

# **Assessing the Impact of Changes to the Census of Population on Human Geography**

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## **Introduction**

Government proposals to discontinue the England and Wales Census of Population in its current form will impact both research and policy users. The spatial dimension of the census is vital for human geography. So what effect do human geographers think discontinuation of the census will have on their subject area? This article, which reports findings from a survey of academic geographers on this topic<sup>1</sup>, reveals considerable and very widespread opposition to the Government's proposals

## **Sampling and response**

The target sample, specialists in human geography at universities in England and Wales, was compiled using the UCAS website to identify BA Geography courses and then individual university websites to identify potential participants. An email was sent to 284 academics in 30 geography departments inviting participation in the online survey via a web-link. Eighty people completed the on-line questionnaires (a response rate of 28 per cent) There was a good geographic spread of respondents, as shown in Figure 1. As 98% of respondents reported that they were human geographers, the sampling method appears to have been successful. Respondents were relatively experienced: 68% had 11-20 years experience as academic human geographers; a

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<sup>1</sup> This survey was conducted as part of the requirements for a BA in Geography at Northumbria University. Dr Jon Swords provided guidance and support in undertaking and completing this research.

further fifth had more than 20 years experience. All respondents were currently engaged in research and the full range of specialisms within human geography were reflected, as shown in Table 1.

**Figure 1: Geographical distribution of academic respondents**



**Table 1: Geography specialisms identified by academics**

<b>Geography Specialism</b>	
Urban/Rural	26%
Cultural	25%
Economic	23%
Social	23%
Historical	15%
Population	12%
Political	11%
Developmental	9%

Base for percentages: All 80 academics

Half of the respondents spent at least 50% of their time on research and a further 10 per cent spent three quarters or more of their time on research. On the other hand, and perhaps surprisingly given that these geographers had chosen to respond to a survey about the census, 82 per cent of respondents said that their approach to human geography was ‘mainly qualitative’.

### **Impact on human geography**

Despite their qualitative orientation, almost half of respondents (45%) had used census data as part of their research and 59% intended to use census data at some point in the future. The great majority (77%) were content with the 10-year interval between censuses, while 17% wanted a more frequent census. Academics were, however, unanimous in the view that the census was worthwhile and almost as many (96%) said human geography would miss the census if it was discontinued.



‘...(the census) allows geography to ‘speak back’ to current political debates..’

‘...(the census is) crucial for understanding, planning for and be(ing) representative of in policy, the UK population and its characteristics...’

Related to this, respondents highlighted the reliability and consistency of census data over time, meaning that gradually changing social or economic phenomena can be reliably mapped. For example:

‘...(it is) a crucial source of information on social change...’

‘...(it allows) policy-makers to monitor employment change, immigration and related Processes...’

‘(without the census) longitudinal comparisons (...) would be lost.’

‘...(it gives) the possibility of comparing (at very local levels) across many decades.’

Academics were particularly vocal about the availability of census data at a range of scales for analysis of the spatial aspects of change:

‘... scale is vital for comprehending trends and relationships.’

‘...it remains our best source of small area data...(...)...without census 2021 we would not be able to confidently know how many people even lived in areas within local authorities...’

‘(without the census) a great deal of research on spatial patterns of population and social phenomena would be scuppered.’

‘(Census data)... is available for a variety of spatial scales, a feature that most other data sources don’t possess. ‘

‘No other source provides reliable sub-district level (data) on dimensions of socio-demographic difference and for rarer populations (e.g. smaller ethnic minorities), no other source even provides reliable sub-regional estimates.’

‘..it is the only source hat can provide robust data on a wide range of personal characteristics at very local levels (and individual level in SARs and Longitudinal Studies)...’

The use of the census to guide the allocation of resources between central and local government and between local policy priorities is also highlighted:

‘...It is an essential planning and governance tool for financial allocation and electoral boundary determination.’

Aside from the substantive census data, academics point to its important role in validating other research:

‘..In addition to census research...(the census) is important in...provid(ing)... background and context to case study areas that are the subject of other research.’

‘For some (the census) acts as a principal data source, whilst for others using other data sources it is a valuable way of checking the representativeness of research.’

This group of human geographers had very little appetite for constructing an alternative to the census from existing online sources (with just 14% believing this was feasible). Commercial data sources are seen as being created via ‘different agendas and biases’, are ‘not collected on the same basis’, ‘may be collected without people’s consent’, may have ‘a lack of consistency in boundaries and spatial coding’, which would avoid information ‘which might be critical of vested interests’ and may mean that access to the information is restricted.

There were a few more positive comments about possible change. but these tended to be qualified in some way (see added emphasis):

‘It is undoubtedly technically possible to produce acceptable population estimates from other administrative data sources, *but* very much harder to produce the detailed social geographies that the census provides.’

‘Alternatives to the census are probably viable in the longer term...(...)... *but* they are not going to be in place by 2021.’

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that academic human geographers value the census highly. They feel that their research, their discipline and the policy work that

is based on geographic research would suffer if the census was discontinued or fundamentally changed. While this study focused only on human geographers, the issues raised are of relevance to other groups of social scientists. It remains to be seen, however, whether these concerns will be sufficient to prevent the discontinuation of the census.

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