

The census and social science : Government and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) responses to the Committee's third report of session 2012-13 : sixth special report of session 2012-13 / House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.

Contributors

Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Select Committee on Science and Technology.

Publication/Creation

London : Stationery Office, 2013.

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House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**The Census and social
science: Government and
Economic and Social
Research Council (ESRC)
Responses to the
Committee's Third Report
of Session 2012–13**

**Sixth Special Report of
Session 2012–13**

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 13 March 2013*

HC 1053
Published on 15 March 2013
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£5.00

Science and Technology Committee

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Sixth Special Report

On 21 September 2012 the Science and Technology Committee published its Third Report of Session 2012–13, *The Census and social science* [HC 322]. On 6 March 2013 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as Appendix 1 to the Report, together with a response received from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), dated 4 February 2013, which is appended to the Government Response.

Appendix 1: Government response

Introduction

On 21 September 2012, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published *The Census and social science* report.

The report followed an inquiry by the Science and Technology Committee, which sought evidence on the potential impact of the ending of the census on social science research; with a view to the recommendations feeding into the Office for National Statistics¹ (ONS) *Beyond 2011 Programme*.

The Government has carefully considered the Committee's report and the issues that it raises, and this paper sets out the Government's response.

Government response

The Government is grateful to the Select Committee for its report, which makes a valuable contribution to the debate about the future of the census and its contribution to social science within Government and more widely.

The UK Statistics Authority has asked ONS to work on alternative methods of obtaining the required information currently collected through the census, with the intention that the 2011 census was the last of its kind.

This paper sets out the Government's response to the recommendations of the Select Committee.

Social Science in Government

1. We are content that the structure of social science research in Government is organised in an effective manner to provide the information required by Ministers in planning departmental spending. We are, however, not convinced about the ability of

¹ The Office for National Statistics is the executive office of the UK Statistics Authority, an independent non-ministerial department.

social scientist advisors to influence Ministers when departmental considerations conflict with those of Government as a whole.

The Government notes this conclusion. Social science advice is, quite properly, one consideration among many in the policy making process. We are comfortable that the current systems for considering expert input, and for agreeing policy positions across departments, enable it to play a full and valuable role, though we will of course keep the need for senior social science input under review.

2. We recommend that the Government give a senior Minister direct responsibility for social science who would take a cross-Government view in Ministerial discussions, respond to Parliamentary questions and reports from Select Committees. We consider this essential, especially in the event that greater departmental co-operation is required to source data in the event of the census being discontinued.

The Government notes the arguments in favour of having a Minister directly responsible for social science.

3. The ESRC's second [National Strategy] document covers the period 2009–2012, and a major part of it concerns making better use of the data that is already collected. It was surprising that we did not hear more about this strategy in our oral or written evidence as it would seem central to the long term provision of data for social science, especially if the census is to be discontinued.

The Government expects that the ESRC will wish to respond to the Committee on this conclusion.

4. Utilities presumably consider their investment decisions against projections made on the basis of local authority structural plans. However, as we note below, local authorities depend, at least in part, on the national census to test the validity of their own projections. We recommend that the Government investigate the potential for sharing anonymised social data collected by utilities.

Government is engaged in discussions with utilities companies on a number of fronts, including discussions regarding the data (particularly usage data) available to utilities.

Importance of census data

5. We appreciate the central role that census data has played for social scientists. The main reasons for its importance for academia are datasets that can be used across many years, continuing longitudinal studies and a central reference point with which other data may be compared. However, Professor Mayhew's concern that social scientists may turn to the census data simply because it is there rather than because it provides the best data source for the research in hand was not convincing. However, we do recommend that the ESRC ensures that, among those researchers it funds, there is no over-reliance on census data to the exclusion of more appropriate data sources, or such use that stifles the development of innovative means of gathering or utilising social data.

The Government expects that the ESRC will wish to respond to the Committee on this conclusion.

6. We strongly consider that there is a need for more up to date information than the census provides. We urge the Office for National Statistics during their 'Beyond 2011' deliberations to ensure that whatever solution they propose provides greater access to current accurate data. (Paragraph 47)

Early results from an initial consultation on "Beyond 2011" requirements have substantiated the need for more frequent information, most notably for topics that are subject to change such as migration and the labour market. At the same time, there is clear evidence to show that in many cases accuracy and the availability of information at small area level are also seen as important. The ONS will need to balance requirements for more frequent updates with the need for accuracy and low level geographic detail. It will continue to consult a wide range of users as part of the Beyond 2011 considerations.

7. We have some concerns that the operation of the census may unduly impact on the day to day operations of the ONS. We recommend that when considering how to provide constant, accurate data to Government, the ONS devise how this might be accomplished in a way that will be less intrusive to the operation of their day to day organisation. (Paragraph 50)

ONS has considerable experience of managing the work associated with a decennial census and coping with the associated build up and run down of such a large scale operation. However, in assessing options for the future provision of population and socio-demographic statistics, ONS will take account of such operational issues and the associated risks.

Potential use of other administrative data

8. Administrative data is often collected without consideration of potential wider application and use, thus often is only fit for a single purpose. There is reluctance on the part of research scientists and government social scientists to utilise it for other purposes due to the difficulties in its reuse. The existing National Data Strategy should provide good practice and guidance on expanding the number of uses and the longevity of data collected at public expense. (Paragraph 59)

The Government expects that the ESRC will wish to respond to the Committee on this conclusion.

9. We also recommend that the ONS seek to remove bureaucratic burdens currently hindering the broader use of data. Too often the Data Protection Act is used as an excuse for not reusing data collected at considerable cost to the public purse. We consider it entirely possible that data could be collected in a way to facilitate better public administration that would not contravene the principles of the Data Protection Act. We would like the Government to indicate how it plans to more broadly use data from sources, such as the Labour Force Survey, as part of their response to this report. (Paragraph 60)

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition that more effective use could be made of public sector data. Through its open data agenda, the Government has been able to free up new datasets for wider use and it expects access to data to continue to grow. The recent launch of the Open Data Institute will ensure that momentum continues both within and outside of the public sector.

ONS has a difficult task in balancing the desire of some users to have access to microdata and the need to protect the confidentiality of the information supplied by individual people and businesses. ONS seeks to make its data available as widely as possible subject to the appropriate statistical disclosure control. The latter is an important safeguard which reassures data suppliers that ONS is handling their data with appropriate controls.

ONS has now made data available to over 2000 "Approved Researchers" since relevant provisions came into effect in April 2008. This includes Labour Force Survey data and household survey data, which has also been provided to the ESRC data archive for dissemination. ONS is also working with users so that anonymised samples of microdata from the census can be widely and effectively used by researchers when they become available next year.

10. We consider Professor Mayhew's evidence as confirmation that there is a credible alternative to the census for the purposes of local government. However, we note that local government are not the only users of census data, and—because of their ad hoc nature—Professor Mayhew's surveys would not substitute for the census in terms of being able to derive a snapshot of the whole nation at one time, with very widespread coverage (because of the mandatory nature of the census process) and the ability to make direct comparisons over time. The academic community would clearly lose more than the public sector by the ending of the census. (Paragraph 63)

ONS welcomes the committee's comments about the need for consistent and comparable statistics, which are essential not only for the academic community but also for the public sector, charities, voluntary organisations and businesses.

11. Furthermore, we are concerned that there would need to be a level of expertise not currently widely available amongst organisations collecting data in order to achieve results comparable with those obtained from census data. We recommend that the Government use the time until the next census is due to ensure administrative data is better able to supplement or replace census data. This will require a considerable investment, and possibly the production of a list of approved providers for local authorities, health bodies, etc, to ensure that the data produced is both robust and comparable across authority boundaries and devolved administrations across the whole of the UK. (Paragraph 64)

Any proposal to place increased reliance on administrative sources for future population and small area socio-demographic statistics will be carefully considered. Many of the issues highlighted by the Select Committee are already being considered by ONS as part of the work being undertaken by the Beyond 2011 Programme. In particular the Programme is building on established relationships with individual data suppliers to improve existing understanding of the scope, content and quality of key sources and to check and clarify any plans which could have implications for the availability or acceptability of the data for

statistical purposes. ONS are also working with the devolved administrations to safeguard the provision of harmonised outputs across the United Kingdom. The risks associated with an increased reliance on such sources must be recognised and, if appropriate, changes may need to be made (for example, to existing data governance arrangements) to safeguard the ongoing supply of consistent and comparable data.

12. Francis Maude, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, wrote to us that “while cost is a driver, the real issue is ensuring that the best possible approach is taken”. We are not persuaded that local and frequent surveys could provide an adequate substitute for census data despite the potential advantage of providing more up-to-date information unless they were designed and implemented to a high standard. We are therefore not convinced therefore that the use of administrative data would be a cheaper option over a ten year census cycle. (Paragraph 65)

The Government notes this conclusion.

Consideration of change or discontinuation of the census

13. However, if standards could be set to facilitate integration with administrative sources, we consider it possible that obligations could be imposed on privatised utilities to produce and provide government with access to useful social data. (Paragraph 66)

Government is exploring the benefits of introducing standards for data. A consultation was held regarding personal transaction data over the summer of 2012 including the value of setting specific standards. There were no strong conclusions on standards beyond the benefit of open machine readable standards to allow for reuse of data. The Government's midata programme will be considering with industry the advantages and disadvantages in standard setting and whether this can be beneficial across a range of sectors.

14. We recommend that the ONS, if they decide to discontinue the census, should consider how administrative data might be collected over a sustained period without falling hostage to political considerations. (Paragraph 68)

No decisions have been made yet by ONS on the best way to meet future user requirements for population and small area socio-demographic statistics. All options will be evaluated in a rigorous and transparent way. In each case, full account will be given to relevant risks or issues of special concern. In the case of an administrative data option, special attention will be given to governance and how best to manage changes to the scope, coverage or quality of existing sources, their ongoing availability, costs and ownership.

15. In this context, there is a particular problem in relation to ensuring the robustness of longitudinal studies by providing a benchmark against which the representative nature of the surviving cohort may be measured. Soundly-based longitudinal studies are a particular strength of the UK at present, and are vital in particular in relation to research into health and educational outcomes. We expect the ONS to pay particular attention to ensuring that any alternatives to the census enable the continuance of such studies. (Paragraph 69)

ONS is aware of the importance of longitudinal studies to the user community and their widespread use for research on social mobility, health and educational outcomes. It is

working with users and relevant stakeholders and their requirements will be an explicit criterion used in the evaluation by the Beyond 2011 Programme.

16. However, the National Data Strategy exists and we judge that this strategy would provide a vehicle through which greater coherence of data collection, both administrative and research, could be achieved in future. (Paragraph 72)

The Government welcomes this conclusion on the need for coherence of data collected across different sources.

17. There is a danger that, if the census is not repeated, there will be no equivalent large-scale collection of trusted data that can be used to correct smaller surveys. We are convinced of the need to have a national reference point that other datasets might use as a benchmark for their own parameters. We recommend that the ONS consider how this might be achieved in the absence of a census; it appears to us that making an existing dataset better would be more advantageous than adding a new one. (Paragraph 77)

ONS is aware of the importance of the census as a benchmark for surveys and for the production of a range of high profile statistics. The recommendations made by the Beyond 2011 Programme will take full account of the implications of any change for survey takers and other census users.

18. The Government spends significant sums on R&D, though it is not clear what percentage of this relates to social science. However, we accept the assurance of the joint heads of the Government Social Research Service that spending is, in the main, being protected even in this difficult economic climate. That same climate makes it even more vital that the Government ensures such expenditure, firmly based on evidence, achieves the maximum benefit possible. (Paragraph 79)

The Government fully agrees with this recommendation.

19. We are not convinced of the value of government collecting data simply because it has happened in the past and we consider that the responsibility to maintain particular datasets should rest with those bodies most interested in the dataset. However, we recognise the difficulties that local charities and support groups may have in accessing information if the census is discontinued. We regard it as essential that the Government recognise these needs and confirm that appropriate steps would be taken to ensure these groups to have continued free access to whatever alternative data is gathered and shared by public bodies in order to avoid detriment to the valuable local services provided by them. We anticipate a central data repository from which all publicly funded social data, not subject to legal or commercial restrictions, would be made available. (Paragraph 80)

20. Therefore, although we do not rule out the development of new sources of data in the future, we consider it would be wrong to discontinue the census simply hoping that new developments will provide a solution to the gaps caused by the loss of census data. ONS must be sure that the tools used to collect data will be adequate. One key concern is that we have not identified any dataset that will really enable social scientists/historians to follow individuals over time. Most public sector data gathering

is focused on the size of specified groups, rather than details of individuals, and private sector databases (such as those for loyalty cards) cover only parts of the population and are of little relevance for many of the economically excluded and the poorer sections of society. (Paragraph 82)

21. We are convinced that the social science benefits of the census are valuable and that they outweigh the financial costs. However, we are also convinced that there remain significant benefits to be gained in terms of improving the consistency, currency and availability of administrative data to government planners. Although we put forward these conclusions to assist in the ONS's 'Beyond 2011' project, we consider it essential that the Government not only retain access to the breadth and quality of data it collects but seeks to improve its currency and consistency. (Paragraph 83)

22. The regular conduct of a census in the UK has provided Government and social scientists with an almost unique dataset

The Government notes these conclusions. Before making a final recommendation on the best approach for the future, ONS will need to be confident that any proposed solution is capable of meeting users' requirements including those of social scientists and historians, and that limitations and strengths of alternative sources have been taken into account. All options will be evaluated to balance user needs, cost, benefit, statistical quality, and the public acceptability of all of the options.

Response from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The ESRC is at the forefront of developing the UK's social science data infrastructure, supporting the creation of world leading data resources and major, pioneering data services which play a leading role in shaping the data landscape for social and economic research. The ESRC works closely in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders across government and elsewhere who both produce and fund access to social and economic data resources to develop the UK's data infrastructure.

The ESRC welcomes the Report and findings of the Science and Technology Committee on The Census and Social Science. The information collected in the Census is an important and rich resource for social science, and is used for a diverse range of purposes. We share the views of the Committee that the national coverage, reliability and breadth of topics included in the census makes it a unique resource, but drawbacks include its cost and timeliness. It is therefore important to complement census-type data with a range of other sources, including administrative data, while recognizing that other sources may have data quality issues. ESRC will continue to co-fund work with the Office National Statistics (ONS) to review alternatives to the current census.

The ESRC has been working with partners through the Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT) which was Chaired by Sir Alan Langlands, to promote better use of routinely collected administrative data. Both the academic community and government researchers recognize the potential for such data and it is essential that the barriers to their use be reduced. The Report from the ADT, 'Improving Access for Research and Policy' was published in December 2012 and its recommendations provide a framework to facilitate research based upon linked administrative data.² Realising the opportunities set out in the ADT Report and the ambitions of the recommendations requires collaboration between a wide range of stakeholders, in particular government departments and agencies, research funders and the research community. This collaboration is central to not only delivering the ambitions of the ADT, but also more broadly if the UK is to continue to develop its data infrastructure.

The ESRC also strongly supports the value of increased access to and use of commercial and transactional data. It is a priority to explore the potential of these datasets for the social science community in coming years. As the major funder of UK longitudinal studies, the ESRC also encourages government partners to continue their investment in such studies. A range of data sources are required to provide a firm foundation for social science infrastructure, therefore continuing support and investment from Research Councils and Government is essential.

A number of the conclusions and recommendations of The Census and social science Report are directed to the ESRC, and responses to these follow.

Conclusion 3 – The ESRC's second [National Strategy] document covers the period 2009–2012, and a major part of it concerns making better use of the data that is already

² www.esrc.ac.uk/adt

collected. It was surprising that we did not hear more about this strategy in our oral or written evidence as it would seem central to the long term provision of data for social science, especially if the census is to be discontinued.

The 2009–2012 National Data Strategy (NDS), led by the ESRC, provides a critical framework for identifying future data needs for the academic, policy and practitioner communities. The UK Data Forum, established by the ESRC, is a consultative body which brings together stakeholders from the public and private sectors, and civil society to improve access to existing data resources and to co-ordinate co-funding of future data priorities to deliver the NDS. Although the UK Data Forum is the owner of the NDS, it is not a body with the authority to order member organisations to comply with the NDS, nor does the NDS represent a formal commitment by government departments to follow it.

The revised National Data Strategy, due to be published in the spring 2013, will provide a strategic framework to inform the development of these data resources, and continuing support and investment from Research Councils and Government is essential.

The 2009–2012 National Data Strategy was the first to recognise the value of data linkage, and the ESRC has continued to recognise that a range of data sources are required to provide a firm foundation for the social science infrastructure in the coming years. The ESRC acknowledges that it is important to complement census-type data with a range of other sources, including administrative data.

The ESRC will continue to co-fund work with the Office for National Statistics to review alternatives to the current census, and it is expected that the next NDS will be important in ensuring an appropriate response to the UK's data needs.

Conclusion 5 – we do recommend that the ESRC ensures that, among those researchers it funds, there is no over-reliance on census data to the exclusion of more appropriate data sources, or such use that stifles the development of innovative means of gathering or utilising social data.

The ESRC will continue to invest in a wide range of data for social scientists, policymakers and practitioners to answer some of the most pressing questions facing our economy and society. We are committed to funding research that exploits this rich and varied data landscape, and to ensuring the widespread use of the UK data infrastructure. For example, the ESRC has developed world-leading longitudinal studies such as *Understanding Society* and the birth cohort studies, made strategic investments in studies based on routinely collected administrative data such as the Scottish Longitudinal Study, and co-fund the Workplace Employee Relations Survey. We direct a significant proportion of our budget to support the data infrastructure, and our research and training award holders are encouraged to use existing national datasets.

To support the social science research community, the ESRC funds the UK Data Service which provides access to over 5000 computer-readable economic and social datasets, and there are over 41,000 registered users of our data services. Access to Census data is provided as part of this data infrastructure.

To encourage social science research using the widest range of data, our recent Secondary Data Analysis Initiative sought proposals to deliver high impact policy and practitioner

relevant research through the deeper exploitation of major data resources created by the ESRC and other agencies. Of the 208 proposals received 12.5% planned to use UK Census and related census data resources. By comparison, 18.3% of proposals sought to analyse *Understanding Society*, a further 18% the British Household Panel Study and nearly 10% each wished to use the Millennium Cohort Study and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing.

Of the 58 projects supported the 5 most used datasets were: *Understanding Society* (19%); British Household Panel Study (13%); UK Census (11%); English Longitudinal Study of ageing (10%); and, Labour Force Survey (8%). The majority of projects are using a combination of datasets to address their research questions.

Conclusion 8 – Administrative data is often collected without consideration of potential wider application and use, thus often is only fit for a single purpose. There is reluctance on the part of research scientists and government social scientists to utilise it for other purposes due to the difficulties in its reuse. The existing National Data Strategy should provide good practice and guidance on expanding the number of uses and the longevity of data collected at public expense.

Routinely collected administrative data are a rich source of information for research and policy makers, and are often high quality, nationally comprehensive, provide information over longer periods of people's lives, and are relatively inexpensive to exploit. However, despite their considerable value as research resources, use of administrative data has often been inhibited by issues relating to the legality of reuse and linkage for research and policy purposes.

Over the past year (2011–2012) the ESRC has been proactively working with partners through the Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT), chaired by Sir Alan Langlands, seeking to understand and address the barriers and challenges to improved and wider use of administrative data. The Taskforce has been seeking to promote better use of routinely collected administrative data, and its Report published in December 2012 'Improving Access for Research and Policy' offered recommendations to establish an Administrative Data Research Network which will, if realised, provide a robust data management and governance arrangement for analysing de-identified routinely collected administrative data.³ Both the academic community and government researchers recognise the potential for such data and it is essential that the barriers to their use be reduced.

The recommendations of the Administrative Data Taskforce may, if realised, enable much better access to and use of a wide range of possibly linked administrative data, and as this progresses the ESRC, the Forum, and its members would expect that the National Data Strategy will play an active role in ensuring an appropriate response to data needs.

Conclusion 16 – However, the National Data Strategy exists and we judge that this strategy would provide a vehicle through which greater coherence of data collection, both administrative and research, could be achieved in future.

The UK Data Forum, established by the ESRC, is a consultative body which brings together stakeholders from the public and private sectors, and civil society to improve access to

³ www.esrc.ac.uk/adt

existing data resources and to co-ordinate co-funding of future data priorities to deliver the National Data Strategy (NDS). The Forum has oversight of the NDS and in the past year has been revising the NDS. The third version of the strategy will build on the achievements of the previous two NDS and will be looking ahead over the period 2013 to 2018. The NDS is designed to facilitate and coordinate the development of data resources for research across the social and economic sciences and at their interface with other areas of scientific enquiry, and will be setting out the challenges and offering recommendations to a range of stakeholders on opportunities to enable researchers to make fuller use of new and existing data sources. Indeed, the NDS was the first to recognise the value of data linkage, and helped to drive forward the establishment of the Administrative Data Taskforce.

The National Data Strategy sets out a vision and practical actions for what must be done to maintain and improve high quality data sources and associated infrastructure to enable high quality research. The ESRC supports this vision and the centrality of collaboration through the UK Data Forum with a wide range of stakeholders across government and elsewhere who both produce and fund access to social and economic data resources to develop the UK's data infrastructure.

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ISBN 978-0-215-05530-9



9 780215 055309