only (such as age, gender, education, location) to match cases across data sets	Older:	I see the value in obtaining accurate data, but personally would not feel comfortable to supply comprehensive data. That's all they need. Anything more personal would be identifiable
	Younger:	
	Indigenous:	Not selected by any participant.
	CALD	Not knowing how the data will be used, not knowing whether the info can/will/may be used by other government departments (invasion of privacy) It is less invasive with your personal details and I think provides an overall information collection/

A well informed guess

This involves using personal characteristics AND an address to match cases across data sets

Older:

Younger:

I understand that data linkage can be beneficial with tracking data over time. I think it is dangerous, however, to have all of this information in one place. There are other methods of collating data and I think government should protect our privacy.

I prefer links between data sets to provide some level of accuracy, but I would not be willing to give out too much of my personal information.

Indigenous:

N/A

CALD

A well informed guess is good enough to generalise.

An almost certain link Level 1

This involves using personal characteristics AND part of your name or a coded version of your name to match cases across data sets

Older:

The reason for my choice is because it offers an almost certain link to match data sets. The partial or coded name may offer some limited security if the data is mishandled.

Younger:

I think this is as much data that they would actually need to assess a general group of people. I think that any more information would rely too heavily on an individual being accurate.

Indigenous:

I like the idea of the coded version, more security without being disclosed

If a certain link included a coded version of my name I would have selected it. The only reason I selected what I did was because of the name coding.

CALD:

Where human intervention is needed to process data, the temptation is always there.

I believe that only a first name is sufficient to do the data link for ABS purpose.

I prefer the coded version of my name because whoever accesses the info will not be able to pinpoint me and dig into more information if needed.

An almost certain link Level 2

This involves using personal characteristics AND your full name to match cases across data sets

Older:

Younger:

Indigenous: So they are certain they have me

A certain link

This involves using your personal characteristics AND your full name AND your address to match cases across data sets

Older:

Younger:

Indigenous:

CALD:

I believe that data collection is important and necessary and should be as accurate as possibly. The ABS has a strict procedure to ensure the safety of the data.

I feel that ABS is an agency that I can trust and that benefits of such data would outweigh the potential negatives. In the long run, it means better services and products available to the public, then I don't see an issue.

Less surveys, quicker to research, more accurate data.

Trust the ABS.

Being used for a good purpose.

I believe personal information has become less sensitive to share.

I will choose a certain link because I trust government policies and procedures and law governing my information

It provides more accurate linkage and data information which will allow ABS to make more informed decisions.

Good quality data is essential in informing decision makers – to improve the impact of policy making.

5. Findings: CDE Project

5.1. Data Integration/Data Linking

Participants were asked whether they had heard of data integration/linking and although some were able to identify an example of data linking, there was generally a low level of understanding of data integration/linking across the groups. Some mid aged participants thought that data integration linked “other information into the system” but did not provide more specific examples of this. There was recognition that information provided to one government department could be made available to other government bodies.

Once provided with more information about data integration participants in the groups acknowledged, and thought it was largely beneficial, that the ABS can access different data sets and pull them together through this process. Many participants across the groups assumed this was already happening across public and private sector contexts and that such activity has not harmed them in the past. Other participants considered that it was worthwhile particularly if health improvements and other issues could be identified before they became bigger problems.

“Better way to combine large amounts of information that might not have been collected otherwise. Better than making everyone say something 5 times” Mid, Metropolitan

There were some concerns about data integration identified among participants. These included including the security of the linked information (and its associated confidentiality), along with a fear among some of for-profit agencies using it to exploit people for commercial purposes or deny them access to services. However, data linking was generally considered to be positive as long as it is used constructively and collectively and not used to access information to deliberately identify individuals. It is evident that many participants could see some benefits of data integration and there were minimal concerns about it as long as it is used in a positive way. There was also a strong sense of inevitability about the use of data linking by government entities.

“It is all going to be collected and used anyway – why fight it?” Older, Regional

CALD participants were somewhat more concerned about privacy issues around linking data. As is noted in the first chapter of this report, many in this group had negative experiences of data linking in their previous countries. These participants were more instant than those in other groups that data linking must not threaten their anonymity.

“Anonymous. It has to be anonymous. I just don’t want any other to know about me. As long as there is nothing about me in there, I am not worried about it.” CALD

5.2. Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset

None of the groups were aware of the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset or that it linked data from the 2006 and 2011 Censuses. The ACLD was viewed as a smart way of identifying trends and how they change over time in Australian society. There was an assumption that this type of data collection was already occurring and there was also a sense that the ACLD is largely building on information and processes that are already available and being used. Some participants recognised the benefits of having longitudinal information available to track trends

and thought that everyone could benefit in the long term. Linking data from the 2006 and 2011 Censuses was considered by some to be a positive step - particularly in relation to health issues. One participant talked about the Close the Gap campaign and thought that the ACLD could contribute to determining whether the program was working and how funding should be allocated in the future.

“You can identify trends. They can see whether the money they are forking out is actually helping people and going to the right places.” Mid, Metropolitan

However, many participants across the groups and mid aged participants in particular raised concerns about aspects of the ACLD. There was confusion about the ABS’ use of 5% of the census to explore questions such as ‘How has people’s employment status changed?’ Younger participants thought that the sample was too small and wondered how 5% was decided upon. This widespread confusion in the groups reflects a lack of understanding about the use of statistical measures in the general population.

ABS using linked data

Responses were mixed when participants were asked what they thought of the ABS linking data from the 2016 Census to previous censuses and other data. Some older participants found this a bit intrusive – but only to the point that they believe that information – post linking - can be tracked back to the individual. If this is not the case they are comfortable with it.

Interestingly, some considered it to be extremely important that people are informed about these type of activities, even though they generally assumed that this was already being done and had not had a sufficient degree of concern to investigate how the ABS had used their census data up to this point. Younger participants thought that it was important that the ABS undertake this type of work and many assumed that the use of linked data already occurred. These participants questioned whether it was important for people to know about using linked data for projects like ACLD. However, these participants also had concerns about the storage of data; with a degree of concern if the 5% worth got leaked, someone else could identify who the participants were. There were concerns about confidentiality across the groups and some commented that there was a lack of information given to the public about activities being undertaken by the ABS.

“There is no wider information given to the public. Flyers etc. The public has a right to know. They should advertise the benefits of the linkage. I’d like to know more about it.”
Young, Metropolitan

Many younger participants thought that as long as linking information in the ACLD was worthwhile and for the benefit of the country then it was appropriate. Others were more resigned and thought that projects like ACLD would occur regardless of whether individuals gave consent for their information to be used. There was an assumption from some older participants that the ABS would use the data “for good” and “not for penalising people”.

A few older participants initially felt that informed consent would have to be provided if a person was in the 5% (of the ACLD) and that people should be able to opt out at any time. However, once it became clear that linked data would be de-identified and aggregated for analysis and reporting purposes, these older participants were much more comfortable with the idea and did not feel that consent would have to be given. In fact they were cognisant of the risks of seeking consent and that the default would be likely be ‘no’ and the resultant data potentially skewed. In contrast, some younger participants thought that the use of names to make the link was inappropriate and were concerned about the possibility of identity theft as databases can be

hacked. There was also a sense that ‘they’ already have a vast amount of information about individuals that is shared so the ACLD would make little difference to individuals if they were part of the randomly selected 5%.

“Why are names relevant to them? If they can track that I moved and became a grandfather, why are names relevant to them?” Young, Metropolitan

There is an acceptance that the police and Medicare can gather and keep this information – it is a bit different for the ABS – not much but a little. There is some concern about who might end up with the data. Older participants had no concerns about topping up the 5% as it was seen as part of the deal and not a specific concern. The solid reputation of the ABS has encouraged generally widespread confidence and trust in the institution.

“We just trust the ABS – it hasn’t done us wrong so far.” Older, Regional

5.3. CDE and Census 2016

Following on from discussion about the ACLD and the 5% sample, participants were asked about their awareness of ABS projects that were publicised at the time of the 2011 Census. Very few participants across the groups could recall hearing about the projects prior to the 2011 however; one younger participant did recall hearing something but could not remember because it was not important to them at the time. Older participants thought that there had been no obvious negative consequences since the last census so there was no need to be concerned about the next census. There was a strong sense from some participants that the ABS, and by extension the government, needed the information contained in the Census.

“I agree. It’s for the good of the country. The information is out there anyway.” Older, Regional

Notifying the public about the census and related linked projects was considered to be important for many participants in the younger and mid aged groups. These participants thought that the public should be made aware through media in the lead up to the census so that people who have concerns can voice their opinion before it goes ahead. There was discussion about the methods that could be used to inform people and opinions varied, some thought that written information was preferable and others thought that a TV or internet campaign would reach more people. However, some participants admitted that regardless of the medium they would be unlikely to pay much attention to it. One mid aged participant did not think it necessary to inform people before the Census, rather they thought it appropriate to inform the public afterwards and stop projects if people raised objections.

“They don’t have to tell them before the census date. They should just make it public afterwards and then stop it if people have any concerns.” Mid, Metropolitan

Many participants thought that principles were needed that laid out the responsibilities of the ABS in its management of personal information. These participants also typically assumed that such principles were already in place while others were less sure and thought that security was a key concern. While these participants hoped that the ABS was using the “best security” available, there was also an acknowledgement that even the best security could be breached.

5.4. Move from CDE defined projects to governing principles

None of the participants across the groups were aware of what, if any, principles govern the ABS data collection and data linking practices. Older participants stated that it was important for the ABS to maintain transparency and publishing the list of planned projects prior to a census is seen as an important demonstration of this transparency. However, these participants could also spontaneously see how this would limit the ability of the ABS to extend to other programs and to be responsive to emerging needs. For this reason it was considered acceptable, and even preferable, to have a set of guiding principles rather than publication of a specific and definitive list of discrete projects. Some asserted that being unable to do any further analysis or problem solving for another five years until the next census was a big drawback of being limited to pre-specified projects. Others were concerned that once information is given, it can't be withdrawn. These participants wanted the power to give and retract permission for the ABS to retain personal information for data linking purposes.

There were mixed responses about governing principles for younger participants, some were more accepting of what happens to their information than others. They thought that principles governing privacy, confidentiality and undertaking projects in the public interest would be the most relevant to them personally. However some questioned what benefit a set of principles would have for them – a sense that they were potentially giving something up for limited personal gain or advantage in return.

“What benefit is it for me? Apart from the infrastructure, but that might not benefit me anyway.” Young, Metropolitan

The perceptions of younger participants centred around the need for any principles to be effective and they thought that working under governing principles would eliminate the need for the ABS to keep asking for permission to use data in this manner. It was suggested that principles could be included in an information packet with the census, specifically including ‘we are going to use this information for...’. In addition, some thought the ABS should also include the following in such an information package:

- Storage of records;
- Timeframes: can only go back to a certain date and it cuts off at a certain date;
- Being ethical in their use of such information.

5.5. Principles governing linkage of Commonwealth data

All participants were shown a document that provides an overview of the Principles that the ABS is governed by in relation to projects that link commonwealth data. On the whole younger and mid aged participants agreed with the principles and thought that they were generally robust and complete. Some thought that the document was too wordy and there was a general consensus that the language needed to be simplified. In addition to this, there was a sense that the document did not clearly state the information used by the ABS would be private and confidential and other participants thought that linking large amounts of personal data made it easier for hackers to access all information. The security of data was a priority and these participants wanted reassurances that the ABS was indeed maintaining the highest level of security.

“Doesn’t clearly say the information will be private and confidential, too wordy. Want a stronger guarantee.” Mid, Metropolitan

“By consolidating are they making it too easy for hackers to steal ALL information?”
Younger, Regional

When participants were asked whether they thought that the ABS still needs to notify people in regards to specific data linking projects it is planning to do, participants generally thought that as long as the ABS followed the Principles then that was enough. It was thought that it would be too time consuming to inform everyone about the projects the ABS wanted to do. Instead some participants suggested that the ABS make this information available to those who want to know.

“Fine for them to go ahead with projects if they follow the principles, it’s a waste of money to inform everyone.” Mid, Metropolitan

“Make it so that if people do want to know they can find out.” Mid, Metropolitan

It was important for older participants that the Principles that the ABS works under included:

- Objectives for gathering and linking the information (why is it important);
- The privacy provisions;
- That individuals cannot be identified;
- That it is for societal benefit and not profiteering; and
- What action may be taken from the results.

For these participants, the benefits of these principles are that the ABS would be seen to be transparent, would be able to be flexible and responsive to emerging needs, that there was some form of recourse for breaches; with the net effect of increasing public confidence in the ABS.

In terms of the principles themselves, at first pass these were well received and were seen to reflect the spontaneously suggested parameters for the principles. However, further discussion and investigation of the specific wording showed that a lot of “weasel words” were being used and government language. Examples were:

- “Responsible agencies *should* treat data....”;
- “Outweighs the privacy imposition and risks to confidentiality” (suggests that risks will be taken if there is public good);
- “Risk of breaches....impact of any breach remains low” (but not eliminated); and
- “Maximum extent possible”.

This language made it seem that the principles were acknowledging that there is no true protection that people’s privacy might be breached. This was a concern – but a relatively minor one. It was generally recognised that the principles had good intentions and were sound, and that generally no 100% guarantees were possible anyway. Some felt it would be overload to be told of every individual project the data was being used for – that it would take a lot of resources to create the information that no one would use. Others thought that they might want to monitor release of results from a particular study and so would find it useful to have access to the projects. It was generally felt that there is a need to make the information publically accessible – largely as a way of keeping the ABS accountable.

Participants from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds generally appreciated the content contained in the Principles. To some extent, the information contained in the Principles went some way to alleviating the concerns that some of these participants had over surveillance. However, it was pointed out that the Principles still did not contain enough information about what

the data was being used for (noting that specific use cases may be beyond the realm of the Principles). Other participants in this group pointed out that there was no information about the disposal of data.

“Yeah, these are good, I suppose. The more disclosure the better. But, after reading this I still do not know what they are going to do ... what sort of projects they are going to target.”
CALD

“What about how data is destroyed? Like personal data? Nothing about that here. What do you need all that data for anyway?” CALD

This perceived shortcoming of the Principles was also apparent in non-CALD groups, though to a lesser extent.

“Good Principles, what I would expect. I would still want to know who is using the data and for what.” Mid, Regional

5.6. Maintaining ‘Gold’ linked datasets over time to maximise their statistical value

Participants were told that the ABS destroys datasets that are linked by name and address, considered to be the best way to link two sets of data together, at the end of the Census processing period. This way of linking data is known as the “Gold” standard. Whilst this practice protects the privacy of individuals, it also limits what can be done with remaining datasets.

Mid aged participants were typically happy with the gold standard and thought that government agencies already had the information they needed through data sharing and that this was just another way of collecting data that would inform future needs for the Australian people. Gold linked data sets were already seen to inform research programs that improve the wellbeing of people into the future.

“Makes sense that info from other agencies are shared with ABS (I.e. Medicare).” Mid, Regional

Some mid aged participants did want to know what the ABS wanted to achieve through data linkage using the gold standard and thought that the ABS needed to be clear where data is collected from other than the Census and what that data will be matched with.

Generally participants across most groups trust the ABS and concerns about security are not with the ABS, rather it is about other people accessing the information.

“Human error and smart people who would like to get their hands on that information.” Mid, Regional

There was minimal understanding from older participants about why names and addresses could not be encrypted to maintain the link between datasets but avoid the risks of individuals being identified with their details. There were concerns that maintaining personal details was too much of a risk that the information would be hacked and used against individuals. This concern was heightened by the fact that the language used in the principles made it clear that the ABS was also not 100% sure that they could protect the information. The assumption is that the ABS currently does not maintain information associated with personal details; however, this was an assumption and a matter of trust. No one had any evidence that this was actually the case.

5.7. Extending the use of "Silver" linkage methodology

The groups were informed by the moderator that in the past ABS has destroyed data sets linked by name and address, but that the name and address is the best way to link data sets – the ‘gold standard’ linkage. Once deleted, the ABS can no longer do the linked data sets. Participants were then asked for their opinions on the ABS keeping the data sets linked by name and address. Some participants across the groups were comfortable with the ABS keeping data linked by name and address and thought this would only be an issue if a person had something to hide.

“If people have something to hide they are a criminal and they are hiding criminal activity, there is no reason to delete name and address.” Mid, Regional

“They know the information anyway, it’s only the putting together that they don’t know.” Young, Metropolitan

However, many participants did not think it was appropriate for the ABS to use names and addresses to link data. Many were uncomfortable about this and the potential for hacking to occur was of primary concern.

“I think it matters, it could fall into the wrong hands.” Mid, Regional

The silver standard link, an encrypted key for all people that complete the Census in 2016, was considered a more appropriate way of linking data. Overwhelmingly, participants across the groups were reassured by the use of a silver standard link and were positive about the ABS using this standard in the future. The use of a silver standard linking process was seen as a positive step forward and was preferred over the gold standard.

“That’s good, it’s what they should be doing.” Mid, Regional

There was however some scepticism about privacy and the risk of identity theft from some.

“People’s primary concerns would be privacy: even though they tell us they have the principles in place they could just do whatever they want with the data.” Mid, Regional

These participants were asked what the ABS could do to change their minds; some thought that more information about how information is stored and why it is beneficial for the ABS to link datasets was important and said that information about the silver linking standard could be given out with the Census. These participants also thought that it was important that people understood how and why data was being used as they were more likely to accept the use of linked data.

Older participants thought that using a silver standard was a reasonable compromise to achieve all the advantages of having linked data while at the same time avoiding all the risks of maintaining identifying data. Questions were raised about how secure the key would be and who would have access to the information that allowed the linkage of the data to a specific person.

Another positive feature of the silver linkage standard was the substantial increase in reliability of the data over bronze (bronze being 50%-70% as opposed to 80% or greater for silver). Many participants of all ages were of the strong opinion that the low level of accuracy for bronze made this type of linkage to be of dubious value. These participants strongly advocated for the use of silver-level linking despite the slightly elevated use of personal identifiers.

“Did you say 60%-70% for the bronze one? <EXPLETIVE> that! Go straight to silver!” Mid, Regional.

Participants from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds were more sceptical about the shift to data linkage. Whilst some of these participants perceived the value of moving to silver, other saw this level of linkage as yet another step towards 'big brother' style monitoring and surveillance.

"It does have its positives, if it is used properly. However, this could also be an application for monitoring. It could have a negative reaction from people because it could lead to tracking them. 'Someone is watching you'." CALD

These participants also pointed out that these concerns were even more pronounced for people of their parents' generation. Not only were these people more likely to have experienced negative surveillance from governments in their country of origin, this cohort was also less likely to understand the finer points of data security such as encryption.

"People who come from different countries think differently. Some are older and these people are more paranoid. They won't understand a lot of this stuff and they would be very suspicious." CALD

5.8. Communication

It was considered very important that information is provided about linkages of the data, even though many participants acknowledged that they would not be sufficiently interested to seek out the information. There is seen to be a relationship with the ABS. Because the ABS "needs" people to provide honest information through the census it is assumed that the ABS will strive to maintain the trust of the people they need information from. Being transparent in their communication about what they are doing with the data that is seen to be an important element in this transaction.

When asked how the information could be best communicated, the immediate reaction from some participants was 'a television campaign'. (Note that this reaction is common in most focus groups regardless of the topic at hand as it is the form of communication and advertising that most readily springs to mind for many people). On further probing, these participants retracted the idea of a TVC as perhaps being too expensive and, at the end of the day, not of interest to enough people to justify the expense. The availability of the information on the ABS website was thought to be sufficient for many.

"I did say a TV commercial. Now I think about it, no. Just put it on the website, wouldn't cost anything. On the front page of the website. Those that are really interested, I don't know how many that would be, can find it easily." Mid, Regional

The most appropriate place to communicate about use of the data was on the Census form. The form is seen to be accessible to everyone – even to the extent that support is provided to those who are illiterate. The Census form has the added advantage of going to everyone and provides a relevant and contextual platform from which to communicate about the use of data. It was also expected that mass media would be used to communicate. It was envisioned such communications would give the key points while being clear and accessible and that it might direct people to website for more information if they were interested.

"Put is on the front cover of the Census. Just make it really clear. If it is on the front cover and really obvious, no one can complain." CALD

However, some participants indicated that this approach was not without drawbacks. Some participants were concerned that statements about data linkages would alarm some people and

dissuade them from completing the Census. Others were of the opinion that very few people read the front cover anyway and that the information would be lost.

“Well, that would just freak some people out. Not me, I understand it (linkage) now but some people might not understand. Freak out and not do the survey.” Mid, Regional

“Does anyone actually read the front cover anyway? Like we were just talking about, most of us can’t even remember if our names were on the front cover or not.” Young, Metropolitan

Despite these concerns, the majority consensus was that the front page of the Census coupled with more detailed information linked from the ABS website was the best option.

6. Methodology

This qualitative research was undertaken with members of the general community, with diverse representation across different segments of the general population. The target audience for the qualitative research will consist of general population, stratified by location and age group. Groups were also conducted with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Indigenous participants, respectively.

6.1. Overall group structure

To address the needs of the ABS from this study, Colmar Brunton conducted a total of 16 1-hour focus groups across both metropolitan and regional locations. Groups were split by age group, with a broad mix of gender in each group. To explore if perspectives on the research topics varied by cultural background, two groups were conducted with participants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, while one group was conducted with those identifying as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) decent. . The table below shows the final breakdown stratification of focus groups, by location and age group. All groups were run in late May through early June 2014.

Table 2: Focus group stratification

Group	Audience	Location
1	26-49 CALD: personal identifiers	Sydney
2	50+: CDE project	Sydney
3	18-25: CDE project	Perth
4	26-49: personal identifiers	Perth
5	18-25: personal identifiers	Wagga
6	26-49: CDE project	Wagga
7	18-25 CALD: CDE project	Melbourne
8	50+: personal identifiers	Melbourne
9	50+: CDE project	Port Pirie
10	18-25: personal identifiers	Adelaide
11	26-49: CDE project	Adelaide
12	26-49: CDE project	Geelong
13	18-25: personal identifiers	Brisbane
14	50+: CDE projects	Brisbane
15	18-25: CDE project	Cairns
16	26-49 ATSI: Personal identifiers	Cairns

6.2. Venues

All of the qualitative research was conducted at a central location in each city or regional centre. In Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide, professional qualitative research facilities were utilised. The ABS in viewed each of these sessions. Focus group sessions in regional locations were held in meeting/conference rooms at a central location.

6.3. Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was conducted by phone using professional recruiters. The recruitment screener was designed to ensure that a robust cross section of the Australian population (within each age group) was achieved. Ten participants were recruited to achieve attendance of at least eight participants per group.

6.4. Moderators

All focus groups were conducted by senior, experienced and expert moderators. Every person who worked on the research had a minimum 10 years' experience in the market and social research industry. Each qualitative session lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration.

6.5. Discussion guides

Two discussion guides were developed in close consultation with the ABS – one to address each topic. These are included as an appendix to this report.

7. Appendix A – Personal Identifiers Discussion Guide

Broad perceptions of ABS (5 mins)

- What words or phrases come to mind when I mention the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or ABS? How come?
- What terms would you use to describe the ABS to others? How come?
- Do you view the ABS as a trustworthy organisation? How come?
- How do you feel about participating in a survey conducted by ABS? How come?

Evolution of the ABS (5 mins)

In recent years, the ABS has moved from an agency that looks information at a particular point in time – such as the information produced from a Census - to an agency that seeks to tell stories and provide useful statistical information about how Australia and Australians are changing over time. To do this, the ABS uses multiple sources of data – both across its own surveys and also through data provided by other Government agencies for research purposes – to deliver greater value from the data it has access to.

Some have described this change as moving from looking at still pictures – a snapshot of a specific point in time – to a movie or film – enabling the viewer to get a much better understanding of what they are looking at and the story of how this is changing over time.

Please turn over the pages on the table in front of you. On the first pages are some examples of the kind of information ABS (and others using ABS or other government data) have been able to produce by using multiple data sources and tracking trends over time.

[GET PARTICIPANTS TO TURN OVER PAGES]

I'm going to quickly read through the examples on the sheet in front of you.

[READ THROUGH EXAMPLES]

- What are your thoughts on the ABS and others bring data from different sources together in this way?
- Is this a positive or negative step? How come?
- What questions do you have about these examples, if any?

How this is achieved? (5 mins)

These examples are possible due to a concept called data integration.

- Has anyone heard of data integration? What do you know about it?

Data integration involves bringing or pulling together two or more groups of information to create a new, bigger, and more informative set of information. Pulling together data for statistical purposes means that the information is used only to produce statistics or research, not to monitor an individual person, household, family or business.

A major aim of data integration is to improve our knowledge and communication about social and economic challenges. For instance with things like health and wellbeing. Data integration has already been used to improve people's health: e.g. it has led to the use of folate in pregnancy to prevent neural tube defects like spina bifida.

Another major advantage of data integration is that it allows better use of data that is already available, so it is a relatively cheap way of pulling together more information in order to help improve people's wellbeing. It also means that people and businesses don't have to answer any additional questions through more surveys, as integration projects make use of existing information which was collected for other purposes.

- What do you think about the concept of data integration linkage?
- Is it important or relevant to you? How come?
- What questions do you have about data integration, if any?

Different ways of pulling information together from different sources (10 mins)

For any given survey the ABS undertakes, the findings present a snapshot of a group of people at a point in time. This ranges from small scale surveys of a small number of people on specific topics, right through to the Australian Census conducted once every five years.

Using data integration approaches, it could also link ~~this~~ with other ABS and Government data to generate more value from the data.

The ability to link these data sets varies depending on how many bits of information the ABS has to link and two or more data sets with. There are broadly three levels:

Let's call the first level - "An informed guess"

This involves using personal characteristics of a survey respondent - such as age, gender, if they are working or not working, education level, and suburb - to try and confirm that the data in one data set belongs to the same individual from another data source.

For example, let's say in one data set - the 2006 Census ~~form~~, for example – there might ~~have~~ be a person with the following characteristics – 51 years of age, male, has Year 10 Certificate, is employed full time in the manufacturing industry, is married, has three children, and lives in Wollongong NSW. In the 2011 Census, it would be useful to identify the same person using these characteristics and see what has changed for this person over this period.

This journey – and the journey of other people with similar characteristics – are then combined to tell a story. This story could be about what happened to people in Wollongong over that period,

what happened to those in the manufacturing period over that time, or what happened to married people with three kids over that time.

While collectively these characteristics give a pretty good indication that one person in one data set is the same person in another data set, we can't be sure – probably only 60% - 70% sure. If it is not the same person, we risk drawing incorrect conclusions (or the wrong story) about them.

This is especially important in terms of smaller sub-groups in the population – for example, if we wanted to look at how people currently unemployed in Wollongong differ by ethnicity, or if they have a disability – this “informed guess” approach is not sufficient to draw any meaningful stories at all.

- How useful do you think having this kind of pulled together information is?
- What if it were your characteristics being used in this way? Do you care? How come?

Ok – let's call the next level of linkage “A well informed guess”

If the ABS had more information about this person – such as their address – they could be more sure about matching this with other data and telling the correct story (probably around 80% sure). If they can be more sure about this link, this enables the ABS to provide more accurate statistics and information (and in some cases new, previously unavailable information), which leads to better decision making in terms of government programs and services. For example, the Government might know they need to have better employment support services in a particular geographic region.

In effect, using an address helps the ABS make better connections and enables them to tell a more detailed story about groups of people, as opposed to just an outline of a story. It would also enable them to work more effectively and use tax payer's dollars more efficiently.

- What are your thoughts on the ABS using address?
- What if it was your address? Would you care? How come?
- What are your thoughts about operational benefits to the ABS?

Ok – let's call the next level “An almost certain link”

Our name is one of our most unique characteristics. By using a person's name in combination with a series of personal characteristics, the ABS could be almost certain that data in different sources belongs to the same individual. This added certainty means that the statistics the ABS produces could be much more accurate and therefore provide more useful information for decision making.

Using this approach, the ABS stories become much richer, enabling them not only to tell the overall narrative but also the sub-plots of different sub-groups on issues such as education, health, and employment.

- What are your thoughts on the ABS using names to pull together a range of information to better inform society?
- What if it was your name? Would you care? How come?

- What if rather than your actual name, there was an encrypted code that represented your name. This code would not make sense on its own, and would only be used as a kind of a key to pull together data from different sources.
 - What are your views on this?
 - Is this different to using your full name? How come?
- What about using just part of your name – such as your initials or some other component of your name?
 - What are your views on this?
 - Is this different to using your full name? How come?

Ok – let's call the next level "A certain link"

If the ABS could use both an individual's name and address in combination with personal characteristics, they can be almost 100% certain that they have matched the right information across two or more data sets. This makes the statistical information the ABS produces to be of the highest quality possible.

This would enable stories to be told about very specific groups of people over time– such as examining the long term employment outcomes of students that have undertaken different forms of schooling or training, or better understanding the job outcomes of students in rural areas versus metropolitan areas. This level of linkage would also enable government to more rapidly identify areas of inequality or disadvantage and provide more timely and targeted responses.

- What are your thoughts on the ABS using both name and address to pull together different types of information?
- What if it was your name and address? Would you care? How come?

Concerns (10 mins)

- What concerns, if any, do people have about the pulling together of information - data integration? Any others?

[WRITE DOWN ALL CONCERNS ON THE WHITEBOARD]

Ok – I want to discuss each of these concerns about the ABS pulling together information in the ways we've just described.

FOR EACH CONCERN RAISED:

- How many of us share this concern?
- Is this a major or minor concern for us? How come?
- What evidence do you have that this could be a problem?
- What could the ABS or anyone else do to address this specific concern?

How is privacy protected (10 mins)

Let's talk about the things that are in place to protect your personal information held by the ABS.

- Does anyone know what the ABS does (or doesn't do) to ensure the privacy of all those they survey? What do they do?

[INSTRUCT PEOPLE TO TURN TO PAGE 2 OF THE HANDOUT]

On the second page of the handout there are a number of processes and protocols that govern the work of the ABS. I'd like to go through each of these briefly with you.

- Legislative protections – the ABS operates under specific legislation that imposes significant penalties on those that break the privacy and/or confidentiality of any survey participant. These include both jail periods and heavy fines. The ABS is prohibited from releasing any info that identifies an individual person or business.
- The ABS IT system has the same security levels as those used by both the Department of Defence and ASIO. It is regularly reviewed by Defence Signals Directorate and upgraded as appropriate to address current and emerging IT security threats.
- All ABS offices have strict physical security protocols that ensure strict controls to all ABS premises.
- All ABS staff must undertake personal security checks before being employed by the organisation. All staff are also required to sign confidentiality agreements that are binding both during the term of their employment with the ABS and also once they leave the ABS.
- The ABS can receive some data from other government agencies, but never shares any of its own data – or combinations of its own data and other data - with other government agencies. All analysis is undertaken solely for research and analysis purposes, and never for either compliance or verification purposes.
- The ABS operates in an open and accountable manner – any Australian can request access to the data held by the ABS (noting some requests attract a fee to cover the costs of compiling these requests).

- What are your views in relation to how the ABS ensures data is accessed to is managed and stored securely?
- Do these measures give you confidence any data you provide would be kept secure?
- Do you have any queries or questions on any of these security measures?

Data linkage options (10 mins)

The ABS is keen to make maximum use of data from various surveys and provide all Australians with detailed and useful stories about a wide range of social trends and issues. At the same time, it wants to ensure it operates in accordance with what the broader Australian community is comfortable with.

Please turn to the third page of the booklet in front of you.

On the third page is a list of the options we discussed earlier this evening. I want you to circle the level that would be acceptable to you in terms of data you may provide to the ABS. Please make your own decision – don't be influenced by anyone else.

There is a box below the table where I also want you to write a brief explanation of why you've selected a certain level you find acceptable – once you've selected a level, please give a brief explanation below please.

[ALLOW TIME TO SELECT LEVEL – THEN TALLY RESPONSES ON WHITEBOARD]

Ok – what option did you choose? [ASK ALL]

For each level chosen by at least one participant:

- Why did you identify that as your acceptable level for linking of your data? Who else chose this level? What were your reasons for selecting this level?
- What additional safeguards or information would you need in order to move to a higher level?

Wrap Up (5 mins)

Have you heard about the ABS in the media recently? Explore some of these views.

Would any decision to retain name and/or address impact on your views of the ABS? How so?

Does anyone have any additional comments in relation to the ABS?

HAND OUT INCENTIVES & CLOSE.

8. Appendix B – CDE Project Discussion Guide

Broad perceptions of ABS (5 mins)

- What words or phrases come to mind when I mention the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or ABS? How come?
- What terms would you use to describe the ABS to others? How come?
- Do you view the ABS as a trustworthy organisation? How come?
- Would you participate in a survey that was being conducted by the ABS? How come?

Australian Census (5 mins)

- Every 5 years the ABS conducts the Australian Census. This was last done in 2011, and is next scheduled to be undertaken in 2016.
 - Why does the ABS conduct the Australian Census?
 - What is the Census data used for? Anything else you know of?
 - Tell me briefly about your experience with completing the census...
 - What kind of questions are included in the Census?
 - Are you happy to provide the information asked for? How come?
 - Are there any questions that you feel uncomfortable or uneasy being asked about? Which ones? Why do these make you feel uneasy? Do you answer them anyway? How come?
- The Census asks for a lot of personal information including name, address, income, education level and employment status of those living in the household.
 - What are your views on this?
 - Who has access to this information?
 - Is this information you supply secure? How do you know?
 - How is this data used?
 - Is this personal information safe?
 - How do you know?

Data Integration/Data Linking

Has anyone heard about Data Integration or Data Linking? What have you heard? What do you think about this?

[FOR THOSE THAT HAVEN'T HEARD ABOUT DATA INTEGRATION/LINKING]

Data integration involves bringing together two or more datasets to create a new, bigger, and more informative dataset. The data is usually linked at the unit record level (i.e. for an individual or a business) or the micro level (for example, linking information for families, households, communities or business groups).

Using integrated data for statistical purposes means that the information is used specifically to help in producing statistics or research, not to monitor an individual person, household, family or business.

A major aim of data integration is improve health and wellbeing. Data integration has already been used to improve people's health: e.g. it has led to the use of folate in pregnancy to prevent neural tube defects like spina bifida.

Another major advantage of data integration is that it allows better use of data that is already available, so it is a relatively cheap way of gathering more information in order to help improve people's wellbeing. It also means that people and businesses don't have to answer any additional questions, as integration projects make use of existing information which was collected for other purposes.

Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (10 mins)

- Has anyone heard of the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLD)? What have you heard about? What do you think about this?

[FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN'T HEARD OF THE PROGRAM]

The ACLD brings together data from the 2006 and 2011 Censuses to create a research tool for exploring how Australian society is changing over time. In the first release, a 5% random sample from the 2006 Census was brought together with corresponding records from the 2011 Census using data linkage techniques without name and address.

- What are your thoughts on the ABS using Census data in this way? Is this positive or negative? How come?
 - Why do you think the ABS did this?
 - Who do you think would make use of the information generated from linking these data sets?
 - What kind of analysis do you think linking Census waves might make possible?
- The linkage of the information from this sample of Australians between Census waves, other ABS data and data collected by other government agencies has allowed the ABS to explore the following questions:
- How has people's employment status changed?
 - Have employed people changed industries?
 - Are school leavers continuing on to further study and/or moving into the workforce?

- How many people are taking up, continuing or ceasing providing unpaid care for others?
- How many people are taking up, continuing or ceasing volunteering?
- Has there been a change in English proficiency for recent migrants?

By answering these questions, Governments at the Federal, state and local level can be better informed about where they should be targeting their limited resources in terms of programs or services for the community.

What are your thoughts on the ABS using this linked data to provide a better understanding of such changes over time?

- What are the positives of this type of work?
- Are there any negatives?
- Did you know the ABS was doing this kind of work with census data?
- Is it important for you to know? Or is this something you would have expected the ABS to be doing as part of their role?
- Should the ABS be doing more or less of this kind of work on Census data? How come?
- Would this make you more reluctant to fill out your Census form, or affect what information you would give on your Census form?
- Would you care if you were in the 5% random sample being linked over time? How come?
 - What specifically would you be concerned about?
 - What information or answers would you need to address these concerns?
- What are your views on the ABS topping up this sample from each round of the Census to ensure a random 5% sample is maintained to ensure it is representative of the broader Australian population?
 - Is this acceptable? How come?
 - Does anyone have any concerns about this? How could or should the ABS address these concerns?

CDE and Census 2016 (5 mins)

Based on the value the linkage of Census data has delivered from the work tracking community changes from the 2006 to 2011 data, the ABS is keen to conduct similar work with the Census data to be collected in 2016, that is, again linking it to the data supplied in both 2006 and 2011 to monitor changes over time.

- How do you feel about this? How come?
- Are you supportive of the ABS using census data in this way, against or don't care? How come?

- What concerns do you have about these plans, if any? How could these be addressed?
- Any other comments about the ABS plans to continue this type of work using census information?

Move from CDE defined projects to governing principles (5 mins)

With the 2011 Census, the ABS identified a number of discrete projects it planned to undertake by linking information across Census waves and made information about the projects public about a year before the Census was taken.

- Do any of us recall hearing about these projects prior to the 2011 Census?
- Would you expect to have been made aware of these projects?
- Is it important for the ABS to tell the public about its planned projects using linked Census data? How come?

After the 2011 data was collected and analysed, there were several other projects identified that the ABS would have liked to have run – and which would have provided similar useful information to the types of projects we’ve already discussed – but the ABS decided not to pursue these because they had not been publically announced as part of their planned projects.

- Is it important for the ABS to tell the public about all of the projects it plans to undertake using identified Census data before the Census is taken? How come?
- If they were to disclose these projects, what type of information would you want? How come?
- What if the ABS was to only conduct such work under a set of clear principles that guides what they could and couldn’t do in relation to data that can be linked
 - What would these principles need to contain?
 - What would be the benefits of such an approach?
 - What might be the drawbacks of such an approach? What would need to happen to address these concerns?

Principles governing linkage of Commonwealth data (10 mins)

The ABS actually already works under a set of principles that dictates what it can and cannot do in relation to projects that link data. –I’m going to give you a document that gives an overview of these principles – I’d like you to spend the next 5 minutes reviewing these and then we’ll discuss them.

[HAND OUT PRINCIPLES DOCUMENT – ALLOW 5 MINS TO READ]

- What are your initial reactions to these principles?

- How confident are you that such principles would ensure your personal data and privacy is protected?
- What are the strengths of these principles?
- What are the weaknesses of these principles, or things that need to be clarified or strengthened?
- If all use of data for linkage projects is governed by these principles, is it important for the ABS to notify the public of the details of each specific project or way in which such data could be used?
 - How come?
 - If you wanted further detail on specific projects, what specific information would you want?

Maintaining "Gold" linked datasets over time to maximise their statistical value (5 mins)

In the past, the ABS has destroyed datasets that are linked by name and address – this kind of link is viewed as the best way to link two sets of data together – otherwise known as the “Gold” standard - at the end of the Census processing period. This is done to protect the privacy of individuals, but it limits what can be done with the resulting datasets, i.e. they can't be used for other useful analysis.

- What about if instead of the ABS destroying these datasets, the ABS was to keep these data sets linked by names and addresses so they can be used for other statistical analysis projects? [PROBE –HOW LONG WOULD PEOPLE BE COMFORTABLE IN TERMS OF THESE RECORDS BEING MAINTAINED]
- Is this a good or bad thing? How come?
- Who has concerns about this? How could these concerns be addressed?
- Would the ABS would keep this data safe and secure?

Extending the use of "Silver" linkage methodology (5 mins)

The ABS uses a variety of methods to link records, as follows

- Gold standard – using name and address information to link records during the Census processing period;
- Silver standard – Name is encrypted using a specific electronic key. This key is then used along with personal characteristics to link with; and
- Bronze standard – linking only on personal characteristics like age and sex and date of birth, but not name and address.

For the 2011 CDE, the ABS used Bronze standard linkage for a number of projects, and generated the silver standard to link the data across Census waves 2006 and 2011 for the randomly selected 5% sample that allows it to monitor changes over time.

In 2016, the ABS is considering developing a silver standard link – that is, a unique encrypted key – for all people that complete the Census in 2016 – so that there is at least the potential for this data to be linked with other data sets into the future.

- Is this a good or bad thing? How come?
- Who has concerns about this? How could these concerns be addressed?
- Would the ABS would keep this data safe and secure?

Wrap Up (5 mins)

Does anyone have any additional comments in relation to the ABS and its data linking program?

HAND OUT INCENTIVES & CLOSE.

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