

Question Bank Commentary: Household Definition

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1) Definition of Terms

The collection of data on household composition and structure is a complex task requiring a number of questions and the elucidation of the characteristics of and relationship between people sharing a common dwelling, who may be related by blood or adoption or may not be related. One of the first tasks of the census enumerator or survey interviewer is to establish the composition and structure of the household. To do this, adequate definition of terms is required.

A household comprises either one person living alone or a group of people, who may or may not be related, living (or staying temporarily) at the same address, with common housekeeping, who either share at least one meal a day or share common living accommodation (ie a living room or sitting room). Resident domestic servants are included. Members of a household are not necessarily related by blood or marriage.

A household is distinct from the less inclusive category of family. A family is defined as either a married or cohabiting couple on their own, or with their never-married children who have no children of their own, or lone parents with similar such children. Members of a family are related by blood, adoption or marriage. In the UK, a family does usually not span more than two generations (though there are exceptions among certain groups). Such a family definition refers to the nuclear family or elementary family. The extended family or kinship group is of course wider, and usually not co-resident.

Households may contain one or two or more nuclear families within them, but also household members other than members of the nuclear family, such as more distant relatives, friends, foster-children, lodgers, flatmates or long-stay guests or visitors. For much of the twentieth century, census data, for example, did not distinguish sharply between household and family, although the distinction has been much sharper since 1961, and is usually now made in major surveys.

Additional categories that may be distinguished within a household other than family are benefit units and domestic consumption units. Benefit units refer to persons on behalf of whom state benefits are received (eg a retired couple in receipt of a single state pension). Domestic consumption units are persons who share common budgeting arrangements within a household which may include more than one such unit.

2) Development of Household Definitions

The reference point for household definition has been the Population Census, which has gathered data both about household composition and about housing and dwellings. Until 1981, the Census used the criterion of shared meals for the definition of a household, as did the major continuous surveys. A household existed where persons resident at the same address shared eating arrangements for at least one meal per day. If meals were not shared, then a separate household did not exist. It became apparent from housing surveys in the 1960s and 1970s that this criterion of shared meals among people in the same dwelling might not be adequate. Such surveys used the criterion of common housing tenure, sharing accommodation under a common ownership or tenancy agreement, whether or not meals were shared. The emphasis here was on sharing housing costs, but not necessarily sharing catering and food costs.

From 1981, the definition adopted in the Population Census and in surveys such as the General Household Survey and Labour Force Survey was extended to include those who shared accommodation rather than simply sharing catering arrangements. But there then occurred a divergence between the [Census](#), [GHS](#) and [LFS](#) on the one hand, the [Family Expenditure Survey](#) (FES) on the other, which retained the criterion of a household having meals together and sharing common housekeeping. One reason for this is that the 'housing togetherness' criterion seemed less relevant for a survey oriented to an expenditure survey, and faced certain practical difficulties in treating households of young adults living together in compiling expenditure diaries.

3) Relationships

It is important in seeking to establish the composition of households at a particular address that the survey researcher finds out what are the relationships between different persons resident at the same address. The approach of the Census provides a benchmark reference.

The 1991 Census asked question 5 on Relationship in Household. "Please tick the box which indicates the relationship of the person to the person in the first column [of the household grid]. A stepchild or adopted child should be included as the son or daughter of the step or adoptive parent. Write in the relationship of 'other relative' - for example, father, daughter-in-law, niece, uncle, cousin. Write in position in Household of an 'Unrelated' person, for example boarder, housekeeper, friend, flatmate, foster child."

The person completing the Census form was then asked to show for each individual in the household their relationship to Person no 1:

- Husband or wife
- Living together as a couple
- Son or daughter
- Other relative (please specify - two lines to write in)
- Unrelated (please specify - two lines to write in)

Written-in answers at the unnumbered boxes for the last two categories above were coded so that all persons in households were allocated to one of the following codes:

- Head of household
- Spouse
- Cohabitant

- Son/daughter
- Child of cohabitant
- Son/daughter-in-law
- Cohabitant of son/daughter
- Parent
- Parent-in-law
- Brother/sister
- Brother/sister-in-law
- Grandchild
- Nephew/niece
- Other related
- Boarder, lodger etc.
- Joint head
- Other unrelated

Step and adopted relationships, where specified as such on the form, are not distinguishable from blood relationships. 'Stepson' or 'adopted son' is therefore coded 3, but 'foster son' is treated as unrelated.

Current ONS recommendations in [Harmonised Questions for Government Social Surveys](#) suggest that the researcher needs to create a relationship grid, and to classify respondents into one of the following categories:

- Spouse
- Cohabitee
- Son/daughter (incl. adopted)
- Stepson/daughter
- Foster child
- Son-in-law/daughter-in-law
- Parent
- Stepparent
- Foster parent
- Parent-in-law
- Brother/sister (incl. adopted)
- Stepbrother/sister (incl. adopted)
- Foster brother/sister
- Brother/sister-in-law
- Grandchild
- Grandparent
- Other relative
- Other non-relative

This list is evidence of the variety of persons who may be found belonging to a particular household, and the collection of such data also permit the office coding of membership of other units, using information about relationships created in the grid.

4) Temporary and Permanent Residence

Persons are considered to be a member of a household if they are permanently resident at that address. Persons are also included if this is that person's main residence even if they are temporarily absent. Children of any age away from home on a temporary job or children under 16 away at boarding school are included in the parental household. Practice varies according to whether young persons over 16 who are away from home temporarily are treated as if they are members of the

household, but in some circumstances they are. However, anyone who has been away from that address continuously for a lengthy period (six months in the GHS) are excluded.

5) Head of Household

Having identified a household, the interviewer or enumerator then needs to identify the head of the household (HoH), a standard term in use in censuses and surveys, but not an uncontroversial one. Usually the head of household is the informant for a census, or the first point of contact in a social survey.

In the mid-1980's the following advice was given to interviewers. The definition of HoH was as follows. If a household contained only husband, wife and children under 16 (and boarders) the husband is always the HoH. Where a couple is living together/cohabiting the male partner is treated as the HoH. In situations where other relatives are co-resident in the household, or some or all of the household are unrelated, the interviewer should establish in whose name the house/flat/accommodation is owned or rented, and the person named in reply to this question recorded as HoH. Where the accommodation is supplied with the job or provided rent free for some other reason, the person to whom the accommodation is given is the head of household.

At that time, two further rules were applied. If there were two persons with an equal claim to be HoH, the older, and the male rather than the female, were to be treated as HoH. The 1984 edition of the OPCS Handbook for Interviewers observed that these rules were necessary because 'the use of joint heads of household is not practical for analysis purposes. Because of this, it is necessary to have consistency in the way in which definitions are made' (p. 63).

In the [1991 Census, the H form](#) was addressed 'to the Head or Joint Head or members of the household age 16 or over', thus allowing for households with no head. The question about relationship in household asked for the relationship of the second and subsequent persons in the household to the person in the first column of the form. For statistical purposes, however, in the 100% tables, the HoH is usually taken to be the person entered in the first column of the grid, provided that that person was over 16 years old and usually resident at that address. No head was identified in households consisting entirely of visitors.

By the mid-1990s, the concept of Household Reference Person (HRP) had emerged, and was being trialled, who would not necessarily be the HoH. A related definition, the householder, the person owning or renting the accommodation, emerged. In the case of joint householders, one would have to be chosen as the HRP. The rules for doing this can be programmed into CAI programmes such as BLAISE, so that the selection of HRP is automatic given the information entered into the household reference grid.

6) Definitions of the Family

As noted above, household and family are distinct concepts. In defining the family, a common and significant distinction is between a smaller, more exclusive, and a larger, more inclusive set of family relations. All members are defined in terms of blood relationship (or occasionally adoption) or marriage. The smaller, more inclusive group of mate(s) and their children is usually called the nuclear, conjugal, elementary or immediate family. In Britain the members of the nuclear family usually occupy the same dwelling, and form one household, though they do not necessarily have to do so. (This overlap in categories has led in the past to confusion between household and family.) The extended family refers to a group of relatives wider than the nuclear family, and including grandparents, brothers and sisters of husband and wife, cousins of the children, and so on. A formal definition is 'any persistent kinship

grouping of persons related by descent, marriage or adoption, which is wider than the elementary family, in that it characteristically spans three generations from grandparents to grandchildren' (Rosser and Harris 1965, p32). In practice, the problems of determining the extent of the extended family are quite complex, depending on the pattern of relationships involved, and the person from whose point of view the relationships are mapped. [Harris and Stacey](#) provide a fuller discussion.

Families were not distinguished clearly from households in the Census until 1961, when a typology specifically for families was introduced. Multifamily households were never very common, although the practice of including domestic servants as 'members of the family' in practice blurred the distinction between families and households. In 1961 approximately 3% of the population of Britain lived in multifamily households, and this was estimated to have fallen in less than one percent by 1994, mainly as a rise in the numbers of people living alone ([Haskey, 1996](#)).

Cohabitation is increasingly widespread, and this is acknowledged in census and survey questions. In the Census, the relationship question includes the category 'living together as a couple', and the major surveys use similar terminology. In 1991, the relationship code 'cohabitant' replaced the former 'de facto spouse', and additional codes of 'child of cohabitant' and 'cohabitant of son/daughter' were introduced in an attempt to identify 'hidden families' within households. The British Household Panel Study, for example, provides the alternatives for Marital Status of : married/ living as couple/ widowed/ divorced/ separated/ never married. 'Living together as a couple' is a description of a state of being, but asking direct questions about that relationship may be more difficult given the absence of any standard terms for persons of the opposite sex living together outside of marriage. This is discussed further in the section on Marital status

Increasing numbers of families are also single-parent families. The official definition of a one-parent family is of 'a mother or father living without a spouse (and not cohabiting) with his or her never married dependent child or children aged either under 16 or from 16 to (under) 19 and undertaking full time education'. In 1971 about 11 in every 12 families with dependent children were married or cohabiting couple families, and only one in twelve was a lone-parent family. By 1991, the proportion of lone parent families had risen to one in five, and was still increasing during the 1990's. The vast majority of these families are headed by the mother, but a small minority are headed by the father (see [Haskey, 1996](#) for more details).

7) Family in the GHS – An Example

Thus, in the General Household Survey, a family is defined as a married or opposite sex cohabiting couple on their own, or a married or opposite sex cohabiting couple/lone parent and their never-married children, provided these children have no children of their own. Persons who cannot be allocated to a family as defined above are said to be persons not in the family. In general, families cannot under this definition span more than two generations, ie grandparents and grandchildren cannot belong to the same family. The exception to this is where it is established that it is the grandparents are responsible for looking after the grandchildren. Adopted and step children belong to the same family as their adoptive/ step parents. Foster children are not, however, part of their foster-parents' family since they are not related to their foster-parents.

A lone-parent family consists of one parent, irrespective of sex, living with his or her never-married dependent children, provided these children have no children of their own. Married or cohabiting women with dependent children, whose partners are not defined as resident in the household are not classified as one-parent families

because it is known that the majority of them are only temporarily separated from their husbands (for example, because he works away from home).

8) The Household Grid

In the Census of Population, a set of questions together constitute the household grid, in conjunction with information completed on the cover of the H Form by the enumerator. These are questions 1 to 8, seeking information about name, sex and date of birth, marital status, relationship in household, whereabouts on night of 21-22 April 1991, usual address and term-time address of students and schoolchildren. This is in effect a household grid, although it seeks other information about usual place of residence. In appearance it differs little from the rest of the census form, seeking information about characteristics of all members of the household.

- [The Census Grid](#)

In major surveys, it is usual to open the interview with completion of a household grid, onto which can be mapped all persons resident at that address, information about the household and family characteristics of those so resident, enabling the structure of the household and family to be established by inference from the data. This is a complex task, to assist in which the definitions and concepts described in other QB sections on household have been developed.

- The household grid in major surveys

Variations in definition of household

- General Household Survey (GHS) - [Household grid for 1993](#)
- Family Expenditure Survey (FES) - [Household grid for 1991](#)
- British Household Panel Survey - [Household grid for 1991](#)

9) Household Type

A further issue once data on household composition has been collected is how types of household can be distinguished. For many purposes it is desirable to have a sense of the range of variability in types of household, and for this purpose a number of classifications have been developed.

The 1991 Census of Population uses two classifications, one for data collected at 100% level and one for data analysed for the 10% sample. For the former, the answers on age, sex, marital status and long-term illness are used to classify all persons counted into one of 22 household composition types.

The second approach uses the answers to the question on relationship to HoH in addition, processed for 10% of the population, leading to a classification which takes account of the relationship between household members. The resulting classification of household and family composition type has 21 categories, and is used for the presentation of some 10% data from the 1991 Census.

The GHS uses a simpler classification, into seven categories of household, as follows:

- adult age 16-59
- adults age 16-59
- small family - 1 or 2 persons age 16 and over or 2 persons aged under 16

- large family - 1 or more persons aged 16 and over and 3 or more persons aged under age 16, or three or more persons aged 16 or over and 2 persons aged under 16
- large adult household - 3 or more persons aged 16 or over, with or without one person under age 16
- 2 adults, 1 or both aged 60 and over
- 1 adult aged 60 and over

Households are also classified according to the families they contain in the following categories:

- non-family households containing * person only or
- 2 or more non-family adults
- one-family households containing * married couple with dependent children
- married couple with independent children only
- married couple with no children
- lone parent with dependent children
- lone parent with independent children only
- households containing two or more families

10) Family Relationships

In a data collection exercise like the Census, highly formalised methods must be found to determine the allocation of individuals to family types. For the 1991 Census, a computer algorithm was used to allocate individuals within households to one of 60 detailed family unit types, which may be shown by clicking here. [[Census Definitions document, Annex C, pp. 62-63, Family Unit classification](#)]. The algorithm also defines the number of family units within a household, the relationship of each unit to the head of household, and the generation within the family unit to which the individual belongs.

In any family unit within a household where there are two generations, the younger generation must be single (never married) and have no obvious partner or offspring. When a person in a younger generation has, or can be shown to have had, a relationship to a person other than their parent(s), that person is not placed in the same family unit as his or her parents. Thus in a two-generation family, married and divorced children are not put in the same family unit as their parent(s), but single non-cohabiting children, even those who used to have a cohabiting partner, are put in the same family unit, since their former relationship cannot be deduced from information given on the Census form.

11) Practice in surveys

- Harris and Stacey - Comparability in Social Research
 - ([p.1-3](#))
 - ([p.4-6](#))
- Haskey, 1996 - changes in the family - 'Population review: (6) Families and households in Great Britain. Population Trends, No 85, Autumn 1996.
 - ([p.1-6](#))
 - ([p.7-9](#))
 - ([p.10-13](#))
 - ([p.14-15](#))
 - ([p.16-18](#))