

# A Controversial Census Topic: Race and Ethnicity in the British Census

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**Abstract:** This paper examines attempts to collect data on a politically controversial topic, race and ethnicity, in the British Census of Population in the post-war period. It discusses an indirect, proxy method of inferring race or ethnicity by asking for the country of birth of the respondent and of his parents, and a direct question where the respondent is asked to identify his racial or ethnic group. Different versions of the direct question are examined, as is the 1979 Census test, which resulted in considerable public resistance to the question. Following the

exclusion of the direct question from the 1981 Census, the subject was reviewed by the Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee, the results of whose report – including practical suggestions as to question wording – are discussed. The Census Office (O.P.C.S.) will have to maintain a higher public profile if such questions are to be asked successfully in the future.

**Key words:** Census; race; ethnicity; Britain; self-identification; proxy; census test.

## 1. Britain's Black Population

The subject of race and ethnicity as a possible topic in British Censuses of Population has aroused considerable controversy, as yet unresolved. Britain in the 1980s is a multi-racial society with a significant black minority, amounting to about 4 % of the population (O.P.C.S. (1984, Table 5, p. 4); O.P.C.S. (1986, pp. 25–26)). This minority is of West Indian, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi descent, with smaller numbers from Africa and other parts of Asia. Britain has become multi-racial within one generation, beginning

with large-scale West Indian migration during the 1950s. So far as the identification of black people in the census is concerned, Britain is significantly different from countries such as the United States or the West Indies whose black populations go back several centuries, and where the identification of persons enumerated by race in censuses have much deeper roots in their census traditions. Britain differs also from the countries of continental Europe with large numbers of “guest-workers” from Southern and Eastern Europe and North Africa (Hammar (1985)) whose immigrant populations are ethnically heterogeneous, identified by language and culture, rather than racially distinctive in terms of skin colour.

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## 2. A Politically Sensitive Issue

Politically, race has been a contentious issue in Britain since the late 1950s, and this has influenced attempts to include a question on racial and ethnic origin in the census. The political salience of black immigration explains why the main statistical attention has focussed upon racial minorities and not upon white ethnic minorities such as the Irish, Poles or Italians (for an international perspective see Petersen (1987)). Black immigration on a large scale began as a response to labour scarcity (Peach (1968)), without conscious government action to promote settlement and integration. The resulting competition for scarce jobs and housing with the indigeneous population led not only to considerable racial discrimination but to political demands to limit numbers of black Commonwealth immigrants. These migrants to Britain possess legal and political citizenship, and are thus not temporary in the same sense as "guest workers." Since 1962 successive British governments, both Conservative and Labour, have legislated to restrict further immigration of black workers, which is now negligible, and by various means limit the flow of wives and children of men already settled, particularly the dependents of the later immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. For a decade from about 1965 to 1975, particularly due to the speeches of Enoch Powell, a Conservative M.P. and ex-minister, the politics of immigrant numbers was a salient issue. Powell alleged that the actual size of the black population was considerably larger than estimates from official sources. Although immigration restriction was accompanied by legislation to promote better race relations (by making certain forms of discrimination illegal and establishing government bodies to promote what was euphemistically called "community relations") government policy was widely perceived by the black minorities themselves to be restrictive and inadequate. Their insecurity

was further increased by organized demonstrations by the extreme right-wing National Front, and by calls by a few right-wing Conservative M.P.'s for schemes for the voluntary repatriation of immigrants to their countries of origin. The 1971 Immigration Act discriminated between black and white immigrants by granting the right of free entry to "patrials," people with close connections to the United Kingdom through birth or descent, while imposing further stringent restrictions upon black Commonwealth citizens. The 1981 British Nationality Act, which revised the law relating to citizenship, was also criticized by opposition parties as a measure to reduce the rights of black minorities and discriminate against them (Layton-Henry (1984, pp. 157–160)). Concern among certain black groups about this forthcoming legislation led to public protests which affected the completion of a trial question on race and ethnicity in the main pretest for the 1981 Census, held in 1979. This event is discussed below.

There are several kinds of argument in favour of collecting data on race and ethnicity in the census. The political prominence of the issue of immigrant numbers made it necessary to provide as accurate estimates as possible of the size of the black population (what government statisticians term people of "New Commonwealth and Pakistani ethnic origin" (Moser (1972))). "New Commonwealth" refers to all parts of the Commonwealth except the "old" white former dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. For demographic purposes these data are essential (Coleman (1983, p. 106)). Many branches of both central and local government need to have accurate information about the size of the black minority population. The disadvantaged economic and social circumstance of black minorities, compared to the white majority (amply documented in successive statistical and research studies) has been seen as a powerful argument for collecting data to monitor change in the

circumstances and the effects of various government policies. Without baseline aggregate census small-area statistics, it also becomes difficult to draw nationally representative samples of black minorities (the procedure followed by Smith (1976, pp. 3–6)). (British practice does not allow samples for government social surveys to be drawn directly from individual census returns that remain confidential, without explicit parliamentary approval.)

### 3. A Proxy Variable

These non-statistical preliminaries are necessary to understand the general climate in which attempts have been made to include a question on race and ethnicity in the British census. In the British censuses of 1951, 1961 and 1966 (the latter a 10 % Sample Census), race and ethnicity was inferred from a proxy question on country of birth. Since most black immigration was then of recent origin, this permitted an accurate count of people of West Indian descent and a reasonably accurate count of persons from the Indian sub-continent, making allowance for the small minority of whites born there because their families were in the civil service, the military, or in business. By 1971, however, it was recognized that an increasing proportion of the black population, the second generation, had been born in Britain and that they would not be identified by a question on country of birth. The 1971 British Census therefore collected information both on country of birth and on parents' country of birth (of both father and mother). The inclusion of the question provoked criticism from the Liberal Party and a campaign for its non-completion by the Young Liberals, which created some publicity but did not materially affect the outcome of the census (Bulmer (1979, pp. 162–165)). When the first analysis of these data was published, it provided the first firm estimate of the

approximate size of the population of New Commonwealth ethnic origin, helping to still the political controversy on that point, and showing the proportion of this group that was U.K.-born to be 36.5 % in 1971 (O.P.C.S. (1975)).

### 4. The Attempt to Find a Direct Question

It was recognized increasingly, however, that birthplace data alone, even complemented with parent's birthplace, was of diminishing value. As more third generation black children were born in the U.K. to U.K.-born parents, the question on parents' country of birth failed to identify a growing proportion of people of West Indian or Asian descent (O.P.C.S. (1978a, pp. 35–43)). Analyses involving parental birthplace also rapidly became quite unwieldy due to the need to cross-tabulate two variables to arrive at the proxy for race or national origin. Instead of a proxy question, the possibility of a direct question on race or ethnic origin, based on self-identification, began to be investigated. A number of models for such a direct question were available, for example from the United States and West Indian censuses, but these only showed the feasibility of such questions in those countries. The precise question asked in Britain would need to be developed on the basis of careful testing to reflect the particular circumstances and ethnic composition of the British population.

Fieldwork by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys began in 1975, and a variety of different forms of question were tried out in sample surveys designed to test the methodology (Sillitoe (1978); O.P.C.S. (1978a, b, c)). The basic form of the first question devised was:

*Race or ethnic group.* Please tick the appropriate box to show the race or ethnic group to which the person belongs, *or from which the person is descended.* The boxes read: 1. White. 2. West Indian

3. African 4. Arab 5. Chinese 6. Indian  
7. Pakistani 8. Bangladeshi 9. Sri Lankan  
10. Any *other* race or ethnic group, or if of  
*mixed* racial or ethnic descent (please  
describe below).

## 5. The 1979 Test Census and the 1981 Census

This version could not, however, be used in the census because the inclusion of a question which referred to colour (in this case "white") was judged not appropriate for a government inquiry which was compulsory. A different version was therefore produced which was used in the 1979 Test Census, a voluntary enumeration covering the entire London Borough of Haringey (O.P.C.S. (1981)). The Haringey Test Census incorporated a split-half design. Half of all schedules included questions asked in the 1971 Census of Population about country of birth and country of birth of father and of mother. The other half included a modification of the direct question on race and ethnicity which read:

11. Racial or ethnic group. Please tick the appropriate box to show the racial or ethnic group to which the person belongs. If the person was born in the United Kingdom of West Indian, African, Asian, Chinese or "Other European" descent, please tick one of the boxes numbered 2 to 10 to show the group from which the person was descended. The boxes read: 1. English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish 2. Other European 3. West Indian or Guayanese 4. African 5. Indian 6. Pakistani 7. Bangladeshi 8. Arab 9. Chinese 10. Any *other* racial or ethnic group, or if of mixed racial or ethnic descent (please describe below).

The results of the test census were seriously affected by hostility towards the questions on racial or ethnic group, parents' birthplaces and own country of birth, expressed by certain

local black organizations and given publicity in the media. In particular 25 000 copies of a leaflet were said to have been distributed linking these questions to alleged plans for new nationality laws that "would make nationality dependent on your parents' nationality, not where you were born..... If we say now who is or is not of British descent, we may one day be asked to 'go home' if we were born here or not" (quoted in O.P.C.S. (1981, p. 37)). In the event only 56 % of the households in the test census completed the forms, compared to a usual response of about 70 %. Among black minorities the proportion was much lower. Only one-quarter of West Indian households and two-fifths of households originating from the Indian subcontinent filled in the test census form. The quality of the answers on the completed forms was also much inferior to that obtained in previous tests in the period 1975–1978. Of the West Indians and Asians who did complete the form, as many as one-third said in a follow-up interview that they objected in principle to the inclusion of these questions in the next census. Even greater objections were expressed to the parents' country of birth question. The largest proportion of errors occurred in recording information about second generation U.K.-born persons arising from ambiguity about what "English, etc." in the first box really meant. This applied both to people of West Indian and Asian descent and to people of continental European descent (O.P.C.S. (1981, pp. 43–45)).

The actual 1981 British Census did not include a direct question on race and ethnicity or on parents' country of birth. The decision to leave such questions out was taken at political level by ministers (Glennie (1985, p. 5)). The census did, however, include a question on country of birth, which has been used to produce tabulations using "country of birth of the head of household" as a proxy variable for race. There were several reasons for this

decision to exclude the question. General reductions in government expenditure dictated a shorter schedule and fewer questions than for previous censuses. It was argued by some that existing sources, mainly sample surveys, were an adequate alternative. The stormy experience of the Haringey Test Census showed how public opinion could be aroused, increasing non-cooperation with the census in general, producing poor quality data, and prejudicing its success. In November 1982 Registrar-General A.R. Thatcher told M.P.s:

What we did conclude was that there were some very articulate people around who were opposed to the question. If the same thing had happened in the full-scale census it would have been pretty disastrous – that was one conclusion. But the other and quite separate conclusion was that at Haringey so many people did not answer the question, it did not obtain the right information. If I remember, only 14 % of the West Indian households not only answered the questions but gave the right answers. The information would have been useless – that was the second conclusion from the test at Haringey (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (1983, Vol. II, pp. 109–110)).

## **6. The House of Commons Select Committee**

The matter did not rest there. In 1982, the Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (a select committee of Parliament) began an enquiry into whether ethnic or racial questions should be asked in future censuses. They invited written evidence from central government departments, local government, health authorities, community relations councils, academic social scientists and other interested organizations, took oral evidence from a variety of sources including those both in favour and opposed to such a question (including local sessions in three areas of black settlement) and visited the U.S.

Bureau of the Census, the city of Chicago, and Canada to acquaint themselves with the statistical measurement of race and ethnicity in North America.

The sub-committee emphatically favoured asking a direct question about race and ethnicity in future censuses. Its report and appendices (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (1983)) provide a fascinating insight into the issues and the division of opinion on the desirability and feasibility of such a question. Its report has been described as “optimistic” (Booth (1983)), arguing strongly that definitive data on racial and ethnic origins are needed if racial discrimination and disadvantage are to be eradicated. To counter the anxieties of many members of ethnic minorities who feared possible misuse of the data in certain hypothetical future situations or who doubted the value of such a question, the committee recommended additional safeguards for the confidentiality of census data, including the destruction of census schedules after the statistical data (excluding names and addresses) has been computerized. To underline the objective of collecting the data to improve the condition of black minorities, they recommended that this objective should be stated on the census schedule. They recommended that questions on nationality, date of immigration or parents’ country of birth should *not* be asked. In designing the census, O.P.C.S. should go over to a self-enumeration question that allows people to identify themselves in a way that they find acceptable. The question used should not compel people to define themselves solely by their descent, but in ways acceptable to them such as black British, black West Indian or black African. The committee went so far as to recommend the following specific form of question:

*Racial discrimination and disadvantage.*  
The answers to these questions will help government, local authorities, employers and other organizations to identify racial

discrimination and disadvantage, to develop more effective policies against them, and to monitor the progress of these policies.

- a. Are you white? Yes/no
- b. Are you black? Yes/no  
If you *are* black, are you British/West Indian/African/Other (tick as many boxes as apply)
- c. Are you of Asian origin? Yes/no  
If *yes*, are you British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/West Indian/Chinese/Vietnamese/Other (tick as many boxes as apply)
- d. Other groups  
Are you Mixed race/Arab/Greek Cypriot/Turkish Cypriot/None of these (tick *one* box)

In addition, the inclusion of a question was recommended on religion for Southern Asian groups only, distinguishing between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. A question on language should also be included, encompassing not only languages other than English (which should include Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali and Punjabi) but *also* English-speaking ability.

These proposed questions have not yet been tested in empirical research, but following the government's response to the report (Government Reply (1984)), further methodological research is currently being undertaken by O.P.C.S. to test alternative ways of asking an ethnic question, including the questions proposed by the select committee. In its reply, the government observed that a question on religion would require an amendment to the 1920 Census Act, and that in general it did not think religion a suitable topic for a compulsory census. However, both religion for South Asian groups, and language, would be included in the small-scale tests of reliability and acceptability of question wording currently being undertaken.

## 7. Conclusions

The story is an unfinished one, and at the time of writing in October 1986 there is no indication about the likely content of the 1991

Census. Clearly a question on ethnic origin is a candidate for inclusion, but one about which it will not be easy to reach a decision (Glennie (1985 p. 5)). Some general points may, however, be made in conclusion.

### 7.1. The conceptual issue

The problem is in part a conceptual one, which can only be touched on here. What do the terms "race" and "ethnicity" denote? There is general agreement among social scientists that they do not refer to objective characteristics of people, but to the way in which members of a society perceive differences between groups in that society and define the boundaries of such groups, taking into account physical characteristics such as skin colour (Bulmer (1986, pp. 54–57)). Given this, a self-assessment question is a particularly appropriate way to determine a person's racial or ethnic group, though the term "race" carries opprobrium in some circles. It is noteworthy that whereas the 1970 U.S. Census headed the racial and ethnic question: "Color or race," in 1980 the question merely asked: "Is this person" and then gave a series of 15 alternatives beginning: "White/Black or Negro/Japanese/Chinese/etc...." (Rothwell (1985, pp. 142–143, 152)). The term "race" was dropped.

Lack of absolute conceptual clarity need not be an insuperable objection to framing a workable question on race and ethnicity. As William Kruskal has observed:

(T)here is no ultimate truth about most – perhaps all – classifications. It would be lovely if there was a truth that one might hope to approach asymptotically and treat deviations from as simple measurement errors. Alas, no; there is essential ambiguity most or all of the time, yet an ambiguity that needs to be understood as well as possible if society is sensibly to use statistical results based on an ineluctable fuzziness (1981, p. 511).

## 7.2. *Framing a question*

In attempting to frame a satisfactory question, it has proved difficult in Britain to reduce race and ethnicity to a single dimension and construct fixed-choice categories. The first form of the question used in the O.P.C.S. test included both colour ("white") and area of origin, and this may be criticized on grounds of incommensurability. On the other hand, such a question has been successfully used in several large-scale British government surveys: the National Dwelling and Housing Survey covering 375 000 households in 1977, the Labour Force Survey since 1981 and the annual General Household Survey since 1983 (Bulmer (1980, pp. 7–10); Booth (1985); O.P.C.S. (1986)). In the less visible setting of a voluntary sample survey the question appears to work.

The test census version, replacing "white" with two categories, "English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish," and "Other European," appears to work less well, in particular because of uncertainty as to how second-generation black people are to be classified. The intention that, for example, second-generation West Indians should classify themselves as of West Indian descent may not accord with their self-perception as English-born "black Britons," and would also seem particularly likely to arouse some of the political sensitivities mentioned earlier. Whether the Select Committee's preferred question is better may be seriously doubted; question design is best left to professionals. There are various criticisms of it. Although it appears to consist of filter questions, in fact all persons enumerated would be expected to answer all questions. How answers to question (c) would be interpreted is far from clear, if more than one box were ticked. Nor is it clear that a stark choice between "black" and "white" would identify many of the smaller, though numerically significant ethnic minorities in Britain such as Chinese, Malaysians, Cypriots, Maltese or

Arabs. Whereas "white" has some plausibility as a category to identify light-skinned people, "black" does not have the same all-inclusive properties in Britain applied to dark-skinned people. The difficulties of question wording lie in trying to combine a question about skin colour for some respondents with a question about area of origin (e.g. West Indian) or ethnic origin (e.g. Chinese) for others, in order to determine race.

## 7.3. *Consultation, preparation and publicity*

A British census question on race cannot be considered apart from the political climate and the circumstances under which the census is conducted. It is no accident that British social scientists, whom one might have expected to urge in unison the inclusion of a race question in the census, are in fact sharply divided on the issue (Royal Statistical Society (1983, pp. 103–114); House of Commons (1983, Vol. II, pp. 138–166; and Vol. III, pp. 135–154)). There was virtually no lobbying by them in favour of such a question in the 1981 Census. Several explicitly argued to the Select Committee that such data should not be collected in the census.

Nor have representatives from the ethnic minorities, particularly the West Indian community, been active in support of such a question. There is deep-laid scepticism about whether the government is genuinely committed to the eradication of racial discrimination and disadvantage. In the late 1970's the main pressure for such a question came from the government-sponsored Commission for Racial Equality, not from advocacy groups or the ethnic minorities themselves. Politically, data on the size of ethnic minorities in Britain have been treated negatively, in terms of exaggerated statistics of immigration, rather than positively as information likely to lead to increased resource allocation to such minorities. Ethnic minority spokesmen have contended that the disadvantages they suffer are

well-known. What is needed on the part of government is greater political will to tackle racial disadvantage directly. In the statistical field the main objective should be to monitor the effectiveness of programmes aimed to ensure equality of treatment in the labour market, in schools, in local authority housing departments, and other public services. This is achieved by improved record keeping rather than by censuses or surveys.

The case for the collection of census data on ethnicity was most clearly stated by the Select Committee. There are strong technical arguments, too, for such a question to be included. Sample surveys, particularly large-scale ones such as the Labour Force Survey, may for some limited purposes be an adequate alternative for national estimates (O.P.C.S. (1986)). For data below the national level, however, particularly for local authorities and health authorities, the census is an essential source. Local monitoring is not an adequate alternative either. The census also provides the opportunity to cross-tabulate a wider range of demographic and social variables with race and ethnicity. The census is, on a national scale, a form of monitoring that provides national benchmarks on topics like employment and housing, and it is through monitoring employment and housing that the impact of equal opportunities policies may be assessed (Bulmer (1980)).

The practical conclusion drawn, given the political sensitivity of the subject, reinforced by the experience of the U.S. Census Bureau, is that if a question on race and ethnicity is included in the census, very extensive prior consultation with a wide range of bodies representative of racial minorities is required. Advisory committees on the model of the U.S. Census Bureau Census Advisory Committees on the Black Population, the Spanish Origin Population and the Pacific American Population are needed at the apex of this consultation process to channel advice

to those conducting the census, including advice on the form of the question. The Select Committee also recommended the establishment of a unit within O.P.C.S. on the model of the U.S. Census Bureau National and Community Services Programs to consult organizations representing and involved with racial minorities several years before the census, and to publicize the benefits of the census for minority communities and key individuals. Present British practice in this respect is wholly inadequate – both in scale, visibility and effectiveness – to the task of devising questions on a controversial topic such as race. The government's reply to the Select Committee (Government Reply 1984: paras 22–25) is cautious about steps which might be taken and shows no sign of giving the issue the prominent attention it requires.

Another most important practical implication is that at the time the census is taken, extensive reassurance of members of ethnic minorities must be provided about the confidentiality of the census, with, if necessary, extra measures such as the return of census forms directly to a central office, not to the enumerator. Publicity explaining the reasons for including a race question would be required, including the support of significant black and Asian organizations and leaders. The Select Committee recommended greater use of ethnic enumerators in areas of predominant black and Asian settlement, and the employment of more local staff by the census office, working through local organizations, to explain in detail why such sensitive and potentially controversial data were being collected. In the 1970 U.S. Census, the Census Bureau distributed a leaflet (quoted in full in Bulmer (1980, pp. 13–14)) supported by 34 black organizations, for example C.O.R.E., S.C.L.C., N.A.A.C.P., and others urging black Americans to participate, which read in part:



On Census Day, say it Loud and Clear  
I'm Black,  
I'm Proud,  
and I AM HERE!  
Be Counted Baby.

Such flamboyance is at odds with the customary discretion and low profile adopted in the taking of the British Census of Population. If, however, a topic as controversial as race and ethnicity is to be included, then arguably a much more visible and articulate public presence will be needed on the part of the national census organization and those whom it enlists in support.

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