



The National Census

Introduction

The Census is the main source of data for national population statistics, for which every household is surveyed. It has been conducted every 10 years since 1801, excluding 1941, when Britain was at war. It can seem daunting and dry, but in fact the census is one of the most important sources of social and historical evidence geographers can use in the UK.

The Census is more accurate than any other social survey because other research can only provide estimates based upon smaller surveys known as *samples*. By law, everyone must participate in the national Census, making it a more or less completely accurate picture of life in the UK.

However, towards the end of each 10 year period the facts can start to become inaccurate, as they will no longer reflect real life quite as well, particularly in urban areas that are experiencing rapid social and economic changes due to migration for example.

Before the Census began, the only facts that were kept consisted of church records of burials, baptisms and marriages. These records are sometimes used by geographers researching changes in population structure occurring further back in time than 1801. Otherwise novels and other secondary texts were the only way of guesstimating the population. However, researching more recent changes has been getting easier for several years now, thanks to the web. The results of past Censuses started appearing on-line a few years ago, when the 1901 data was made available. At first, so many people were trying to view the site that it had to be temporarily shut down! This was due to the huge interest in tracing family history that now exists in the UK.

How can old Census records help geographers?

Let's think about the 1861 Census for a minute. Queen Victoria was nearly half-way through her reign and America was in the midst of a civil war when the 1861 Census data were originally collected. Population was still growing rapidly in the UK and transport was limited. In London, people lived at much higher residential densities than today and the sewer system had not been completed (although work had begun). As a result, cholera and tuberculosis outbreaks were still common and people often did not live long lives. The 1861 Census provides a window into a world very different from today. Geography students might be able to investigate the following themes using old Census data, all of which are relevant to the courses that they are taking:



- **Population structure** was very different in 1861. It was a time when birth rates were still high but death rates had recently started falling due to better healthcare and hygiene. As a result, families present in the 1861 Census will probably have very large numbers of children by today's standards.
- **Life expectancy** was still a lot lower than today, however, with many people not living beyond 60. There will therefore be a relative lack of elderly people compared with the present day.
- **Working lives** were also very different. Most people worked in factories or were still tied to the land as miners, stone masons or farmers.

How do I get access to old Census records?

Go to <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census/?homepage=fr-census>

Select the year you want to search for free (between 1841 and 1891). Add as much information as you can.

Names of individuals can be searched for, or actual addresses. If you had family living in the UK at that time, you can search using your surname (perhaps ask your grandparents if they can remember any old family names). If you did not have relatives living in the UK in 1861, then you can still have fun looking up the details of famous people that were alive at the time, such as Charles Dickens or Florence Nightingale (but be careful, many people may have had these names so you will have to look carefully to find the right person).