

Dorling, D. (2021) Census 2021 will reveal how a year of lockdowns and furlough has transformed the UK, The Conversation, March 18th, <https://theconversation.com/census-2021-will-reveal-how-a-year-of-lockdowns-and-furlough-has-transformed-the-uk-157337>

Census 2021 will reveal how a year of lockdowns and furlough has transformed the UK

March 18, 2021 2.29pm GMT

Author



Danny Dorling

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, University of Oxford

Many people may feel unsure as to whether the English, Welsh and Northern Irish census of 2021 should be going ahead, given that it's occurring during a pandemic when many aspects of our lives are far from normal. The census has actually been postponed by a year in Scotland due to these concerns.

Census timing has appeared unfortunate before. The 2001 census took place during the peak of the foot and mouth disease outbreak, amid concerns that census officials might spread the disease between farms.

Because most people will fill in their 2021 census form online, disease transmission is less of a concern this year. But there's another criticism levelled at censuses: that they only ever deliver a snapshot of a population at a specific time, no matter how unusual or temporary the circumstances within a household may be.

There are worries that the 2021 census will capture a particularly distorted snapshot of a country transformed by the pandemic. It'll capture young adults temporarily ensconced in parents' homes, thousands of mainland Europeans who had planned to leave but are temporarily trapped in the UK by lockdown rules, and millions of furloughed workers counted as employed despite the real possibility that they're soon to lose their jobs.

However, there's a strong argument in favour of holding the census now – precisely because so much has changed. The 2021 census won't just capture a unique time in our history; it's also the best way to show which areas and demographics have been newly disadvantaged by the pandemic, helping direct public funds and services to where they're needed the most.



Why hold a census?

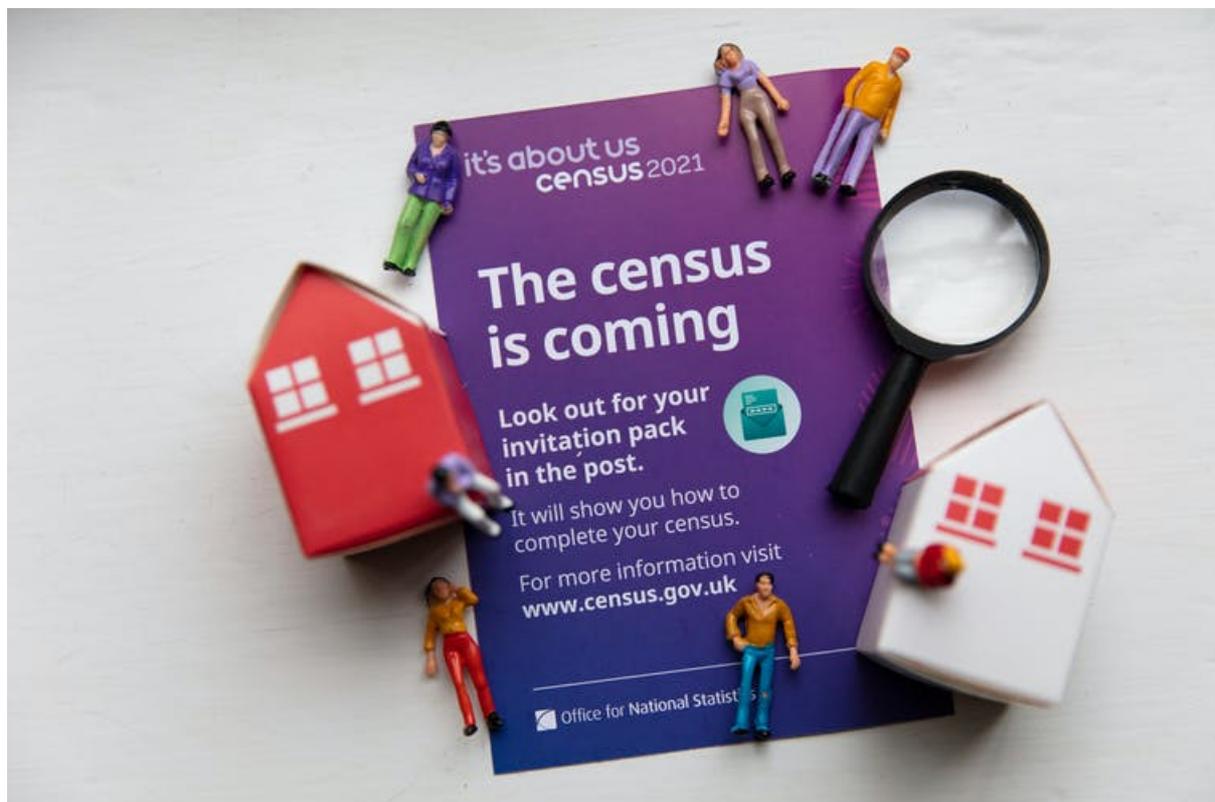
Without the census, held every ten years in the UK, local government would know very little about the composition of the population it currently serves. Officials wouldn't know which areas were falling behind others, which homes were lying empty, or which families were living in cramped and unsafe conditions.

Census data like these underpin the fair allocation of public finances, revealing the areas and even the postcodes most in need of support. Plus,

the census saves the taxpayer money: even the crudest estimate of the value of the census shows that running one every ten years saves £500 million annually in administrative costs.

Previous censuses have been instrumental in improving lives across the country. As Britain built back from 1950s austerity, an extra 1966 census was squeezed between those taken in 1961 and 1971 to help guide the urgent investments of the government of the day.

Censuses also expose hidden inequalities. The 2001 census was the last to ask which floor of a block of flats families lived on, revealing that most children living above the fifth floor in England weren't white. That fact meant a great deal more after the 2017 Grenfell tragedy.



Census 2021 comes at a unique time for the UK – which is what makes it so important.

Census 2021

The 2021 census is not an ambitious census. The number of rooms (other than bedrooms) in a home is no longer asked, as it has been since 1911 (when questions about being deaf and dumb, blind, a lunatic, or an imbecile were dropped). That means we'll no longer know how overcrowded the worst-housed tenth of the population of England and Wales are when compared to the best-off tenth – who had five times as many rooms per person in 2011.

The 2021 census will only ask one new question: whether someone has ever served in the UK armed forces. This could be useful in understanding the links between ex-service people and homelessness. The only other change is that sexual orientation and gender identity have been assigned more categories.

But this census will nonetheless bestow much-needed clarity on a society buffeted by the pandemic. Uncertainty about how many people are actually living in the UK right now – let alone where exactly they live – is higher this year than it has been for many decades. It's thought that over a million people left the country in 2020 who would not normally have left, but we don't know how many really did and if they left for good. This has serious implications for the allocation of funding across regions.

More importantly still, the 2021 census will provide a clearer picture of the inequalities that have come to light since the beginning of the pandemic. The isolation of the elderly, the suffering in old industrial wards, and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities will all be better illustrated and contextualised by this census.

In February 2020, just weeks before the start of the pandemic, the BBC ran a story suggesting that the 2021 census could be the last census. In hindsight, that seems ludicrous: now more than ever, we need the census to tell us even the most basic of facts about our society. Perhaps the pandemic will bring us to our senses when it comes to the value of a census.

I'd argue we go even further, adding an extra census in 2026 which will adequately reflect the damage done by the pandemic, and how equitable the UK's recovery will look a half-decade hence. The pandemic has forced people online, making a largely online census, held every five years, far more feasible and less expensive. Perhaps we should even start to ask household income in our censuses, as they do in the US, to further enrich our data on inequality across the country.

Official statistics like the census are not just for governments but for all of us. Crucially, census data helps us to assess the performance of government. As the UK looks to "build back better" after the pandemic, we'll be able to look to the 2021 census to judge whether new policies tackle inequalities in the regions that need the most help.