**Ethnicity Facts and Figures - a marriage of good statistical practice and policy relevance**

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**Abstract**

*In October 2017 the UK Government launched an innovative website called Ethnicity Facts and Figures. Drawing together information held by government departments - survey and administrative data - it paints a compelling, and at times uncomfortable, picture of the different experiences of ethnic groups in areas as diverse as crime and justice, education, health, housing, and the labour market.*

*This paper describes how we ensured that the website and overarching report comply with the statistical standards set out by the UK’s Statistics Authority in its Code of Practice for Statistics. The Code establishes a framework based around three pillars: Trustworthiness, Quality and Value*

*The paper also explores some of the challenges of maintaining statistical integrity in a project characterised by intense political interest and sensitivity, and sets out next steps.*

**Keywords***: ethnicity / policy relevance / Code compliance / user engagement.*

1. **The Code of Practice for Statistics**

The preparation and publication of a Code of Practice for Statistics are statutory responsibilities of the UK Statistics Authority, which is also responsible for assessing sets of official statistics against the Code with a view to awarding designation as National Statistics.

The first edition of the Code was published in January 2009. Over the last two years the Authority has reviewed the way in which the Code has been used. In July 2017 the Authority launched a consultation on a refreshed edition of the Code, structured around three pillars – trustworthiness, quality, and value – and a set of principles that can be applied to a wide range of numerical information; within these principles are embedded a series of detailed practices that should be adopted by organisations producing and releasing official statistics. The Authority’s intention was to provide all producers of statistics and numerical information with a framework that could be applied in a proportionate and flexible way to improve public confidence. The consultation closed on 5 October 2017; the revised Code was published[[1]](#footnote-1) in February 2018.

The refreshed Code of Practice for Statistics sets out 87 statements of (good) practice, structured under 14 high level principles:

Trustworthiness

Honesty and integrity (T1)

Independent decision making and leadership (T2)

Orderly release (T3)

Transparent processes and management (T4)

Professional capability (T5)

Data governance (T6)

Quality

Suitable data sources (Q1)

Sound methods (Q2)

Assured quality (Q3)

Value

Relevance to users (V1)

Accessibility (V2)

Clarity and insight (V3)

Innovation and improvement (V4)

Efficiency and proportionality (V5)

At the time the *Ethnicity Facts and Figures* website[[2]](#footnote-2) was launched (10 October 2017) we published a statement of (voluntary) compliance[[3]](#footnote-3) describing our approach to producing the first Audit at the level of the principles[[4]](#footnote-4), drawing on the detailed practices as appropriate. This statement served two main purposes:

a. To provide transparency for users – by recording the way that the Cabinet Office’s Race Disparity Unit (RDU) has approached the production and dissemination of the Race Disparity Audit (RDA).

b. To identify areas in which compliance with the Code could be enhanced as the Audit was developed.

In the current paper we have, for illustrative purposes, set out the extent to which our development of the Race Disparity Audit complied with each pillar of the Code (in summary), and with the first principle under each pillar (that is - T1, Q1, and V1); for convenience we have included the Statistics Authority’s description of each element of the Code.

**2.**    **The Race Disparity Audit**

The Prime Minister announced the Race Disparity Audit in August 2016; the objective was to publish Government data on disparities in treatment and outcomes in public services for all races. The work was led by a multi-disciplinary team, including experts in statistics and research, digital, and policy: the Race Disparity Unit (RDU).

The RDU collected and cleaned ethnicity data from UK Government departments, collating and prioritising what should be published at launch. The team prepared commentary to explain the key aspects of the data on the *Ethnicity Facts and Figures* website and drafted a summary analytical report. The team engaged with a wide range of external partners to understand potential uses of the data and to test demand for the website, including testing the needs of different potential users.

**3.      RDU's approach to the production and dissemination of the Audit**

*3.1   Trustworthiness: confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics and data*

*Trustworthiness is a product of the people, systems and processes within organisations that enable and support the production of statistics and data. Trustworthiness comes from the organisation that produces statistics and data being well led, well managed and open, and the people who work there being impartial and skilled in what they do.*

All of our work on the Audit is guided by the public interest. The decisions we have made – for example, about the range of data to be presented, the choice of time periods, the nature of the overarching analytical report, and quality assurance processes - are guided by a clear commitment to transparency, accessibility and objectivity and are shaped by extensive user testing.

By ‘public interest’ we are referring to the Audit’s capacity to demonstrate in an accessible and quantified way how people of different ethnicities are treated by public services.

*3.1.1   Honesty and integrity.*

*People in organisations that release statistics should be truthful, impartial and independent, and meet consistent standards of behaviour that reflect the wider public good.*

RDU’s senior management and analysts are aware that statistics that aren’t trusted won’t be used; also that any appearance of the partisan presentation of data might challenge the trustworthiness of the whole Audit. We undertake stringent quality assurance with a view to ensuring that the commentary identifies the salient points, and presents them clearly. Should any users feel that we have not been as accurate or objective as we have intended to be, we review the commentary objectively. In February 2018 we revised the way we presented information about the post-education destinations[[5]](#footnote-5) of young people from the Gypsy/Roma Traveller group in response to criticism that we felt was legitimate; in the ‘page history’ on the web page we said “further and more comparable commentary for Gypsy/Roma added”.

The detailed practices supporting the principle of *Honesty and integrity* stipulate a number of aspects of the orderly release (publication) of statistics. These considerations are particularly important when new statistics are released. In the case of the Audit - which draws together previously published statistics (albeit some of the detailed analyses by ethnicity, such as social renting, overcrowding, and travel by distance/mode were new) – and which has involved the provision of data from a range of government departments, we believe that we have complied with the spirit of the Code. We think that we could enhance compliance in the future by pre-announcing the publication of new data and updates (revisions) well in advance.

*3.2   Quality: data and methods that produce assured statistics.*

*Quality means that statistics fit their intended uses, are based on appropriate data and methods, and are not materially misleading. Quality requires skilled professional judgement about collecting, preparing, analysing and publishing statistics and data in ways that meet the needs of people who want to use the statistics.*

At a conceptual level it is helpful to distinguish between the quality of each source/item of data included in the Audit, and the quality of the Audit as a whole.

In prioritising the data to be included in the Audit, the criteria we adopted included ‘quality’ and ‘relevance’. We were guided by statistical experts across government about the quality of particular sources, and we draw on official (including National) statistics. For each measure on the website we have included background sections covering a brief summary of noteworthy aspects of the data sources and the associated methodology, and relevant web links. And we adopted quality assurance arrangements that made the most of the expertise of Departmental statisticians.

At the level of the Audit as a whole, we have enhanced quality by ensuring that the initial set of data included covered a broad range of topic areas, and by the use of established presentational frameworks and statistical classifications. We have also included in the overarching analytical report a clear summary description of some key considerations of quality:

* That there are some areas of public services where there is little or no data about ethnicity.
* That where relevant data *is* collected, a common challenge is having insufficient numbers of cases to study in the ethnic minority groups; inevitably this limits the degree to which firm conclusions can be made about differences between ethnic groups, and the ability to take account of other factors in analysis in addition to ethnicity.
* That the quality of data on the ethnicity of individuals varies and is generally better when reported by people themselves, as it is in surveys and the Census and most administrative sources. We have made clear that administrative data – such as that collected from service providers – can suffer high levels of non-recording of ethnicity and the overuse of ‘other’ categories, undermining the ability to identify differences in how people in each ethnic group are treated.

*3.2.1   Suitable data sources*

*Statistics should be based on the most appropriate data to meet intended uses. The impact of any data limitations for use should be assessed, minimised and explained.*

The scope of the Audit is UK Government data.  An initial review required all Government Departments to identify what data they held on UK public services that could be analysed by ethnicity. The review identified a vast amount of information, some of which was already published and some that had not yet been analysed for ethnic differences. The data identified by the Audit was very varied in quality and depth. It spanned the Census, published official statistics, numerous Government surveys and Departments’ own administrative records.

Some datasets were prioritised for inclusion in the first release (that is, the version of the website launched in October 2017). The intention was, and subsequent practice has been, that other data sets would be added in due course. The criteria for prioritising data reflected its quality, readiness, manageability and relevance to key concerns identified by users of the data, including members of the public, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public services and Government Departments themselves. The emphasis was on opening up data to the public where it was reasonably reliable, with caveats as necessary. In prioritising we are aiming to:

* cover subject areas that matter most to our users e.g. health, education, work
* provide more granular ethnicity breakdowns i.e. favouring a higher number of different ethnicities than merely “white or non-white”
* include breakdowns by geography, income and gender

The prioritised list for launch, and subsequent lists of new measures, have been formally approved by Ministers.

*3.3   Value: statistics that support society’s needs for information.*

*Value means that the statistics and data are useful, easy to access, remain relevant, and support understanding of important issues. Value includes improving existing statistics and creating new ones through discussion and collaboration with stakeholders, and being responsible and efficient in the collection, sharing and use of statistical information.*

We consider that the rationale for and nature of the Audit are absolutely aligned with the principle of securing public value. For example, while the data presented on the website are available elsewhere, we have been told that bringing the data together in one place is hugely helpful to analysts and policy makers. Also, while experts in a particular topic area, such as health or education, are unlikely to find anything ‘new’ on the website, they do gain new insights by being able to look readily at data on related topics.

*3.3.1   Relevance to users*

*Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted on, and their use of statistics supported.*

We have put considerable effort into actively engaging with users about the scope of the Audit, and its delivery via a web site.

We have spoken to hundreds of users since the project started, to help us understand who are users are, what their different needs are, how those might already be met elsewhere, and what problems they had that we could solve.

The different groups of users included:

* members of the public - from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds
* Central and local government - policy and programme officials and analysts
* NGOs
* academics
* public service managers from sectors such as education,  employment and health e.g. head teachers, job centre managers

Their information needs vary a great deal as does their comprehension of statistical data. As noted above, the prioritisation exercise was intended in large part to reflect users’ needs for specific data (and for a range of data about different topics). Once we had the data, we had to present our content in a clear and meaningful way to non-experts in statistics and data. We also needed to make sure it was accessible so that visually or manually impaired people could use the service. Users with more expertise in statistics and data manipulation wanted access to the data and richer background information to give context on how it was collected and analysed. And we released alpha and beta versions of the web tool (showing only data that had previously been published) to selected users and stakeholders, as part of our testing.

We have viewed the expert guidance we received from government statisticians about data quality through the lenses of relevance and accessibility – we are committed to ensuring that the Audit meets the needs and captures the attention of a wide range of users, including non-specialists. So, for example, in many places we have presented estimates in a rounded form, rather than showing decimal places – our judgement has been that in the context of the Audit, the slight loss of precision is outweighed by the benefit of making the data and the messages easier to absorb.

**4. Next steps**

Over the coming months we will:

* Add to the richness of the data presented on the website, by adding new datasets and analyses. Our intention, in the spirit of Code compliance, is to make public the date on which new data are to be published.
* Ensure that all of the data presented on the website are the latest available, streamlining and where possible automating the updating process. To enhance Code compliance we will draw users’ attention to our proposed dates for Updating, in the form of a revisions schedule, and we will explore the feasibility of consulting about proposed new measures.
* Enhance the quality of ethnicity data, primarily by working across Government (with the Office for National Statistics) to further harmonise the way that people’s ethnicity is recorded and presented.
* Support policy making by a range of activity to ensure that the data are analysed robustly and that proposed policy interventions are rooted in statistical evidence.
1. <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/static/statement-of-compliance.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In practice compliance was reviewed against the then draft Code of Practice, which differed a little from the final version. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/after-education/destinations-of-school-pupils-after-key-stage-4-usually-aged-16-years/latest> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)