

Statistical bulletin

# Approximated Social Grade, England and Wales: Census 2021

An estimation of the financial and social situation of usual residents in households and how this differs by age and sex, and ethnic group, Census 2021 data.



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# 1 . Main points

- Approximated Social Grade (ASG) was allocated to all usual residents in a household with a Household Reference Person (HRP) aged 16 to 64 years (46.7 million, 79.8% of all usual residents in households).
- The grades calculated from census data include higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations (AB), supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations (C1), skilled manual occupations (C2), and semi-skilled and unskilled manual and lowest grade occupations (DE).
- Census 2021 data showed that "C1" supervisory, clerical and junior occupations was the most common ASG for England and Wales, at 32.8% of all usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years (15.3 million people).
- In England, 23.5% of people were classed as the highest social grade, "AB", compared with Wales at 19.6%.
- The regions with the largest percentages of people classed as the highest social grade, "AB", were London (28.4%) and the South East (28.2%), whereas the North East (18.3%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (19.4%) had the lowest proportions.
- The age groups in England and Wales with the largest proportions of the highest social grade, "AB", were aged 35 to 44 years (27.5% for females, 28.2% for males) and 45 to 55 years (24.4% for females, 25.8% for males).
- Across England and Wales, people who identified in the "White: Irish" ethnic group category had the largest proportions of the highest social grade, "AB", (36.9%) and the smallest proportion of the lowest social grade, "DE", (13.7%) out of all the ethnic groups.

## 2 . Approximated Social Grade (ASG) in England and Wales

Social Grade is a socio-economic classification. This is a way of grouping people by type, which is mainly based on their social and financial situation. ASG is a model created by the Market Research Society for census data to estimate Social Grade. The ASG model for Census 2021 is based on characteristics of the Household Reference Person (HRP), including:

- current or most recent occupation using the Standard Occupational 2020 Code (SOC2020)
- sex
- economic activity status
- employment status and if they supervise or employ others
- highest level of qualification
- household tenure
- number of people and number of people aged 16 years and over in their household
- number of cars or vans in their household

These combined variables give a good measure of Social Grade using Census 2021. Social Grade is helpful to organisations who collect information on voting behaviours, consumer attitudes and market research.

Census 2021 data for ASG allocated all usual residents in households the grade of their HRP if the HRP was aged 16 to 64 years. The HRP is the person in a household who serves as the reference point to characterise a whole household, mainly based on economic activity. Census data provided a more reliable estimate of Social Grade for HRPs of working age, which means that 28.9% of HRPs (7.2 million) and 20.2% of usual residents in households (11.8 million) did not receive an ASG. Estimates were based on the HRP's current or most recent occupation. For retired HRPs aged 65 years and over, this may not best reflect their career or highest status position; therefore, they were not included. For more information, see [Section 7: Strengths and limitations](#).

Social Grade has six possible classes: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. Grade A (higher managerial roles, administration or professional occupations) and Grade E (non-working) are the least common. This means they are difficult to allocate with as much certainty using the census model, so census data uses a combined four-class system (AB, C1, C2, DE). This produces a good estimation for the 46.7 million usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years. Figures in this bulletin are expressed as proportions of this population. The full definitions and numbers for these grades include:

- AB: higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations (23.3%, 10.9 million people)
- C1: supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations (32.8%, 15.3 million people)
- C2: skilled manual occupations (21.3%, 10.0 million people)
- DE: semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations (22.6%, 10.6 million people)

ASG in 2011 and 2021 is broadly comparable. However, different methods were used to derive ASG in 2021 compared with 2011, so we will not make comparisons in this bulletin. Some respondents may have been assigned a different grade because of the improved methodological approach in 2021. Any change in the distribution of ASG since 2011 will be partly because of methodology improvements and partly indicative of real change. Care should be taken when using this data to assess trends over the last decade for policy or planning purposes. For more information, see [Section 7: Strengths and limitations](#).

## **Figure 1: People in England were more likely to be classed as grade AB than in Wales**

**Approximated Social Grade, usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years, 2021, England, Wales**

## Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

In England, the AB, “higher and intermediate occupations” category showed the largest regional differences. This ranged from 18.3% in the North East to 28.4% in London. The C1 occupation category was most common and had the least variation across English regions. Proportions of grade C1 ranged from 30.9% in London to 34.1% in the South East. The proportion of people classed as C2, in “skilled manual occupations”, ranged from 17.5% in London to 23.6% in the South West. The highest proportion of people classed as DE, in “lower grade occupations” or long-term unemployed, ranged from 17.4% in the South East to 27.3% in the North East.

In Wales, people were most likely to be classed in the C1 category (32.9%), followed by DE (24.6%). Wales had a higher proportion of people classed as grade C2 (23.0%) than in England (21.3%). However, Wales had lower proportions of grade AB (19.6%) than England (23.5%).

## Figure 2: Approximated Social Grade varied across local authorities in England and Wales

### Approximated Social Grade, usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

#### Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

#### Notes:

1. AB grouped people who had higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations. C1 grouped people who had supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations or who are full-time students. C2 grouped people who had skilled manual occupations. DE grouped people who had semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations; unemployed and lowest grade occupations.

English local authorities with the highest percentage of people with grade AB were in London and its surrounding area:

- the City of London (52.9%)
- Richmond-upon-Thames (49.1%)
- St Albans (48.5%)

Local authorities with the highest percentage of people with grade DE were in:

- Leicester (38.2%)
- Sandwell (35.8%)
- Middlesbrough (35.6%)

Welsh local authorities with the highest percentage of people classed as AB were:

- Monmouthshire (30.1%)
- Vale of Glamorgan (27.7%)
- Cardiff (26.3%)

The places in Wales with the highest percentage of people with grade DE were:

- Blaenau Gwent (33.5%)
- Merthyr Tydfil (30.7%)
- Neath Port Talbot (28.7%)

## Sex and age by ASG

The largest proportion of adults in England and Wales with grade AB were halfway through their working life, aged 35 to 44 years (27.5% for females, 28.2% for males) and 45 to 55 years (24.4% for females, 25.8% for males). Conversely, males and females at the beginning of their working life, aged 16 to 24 years, had the lowest percentages of AB (16.9% for females, 17.4% for males).

C1 was the most common grade in all age groups for both males and females. The highest proportion for females were those aged 16 to 24 years (37.7%). Meanwhile, this age range was the second highest for males (36.8%). This finding reflects the high numbers of full-time students in this age group. The highest proportion of grade C1 males (42.0%) were those aged 65 years and over, with a HRP aged 16 to 64 years.

Females aged 65 years and over (with a HRP aged 16 to 64 years), had the highest proportion of grade C2, at 26.2%. In comparison, males in the same age group had the lowest proportion, at 16.6%. Males aged 55 to 64 years had the highest proportion of grade C2 at 26.3%, compared with females in the same age group at 18.7%.

Among those aged 55 to 64 years, females had the highest percentage of grade DE at 26.7%, compared with 23.5% of males in the same age group. The age group among males with the highest proportions of grade DE were aged 16 to 24 years (24.5%). Across both sexes, the lowest proportion classed as DE was those aged 35 to 44 years (20.2% for females, 17.6% for males). This age group had the highest proportions of grade AB.

### **Figure 3: Males and females aged 35 to 44 years had the highest proportion of grade AB and lowest proportion of grade DE**

**Sex by age by Approximated Social Grade, usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years, 2021, England and Wales**

**Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. AB grouped people who had higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations. C1 grouped people who had supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations or who are full-time students. C2 grouped people who had skilled manual occupations. DE grouped people who had semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations; unemployed and lowest grade occupations.

## Ethnic group by ASG

At the national level, Census 2021 data shows that ASG did differ by which ethnic groups people identified with. In 2021, the ethnic group question had two stages. Firstly, a person identified with one of the five high-level ethnic groups. Secondly, a person identified with one of the 19 available response options, which include categories with write-in response options.

In England and Wales, over a third of people who identified in the "White: Irish" category were classed as grade AB (36.9%). They also had the lowest proportion of grade DE (13.7%) out of all the ethnic groups. The next highest percentages of grade AB were for people who identified in the "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian" category (35.7%), followed by those who identified in the "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Indian" category (33.6%).

Those who identified in the "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Chinese" category had the highest proportions of grade C1 (36.6%) and also had relatively high proportions of grade AB (30.5%). Similarly, there was a high proportion of grade C1 for those who identified in the "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Indian" category (34.7%), followed by those who identified in the "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: Caribbean" category (35.6%).

Out of all the ethnic group categories, the highest proportion for grade C2 was for people who identified in the "White: Roma" category, at 27.7%. This group also had high percentages of DE (38.0%). Other ethnic groups with high proportions of grade C2 were those who identified in the "White: Other White" (24.8%) and "White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British" (22.3%) categories.

People who identified in the "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" category had the highest proportion of grade DE (61.3%) and the lowest proportions of grade AB (3.5%). The groups with the next highest proportions of grade DE identified in the categories "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi" (43.9%) and "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani" (41.5%).

### **Figure 4: People who identified in the “White: Irish” ethnic group category were the most likely to be classed as AB grade**

**Ethnic group by Approximated Social Grade, usual residents in households with HRPs aged 16 to 64 years, 2021, England and Wales**

**Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. AB grouped people who had higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations. C1 grouped people who had supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations or who are full-time students. C2 grouped people who had skilled manual occupations. DE grouped people who had semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations; unemployed and lowest grade occupations.

### 3 . Comparing Approximated Social Grade (ASG) with National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)

Social Grade and NS-SEC are both used to classify the social and financial situations of households based on the characteristics of the Household Reference Person (HRP). However, as they have different purposes, different methods of classification are needed. For Census 2021 data, ASG classifies usual residents in households where the HRP is aged 16 to 64 years (71.1% of all HRPs), whereas NS-SEC is used for usual residents in households where the HRP is aged 16 years and over (99.9% of all HRPs). Additionally, NS-SEC is solely based on the HRP's occupation, whereas ASG uses additional indicators of affluence such as the HRP's highest level of qualification, car ownership and tenure. As such, differences between the two variables may be because of the differences in the population or difference in the exact methodology. For more information about the differences between ASG and NS-SEC, see [Section 6: Measuring the data](#).

Nonetheless, it is useful to broadly compare ASG and NS-SEC because they both group HRPs on their occupation and should classify HRPs of "working class" and "middle class and above" grades at similar proportions. In this instance, "working class" relates to routine and manual occupations and people in long-term unemployment. For ASG, 44.1% of HRPs could be considered "working class" belonging to the C2 or DE categories. For NS-SEC, this was lower, as 38.0% of HRPs could be considered as "working class" by combining all categories from "L10: Lower supervisory occupations" to "L14: Never worked and long-term unemployed".

The "middle class and above" social group includes administrative, managerial and professional occupations and full-time students. By combining the AB and C1 categories, 55.9% of HRPs could be considered "middle class and above" using ASG. Whereas, using NS-SEC, 62.0% of HRPs could be considered "middle class or above" when categories from "L1: Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations" to "L9: Own account workers" and "L15: Full-time students" are combined.

### 4 . Approximated Social Grade data

#### [Approximated Social Grade](#)

Dataset | Released 17 August 2023

Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in households in England and Wales by Approximated Social Grade of their Household Reference Person aged 16 to 64 years. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

#### [Approximated Social Grade dataset specifications](#)

Supporting information | Released 17 August 2023

Census 2021 variables, classifications and geographies included in the Approximated Social Grade data.

#### [National Statistics Socio-economic Classification \(NS-SEC\)](#)

Dataset | Released 8 December 2022

Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales by National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

### 5 . Glossary

#### Age

A person's age on Census Day, 21 March 2021, in England and Wales. Infants aged under one year are classified as zero years of age.

## Approximated Social Grade

This is a socio-economic classification used by the market research and marketing industries to analyse spending habits and consumer attitudes. It is not possible to assign social grade precisely from Census 2021, although the Market Research Society's method provides a good approximation.

## 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 one out of 19 tick-box response categories, including write-in response options.

## Economic activity

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 people 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.

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, if you want to look at all those with a particular labour market status.

## 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.

## Household

A household is defined as:

- one person living alone
- a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room, or dining area

This includes:

- all sheltered accommodation units in an establishment (irrespective of whether there are other communal facilities)
- all people living in caravans on any type of site that is their usual residence; this will include anyone who has no other usual residence elsewhere in the UK

A household must contain at least one person whose place of usual residence is at the address. A group of short-term residents living together is not classified as a household, and neither is a group of people at an address where only visitors are staying.

## Household Reference Person

A person who serves as a reference point, mainly based on economic activity, to characterise a whole household.

## National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)

The 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

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.

## Tenure type

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

Owner-occupied accommodation can be:

- owned outright, in which the household owns all of the accommodation
- owned 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.

## 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.

## 6 . 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.

Labour market data mainly refer to respondents' activity in the last seven days; this refers to 15 to 21 March 2021. In the unemployment and economically inactive groups, the four weeks a person has been looking for a job are from 21 February to 21 March 2021, and they must be able to start a job in the next two weeks, 21 March to 4 April 2021.

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 impact 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. The majority of returns (89%) were received online. The response rate exceeded our target of 94% overall and 80% in all local authorities.

Read more about person and question-specific response rates at local authority level in our [Measures showing the quality of Census 2021 estimates methodology](#).

### Comparing Approximated Social Grade (ASG) and National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)

Some differences in classification of socio-economic status for ASG and NS-SEC will be attributed to the difference in population, as ASG does not allocate a social grade for Household Reference Persons (HRPs) aged 65 years and over. Additionally, NS-SEC is solely based on the HRP's occupation, whereas ASG uses additional indicators of affluence, such as the HRP's highest level of qualification, car ownership, and tenure.

NS-SEC has a standardised method based on the Census 2021 questions related to occupation, economic activity, and employee relations (whether the respondent is classed as an employee, employer or self-employed). ASG uses advanced analytics techniques to identify which census variables, including those of NS-SEC, to best predict social grade for the working and non-working population in 2021.

For more information on how NS-SEC is classified, see our [NS-SEC methodology](#).

## 7 . Strengths and limitations

## Comparability with the 2011 Census model

Approximated Social Grade (ASG) is broadly comparable between 2011 and 2021. The classification categories remain the same as 2011; however, the 2021 model was created using different algorithms and variables. In 2011, the census model was built using Chi-square Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) decision tree analysis. An improved methodological approach was adopted in 2021 using a newer, high-performance, Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) algorithm. XGBoost is also based on decision tree learning but can better cope with more complex decisions for smaller subgroups of Census respondents.

Other advanced analytics techniques were first used for selecting the best predictors of social grade and the most important variables were then included in the XGBoost model. More information on the 2011 and 2021 models can be found on the [MRS social grade webpage](#).

## Limitations of using census data to estimate Social Grade

Census 2021 was not designed to directly measure Social Grade, as this requires more comprehensive survey questions, typically carried out by a market research interviewer. Census data cannot use the more detailed six-way classification of Social Grade (A, B, C1, D, E), as it cannot differentiate between A and B, or D and E social classes with enough certainty. Therefore, this data is more useful to distinguish between middle- and working-class individuals across England and Wales, than to specify sub-groups, for example, those who are or were in professional occupations (belonging to category A) or unemployed (belonging to category E).

Retired people cannot be classified with as much certainty using Census 2021 data compared with social grading of other data sources. ASG may underestimate the grade of retired people, as it is based on their most recent occupation that they receive a pension from, rather than their past occupation with the highest grade. ASG uses a different model for retired people to overcome this, however this did not have enough accuracy for HRPs aged 65 years and over. Therefore, Household Reference Persons (HRPs) of retirement age (65 years and over) were not allocated a social grade and usual residents in households only receive a social grade if their HRP is aged 16 to 64 years.

Assigning the social grade of the HRP to the whole household has limitations. It is unlikely that all usual residents in multi-family or multi-generational households will have an identical social grade. For instance, students living with young professionals or working adults living with retired people. Therefore, ASG is a household estimate that does not predict an individual's social or financial circumstances.

## Labour market quality information

Census 2021 took place during a period of rapid change. We gave extra guidance to help people on furlough answer the census questions about work. However, we are unable to determine how furloughed people followed the guidance. Take care when using these data for planning purposes. Read more about specific quality considerations in our [Labour market quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#).

## Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)

Census 2021 data were classified using the 2020 update of the SOC, while 2011 Census used the 2010 version. These two classifications are not directly comparable because of changes in the way many occupations were classified. More information is found in our [SOC 2020 user guide](#).

## General

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

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

## 8 . Future developments

We are currently transforming population statistics. As part of this work, we're exploring how we might use administrative and other sources of data to estimate future population characteristics, such as social grade. Find out more [about our proposed transformation of population and migration statistics](#) and how you can take part in the consultation on our proposal in our [Get involved web page](#).

One of the main objectives of this consultation is to understand user needs and their importance so that we can prioritise our research plans in the future. We are keen to hear people's views on our ambitious proposals for the transformation of our population and migration statistics. The consultation is open to anyone who uses the Office for National Statistics's (ONS's) data. This could include experienced users or those who are looking to use our data for the first time.

## 9 . Related links

### [Labour market quality information for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Revised 27 July 2023

Known quality information affecting labour market data from Census 2021 in England and Wales.

### [Education quality information for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Revised 10 January 2023

Known quality information affecting education data from Census 2021 in England and Wales

### [Industry and occupation, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 8 December 2022

A summary of Census 2021 data about industries that people are employed in, types of work people do as their main job and social grades in England and Wales.

### [Approximated Social Grade on the 2021 Census, Market Research Society](#)

Web page | Last updated 31 July 2023

For MRS information on social grade and its development of the model for the Census 2021, when this becomes available.

## 10 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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