

# The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

## Should the Census be abolished?

**According to Jennie Beck, Chairman of The Market Research Society and Group Director, NFO Media, the Census is no longer fit for purpose. She was proposing the motion ‘The Census should be abolished’ at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 24 November 2003. The Debate was chaired by Cheryl Gillian, MP for Chesham and Amersham and sponsored by JICREG.**

Jennie Beck pointed out that the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is itself highlighting the Census deficiencies in terms of speed, cost efficiency, consistency and contemporary relevance. She suggested that valid reasons for abolishing the Census are that it has outlived its usefulness or relevance; that it is no longer fit for purpose; that there is a decline in public commitment to it; that there are better and fairer ways of organising things; and that there are cheaper alternatives.

She stressed that the proposers were not proposing the abolition of population statistics. There is obviously a need for some form of population measurement system for policy planning. What they were arguing is that a ten-yearly enumeration is not the way to do it.

The Census is required to be consistent, timely and accurate. As far as the first is concerned it is hard to claim consistency when surveys are so far apart – especially when changes in methodology and population definitions are fed into the mix. More of these changes are planned for the next Census (if there is one), but the future strategy aims to achieve consistent accuracy of estimates rather than setting out to apply consistent methods across all areas – recognition, perhaps, that the one size fits all approach is no longer tenable.

The Census is also required to be timely, but it is woefully slow. Though the count was over 30 months ago, we are still waiting, among other things, for data by postcode sector and for migration data.

The Census is not frequent enough for most commercial uses of the data, but this timescale also means that the Census is slow to respond to changes in population or innovations in research ideas and methodologies.

The third requirement is accuracy and this it does pretty well, though not necessarily better than a large-scale sample survey would do. The Census population figure has a margin of error of 2%, rising to 5% in the areas of maximum uncertainty.

It also has response rates that are the envy of the commercial research sector, but even the Census is falling victim to the declining interest of the population.

Jennie Beck went on to argue that the Census as we know it does not fit with what we are like in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. The enumeration approach itself seems to be suffering from diminishing relevance. We have an increasingly diverse population with, in places, significant population mobility. Yet the Census uses a single approach, a single count of population, on the basis of usual residence on a particular night.

There are other better ways of providing the population data we need. And they are probably cheaper than the 2001 Census.

There is a wealth of government data eg the Labour Force Survey, family resources and expenditure surveys, migration and travel surveys and so on, that in many ways duplicate Census findings. Jennie Beck acknowledged that what we have now cannot fully replace the Census, especially where small area data are concerned.

Looking to the future she pointed out that new sampling methodologies are being used in France and the US to replace the outmoded periodic Census and the ONS itself is monitoring the experience in those countries. We might also have publicly available commercial data to guide policy making.

We might also have the Citizen Information database, drawing together all large public sector databases on the British population, including those for national insurance, income tax, council tax, the NHS, the DVLA and the Electoral Register. There will also be a national address register and with these two in place, she suggested, we can see a future without a Census.

A Census is planned for 2011 and the intention seems to be to match other data such as population and address registers with 2011 Census findings to create a Population Statistics database. This would then be updated regularly and supplemented by continuous population surveys, specific area surveys and possibly, a rolling but reduced Census exercise.

Jennie Beck concluded “It’s good to know that the ONS seems to share my view that the current Census is too slow, too infrequent, uses outmoded methodology, has to live with declining response, is too expensive and could relatively easily be replaced....it does look as if the question is not ‘if’ the Census is abolished, but ‘when’ ”.

## **Unique**

Opposing the motion Jil Matheson, Director of Social Reporting & Analysis Group, Office for National Statistics, pointed to the historical and current relevance of the Census. The Census is an enumeration of the ‘number and condition of the population’ with various unique features.

- *Information* It has information of three kinds: about number in the population, about population structures – how people group together – and about population characteristics ie those with long-term illness, the number of carers – information that is not available elsewhere.

- *Universal coverage*. It includes everyone in the same way – children as well as adults and everyone across the country, not just those who live in particular localities, and not just those who happen to use certain services.

- *Comparability* Information is collected in the same way everywhere, at a single point in time.
- *Small area statistics* The Census has information for small areas and a variety of geographies, whether that be administrative areas or parliamentary constituencies.
- *Single source of information* The Census collects data about different aspects of people's lives and is able to link together data on housing conditions and occupation and more recently, long-term illness and occupation, or ethnicity etc.
- *Transparency* The Census provides trusted information based on an open and transparent process, with confidentiality protected. The Census has no interest in individuals, just in how they contribute to the aggregated, statistical whole. Protecting confidentiality is at the core of the ONS business, so providing high quality information, being open about methods and protecting confidentially is its sole purpose. It is an essential part of the public's willingness to give information.

Jil Matheson went on to discuss the need for the kind of information provided by the Census. From widespread user consultation, already begun for 2011 with a wide range of users – central and local Government, academics and researchers, voluntary and business sectors and community groups – the demand for the Census is overwhelming. The requests for new information, which is not available elsewhere, is again likely to exceed the capacity of the Census to collect (as in 2001 when, for example, there were widespread calls for an income question).

There are increasing demands from policy makers for information to support evidence-based policy. Census information is used in the allocation of some £100 billion of government money annually. The whole Neighbourhood Renewal strategy is, for example, about targeting resources and monitoring change over a whole range of information.

Social and market research companies use the Census directly or indirectly to improve their survey operations. The private sector use it in determining their planning decisions eg where to build a new supermarket. Even football clubs use it. Wimbledon decided to move to Milton Keynes partly by looking at the demographic profile of the MK area.

The 2001 Census has made 2 billion counts available free on the Web. Since the first results were released over 1.5 million people have accessed free Census data on the Web. This is for a total cost of £207 million over 10 years for the 2001 Census – just 40p per person per year.

The results of the Census are subject to more scrutiny than any other information source in this country. Every modern Census has changed over the decades and reflect the social and technological conditions at the time. The 2001 Census was innovative in many ways and the 2011 Census will develop further. More mobile populations and more diverse family structures pose real challenges eg children who split their time between separated parents; workers who spend part of their time working (and living) somewhere and other times living with their families. Defining the population that we want to measure is a big challenge and already being discussed and consulted on for 2011. This is something the ONS can do because it is a distinct activity designed and carried out as a single operation. The issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are part of its discussion documents.

It is also true that there are challenges in getting response, particularly in some inner city areas. Renewed and focused efforts are required in these hard-to-count areas.

These factors do not invalidate the Census. Certainly, for 2011 there is no adequate alternative which can match the unique features of the Census, despite the growing interest in administrative records or databases or surveys. All currently have significant disadvantages and the quality of lists vary enormously across the country. And they are all compiled in different ways, at different times, using different definitions and for their own specific purposes. And they are subject to change as a result of administrative or policy change.

Jil Matheson concluded: “There is huge support for the Census and huge and increasing demand for the information it provides. To abolish it without adequate alternatives – and currently there are not – would be an act of extreme vandalism”.

### **Commercial datasets**

Seconding the motion Clive Humby of dunnhumby, argued that commercial databases are now available that can complement the new national government data resources. We can marry data such as the Electoral Roll, National Address Register, Inland Revenue and Citizen Information databases with data on the population’s behaviour from transaction rich sources such as supermarket loyalty card data, credit card transactions, and other major databases on consumer behaviours. For example, the utilities know who uses gas and electricity and how much they use, how many homes have telephones etc. The list is endless and technology has made fusion of these data sources very cost effective.

Clive Humby pointed out that he had spent the first 13 years of his career building models for commercial and public sectors based on Census data, which predicted the demand for products and services, behaviour of consumers in the catchment area of stores and levels of activity in areas such as smoking and drinking. The first major problem with these models is that the nature of Census data does not take into account the local social, income and expenditure differentials driven by local economies. The second major problem is that the Census is a snapshot in time, yet many of the issues are tackled through communication and resource allocation and we need to understand the trends in change that these major government initiatives provide.

Clive Humby now uses much more timely and rich data sources, such as supermarket loyalty card data and credit card transaction data. Whilst these suffer from lack of 100% coverage, the benefits are that they give much more precise measures and they have the ability to track trends and take a regular pulse on key issues. For example, a factory closing in a town might have a dramatic impact on a local community. Commercial data sources can spot such changes quickly. Today’s technology allows cost effective analysis of 500 million shopping baskets, for 12 million homes and every item purchased, to understand what drives consumer behaviour.

Clive Humby illustrated his argument with information about smoking behaviour, childhood obesity, and dietary behaviour. He argued that census-based models give very little discrimination on such issues, but superb commercial sources of data exist to answer many of the questions about behaviour.

We would still anonymise and aggregate such data. They would provide much more accurate targeting, show trends month on month and allow much better returns than any census-based model. The approach is not restricted to product purchasing through supermarkets. Excellent data exist within utilities on customers' usage and these can be accurately linked to lifestyle lists and other information to profile usage of different groups of the population.

Today's methods for the fusion of large transaction database, research and other data sources have made the Census a blunt irrelevant tool. Because it is so generalised, it can never be a good predictor of any issue, compared with bespoke data, suited to the issue at hand. It costs over £200 million to run the Census and it does not provide answers to the key questions of the day. Models and research are still needed to build an understanding from Census data and provide insight into the key issues.

In the UK massive commercial and public data resources that already give more in-depth insights into issues are available at a fraction of the costs and more quickly.

Clive Humby argued that the Census should be abolished and the resources focused on answering key questions of special needs. Other existing data sources are timelier, offer trends and can measure results from actions taken right down to week on week.

“Let's stop spending £200 million on the pea pod that is the Census and put these resources to work on answering the key questions impacting society today”.

### **Costs**

Keith Dugmore, Director, Demographic Decisions, seconding the opposition, argued that it would be madness to abolish the Census.

He picked up some of the themes. Its uniqueness in having close to a 100% count and information for very small areas was unarguable. It is also indispensable for cross-tabulating topics: not only obvious demographics such as sex and age, but for instance car ownership by religion. Some eminent objectors have suggested that it is an invasion of privacy. On the contrary, participation is part of a civilised society, an affirmation of social capital and a sense of community.

Turning to the question of cost, Keith Dugmore pointed out that its cost of £207 million is a minuscule part of Government spending. One could have three or four Censuses for the price of one Dome! Its value to public services is immense eg distributing grants to local areas; examining council housing by race; analysis of rubbish collection; preventing crime etc.

The Census is a vital ingredient of business in targeting local markets eg for superstores, golf clubs, new city centres; classifying individuals, both customers and prospects; and design of market research surveys. It provides quotas and sample frames with increased accuracy and lower cost. Geodemographic profiling based on Census data is an invaluable market research approach.

The Census had received a lot of negative press coverage. Inevitably some areas are more difficult than others, but the press has reported the extreme cases. Results in Westminster were an exception.

Considerable progress is being made with data from Government administrative records, but there is still a long way to go. There are technical and political hurdles to a Population Register. Sample surveys suffer from bias in size and non-response and do not provide small area data.

Customer databases have problems with coverage, quality and timing. One could model the data but there are still issues of accuracy for small areas and changes over time.

The biggest argument is cost. The Census is a government activity and its results are now freely distributed. If it was abolished, how much would the privately-owned alternatives cost?

Keith Dugmore concluded “The Census should not be abolished until there is a proven better alternative”.

### **Discussion from the floor**

- The Census works with individual data and is very powerful. If the commercial sector provide the data, they do not have to give public access. The information they collect gives them massive commercial advantage: why should they make it available to competitors?
- It is a fundamental basis of a democratic society to have data freely available.
- The Census is much less accurate than any of the speakers were prepared to admit. The population has become more complex, but this is not an argument to abolish it. All people live on illusions. If the Census is the right kind of illusion why abolish it? If the Census was abolished it would be replaced by what the government feels it should be replaced by. There is always something worse around the corner (These cynical remarks were made by the well-known advertising economist Harold Lind).
- The Census is used in local government, particularly health authorities. Alternative data sources would not provide the same information.
- For most purposes the Census is fit for purpose. Non-census data tend to be backed up by calibration of data from the Census. Other data sources might be a means of improving the Census. It is a tremendously good national asset.
- Income data should be put on the Census.

### **Summing up**

Summing up for the opposition Jil Matheson commented that the proposers demonstrated a very narrow view of what the Census is for. It is used in the commercial world, but this in no way invalidates its use in public sector planning and allocation of resources for schools, hospitals and other services.

The strengths of the Census are transparency of method and consistency of application. She acknowledged that there had been criticism of some of the figures, but the Statistics Commission has stated that no alternative approach would have produced better statistics.

There have been ½ million users – the results are freely available as part of public service. How much would it cost to access the myriad and separate commercial databases?

The alternatives are no substitutes for the Census. The Electoral Register, for instance, is designed as a list of people who are eligible to vote. Students can register twice. It is also variable between different parts of the country. It is certainly not suitable as a national source of information.

The Census is about the democratic process of government, in which people can take part. According to the late Dr Mark Abrams “The statistical process of the Census is the eyes and ears of a democratic government”.

The ways in which we do things have to be modified and improved but, as yet, there are no alternatives to the Census.

Summing up for the motion, Jennie Beck remarked that she was surprised that no market researcher in the audience said how much the Census was needed in research. It has been an important factor in market research

particularly for small area data. But market research used it because it was there. Census data are out-of-date for market research.

Democratic involvement in society is becoming increasingly unimportant for people.

No other data source give universal coverage.

The Census should be abolished because it has serious flaws. Even the ONS is looking at changes.

### **The result**

The motion was significantly defeated by a show of hands.

### **Next Debate**

The next debate will take place on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2004, sponsored by The Chartered Institute of Marketing. The motion is "*Marketers focus too much on the customer, at the expense of the rest of the business*" Details from Debating Group Secretary, Doreen Blythe (Tel: 020 8202 5854)

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