

Dorling, D. (2013) Why cutting the census has almost nothing to do with saving money, StatsLife (online Magazine of the Royal Statistical Society), December 19<sup>th</sup>, <http://www.statslife.org.uk/opinion/1102-why-cutting-the-census-has-almost-nothing-to-do-with-saving-money>

# Why cutting the census has almost nothing to do with saving money

Written by [Danny Dorling](#) on 19 December 2013. Posted in [Opinion](#)



I cannot help but be exceedingly suspicious of the [proposals by the ONS](#) to cut the decadal census. The amount of money that could be ‘saved’, estimated at between 80p and £1.20 per person per year is clearly not the reason for these suggested changes. There is uncertainty about what the amount might be because there are cheaper and more expensive ways of running a census.

Also, we do not know how many people we will be sharing the costs with in 2021. We do not know what net-migration will be. Cut the census and we may never know what it has been. A cynic might suggest that perhaps the government does not want its migration record to be enumerated in future, but I think the reason cancellation of the census is being proposed is more cock-up.

Ministers are simply not aware of the social science or think they can ignore it with impunity. They should look at what happens when they do that with the relatively uncomplicated case of culling badgers. If you find it laughable when a minister suggests that the [badgers have moved the goal-posts](#) then imagine how tragically sad you might find it when parents are blamed for having too many children to fit in the local school. What will occur when motorists are blamed for buying too many cars to fit on the road or older adults blamed for getting too ill, too often for the available medical care in an area?

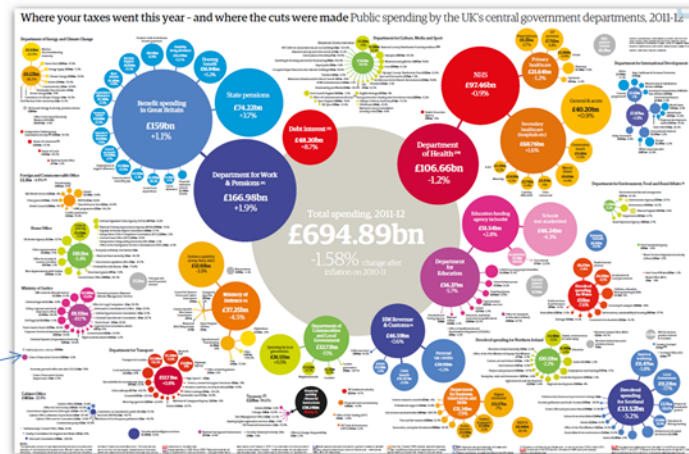
Many coalition ministers also conflate the nineteenth century census with social engineering, but in truth it is a very old fashioned conservative population enumeration brought in by Tories who were worried they had too few troops to put the great back in Britain (and then they never stopped worrying about that). The costs of the census are so small that it would be a dot that was barely visible on the graphic shown below.

## 2011 UK government expenditure

Spending was £695 billion.

The census costs a fraction of that: 0.069%

Total census cost is smaller than this dot. Spread over ten years it is tiny: £48 million a year, or less than 80p each.



The argument that there simply is not enough money is fictional as huge sums of money are found for other government initiatives. Currently the government is spending many dozens of billions of pounds on schemes designed to maintain high house prices. These ‘help-to-buy’ schemes are aimed to underwrite up to £130 billion of new mortgage lending. The idea that the government can afford to do this and that we can all afford the possible future bailout of the banks if house prices were to fall, but that we cannot afford a few million to know who is housed badly or who has far more than they need is ludicrous.

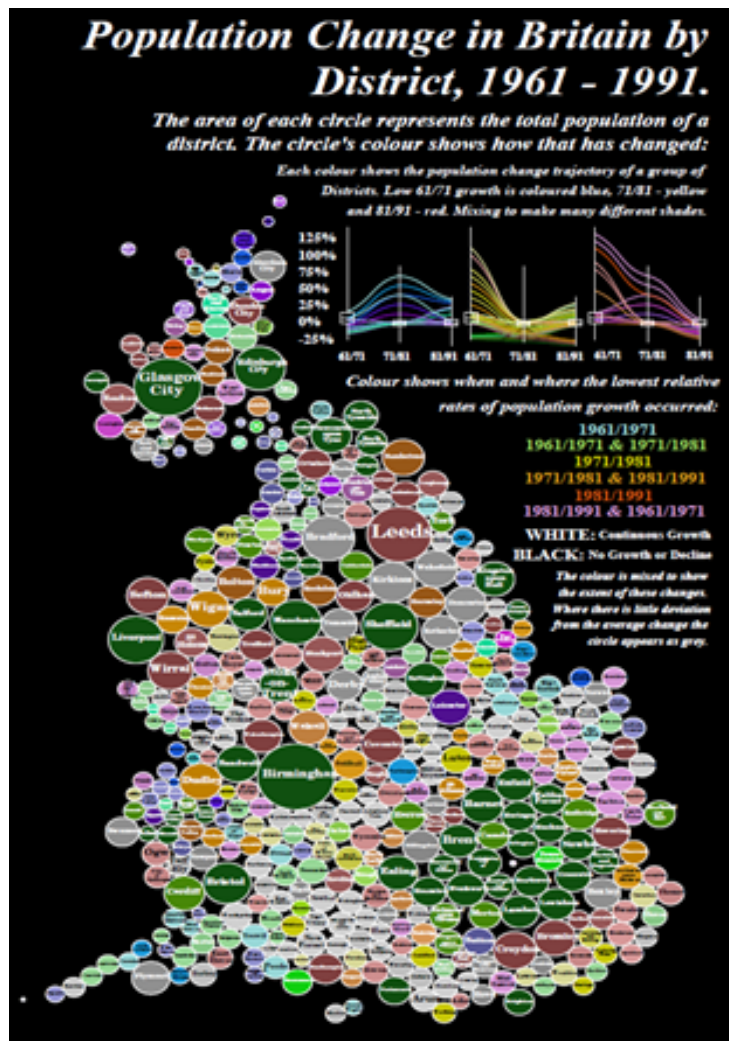
The census tells us where all the empty mansions are in London. It told us that the population of Kensington and Chelsea went down between 2001 and 2011. It points us towards obvious solutions to housing problems. It tells us that there more ‘spare cars’ held by the rich, more households with more cars than potential drivers. Usually these are people who live in very affluent areas and they have more spare vehicles than there are struggling poor families with toddlers and no car. The census gives you clues as to why some families have so little.

The census also tells you, more mundanely, where schools are needed and where there is already a glut of schools for the future children not yet born. The census allows you to plan so that you don’t waste money and use what you have badly. The census is the only true count of how many young people are having their talents and lives wasted. The census measure of unemployment is a far more reliable count of who is looking for work and would like work than the numbers who are able to claim benefits.

The census is what we have used in the past to help us plan our way out of previous economic messes and failed excessive laissez-faire experiments. It took the census of 1931 to reveal just how devastating the 1929 crash had been in its effect on many parts of the country. It took the 1991 census to reveal that a million people were not willing to pay the poll tax. If we want to rely on more than a hoped for fortuitous conflagration of individual aspiration improving our lives then we need to plan and to plan we need to know what is happening.

Alternatively, you might believe it is better to let any group of parents set up a free-school anywhere; or that if young people can't find work it is their own fault and they are too choosy. You may believe that only a basic health service should be provided free at the point of delivery, not one tailored to the needs of local populations. You may believe that people only really value what they pay for. If you believe such things then you may favour not having census data.

Take the city I am now a return migrant to. I was counted in the 1971 census as living in Cowley, Oxford. The census was used to determine the need to build the schools I would later go to. Those schools were not built because parents were willing or able to pay upfront for their children's education. In 1981 the census showed that the city was doing fine, but that other places were not. Government in the 1980s largely ignored what the census revealed, small areas with over half of all men out of work, until many rioted.

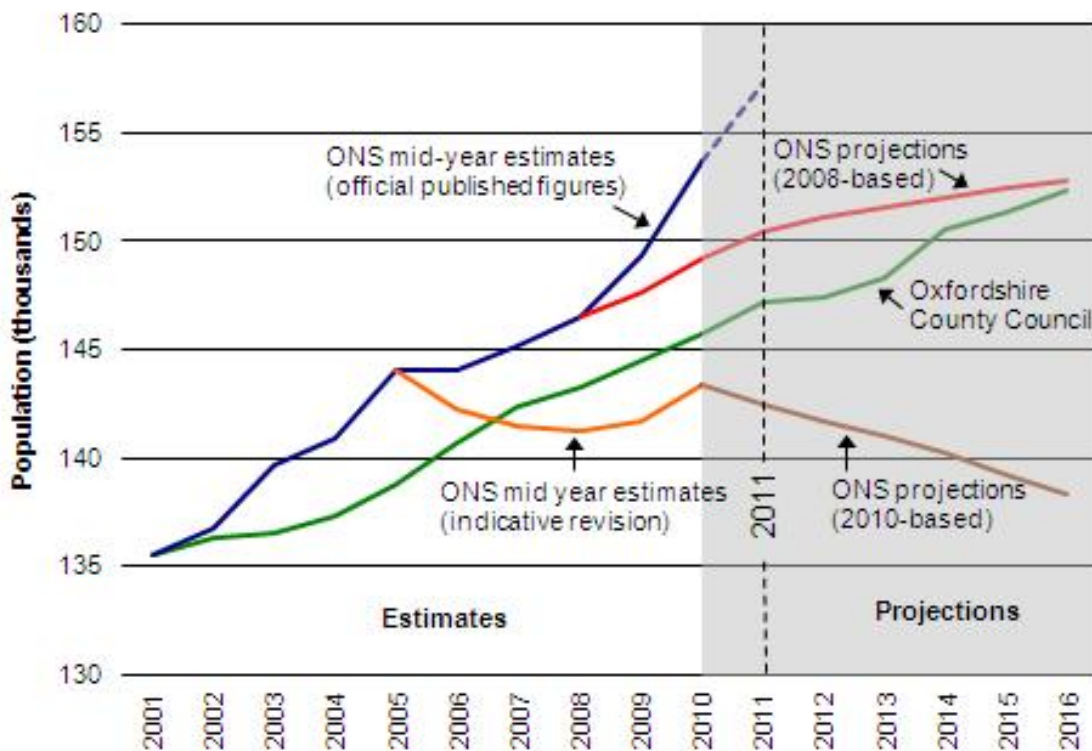


In 1991 the census recorded the size of my home city to still be growing fast and Newcastle, the one I had moved to, was revealed to be shrinking. I first drew the image above back in 1991, it combines census data from 1961, 1971 and 1981 with population estimates for 1991 to show when each part of Britain was faring differently in those decades. The dark green areas have been depopulating, including much of Inner London back then, but not Oxford.

The graph below shows how the population changed in Oxford from 2001 onwards and just how vital the census was in correcting the estimates. Both the map above and the graph below could simply not be constructed from admin records, even modern day ones. Do not believe private sector data companies when they tell you just how good their data is. Their job is partly to lie well about such things.

A few months after the 2011 census was taken there were small scale disturbances in [Oxford](#) and massive riots in [London](#). If you do not built, plan, care and count enough, you get disorder, harm, and most visibly riots. Individual aspiration, left to itself fills up some places to bursting point and empties out others to despair. The reason we have a census is to collectively count for and care for each other because we know that the market, left to itself cannot do this. In fact the market without a strong state fails.

The census consultation, over whether to have the next census or not, is not the only recent ONS consultation. The ONS have been ordered to make a [cut of £9 million in the cost of disseminating the data](#) they provide. To get to that total they have had to offer up hundreds of datasets to be possibly cut. These include stopping the publication of the weekly figures on deaths registered in England and Wales.



Source: Fransham, M. (2012) Oxford's population – think of a number (or, Why we need a Census) Significance Magazine, October 25<sup>th</sup>, <http://www.significancemagazine.org/details/webexclusive/2120151/Oxfords-population--think-of-a-number-or-Why-we-need-a-Census.html>

The weekly mortality figures showed us this year of a [huge rise in mortality among the elderly](#). The annual indicative saving from cutting the weekly dissemination of death counts is between £10,000 and £50,000, or roughly £1 for the death of every extra elderly person who has recently died in Britain as mortality numbers rise. A similar saving is being proposed through soon cutting the annual statistical bulletin on cancer survival in England, or the annual statistical bulletin on suicides in the United Kingdom.

Only the most naïve of commentators could believe that a massive consultation to make savings that are less than a value of a single modest Notting Hill home is anything but a distraction. The reality is that – if there are savings to be made – then these need to be made from those who have the most to give and the least need for much of what they already enjoy.

Britain is one of the richest countries on earth. The census and many surveys help identify where those riches are held. The census, for instance, tells you how many families live in very expensive London homes that are supposedly owned by companies for commercial not residential use. The census also reveals what is still so wrong in our society that needs to be fixed. It shows how many children are full-time carers for their disabled parents, it shows many many people are living in overcrowded homes. The two sides of what all these statistics reveal, of those with the most and those with the least, are not unrelated.

We should plan to use the 2021 census to address the social problem of our time that is currently growing quickest: rising inequality. There are some who do not see that as problem but who would also rather you did not get to see the problem too. The census asked everyone, everywhere, what they have and where they live. The richest 1% can legally avoid it no more than anyone else can. Few surveys can get accurate measures of the lives of the very richest in British society, but no one can hide from a well-designed census.