

How many people with Pacific island heritage live in Australia?

by Stephen Howes and Huiyuan Liu

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Australia Day Parade, Adelaide, 2010

Photo Credit: [Michael Coghlan/Flickr](#)

Like many questions, it sounds like it should have a simple answer, but it doesn't.

One answer is to count all those living in Australia born in the Pacific islands. There are two limitations to this approach. First, there is a significant share of Pacific island migrants, thus defined, who are clearly not of Pacific heritage. They are the children of expatriates, with ancestry from Australia or England or China, etc. Second, this method can't be used to measure the number of second-generation Pacific migrants (those born here as the children of migrants), since, by definition, they are born in Australia. Nor does it include migrants with Pacific heritage born in third countries, such as New Zealand.

Another approach is to count all and only those who are recorded in the Australian census as being of Pacific ancestry. This method gets around both of the above problems, since expatriates are excluded, and second-generation and born-elsewhere migrants included. This ancestry approach is used by James Batley to [analyse](#) 2006 to 2016 census data.

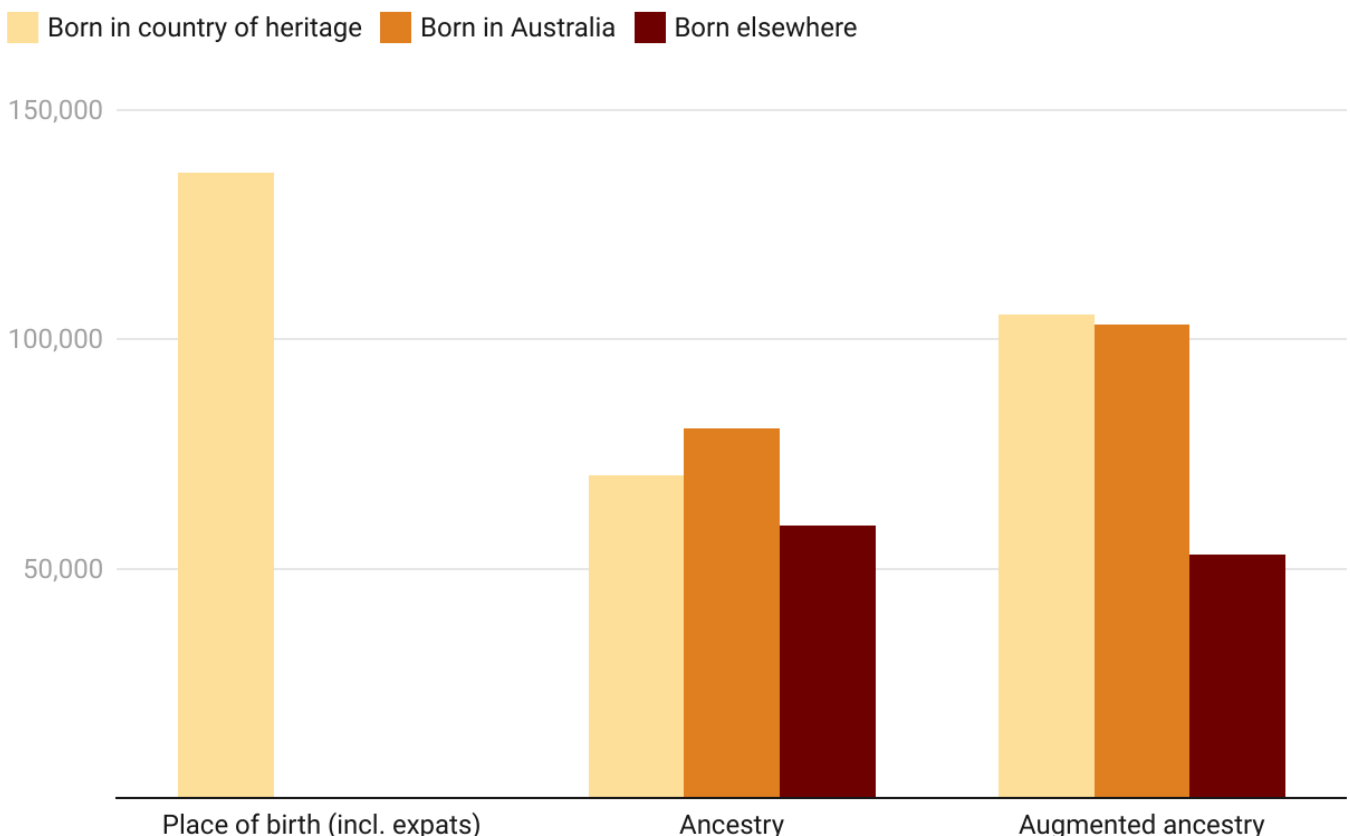
This method makes more sense, but has its own problems. For one thing, the way the census is set up simply counting ancestries can lead to double-counting. People can claim up to two ancestries each in the census, and if someone writes they are both ni-Vanuatu and Fijian a straightforward count by Pacific ancestry will count that person twice. Another and bigger problem is that this method excludes Indo-Fijians, who are in fact the largest group of migrants with Pacific heritage in Australia. (Indians were brought to Fiji as indentured labourers between 1879 and 1920.) Only in 2011 was a "Fijian Indian" ancestry category added to the Australian census. And many Indians from Fiji continue to classify themselves as Indian. In fact, between 2011 and 2016 the number living in Australia born in Fiji identifying as "Fijian Indian" fell from 10,942 to 7,717. This is an interesting commentary on how Indo-Fijian migrants perceive themselves, but also a sure sign that we can't just add self-identifying Indo-Fijians to the mix if we want to measure the number of Pacific migrants in Australia.

The approach we follow, which we call the “augmented ancestry” method, corrects for double counting and also tries to get a more accurate estimate of the Indo-Fijian diaspora. You can read the data notes, but on the latter, which is by far the bigger correction, the key assumption is that all migrants born in Fiji with Indian or Southern Asian ancestry are in fact Indo-Fijians.

The next two charts show the major differences between the three methods: birthplace, ancestry, and our “augmented ancestry” method. Our analysis covers all independent Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste, though Timor-Leste is not included in our Pacific totals.

Our method gives a number of born-in-country migrants that is less than the total arrived at using the birthplace method because it excludes expatriates. However, it is greater than the total calculated using the ancestry method since it attempts to estimate and include all Indo-Fijians.

Figure 1: Pacific islanders in Australia – estimates from the three methods, 2016



In ancestry and augmented ancestry methods, "born in country of heritage" counts those who are born in the same Pacific country as their claimed heritage.

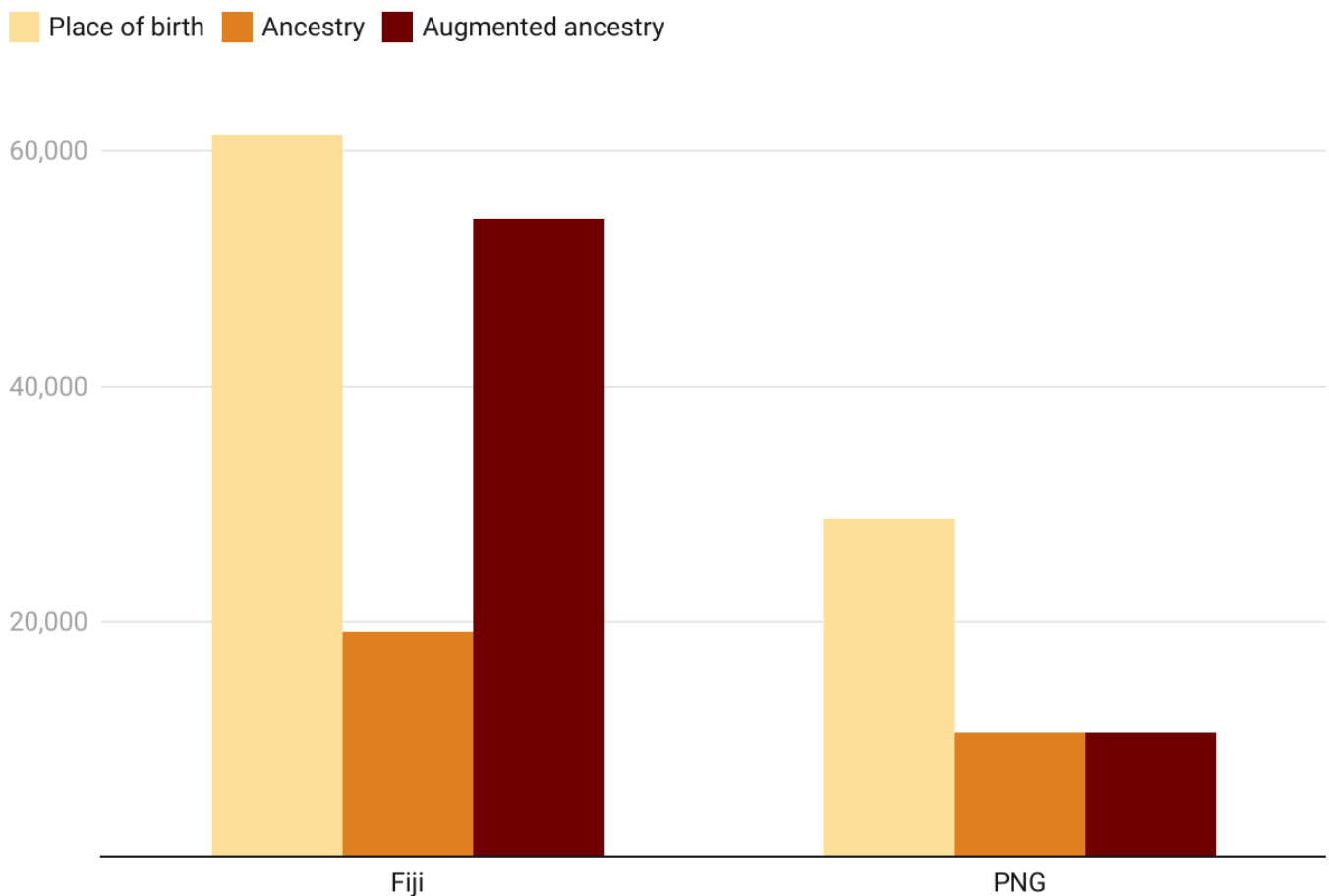
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The next graph zeroes in on the two countries where the three methods give the

biggest differences in results: Fiji and Papua New Guinea. For simplicity, we focus only on first-generation migrants. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [2016 census](#), there are 61,472 people born in Fiji living in Australia: 19,182 of these identify themselves as Fijian, and another 7,618 as Fijian Indian (after adjusting for those who identify themselves as both Fijian and Fijian Indian). But we estimate that 54,238 have Fijian heritage, almost twice as many. That difference is 27,438 of Indian and other South Asian heritages born in Fiji.

There are 28,803 people living in Australia born in PNG, but only 10,550 are of PNG ancestry, according to the ABS. The large gap between these two numbers is due to the large number of expatriates who have returned or migrated from PNG to Australia.

Figure 2: Fijians and Papua New Guineans born in country now living in Australia: estimates from three methods, 2016

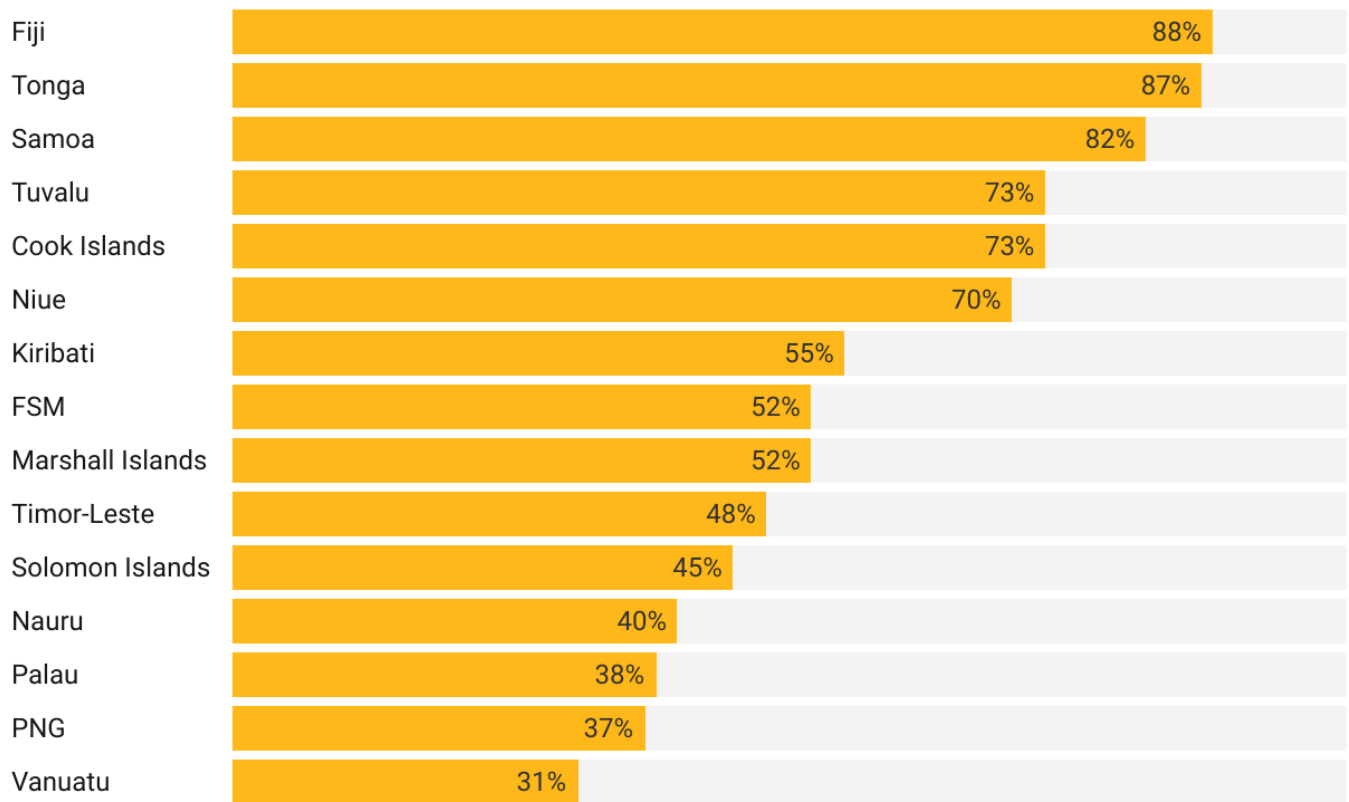


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There is in fact a large range in the share of migrants to Australia born in the Pacific with Pacific ancestry. At one extreme, 88% of migrants to Australia born in Fiji are (we estimate) of Fijian (including Indo-Fijian) heritage and 87% born in Tonga are Tongans. At the other, only 31% of migrants born in Vanuatu are ni-Vanuatu, and

37% of migrants born in PNG are Papua New Guinean.

Figure 3: Percentage of those born in the Pacific now living in Australia whose heritage and country of birth coincide, 2016



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The differences are systematic. The distinction between birthplace and ancestry is much more important for Melanesian countries than it is for Polynesian ones. High-migration countries such as Tonga, Samoa and Fiji have a high ratio of national to expatriate migrants to Australia, whereas low-migration countries such as Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu have a much lower ratio. There are 31,945 migrants in Australia who were born in PNG, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu, but only about 11,700 of these are of their country heritage. Looking at birthplace alone, we would say that there are more Papua New Guinean migrants than Samoans in Australia (28,803 v 24,016), but if we look only at those born in country with indigenous heritage that relationship is reversed (10,550 v 19,632).

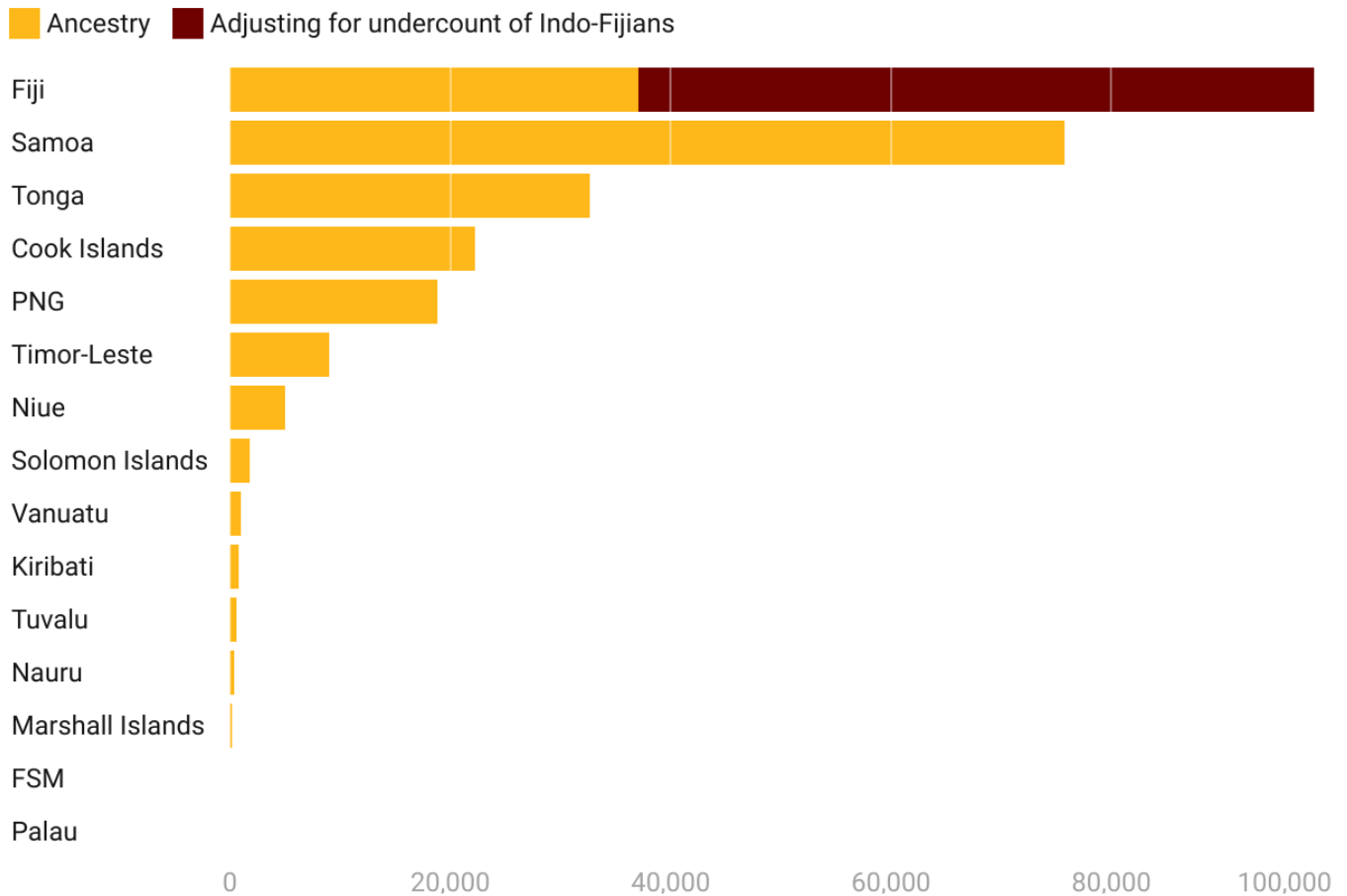
The reason for these massive differences is that the barriers that keep migration rates low from low-migration countries apply only to the nationals of those countries. Expatriates are a globalised community.

To return to the question with which we began, our answer is that in 2016 there were 261,762 people with heritage from one of the independent Pacific island countries living in Australia (after adjusting for the double-counting of people who

claim two Pacific ancestries).

Numbers by country are shown in the next graph. Once Indo-Fijians are added in, Fijians become the biggest group followed by Samoans.

Figure 4: Country of heritage for people with Pacific Island heritage living in Australia, 2016

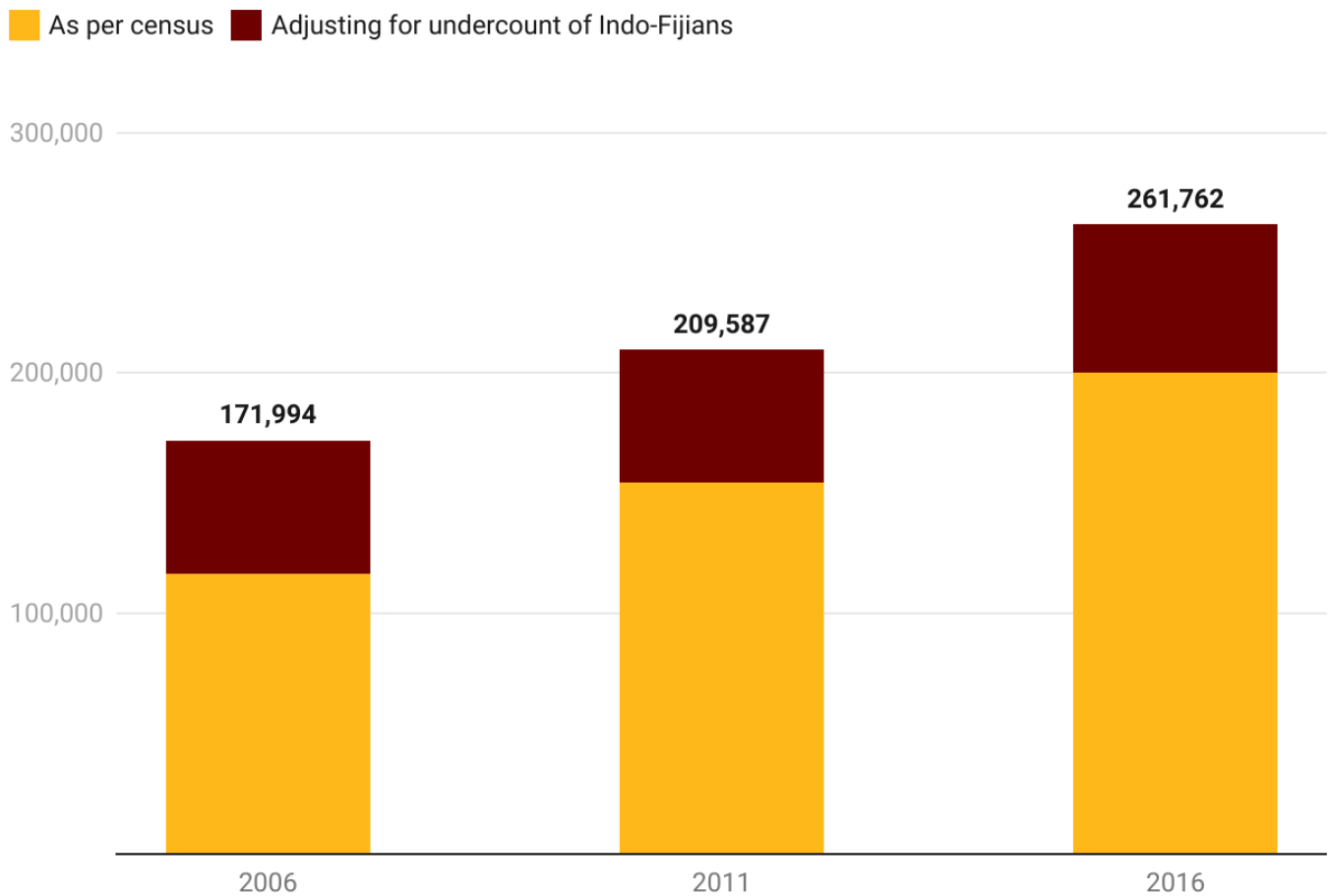


Note: By-country numbers do not apply double-counting adjustments, for example, a person claiming both Fijian and ni-Vanuatu ancestries is counted once against Fiji and again against Vanuatu.

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We have also used our “augmented ancestry” method for 2006 and 2011. The final graph presents totals for the Pacific, adjusting for double counting (2-4%), and showing the difference it makes to adjust for the undercounting. The annual average growth of people with Pacific heritage living in Australia is 4% from 2006 to 2011 and 4.5% from 2011 to 2016.

Figure 5: Number of people with Pacific Island heritage living in Australia, 2006 to 2016



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We look forward to the release of Australian 2021 census results to [update this analysis](#).

Note: Our methods and assumptions are detailed in the [data notes](#) and the data itself is available in this [excel spreadsheet](#). The blog and the relevant data was updated in December 2022 to correct minor calculation errors: for example, in 2016, the number with Pacific island heritage has changed from 262,057 to 261,762.

Footnote: Sir Paul Hasluck, Australia’s Minister for Territories from 1951 to 1963 writes in his book A time for building: Australian administration in Papua New Guinea 1951-1963: “As for the Chinese, I saw at once that the only way open was to give them full Australian citizenship, with the right of permanent residence in Australia and to give them every possible encouragement to all of them to identify themselves with Australians as part of a single immigrant community. These ideas were quite contrary to prevailing opinion in the Territory and in Australia at that time.” (p.31). Of the 18,253 expatriates born in PNG living in Australia in 2016, 7,384 claim Australian ancestry and 2,974 claim Chinese.

Disclosures:

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