

Ethnic Groups in the Census: Categorisation and Change

This document provides key information on the changing ethnic group categories in the 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses of England and Wales. The document provides suggestions on how to compare ethnic groups over time, given these changes. This document currently focusses on England and Wales, but will be expanded to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Use of this resource should be acknowledged as follows:

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Read more on the growth of ethnic diversity and decreasing ethnic residential segregation in England and Wales in *The Geographical Journal*: <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/geoj.12507>

This guidance document accompanies the GEDI Census briefing: Catney, G., Lloyd, C.D., Ellis, M., Wright, R., Finney, N., Jivraj, S., Manley, D. and Nishikido, M. (2024) *England and Wales are Becoming Increasingly Ethnically Diverse and Less Residentially Segregated*. GEDI Evidence from the 2021 Census Briefing Series: Issue 1. Geographies of Ethnic Diversity and Inequalities (GEDI). www.gedi.ac.uk

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Ethnic group categorisation in 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses

A question on ethnic group was first included in the 1991 Census. The completion of the census is a legal obligation, and the ethnic group question is compulsory. When the ethnic group question was first included in 1991, residents of England and Wales selected which ethnic group they ‘descended from’ out of ten given categories: White, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Black African, Black Caribbean, Other Asian, Other Black and Any Other². Changes to the ethnic group question have been made at every census since, as a response to the growth of ethnic diversity, and the evolving needs for ethnic group data.

In 2001, the question asked about ethnic group in relation to ‘cultural background’. White was replaced with White British, White Irish and Other White. Additional response categories also included four Mixed groups (White and Asian, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean, White and Other), Other Black and Other Asian.

In 2011, the question simply asked about respondents’ ethnic group or background. More categories were added: White Gypsy or Irish Traveller and Arab. The White British category was changed to White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (White British is the most commonly used label for this group).

The 2021 question required respondents to tick one box to best describe their ethnic group or background. The ethnic group categories were nearly identical to the 2011 Census in England and Wales, with the addition of a Roma category. The number of ethnic groups provided as possible responses thus increased from 10 in 1991, to 16 in 2001, to 18 in 2011 and 19 in 2021.

To allow for comparisons over time, the number of ethnic groups must be aggregated to match the groups for earlier periods³. These are detailed in Tables 1-3. For comparisons between 1991 and 2001 onwards, it is recommended that eight comparable ethnic groups are used for analysis³. Greater detail is possible when considering changes between 2001 and later time points (2011, 2021), with analysis of 16 comparable groups. Analyses of data between 2011 and 2021 can be undertaken for 18 comparable groups.

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Ethnic group population change in England and Wales

There were 59,597,542 people living in England and Wales in 2021 (Table 4). Out of the total population, nearly 75% identified as White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (hereafter White British) and around 18% identified with an ethnic group other than White. The largest minority ethnic group was Indian, with over 3% of the total population in England and Wales. White British and White Irish populations have been declining over time².

The ethnic groups that have grown the fastest are those that made up smaller proportions of the population when data were first collected in 1991. The remarkable increase of the heterogeneous 'Other' group reflects the diversification of diversity. Despite the inclusion of additional groups at every census, many people still do not self-identify with the pre-prescribed census groups – in 2021, the 'Any Other' category accounted for nearly a million people.

There are several demographic elements shaping the changing ethnic landscape of the England and Wales population: the balance of births and deaths, related to different age structures of ethnic groups, and the balance of in- and out-migration. Additionally, some people may change their ethnic group identity over time, reflecting the variability in how we see ourselves or how we feel others may see us^{2,4}.

Table 1. Consistent Census ethnic groups for analyses for 1991-2001-2011-2021.

Consistent ethnic groups 1991-2021	1991 groups	2001 groups	2011 groups	2021 groups
White	White	White British White Irish Other White	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British White Irish Other White Gypsy/ Irish Traveller	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British White Irish Other White Gypsy/ Irish Traveller Roma
Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian
Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani
Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi
Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
African	Black African	Black African	Black African	Black African
Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean
Other	Other Asian Other Black Any Other	Mixed White and Black Caribbean Mixed White and Black African Mixed White and Asian Other Mixed Other Asian Other Black Any Other	Mixed White and Black Caribbean Mixed White and Black African Mixed White and Asian Other Mixed Other Asian Other Black Any Other Arab	Mixed White and Black Caribbean Mixed White and Black African Mixed White and Asian Other Mixed Other Asian Other Black Any Other Arab

Table 2. Consistent Census ethnic groups for analyses for 2001-2011-2021.

Consistent ethnic groups 2001-2021	2001 groups	2011 groups	2021 groups
White British	White British	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British
White Irish	White Irish	White Irish	White Irish
Other White	Other White	Other White Gypsy/ Irish Traveller	Other White Gypsy/ Irish Traveller Roma
Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian
Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani
Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi
Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
Black African	Black African	Black African	Black African
Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	Mixed White and Black Caribbean
Mixed White and Black African	Mixed White and Black African	Mixed White and Black African	Mixed White and Black African
Mixed White and Asian	Mixed White and Asian	Mixed White and Asian	Mixed White and Asian
Other Mixed	Other Mixed	Other Mixed	Other Mixed
Other Asian	Other Asian	Other Asian	Other Asian
Other Black	Other Black	Other Black	Other Black
Any Other	Any Other	Any Other Arab	Any Other Arab

Table 3. Consistent Census ethnic groups for analyses for 2011-2021.

Consistent ethnic groups 2011-2021	2011 groups	2021 groups
White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British	White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British
White Irish	White Irish	White Irish
Other White	Other White	Other White
Gypsy/ Irish Traveller	Gypsy/ Irish Traveller	Gypsy/ Irish Traveller Roma
Indian	Indian	Indian
Pakistani	Pakistani	Pakistani
Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi
Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
Black African	Black African	Black African
Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean	Black Caribbean
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	Mixed White and Black Caribbean
Mixed White and Black African	Mixed White and Black African	Mixed White and Black African
Mixed White and Asian	Mixed White and Asian	Mixed White and Asian
Other Mixed	Other Mixed	Other Mixed
Other Asian	Other Asian	Other Asian
Other Black	Other Black	Other Black
Any Other	Any Other	Any Other
Arab	Arab	Arab

Table 4. Population counts and proportion of the total population of ethnic groups reported at each Census, 1991–2021⁴.

1991 ethnic groups	2001 ethnic groups	2011 ethnic groups	2021 ethnic groups
Total pop: 49,890,277	Total pop: 52,041,916	Total pop: 56,075,912	Total pop: 59,597,542
White (46,937,861; 94.08%)	White British (45,533,741; 87.49%) White Irish (641,804; 1.23%) Other White (1,345,321; 2.59%)	White British (45,134,686; 80.49%) White Irish (531,087; 0.95%) Other White (2,485,942; 4.43%) Gypsy/ Irish Traveller (57,680; 0.10%)	White British (44,355,038; 74.42%) White Irish (507,465; 0.85%) Other White (3,667,997; 6.15%) Gypsy/ Irish Traveller (67,768; 0.11%) Roma (100,981; 0.17%)
Indian (830,205; 1.66%)	Indian (1,036,807; 1.99%)	Indian (1,412,958; 2.52%)	Indian (1,864,318; 3.13%)
Pakistani (455,363; 0.91%)	Pakistani (714,826; 1.37%)	Pakistani (1,124,511; 2.01%)	Pakistani (1,587,819; 2.66%)
Bangladeshi (161,701; 0.32%)	Bangladeshi (280,830; 0.54%)	Bangladeshi (447,201; 0.80%)	Bangladeshi (644,881; 1.08%)
Chinese (146,462; 0.29%)	Chinese (226,948; 0.44%)	Chinese (393,141; 0.70%)	Chinese (445,619; 0.75%)
Black African (209,589; 0.42%)	Black African (479,665; 0.92%)	Black African (989,628; 1.76%)	Black African (1,488,381; 2.50%)
Black Caribbean (499,030; 1.00%)	Black Caribbean (563,843; 1.08%)	Black Caribbean (594,825; 1.06%)	Black Caribbean (623,119; 1.05%)
Other Asian (192,930; 0.39%)	Mixed White and Black Caribbean (237,420; 0.46%)	Mixed White and Black Caribbean (426,715; 0.76%)	Mixed White and Black Caribbean (513,042; 0.86%)
Other Black (175,755; 0.35%)	Mixed White and Black African (78,911; 0.15%)	Mixed White and Black African (165,974; 0.30%)	Mixed White and Black African (249,596; 0.42%)
Any Other (281,381; 0.56%)	Mixed White and Asian (189,015; 0.36%)	Mixed White and Asian (341,727; 0.61%)	Mixed White and Asian (488,225; 0.82%)
	Other Mixed (155,688; 0.30%)	Other Mixed (289,984; 0.52%)	Other Mixed (467,113; 0.78%)
	Other Asian (241,274; 0.46%)	Other Asian (835,720; 1.49%)	Other Asian (972,783; 1.63%)
	Other Black (96,069; 0.18%)	Other Black (280,437; 0.50%)	Other Black (297,778; 0.50%)
	Any Other (219,754; 0.42%)	Any Other (333,096; 0.59%)	Any Other (923,775; 1.55%)
		Arab (230,600; 0.41%)	Arab (331,844; 0.56%)

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References

Additional helpful resources can be found in the ‘[Related Articles](#)’ section of the [GEDI website](#).

¹ Finney, N., & Simpson, L. (2009) *Sleepwalking to Segregation?: Challenging Myths about Race and Migration*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

² Jivraj, S. & Simpson, L. (2015) Introduction: The dynamics of diversity. In: Jivraj, S. & Simpson, L. (Eds.) *Ethnic identity and inequalities in Britain: The dynamics of diversity*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press, pp. 1–15.

³ Simpson, L., Jivraj, S., & Warren, J. (2016) The stability of ethnic identity in England and Wales 2001–2011. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society*, 179(4), 1025-1049. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/rssa.12175>

⁴ Catney, G., Lloyd, C. D., Ellis, M., Wright, R., Finney, N., Jivraj, S., & Manley, D. (2023) Ethnic diversification and neighbourhood mixing: A rapid response analysis of the 2021 Census of England and Wales. *The Geographical Journal*, 189(1), 63-77. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12>