Environment and Planning A 1994, volume 26, pages 1172 - 1173

Commentary

Gone and forgotten? The census's missing one-and-a-half million

A technical haze of formulae and indices surrounds the allocation of money to people by area in Britain, creating an impression of impartiality and scientific accuracy. Funding for local councils through the Standard Spending Assessment formulae uses social needs indices. The new Single Regeneration Budget has its Index of Urban Conditions, specially commissioned by the Department of the Environment. Rural Development Programme areas have to pass a threshold of decline. Generalised housing needs are measured using the General Needs Index (the Department of the Environment), and the Housing Needs Index (the Housing Corporation). European Community social funds are directed to those areas whose residents suffer most from the new buzz-phrase, 'social exclusion'. Many of the underprivileged residents who should be targeted by these programmes have been excluded from the 1991 Census, the basic source of data on which all these indices and thresholds are based.

Although census response for Great Britain as a whole was 98%, government statisticians have estimated that the nonresponse was three times as high in urban areas as elsewhere. Over one in five of men in their twenties were missed across all the major cities. A total of 1.2 million residents did not appear across the whole of Britain. How could this happen? One reason is that the poll-tax campaigns, with many people resisting registration and payment, were at their height at the time of the census (April 1991). There is no need to paint a picture of poll-tax-resisters fearing that bailiffs would have access to the census through some conspiracy to break the rules of confidentiality which cover the census. It is simply that the anti-poll-tax campaigns provided a precedent of noncompliance with official monitoring, weakening a culture of accurate completion of the census.

The poll tax is not the only culprit, however. It was quite possible to be recorded on a census form but not be counted as a resident. At least 200 000 of the missing were in various degrees of transience and homelessness, classifying themselves as visitors at their only address (or being so classified by the form-filler) and thus as a 'resident' at no address. Others, including some 50 000 very elderly residents, who entered care homes or hostels soon before census day; the census demands six months' stay before counting someone as a resident in such accommodation.

Two government statisticians have been valiantly attempting to assess the level of census nonresponse, within their workload. They have come up with adjustment rates for each age group in six types of area in Britain, separately for men and for women, by comparing the census results with what might be expected given the 1981 Census results and changes that have been monitored since then. These are the adjustments that reveal that most of the missing were young men in cities, and significant numbers of young children, young women, and the very elderly.

Although buildings are easy to count—they do not move around—it has proved difficult to count the number of households that live within them. The Department of the Environment is not using the suspect census count of households, but a much higher and more feasible estimate of household numbers, while waiting for the results of the survey designed to validate the census coverage. Unfortunately, the validation survey missed well over half of those the census had omitted, leaving such

a mess to clear up that its report is still waiting to be published as we write, three years after the 'validation' fieldwork was completed.

There is no indication, as yet, that any coherent official attempt will be made to estimate the degree and nature of the undercount of households in the way that has been done for residents, in spite of its importance to housing policy. It is much more difficult to estimate numbers of missing households and the government statistical service is simply not well enough funded to be able to take on such a job.

But does all this make any practical difference? Although the million and a half were missed or missallocated for a variety of reasons, they are united in being more likely to need the services that are targeted through use of the census results from which they are excluded. The need for social housing, for instance, is clearly underestimated by the census because of the large number of homeless people not counted in the tables.

Official population estimates for 1991 and 1992 are now based on adjusted census counts. This is the good news. The bad news is that the adjustments are unreliable. For example, the national figures for young adults are so uncertain that we cannot tell whether mortality rates have really increased for these particular age groups in recent years; not because we do not know how many people have died but because we can no longer be sure of how many people there were in the population 'at risk'. This is an issue for those investigating recent trends in suicides, for instance.

What of the programmes funded by formulae designed to target areas in most need? Despite adjusting for the undercount in its estimates of households, the Department of the Environment has not yet adjusted the census data which it uses for distributing local government grants—in the Standard Spending Assessment already referred to. The losers will be those whose need has been most underestimated by the census—those in cities where high numbers of young adults actually live. It is not only the missed people who lose out. These local authorities will lose up to 2% of their grant and are likely to spread such losses across all their services.

One hopes that the local grant figures will be adjusted. Even then, the unreliability which now surrounds the measures they are based on suggests that the government fines for exceeding local authorities' assessed need to spend—capping—should end.

The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys has taken the census, and its validation survey, and have gone to considerable lengths to produce the final adjusted population figures. They have begun to advise other census users how to adjust their figures. But is anyone listening? The 1991 Census was heralded with posters of a baby asking "Where will I live? Will I have a job?" The implication was that the government did want to plan for the needs of the whole population. That commitment is difficult to observe, now that the census field procedures have failed to meet the social realities of 1991.

The government has failed to fund a census (and its validation survey) accurate enough for Whitehall to assess the needs of localities fairly. No longer can they claim to have a reliable picture of the subtle differences between the needs of different areas.

There is an urgent need for all parties with something to offer on this subject—including government, local authorities, and academics—to piece together why so many were missed by the census, how social policy formulae can take the missed on board, and how to avoid the same void of information following the next census in 2001.

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