

# **Gender Identity in the 2021 Census of England and Wales: Comparing the 2022 Census of Scotland**

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*The 2021 Census of England and Wales attempted to identify the transgender population by asking 'Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?'. I have argued that this question confused a substantial number of respondents who erroneously answered in the negative (Biggs, 2024). This confusion is manifested in the overrepresentation of adults lacking English proficiency who were classified as transgender. The 2022 Census of Scotland asked a much clearer question, 'Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?' Comparison between the results provides further evidence that the Census of England and Wales inflated the transgender population.*

As the number of people identifying as transgender increases, it becomes more important for them to be counted in social statistics. The 2021 Census of England and Wales attempted to identify transgender people indirectly, by asking ‘Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?’ I have argued that this question confused a substantial number of respondents who erroneously answered in the negative (Biggs, 2024). This explains why the results were implausible with regard to geography, language, education, ethnicity, and religion, and why they contradicted data on referrals to gender clinics and signatures on a pro-transgender petition.

This note compares results from the 2022 Census of Scotland, which asked a clear and direct question about transgender identity (Guyan, 2022; Murray and Hunter Blackburn, 2019). Because enumeration in Scotland was postponed for a year, the results were just released in June 2024. The proportion of adults in Scotland who considered themselves transgender were significantly lower in Scotland than the proportion classified as transgender in England and Wales. By contrast, adults were more likely to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual in Scotland than in England and Wales. Most revealing is the cross-tabulation of transgender identity with language proficiency. The anomaly that I discovered in England and Wales—an implausibly high proportion of adults with poor English being classified as transgender—did not exist in Scotland.

### **Census questions**

The decadal census of the United Kingdom is administered by three separate agencies, though almost all the questions are identical. The Office for National Statistics—responsible for England and Wales—and National Records of Scotland introduced a new voluntary question on transgender identity, following the customary question on sex. (The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency did not follow suit.) These two agencies formulated the question in completely different ways.

The Office for National Statistics asked ‘Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?’ The answers were ‘Yes’ or ‘No, write in gender identity’ with a free-text field. I have recounted the origins of this question in detail (Biggs, 2024). Remarkably enough, this question had been rejected in earlier testing: a non-transgender focus group found the question ‘very confusing’, while a transgender group ‘accepted that non-trans people would not understand the question, especially if first language [sic] was not English’ (Balarajan et al., 2011: 60–61).

National Records of Scotland, by contrast, asked ‘Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?’ The answers were ‘No’ or ‘Yes, please describe your trans status (for example, non-binary, trans man, trans woman)’ with a free-text field. This question had been considered by the Office for National Statistics, but rejected after ‘community testing at LGBT History Month events’ in 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Curiously, the same question when tested in Scotland was determined to ‘produce good quality data’ (Guyan, 2022: 80).

I have argued that the Office of National Statistics’ question was flawed in several respects. First, it assumed that everyone has a gender identity, which is false. Some feminists, for example, vehemently reject the notion (e.g. Brunsell-Evans, 2020). Asking about gender identity is analogous to eliciting the respondent’s religion by asking ‘Which God do you worship?’ Second, the question assumed that everyone’s sex was registered at birth, which is false. Many older immigrants from poor countries like India had not undergone registration at birth. Third, a respondent who failed to comprehend both of the key terms—gender identity and sex registered at birth—would be inclined to default to a negative answer, and thus be counted as transgender. In Scotland, by contrast, a respondent who did not understand the meaning of ‘trans’ would default to a negative answer, and so would be correctly classified as not transgender. The Scottish question also elaborated the meaning of ‘trans’ by providing examples of transgender identities in the text of the affirmative answer, such as ‘trans man’ and ‘non-binary’.

These different questions were supposed to measure the same phenomenon. The Office for National Statistics defined trans people ‘as those whose gender identities do not match the sex assigned at birth’ (Office for National Statistics, 2016: 4). National Records of Scotland defined transgender or trans as ‘a term used to describe people whose gender is not the same as the sex they were assigned at birth’ (National Records of Scotland, 2024b). No other question in the census diverged so significantly between England and Wales on one hand and Scotland on the other. The question on sexual orientation, for example, was identical in both parts of Britain.

## **Census results**

The Census of England and Wales achieved a response rate of 97% from usual residents, while the rate for Scotland was only 90%. For missing respondents, answers were imputed. Table 1 compares the results (National Records of Scotland, 2024b; Office for National Statistics, 2023a). The transgender question, being voluntary, was skipped by almost identical proportions of adults in England and Wales and in Scotland. (Adult will be used to denote those aged 16 or

over.) In England and Wales, 0.54% of the adult population answered that their gender identity was not the same as their natal sex. In Scotland, the proportion who considered themselves as trans was significantly lower, 0.44%.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, a higher proportion of adults identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (or listed identities other than heterosexual such as queer) in Scotland than in England and Wales: 4.0% compared to 3.2%.

The Scottish Census was obviously superior in encouraging trans respondents to specify their particular identity. Only 7% of trans adults failed to write in their identity in Scotland, compared to 45% of the adults whose identity did not match their natal sex in England and Wales. Three times as many adults declared themselves to be non-binary in Scotland as in England and Wales, which raises the possibility that a significant number of non-binaries in England and Wales did not write in their identity in the free-text field.

### **Geographical characteristics**

I have shown that the geographical distribution of the transgender population in England and Wales diverged significantly from the distribution of signatories to a pro-transgender petition (Biggs, 2024). Figure 1 plots the association separately for 573 Westminster constituencies in England and Wales and 59 in Scotland. Dashed lines show the overall average for each part of Britain. In England and Wales, constituencies in the upper left-hand quadrant are anomalous: they have a high concentration of transgender adults, according to the Census, but few signatories on the pro-transgender petition. These include constituencies for the London boroughs like Brent and Newham in London, which also have a high proportion of immigrants with poor English. In Scotland, by contrast, there are no such deviations from the strong positive association between trans adults and petition signatories. Trans people are attracted to places where they find a more welcoming environment, like Dundee and Edinburgh; conversely, places where trans people congregate have more allies willing to sign a petition in their support.

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<sup>1</sup> Because the transgender population is growing fast, a census held in 2022 should yield an appreciably higher number than in 2021. In a huge database of patient care records in the United Kingdom, transgender prevalence grew by an average of 17% per year from 2013 to 2018. If the transgender population in Scotland were growing at such a rate from 2021 to 2022, then the proportion in 2021 would have been 0.38%.

## **Individual characteristics**

I have shown that the transgender question in England and Wales produced implausible results when cross-tabulated with language proficiency (Biggs, 2024). The Census asked about proficiency in English (in Wales, this was proficiency in English or Welsh). Figure 2 recapitulates the proportion of adults stating that their gender identity differed from their natal sex in three subpopulation: those who spoke English as their main language; those whose main language was not English but who spoke it ‘well’ or ‘very well’; and those who spoke it ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’ (Biggs, 2024: Figure 3). Of those who spoke English as their main language, 0.42% declared that their gender identity did not correspond to their natal sex. Of those who did not speak English well, 2.24% declared a lack of correspondence—indicating, according to the Office for National Statistics, that they were transgender. Such an extraordinarily high proportion is exactly what would be expected from a question that was incomprehensible to many respondents with poor English, and that primed those who did not understand the question to give a negative answer and thus be classified as transgender.

Figure 2 also compares the results from Scotland, provided to assist an investigation by the Office for Statistics Regulation, which was initiated to address my previous findings (National Records of Scotland, 2024a). Because the absolute numbers in the third subpopulation are small, 95% confidence intervals are added to indicate what could be attributed merely to random variation. Of those who spoke English as their main language, 0.43% considered themselves trans. This was almost identical to the proportion in England and Wales. Of adults in Scotland who spoke English well but not as their main language, 0.65% considered themselves as trans. The fact that this is higher than the proportion of native speakers could reflect the fact that this subpopulation includes many foreign students and young professionals: transgender identification is far higher among the young. In England and Wales, the ostensible transgender population was twice as high. The final subpopulation is most telling. Of adults in Scotland who did not speak English well, 0.47% considered themselves trans. (The difference between this proportion and the proportion of native English speakers is not statistically significant,  $p = 0.13$ .) In England and Wales, the proportion was almost five times as high.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, comparison with the Census of Scotland provides further evidence that the question asked by the Census of England and Wales was seriously flawed. As I have previously argued, it inflated the total transgender population by including respondents who could not understand such a cumbersome question. Comparison also suggests something that I did not

expect. Unlike the Census of Scotland which positively encouraged transgender respondents to write in their particular identity, the Census of England and Wales might have significantly undercounted the number of non-binaries. In response to my critique of the implausibly high prevalence of transgenderism among people whose English was poor, the Office for National Statistics speculated that ‘it is possible (but difficult to confirm) that trans migrants might have specifically chosen the UK because of its civil rights legislation and greater social acceptance than many other countries, impacting the trans proportion among that population group’ (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). If this argument is given credence, then trans migrants should have been attracted to Scotland rather than England: the governing Scottish National Party (in coalition with the Green Party) championed the policy goals of the transgender movement, unlike the Conservative Party which ruled over England. Yet Scottish adults who spoke poor English were no more likely to identify as trans than native speakers. Further evidence will become available when National Records of Scotland releases cross-tabulations of gender identity by sex and by religion, later in 2024.

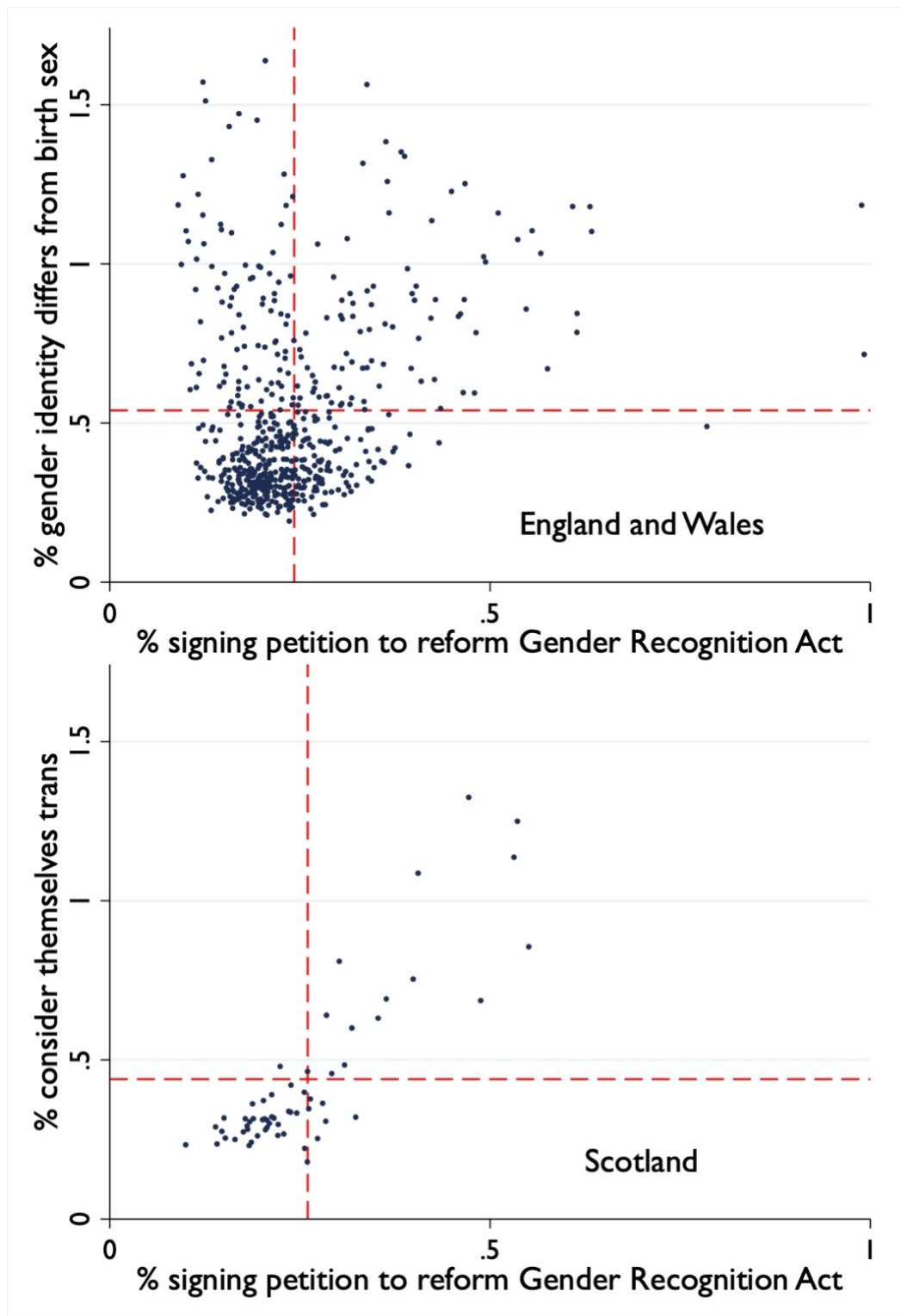
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	% of total		% of transgender subtotal	
	England and Wales	Scotland	England and Wales	Scotland
Not answered	6.00%	5.92%		
Not transgender	93.46%	93.64%		
Transgender				
trans man	0.10%	0.07%	18%	17%
trans woman	0.10%	0.07%	18%	15%
nonbinary	0.06%	0.20%	12%	45%
other specified gender	0.04%	0.07%	7%	16%
unspecified gender	0.24%	0.03%	45%	7%
<i>subtotal</i>	0.54%	0.44%	100%	100%
<i>Total</i>	100.00%	100.00%		

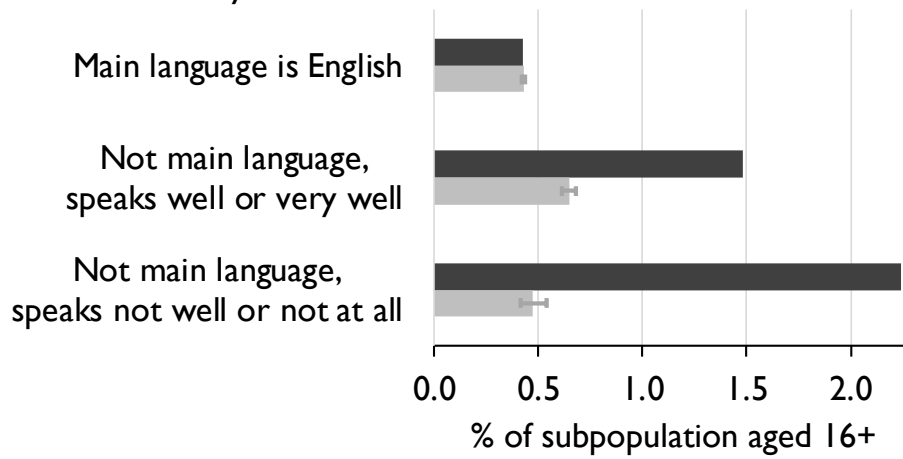
**Table 1.** Transgender identity of population aged 16+, Britain, 2021–22





**Figure 1.** Transgender identity and pro-transgender petitioners by Westminster constituency, Britain, 2021–22

- England and Wales, 2021: 'Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?'—'No'
- Scotland, 2022: 'Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?'—'Yes'



**Figure 2.** Transgender identity by English proficiency, Britain, 2021–22