

The stability of ethnic group and religion in the Censuses of England and Wales 2001-2011

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Linked records represent only part of a population. Under three quarters of the population enumerated in 2011 was also enumerated in 2001.

The proportion is lower for population groups with a relatively high crude rates of birth, immigration and non-response to the census. For the African, Arab and Other White groups, where immigration has been the major factor in their growth in England and Wales, only one quarter of their 2011 population had also been enumerated in 2001. All other ethnic minority groups are represented in the linked records by between 35% and 60% of their 2011 enumerated population. Linked records of the White Irish and White British groups make up 71% and 80% of their 2011 enumerated populations respectively. Linked records make up between 41% (Muslim) and 78% (Christian) of religion groups enumerated in 2011.

Neither ethnic group nor religion is a stable characteristic for each individual.

Although birth, deaths and migration account for the great majority of change in the size of an ethnic group population between one census and another, there is additional change due to individual change in recorded ethnic group.

4.0% of the linked population moved categories between 2001 and 2011, compared to 2.0% in 1991-2001. Religion was much less stable: 16.4% moved category, after excluding those who chose not to answer the question on either occasion. Some religious change is related to children adopting a religion as teenagers or adults. 'No ethnic group' is not a permitted response while 'No religion' is.

New categories induce changed ethnic identification. For example two thirds of those who chose 'Arab' in 2011 had chosen in 2001 either 'White: Other', 'Asian: Other', or 'Other: Other'.

'Mixed: White and Black Caribbean' gained more people than it lost to other categories, increasing by 16% for that reason alone. The White: Irish group's net loss of 8% to other groups accounts for a significant part of its drop in population by 18% between the two censuses. The Black: Caribbean group's net loss of 3% to other groups gives a context to its overall growth in population of 4%.

Individuals in the White British group showed greatest stability of identity between 2001 and 2011 at 99%, other 'single' groups varied from 97% (Bangladeshi) to 74% (Irish). Between 2001 and 2011 the mixed groups had lower stability: 57% to 77% remained in the same category.

It is recommended that the residual Mixed: Other, Asian: Other, and Black Other ethnic groups are compared over time only when giving a caution that their populations have very low stability – under 50% remained in the same group in both censuses. Stability falls to less than 15% for the final Other: Other category which should only be used to complete tables.

Later reports will show that imputation and UK birthplace are each associated with reduced stability for minority ethnic groups, but that neither age nor social characteristics have clear relationships with the stability of an ethnic group. Census instability is probably a property of ethnic identities that do not fit the pre-worded categories, rather than being random or socially explained.

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