
Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census



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Table of contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Approach for the 2021 Census	4
3. 2019 Census Test: Ethnic or cultural origins questions tested	5
4. 2019 Census Test: Summary of results	6
4.1 Data quality	6
4.2 Other considerations	7
4.3 Summary	8
5. Conclusion	8
Appendix 1 – 2019 Census Test questions on ethnic or cultural origins	10
Appendix 2 – 2021 Census linked list of examples of ethnic and cultural origins (preliminary)	11

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

1. Introduction

The census is the country's storyteller. Through good and difficult times, the census has been providing a detailed picture of Canada's changing mosaic—giving Canadians facts on where we came from, to where we are, and guiding decisions on where we want to be. To respond to the country's needs and write the next chapter of Canadians' data foundation, Statistics Canada conducted country-wide engagements. We also conducted a census test with over 135,000 households to determine whether new or revised questions under consideration can be easily understood and correctly answered. We listened to Canadians, because we know that this is about your census, your community, your future.

This series of technical reports provides an in-depth view of the changes in content for the 2021 Census of Population, as the census process is ever changing to reflect changes in the Canadian population and its demographic characteristics.

A question on ethnic or cultural origins has been included on the Canadian Census of Population since 1871. Furthermore, even before Confederation, a question on this topic was asked in censuses, reflecting a long-standing, continuing and widespread demand for information about the ethnic and cultural diversity of the population.

Today, this information is used to support the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as well as by governments, businesses, academics, researchers, and ethnic and cultural associations throughout the country.

Responses to the ethnic or cultural origins question on the census reflect respondents' perceptions of their background. As such, many factors can influence changes in responses over time, including the contemporary social environment, the respondent's knowledge of their family history, and their understanding of and views on the topic.

Over time, there have also been differences in the wording, format, examples and instructions of the ethnic origin question used in the census. As a result, the historical comparability of ethnic origin data has been affected by these factors, as well as by changes in data processing, proxy responses and the social environment at the time of the census.

2. Approach for the 2021 Census

The content of the 2021 Census questionnaire is the result of extensive engagement, discussions and testing, including comprehensive one-on-one interviews and a rigorous 2019 Census Test involving over 135,000 households across Canada.

After the 2016 Census, concerns were raised that changes to the list of examples of ethnic and cultural origins included as part of the question were affecting response patterns. Concerns were also raised about the wordiness of the question, which made it difficult for certain people to read and respond to the question.

To investigate the impact of examples on response patterns, Statistics Canada analyzed the 2016 Census data integrated with data from the 2011 National Household Survey and found evidence that the examples in the question itself have a significant prompt effect.¹ Specifically, respondents were more likely to report an origin when

1. Please refer to the [Technical report on changes in response related to the census ethnic origin question: Focus on Jewish origins, 2016 Census integrated with 2011 National Household Survey](#).

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

it was included in the list of examples and, conversely, less likely to report an origin if it was not included in the list. This analysis was supported by the results of the 2019 Census Test, which are described in the following sections.

To address the limitations of the question asked in 2016 and to better reflect Canada's growing diversity, examples will be removed from the 2021 Census questionnaire to eliminate their effect on responses.² In their place—and to help respondents better understand the question—a description of types of origins will be provided, along with a link to a list of over 500 examples of ethnic and cultural origins. This extensive list of examples will provide greater detail and diversity than what was disseminated in the past.

3. 2019 Census Test: Ethnic or cultural origins questions tested

The 2019 Census Test included three versions: a control version, which was identical to the 2016 Census question on ethnic or cultural origins, as well as two different test versions.³

The first test version, test version 1, included the following elements:

- There were no examples of ethnic or cultural origins in the question itself.
- Instead, the question included the following instruction: "Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, or origins that refer to different countries, or other origins that may not refer to different countries."
- Examples were replaced by a link to a page with an extensive list of examples of ethnic and cultural origins. Examples in this list were the result of stakeholder and expert engagement.

The second test version, test version 2, used the same approach as test version 1, but included 10 examples of different types of origins in the question itself (Indigenous origins, origins referring to countries, origins not referring to countries). The purpose of testing this version was to see whether including just a few examples of different types of origins would be enough to help respondents answer the question without introducing the same example-led prompt effect seen in the 2016 Census question, which included 28 examples.

Table 1

Summary of versions tested for the question on ethnic or cultural origins, 2019 Census Test

Version tested	Key features
Control (2016 version)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Same as the 2016 Census ethnic or cultural origins question• 28 examples listed directly on the questionnaire• Additional information included regarding why the question is asked
Test version 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No examples listed directly on the questionnaire• Description of different types of origins, with a link to an extensive list of origins
Test version 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Description of different types of origins, with 10 examples listed directly on the questionnaire• Link to an extensive list of origins

Source: Statistics Canada, 2019 Census Test.

2. For many respondents, ethnic or cultural origins are multidimensional and fluid. As a result, examples may have more of a prompt effect for this question than for other questions on the census.

3. See [Appendix 1](#) for the three versions of the question on ethnic or cultural origins tested in the 2019 Census Test.

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

4. 2019 Census Test: Summary of results⁴

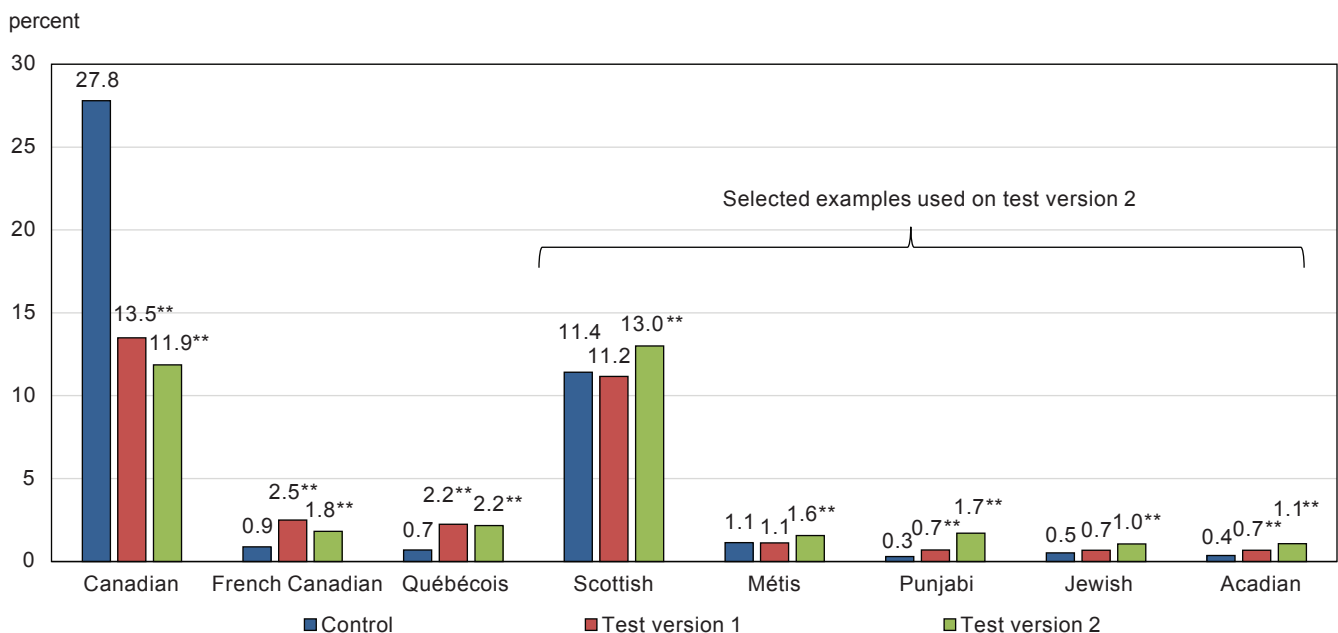
4.1 Data quality

As indicated, the results of the census test supported the findings of the recent technical report⁵ on changes in response patterns related to the ethnic or cultural origins question. In short, including examples of ethnic or cultural origins directly on the questionnaire prompts respondents to report the origins included among the examples rather than those that are not included.

Chart 1 presents the proportion of 2019 Census Test respondents who reported selected origins by version. In the chart, example-introduced response bias is evident in the response patterns for the origins included as examples directly on one or more of the question versions. The origin “Canadian,” which appeared as an example only on the control version, received—proportionately—more than twice as many responses for the control version than for either of the two test versions. Example-introduced bias was also seen for origins such as Punjabi, Jewish and Acadian, which were included as examples only on test version 2 and all had much higher counts for this version than for either the control version or test version 1.

Chart 1

Proportion of respondents reporting selected ethnic or cultural origins by version, 2019 Census Test



** significantly different from the control version ($p < 0.01$)

Source: Statistics Canada, 2019 Census Test.

The origin “Scottish” was included as an example on both the control version and test version 2, and there was evidence of higher example-introduced bias in test version 2, where Scottish was 1 of just 10 examples, rather than 1 of 28 examples. As a result, test version 2 should not be viewed as an acceptable middle ground between

4. Unless explicitly stated, the results analyzed in this report are based on responses to the electronic (internet) questionnaire and not the paper questionnaire. For the 2021 Census, roughly 75% of respondents are expected to self-enumerate using the electronic questionnaire.

5. Please refer to the [Technical report on changes in response related to the census ethnic origin question: Focus on Jewish origins, 2016 Census integrated with 2011 National Household Survey](#).

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

the control version, which included 28 examples, and test version 1, which had no examples. Instead, the 2019 Census Test showed evidence of even greater example-introduced bias for examples included in a shorter list than in a longer one. Therefore, in this regard, test version 2 had the lowest data quality of the three versions tested.

Test version 1 also yielded more varied and diverse responses. Almost 43% of respondents to test version 1 reported origins that were not among the 28 origins used as examples on the control version. In contrast, 34% of respondents in the control panel reported origins that were not among the 28 examples.

Table 2
Proportion of respondents reporting origins used as examples in the control version by version, 2019 Census Test

	Control version	Test version 1
	percent	
2019 Census Test respondents, by version		
% of respondents reporting origins used as examples in the control panel	79.1	68.7**
% of respondents reporting origins not used as examples in the control panel	34.0	42.8**
Total ¹	>100.0	>100.0

** significantly different from the control version ($p < 0.01$)

1. The proportions sum to greater than 100% because some respondents reported multiple origins, some of which were used as examples in the control panel and some of which were not.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2019 Census Test.

This diversity in response patterns is also seen in the reporting of different categories of origins—Indigenous origins (e.g., Cree, Inuit), origins referring to countries (e.g., Canadian, Chinese) and other origins that may not refer to countries (e.g., Acadian, Jewish). For the control version, almost 90% of respondents reported country-based origins, compared with under 80% for test version 1. This is understandable, as many of the origins used as examples for the control version refer to countries.

In contrast, for test version 1, a higher percentage of respondents (20.7%) reported other (non-country) origins. For the control version, 10.6% of respondents reported other (non-country) origins.

Table 3
Proportion of respondents reporting different types of ethnic or cultural origins by version, 2019 Census Test

	Control version	Test version 1
	percent	
2019 Census Test respondents, by version		
% of respondents reporting Indigenous origins	5.8	4.7**
% of respondents reporting country-based origins	89.5	79.4**
% of respondents reporting other origins	10.6	20.7**
Total ¹	>100.0	>100.0

** significantly different from the control version ($p < 0.01$)

1. The proportions sum to greater than 100% because some respondents reported multiple origins, some of which were combinations of Indigenous, country-based and other origins.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2019 Census Test.

4.2 Other considerations

Without examples directly on the questionnaire, the ethnic or cultural origins question is for many respondents more difficult to respond to. Based on the results of the 2019 Census Test, this was evident both in the amount of time it took respondents to complete different versions of the question and in the non-response rates for the different versions of the question.

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Compared with the control version, both test versions of the question took longer for respondents to complete for their households. This was largely a result of the extra time that respondents spent on the linked list of examples. Without examples directly on the questionnaire, more respondents accessed the linked list of examples, and reviewing the extensive list of examples resulted in longer time needed to respond to the question.

As well, the test versions had higher non-response rates than the control version (control: 2.8%, test version 1: 4.8%, test version 2: 4.1%). Again, this is understandable—having examples directly on the questionnaire helps respondents answer the question, albeit by prompting them to report one or more of the origins used as examples on the questionnaire. Without examples on the questionnaire, more respondents have difficulty answering the question, resulting in higher non-response.

4.3 Summary

In the 2019 Census Test, test version 1 of the ethnic or cultural origins question exhibited the highest data quality of the three versions tested—it was the version that largely mitigated the data quality issue of example-introduced response bias. It was also a more challenging version of the question for many respondents to respond to, as evident in the longer average time it took for respondents to answer the question, and in the higher non-response rate.

However, improving the data quality of the question by removing example-introduced response bias is of primary importance, and for this reason, test version 1 of the ethnic or cultural origins question will be used for the 2021 Census. This revised version of the ethnic or cultural origins question also yielded more varied and diverse responses. More respondents reported origins that were not on the list of examples on the 2016 questionnaire, and more respondents reported origins that were not associated with countries.

5. Conclusion

The 2021 Census question on ethnic or cultural origins has been revised since the 2016 Census and now includes the following elements:

- There are no examples of ethnic or cultural origins listed in the question itself.
- There is a description of different types of origins, specifically: “Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, or origins that refer to different countries, or other origins that may not refer to different countries.”
- There is a link to a page with over 500 different examples of ethnic and cultural origins.⁶

The revised question addresses concerns regarding the impact the list of examples on the questionnaire was having on response patterns. The question allows respondents to report their origins without the influence of examples listed on the questionnaire, resulting in better-quality data that are more representative of the population.

However, the new version of the question for the 2021 Census will produce results that will not be comparable to the 2016 Census results for many ethnic and cultural origins. The origins that will be particularly affected are those that were among the 28 examples listed directly on the 2016 Census questionnaire (e.g., Canadian). For the 2021 Census, these origins will be included as part of the much more extensive list of examples of ethnic and cultural origins, mitigating the prompt effect they have had in the past.

It should be noted that the results on ethnic or cultural origins have not been fully comparable between censuses in the past either, in part because of changes to the list of examples over time.⁷ After the examples are removed

6. [Appendix 2](#) includes a preliminary version of the examples of ethnic and cultural origins to which the questionnaire will link.

7. Please refer to the [Technical report on changes in response related to the census ethnic origin question: Focus on Jewish origins, 2016 Census integrated with 2011 National Household Survey](#).

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

from the questionnaire, results will no longer be affected by this factor, and this will help improve historical comparability moving forward.

The approach for the 2021 Census will yield more varied and diverse responses than in past censuses. To better reflect the range of responses received, a greater number of origins will be disseminated for the 2021 Census.

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Appendix 1 – 2019 Census Test questions on ethnic or cultural origins

Control version (2016 Census)

What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's **ancestors**?

An ancestor is usually more distant than a grandparent.

For example, Canadian, Chinese, English, East Indian, French, Italian, Filipino, German, Cree, Mi'kmaq, Salish, Métis, Inuit, Scottish, Irish, Dutch, Ukrainian, Portuguese, Polish, Korean, Iranian, Vietnamese, Jamaican, Pakistani, Lebanese, Colombian, Mexican, Somali, etc.

This question collects information on the ancestral origins of the population and provides information about the composition of Canada's diverse population.

Specify as many origins as applicable.

Test version 1 (selected for the 2021 Census)

What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's **ancestors**?

Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, or origins that refer to different countries, or other origins that may not refer to different countries.

For examples, refer to this [list of ethnic or cultural origins](#).

Specify as many origins as applicable.

Test version 2

What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's **ancestors**?

Ancestors may have Indigenous origins (e.g., Cree, Métis, Inuit), or origins that refer to different countries (e.g., Scottish, Chinese, Jamaican, Moroccan) or other origins that may not refer to different countries (e.g., Jewish, Acadian, Punjabi).

For additional examples, refer to this [list of ethnic or cultural origins](#).

Specify as many origins as applicable.

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Appendix 2 – 2021 Census linked list of examples of ethnic and cultural origins (preliminary)

Examples of ethnic or cultural origins include (but are not limited to) the following:¹

Indigenous origins	Origins referring to countries ²	Other ethnic or cultural origins
Abenaki	Afghan	Acadian
Ahousaht	Albanian	Afar
Algonquin	Algerian	African
Anishinaabe	American	African American
Apache	Angolan	African Canadian
Assiniboine	Anguillan	African Caribbean
Atikamekw	Antiguan	African Nova Scotian
Beaver (Dunne-za)	Argentinian	Afrikaner
Blackfoot	Armenian	Akan
Blood (Kainai)	Aruban	Albertan
Carrier (Dakelh)	Australian	Alsatian
Cayuga	Austrian	Amhara
Chemainus (Stz'uminus)	Azerbaijani	Amish
Cherokee	Azorean	Anglo-Indian
Cheyenne	Bahamian	Arab
Chilcotin (Tsilhqot'in)	Bahraini	Arawak
Chipewyan (Denesuline)	Bangladeshi	Ashanti
Choctaw	Barbadian	Asian
Coast Salish	Belgian	Assyrian
Cowichan	Belizean	Baloch
Cree	Beninese	Bambara
Crow	Bermudian	Bamileke
Dakota	Bhutanese	Bantu
Delaware (Lenape)	Bolivian	Baoulé
Dene	Bosnian	Bashkir
Dene Tha' (Slavey)	Brazilian	Basque
Ditidaht	Bruneian	Batswana
Dzawada'enuxw	Bulgarian	Bavarian
Ehattesaht	Burkinabe	Bengali
First Nations	Burmese	Berber
Gitxsan	Burundian	Black
Gwa'sala	Byelorussian	Bohemian
Gwich'in	Cambodian	Bosniak
Haida	Cameroonian	Breton
Haisla	Canadian	British
Halalt	Cape Verdean	British Columbian
Hän (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in)	Caymanian	Buddhist
Heiltsuk	Central African	Cape Bretoner
Hesquiaht	Chadian	Carib

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Examples of ethnic or cultural origins include (but are not limited to) the following:¹

Indigenous origins	Origins referring to countries ²	Other ethnic or cultural origins
Homalco	Chilean	Caribbean
Huron (Wendat)	Chinese	Catalan
Huu-ay-aht	Colombian	Caucasian (White)
Innu	Comorian	Celtic
Interior Salish	Congolese	Central African
Inuit	Costa Rican	Central American
Inuvialuit	Croatian	Central American Indian (Indigenous)
Iroquois (Haudenosaunee)	Cuban	Central Asian
Kaska	Cypriot	Chaldean
K'omoks	Czech	Channel Islander
Ktunaxa (Kutenai)	Danish	Chechen
Kwakiutl	Djiboutian	Chin
Kwakwaka'wakw	Dominica Islander	Christian
Kyuquot/Cheklesah	Dominican	Circassian
Laich-kwil-tach	Dutch	Coptic
Lakota	Ecuadorian	Cornish
Lekwungen	Egyptian	Corsican
Malahat	English	Creole
Maliseet	Eritrean	Czechoslovakian
Mamalilikulla	Estonian	Dinka
Métis	Ethiopian	Doukhorbor
Mi'kmaq	Faroese	East African
Mohawk	Fijian	East Asian
Montagnais	Filipino	Eastern European
Moose Cree	Finnish	Edo
Mowachaht/Muchalaht	French	Esan
Musqueam	Gabonese	Eurasian
Nakwaxda'xw	Gambian	European
'Namgis	Georgian	Ewe
Naskapi	German	Fante
Navajo	Ghanaian	Flemish
Nez Perce	Gibraltar	Franco Ontarian
Nisga'a	Greek	French Canadian
Nlaka'pamux (Thompson)	Greenlandic	Frisian
Nuchatlaht	Grenadian	Fulani
Nuu-chah-nulth	Guadeloupean	Ga-Adangbe
Nuxalk	Guatemalan	Galician
Odawa	Guinean	Gaspesian
Ojibway	Guyanese	Goan
Oji-Cree	Haitian	Greek Cypriot
Okanagan (Syilx)	Honduran	Gujarati
Oneida	Hong Konger	Harari

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Examples of ethnic or cultural origins include (but are not limited to) the following:¹

Indigenous origins	Origins referring to countries ²	Other ethnic or cultural origins
Onondaga	Hungarian	Hausa
Passamaquoddy	Icelandic	Hawaiian
Penelakut	Indian (India)	Hazara
Piikani	Indonesian	Hindu
Plains Cree	Iranian	Hispanic
Potawatomi	Iraqi	Hmong
Qalipu Mi'kmaq	Irish	Huguenot
Quatsino	Israeli	Hutterite
Sahtú (North Slavey)	Italian	Hutu
Salish	Ivorian	Igbo
Saulteaux	Jamaican	Igorot
Secwepemc (Shuswap)	Japanese	Ilocano
Seneca	Jordanian	Indo-Caribbean
Shawnee	Kazakh	Indo-Fijian
Shishalh (Sechelt)	Kenyan	Indo-Guyanese
Siksika	Kittitian/Nevisian	Jatt
Sioux	Korean	Javanese
Snuneymuxw	Kosovar	Jewish
Squamish	Kuwaiti	Kabyle
St'at'imc (Lillooet)	Kyrgyz	Karen
Stó:lō	Laotian	Kashmiri
Stoney (Nakoda)	Latvian	Kashubian
Swampy Cree	Lebanese	Khmer
Tagish	Liberian	Kikuyu
Tahltan	Libyan	Kurdish
Tla'amin (Sliammon)	Liechtensteiner	Latin American
Tla-o-qui-aht	Lithuanian	Luba
Tlatlasikwala	Luxembourger	Luo
Tliche (Dogrib)	Macedonian	Maghrebi
Tlingit	Malagasy	Maharashtrian
Tlowitsis	Malawian	Malay
Tsek'ene (Sekani)	Malaysian	Malayali
Tseshaht	Malian	Malinké
Tsimshian	Maltese	Manitoban
T'Sou-ke	Manx	Maori
Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee)	Martinican	Mapuche
Tuscarora	Mauritanian	Maroon
Tutchone	Mauritian	Mayan
Ucluelet	Mexican	Mennonite
Wet'suwet'en	Moldovan	Middle Eastern
Woodland Cree	Mongolian	Moravian
WSÁNEĆ (Saanich)	Montenegrin	Mossi

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Examples of ethnic or cultural origins include (but are not limited to) the following:¹

Indigenous origins	Origins referring to countries ²	Other ethnic or cultural origins
Wuikinuxv	Montserratan	Muslim
	Moroccan	Ndebele
	Mozambican	New Brunswicker
	Namibian	Newfoundlander
	Nepali	Norman
	New Zealander	North African
	Nicaraguan	North American
	Nigerian	Northern European
	Nigerien	Nova Scotian
	Northern Irish	Nubian
	Norwegian	Oceanian
	Omani	Ontarian
	Pakistani	Orcadian
	Palestinian	Oromo
	Panamanian	Pacific Islander
	Papua New Guinean	Pashtun
	Paraguayan	Pennsylvania Dutch
	Peruvian	Persian
	Polish	Pipil
	Portuguese	Polynesian
	Puerto Rican	Prince Edward Islander
	Réunionnais	Punjabi
	Romanian	Québécois
	Russian	Quechua
	Rwandan	Rohingya
	Saint Helenian	Roma
	Salvadorean	Ruthenian
	Samoan	Sami
	Saudi Arabian	Saskatchewanian
	Scottish	Scandinavian
	Senegalese	Serer
	Serbian	Shona
	Seychellois	Sicilian
	Sierra Leonean	Sikh
	Singaporean	Sindhi
	Slovak	Sinhalese
	Slovenian	Slavic
	Somali	Soninke
	South African	South American
	South Sudanese	South American Indian (Indigenous)
	Spanish	South Asian
	Sri Lankan	Southeast Asian

Ethnic or cultural origins: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census

Examples of ethnic or cultural origins include (but are not limited to) the following:¹

Indigenous origins	Origins referring to countries ²	Other ethnic or cultural origins
	St. Lucian	Southeast European
	Sudanese	Southern European
	Surinamese	Swahili
	Swazi	Tamil
	Swedish	Tatar
	Swiss	Telugu
	Syrian	Tibetan
	Tahitian	Tigrian
	Taiwanese	Transylvanian
	Tajik	Tswana
	Tanzanian	Turkish Cypriot
	Thai	Tutsi
	Togolese	Ulster Scot
	Tongan	United Empire Loyalist
	Trinidadian/Tobagonian	Uyghur
	Tunisian	Walloon
	Turkish	West African
	Turkmen	West Asian
	Ugandan	West Indian
	Ukrainian	Western European
	Uruguayan	Wolof
	Uzbek	Xhosa
	Venezuelan	Yazidi
	Vietnamese	Yoruba
	Vincentian	Yugoslavian
	Welsh	Zoroastrian
	Yemeni	Zulu
	Zambian	
	Zimbabwean	

1. The examples in the list have been chosen based on their frequency of response to the previous census. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all possible origins, and respondents may report origins that are not on the list.

2. The list of country-based origins is based on the countries and areas of interest listed in the [Standard Classification of Countries and Areas of Interest \(SCCAI\) 2018](#). Origins corresponding to the countries of the United Kingdom (English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish) are also included.