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## **Measuring Gender Identity in Australia**

Australian Bureau of Statistics





# MEASURING GENDER IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA

Information Paper

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## BACKGROUND

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the [Standard for Sex and Gender Variables](#) on 2 February 2016 (cat. no. 1200.0.55.012). This standard was developed as a result of a major review of the sex standard ([Demographic Variables, 1999](#) (cat. no. 1285.0)), which was broadened to include the interrelated concept of gender.

The intent of the new standard is to maximise the statistical efficacy of the topic/variable, which is achieved by explaining the interrelated concepts of sex and gender, defining standard classification categories for each concept and including question modules for the collection of sex and gender information. It was developed in consideration of, and aligns with the [Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender, November 2015](#) (Attorney-General's Department (AGD)), which complements [Commonwealth anti-discrimination law](#) and the [Australian Privacy Principles](#). Both internal and external consultation was undertaken to assist the development of the standard, with feedback incorporated into the final product.

For the 2016 Census, the ABS recognised that individuals may identify as a sex or gender other than the sex they were assigned at birth or may not identify as exclusively male or female. The ABS therefore provided methods for all response form types so that people could record their sex in the way they thought most appropriate. The 2016 Census also aimed to gather information that would assist the design of questions, expand the ABS Standard Classifications of Sex and Gender, and support more informed collection of information on sex and gender in future ABS collections. An initial paper, [Sex and Diversity in the 2016 Census](#), was published in June 2017, and will be followed by three more detailed articles over coming months.

## DEFINITIONS OF SEX AND GENDER

The term 'sex' refers to a person's biological characteristics. A person's sex is usually described as being either male or female. Some people may have both male and female characteristics, or neither male nor female characteristics, or other sexual characteristics. Sex is assigned at birth and is relatively fixed. However, a person's sex may change during their lifetime as a result of procedures commonly referred to as sex change, gender reassignment, gender affirmation, transsexual surgery, transgender reassignment or sexual reassignment. Throughout this process, which may be over a considerable period of time, sex may be recorded as either male, female or other.

The term 'gender' refers to the way in which a person identifies their masculine or feminine characteristics. A person's gender relates to their deeply held internal and individual sense of gender and is not always exclusively male or female. It may or may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth. As gender is determined by the individual, it can therefore be fluid over time.

Data collection managers need to identify whether they need to collect sex or gender.

## INCLUSION OF A THIRD CATEGORY

The new standard recognises the need to include a third category for both sex and gender to ensure it caters for the whole population and provides the opportunity for respondents to respond other than male or female. The label 'Other' is used to describe the third categories of both sex and gender because a more descriptive term has not been widely agreed within the general community. The use of 'Other' is also consistent with best practice for developing statistical classifications that identify and accurately label categories of the population that make up a significant proportion of an overall population (e.g. 'Male' and 'Female'), with the remaining categories of the population brought together to form a third category labelled 'Other'.





Further, this standard recommends the inclusion of a 'please specify' write-in facility for the 'Other' categories giving respondents the opportunity to describe their sex and/or gender in a way they are comfortable with.

## IN DEPTH SOCIAL STUDIES

The standard is not intended to support in depth social studies of sexual or gender diversity (in relation to sex/gender as defined in our standard) due to the concepts of sex and gender, and their definitions, not being well understood by the general public.

Technically, if the definition of sex was well understood by respondents, then those who respond as "other" should consist only of persons who have been diagnosed as having both male and female characteristics, or neither male nor female characteristics, or other sexual characteristics or while a person is undergoing a sex change. However, it is unlikely that this will be the outcome.

In the case of gender, persons should respond as male/female/other dependant on how they identify at that particular point in time.

It is also highly likely that respondents will continue to confuse the concepts of sex and gender and report as such - the 'please specify' write in option will assist with analysis of this issue.

In depth social studies of sexual or gender diversity would need to ask several questions to accurately identify relevant subpopulations and/or track the transition process within the concepts of sex and gender or between sex and gender. To date, the ABS has not undertaken any such studies and do not plan to do so in the foreseeable future. The ABS can provide limited assistance to researchers who wish to undertake these types of social studies, including notifying them of published recommendations on how to identify sex and gender subpopulations that we are aware of (i.e. from some advocacy groups). With appropriate funding, there is potential in the ABS household survey program to include more specific questions about gender in surveys such as the General Social Survey (GSS).

## IMPLEMENTATION IN THE ABS

While the AGD's guidelines expected all Australian Government Departments and agencies to implement the [Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender](#) by 30 June 2016, the ABS will be progressively incorporating the Standard for Sex and Gender Variables into its household survey program over the next few years, starting with the 2016 Post-Enumeration Survey of the 2016 Census of Population and Housing (the Census), and the 2019 iteration of the GSS.

Care is required to consider the potential impact of implementing the new standard on each relevant ABS collection. The first step towards implementation is to identify the concept required to be collected. The ABS has advanced this step and notes:

- The production of ABS population estimates and projections are dependent on the measurement of biological sex obtained from the Census of Population and Housing (the Census) and the number of births and deaths, recorded by sex, regularly provided to the ABS by each State and Territory's Registrars of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. The collection of sex in the Census is further supported by the following international standards:
  - the United Nation's Statistical Division's [Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2 \(2008\)](#) which notes sex as being a core topic essential for inclusion in population and housing censuses; and
  - United Nation's Statistical Division's [Principles and Recommendations for a Vitals Statistics System, Revision 3 \(2014\)](#) which requires all births and deaths be recorded by sex.
- The ABS Labour Force Survey collects sex as Labour Force estimates are calculated in such a way as to add to independent estimates of the civilian population aged 15 years and over which





are based on the latest Estimated Resident Population. For more information on the underlying concepts and structure of Australia's labour force statistics, and the sources and methods used in compiling the estimates, refer to [Labour Statistics: Concepts, Sources and Methods](#) (cat. no. 6102.0.55.001).

## Transformation

The ABS is fundamentally transforming its business and will modernise its infrastructure over the next five years to provide the foundation for the ABS future. As noted above, the Standard will be incorporated into ABS collections as part of this transformation. Implementation in non-statistical systems (e.g. recruitment, pay and entitlements) is underway.

## FUTURE REVIEW OF THE STANDARD

The ABS regularly reviews its standards, and this standard will be reviewed within the next five years (likely to be 2018-19). The review will include a review of the 'Other' labels and may provide further guidance on appropriate 'Other' subcategories and labels, if further information (e.g. cognitive testing, analysis of actual responses) is available to inform this development. Reviews of both the [Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender](#), and the Australian Standard 4590 Interchange of Client Information will also inform our review.

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation - a person's emotional or sexual attraction to another person - is a separate concept and is not covered in the Standard for Sex and Gender Variables.

Sexual orientation was collected by the ABS for the first time in the 2007 [Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) (SMHWB) (cat. no.4326.0), and again in the 2014 [General Social Survey](#) (GSS) (cat. no. 4159.0). While the ABS does not currently have a standard for sexual orientation, it may develop one prior to the next GSS, which is scheduled for 2019. THE SMHWB provided diagnoses of multiple mental health conditions and a range of demographic and other health information including life satisfaction and psychological distress. The GSS aims to provide an understanding of the multidimensional nature of relative advantage and disadvantage across the Australian population (aged 15 years and over), and to facilitate reporting on and monitoring of people's opportunities to participate fully in society. It also enables cross classification of sexual orientation by a range of health, wellbeing and social participation variables.

