



TOM CALVER | ANALYSIS

## Can we trust what the census says?

Crucial policy decisions are based on its data, but it's only as accurate as the people filling it in: us

Tom Calver, Data Editor

Sunday December 04 2022, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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**W**hen the 2011 census said just 9,000 people lived in Whitechapel, east London, Dr Shlomit Flint Ashery refused to believe it.

Armed with a clipboard and a grasp of Arabic and Bengali, the researcher at Bar Ilan University, Israel, conducted her own door-to-door survey of the ethnically diverse area. She befriended religious leaders in mosques and mothers in local parks. After weeks of work she had recorded the names of 13,000 individuals - 4,000 more than the census thought.

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people from other cultures.” Specifically, in Whitechapel, it was not very good at counting households that contained multiple generations, or multiple families - especially among tight-knit migrant communities where distrust of the authorities is high.



Unlike the biblical iteration that required Joseph of Nazareth to return to his hometown, the modern census is a “snapshot” of the day it is filled in  
ALAMY

The census is hailed as the gold standard: the Office for National Statistics (ONS) invests millions in ensuring it is done correctly. Filling it in is mandatory — those who didn’t in 2021 faced a £1,000 fine — and last time 89 per cent did so online. In Scotland, a dismal response rate of 79 per cent has forced an inquiry. Everything from homes, healthcare, schools and even sewer capacity is planned from the information it collects. Can we trust it?

In 1911 the suffragette Emily Davison, later killed by the King’s horse at Epsom, was found “hiding in the crypt of Westminster Hall” by census officials. This was recorded as her address.

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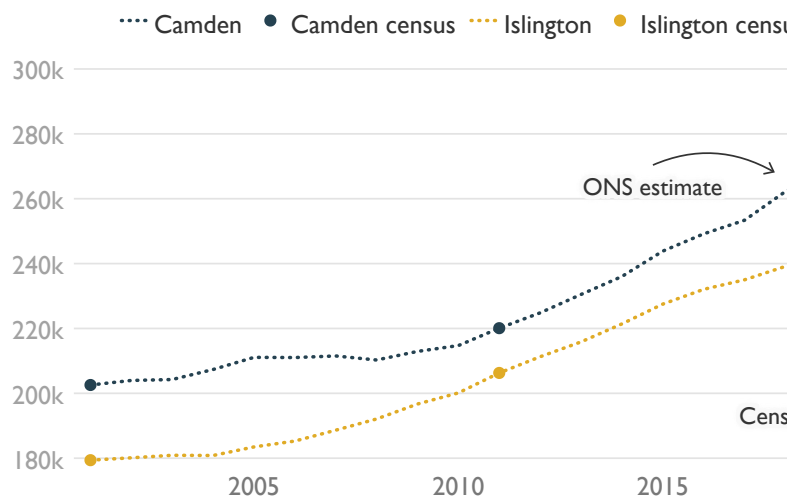
Here lies a limitation of the modern census: unlike the biblical iteration that required Joseph of Nazareth to return to his hometown, it is a “snapshot” of the population of where they are on the day it is filled in.

The latest census was conducted in early 2021. Britain was in lockdown, so many of us were not where we usually live. Students who had gone home for Christmas did not immediately return to university; families may have gone to live with grandparents or in second homes.

Officials believe this made the population of some London boroughs seem much less than it usually is. Camden’s population — which the ONS previously thought was rising — nominally shrank by 10,000 over ten years to 210,000. Councillors, fearing the borough could suffer a reduction in government funding as a result, have joined a campaign to find the city’s “lost Londoners”.

## Missing people

Mid-year population estimates. The 2021 census suggested Camden had 70,000 fewer people than expected



billions of pounds for frontline services are at stake, and our residents will be the ones who suffer,” the Camden council leader Georgia Gould said in the summer.

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Perhaps a greater problem is that the census is simply not very good at reaching certain communities. Some 97 per cent of households responded to the census, according to the ONS, up from 94 per cent a decade earlier: Professor Tony Champion, emeritus professor of population geography at Newcastle University, points out that the fact it happened “when most people were bored out of their minds and had plenty of time to complete the form” may have helped.

There are other reasons to treat census figures with a pinch of salt, as another population-wide programme conducted at the same time shows. Some 6.1 million people in their sixties had received a first vaccine dose by the end of 2021 — around 1 per cent more than the total number of sixty-somethings recorded in the census.



Wales as 59,597,300  
MATT ALEXANDER/PA

Comprehension has mercifully improved since the first census forms were handed out 200 years ago. When asked of his “relationship” to the head of the household, one Victorian agricultural labourer, living in a shed at the bottom of a farmer’s garden, replied “friendly”. Yet even now that most of us can read, some of the categories remain ambiguous. If you are not one of Britain’s two million churchgoers but enjoy some fruits of the Christian tradition, do you mark your religion as Christian? Even ethnicity is, apparently, not that objective. “I changed my ethnicity between 2011 and 2021,” says Professor Edward Higgs, a leading census historian: “I put white Irish this time.”

Censuses are good at tracking change — but not if you change the questions. For last year’s census, the ONS moved “British” to the top of the census form, where “English” had been a decade before.

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This was, it says, to make it easier to answer the question — yet in a striking example of “question-order bias”, the number of people identifying as “English” fell from 58 per cent, to 15 per cent. Some of that fall may be a genuine collapse in “English” identity, but we have no way of knowing.

Question order bias

Proportion of people in England and Wales by how they identify in the 2011 and 2021 censuses. "British" was moved to the top of the form last year

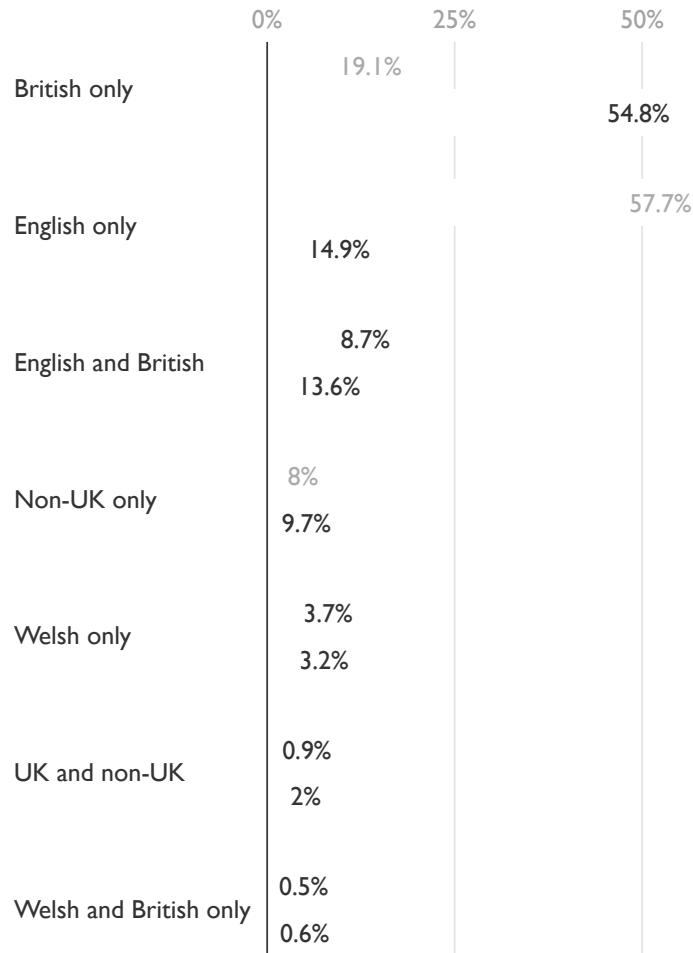


Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: ONS

Does any of this matter? It very much can do. For years, the ONS forecast that Coventry’s population would rise by 32 per cent between 2011 and 2031 – twice as fast as Birmingham’s. Yet on closer inspection, it emerged that these projections expected most of the city’s substantial student population to stay in Coventry after graduating (most do not). Thousands of homes for these graduate ghosts that were set to be built – some on greenbelt land – were not really needed.

There is a solution to these census imperfections. Countries like Norway have a joined-up “population register”, where data on

and the ONS is set to decide next year whether it can adopt a similar approach here.

This most recent census may well end up being the “best and highest quality” so far, according to Champion. Yet as long as it is filled in manually, it can only ever be as accurate as the people filling it in.

[@TomHCalver](#)

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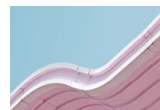
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**Noam Flint Ashery**



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**Mr William Hill**



6 HOURS AGO

The Establishment does not want to do the census properly as they do not want the people to hear what that might say.

Imagine fully establishing the number of illegals in the UK unknown to the Government, and how they are living outside the system. Imagine fully defining the circumstances of our citizens and the lack of housing/overcrowding. This is what the Whitechapel example represents.

As it is, with reports that race and ethnic origin are to be excluded in future as they are too controversial, the whole exercise is increasingly pointless

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**Freespirit**



11 MINUTES AGO

I think you have highlighted the problem. The Establishment has lost control, not gained it. As the voters have realised the establishment cannot cope. Leaders have always made monumental mistakes. Yet in the modern technological world, there is nowhere for them to hide. Identity Cards, which the public want, will frighten them even more. Politics is behind the curve, the people have moved on and want more information on how we are run. Parliament is based on telling us, not co-operating. A new form of politics is needed. By removing race and ethnicity, they are hoping no questions will be asked. It should be on the censuses, not hidden. Another reason this country will not issue identity cards. In European countries they have no issue with them! I wonder if this is why Britain now wants to opt out of so many of the rights we use to have.

*(Edited)*





1 HOUR AGO

Why would the population of Tower Hamlets distrust the authorities?

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**Catface**



3 HOURS AGO

I trust nothing in the census or from any other government body for that matter. I certainly don't trust anything in the media.

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**Joss Bolton**



34 MINUTES AGO

That is a whole lot of lack of trust. Try trusting many public bodies to get it wrong; that way you can describe yourself as an optimistic cynic.

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**Adrian Levine**



4 HOURS AGO

To me a joined up approach- like the Norwegian way is logical. But it needs multiple data sets which look a very different things e.g. vaccination data and bank account data so as not to reinforce confirmation bias.

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**Cliff Buffham**



25 MINUTES AGO

The Scottish census cannot even record the sex of its inhabitants correctly.

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**TECHNOPHOBEBLONDE**



4 MINUTES AGO

And that really is an issue. If you don't know how many women and men you have in your population how can health care be properly planned?

Official population figures are a complete and utter joke. There are way more people here than they would have you believe and that is one of the reasons why everything is falling to bits ...

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**SH**

23 MINUTES AGO

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The Census methodology and its advantages and disadvantages are made transparent by ONS. Decision makers use data, including the census, to mitigate the risk of making the wrong decision and therefore don't look at the numbers alone. They consider the source and its relevance to their issue. Indeed vaccinations were available to people who ONS never needed to count according to their definition of the usual resident population. It would have been suspicious if those numbers matched and health officials took that into account, clearly. Linking up datasets will come with different issues, including but not only, privacy. The only real alternative, if we think we need one, is a population register.

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**Catface**

12 MINUTES AGO

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ONS staff are undoubtedly carrying out their duties diligently, it's how that data is interpreted and presented that people doubt. For instance, why the delay on reporting just this part of the census?

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**Elfi Das**

7 MINUTES AGO

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Bring in ID cards and make everyone register locally and this each time they move. Unfortunately the UK does not seem to have the money to implement this. But in the long term it would save them a lot and, we would know exactly who and how many live on our island.

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**Freespirit**

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# Comment

then easily cross referenced in a database. Other sophisticated country's have them. The voters have a right to know the demographic make up of this country. So do Historian and Genealogist.

*(Edited)*

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