

2 RURAL STATISTICS: A SUMMARY

2.01 The Nature of the Statistical Information

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics"

(Mark Twain "Autobiography," posthumously published in 1924;
original quote attributed to Benjamin Disraeli)

If, as we have seen, there are numerous ways of defining or describing 'rural' England, there will also be numerous ways of gathering and interpreting 'rural' population information. A wide variety of government departments, NGOs & research bodies have surveyed various parts, or even all, of the English population at various times.

Potentially the most thorough of these is the decennial national Census (last carried out in 2001), because it is intended to gather data on *every individual* in the country.

[\[CLICK HERE\]](#) -> for Office of National Statistics (ONS): 2001 Census 'front page']

In reality there are potential drawbacks with information from the national censuses:

- Although the data gathered may cover each individual, much of the information gathered is not directly from those individuals but from the *heads of households* in which the individuals are to be found. This may be a minor problem, but is real nonetheless - and it may have heightened significance if it produces consistently 'skewed' information for, say, a small ethnic minority group.
- The usefulness of each decennial census is limited by the questions included in the survey. There is often considerable debate & disagreement within government circles (and more broadly) about the nature of these questions and the type of information they seek to elicit. On the other side, civil liberties groups and others are often very vocal about the amount & type of information the government seeks to acquire. An example of this sort of 'debate' is revealed by the fact that only the most recent English national census has asked for information on religious affiliation ... and this at only the broadest of levels.

[\[CLICK HERE\]](#) ->> to go to "Christian Identity & the Rural Population" where this is discussed]

- Although the same 'core' information is gathered in each census, other questions are included in order to provide information in some important - but not 'core' - area of concern (e.g. religious affiliation). However, such additional questions may not be repeated in a subsequent census. This means that only a 'snapshot' is produced of the population in relation to that issue, i.e. what the situation was in that particular census year. Change and development with time (what is technically known as a 'longitudinal survey') cannot be measured.
- There is, quite simply, too much information. It takes a great deal of time to 'digitise' and collate all the information received in order to produce a database that is comprehensive enough for important questions to be 'asked' and answered. This is amply illustrated by the complexity of the website for the Office of National Statistics (ONS), and the potential difficulties facing the average individual trying to get hold of specific local information.

- Finally, statistics - by their very nature - both *generalize* and *average out*. This means that extremes are avoided, which may be helpful; but it also means that looking just at statistics prevents an assessment of the *particular* ... the individual case. This is one of the unfortunate circumstances faced by government both national & regional; it is obliged to work with the generalized 'picture' presented by statistics. So, although statistics may be helpful for showing trends and general positions, they should always be complemented with (or even replaced by) detailed information from the specific locality in question (e.g. a particular parish).
- However, taking the previous points into consideration, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has recently made it possible for 'ordinary' users to access local-level statistics of various kinds. This makes it possible for a more detailed and accurate 'picture' to be built up of a specific locality, and is free to use by any individual or group. Not all the categories of statistical information are available at this small, local scale, though.

[\[CLICK HERE ->> to access Office of National Statistics \(ONS\) 'Neighbourhood Statistics'\]](#)

FOR ACTION

Log onto the ONS "Neighbourhood Statistics" pages using the link given above, and enter details of your own area or location in the search.

What sort of information can you get?

Do you learn anything new? What?

Is any of it helpful in giving you a better 'picture' of your neighbourhood or community? In what ways?

Nevertheless, the data gathered in such censuses provides an enormous "pool" out of which can be drawn all manner of information. In particular it provides a 'baseline' for so-called 'longitudinal' comparisons - looking at how certain characteristics change with time. Given the universality of the data, it also allows - at least theoretically - more recent "categories" to be 'fitted over' earlier data. A relevant example is that of current work being done by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to apply the new government definition of 'rural' to data obtained in the 2001 National Census - which was performed prior to the introduction of this new rural definition.

In addition to the detailed National Census, the Office for National Statistics also produces population 'estimates' for the years between the decennial 'counts'. These are performed like all other surveys on England's population, by examining a *representative sample* of the whole population in such a way as to reflect as accurately as possible the situation for the population as a whole. These so-called 'mid-year' estimates don't provide as much detail as the decennial census, but they do identify trends. When combined with information gathered by other organisations & bodies in narrower areas of interest, useful tools for describing & analysing the English population are produced.

In this unit, virtually all the statistical information displayed or discussed comes from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). Often, though, this is *via* the medium of another organisation or publication. The Countryside Agency's report "The State of the Countryside 2004" is a good illustration. It contains data obtained from ONS but in a form dictated by the specific needs of the Agency's report, e.g. "**England: Comparison of Rural-Urban Population Changes 1981-2002**" [[CLICK HERE](#) ->> to see this chart]

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Have you ever had problems using or understanding statistics?
In what way might statistics help you in your life or work?

[CLICK HERE](#) ->> to return to the start of this section

[CLICK HERE](#) ->> to move to next part of the unit, 2.02
"The Growth, Size & Distribution of the Rural Population"

[CLICK HERE](#) ->> to return to breakdown of Unit 2

[CLICK HERE](#) ->> to return to the Project website "Home Page"