

Dorling, D. (2021) If Boris Johnson is serious about levelling up, he would plan for a 2026 census now, The Observer, March 14th, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/14/gvfgf>

If Boris Johnson is serious about levelling up, he would plan for a 2026 census now

[Danny Dorling](#)



An extra population survey, on top of next week's, would provide information the country really needs



The Thames between Hammersmith and Barnes in west London: without information about people's lives, how can we know their needs? Photograph: BasPhoto/Alamy

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The 2021 census is being held on Sunday 21 March – online. You may have already received your code through the post. You may have completed your census return, as you can do that early. You may have requested a paper form.¹ Or you may have put it all aside.

Don't worry about people not filling in the census form: 30,000 field officers will start knocking on the doors of those who have missed the count in April.² On top of that, a census coverage survey of 350,000 households is planned.³ The methodology for this is a refined version of the “capture-recapture” technique for estimating the number of whales in the ocean.⁴

A more serious concern is that the outsourcing of part of the census operation to a private company will cause problems.⁵ Sadly, we are stuck with a government that mandates the involvement of the private sector where it is not beneficial. However, knocking on doors (and stepping back 2 metres) in the weeks after 21 March is not going to be the hardest thing in the world to get right. It is not hard to enumerate a population still mostly locked down.

The most serious concern will be that it will be a snapshot of a strange, unrepresentative time, an image of pandemic Britain where young adults have temporarily moved in with their parents. It will record a place with low street homelessness, at the tail end of the “Everyone In” campaign.⁶ It will miss Scotland, as the census is being taken in a year's time there. It will include hundreds of thousands of people just waiting to travel back to mainland Europe (for good), prevented by travel restrictions but ready to join the million who (we think) left in 2020.⁷ And it will count as employed those currently furloughed, but who will not be returning to work.⁸

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What can be done to fix this? In the early 1960s, it was decided that an extra 1966 census was needed for the planning required to “build back better” from 1950s austerity. It was the precursor to the most comprehensive census of all time, held in 1971. This census told us who had hot running water in their kitchen sink and where housing need was most acute. Since those times, censuses have been cut back in scope. The 2001 census was the last one to ask what floor level a family lived on in a block of flats, allowing us to know that the majority of children in England above the fifth floor were not white,⁹ a fact that meant a great deal more after the Grenfell tragedy than before it.

A 2026 census could be used to ascertain if any local levelling up has occurred overall. To date, we have seen levelling down, because of the way the government has dealt with the pandemic.¹⁰ A 2026 census could assess how much we have recovered – or not – in the five years from March 2021. It would fill the gaps in the record. A government that was serious about levelling up, as the 1960s governments were, would plan for a 2026 census now.

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¹ <https://census.gov.uk/help/get-an-access-code-or-paper-census>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/14/ons-gears-up-for-once-in-a-decade-challenge-with-2021-census>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/censusdesign/operationalplanningresponsetothecoronaviruscovid19forcensus2021englandandwales>

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http://depts.washington.edu/pnwcesu/reports/J8W07070001_Final_Report.pdf

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/10/call-for-england-and-wales-census-to-be-postponed-amid-covid-concerns>

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<https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2020/may/18/everyoneinfordgood-%E2%80%93-ending-rough-sleeping-for-good-after-lockdown>

⁷ <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/labour-force-survey-the-mystery-of-the-shrinking-migrant-workforce/>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/census2021paperquestionnaires>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/25/communities.politics>

¹⁰ <https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/covid-impact-on-industrial-towns>