

Response to consultation document 'Civil registration: delivering vital change'  
**Statistical information obtained from registration: ethnic group.**

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This response may be deemed to cover questions 126-130 in the standard response form.

I refer to the proposals to include ethnic group of child, mother and father in the statistical information collected at the time of birth, ethnic group of marriage partners, and ethnic group of deceased persons. In the proposal document these are contained in 9.4.3-9.4.6 (births), 9.4.28-9.4.30 (deaths), 9.4.41 (marriages).

All the discussion below relates directly to the proposal for births. Most of it also relates to deaths and marriages. In general, my conclusion is that the expected advantages of recording ethnic group at registration are outweighed by the disadvantages, and that alternative methods exist to satisfy the aims proposed for recording ethnic group at the time of registration.

## **1. Introduction and summary**

My professional work over 20 years at Bradford Council and the University of Manchester has involved population statistics with an ethnic group dimension, using records from registration, from the health service and from the census. As the demographer behind the first population estimates for ethnic groups for very local areas, I am well aware of their importance to government and to research. I have contributed reviews of similar work to the government's feasibility study of population projections with an ethnic group dimension.

There is no doubt that it would make demographers' lives easier, and researchers' work richer, should registration include statistical information of ethnic group, allowing calculation of vital statistic and rates for national and local areas with an ethnic group dimension. Some of my colleagues who have not expressed qualms about the data-rich vista of ethnic group registration statistics will not thank me for doing so myself.

However, the aims of the proposals are not achieved directly by the proposals. For example, for population estimates, migration would remain the greatest unknown factor in change, as it is now, and thus registration information will only partly go towards the main aim of local population estimates. The difficulties of using, for the aims stated by the proposals, a classification which has changed, is changing and will change in the future are substantially insurmountable and reduce the proposed benefits. With these reservations in mind, the adverse social impact of measuring ethnic group at civil registration, particularly at birth, weigh significantly in the consideration of the proposals.

The changing content of ‘ethnic group’ over time is thoroughly discussed by many authors (including Coleman and Salt, 1996; Kertzer and Arel, 2002; Aspinall, 2001; Simpson, 1997, 2002), and creates a fundamental weakness in the proposal to add ethnic group to the statistical information collected at registration.

These various points are outlined in a more systematic form below, together with alternatives to reach the aims given for the proposals to record ethnic group at registration.

## **2. The social impact of counting ethnicity is contested**

The positive reasons for counting ethnicity at registration derive mainly from legislation to counter discrimination (9.4.3). The negative impact is to weaken the common civic identity of those living in the UK, by unnecessarily creating or supporting a divisive distinction. Debates balancing these two valid concerns led to rejection of counting ethnicity in Israel and France, and the delay in inclusion of ‘ethnic group’ in censuses in Britain. Birth registration is particularly influential in self-identification, as it is our proof of existence, our fundamental acknowledgement by society, and is thus more sensitive than other data collection methods in this balance.

## **3. Future civil liberties are not protected**

The safeguard that statistical information is not public for individuals is a limited one when taking a historical view. The relationship of minorities to the state changes over time. While legislation requiring ethnic group monitoring is accepted as positive at present, this is no guarantee of the future. The nefarious use of racial categories on vital registration and identity cards in other countries and other times (South Africa, Germany and the USA provide examples) is not a current concern for many people in Britain. But civil registration should not be made a hostage to political cleavages along racial grounds that could become important in the future. The reprehensible potential use of ethnicity records in a divisive way relies on a biological notion of ethnicity, that views people as having inevitably different worth or rights because of unchangeable characteristics. It is unfortunately the case that birth registration is particularly apt for use by policies motivated by such a view.

The present government is considering a variety of means of population estimation including the linking of different administrative, registration, census records of people, households and addresses. The implications of these for registration proposals cannot be predicted as there are no firm proposals as yet. However, the fact that all these systems are subject to change means that concerns about the unpredictable future use of statistical information from registration should be taken seriously.

#### **4. The temporary nature of the need for ethnicity statistics is not suited to civil registration on a life time record**

The Race Relations Act on which the demand for ethnic group statistics mainly relies, aims to reduce discrimination. It is by its nature an aim which if successful will reduce or at least change the need for monitoring. The addition of ethnic group to a permanent registration record is at odds with the temporal nature of the political need for monitoring. It is an admission of defeat.

#### **5. Ethnic group classifications change, creating insurmountable technical and personal dilemmas**

##### *5.1 The ethnic group classification will change*

All countries' experience of measuring ethnic group confirms the changing nature of the classification. For example, in the USA and Canada the terms 'race', 'ethnicity', 'ethnic group' and 'visible minorities' have been used, each with classifications that have responded to the changing government and popular notions of relevant and acceptable categories. The UK experience confirms this temporal nature of 'ethnic group', which changed from the 1991 Census (10 categories) to the 2001 census (16 categories) and has already been superseded by proposals from the Commission for Racial Equality to include English/Welsh/Scottish/Irish categories, proposals which have been accepted in part by the Office for National Statistics in their current recommended guidelines for surveys and administrative collection of data. England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland each used different categories in the 2001 census question on ethnic group.

The reasons for continuing change are clear and acceptable. First, the mix of purposes, including monitoring immigration, promoting social cohesion and cultural autonomy, as well as legislative measures against discrimination on grounds of "colour, race, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origin". Second, the changing composition of immigration which influences our sense of new identities in Britain. Third, our personal changing sense of identity, dependent on the contemporary understanding of our history and of relations between groups. Official categories at best are objective measures of subjective identity, are therefore negotiated between civil organisations and government, and are naturally subject to negotiated change.

Our current categories (the National Statistics guidelines as proposed in the Civil registration consultation document) combine a broad categorisation of colour (White, Black, Asian, Chinese, Mixed) and sub-categories based on country of family origin (Irish, Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean, and so on). Future changes will add categories in response to demographic change, and may include major developments such as the separation of 'race' from 'ethnicity' as in the USA, or the inclusion of religion in basic categories in response to its perceived importance in discrimination.

There is a continuing tussle between on the one hand the view of ethnic groups as primordial markers of groups visible in biological ancestry, or country of origin, which both state and civic groups may wish to claim, and the view of ethnicity as fluid self-identity which is multi-dimensional and subject to change throughout each person's life. Both views lead to changing classifications. The use of ethnic group on

civil registration may slow down change in classifications, because of the cost of implementing change, but this will only reduce their utility and meaning, and increase resistance to the categories from those who are asked to use them to self-identity as they move over time further from the popular view of identity.

### *5.2 Changed classifications reduce their utility*

The impact of changing classifications is to make comparisons over time inaccurate and for some groups impossible. For example, the White group cannot be compared exactly between even the 1991 and 2001 censuses (because the inclusion of Mixed categories affects some people's responses), while the Irish and Mixed groups in the 2001 Census have no corresponding categories ten years earlier. A registration system that contains people with different classifications, because registration was at different times with different classifications, will not be easy to use for the demographic purposes it is intended for. There will of course be costs attached to each change.

### *5.3 Personal changes in identity will not be captured*

The impact of including ethnic group on registration records also occurs at the personal level. It is accepted that a person will self-identify in the context and at the time they are asked to complete a form, but it will not be possible to keep a civil registration record up to date. A new birth's classification, most probably provided by the mother at time of registration, will not necessarily be the identity adopted by the child when grown to adult, nor will an adult's classification remain stable. A measure of the amount of change can be seen from the 1991 census, when 13% of all respondents who had ticked a category other than white, changed that category in the follow-up Census Validation Survey just a few weeks later. Information on the extent of individuals' changing their declared identity will be available when the 1991 and 2001 linked records are available in 2004 from the Longitudinal Study. Thus even without a change in categories, the interpretation of data is not straightforward.

## **6. Alternatives to statistical information collected at registration**

The consultation document recognises that censuses and surveys provide means of measuring demographic change with an ethnic group dimension (9.4.5). Fertility, mortality, marriage and other partnerships can be measured in this way. At sub-national level, demographic change has been regularly monitored between censuses and forecast for the future by local authorities without registration statistics (as reviewed in Simpson, 2002). The main motor of population change for most of the currently classified ethnic groups is not differential fertility or mortality but the ageing of the current age structure, which is known from the census.

The census provides sub-national ratios of children to adult women which provide accurate measures of the impact of fertility on population change for each ethnic group.

Health Episode Statistics, and the new NHS Number of Babies Minimum Dataset provides ethnicity of mother and child for each birth, from which local trends of fertility can be measured.

Census Samples of Anonymised Records, the Longitudinal Study which provides an anonymised sample of census records linked to civil registration events, and the

Labour Force Survey and other national surveys, together provide national and in some cases regional trends in fertility, mortality, marriage and other partnerships.

These sources are ample to make good estimates of changing population of different ethnic groups for local areas when combined with the most recent census statistics.

The main missing ingredient is not registration events but migration since the most recent census.

### **References used in this document**

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