

Workshop B Census to be axed after 2011 – so what?

Simon Briscoe, Timetric

The history of the census is seriously romantic and, like many, I fell deeply in love with its outputs. But that love at first sight has faded as the years have passed.

Two main reasons why the love has faded:

- It lied to me in 2001. One million young men were missing (but the ONS tried to cover it up) and housing estates were missed off the count. Despite this, the final numbers were presented with a spurious accuracy - the UK's population was 58,789,194, we were told as the ONS turned a blind eye to data issues relating to illegal immigrants, second homes, students, forces bases and those on business trips. So embarrassed was the ONS, it seems, that the press release with that magic number on it has been removed from the web site!
- The census no longer sheds the light that it did in 1801, or even 1981. We have so many more data sources and potential data sources, that it is time to think of a new way of collating key data to create that picture of the country. We also have the technology to process all the administrative and corporate data that could tell us so much.

We should also bear in mind the breathtaking cost of the census these days. Just think what a one-off £1/2 billion spent on improving the non-census data sources could do!

I might be more convinced of the argument to keep the census if there was any sign that it is truly loved by the National Statistician, the ONS and other key stakeholders. Of course retailers, local authorities and others use it and cannot imagine life without it, but that is habit, not love. It would be disruptive to learn to use new sources offering data in different formats but there is no passion for the insight the census reveals.

Let's just think what we might have - near real time data based on where people are and what they are actually doing. Think what we have - ten yearly data, based on a non-representative sample, ten years out of date!

PS Here is the link to that press release - <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/censusUK.pdf>

"This census has been a world class exercise that has given us the most accurate picture possible of our population. It is the most accurate census result that could be achieved using the best methods available. No census can ever cover 100 per cent of the population. Census 2001 was designed from the outset to take full account of this to provide what users of statistics really want - figures representing everyone. Census 2001 therefore was a package that included an independent survey of a third of a million households which could be cross-matched against the return of forms. Further statistical tests mean that Census 2001 gives an accurate picture of the whole population."

Census to be axed after 2011 – so what?
Prof David Martin, University of Southampton

I am an enormous supporter of the census, as ESRC Census Programme Director for 10 years and a census data user for at least 25. It is a unique vehicle for collecting population data which results in an integrated dataset from which multiple integrated datasets can be derived. However, it is now facing challenges which I believe make it unsustainable in the longer-term.

Let's return to that vehicle analogy. I have recently purchased a 2010-model car – badged as a “green” diesel. Of course it cost a bit more, but by the standards of 2001 it is quite remarkable: high mpg, low emissions and road tax, masses of safety systems and great refinement. It is the latest evolution in a long line of successful family estates and is about as well-tuned to contemporary needs as a car can be. Of course, in order to obtain the advertised efficiency I need particularly favourable driving conditions – it doesn't do so well when I am driving around the university looking for a parking space or waiting for a teenage daughter to leave the house. In reality, the inconveniences of everyday life seriously detract from its peak performance. Worse, in the event of a crisis such as a strike by refinery workers or tanker drivers I will be stuck like every other driver and when at some point the diesel runs out or I simply cannot afford it, all I will have left is an expensive and inconveniently shaped garden shed.

Back to the census: I'm about to get a 2011-model census. Of course it cost a bit more, but by the standards of 2001 it is quite remarkable: flexible enumeration strategy, custom address list, internet completion option, data output as web services. It is the latest evolution in a long line of successful national censuses and is about as well-tuned to contemporary needs as a census can be. Of course, in order to obtain maximum coverage we need particularly favourable enumeration conditions – it will not do so well if high-profile politicians rubbish it, there is a surge in public mistrust of government, people object to questions about their nationality or intention to remain, or they are missed from the address list. In reality, the very nature of modern society seriously detracts from its peak performance. Worse, in the event of a crisis such as a major negative publicity campaign, a national postal strike or coverage rates for major places and population sub-groups fall so low that the result cannot reasonably be estimated, then all we have left is an expensive and inconveniently shaped survey dataset.

What is the solution? If I want to carry on driving in the next couple of decades, what I really need is a hybrid vehicle or even an electric vehicle. Unsurprisingly, the car industry has worked this out and is investing a lot of money in new technologies so that they become acceptable before motoring with the internal combustion engine ceases to be a practical option. Very long lead-in times are required because the technology has to be proven and any transition will involve drivers like myself in behavioural change too: I will probably have to get used to less acceleration, theoretical range, bootspace etc. and so will the entire motoring community. Collectively, we need to realise that it is the journey and not the particular vehicle that is most important if we want to keep on driving. It's just the same with the census – we need to adapt our behaviour, accept new technologies and stay focused on the journey (user needs) rather than our current vehicle (the census).

The census is to be axed after 2011 – so what? What worries me most about this is that I seem to be part of an industry that is proving very slow to realise the urgency of developing hybrid and alternative vehicles and where most of the drivers seem content to hope that the oil will just keep flowing. In reality, we are only a few months away from the last few deliveries from the refinery!

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Annette Dellevoet, Senior GIS Analyst
Network and Investment Planning, Sainsburys Supermarkets Ltd

Census data (despite all its faults) is the keystone of all our store decisions, when I told my boss they might axe it, she was horrified, she wants it every 5 years!

The value of the Census to us comprises:

- the breadth of coverage, i.e. whole UK
- the depth of coverage, i.e. number of different variables
- the small area building blocks, which allow us to define our own catchment areas
- freely available, although wasn't in the past

We don't only use Census data, but many of the other datasets we do use are underpinned by the Census, e.g. estimates and projections of populations, ACORN, OA Boundaries

Census flaws:

- only every 10 years, so we need to use estimates to fill the gaps
- OA population-weighted centroids difficult to use when targeting new developments, i.e. greenfield sites don't have OA centroids.
- undercounting - although less important in the commercial world: even an 80% UK survey is better than the biggest commercial surveys
- some groups, e.g. workers and students difficult to locate and quantify accurately

Few commercially available alternatives, all flawed e.g.

- Electoral Roll spoiled by marketing opt-out, but only counts adult UK citizens so incomplete anyway
- Lifestyle surveys, inherent bias makes the data not robust at small area levels
- Loyalty card data - only covers current customers, no good for targeting new areas

The decisions we make cost millions of pounds so they need to be right, if the Census wasn't free we would be prepared to pay for it (reluctantly and within reason!) But obviously this goes against the grain, and the transparency agenda.