

Open Letter on Collecting High Quality Census Data on Sex and Gender

We are an international team of scientists with extensive expertise collecting and quantitatively analyzing high quality data from human participants. Our group includes current and former editors of scientific journals, statisticians, and analytic instructors; collectively, we have many decades of experience working with quantitative human data, survey methods, and complex datasets.

We are writing to convey our expert consensus that (1) asking respondents to self-report their lived sex poses absolutely no threat to collecting high quality data on sex and (2) the addition of a question about gender identity to the 2021 English and Welsh census improves its ability to accurately represent the population.

(1) The 2021 English and Welsh census will collect robust, high quality data on sex.

The question on sex in the English and Welsh census asks “What is your sex?” with response options “Female” and “Male.” Historically, no guidance was provided for this question and respondents could answer in line with their self-identified or lived sex (consistent with other identity questions such as religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation). In the 2011 census, explicit guidance was added to advise respondents to answer the question in line with their self-identified or lived sex. For the 2021 census, the Office of National Statistics revised its guidance to suggest that respondents could answer in line with their sex noted on an official document. Following a [March 2021 case](#) in the High Court, the ONS was then forced to revise the guidance once more, after census data collection had already begun, to explicitly capture data on legal sex strictly as indicated on an individual’s birth certificate or Gender Recognition Certificate.

This decision follows [widely publicized claims](#) that the guidance on this question on sex will somehow undermine the ability of the census to collect robust data on sex. We would like to note that this concern is simply unfounded. The guidance wording will not affect how either cisgender people (likely around 99% of the population) or transgender people with a Gender Recognition Certificate answer the question on sex. Moreover, [research suggests](#) (and our experience confirms) that the vast majority of survey respondents skip over instructions when it seems possible to answer a question without reading them.

For all of these reasons, the specific wording of the guidance does not threaten the ability of the English and Welsh census to collect robust data on sex. Indeed, when the highly regarded Pew Research Center conducted a [randomized experiment](#) to test the effects of various sex and gender question wordings on data quality in the US, they found that the way they asked about sex and gender had little effect on the distribution of US adults in each gender category. However, the way they asked about sex and gender did affect the ability of the survey to capture the percentage of adults identifying as transgender or non-binary. Overall, then, these kinds of survey changes are extremely unlikely to worsen data accuracy for cisgender people, but can improve it for transgender and non-binary people.

(2) The 2021 English and Welsh census can improve data quality on gender.

At its core, a census should provide accurate representation of its population of interest. Adding a gender identity question to the 2021 English and Welsh census can help achieve this goal, precisely because it will allow researchers—for the first time—to meaningfully quantify the transgender population, consistent with the recognition of the [complex relationship between sex and gender](#).

As described above, question wording is unlikely to meaningfully alter population-level estimates of males and females overall, but question wording can matter substantially for accurately quantifying the transgender and non-binary communities. For example, non-inclusive question wording can make transgender and non-binary people [feel unwelcome](#) and [discourage them](#) from contributing their data. As a result, non-inclusive questions may result in an underestimation of the true size of the transgender community. For this reason, the addition of the gender identity question represents an improvement over census questions from previous years. Asking about legal sex (rather than lived sex) also harms the quality and interpretability of data describing the transgender and non-binary communities, because it means that transgender and non-binary peoples without a Gender Recognition Certificate may respond to the question differently depending on the extent to which they read and choose to follow the instructions.

Conclusion

In closing, we support steps to meaningfully quantify the transgender population in the English and Welsh census and we strongly oppose the misuse of scientific-sounding claims to justify the oppression of vulnerable groups. Cloaking abominable moral positions in the veneer of scientific-sounding justifications is not a new phenomenon; it has a long history including [slavery](#), [eugenics](#), [forced sterilisation](#), [the denial of women's suffrage](#), and more. Our scientific integrity precludes us from taking part in or endorsing such pseudoscientific interests while our ethical responsibility as scientists compels us to speak out against them. We therefore strongly reject any claim that measuring lived sex would prevent the 2021 English and Welsh Census from collecting robust and accurate data about sex.

Sincerely,

Scientific experts in quantitative data, surveys, and/or large datasets.

The following signatures appear in no specific order. Please note that the letter reflects the informed personal opinions of the signatories and not the opinions of their employers or funders.

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