

Triennial Assembly: Proposed Contribution to the Topic: Population Statistics

Discussion Topic: Census Future

Themes: Innovation, Regional and Local, Data linkage and integration

Introduction:

It has been suggested that the increasing use of administrative data may provide much of the data we normally associate with a census and that, as a result, there may be no requirement for a Census in 2031 or that the requirement will be severely limited. There are many users who are seriously concerned by this possibility and, since the Assembly will only be every three years, there will only be one other opportunity for it to review the subject prior to the 2031 census. We therefore consider it very important that the Census should be an agenda item for the 22nd - an opinion endorsed by the survey result that Population Statistics are the single most important Topic to be discussed at the Assembly. We therefore believe this should be a plenary item.

The discussion will present User concerns with proposed future Census approaches, the reasons for those concerns, and how Users could work with ONS to address potential issues

Suggested briefing material (ie pre-reading):

All trial work undertaken for the Census and report of the results and decisions

The OSR's reviews of the Census.

Documents concerning the controversy on Gender.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Methodology – the possible replacement of Survey Methodology with Administrative data – how good is the local administrative data available – would it need to be improved in the interim?
 - a. Is there variation in quality of Admin data by country, or local area?
 - b. What variables would be included and which would be lost. What new variables would be gained?
 - c. How frequently would the Census be updated?
2. Value for money – What is the Value (to the economy) of an accurate census?
3. Need for transparency, genuine discussion and debate – in costs, process and accuracy.
4. How would users like to be consulted/communicated with?
5. Modelling of data vs survey data – how can this be made more transparent? Be reviewed for quality / flaws (eg experience with Coventry mid-census estimates).

Conclusions would identify genuine User concerns, the issues where User consultation would be useful, Identification of a Possible User group going forward.

Proposed Facilitator/ Speakers could include:

Dr. Emma White, Director of Information Governance and Data Protection Officer at City University of London and member MRS Census Committee. Professor Tony Champion, Newcastle University, Merle Gering, CPRE; Plus ONS Census persons.

Proposed mode: *presentation from ONS, presentations from one or 2 key users. We also suggest pre-identifying some topics for breakout groups to discuss key issues*

Selected comments from Better Statistics Survey Respondents

Need to ensure that accurate, detailed and spatially disaggregated data on the structure of the population is collected regularly. The Census remains the best source of such data (despite the problems with the 2021/22 Census) and the combination of survey and administrative sources is not proven to provide an adequate replacement. The Census could be collected more frequently than every ten years, but even so, there is a need to ensure that mid-year estimates are as reliable as possible. Age/sex breakdowns are no longer adequate - to support equality aims and monitor health etc., other breakdowns of the population must be created, for the most detailed geographic breakdown possible. Administrative systems need to improve the way they collect demographic data if these are used to provide regular information.

To put all the basics of all political and economic statistics in context.

We do not know enough about the number, type or location of people living in this country. All else feeds off these numbers. Solve this dataset and many problems with survey quality and response rate, and admin data, will be largely resolved.

We need a much more accurate idea of the population, changes in it, and the split between births and deaths and inward and outward migration. With migration figures, useful to know source and destination countries. Useful to know ages (to what extent is inward migration, in particular, people of working age vs dependents).

Whether the 2031, and if not the 2041, Census would be replaced by an "administration data" census. If so, what data might not be available? Examples include data on households as opposed to addresses and people by religion for small areas.

Businesses such as research and Media Audience Measurement need 'universal source of truth' in population to enable representative samples of media universes.