

Article

The labour market status of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021

UK armed forces veterans labour market variables by personal characteristics. Includes data on employment status, qualifications, employment industry and occupation.

Contact:
Veterans Analysis team
census.customerservices@ons.
gov.uk
+44 1329 444972

Release date:
7 June 2024

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Veterans and non-veterans](#)
3. [Statistical adjustments – comparing veterans and non-veterans](#)
4. [Economic activity – veterans compared with non-veterans](#)
5. [Highest qualifications and economic status by health, disability and unpaid care – veterans compared with non-veterans](#)
6. [Veterans in employment – hours worked, industry and occupation compared with non-veterans](#)
7. [Future publications](#)
8. [UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Data sources and quality](#)
11. [Related links](#)
12. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- Similar proportions of veterans and non-veterans were economically active (42.4% compared with 41.6%) and economically inactive (57.6% compared with 58.4%) following adjustments to account for differences in age, sex and region; veterans and non-veterans in each economically inactive sub-category were very similar.
- Among the economically active, a smaller proportion of veterans (17.0%) than non-veterans (23.0%) were self-employed, following adjustments; this finding was replicated across a range of personal characteristics, with the exception of those aged between 16 to 24 years old and those born in Nepal, where veterans and non-veterans were more similar.
- Of the 755,800 veterans in employment (employees and self-employed) 17.7% worked 49 hours or more per week compared with 14.5% of non-veterans, after adjustments.
- The biggest differences between veterans and non-veterans in employment by industry were in the wholesale and retail trade industry (11.8% of veterans compared with 14.8% of non-veterans), and the public administration and defence industry (11.6% of veterans compared with 5.9% of non-veterans), following adjustments.
- We found a comparable relationship between the provision of unpaid care and unemployment within the veteran and non-veteran populations, after adjustments; these findings were replicated when we considered general health and disability.
- Overall, veterans were less likely than non-veterans to have no qualifications or Level 4 qualifications (degree or equivalent and above); although female veterans (34.9%) were more likely than female non-veterans (30.1%) to have Level 4 qualifications, following adjustments.

2 . Veterans and non-veterans

People who have previously served in the regular or reserve UK armed forces are often known as veterans. In this article we refer to usual residents aged 16 years and over who have served in the UK armed forces as the veteran population. The non-veteran population in this article refers to usual residents in England and Wales aged 16 years and over who have not previously served, or are still currently serving, in the UK armed forces.

We have not directly measured uncertainty of the estimates as part of this analysis. We would expect uncertainty to be small given the nature of the census and [associated published confidence intervals](#) for Census 2021. However, some caution is advised in inferring genuine differences in estimates based on small variations in proportions. Unless otherwise stated, patterns for England and Wales are similar to that for England and Wales together.

3 . Statistical adjustments – comparing veterans and non-veterans

Almost one-third of veterans were aged 80 years and over, compared with 5.1% in the non-veteran population (as reported in our [Characteristics of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#)). Veterans were also more likely to be male and to live in certain areas. To enable comparison between veterans and non-veterans, we use statistical adjustments applied to the non-veteran population throughout this article.

We do not adjust estimates for the veteran population. This is because unadjusted information about armed forces veterans is important for government, local authorities, the NHS and organisations in the voluntary sector that provide services for veterans.

Our data tables provide both unadjusted and adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population. This article uses adjusted estimates.

Unadjusted estimates

These estimates show what differences exist between veterans and non-veterans.

Adjusted estimates

The adjusted estimates make the non-veteran population comparable with the veteran population by age, sex and region. These estimates show what, if any, difference would exist between veterans and non-veterans if the two populations had the same age, sex and regional distribution. This helps us to understand where differences between veterans and non-veterans are likely to be attributable to age and sex or location.

4 . Economic activity – veterans compared with non-veterans

Census 2021 asked respondents about their economic activity. Responses were grouped into people who were economically active (employees, self-employed or unemployed: seeking work) and economically inactive (for example, retired or long-term sick or disabled).

Census 2021 was conducted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change, and it is possible that this affected the way some people responded to the labour market questions on the census. See [Section 10: Data sources and quality](#) for further information about interpreting census labour market data.

Just over two-fifths of veterans were [economically active](#) (42.4%) and nearly three-fifths were [economically inactive](#) (57.6%).

Figure 1: The proportions of economically active and economically inactive veterans and non-veterans were similar, after adjustments

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans by economic activity, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Following adjustments to the non-veteran population to account for differences in age, sex and regional distribution between veterans and non-veterans, similar proportions of veterans and non-veterans were retired (50.8% compared with 49.4%) or economically inactive students (0.7% compared with 0.8%). Similarly comparable proportions of veterans and non-veterans were found in the remaining economically inactive categories, after adjustments: looking after family or home (1.2% compared with 1.9%), long-term sick or disabled (3.4% compared with 4.1%) and “other” (1.5% compared with 2.3%).

Similar proportions of veterans and non-veterans were unemployed (1.6% compared with 1.7%). However, veterans were more likely than non-veterans to be an employee (33.6% compared with 30.3%) and less likely to be self-employed (7.2% compared with 9.6%).

We considered just the economically active (employees, self-employed and unemployed) populations to ensure small differences in some of the economically inactive groups were not causing the differences between employment and self-employment. We found a similar pattern to that seen overall. A higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans were employees (79.2% compared with 72.8%, respectively) and a lower proportion were self-employed (17.0% compared with 23.0%, respectively).

Personal characteristics

Personal characteristics can be associated with economic activity outcomes as explored in our [Diversity in the Labour Market, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#). When we explored economic activity by personal characteristics (sex, age, high-level ethnic group, country of birth and sexual orientation), the general pattern between veterans and non-veterans typically held true. Here we focus on the variations which were found.

Age

When considering the whole population, greater differences were found between veterans and non-veterans aged 16 to 19 years than in other age groups. A much lower proportion of veterans than non-veterans were students (41.9% compared with 61.3%), after accounting for differences in sex, age and location, and as a result a higher proportion were employees (35.5% compared with 23.0%).

We explored the overall finding that veterans were more likely to be an employee and less likely to be self-employed than their non-veteran counterparts, by considering just those that were economically active. We found that this only held true for those aged 30 years or over, and differences seen tended to increase with age up to age 84 years.

Figure 2: Veterans aged 30 years and over were less likely to be self-employed than non-veterans among the economically active

Percentage of economically active UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans that were self-employed by age group, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

We have adjusted the non-veteran population to allow for comparisons with veterans generally. However, we know some veteran characteristics are associated with age because of the levels of diversity over time in the UK armed forces. These include sex, the countries from which citizens were eligible to join the UK armed forces, the propensity of different groups to join the UK armed forces and other complex factors.

This means female veterans, veterans from minority sexual orientations, and those belonging to some high-level ethnic groups, are likely to be younger than other veterans. For more information on diversity among those currently serving, see the [Ministry of Defence UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: October 2023 report](#).

We know some members of the armed forces retire earlier than those in other sectors because of age restrictions on service, fitness requirements and differing pension provisions. These factors may also account for differences between the economic activity of the veteran and non-veteran populations. Therefore, we consider only the economically active population for the remaining personal characteristics, to ensure fluctuations between the number of retired veterans with different characteristics does not affect findings.

Our findings were similar for men and women and for veterans identifying within all high-level ethnic groups and all sexual orientations. Veterans were less likely than respective non-veterans, within personal characteristic groups, to be self-employed and were more likely to be employees.

Country of birth

The census asked people in which country they were born. This is different from nationality, for example, some British citizens are born in other parts of the world. However, we would still expect certain patterns for veterans in country of birth data based on [entry requirements to join the UK armed forces](#). Over time these have included a requirement to be a British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen, with people from Nepal able to serve as Gurkhas under special and historical arrangements. We have grouped countries [accordingly](#).

We would expect some differences in economic activity and employment between veterans and non-veterans within country of birth groupings. This is because of the criteria for [Worker visas](#) and the differences in [Immigration Rules for those who have served in HM Armed Forces](#), compared with those that have not.

We know that non-veterans born in Nepal have a different age profile to other non-veteran populations. Therefore, we would not expect differences between veterans and non-veterans born in Nepal to be fully accounted for by our adjustments. They may also have other unique properties that we cannot measure with this analysis.

The same pattern as that found overall for the economically active populations was seen within most country of birth groupings. Yet the proportions of veterans and non-veterans born in Nepal displayed a differing pattern, and veterans and non-veterans were more similar; 88.6% of veterans and 89.0% of non-veterans were employees, 8.9% of veterans and 7.1% of non-veterans were self-employed, and 2.5% of veterans and 3.9% of non-veterans were unemployed.

Figure 3: Veterans were less likely to be self-employed than non-veterans in most country of birth groupings, except for those born in Nepal, following adjustments

Percentage of economically active UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans that were self-employed by country of birth groupings, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

5 . Highest qualifications and economic status by health, disability and unpaid care – veterans compared with non-veterans

Numerous factors can influence a person's employment or economic status including their [qualifications and socio-economic position](#) which we include in this analysis. Disability can be related to economic activity (see our [Economic activity status by provision of unpaid care by general health dataset](#)) and a person's general health, and the provision of unpaid care, can also affect their economic position. We have considered these factors to understand if their relationship to economic activity differs for veterans compared with non-veterans.

Highest qualification

Figure 4: Veterans were less likely than non-veterans to have no qualifications or Level 4 qualifications, and more likely to have Level 1, 2 or 3 qualifications, following adjustments

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans by highest qualification, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Sex

Following adjustments to the non-veteran population, female veterans (34.9%) were more likely than female non-veterans (30.1%) to have Level 4 qualifications (degree or equivalent or above).

Ethnic group

In England and Wales, following adjustments to the non-veteran population to account for differences in sex, age and location between veterans and non-veterans, across all high-level ethnic groups veterans were less likely than non-veterans to have no qualifications. This was least pronounced for those that identified within the "White" high-level ethnic group. Veterans that identified as "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African" were more likely to have Level 4 qualifications than their non-veteran counterparts (45.8% compared with 35.1%). In Wales, the same pattern was seen regarding no qualifications, although a similar proportion of veterans (39.3%) and non-veterans (40.0%) that identified as "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African" had Level 4 qualifications.

Figure 5: Across all high-level ethnic groups, a smaller proportion of veterans than non-veterans had no qualifications following adjustments

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans with no qualifications by high-level ethnic group, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Country of birth

When we considered highest qualifications by country of birth, the greatest differences identified were between veterans and non-veterans born in Nepal. A higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans had no qualifications (48.5% compared with 28.7%) and a much lower proportion had Level 4 qualifications (5.3% compared with 28.9%), following adjustments.

As with economic activity, we would expect some differences in highest qualifications between veterans and non-veterans within country of birth groupings. This is because of the criteria for [Worker visas](#) and the differences in [Immigration Rules for those who have served in HM Armed Forces](#), compared with those that have not. For example, a higher proportion of people who have not served may need to apply for the Skilled Worker visa which has minimum qualification requirements.

Sexual orientation

Differences between veterans and non-veterans that identified as “Straight or heterosexual”, “Gay or lesbian” or “Bisexual” were consistent with our overall findings (veterans were less likely to have no qualifications and less likely to have Level 4 qualifications than non-veterans). However, among those that identified as “Another sexual orientation” the difference seen in relation to those with no qualifications was much larger (12.1% of veterans compared with 24.5% of non-veterans) and veterans were more, rather than less, likely to have Level 4 qualifications (45.0% compared with 36.6%) after accounting for differences in sex, age and location.

Self-reported general health, disability and unpaid care

As reported in our [Characteristics of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) and [UK armed forces veterans, health and unpaid care, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) articles, following adjustments to account for differences in sex, age and location, overall, veterans and non-veterans were similar in their reporting of general health. A slightly higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans were disabled and both populations were broadly comparable regarding the provision of unpaid care.

Evidence suggests that disability, health status and unpaid carer status are associated with economic activity. More information can be found in our [Disability and employment, UK bulletin](#) and our [Economic activity by provision of unpaid care by general health dataset](#).

Since we know veterans and non-veterans are similar in relation to health, disability and unpaid care, we explored whether these factors had a similar relationship with economic activity for veterans as for non-veterans. When we explored economic activity, employment (hours worked, current industry and current occupation) and highest qualification by health, disability and unpaid care, the same patterns were generally seen for veterans and for non-veterans. This suggests that with regards to these factors and their relationship with veterans’ economic activity, veterans are not more disadvantaged than non-veterans.

Regardless of veteran status, following adjustments, the differences between the proportion of economically active people that were employees, self-employed or unemployed were all similar based on whether they:

- had good health compared with bad health
- were disabled or non-disabled
- did not provide unpaid care or did provide unpaid care

Figure 6: The association between health or disability, or unpaid care and unemployment status, was similar for veterans and non-veterans, following adjustments

Size of percentage change in unemployment, comparing health, disability and unpaid carer status, by veteran status, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Census 2021 asked questions about economic activity, occupation and employment history. The responses are used to provide an indication of socio-economic position using the [National Statistics Socio-economic Classification \(NS-SEC\)](#). NS-SEC data for the veteran and non-veteran populations by personal characteristics are available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

6 . Veterans in employment – hours worked, industry and occupation compared with non-veterans

The analyses in this section focus on the just over 750,000 (40.8%) veterans in employment (employees and self-employed) on Census Day 2021.

Analysis of veterans and non-veterans aged 66 years and over by employment and personal characteristics are available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

Hours worked

Figure 7: Veterans were more likely than non-veterans in employment to work full-time hours, before and after adjustments

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans by hours per week worked, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Personal characteristics

When we considered hours per week worked by personal characteristics (sex, age, high-level ethnic group, country of birth and sexual orientation), some variation was seen. However, typically, the overall patterns hold true. Data are available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

Industry

Census collected information about the economic activity of respondents' employer or business which are classified to an industry based on the [Standard Industrial Classification](#). After adjusting the non-veteran population to account for differences in sex, age and location, the proportions of veterans and non-veterans working in the majority of industries were similar (less than 2.0% difference). Bigger differences were found in four industries:

A higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans worked in:

- transport and storage (9.8% compared with 7.0%)
- public administration and defence and compulsory social security (11.6% compared with 5.9%)

A lower proportion of veterans than non-veterans worked in:

- construction (11.1% compared with 13.1%)
- wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (11.8% compared with 14.8%)

The public administration and defence industry includes activities that are typically governmental in nature although they are conducted by both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Figure 8: The greatest difference between the proportion of veterans and non-veterans was found in the public administration and defence; compulsory social security industry, before and after adjustments

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans by current industry, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Personal characteristics

When we considered industry by personal characteristics, differences between veterans and non-veterans were typically consistent with our overall findings. We have focused here on any variations from the overall patterns.

Age

After adjustments, veterans aged 44 years and under were more likely than non-veterans to work in construction and veterans aged 45 to 79 years were less likely than non-veterans to work in this industry.

Ethnic group

Following adjustments, to the non-veteran population to account for age, sex and regional differences between veterans and non-veterans, veterans who identified as “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” or “Other ethnic group” were more likely than non-veteran counterparts to be employed in the financial, real estate, professional and administrative activities industry. A lower proportion of veterans than non-veterans within the “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” group were employed in the transport and communication industry, while the reverse was found in all other high-level ethnic groups.

Country of birth

When we explored industry by country of birth, we found a lower proportion of veterans (22.9%) than non-veterans (38.8%) born in Nepal were employed in public administration, education and health. The opposite was seen in all other groupings and nearly twice the proportion of veterans than non-veterans born in British Overseas Territories were employed in this sector (50.0% compared with 26.2%), after we accounted for differences in sex, age and location.

We would expect some of these differences to be accounted for by [visa requirements](#) for people born outside of the UK. For example, Skilled Worker visas require a “certificate of sponsorship” from an employer and a minimum level of salary.

Sexual orientation

Following adjustments, among those that identified as straight or heterosexual a lower proportion of veterans than non-veterans were employed in construction. Among those that identified within a minority sexual orientation the reverse was found, and a higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans were employed in construction. This may reflect the fact that younger veterans were more likely than younger non-veterans to work in the construction industry. There is a relationship between age and self-reported sexual orientation, as reported in our [Sexual orientation: age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

Occupation

Census 2021 asked respondents, aged 16 years and over, for their job title and the main activity of their employer. These answers were coded using the [Standard Occupational Classification 2020](#).

In line with our findings for industry, after accounting for differences in sex, age and location, similar proportions of veterans and non-veterans were employed (employees and self-employed) in most occupation categories.

Figure 9: A higher proportion of veterans than non-veterans were employed in protective service occupations, and in transport and mobile machine driver and operative occupations

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans and non-veterans by current occupation, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021

Personal characteristics

Some fluctuations were seen within groupings when we explored current occupation by personal characteristics, although the overall pattern typically held true. Data are available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

Sex

After accounting for differences in sex, age and location between veterans and non-veterans, female veterans were more likely than female non-veterans to work in professional occupations (24.4% compared with 21.0%) and less likely to work in elementary occupations (6.7% compared with 10.0%), roles which require a minimum general level of education or training, for example elementary cleaning, retail or hospitality occupations.

A higher proportion of male veterans than male non-veterans worked in associate professional and technical occupations (15.7% compared with 11.0%) or process, plant and machine operative occupations (17.2% compared with 13.1%), and a lower proportion worked in skilled trade occupations (15.8% compared with 19.0%).

Ethnic group

Following adjustments to the non-veteran population to account for differences in sex, age and location between veterans and non-veterans, veterans that identified as “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” were more likely than non-veterans to be employed in elementary occupations (22.9% compared with 11.1%). In Wales, a higher proportion of veterans (13.3%) than non-veterans (8.0%) who identified as “Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African” were employed in skilled trade occupations.

Country of birth

After adjustments, the greatest difference between veterans and non-veterans by current occupation were among those born in Nepal or born in British Overseas Territories. However, as with our findings for industry, some of this difference may be explained by employers who recruit people from outside the UK needing to meet certain criteria such as that for the [Skilled Worker visa](#).

Sexual orientation

Veterans in all groups, except the straight or heterosexual group, were more likely than non-veterans to be employed in skilled trades occupations, when differences in sex, age and location between veterans and non-veterans were accounted for.

We have explored economic activity and employment of spouses or partners of, and who were living with, UK armed forces veterans and presented general comparisons with the usual resident population by sex and age groups. These data are provided for broad comparison purposes only, as the general population includes the spouses or partners population. These data are unadjusted and cannot be used to compare groups across categories or geographies. The data are available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

7 . Future publications

You can find out more information on our [UK armed forces veterans analysis plans](#) and the [release plans for Census 2021](#) more generally on our website.

8 . UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales data

[The labour market status of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 7 June 2024

Labour market variables including highest qualification, industry and occupation by veteran status and personal characteristics. With adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population.

[The labour market status of spouses or partners of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales, Census 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 7 June 2024

Spouses or partners who lived in the same household as a veteran by labour market variables including highest qualification, industry and occupation. With usual resident population comparisons.

[Create a custom dataset](#)

Interactive content | Released 28 March 2023

Flexible datasets where you can choose and change the area type, coverage and variables for Census 2021 data, and create custom datasets yourself.

9 . Glossary

Country of birth

The country in which a person was born. For people not born in one of the four parts of the UK, there was an option to select "elsewhere". People who selected "elsewhere" were asked to write in the current name for their country of birth.

However, not all non-UK-born people are foreign nationals. The numbers of non-UK-born people include British citizens who were born abroad, such as children of military personnel or other British workers stationed abroad.

For this analysis on veterans and in relation to entry requirements to the UK armed forces, we have grouped countries into the following categories: "UK countries", "Ireland", "other Commonwealth countries", "Nepal", "British Overseas Territories" and "all other countries".

Economic activity status

People aged 16 years and over are 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 within two weeks
- unemployed, but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted

It is a measure of whether or not a person was an active participant in the labour market during this period. Economically inactive are those aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 March 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.

Economically inactive people could state that, between 15 and 21 March 2021, they were:

- retired
- studying
- looking after home or family
- long-term sick or disabled
- other

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

Ethnic group and high-level ethnic group

The ethnic group that the person completing the census feels they belong to. This could be based on their culture, family background, identity or physical appearance.

Respondents could choose 1 out of 19 tick-box response categories, including write-in response options. High-level ethnic group refers to the first stage of the two-stage ethnic group question.

High-level groups refer to the first stage where the respondent identifies through one of the following options:

- "Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh"
- "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African"
- "Mixed or Multiple"
- "White"
- "Other ethnic group"

Highest level of 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.

Hours worked

The number of hours worked per week before the census includes paid and unpaid overtime. This covers the main job of anyone aged 16 years and over.

Industry (current)

Classifies people aged 16 years and over who were in employment between 15 March 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.

National Statistics Socio-economic Classification

The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) indicates a person's socio-economic position based on their occupation and other job characteristics.

It is an Office for National Statistics standard classification. NS-SEC categories are assigned based on a person's occupation, whether employed, self-employed, or supervising other employees.

Full-time students are recorded in the "full-time students" category regardless of whether they are economically active.

Occupation (current)

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 March and 21 March 2021, by the SOC code that represents their current occupation. The lowest level of detail available is the four-digit SOC code which includes all codes in three-, two-, and one- digit SOC code levels.

The Standard Occupational Classification 2020 categorises 104 occupations. These were combined into 26 categories to explore the overall veteran and non-veteran populations. They combined further into 9 high-level categories to examine occupation by personal characteristics.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is a term covering sexual identity, attraction, and behaviour. For an individual respondent, these may not be the same. For example, someone in an opposite-sex relationship may also experience same-sex attraction, and vice versa. This means the statistics should be interpreted purely as showing how people responded to the question, rather than being about who they are attracted to or their actual relationships.

In Census 2021, a voluntary question was asked about sexual orientation, which 92.8% of UK armed forces veterans answered.

UK armed forces veteran

People who have previously served in the UK armed forces. This includes those who have served for at least one day in HM's Armed Forces, either regular or reserves, or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations. It does not include those who have left and since re-entered the regular or reserve UK armed forces, those who have only served in foreign armed forces, or those who have served in the UK armed forces and are currently living outside of England and Wales.

A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day was in the UK and had:

- stayed, or intended to stay, in the UK for a period of 12 months or more
- had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK, and intended to be outside the UK, for less than 12 months

10 . Data sources and quality

Census 2021 provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included.

These accredited official statistics were independently reviewed by the Office for Statistics Regulation in June 2022. They comply with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in [the Code of Practice for Statistics \(opens in a new tab\)](#) and should be labelled “accredited official statistics”.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. Item non-response rates can also be found in our [Measures showing the quality of Census 2021 estimates methodology](#). We ensure that census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of people who were not recorded on a census response. This means that census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical uncertainty associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. All counts in this article have been rounded to the nearest five.

Census 2021 asked the question about previous service in the UK armed forces for the first time. The Ministry of Defence previously published estimates in our [Census 2011: Working age UK armed forces veterans residing in England and Wales bulletin](#) that relate to the working age veteran population and are not directly comparable. As expected, and in line with mortality data, Census 2021 estimates for UK armed forces veterans in older age groups are lower than estimates derived in 2017 using the [Annual Population Survey](#).

We are working to understand how differences in the UK censuses affect our ability to produce harmonised statistics on UK armed forces veterans across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A question relating to previous service in the UK armed forces was asked on the 2022 Census in Scotland. The census in Northern Ireland did not ask a question about previous service in the UK armed forces, but the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency are exploring administrative sources to understand their veteran population. An estimate for Great Britain may be produced with the relevant caveats.

Quality

Quality considerations, along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally, are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#).

More information about the specific quality considerations for UK armed forces veterans can be found in our [UK armed forces veterans quality and methodology information for Census 2021](#).

Census 2021 was conducted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change, and it is possible that this affected the way some people responded to the labour market questions on the census. Specifically, analysis suggests that there was a tendency for some people who were furloughed to report that they were out of work rather than in employment when completing the census.

Compared with estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the census shows fewer people in employment and more people in unemployment or economic inactivity. Some of the discrepancy will be explained by the issue of recording the labour market status of some furloughed individuals in the census. There are also a range of conceptual differences, between Census 2021 and the LFS, which make comparisons between the two sources difficult.

Users should be aware of these issues when analysing Census 2021 labour market figures. However, overall, most census respondents responded to the labour market questions in the way we expected. Therefore, the census continues to be a valuable tool for understanding the labour market conditions in small geographical areas and for population subgroups. For further information about interpreting census labour market data, please see our [Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: 13 March 2021 article](#).

Additional quality information about labour market data can be found in our [Labour market quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#).

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

We have not directly measured uncertainty of the estimates as part of this analysis. We would expect uncertainty to be small given the nature of census and [associated published confidence intervals](#) for Census 2021. However, some caution is advised in inferring genuine differences in estimates based on small variations in proportions.

11 . Related links

[UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 10 November 2022

UK armed forces veteran population who have either previously served in the regular forces, reserve forces or both, Census 2021 data.

[UK armed forces veterans in Wales \(Census 2021\)](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 10 November 2022

Census 2021 data about UK armed forces veterans in Wales.

[UK armed forces veterans quality information for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 10 November 2022

Quality information about the UK armed forces veterans data from Census 2021 in England and Wales to help users correctly interpret them.

[Census 2021 dictionary](#)

Methodology | Released 10 November 2022

Definitions, variables and classifications to help when using Census 2021 data.

[Armed forces community \(veterans\) question development for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 27 January 2021

How we researched, developed and tested the Census 2021 question on the armed forces veteran community.

[Harmonised standard for previous UK armed forces service](#)

Methodology | Released 16 March 2022

Detail on how the measurement of previous UK armed forces service has been made more comparable, consistent, and coherent.

12 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 7 June 2024, ONS website, article, [The labour market status of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)