

Statistical bulletin

Language, England and Wales: Census 2021

Main language, English language proficiency, and household language in England and Wales, Census 2021 data.



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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Main languages in England and Wales](#)
3. [Main languages varied across England and Wales](#)
4. [English language proficiency](#)
5. [Main languages within households](#)
6. [Future publications](#)
7. [Language, England and Wales data](#)
8. [Glossary](#)
9. [Measuring the data](#)
10. [Strengths and limitations](#)
11. [Related links](#)
12. [Cite this statistical bulletin](#)

1 . Main points

- In 2021, 91.1% (52.6 million) of usual residents, aged three years and over, had English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language (down from 92.3%, or 49.8 million, in 2011).
- In 2021, a further 7.1% (4.1 million) of the overall population were proficient in English (English or Welsh in Wales) but did not speak it as their main language.
- The most common main languages, other than English (English or Welsh in Wales), were: Polish (1.1%, 612,000), Romanian (0.8%, 472,000), Panjabi (0.5%, 291,000), and Urdu (0.5%, 270,000).
- The largest increase was for people who specified Romanian as a main language, who accounted for over 0.8% of usual residents in 2021 (472,000 people), up from 0.1% (68,000) in 2011.
- In 2021, 63.8% (15.8 million) of households consisted of members who all had the same main language; 6.0% (1.5 million) had different main languages within the household.

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2 . Main languages in England and Wales

English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language

In England and Wales, 91.1% of usual residents aged three years and over (52.6 million out of 57.7 million) had English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language. This is a percentage decrease compared with 2011, when 92.3% (49.8 million) had English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language.

In 2021, a further 7.1% (4.1 million) of the overall population were proficient in English, so they spoke English either "well" or "very well" (English or Welsh in Wales), but did not speak it as their main language. Additionally, 1.5% (880,000) could not speak English well, and a small percentage (0.3%, 161,000) of the overall population could not speak English at all.

Main languages, other than English (English or Welsh in Wales)

Polish remained the most common main language accounting for 1.1% (612,000) of usual residents, for those who do not have English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language.

In 2021, Romanian moved into the top 10 main languages, excluding English (English or Welsh in Wales). This was the largest increase over the decade. In total, 0.8% of people (472,000) listed Romanian as their main language, up from 0.1% (68,000) in 2011. This mirrors a similar increase in the number of people who listed Romania as their country of birth between 2011 and 2021 (an increase between censuses of 459,000, or a 0.8 percentage point change). It also mirrors an increase in the number who chose only a Romanian national identity (an increase between censuses of 405,000, or a 0.7 percentage point change).

Figure 1: The top ten main languages spoken in England and Wales, excluding English (English or Welsh in Wales)

Total usual resident population, aged three years and over, who speak each language as their main language, 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

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3 . Main languages varied across England and Wales

English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language

The percentage of people who spoke English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language was higher in Wales (96.7%, 2.9 million out of 3.0 million) than it was in England (90.8%, 49.7 million out of 54.7 million).

In Wales, people were asked if their main language was anything other than English or Welsh. Therefore, it is not possible to determine how many people in Wales consider Welsh to be their main language. There was a separate question for people in Wales asking them about their Welsh language ability. On 6 December 2022, the Welsh Government will be publishing information on Welsh language skills in Wales.

The region of England with the highest percentage of people with English as a main language was the North East (96.5%, 2.5 million), whereas London had the lowest percentage (78.4%, 6.7 million).

Figure 2: The percentage of people with English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language varied across local authorities in England and Wales

Percentage of the usual resident population, aged three years and over, who reported English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

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Polish as a main language across England

In England, Polish (1.1%, 591,000) was the most common main language for those who did not speak English as a main language. At a regional level, the highest percentage of people who had Polish as a main language was in the East Midlands (1.5%, 71,000). The percentage of people with Polish as a main language varied across local authorities from 0.1% (100) in Castle Point to 5.7% (4,000) in Boston.

Romanian as a main language across England

The next most common main language in England was Romanian (0.9%, 466,000). The region with the highest percentage of people who reported Romanian as a main language was London (1.9%, 159,000). In particular, the local authority of Harrow had the highest percentage of its population reporting Romanian as a main language (7.5%, 19,000).

Panjabi and Urdu as main languages across England

The third and fourth most common languages, excluding English, both originate from South Asia: Panjabi (sometimes spelt Punjabi) and Urdu. They are both widely spoken languages in India and Pakistan, as well as elsewhere in South Asia. In England, the highest percentage of people that had Panjabi as a main language was in the West Midlands (1.4%, 83,000). Wolverhampton was the local authority with the largest percentage of people with Panjabi as a main language (6.5%, 17,000). The English region with the overall largest proportion of people who had Urdu as a main language was the North West (0.8%, 59,000). However, Slough in the South East was the local authority with the largest proportion (4.3%, 7,000).

The most common main languages, other than English or Welsh, in Wales

As in 2011, Polish was the second most common language after English or Welsh in Wales (0.7%, 21,000). The Welsh local authority with the highest proportion of people that had Polish as a main language remained as Wrexham (2.5%, 3,000).

Arabic was the next most common main language in Wales (0.3%, 9,000). The Welsh local authority with the highest proportion of people that had Arabic as a main language was Cardiff (1.4%, 5,000).

Figure 3: Main language spoken, excluding English (English or Welsh in Wales)

Percentage of total usual resident population, aged three years and over, who speak each language as their main language, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

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British Sign Language in England and Wales

In addition to spoken languages, British Sign Language (BSL) was the main language of 22,000 (0.04%) usual residents aged three years and over across England and Wales. This is an increase of over 6,000 since 2011 (15,000, 0.03%).

Within England, BSL is the main language of just over 21,000 people (0.04%). This percentage is slightly higher than in Wales, where just over 900 people (0.03%) have BSL as a main language. Across the two nations, the area with the highest percentage of people with BSL as their main language was Derby (400, 0.2%), as it had been in 2011 (300, 0.1%). One reason for this could be that the Royal School for the Deaf is situated in Derby, so children have access to both BSL and English. For those who move for educational purposes, they may remain in Derby because of an active Deaf community.

4 . English language proficiency

People who did not report English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language were asked to report how well they could speak English (8.9%, 5.1 million). Of those 5.1 million people, 43.9% (2.3 million) could speak English very well, 35.8% (1.8 million) could speak English well, 17.1% (880,000) could not speak English well, and 3.1% (161,000) could not speak English at all.

For households that did not have English as a main language, assistance in completing the census questionnaire was provided through interpretation services, and translation leaflets were made available in over 50 languages.

Figure 4: Most people who do not have English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language can speak English “Well” or “Very well”

Percentage of the usual resident population, aged three years and over, who do not identify English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language, 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

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The following interactive tool can be used to consider how English language proficiency, for those who do not speak English (English or Welsh in Wales), varies across England and Wales.

Figure 5: English language proficiency varies across local authorities of England and Wales

Percentage of the usual resident population, aged three years and over, who do not identify English (English or Welsh in Wales) as their main language, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

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5 . Main languages within households

There were 24.8 million households across England and Wales in 2021, up 6.1% from 23.4 million in 2011.

For the first time, we collected information on whether household members have the same or different main language. For the 24.8 million households, 69.8% were households with more than one person. Of these households:

- all members have the same main language (15.8 million) in 63.8% of households
- the main language differs between generations, but not within partnerships (480,000), in 1.9% of households
- the main language differs within partnerships (534,000) in 2.2% of households
- main languages differed between other household relationships, such as between friends (465,000), in 1.9% of households

Figure 6: Proportion of households where the main language differs, by household type, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The following categories have been aggregated into “Multiple main languages within household”: “Main language differs between generations, but not within partnerships”, “Main language differs within partnerships”, and “Any other combination of multiple main languages”.

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6 . Future publications

On 6 December 2022, the Welsh Government will be publishing information on Welsh language skills in Wales, including an age breakdown.

More detailed data and analysis on language will be published in the coming months, alongside the release of multivariate data. Read more about our [ethnic group, national identity, language and religion analysis plans](#) and the [release plans for Census 2021](#) more generally.

7 . Language, England and Wales data

[Main language \(detailed\)](#)

Dataset | Released 29 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in England and Wales by their main language. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

[Household language](#)

Dataset | Released 29 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify households in England and Wales by the combination of adults and children within a household that have English (English or Welsh in Wales) as a main language. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

[Multiple main languages in household](#)

Dataset | Released 29 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify households in England and Wales by the combination of household members speaking the same or different main languages. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

[Proficiency in English](#)

Dataset | Released 29 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in England and Wales by their proficiency in English. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

8 . Glossary

English language proficiency

How well people whose main language is not English (English or Welsh in Wales) speak English.

Main language

A person's first or preferred language.

Multiple main languages in household

Classifies households by whether members speak the same or a different main language. If multiple main languages are spoken, this identifies whether they differ between generations or partnerships within the household.

Usual resident

A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day, 21 March 2021, was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

9 . Measuring the data

Reference date

The census provides estimates of the characteristics of all people and households in England and Wales on Census Day, 21 March 2021. It is carried out every 10 years and gives us the most accurate estimate of all the people and households in England and Wales.

We are responsible for carrying out the census in England and Wales but will also release outputs for the UK in partnership with the Welsh Government, the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The census in Northern Ireland was also conducted on 21 March 2021, whereas Scotland's census was moved to 20 March 2022. All UK census offices are working closely together to understand how this difference in reference dates will affect UK-wide population and housing statistics, in terms of both timing and scope.

Response rate

The person response rate is the number of usual residents for whom individual details were provided on a returned questionnaire, divided by the estimated usual resident population.

The person response rate for Census 2021 was 97% of the usual resident population of England and Wales, and over 88% in all local authorities. Most returns (89%) were received online. The response rate exceeded our target of 94% overall and 80% in all local authorities.

Further information on question-specific response rates will be published in a separate report later this year.

10 . Strengths and limitations

Quality considerations, along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally, can be found in the [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the specific quality considerations for [Ethnic group, national identity, language, and religion quality information for Census 2021](#).

Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates report](#).

11 . Related links

[Census map](#)

Interactive content | Updated 29 November 2022

Interactive map tool that visualises Census 2021 data on different topics down to a local authority area and neighbourhood level.

[Ethnic group, national identity, language, and religion quality information for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 29 November 2022

Known quality information affecting ethnic group, national identity, language and religion data from Census 2021 in England and Wales.

[Ethnic group, national identity, language and religion variables: Census 2021](#)

Supporting information | Released 28 November 2022

Variables and classifications used in Census 2021 data about ethnic group, national identity, language, and religion.

[Ethnic group, national identity, language, and religion in Wales \(Census 2021\)](#)

Bulletin | Released 29 November 2022

A summary by Welsh Government of Census 2021 data about ethnic group, national identity, language, and religion in Wales.

12 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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