

How have people's ethnic identities changed in England and Wales?

Summary

Anonymous records linking responses to each census allow us to track how individuals express their ethnic identity across time.

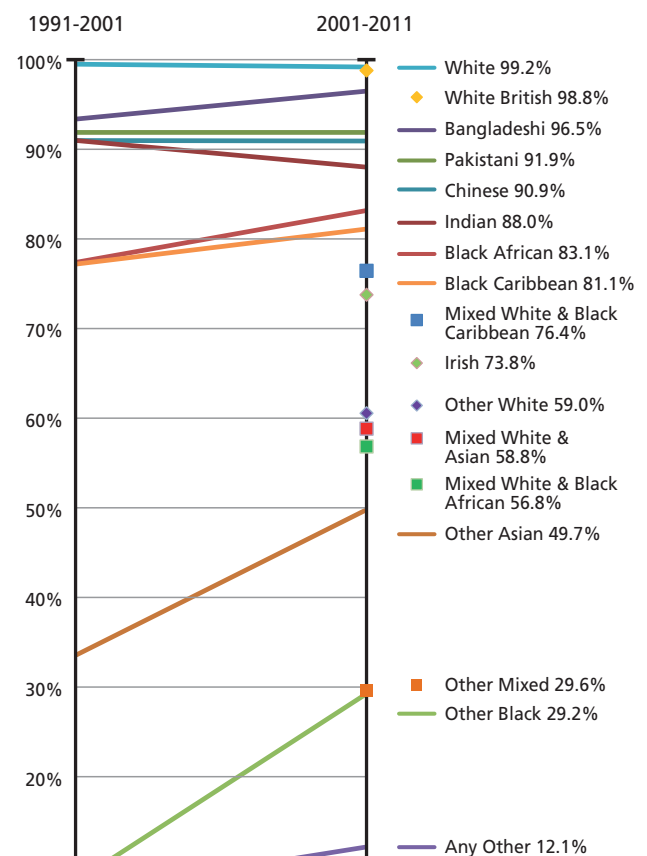
- Ethnic group is not a fixed characteristic during a person's life.
- 4% of all people chose a different ethnic group in 2011 than in 2001. This is twice the level of instability found for the decade 1991 to 2001.
- Among the main ethnic group categories, 1% of White British in 2001 changed their ethnic group when asked again in 2011. 4% of Bangladeshi, and 26% of Irish changed their ethnic group.
- A larger proportion of those in mixed ethnic groups changed their recorded category (for example 43% of White and Black African in 2001 identified with another census category a decade later).
- A change of ethnic group category in the census is often due to a person's background fitting more than one category; it need not involve a conscious change of ethnic identity.
- The main categories of ethnic group can be compared from one census to another, but the residual 'Other' categories cannot. A recommended comparison of most stable groups identifies 7 groups for comparison from 1991 to 2011, and 12 groups for comparison from 2001 to 2011.

Introduction

The growing diversity of England and Wales has been shown in previous census Briefings in this series (See *How has ethnic diversity grown 1991-2001-2011?*). The sizes of the White British and White Irish ethnic groups have decreased slightly, while the total population of other minority ethnic groups has grown by about 50% between 2001 and 2011.

Most change is due to the balance of births, deaths and migration, which vary between ethnic groups (See *What makes ethnic group populations grow?*). A smaller

Figure 1. Stability of ethnic group 1991-2001 and 2001-2011



Note: The figure shows the percentage staying in the same ethnic group from one census to the next. After each group's name is the stability in 2001-2011. The stability of the seven categories introduced in 2001 can be shown only for the period 2001-2011.

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proportion of the change is due to people choosing a different ethnic group when asked more than once. This Briefing explores those individual changes from one census to another.

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A change in ethnic group can happen because of errors in recording, or changes in the question. However, a person might tick a different ethnic group because their family background and personal affiliation fit more than one category offered in the census (see box on p3).¹

Stability of ethnic group

The proportion of people staying in the same ethnic group from one census to the next is shown in Figure 1. Almost all of those who in 2001 ticked White British, 98.8%, also ticked White English/Welsh/Northern Irish/Scottish/British in 2011. The label had slightly changed between the censuses but was adopted by almost all the same people. In 1991 there was only one 'White' option, and 99.2% ticked also one of the White options in 2001.

For the minority groups Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese, Indian, African and Caribbean, the proportion staying in the same category was between 80% and 97%. Significant proportions of people choosing a group in 2001 chose a different group in 2011. The proportions staying in or moving from a group changed a little from what was the case for 1991-2001, but not by much. Some people moved in opposite directions, which we examine below.

The Mixed categories were asked only from 2001, and so their stability in the census can only be measured for the period 2001-2011. It is lower than the 'non-mixed' groups, with over 40% of those choosing 'Mixed White and Asian' or 'Mixed White and Black African' in 2001 moving to a different category in 2011.

The stability of residual 'Other' groups – the option under each broad heading to write in an answer – was generally low. 59% of those ticking 'Other White' in 2001 stayed with that category in 2011, just under 50% of 'Other Asian' stayed there, only 30% of 'Other Mixed' and 'Other Black' stayed in those categories, and only 12% stayed with the final category 'Any Other'. Even these low levels of stability were sometimes higher than those for the period 1991-2001.

This does not mean that a lot of people responded randomly or without thought to the question. It means that their family background does not fit easily into a single category and so was entered differently at each census. For example a Latin American who had been in Britain for many years might enter themselves as White British or Other White or Any Other. The child of parents with Chinese and Caribbean heritage might choose different categories on different occasions. This is a reason for research to consider country of birth, religion and language together with ethnic group.

The low stability of the residual categories apart from 'Other White' means that they not only include a diverse

Studying how an individual changes over time

The Office for National Statistics' Longitudinal Study links together census and other demographic data for about 1% of the population in England and Wales. It does not retain name or address, and no identifiable information about individuals may be released. It offers a valuable perspective of how individuals change their circumstances, that adds to the snapshot of the population which each census provides.

This briefing studies change over the decades 1991-2001 and 2001-2011. It includes those who were enumerated in two censuses. About three quarters of the 2011 resident population were enumerated in both 2001 and 2011 censuses and linked in the Longitudinal Study. This proportion is 80% for White British, and drops to about one third for the Arab, African, and Other White groups which had relatively large proportions of births and immigration during the decade.

set of origins but also that a comparison of the group from one census to another is comparing different sets of people, and should be made with great caution.

Although the White British group's stability is highest of all ethnic groups, it is so much bigger in population size that the number moving from it, about 450,000, is more than from any other group.

Among all those who were enumerated in both censuses, 4.0% changed their recorded ethnic group between 2001 and 2011. This is exactly double the instability between 1991 and 2001 (2.0%), in spite of the greater changes to the question during the earlier period.

The larger instability is due to the changed composition of the population, which now has more residents with ethnic identities that are not easily included within the existing census categories. It may also be that as people have grown used to the idea of defining their own ethnic group, more are choosing to define themselves differently. We can explore this by looking at the direction of change between groups.

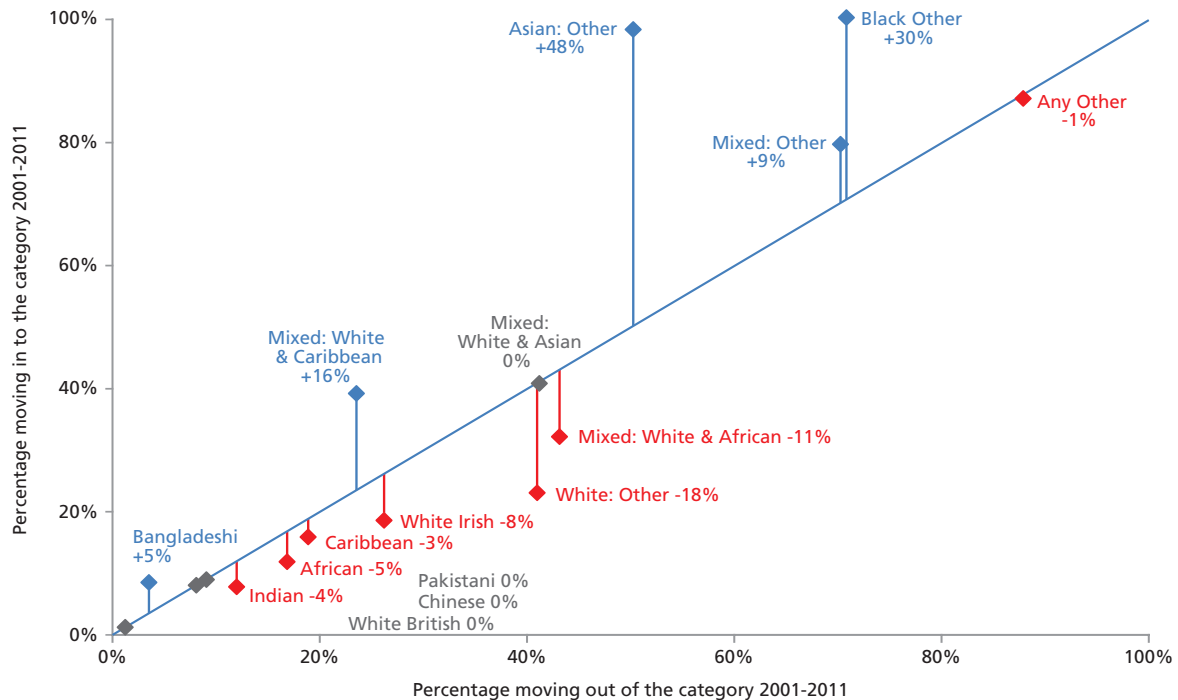
Net transfers from other ethnic groups

While some people move away from each group, others move to it. Figure 2 shows the extent of moves to and from each group between 2001 and 2011, and the net impact on the size of the group.

For some groups, even the very unstable ones like 'Any Other', the moves to and from the group balance out and the net transfer is very small.

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Figure 2. Net transfer to each ethnic group from other categories, 2001-2011



Notes: The net transfer to a group between the censuses is the difference between those moving in to it and those moving out of it.

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Why would a person's ethnic group change?

More than one response is suitable for the same person. We cannot quantify this exactly, but it is likely to be the biggest reason for instability. For example, a person with Turkish family origins and British nationality might choose between 'White British', 'Other White' and 'Any Other' without changing their sense of identity. Someone with parents born in Ireland and Nigeria might also choose different ethnic categories on different occasions.

The census question has changed since it was introduced in 1991². Four Mixed categories were added in 2001, and the White category divided. The 2011 census saw fewer changes; it added categories for 'Arab' and 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller', and it moved 'Chinese' into the broad 'Asian' category, meaning for example that those of non-Chinese Far Eastern origins are likely to have moved from 'Any Other' (in 2001) to 'Other Asian' (in 2011). The new categories in 2011 account for 5% of those who moved to a different category from their 2001 record.

When the question has not been answered, an answer is estimated by the Census offices (it is 'imputed'). Records with estimated values in either 2001 or 2011 account for 20% of those who moved to a different category from their 2001 record.

A different person may have filled in the form at each census. This is particularly likely when a child in 2001 had become an adult by 2011. We cannot quantify this effect but it is likely to be small because we have found that stability in identification is not strongly related to age.

A conscious change in identity. As we go through life, both our perception of official enquiries such as the census and our sense of ethnic identity may change, and for this reason we may decide to declare ourselves differently in the census.

Errors in the census collection. A person may unintentionally tick a box, or the process that scans answers from a form onto a computer may create an error. These are unlikely to be major reasons for instability in ethnic group but will add a little 'noise' to the data.

Changes in the allocation of write-in responses. The census offices reviewed and changed some of the allocation of write-in answers. The major example is 'Kashmiri' which in 2011 was added to the residual 'Other' categories, rather than to 'Pakistani' as in 2001.

About half the level of instability between two censuses a decade apart also occurred between the same question asked twice only 6 weeks apart³. This confirms that instability is to be expected due to the unreliability of responses rather than conscious changes in identity.

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For some groups like the White Irish and 'Other White', the net transfer is negative – more people moved out than moved in – making a net loss of 8% and 17% respectively. The full matrix of moves¹ shows that the net movement away from both these groups was mainly to White British, perhaps because that category was phrased more inclusively in 2011 as 'White English/Welsh/Scottish / Northern Irish /British'.

Some groups gained substantially from net transfers from other groups, including Bangladeshi (+5%), and 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean' (+16%).

The three residual groups 'Other Asian', 'Other Black' and 'Other Mixed' each gained substantially, which supports the suggestion that people were more willing in 2011 to write in what they felt to be their specific family origin when it was not named in the categories provided.

These net transfers, even when as large as causing an increase of one half in the 'Other Asian' group, should not be over-stated: they are still small relative to the change in population from births, deaths and migration. The Other Asian population of England and Wales more than tripled in size between 2001 and 2011.¹

Amalgamated ethnic groups and broad categories

A little under half of the transfers between groups are within the broad headings of White, Asian, Black, Mixed and Other. However, the loss of meaning when using a broad category far outweighs the slight gain in stable

responses. The three categories 'Black Caribbean', 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean' and 'Other Black' had significant exchanges between the two censuses, but similarly one could not amalgamate them without losing a great deal of value.

Comparable ethnic groups across censuses

Considering the instability of responses between censuses, it is recommended that when comparing 2001 and 2011 census outputs, twelve comparisons may be made with reasonable confidence because of their relatively high stability: White British, White Irish, Other White, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black African, Mixed White and Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Caribbean and African.

Caution should be made when comparing Other Asian, Other Black and Other Mixed because of the high instability of these responses between the two censuses. They may be best amalgamated with the remaining categories as a single 'Other' category, or shown within each of the broad groups but only for completeness.

For comparisons between 1991, 2001 and 2011 it is recommended that seven categories are used: White, Caribbean, African, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese. The remaining categories can be added into a single residual 'Other' category for completeness but its composition has changed so much that its characteristics should not be compared across time. For comparison between the three censuses, White cannot be easily divided because it was a single group in 1991.

¹ Further detail of the work described in this briefing is given in Simpson, L., Jivraj, S., Warren, J. (2014) The stability of ethnic group and religion in the Censuses of England and Wales 2001-2011. *CCSR/CoDE Working Paper* 2014 University of Manchester.

² *Census ethnic group questions in the UK* What is your ethnic group? Extracted from the specimen Census forms as held on Census agencies' websites.

³ Simpson, L., & Akinwale, B. (2007) *Quantifying stability and change in ethnic group*, *Journal of Official Statistics*, 23(2): 185–208.

Sources: The ONS Longitudinal Study for England and Wales. This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

This briefing is one in a series, *The Dynamics of Diversity: evidence from the 2011 Census*.

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