

## Advisory Groups Paper (97)12

**PROGRESS ON SMALL-SCALE TESTING OF POSSIBLE CENSUS QUESTIONS**

The background to the 2001 Census Small Scale Testing programme was reported in Advisory Group Paper (96)01

This paper reports on the progress to date.

**Advisory Group members are invited to:-****1. Note the current situation****PROGRESS ON SMALL-SCALE TESTING OF POSSIBLE  
CENSUS QUESTIONS**

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- 1 This paper reports progress to date.
- 2 The report of the test of an ethnicity question including categories for 'Black-British', 'Asian-British' and 'Mixed' has been delivered by Social Survey Division and copies can be obtained from the Secretary on request. The Ethnic Group Sub-Group of the Content Working Group has been reconvened to take stock of research on this topic and help the Census Offices consider possible further work in the light of this report and, in due course, the results of the 1997 Test.
- 3 Nearly all potential census questions have now been tested, but those that have not are the priority for the next stage of the programme. These include:
  - questions about ability in English and/or language spoken in the home, which it was agreed some while ago would be included in the testing programme;
  - new closed questions on industry and a socio-economic classification, as possible radical alternatives to the traditional open (i.e. write in) questions which are relatively expensive to capture and code; and

- possible alternative questions about relationship within the household, to be tested as a contingency in case the matrix question used in the 1997 Test is not used in the Census.

4 The current small-scale test will research:

- capital letter write-ins to the traditional open questions about occupation and industry, in order to evaluate the use of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to capture this information prior to coding;
- a revised question about professional qualifications, also with write-ins in capital letters for OCR; and
- new closed questions on industry and "occupational group" which is effectively the new socio-economic classification being proposed by the ESRC Review team.

The Census Offices are thus researching two alternative options for occupation and industry; a potentially cheaper way of capturing the traditional responses prior to automatic coding; and the radical alternative of using closed questions so that the capture of text responses and coding would not be needed. In the Census we could use the traditional questions, or the new questions, or a mixture of the two, for example closed industry but open occupation.

5 The test is being carried out by asking respondents to the ONS Omnibus Survey in September to complete a short self-completion questionnaire (copy attached) before the usual survey questions. The Omnibus includes questions about demographic characteristics and also occupation and industry and this information will be compared with the responses to the questionnaire. The exercise may need to be repeated in the next survey which will be in November, and perhaps in further surveys after that.

6 Once the research has been completed, the viability of the new closed questions will be considered under the following headings:

- *Acceptability to the public:* there is no reason to suppose that a closed question about industry would be unacceptable. Previously there has been some adverse reaction to asking employer's name and address, and using a closed industry question would remove this disadvantage. The reaction to the question about occupational group/socio-economic class is difficult to predict;
- *Burden on the public:* we do not know if people will find it easy to pick the box to tick in each case, and the subsequent questions by the interviewer will ask about this. If form fillers do find it easy they will probably see the closed questions as less burdensome than the traditional write-in questions;
- *Quality of data collected:* we do not know how the quality of data collected directly from these closed questions will compare with that collected by the traditional, less direct questions. The new closed questions could be processed in conjunction with the questions on employment status and size of establishment and the complete set of responses used to produce the outputs;
- *Census users' requirements for information:* it appears likely, from the current draft of the business cases, that most users would be content with Census outputs on industry at a high level in the classification which would be based on the new closed question provided it works reasonably well. There may be a stronger case for Census outputs on occupation as well as socio-economic group, which would militate against the new socio-economic classification question being used in the Census;

- . *Space required on the Census form:* the new closed question on occupational group requires the same amount of space on the form as the traditional questions about job title and things done in job which ask for responses in capital letters for OCR purposes. The new closed question on industry however, is likely to require more space on the form than the traditional questions, though if the section of the classification covering manufacturing were condensed the difference might not be large.
- 7 The Census Offices are about to plan tests of two other topics - ability in English/language spoken in the home, and alternative forms of question about relationship within household. It had been hoped to use the Omnibus for the latter but this has proved not to be practicable. This test (or tests) will conclude initial testing of possible questions.
- 8 The need for any further testing will be considered in the light of the results of these latest tests, and the results of the 1997 Test.
- 9 Advisory Group members are asked to note the current situation.

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**CENSUS QUESTIONNAIRE TO BE INSERTED HERE**