

A nation ever more divided

Danny Dorling and **Phil Rees** summarise some of the key findings of one of the first studies of the preliminary Census results – a study that provides statistical evidence of increasing social division

A Census has been held in the UK every ten years for the last 200 years, other than in 1941. Censuses are the only source of reliable information on the changing social geography of the nation. The 1991 Census, when analysed, revealed the extent of the social damage suffered within many cities and across large areas outside South East England during the 1980s. The full results of the 2001 Census will yield some 5 billion statistics – far more than the combined total from all previous Censuses, and roughly 100 social facts for every person living in the UK.

The first results to be released from the latest population Census reveal something shocking.¹ We had expected the 2001 Census to be a little less interesting, if very much more detailed, when compared to its predecessor. Under the Major and Blair Governments, the 1990s had appeared to be a quieter time, during which some of the social divisions of the 1980s were beginning to heal. Unemployment had fallen rapidly by 2001. There were no large-scale industrial disputes. More children than ever before were entering universities. The country had become much wealthier. We expected to see in the statistics a nation coming together again.

Instead, the 2001 Census is beginning to reveal a nation ever more divided by geography – today, where people live has a greater influence on life chances than it has had at any time for at least the last 50 years.

The key single – and we admit very crude – summary statistic from our initial analysis is that if British society were to be returned to the state of division that existed in 1991, then roughly *1 million* people would have to move home, crossing local authority boundaries so as to *reduce* the degree of social division between local authority areas back to their 1991 levels. Our definition 'social division' uses all those statistics reported in the 2001 Census 'Key Statistics' which were also measured in the 1971, 1981, and 1991 Censuses; we have not specially selected them.

To illustrate the nature of just a few of the 1 million transfers in our main analysis, we consider here just three sub-groups of the population:

- *People aged 45-59*: Across Britain, the proportion of the population aged 45-59 rose from 16 per cent to 19 per cent as the baby boomers reached later middle age. However, the proportion of 45-59 year-olds actually fell in Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth, and Brent. It hardly changed in the rest of London, or in Nottingham, Glasgow, Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester, Southampton, Reading, Oxford, Sheffield, and Leeds.
- Part of the polarisation by age in Britain is caused by the influx of new students into some of these university towns; but the out-migration of the older age group from the cities into towns and the countryside, at levels not seen before, is a much more important factor. Increased early retirement might have a small part to play, but increased long-distance commuting appears to be one of the main driving forces that has allowed segregation by age in Britain to grow.

- *People who labelled themselves as 'White'*: Nationally, the proportion of people who label themselves as White fell between the last two Censuses, from 94 per cent to 92 per cent. This White population became more spatially polarised as, in general, the proportion of the population labelled as White fell the most where it was the lowest to begin with and actually rose in a few areas where it was very high to begin with. All other ethnic groups in Britain became more geographically mixed compared with Whites in the 1990s – experiencing reductions or no change in their degree of spatial separation from other groups.

- Again, longer-distance commuting, coupled with differential migration, that has probably contributed to the changing geography of ethnicity in Britain. Analysis of the changing geography of ethnicity in Britain, of the life chances of ethnic minority groups and sub-groups such as their children, and of the distribution of the new 'mixed' and religious categories included in 2001 are all likely to produce some of the most interesting and important findings from this Census.

- *Young people who were unemployed*: Unemployment between ages 16-24 has thankfully fallen from 14 per cent to 6 per cent between the Censuses. A large part of this fall is due to increased access to further and higher education. However, rates remain above 10 per cent in the following areas: North Ayrshire, Knowsley, South Tyneside, Wansbeck, Wear Valley, East Ayrshire, Blaenau Gwent, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, Easington, Blyth Valley, and Copeland. The list that is depressingly similar to those seen after the 1971, 1981, and 1991 Censuses, and indeed it includes many areas that featured in the Special Areas Acts passed by Parliament in 1934, with the aim of reducing unemployment in these places. Youth unemployment has fallen most where it was lowest to begin with. Put another way, the New Deal has worked best where it was least needed. Behind these statistics lies the reality that it is the *great grandchildren* of many of the men who could not find work in the 1930s who cannot find work in their youth now, despite rates of joblessness being at their lowest for a generation.

The three measures we have considered were derived from 2,040 statistics from both the 1991 and the 2001 Censuses, drawn from England, Wales, and Scotland (we have omitted Northern Ireland from our analysis to date). These values make up some of 0.00004 per cent of the 2001 Census statistics that will be released in total. This brief article is clearly a partial story, and the remaining 99.99996 per cent of the story remains to be told.

Separation

At the time of undertaking the analysis on which this article is based, we were both professors at the University of Leeds and so, like most other professors, lived in affluent suburbs some miles north of the University. We commuted daily through areas which are slowly, but surely separating from the rest of society, just as our suburbs are separating too. Britain is slowly splitting socially along lines which the 2001 Census will allow us to draw on the map and see ever more clearly. It is dividing in ways that are largely invisible without access to a detailed census to see.

This division is not a story of extremes. It is *not* a tale of a few gentrifying areas and gated estates, of a few inner city slums or derelict pit villages. This is a story that involves the places in which almost all people in Britain live, and changes which are

often so gradual that they are barely perceived and which official sample surveys cannot hope to uncover. And the implications of this story will be played out for at least 70 years to come. We very much hope a Special Areas Act will not be needed in 2073 – but if society continues to change at its current rate and in its current direction, it will be. Britain's cities, towns, and villages are dividing, both within them and between them, from the countryside, across the north and the south, and between the three nations. There has been no halt to what began in the early 1980s.

On a more optimistic note, one advantage of the long history of the Census is that we can see that increasing geographical social divisions are not inevitable. They fell most quickly and dramatically between 1931 and 1951. We have shown elsewhere¹ how they hardly changed between 1971 and 1981 (and certainly fell between 1971 and 1979). Inequalities almost certainly fell in the 1960s, although there is, as yet, no access to the digital records of the 1961 Census held in the electronic public record office.

Past Censuses have shown that the nation came together geographically after Labour governments had been in power. The current government has a chance to maintain this record, but we may now not be able to measure any successes until 2011, unless a 2006 mid-term census is funded.

There is, however, an alternative to a mid-term census. A major programme is under way to create a year-by-year series of neighbourhood statistics for small areas using administrative records. Already some statistics from around the years 1997 and 1998 are available on the ONS 'Neighbourhood Statistics' website,² and already some Census data have been added there. Much more is planned and promised. Perhaps we will soon be able to use these statistics to monitor the changing geography of society year by year rather than decade by decade. And perhaps the resulting more frequent reminders of how society is changing might inspire others to work harder to narrow the growing divides.

Professor Danny Dorling is with Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, and **Professor Phil Rees** is with the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. This article draws upon a paper published in *Environment & Planning A*.

Note

1 For more details see D. Dorling and P. Rees: 'A nation still dividing: the British Census and social polarisation 1971-2001'. *Environment & Planning A*, 2003, 35, pp.1287-1313

2 <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/Default.asp>