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Local government without the census – it's a frightening vision

Government plans to axe the 2021 census will cause havoc for council managers. Danny Dorling imagines an unpalatable future

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A 2011 census form is posted. The government is proposing to abandon the next census, scheduled for 2021. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

Think forward a little to January 2023, a decade from now and award yourself a plum job: you are the chief executive of a large urban local authority. It is your job to ensure the efficient delivery of [local government](#) services in your city. More than that, you have a responsibility for the wider improvement of the social environment of the area, wider than local government itself can achieve.

You have to be able to answer councillors' questions about the shape of things to come. What is being planned and how are these plans faring? Is your city coming together or growing apart? How do its fortunes compare to similar cities? Are you falling behind or moving ahead of the pack?

Let's start with a simple question: who's coming and who is going? Is your city attracting people with skills, or is it losing more than it is gaining? Are more graduates arriving than are departing? What of those young people who don't have as many skills? How many in your area are not in education, employment or training but are also not counted among the statistics of people claiming benefits, perhaps because they do not qualify because of family circumstances? Who are the people not registered to vote in each area? Are things getting better or worse and, if so, in which parts of the city?

Before you can plan for what you might do about any of this, you need to know exactly what is occurring in your area. Are some neighbourhoods spiraling downwards? Where do the most acute housing shortages remain? Where are children sharing bedrooms with adults because their homes have too few rooms for their needs? Is this hidden in the growing private rented sector? How big is the private rented sector now? Are there many children who do not appear to be attending school? Are there more children living in an area than listed on the register?

And you have to understand the impact of the policies you already have. Has there been an increased take-up of those cycle lanes you provided, for example? Is the inner city really becoming a ghetto or is that just speculation in the local press? Someone suggested that life expectancy in the poorest parts of the city must be falling, given all those overdoses. How do you respond to those requests from various groups for resources when they all tell you that their group is growing in number?

It's a great job, this new job of yours – but it would help if you knew a little more than what the electoral roll, school records, council tax and children-at-risk registers tell you.

You ask your officials for help. One has been here some time, managed to survive all those rounds of cuts. She shows you the statistics you need, but they date from 27 March 2011. You ask when they were gathered.

"Almost exactly a decade ago" comes the reply. "At the end of January 2013, the Office for National Statistics released all this ward-level data from the last [census](#) and we've been relying on it ever since to underpin our work. Every year since, we have some basic updates: the number of babies born in each area and the numbers of people dying.

"Years ago they told us about how many people were moving between areas, but that data relied on the NHS and everyone being registered with a local GP, but what with all the changes and all the new providers since 2013 ... "

You demand to know why your authority hasn't done anything to update the statistics available to you. Your staff member reminds you that the council chose to pay a private sector data company, which sent the authority estimates of how your area was changing. The company said it had access to the data that allowed it to do that – TV license records, credit card data, and other types of personal information.

The government told the council to use the company, you are told. The organisation was considered "innovative" but, after a few years, the council's staff began to notice discrepancies. Your helpful official explains: "They told us how many children they estimated to be cycling to school, but we checked the school bike sheds. We complained, but they told us that they could not reveal how they made their estimates. It was commercially confidential."

This is the world in which councils will be living in less than a decade if government plans to axe the census are executed. If councils don't fight now to save this important resource, they will be flailing in the dark when it comes to strategic decisions and informed budget-setting. Private organizations may be able to fill in the cracks, but they can never replace the open exchange of public data that the census allows.

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