

census
2021

Census 2021

Update on UK Armed Forces Veterans

Topic Report

August 2020

Executive Summary

At the start of the 2021 Census project, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) ran a consultation on the content of the Census questionnaire. A topic that arose was the provision of statistical information on UK Armed Forces Veterans living in Northern Ireland.

As part of the Census Proposals¹ it was noted that the provision of such data would help central/local government and charities that work with veterans and their families to meet commitments under the Armed Forces Covenant². Alongside the Proposals Document an initial UK Armed Forces veterans topic report was published by NISRA in April 2019³. Since then Census Office has continued to undertake research on how best to provide “census-type” statistics on UK Armed Forces veterans. Over this time NISRA has engaged with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and UK Armed Forces veterans groups based in Northern Ireland. Census Office carried out a 2019 Census Rehearsal with a UK Armed Forces veterans question, commissioned a public survey on public acceptability and held focus groups with local veterans to consider this issue.

The results of this research showed that

- returns from the 2019 Census Rehearsal indicated that some local veterans would not disclose their veteran status; and
- feedback from local focus groups reinforced this with local veterans indicating that a veteran question on the census was “strongly unacceptable for veterans”.

These findings led to a veterans question not being included in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland. At the same time NISRA has been working with the Ministry of Defence to obtain secure access to and use of the Service Leavers Database. This has been successful and NISRA are working towards providing “census-type” information on veterans through secure data linkage. The remainder of this report outlines these points in detail.

¹ See www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2021-census-proposals-document for more information.

² See www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/ for more information

³ See www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/uk-armed-forces-veterans-topic-report.pdf

Further research

1. NISRA, working with the MoD and the ONS, has acquired a secure extract of the Service Leavers Database (SLD). The Service Leavers Database is maintained by the MoD and has details of service personnel who have left the UK Armed Forces since the mid-1970s.
2. As part of a feasibility project NISRA successfully linked the Service Leavers Database to the 2011 Census for Northern Ireland. This data linkage approach allows for “census-type” statistics to be published on the linked data Census-Veterans Leavers data.
3. In summary the linked data showed that there were just under 30,000 UK Armed Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland whose details linked to data recorded in the last census⁴. This estimate is at the lower end of the expected range and is lower than the initial survey based estimate made by Census Office in the April 2019 topic report. This result was expected because:
 - the Service Leavers Database is based on details of those who have left the UK Armed Forces as at 2019. This data was matched with the 2011 Census data – for some there may differences in the demographic data (e.g. change of name after leaving the Service) and this may give rise to inaccuracy in data matching which will lead to a lower estimate;
 - the Service Leavers Database currently only contains details of those who have left the UK Armed Forces since the 1970s – there will be some veterans living in Northern Ireland who left the UK Armed Forces prior to this;
 - there are known data quality issues with the earlier data in the Service Leavers Database which has been compiled from historical HR records where there was less consistency in the capture of key demographic data fields; and
 - former members of the Armed Forces Reserves may not be included in the Service Leavers Database. It is likely that more data will be missing for reserves than regulars – in addition members of the Ulster Defence Regiment are not generally included in the Service Leavers Database.
 - NISRA will continue to work with the MoD to improve the methods and data sources to provide improved statistics on UK Armed Forces veterans through linkage of the Service Leavers Database to the 2021 Census.

⁴ A detailed report on the results of the linkage will be published shortly.

Census Rehearsal 2019

4. As part of this suite of research a question on UK Armed Forces veterans was included in the Census Rehearsal in October 2019. The question used was similar to the question used in Great Britain. In total around 10,000 households replied to the Census Rehearsal. By linking the Rehearsal responses to the Service Leavers Database it was possible to determine that nearly 20% of veterans in the Rehearsal area, that were present on the Service Leavers Database, did not disclose their veterans' status in the veterans' question in the Rehearsal. In part this may be due to Veterans not being willing to disclose their status in a survey questionnaire.

Focus Groups

5. As a further step NISRA undertook acceptability testing with local veterans over whether a question could be included in the 2021 Census. Two focus groups were led by the ONS researchers who had carried out similar focus group testing in England and Wales. The two focus groups included veterans who were invited through local veteran support organisations.
6. The veterans from the focus groups reported that the inclusion of a veterans question in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland would be *“strongly unacceptable for members of this group and may put overall response to the Census at risk”*. The majority of veterans believed that it was not acceptable to ask this question in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland. Many said that if the question was asked in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland then they would not respond accurately and might even not respond to the overall Census.

Next steps

7. A veterans question will not be included in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland, but this research has shown that veterans statistics can be provided through data linked to the Census. NISRA continues to work with the MoD to improve both the data being used and the linkage methods used to create “census-type” statistics on UK Armed Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland. In doing so NISRA will continue to engage with both the wider public and local UK Armed Forces veterans groups.