

Improved population statistics?

Radical Statistics reporter

This is a short story of low confidence in population statistics, and improvements that are paradoxically likely to lower that confidence further. It is a story of running faster but falling behind, and a story of local authority researchers feeling the budget pinch.

The story can begin in 1991, when the census fell short by a million people of what was thought to be the true population estimated from the births, deaths and migration since the previous census. It was felt the fault lay with the Census missing too many people. By 2001, procedures were in place for a massive and largely successful survey after the census to check on the number and types of people who had been missed. When the census plus the survey estimate of people missed gave a figure that again fell a million people short of what had been thought to be the true population, the Census was this time believed.¹

Since 2001 there has first been a big effort to get a best estimate of the population in 2001 based on the Census – which was revised finally in September 2004. This has been followed by another big effort, to improve the estimates of population change since the census – focused on improving estimates of international migration *and* of internal migration within the UK. The aim is to have closer agreement between the 2011 Census population and the population rolled forward from 2001 using these estimates of migration in the intervening years. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) hopes in these ways to rebuild trust in its population statistics which is felt to be needed after the discrepancies at the time of the past two censuses.

Between December 2009 and February 2010 ONS has consulted widely on a series of improvements to 2008 population estimates, which will update the estimates of migration in each year since 2001. There are two major changes. The distribution of international migration between local authorities will use health service patient records and National Insurance Number registrations. Estimates of migration of when students start and end their studies will use records from the Higher Education Statistics Authority.²

These are generally thought to be improvements, and the impacts are substantial, not to England's population as a whole but to the local authority totals which affect finance for local services. Brent, Cambridge, Oxford, Camden, and Elmbridge all are reduced by 7 thousand people or more, the biggest being the reduction of 8.5% or 20 thousand people from Camden. Hounslow, Southwark and Barnett

are all increased by 10 thousand people or more. That is a lot of people, and it affects not just finance but estimates of overcrowding and housing need. It affects rates of fertility and mortality, crime and all sorts of other social indicators. The changes particularly affect ages 18-29.

So isn't this all good news, isn't every improvement to be welcomed? Better to acknowledge the truth than to plan services for the wrong number of people? Better to get it right now rather than wait for the 2011 Census to once again throw a big cat among the pigeons? Well, that would be a no-brainer if one could be sure that these improvements would be the end of the road.

ONS demographers leading the consultation acknowledge that further improvements are in the pipeline. Better survey data measuring both immigration and emigration, possible use of electronically scanned passport control, better use of administrative records, could all be incorporated into more accurate population estimates within the next five years.

But even then, the 2011 Census is highly unlikely to give a figure close to the estimates rolled forward from 2001. We live in ways that make it less easy to count us. The 2001 starting point was not very exact, and nor are any of the methods of counting how we have moved around since then. There will always be significant discrepancies between different ways of counting the population, which will always be big enough in some area or another to cause anxiety.

Managers of schools, social services and housing can accept that once every ten years there will be a new starting point to population and planning. But changing the estimates every few years has been unsettling. It is not just the changed estimates of population, but the changed vision of the future based on revised levels of population change. The population was first revised in 2002 after the 2001 Census, then again in 2004, and now there are to be major revisions again in May 2010. The question is not only: how will it affect the money available for local services, but: why should we use that figure to make new plans if it will change again in a couple of years?

Local authorities are being forced to cut budgets. Research staff are asked to comment authoritatively and provide local evidence relevant to a regular flow of new policies and initiatives. They seldom do this with sufficient resources. South Tyneside are not unusual in being told to expect 250 redundancies in 2010, often the impact is greater. Calderdale's research manager has retired and not been replaced. At the time of writing in January 2010 every local authority is drawing up its first 'post-recession' budget, with management companies like Price Waterhouse Cooper and Deloitte making substantial profit from selling advice on where to make public cuts.

So research staff have less time to understand and defend proposed changes to official statistics, and feel closely the dis-benefits of regular revisions to population estimates. Watch this space.

¹ Some of the detail is set out in Ludi Simpson (2007) Fixing the population: from census to population estimate, *Environment and Planning A*, 39(5): 1045-1057.

² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/imps/mig-stats-improve-prog/comm-stakeholders/improvements-to-the-mid-2008-population-estimates/index.html>