
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Bernard Jenkin MP
Chair, Public Administration Select Committee
House of Commons
LONDON
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Dear Bernard

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY RESPONSE TO *TOO SOON TO SCRAP THE CENSUS*

I am writing to respond formally on behalf of the UK Statistics Authority to the Committee's Fifteenth Report of Session 2013-14, *Too soon to scrap the Census* (HC 1090), published on 17 April 2014. The Authority's response to those of the Committee's recommendations made to us is set out below.

A. Options for the future of the census

The Office for National Statistics has not provided detailed information about what data, other than a head count, could be harvested from the various administrative sources. We recommend that the Office for National Statistics lists all the public and quasi-public sources that could be tapped for data, the data that could be forthcoming from them and the administrative, technical and legal barriers to the use of, and ultimately linking of, that data. (Paragraph 21).

UK Statistics Authority response

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published a research paper in October 2013, setting out ONS's initial assessment of a broad range of public authority administrative data sources.¹ This paper indicated that several sources could potentially provide information for the purposes of producing official statistics on the characteristics of the population. ONS believes that this assessment has helped to identify priority sources that will be of future interest.

ONS also published four case studies in May 2014 which reviewed the potential for using administrative data for some key topics: ethnicity, household estimates, unemployment and income.² This work indicated the potential in combining administrative and survey data to provide some of this information. ONS's ongoing research programme will explore this potential further.

The use of an address register in 2011 was a very good example of using administrative records to enhance the accuracy of population statistics. Other administrative data was also apparently used.

¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/beyond-2011-producing-socio-demographic-statistics-2.pdf>

² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/methods-and-policies-reports/beyond-2011--statistical-research-update.pdf>

We recommend the Office for National Statistics sets out what data it used in 2011, the impact it had on the resulting estimates, the lessons learnt from this experience and how such additional sources can be used more widely and effectively. (Paragraph 26)

UK Statistics Authority response

The 2011 Census population estimates have been subject to a rigorous quality assurance process. As a part of this process a series of checks have been carried out that involved comparing census data to a range of other data sources, including administrative data. Examples of the use of administrative data in the quality assurance process include:

- Council Tax data (aggregated to local area geographies, such as lower super output area, LSOA) which included totals of properties that were required to pay Council Tax and those that were exempt. This information was particularly helpful to quality assure household estimates of the resident population, which excludes most properties exempt from the payment of Council Tax, and to identify individual outlier cases.
- NHS patient register data were also used extensively in 2011 Census quality assurance processes, for example reviewing the number of patient records at particular addresses so as to resolve any discrepancies between the patient register and Census returns for individual households.

Further information about the administrative sources used for the 2011 Census quality assurance process have been published in various papers available on the ONS website.³

ONS's research programme is exploring additional topic areas where administrative data could supplement data from future population censuses, while enhancing the accuracy of population statistics. These include improving the efficiency of census-taking by targeting resources towards non-responders, imputing for missing data, improving address register information about communal establishments, and using other available data sources to estimate occupancy and vacant households.

Population estimates are of fundamental importance to the statistical system, policy makers and society more widely, but the days of the traditional, ten-yearly, paper-based census are numbered. The Government has a wealth of detailed administrative data which is currently unexploited and which could provide a rich seam of information to improve the nation's knowledge of its population and boost the quality of public services. Data from administrative sources can be richer, broader, cheaper and timelier than the equivalent from a traditional census; it can be made available far more frequently than every ten years. The National Statistician has recently recommended that there should be a census in 2021, albeit conducted where possible online, and that there should be greater use of administrative data and surveys. It is too soon to decide whether to scrap the census. We believe that it is right to have a census in 2021; as insufficient effort has been made in recent years, the alternative options for the collection of population statistics have not been adequately tested and plans are not sufficiently advanced to provide a proper replacement, given the importance of the resulting data. (Paragraph 27)

³ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/the-2011-census/processing-the-information/data-quality-assurance/overview-of-administrative-comparator-data-used-in-2011-census-quality-assurance.pdf>;
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/2011-census-data/2011-first-release/first-release--quality-assurance-and-methodology-papers/quality-assurance-of-census-population-estimates.pdf>;
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/the-2011-census/processing-the-information/statistical-methodology/predicting-patterns-of-household-non-response-in-the-2011-census.pdf>

UK Statistics Authority response

Considerable effort has been made in recent years to explore alternative options for the collection of population statistics. ONS has undertaken extensive research to identify and evaluate the future options for taking a census, and these reports are available on the ONS website.⁴ This work was commended by the independent review of methodology led by Professor Chris Skinner, and the review report included positive observations about the innovative work undertaken by ONS in the evaluation and matching of administrative sources. The review report also acknowledged that ONS has a strong understanding of the methodological challenges and risks in this area.⁵

The Statistics Authority believes that the decision to move to a different system for producing population statistics is not one to be taken lightly. The National Statistician's recommendation to the Authority on the future provision of population statistics in England and Wales, published on 27 March 2014, offers a springboard to the greater use of administrative data and annual surveys in future.⁶ The Authority welcomes the Government's recent endorsement of our recommendations set out in a letter from the Minister for the Cabinet Office.⁷

ONS will only be able to make greater use of data from administrative sources where it has the legal authority to do so. Although progress has been made using powers in the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*, further legislation may help to maximise the benefits of future data sharing. ONS is actively engaged with the Cabinet Office and other government departments in an open policy making process to explore possibilities in this area, including the wider public acceptability of future data sharing legislation.

However, in order to get the most use out of the information already held by the Government, for the purposes of high quality and granular population statistics, and before we can be sure that there can be, eventually, a full and proper replacement for the traditional census, much more work must be done. We are concerned that the work on the future of the census has been done in isolation. (Paragraph 28)

UK Statistics Authority response

Work on the future of the census has not been undertaken in isolation. ONS encouraged and used feedback from a wide range of stakeholders and users, including academics, international colleagues, and privacy groups, which culminated in a three-month public consultation. ONS engaged with stakeholders and the wider user community through numerous meetings and public events. In excess of 700 responses to the consultation were received. As the National Statistician's recommendations set out, we agree that there is more work to be done before a full and proper replacement for the traditional census can be made. ONS's future research programme will reflect this.

We recommend that the Office for National Statistics, under strong leadership from the board of the UK Statistics Authority, now scope and set out a more ambitious vision for the creative and full use of administrative data to provide rich and valuable population statistics. The Office for National Statistics should explain how the outputs will be different if administrative data were to be used in place of much of the census, explaining clearly the advantages and disadvantages. (Paragraph 29)

⁴ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/methods-and-policies-reports/beyond-2011--independent-review-of-methodology.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/national-statisticians-recommendation.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/index.html>

UK Statistics Authority response

ONS is finalising a research work plan for the next three years, and this will be published later this year. This research plan will include an evaluation of how administrative sources can be used to supplement and enhance census data. The quality of such outputs will need to be evaluated before it is possible precisely to define what future statistical outputs might look like.

As noted above, ONS continues actively to engage with the Cabinet Office and other government departments in exploring the possibilities for improving access to the administrative data held by government for the purposes of producing official statistics, and the legislative requirements that might be necessary to enable this.

ONS has established an administrative data programme to increase the use and re-use of administrative data, building capacity and capability by pulling together and developing, relevant work strands on administrative data. This will enable progress towards the strategic aim of ONS being at the forefront of integrating and exploiting data from multiple sources, improving quality, reducing respondent burden and survey costs, delivering efficiency and enabling the development of new statistical products.

ONS's administrative data programme is also incorporating ONS's contribution to the Administrative Data Research Network. The Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) has been established as a UK-wide partnership between universities, government departments and agencies, funders, and the wider research community to help accredited researchers carry out social and economic research on de-identified administrative data.

As recommended in the Administrative Data Task Force Report published in December 2012⁸, the UK Statistics Authority is the reporting body to the UK Parliament for the ADRN and seeks assurance for the robust performance and governance of the Network from the ADRN Board which has been established for this purpose, under the chairmanship of Professor David Hand, a non-executive member of the UK Statistics Authority Board. The objectives of the ADRN Board are to: (i) promote and safeguard the linkage of administrative data for research and statistical purposes that serves the public good; and (ii) provide assurance to Parliament and the public, through the Board of the UK Statistics Authority, about the achievements of the Network.⁹

In February 2014, the Authority launched a programme of work on the use of administrative data in the production of official statistics under the direction of the Authority's Head of Assessment. The programme is looking at how these data are currently being audited - by producers of statistics or by other experts - and ways in which the audit arrangements can be improved to enhance public confidence in the derived statistics. The programme is also looking at the issues that arise when official statistics become the basis of performance targets at an individual or organisational level. In addition, the Authority will develop guidance on the high-level principles that should apply to the audit of administrative data. Taken together, this programme will re-emphasise the importance the Authority attaches to appropriate quality assurance for maintaining and enhancing public trust in official statistics.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/administrative-data-research-network/administrative-data-task-force-report---december-2012.pdf>

⁹ For further information about the ADRN Board, see <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/administrative-data-research-network/index.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/administrative-data-and-official-statistics/index.html>

B. Public concerns about data sharing

The Cabinet Office and the Office for National Statistics must make every effort to publicise the benefits of greater sharing of administrative data within Government and to the wider world, in order to realise the considerable benefits of using administrative data for policy-making, policy understanding and efficiency, and of course for the production of population statistics. The Government should use the lessons learnt from the problems with the “care.data” rollout to embark upon a public information campaign about the future of the census in order to raise understanding of the benefits of sharing administrative data, give information about the safeguards which will be in place to protect people’s personal information and privacy, in order to smooth the way for its greater use. (Paragraph 34)

UK Statistics Authority response

The Statistics Authority agrees that the benefits of greater sharing of administrative data within Government are substantial. The Authority and ONS will continue to make the case for improving current data sharing arrangements. As noted above, ONS is working with the Cabinet Office and other government departments to make the case for improving access to the administrative data held by Government for statistical purposes, including plans for wider public consultation and communication activities in this area, and to develop proposals to deliver the necessary changes while providing public reassurance on privacy and data security.

ONS published a paper in July 2013 setting out the privacy and security safeguards that ONS intends to put in place throughout the research phase of the Beyond 2011 Programme.¹¹ In its response to ONS’s public consultation on the future of population statistics in England and Wales, the Information Commissioner’s Office noted that they recognised that ONS has a strong track record of protecting the personal data from previous censuses, and that the Information Commissioner has confidence in ONS’s approach to data protection as demonstrated by previous census operations.

Yours sincerely



Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

¹¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/beyond-2011-safeguarding-data-for-research-our-policy--m10-.pdf>