Census Consultation 2013, return of the Economic History Society; Royal Historical Society and the Social History Society

The Royal Historical Society, Economic History Society, and Social History Society are the major subject associations for historians in the UK with a combined membership of almost 5,000 historians, the majority of whom are active researchers in the UK in the various branches of history.

Consultation on Census Questions

The two approaches referred to are:
• A census once a decade, like that conducted in 2011, but primarily online.
• A census using existing government data and compulsory annual surveys.

This questionnaire includes the following nine questions/opportunities to comment (you do not have to respond to all of the questions):
1. What are your views of the different census approaches described in the consultation document?

Decennial census
If the census is to have value for long term planning and study, there needs to be a decennial census with consistent categories across the decades and a comparable level of detail to allow longitudinal studies. The basic unit of the household (as an affective unit rather than just a single address) has significant advantages for micro- and small area studies.

It is difficult for citizens at one point of time to anticipate what their descendants may wish to do with the records that their forbears produced. The greatest security of the integrity of historical materials is to preserve data in as raw a form as possible rather than as synthetic statistics derived from agencies over which the compiler of statistics has no control.
Quantitative historians derive their own statistics and social and economic historians reconstitute families, study communities, occupations, migration, family structures, and housing using the raw data. An example of the quantitative approach is the world-leading work on historical demography by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population & Social Structure which would have been impossible without the kind of data which UK records provide and which has provided a template for work on historical demography elsewhere in the world. (There is a separate submission from Dr Leigh Shaw Taylor, director of the Group.) An example of the use of census data for social history is the work of Professor Pat Thane on old age and changing attitudes to it.

Although the census is not a perfect record, its defects are well understood by historians (the work of Professor Edward Higgs of Essex university—who has made a separate submission—has been very significant for this) and by statisticians. The ONS takes care to sample in ways that try to compensate for the defects. They recognise that there is a higher degree of non-compliance, partly because of mobility and partly because of a growing concern in the population about privacy.

There must be concerns about the security of data held on an online census, especially given recent problems with several government agencies. The ONS has given thought to the problem of online access though it is difficult, even now, to anticipate what online access is likely to be in 2021, let alone in 2031. It seems likely that groups that are already under-represented will continue so to be (the mobile, migrants and asylum seekers, the very old).

Given that historians can only use the detailed census returns 100 years after the census was taken, there must be concerns too about the preservation of digital material (The National Archives is much exercised about this.)

Further censuses of a traditional kind, even if conducted online, would require no new legislation, no time battling with other organisations’ data collection and protection policies, and no problems of data linkage between different government agencies.

**The Administrative Approach (statistics derived from administrative data)**

This has the appeal of bringing together data about the population which is at present inaccessible (NHS patient records, data from the DWP and HMRC, local authority records). The ONS makes a convincing case that in many instances the statistics derived are more accurate than those from the census and that statistics may be derived at more frequent intervals than every 10 years.
The greatest loss would be the preservation of the raw data from which the statistics were derived (there seems little chance that patient records and tax and benefit records for individuals will ever become publicly available). There would also be a loss of small area data and it is evident (from what the ONS says) that households can only be considered as addresses rather than affective units as in the census (for example, with the census a house in multiple occupation describes the units within the address and the relationship between cohabitees; with the administrative approach there would simply be a head count for the building).

There must also be concerns about 1) the transitional arrangements 2) consistency of data across agencies 3) the force of the legislation required 4) the need for an address register/population register

1) In order that there be some comparability between the census and a new administrative approach, the two systems would need to be run alongside each other for at least 2 census periods (2021 and 2031)

2) The ONS is unlikely to be able to dictate to such large and powerful organisations as the NHS and the HMRC how they collect their data, so there is no assurance that the data derived from these agencies will be consistent from year to year. Nor is there a ready way to manage data following substantial reorganisations of administrative units (if, for example, child benefit was moved to a different department of state, or there were a wholesale reorganisation of local government as there was in 1972).

3) Legislation would be required to allow the ONS access to and the ability to link data from such agencies. Parliament will be concerned about the protection of civil rights/privacy. It is likely that the ONS’s desired access will be watered down, making the administrative approach much less effective. For this to be ready for the 2021 census the legislation would need to be considered in 2015, a general election year.

4) The administrative approach would rely upon the creation of a population register of a kind that many European countries have. This would require legislation to make registration compulsory when someone moved house, left the country or died. This would raise again the identity card debate. It would certainly not allay the concerns of those who regard the census as an imposition on privacy.

2. Please specify any significant uses of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.

3. Please specify any significant additional benefits of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.
4. What would the impact be if the most detailed statistics for very small geographic areas and small population groups were no longer available? High, medium, low or no impact?

   a. If medium or high impact, please give further information.

   *What would be lost is the capacity (for the future) to make comparisons over a longer time span. It is also not possible to anticipate what census data might mean for future planners and policy makers.*

5. What would the additional benefit be if more frequent (i.e. annual) statistics about population characteristics were available for areas like local authorities and electoral wards? High, medium, low or no additional benefit?

   a. If medium or high, please give further information.

6. Please specify any significant uses of census information for historical research that we have not already identified.

   See above. *It is not possible to anticipate what census data might mean for future planners and policy makers, historians and social scientists so the provision of raw data rather than digested statistics is of paramount value.*

   The loss of raw data would be the greatest loss for historical research. This is not just genealogical research (the family history/genealogical community will be making their own submissions), but the ability to understand communities as well as the nation in past times and the changes that have taken place. Dr Leigh Shaw Taylor, director of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population & Social Structure, makes the point that use of early census data has shown that migration from the countryside to towns, which is considered to be an essential factor in the Industrial Revolution, actually started at least 50 years earlier.

   Historians use the census data in large scale studies (such as the Cambridge studies on the occupational structure of Britain 1379-1911, on historical epidemiology and the determinants of mortality, and welfare economy and society. They also use it for smaller studies such as those published in the last three years alone: on the demographic impact of the Irish famine [the census covered what is now the Republic of Ireland before 1922]; on social mobility; on nineteenth century racial demographics; on women’s occupations and citizenship; on sectarianism in Scotland; on the history of social care and on disability.

   Historical research in the UK holds a pre-eminent place globally for the outstanding quality of its historical records, work on which has provided the template for historians working in comparable areas elsewhere in the world. This material, of which the census is perhaps the most significant, is of particular value for providing long time series, and consistent and accurate data. Furthermore, the data in censuses is not dependent on particular
administrative units so that changes such as the 1972 local government reforms still allow accurate comparisons to be made over time.

7. What advantages or disadvantages for genealogical or historical research can you see from a move to a solution based on archiving administrative sources?

   Few, because of the absence of the raw data.

8. What are your views of the risks of each census approach and how they might be managed?

   The risks of the second approach are that it cannot be effected as set out in the consultation document because of concerns raised during the passage of legislation to permit the necessary access to and linking of government departmental data. In this case, we would end up with the worst of all worlds.

9. Are there any other issues that you believe we should be taking into account?