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Why do we need a Census?

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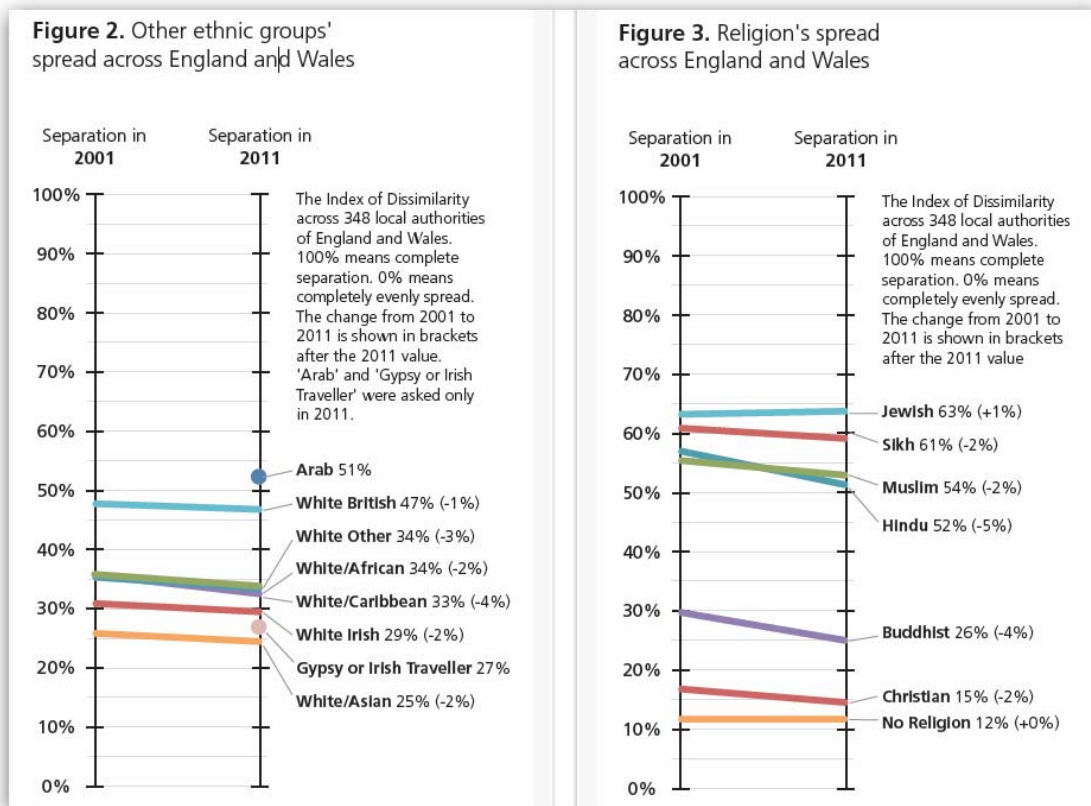
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The Census held in 2011 could well be the last of its kind. There is currently a review underway, but already government has proposed that there be no traditional Census held in 2021. A two-century-old decadal tradition, interrupted only by World War Two, is currently ear-marked to end.

I do not believe it, but I am told that if the current government decision is not reversed during 2013, then there will be no budget for another Census and too little time to reinstate it in the planning, even if there is a change of governing party in 2015. What is so odd about all this is that the Census is a cheap, old-fashioned, rather conservative survey. A Coalition that believes in small government would normally be expected to favour a Census over most of the workable alternatives, unless it would rather there were no reckoning at all.

Other countries have population registers so they know how many people there are and how they are coming and going, but the current UK government is opposed to ID cards and hence a population register. Several Scandinavian countries put their registers on-line including information on the tax paid by each individual so that everyone is able to check and ensure there is no evasion. I don't think this is what the UK government had in mind when it announced the end of the Census, but maybe I am too pessimistic.

The Census allows social scientists to determine in what direction the trends are going. Within a week of the 2011 results being published, Ludi Simpson and Stephen Jivraj, on behalf of the [Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity at The University of Manchester](#), had analysed the results and determined that every single ethnic minority group within England and Wales had become more dispersed geographically despite rising in numbers in most cases. The same was true of every religion group except for the Jewish religion [1]. [These findings can be downloaded here](#), the graphs are here:



In the week before Simpson and Jivraj's analysis was complete, the UK press had already decided that the rising numbers of many groups of people born outside of Britain meant that there had to be ethnic polarization within Britain. They were wrong, and

because we had a Census and hence data for every local authority, it was possible to show that they were wrong. Without a Census we would not know.

Without a Census we will have no idea about how our towns and cities are changing. We will not know whether we are more all in it together, or if we are polarizing yet more economically while still mixing more by ethnicity. If there is not even an adequate replacement for the basic counts of people by age and sex in small areas then we will not be able to determine whether life expectancy has begun to fall in any area in the years to come. It last fell in particular places for particular groups during the 1930s depression.

Without a Census in 2021 there will be no graphs of the kind shown in the [University of Manchester report](#). The shrillest voices will win over the most informed. Without a Census we will not know if there are actually enough bedrooms for all to be housed and where they are, we will not know who is working at more than one job, for too many hours, and who has too little work. We will not know where children are doing worse at school in a way that allows us to take account of all children (not just those at school and in the state-schools records) and we will not know where their prospects are most favourable when measured more widely. We will not know what it is that we are all together in, and how it has changed.

1. From ‘ More segregation or more mixing?’ briefing document from The Economic and Social Research Council’s Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE). A pdf can be downloaded here <http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/>