

Article

Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021

Characteristics of built-up areas (BUAs) in England (excluding London) and Wales. Characteristics include age and sex, country of birth, housing, qualifications and employment.



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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Built-up areas](#)
3. [Age and sex](#)
4. [Country of birth](#)
5. [Housing](#)
6. [Qualifications](#)
7. [Employment](#)
8. [Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021 data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Data sources and quality](#)
11. [Future developments](#)
12. [Related links](#)
13. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- Major built-up areas (BUAs) had the youngest populations, with a median age of 34 years in both England (excluding London) and Wales.
- The proportion of non-UK born residents increased as BUA size classification increased, with the highest proportions living in major BUAs in England (excluding London) (22.9%) and Wales (16.7%).
- Households in major BUAs had the lowest levels of outright home ownership in England (excluding London) (25.9%) and Wales (28.4%).
- Minor BUAs had the highest proportion of usual residents aged 16 years and over with Level 4 or above qualifications in England (excluding London) (34.3%), but major BUAs had the highest proportion in Wales (39.4%).
- In England (excluding London), minor BUAs had the highest proportion of usual residents aged 16 years and over working as managers, directors, and senior officials (16.2%).
- In Wales, over a quarter of usual residents aged 16 years and over in major BUAs worked in professional occupations (26.5%).

2 . Built-up areas

Built-up areas (BUAs) are a geography based on the physical built environment, using satellite imagery to recognise developed land, such as cities, towns, and villages. This allows economic and social statistics to be investigated based on actual settlements where most people live.

BUAs are classified by population size as minor, small, medium, large or major, and characteristics are explored using Census 2021 data.

Table 1: Built-up area (BUA) size classification

Population range (Usual resident population)	BUA size classification	Approximate settlement type
0-4,999	minor	hamlet or village
5,000-19,999	small	larger village / small town
20,000-74,999	medium	medium towns
75,000-199,999	large	large towns / smaller cities
200,000+	major	cities

Source: Office for National Statistics

The data in this article is not directly comparable with 2011 Census data because the method for producing BUAs has changed. For more information see [Section 10: Data sources and quality](#).

In 2021, there were 7,018 BUAs. Among these, 6,439 BUAs were in England (including 33 in London) and 579 were in Wales. In England and Wales, 56,366,690 people lived in BUAs (94.6% of the population).

The proportion of people living in BUAs was 94.9% in England and 88.0% in Wales. The largest BUAs by population were Birmingham (1,121,375 people) in England (excluding London), and Cardiff (348,535 people) in Wales.

In 2021, BUAs covered 11.0% of England (1.5 million hectares) and 4.4% of Wales (around 93,000 hectares).

For the remainder of our analysis, we have removed London's 33 BUAs. This is because in Greater London, the method to identify BUAs does not recognise individual settlements in the same way. It instead provides data by London borough boundaries.

For more information on London, see our [create a custom dataset](#) or our [Topic summaries, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) and [Census Maps, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) webpages.

Figure 1: Explore population characteristics of individual BUAs

Usual resident population counts and median age, by individual BUA, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

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3 . Age and sex

As built-up area (BUA) size classification increases, the age of the population tends to decrease in England (excluding London) and Wales.

Figure 2: Larger BUAs have younger populations

Population pyramids for usual residents living in BUAs, by BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

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In England (excluding London), minor and small BUAs had greater proportions of those aged over 50 years compared with other BUA size classifications. Large and major BUAs had greater proportions of working-age people, with a peak in the group for people aged 30 to 34 years. In Wales, major and large BUAs generally had younger populations, peaking in the group for people aged 20 to 24 years.

Figure 3: Explore population pyramids of individual BUAs

Population pyramids for usual residents living in BUAs, by individual BUA, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

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Table 2: Median age by BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021
Census 2021 from the Office for National Statistics

BUA size classification	Median age - England (excluding London)	Median age - Wales
minor	48	47
small	44	42
medium	41	41
large	38	38
major	34	34

In England (excluding London), among small, medium, large, and major BUAs, the BUA with the highest median age was Barton-on-Sea (65 years). The BUAs with the lowest median age were Canterbury and Stoke Gifford (27 years), which are areas with large student populations.

In Wales, among small, medium, large, and major BUAs, the BUA with the highest median age was Porthcawl (54 years), which had a high proportion of older residents (aged 64 years and over). The BUA with the lowest median age was the university town of Aberystwyth (24 years).

4 . Country of birth

In England (excluding London) and Wales, the proportion of people born outside of the UK increased as the size of built-up area (BUA) increased. In England (excluding London) this ranged from 6.4% of people living in minor BUAs born outside the UK (400,750 people) to 22.9% of those living in major BUAs (1,873,100 people). In Wales, this ranged from 3.9% of people living in minor BUAs (25,075 people) to 16.7% of people living in major BUAs (58,230 people).

Figure 4: Those born outside of the UK were more likely to live in larger BUAs

Percentage of usual residents by country of birth and BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

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5 . Housing

Accommodation type

Generally, as built-up area (BUA) size classification increases, the proportions of households living in a flat, maisonette or apartment and terraced properties increases.

In England (excluding London), 7.3% of households (208,555 households) in minor BUAs were living in a flat, maisonette or apartment. This increased to 27.6% (955,345 households) in major BUAs. The proportion of households living in terraced properties increased from 16.9% (486,000 households) in minor BUAs to 28.8% (997,155 households) in major BUAs.

In Wales, the proportion of households living in a flat, maisonette or apartment ranged from 8.7% (27,605 households) in minor BUAs to 27.9% (41,750 households) in major BUAs. The proportion of households residing in terraced properties increased from 24.2% (77,170 households) in minor BUAs to 29.9% (44,780 households) in major BUAs.

In contrast, the proportion of households living in detached properties decreases as BUA size classification increases. This was apparent in both England (excluding London) and Wales. In England (excluding London), this decreased from 42.4% (1,217,090 households) in minor BUAs to 11.3% (390,495 households) in major BUAs. In Wales, this proportion decreased from 35.0% (111,390 households) in minor BUAs to 12.8% (19,155 households) in major BUAs.

In England (excluding London), the major BUAs with the largest proportion of households living in detached properties were Derby (24.9%) and Northampton (22.0%). The largest proportions of people living in terraced properties were in Kingston-Upon-Hull (46.6%) and Portsmouth (40.8%).

More than half of households lived in a flat, maisonette or apartment in Salford (53.5%), Brighton and Hove (51.9%), and Bournemouth (50.7%).

In Wales, the highest proportion of households living in a flat, maisonette or apartment was in major BUAs (27.9%).

More than 4 in 10 households lived in a flat, maisonette or apartment in Llandudno (43.5%), and over a third in Aberystwyth (37.9%) and Penarth (35.7%).

Figure 5: Households in smaller BUAs were more likely to live in detached properties

Percentage of households by accommodation type and BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

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Tenure

Tenure is whether a household rents or owns the accommodation that they occupy.

In both England (excluding London) and Wales, as the BUA size classification increases, the proportion of households owning their home outright decreases and renting generally increases.

In England (excluding London), large BUAs with the highest proportion of households in properties owned outright included Solihull (42.7%), Royal Sutton Coldfield (42.4%) and Southport (40.3%), all of which were more than 10 percentage points higher than the group average for large BUAs (29.7%).

In England (excluding London), Formby had a very high rate of outright ownership of medium BUAs, at over half of the population (55.3%).

The highest proportion of people in households that lived in private-rented or rent-free accommodation in England (excluding London) in large BUAs was in Salford (41.2%).

In Wales, in medium BUAs, the highest proportion of outright ownership was in Neath (38.6%), while the highest proportion in private-rented or rent-free accommodation was in Rhyl (26.1%).

In England (excluding London), there was an increase in the proportion of households living in social-rented properties with increasing BUA size classification. The highest proportions of people who lived in social-rented properties were in large and major BUAs (18.3% and 22.1%, respectively). Wythenshaw had almost twice the group average for large BUAs (36.4% compared with 18.3%).

A similar pattern was observed in Wales, except large BUAs had a higher proportion in social-rented housing than major BUAs (21.9% compared with 17.4%).

Figure 6: Major BUAs had the lowest levels of outright home ownership

Percentage of households by tenure and BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

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6 . Qualifications

This analysis looks at the highest level of qualification of usual residents aged 16 years and over in built-up area (BUA) size classifications. Many factors could account for differences in qualifications, including the age profile of the BUA. For more information see our [How qualification levels across England and Wales differ by country of birth article](#).

In England (excluding London), minor BUAs had the highest proportion of usual residents aged 16 years and over with [level 4 or above qualifications](#) (34.3%). Level 4 or above qualifications include higher national certificate, higher national diploma, bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications.

In all other BUA size classifications, approximately 30% of residents held level 4 or above qualifications.

In medium BUAs, Harpenden, in London's commuter belt, had more than twice the group average of people holding level 4 or above qualifications (60.5% compared with 29.8%). In large BUAs, more than half of people in St Albans (56.7%) and Cambridge (55.8%) had level 4 or above qualifications, considerably higher than the large BUA average (31.1%).

Figure 7: People with the highest qualifications lived in minor BUAs in England (excluding London) and major BUAs in Wales

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by highest level of qualifications and BUA size classification, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

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Generally, in England (excluding London), the proportion of people with no qualification increases as BUA size classification increases.

In major BUAs in England (excluding London), Bradford had the highest proportion of people with no qualifications (28.4%), almost 8 percentage points above the group average (20.6%). Oldham and West Bromwich had higher proportions of people with no qualifications than the large BUA average of 18.9% (31.0% and 29.2%, respectively).

In contrast to England (excluding London), major BUAs in Wales had the highest proportion of residents with level 4 or above qualifications (39.4%). In all other BUA size classifications, approximately 30% of residents held level 4 or above qualifications. Penarth and Cardiff had some of the highest proportions of residents with level 4 or above qualifications (48.6% and 39.4%, respectively).

Only five small BUAs had more than 40% of their population with level 4 or above qualifications. These included Pontyclun (45.1%), Rogerstone (44.4%), Undy and Magor (41.8%), Caerleon (41.5%) and Dinas Powis (41.4%), which are all within commuting distance of Newport and Cardiff.

Among medium BUAs, Port Talbot and Merthyr Tydfil had the highest proportions of people with no qualifications in Wales (28.3% and 27.6%, respectively). These are around 6 percentage points above the medium BUA average (21.8%).

Figure 8: Explore qualifications in individual BUAs

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by highest level of qualifications, individual BUAs, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

Download the data

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7 . Employment

Census 2021 took place during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change. This will have affected the labour market topic.

In this article, employment refers to those aged 16 years and over who are economically active and in employment, either as an employee or self-employed. For more information, see [Section 9: Glossary](#).

In England (excluding London), 56.6% of usual residents aged 16 years and over living in a built-up area (BUA) were employed (20,673,055 people). Small, medium and large BUAs had the highest proportions of people in employment (57.1%, 57.5% and 57.7%, respectively), with minor and major BUAs having the lowest values (55.9% and 54.2%, respectively).

Major BUAs with the largest proportions of people in employment included Northampton (63.5%), Reading (62.6%) and Bristol (61.2%).

Large and major BUAs with less than half of their population aged 16 years and over employed included Oldham (47.9%), Nottingham (48.5%), Birmingham (49.4%), Middlesbrough (49.4%) and Bradford (49.7%).

In Wales, 53.2% of those living in a BUA were employed (1,193,155 people), with similar proportions observed across BUA size classifications (52.2% to 53.9%).

Penarth had the highest proportion of people in employment across medium, large, and major BUAs (59.2%). Medium and large BUAs with the lowest levels of employment included Rhyl (48.2%), Swansea (48.8%), Port Talbot (49.0%) and Colwyn Bay (49.7%).

Figure 9: Explore employment in individual BUAs

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by employment status, individual BUAs, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

Download the data

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Industry

This analysis investigates the most common [broad industries](#) that employed the largest numbers of usual residents in BUAs aged 16 years and over. Note that this analysis is based on the residential address of workers and not the location of their workplace.

In minor and small BUAs, when compared with larger BUAs, there were typically higher proportions of people working in the following industries in England (excluding London):

- construction
- professional, scientific and technical activities
- public administration and defence
- compulsory social security
- agriculture, forestry and fishing

In Wales, in minor and small BUAs, when compared with larger BUAs, there were typically higher proportions working in the following industries:

- construction
- agriculture, forestry and fishing

In England (excluding London), some individual BUAs had particularly high proportions of people working in the following industries:

- Boston and Spalding in Lincolnshire had high proportions of people employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing (4.4% and 3.4%, respectively), compared with the average for medium BUAs (0.4%)
- several BUAs in Cumbria had high proportions of people working in water supply: sewerage, wastewater management and remediation, including Whitehaven (21.1%), Cleator Moor (20.8%) and Egremont (19.9%)
- high proportions of people were employed in transportation and storage in Felixstowe (22.5%), Crawley (12.8%), Slough (11.4%), Rugby (11.2%) and Luton (10.7%); for further information see our [The rise of the UK warehouse and the "golden logistics" triangle](#) article
- Reading had a high proportion of people employed in information and communication (12.2%), nearly three times the average for major BUAs (4.1%)
- BUAs with high proportions employed in information and communication were concentrated in the South-East and East of England (excluding London), particularly around London
- more than 1 in 10 workers in Cambridge (14.1%), St Albans (13.0%), Bath (10.6%) and Guildford (10.1%) were employed in professional, scientific and technical activities

In Wales, analysis of individual BUAs identified high proportions of people working in the following industries:

- Wrexham had almost twice as many people employed within manufacturing (19.1%) than the average for medium BUAs (9.9%)
- Llandudno and Aberystwyth had high proportions of people employed in accommodation and food service activities (15.9% and 11.2%, respectively), more than double the average for small BUAs (5.0%)
- high proportions of people were employed in human health and social work activities in Rhyl (23.2%), Colwyn Bay (19.9%) and Llanelli (19.9%), compared with the average for medium BUAs (17.7%)
- Aberystwyth had a high proportion of people working in education (18.1%), almost twice the group average for small BUAs (9.1%), likely reflecting the influence of the university on local employment

Figure 10: Explore industry in individual BUAs

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by industry, individual BUAs, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

Download the data

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Occupation

In Census 2021, usual residents aged 16 years and over were asked for their full job titles (for their main job or, if not working, their last main job).

When compared with smaller BUAs in England (excluding London), there were higher proportions of people in elementary occupations in larger BUAs, such as:

- caring, leisure and other service occupations
- process plant and machine operatives
- sales and customer service occupations

When compared with larger BUAs in England (excluding London), there were higher proportions of people in minor and small BUAs employed as managers, directors and senior officials, and in skilled trades occupations.

In major BUAs in Wales, over a quarter of people were employed in professional occupations (26.5%).

In minor and small BUAs in Wales, there were higher proportions of people employed in skilled trades occupations, and caring, leisure and other service occupations, when compared with larger BUAs.

Figure 11: Managers, directors and senior officials were most likely to live in minor BUAs in England (excluding London)

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by occupation and BUA size classification, England (excluding London), 2021

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Figure 12: Over a quarter of people living in major BUAs worked in professional occupations in Wales

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by occupation and BUA size classification, Wales, 2021

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There were high proportions of people working in elementary occupations in Goole (26.4%) and Shirebrook (26.4%) in England (excluding London), and in Shotton (21.1%) in Wales.

BUAs with high proportions of professional occupations included Cambridge (42.2%) in England (excluding London), and Penarth (30.8%) and Pontyclun (30.8%) in Wales.

Figure 13: Explore occupation in individual BUAs

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over by occupation, individual BUAs, England (excluding London) and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. This figure includes small, medium, large and major BUAs.

Download the data

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8 . Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021 data

[Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 2 August 2023

Population and household characteristics by built-up area (BUA) size classification and individual BUAs, England (excluding London) and Wales, Census 2021. Data are available at a country, BUA size classification and individual BUA level.

9 . Glossary

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.

Age

A person's age on Census Day (21 March 2021) in England and Wales. Infants aged under 1 year are classified as aged 0 years.

Sex

This is the sex recorded by the person completing the census. The options were "Female" and "Male".

Median age

The median age is the age of the person in the middle of the group, such that one half of the group is younger than that person and the other half is older.

Country of birth

The country in which a person was born. For people not born in one of the four countries of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, there was an option to select "elsewhere". People who selected "elsewhere" were asked to write in the current name for their country of birth. This classification provides additional detail on write-in responses.

Accommodation type

The type of building or structure used or available by an individual or household. This could be:

- the whole house or bungalow
- a flat, maisonette or apartment
- a temporary or mobile structure, such as a caravan

More information about accommodation types

A whole house or bungalow property type is not divided into flats or other living accommodation.

There are three types of whole houses or bungalows, including:

- detached: none of the living accommodation is attached to another property but can be attached to a garage
- semi-detached: the living accommodation is joined to another house or bungalow by a common wall that they share
- terraced: a mid-terraced house is located between two other houses and shares two common walls; an end-of-terrace house is part of a terraced development but only shares one common wall
- flats (apartments) and maisonettes: an apartment is another word for a flat; a maisonette is a two-storey flat

Accommodation tenure

Whether a household owns or rents the accommodation that it occupies.

Owner-occupied accommodation can be:

- owned outright, which is where the household owns all of the accommodation
- with a mortgage or loan
- part-owned on a shared ownership scheme

Rented accommodation can be:

- private rented, for example, rented through a private landlord or letting agent
- social rented through a local council or housing association

This information is not available for household spaces with no usual residents.

Qualification

The highest level of qualification is derived from the question asking people to indicate all qualifications held, or their nearest equivalent. This may include foreign qualifications where they were matched to the closest UK equivalent.

For more information on different levels of qualifications, please see our [Education, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#).

Employed

The proportion of usual residents aged 16 years and over in employment the last seven days before Census 2021. "Employed" excludes those who are unemployed, retired, studying, looking after home or family, or long-term sick or disabled.

Economic activity

People aged 16 years and over are considered economically active if, between 15 March and 21 March 2021, they were:

- in employment (an employee or self-employed)
- unemployed, but looking for work and could start work within two weeks
- unemployed, but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted

Economic activity is a measure of whether or not a person was an active participant in the labour market during this period. Economically inactive people are those aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 to 21 March 2021 and had not looked for work between 22 February to 21 March 2021 or could not start work within two weeks.

The census definition differs from the International Labour Organization definition used on the Labour Force Survey, so estimates are not directly comparable.

This classification splits out full-time students from those who are not full-time students when they are employed or unemployed. It is recommended to sum these together to look at all of those in employment or unemployed, or to use the four-category labour market classification, for those with a particular labour market status.

Industry

Classifies people aged 16 years and over who were in employment between 15 and 21 March 2021 by the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code that represents their current industry or business. The SIC code is assigned based on the information provided about a firm or organisation's main activity.

Occupation

Classifies what people aged 16 years and over do as their main job. Their job title or details of activities they do in their job and any supervisory or management responsibilities form this classification. This information is used to code responses to an occupation using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020. It classifies people who were in employment between 15 and 21 March 2021 by the SOC code that represents their current occupation.

10 . Data sources and quality

This article uses data from Census 2021, England and Wales. Details of the strengths, limitations, uses, users and methods used are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#).

Read more about the specific quality considerations for:

- [Demography and migration](#)
- [Housing](#)
- [Education](#)

Census 2021 was conducted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on 21 March 2021, a period of unparalleled and rapid change. This may have affected the way some people responded to the labour market questions on the census. Estimates from the census will also differ to those collected on the [Labour Force Survey](#) because of a range of conceptual differences between the two sources.

Please see our [Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: 13 March 2023 article](#) for further information about interpreting census labour market data. Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates methodology](#).

Built-up area (BUA) geography

This is the first Office for National Statistics (ONS) article using the updated BUA geography. This replaces the 2011 version that was used in Census 2011 adopted in our understanding towns series including [Understanding towns in England and Wales: an introduction: 2019 article](#) and [Understanding towns in England and Wales: industry analysis: 2021 article](#).

BUAs are derived from a process that uses satellite imagery to recognise the boundaries of built-up area development and identify individual built-up area settlements (equating to cities, towns, and villages). The only exception is Greater London, where different settlements are not able to be separately identified and where the geography instead follows administrative borough boundaries. This means that London is not included in most of the analysis in this article, which instead focuses on the remainder of England and Wales where the geography is applied in a consistent manner.

The new edition of the geography, produced by Ordnance Survey, includes several changes to previous versions. The main change is that the geography has been simplified into a single layer, providing one boundary and a single set of statistics for each settlement.

Changes and updates to the geography boundaries since 2011 mean that statistics from 2021 BUAs cannot be directly compared with those from 2011. The single layer used in the new geography most closely resembles the 2011 BUA subdivision layer.

Another important change is that the new geography will be updated more frequently. Ordnance Survey plans to update the boundaries every two years, with the next release scheduled for April 2024. This means that changes to BUA boundaries will be monitored on a more regular basis using a consistent methodology.

Please contact subnational.geographies@ons.gov.uk with any feedback on the new BUA geography. More details about the BUA methodology can be found in [Ordnance Survey's Open built up areas technical specification: 2022](#).

11 . Future developments

Further analytical research on built-up areas (BUAs) will be published in the coming months.

Read more about our [Geographic analysis plans](#) and our [Release plans for Census 2021](#) more generally.

12 . Related links

[Data and Analysis from Census 2021](#)

Webpage | 8 June 2023

The census analysis programme homepage links to the detailed and comprehensive research programme based on Census 2021 in England and Wales. Alongside the production of basic facts and figures of the population, the programme will produce statistics which highlight issues of public policy concern. The programme includes a wide range of topics, covering a diverse range of sub-populations. Our aim is to provide up-to-date and meaningful analysis that will help users to inform decisions on future policy and services.

[Census maps](#)

Interactive map | Released 2 November 2022

Use our maps to find out what people's lives were like across England and Wales in March 2021.

[Create a custom dataset](#)

Dataset | Released 28 March 2023

We group Census 2021 data together based on who or what the information is about, for example, people or households. We make population types from these groups or subsets of them. For example, people who are usually resident in England or Wales make up the population type usual residents.

[ONS Open Geography Portal: Built Up Areas \(2022\) GB BGG](#)

Boundaries dataset | Released 7 December 2022

This file contains the digital vector boundaries for built-up areas in Great Britain as of December 2022. The built-up area boundaries are generalised and created using an automated approach based on 25m grid squares (BGG).

This file has been created from [OS open built-up areas](#). Further information about this product can be found in our [FAQ document](#) or from Ordnance Survey's [product information page](#). Please note that this product contains both Ordnance Survey and ONS Intellectual Property Rights.

13 . Cite this article

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