

Reporting of housework hours in the Australian Census



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Introduction

'Housework', or 'unpaid domestic work' includes activities such as cooking, cleaning and maintaining a household. These activities contribute significantly to the economy and wellbeing of individuals and families, but are not recognised as 'labour' in national accounts (Alonso, et al. 2019). Although women's labour force participation has increased and traditional gender role attitudes have diminished over time, women still do the bulk of unpaid domestic work (Mills, et al. 2014). Time devoted to unpaid domestic work can affect a person's ability to participate in other activities, such as paid work (WGEA 2016). Hence it is recognised that having an accurate understanding of the patterns of unpaid domestic work is crucial for achieving gender equality, understanding the economy, and informing policy decisions that affect individuals and families.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has now completed the second stage of the 2026 Census topic consultation. One of the topics under review for removal was that of unpaid domestic work (ABS 2023). This recommendation is based on the availability of alternative data or that the data need is not as strong compared to the public value criteria, which includes that there is a need to collect the data for small population groups and/or small geographic areas.

The inclusion of unpaid work in the Census was the subject of debate for at least a decade before it was included for the first time in 2006. Many submissions called for its inclusion prior to the 1996 and the 2001 Censuses, but it was ultimately excluded as there were already other sources of high-quality data on the topic. It was also noted that national data existed and that there was no specific need identified to have this topic collected for small areas or for small population groups (ABS 1996, 2001a; 2001b).

In June 2003 a Consultative Committee on Unpaid Work comprised of representatives from ABS and key external organisations was established to determine the need for questions on unpaid work in the 2006 Census. The committee identified a need for data on unpaid work at the small area level, and as a result four questions on unpaid work were included, on: (1) unpaid domestic work, (2) volunteering, (3) caring for children, and (4) caring for elderly or disabled persons. The question has been repeated in all subsequent censuses.

However, high-quality alternative data on unpaid domestic work is available in Australia. The ABS collects rich data on primary and secondary activities through the National Time Use Surveys (NTUS) (1992, 1997, 2006 and 2020-21). A question on housework is also included in the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

Although domestic work is collected in the Census, the results differ quite substantially to that from other data collections. The Census data records a large proportion of the population not participating in any domestic work: at the 2021 Census, 29% of men, and 22% of women aged 15+ were recorded as not doing any domestic work in the previous week.

In contrast, the 2020 HILDA survey records 7% of men and 3% for women aged 15 + who stated that they did not do any housework in a typical week. In the Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, fewer than 5% of men aged 18 +, and fewer than 2% of women did no indoor housework in the previous week (ABS 2021), and in the NTUS 2020-21, 18% of men and 7% of women did not engage in 'domestic activities' in the last two days (ABS 2022).

This paper compares the stated hours of domestic labour in the Census with data from the HILDA survey to better understand the patterns behind the large proportion of Australians that record doing no domestic work in the Census.

Data and methods

We use the Australian Census (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021) and approximately corresponding years from the HILDA Survey. The Census question asks: "In the *last week* did the person spend time doing unpaid domestic work for their household?". Further instructions note to include all housework, food/drink preparation and clean-up, laundry, gardening, home maintenance and repairs, household shopping and finance management. The answer categories are:

- 1) No, did not do any unpaid domestic work in the last week,
- 2) Yes, less than 5 hours
- 3) Yes, 5-14 hours
- 4) Yes, 15-29 hours and
- 5) Yes, 30 hours or more

The HILDA survey is a longitudinal national household panel survey. One component of the interview involves a self-completion questionnaire, which asks: "How much time would you spend on each of the following activities in a typical week?" A list of different activities is given including "Housework, such as preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning house, washing clothes, ironing and sewing" and respondents are asked to answer in terms of hours and or minutes.

We compare the percentage who do no housework over time from both sources of data for people aged 15 and over, before examining in further detail the distribution of answers by age group and sex for those aged 18-64 in the latest Census and HILDA data. All HILDA data presented is weighted with the cross-section self-completion questionnaire responding person population weight (Summerfield, et al. 2021).

Key features

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the population aged 15 and over who reported doing no housework in the Census and in HILDA. For comparability, we created figures for both the overall Census data and a subset that only includes individuals residing in private dwellings, and excluding those living in remote or very remote areas. This adjustment aligns with the HILDA data's exclusion of non-private dwelling residents and those in remote or sparsely populated regions.

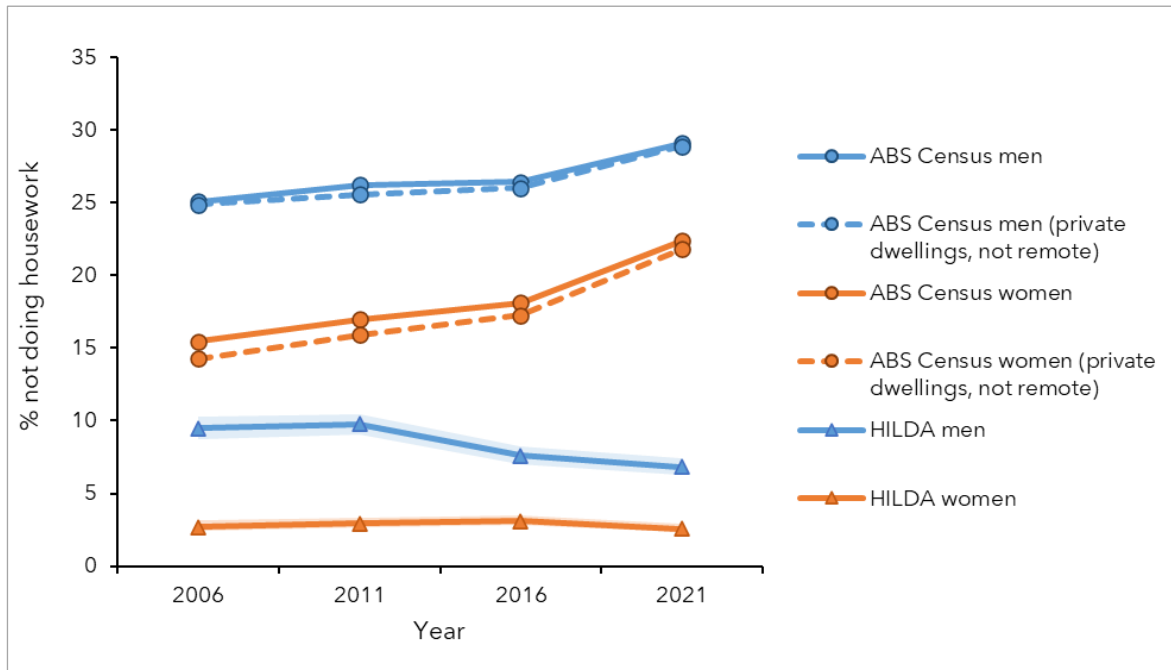


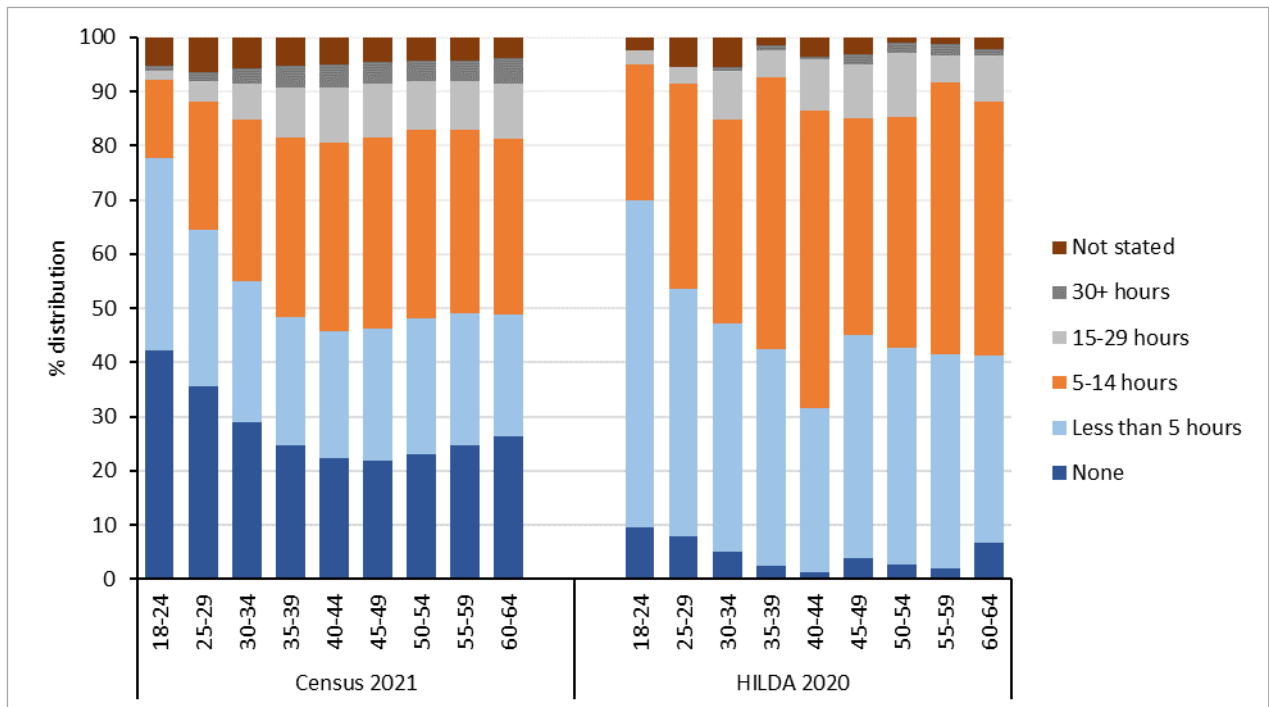
Figure 1: Percentage of the population aged 15+ who did zero hours of unpaid domestic work, by sex and year (Census and HILDA)

Source: ABS Census and HILDA survey data.

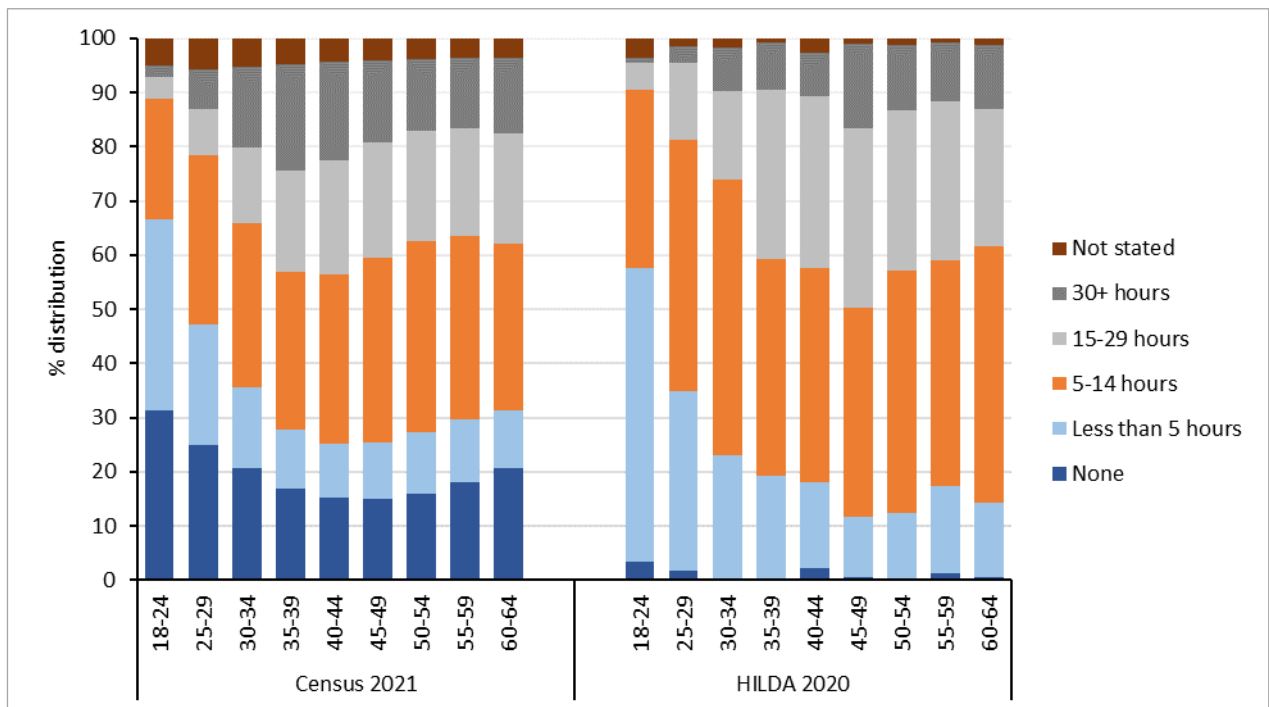
The Census figures are substantially higher than the HILDA proportions, even when the Census data is restricted. In the Census, approximately one quarter of men are recorded as performing no domestic work, with the proportion increasing over time. Conversely, the HILDA data shows less than 10% of men indicating no involvement in household chores, with the proportion decreasing over time. A similar pattern is evident among women in both datasets.

The distribution of responses by gender and age group for the 2021 Census and 2020 HILDA data, was then analysed and is illustrated in Figure 2. The disparity in response patterns is apparent across all age groups. When we compare those who completed 5 hours of domestic work or less, the differences become slightly less pronounced. It is likely that HILDA is capturing people who do small amounts of hours, while they are likely being reported as 'none' in the Census.

The Census data on domestic work shows a different distribution to other sources of data, particularly when it comes to those who do no housework at all. A potential explanation for reporting no hours may be proxy reporting. In the Census, one household member can respond for everyone, which could lead to less accurate reporting. However, if proxy reporting were a



(a) Men



(b) Women

Figure 2: Distribution of hours of unpaid domestic work in Census 2021 and HILDA 2020 by age group and gender

Source: ABS Census and HILDA survey data.

contributing factor, restricting both data sets to those living alone should narrow the gap. Our analysis shows the contrary, as the gap is larger. In the 2021 Census, of those aged 18-64, 36% of men living alone reported not engaging in housework, compared to just 3% in the HILDA survey. For women, the respective figures were 29% and 1%.

Another explanation is the different question wording. Both questions refer to a one-week period but in HILDA the responses are given as hours/minutes rather than categories. The Census question asks if the person spent any time, whereas the HILDA question asks how much time was spent. Further, the Census wording of 'unpaid domestic work' may sound unfamiliar, as it is colloquially referred to as 'housework'.

Most papers on domestic labour in Australia have relied on HILDA (Craig & Siminski 2010, 2011; Baxter & Hewitt 2013; Foster & Stratton 2018,2019; Mooi-Reci & Craig 2020; Ervin, et al. 2023), or NTUS (Bittman, et al. 2003, 2004; Craig & Mullan 2010; Craig, et al. 2016; Craig & Powell 2018). We could find no published research using the Census for small-area or small population groups, although we acknowledge that community organisations may have used it for their own purposes.

This DemoGraphic shows that reported hours spent on housework are substantially lower in the Census than any other data source. Other data collections have greater space for specific instructions, or more detailed time recording, providing high-quality data. We question whether the current question is currently overstating zero participation in housework, and believe that this is an additional reason for removing the current question from the Census.

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