

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!

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