

Article

Characteristics of UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021

UK armed forces veteran population from Census 2021 data, includes population age, where people were born, religion, ethnic group, legal partnership status and general health.



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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [The structure of the veteran population by age, sex, country and region, England and Wales](#)
3. [Previous service in the UK armed forces by country of birth and passports held](#)
4. [Previous service in the UK armed forces by personal characteristics](#)
5. [Previous service in the UK armed forces by self-reported general health](#)
6. [UK armed forces veterans by type of service, age and sex](#)
7. [Future publications](#)
8. [UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Data sources and quality](#)
11. [Related links](#)
12. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- Of the total (just over 1.85 million) UK armed forces veteran population in England and Wales, 13.6% (235,430) were women (13.8% in Wales and 13.5% in England) and 86.4% (1,601,705) were men (86.2% in Wales and 86.5% in England).
- Almost one-third (31.8% or 589,640) of veterans were aged 80 years and over, reflecting National Service policy (1939 to 1960) inclusive of War Service (to 1948).
- Most UK armed forces veterans living in England and Wales were born in the UK (94.2% or 1,744,985), 2.1% were born in other Commonwealth nations (39,420) and the proportions born in Nepal and Ireland were similar (0.6% and 0.5% or 10,240 and 9,480, respectively).
- Those who had previously served in the UK armed forces were more likely to identify their ethnicity within the high-level “White” category (96.4% or 1,785,640) than non-veterans (83.1% or 38,827,845); differences remained even after accounting for the older age distribution of veterans.
- Those who had only served in the reserve forces were younger and more likely to be female than the rest of the veteran population, 64.1% were aged under 65 years and 24.6% were women, this may reflect the relative ease that volunteer reserves are able to leave service and historical roles of women serving in the UK armed forces.

2 . The structure of the veteran population by age, sex, country and region, England and Wales

People who have previously served in the regular or reserve UK armed forces are often known as veterans. In this article we refer to usual residents aged 16 years and over who have served in the UK armed forces as the veteran population. The non-veteran population in this article refers to usual residents in England and Wales aged 16 years and over who have not previously served or are still currently serving in the UK armed forces.

The structure of the veteran population differed substantially to the non-veteran population in relation to age and sex, with the veteran population being much older and mainly male.

Of the total UK armed forces veteran population in England and Wales, 13.6% (251,400) were women (compared with 53.1% of the non-veteran population) and 86.4% were men (1,601,705).

Almost one-third (31.8% or 589,640) of veterans were aged 80 years and over, reflecting National Service and War Service from 1939 to 1960. This can be compared with 5.1% or 2,380,350 people who were aged 80 years and over in the non-veteran population.

Over half of veterans (53.0%, or 982,365) were aged 65 years and over. This compares with 21.6% or 10,080,950 people who were aged 65 years and over in the non-veteran population.

UK armed forces veterans are typically clustered in areas near to armed forces bases. Wales and some regions of England have a higher proportion of veterans than England and Wales overall, and there is variation in some characteristics of the population across regions. Read about UK armed forces veterans usually living in areas near armed forces bases in our [UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#).

Figure 1: The structure of the UK armed forces veteran population differs substantially to the non-veteran population

Percentage of the usual resident population aged 16 years and over by previous service in the UK armed forces, age groups and sex, 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

3 . Previous service in the UK armed forces by country of birth and passports held

Country of birth

The census also asked people what country they were born in. This is not the same as nationality, for example, some British citizens are born in other parts of the world. However, we would still expect certain patterns in country of birth data based on [entry requirements to join the UK armed forces](#), which over time have included a requirement to be a British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen, with people from Nepal able to serve as Gurkhas under special and historical arrangements. As expected, most UK armed forces veterans living in England and Wales said that they were born in the UK (94.2%, 1,744,985), 2.1% were born in other Commonwealth nations (39,420 veterans) and the proportions born in Nepal and Ireland were similar (0.6% and 0.5 % or 10,240 and 9,480, respectively).

A smaller proportion (0.1% or 1,040) said that they were born in British Overseas Territories, with the remainder (2.6% or 47,920) stating that they were born elsewhere.

The country of birth pattern was similar in England. Wales showed a slightly different pattern with a smaller proportion of veterans born in Nepal (0.2% or 175) than in Ireland (0.3% or 390).

The South East and London were the most diverse areas of England and Wales for the countries veterans stated they were born in. The number of veterans that said they were born in Nepal and living in the South East was 5,350, and 2,715 in London. These two regions housed 78.8% of all veterans that said they were born in Nepal (8,065 out of 10,240). London and the South East are also the most diverse areas of England and Wales for countries people said they were born in when considering the non-veteran population.

Figure 2: The South East and London showed the most diversity in the countries veterans stated they were born in

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans by non-UK countries of birth, 2021, England and Wales, and regions of England

Download the data

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Passports held

The census also asked people about the passport or passports they held. As with country of birth data this does not signify nationality, but we would expect certain patterns in passport(s) held among the veteran population, based on entry requirements to join the UK armed forces. Of all UK armed forces veterans living in England and Wales, 17.2 % said they did not currently hold a passport, 82.0% held only one passport and the remaining 0.8 % said they held multiple passports. Among those that said they held only one passport, 80.3% held only a UK passport, 0.3% held only an Irish passport and 1.4% said they held only one passport from another country (Nepalese: 0.4%, Commonwealth countries: 0.2%, Other countries: 0.8%).

4 . Previous service in the UK armed forces by personal characteristics

Information about the characteristics of UK armed forces veterans is important for government, local authorities, the NHS and organisations in the voluntary sector that provide services for veterans.

The veteran population differs in structure to the non-veteran population. They are older and they also differ in relation to sex and where they live, and these factors interact with other personal characteristics. For example, age can be strongly related to legal partnership status, health and religion. Because of this, veterans may differ to the non-veteran population when considering these characteristics. It is important to be aware of these differences but also to understand when these differences are not attributable to the status of having previously served in the UK armed forces and can be explained by the unique structure of the veteran population.

We have provided adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population in our [accompanying dataset](#). These show what, if any, difference would exist between veterans and non-veterans if the two populations had the same age, sex and regional distribution. We have not directly measured uncertainty of the estimates as part of this analysis. We would expect uncertainty to be small given the nature of census and [associated published confidence intervals](#) for Census 2021. However, some caution is advised in inferring genuine differences in estimates based on small variations in proportions.

Ethnic group

This analysis looks at UK armed forces veterans by five high-level ethnic groups people chose to identify within. Across England and Wales, 96.4% of UK armed forces veterans (1,785,640) identified their ethnicity within the high-level “White” category. This compares with 83.1% (38,827,845) of the non-veteran population. When we adjust the non-veteran estimates by assuming the same age, sex and regional distribution for non-veterans as for veterans, differences are smaller but still apparent. We estimate 90.0% of non-veterans would have identified within the high-level “White” category compared with 96.4% of veterans. We would not expect this difference to be fully accounted for by our adjustments. A number of factors could contribute, including the levels of diversity over time in the countries from which citizens were eligible to join the UK armed forces, historical British nationality law, immigration more broadly and propensity of different groups to join the UK armed forces. For more information on diversity among those currently serving, see the [Ministry of Defence's UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2022](#).

Just over 1 in 100 veterans (1.3% or 24,150) identified within the “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” group and a further 1 in 100 hundred veterans (1.0% or 19,315 people) identified within the “Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African” ethnic group. A slightly smaller proportion (0.8% or 15,705) identified within the “Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups” and 0.4% identified within the “Other ethnic group”. There was a similar pattern for England but less diversity by high-level ethnic group in Wales. Wales also has less diversity by high-level ethnic group than England when considering the non-veteran population.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of veterans and non-veterans identifying within the high-level “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh”, “Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African”, “Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups” and “Other ethnic group” categories, along with adjusted estimates that show what difference we would expect if the non-veteran population had the same age, sex and regional distribution as the veteran population.

Figure 3: Veterans were less diverse than non-veterans based on the high-level ethnic groups they identified within

Percentage of the population aged 16 years and over by previous service in the UK armed forces, and high-level ethnic groups (excluding “White”), with adjusted non-veteran estimates, 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

For the reasons outlined previously, the differences are maintained after adjustments.

Country, region and local authority level data showing high-level ethnic groups by previous service in the UK armed forces is available in our [accompanying datasets](#).

Religion

The question about religion was a voluntary question in Census 2021 and 94.7% of veterans answered. Among UK armed forces veterans living in England and Wales, 64.2% (1,189,545) described themselves as “Christian” (England: 64.6% or 1,122,095, Wales: 58.5% or 67,450). Over a quarter of veterans (28.1%, 520,920) reported having “No religion”. A small proportion described themselves as being affiliated with a religion other than “Christian” (2.4%, 43,950). Similar patterns can be seen across England and Wales and the majority of the regions of England. In line with the overall population, London had the highest number and proportion of veterans that described themselves with a religion other than “Christian” (10.1% or 10,180 people).

A higher proportion of veterans living in England and Wales described themselves as “Christian” compared with the non-veteran population (64.2% compared with 48.1%). A smaller proportion also described themselves as belonging to a religion other than “Christian” (2.4%, compared with 9.9% of the non-veteran population). When we adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population to show what, if any, difference would exist between veterans and non-veterans if the two populations had the same age, sex and regional distribution, these differences were smaller but still apparent. We estimate 58.3% of the non-veteran population would have described themselves as Christian compared with 64.2% of the veteran population. This suggests this difference is not just a result of the age, sex or regional structure of the veteran population. Adjusted estimates and estimates by age can be found in our [accompanying dataset](#).

Legal partnership status

Of the UK armed forces veterans, 57.1% (1,057,500) said that they were married or in a registered civil partnership. Only 14.6% veterans (270,950) said they were single (never married or in a registered civil partnership), 13.4% or 248,270 veterans said they were widowed or a surviving civil partner and 12.5% or 230,945 veterans said they were divorced or had a dissolved civil partnership.

This pattern was similar across both England and Wales but varied at the regional and local authority level, with higher numbers of “single” UK armed forces veterans in many metropolitan areas, which may be a function of the age profile of those areas being younger.

UK armed forces veterans were less likely to say they were single (never married and never registered in a civil partnership) compared with the non-veteran population (14.6% compared with 38.8%). They were more likely to report they were married or in a civil partnership, divorced or in a dissolved civil partnership and widowed or a surviving civil partnership partner, than non-veterans.

Since partnership status is typically related to age, we provide adjusted estimates for the legal partnership status of the non-veteran population to understand what the estimates would be if the non-veteran population had the same age, sex and regional profile as that of the veteran population. When we adjusted estimates, some small differences still remain. Although the difference was smaller, veterans were still less likely to have said they were single (never married and never registered in a civil partnership) than non-veterans (14.6% compared with 18.5%). Veterans were no longer more likely to say they were married or widowed, suggesting differences in proportions married or widowed can be accounted for by the age and sex of the veteran population.

Figure 4: Veterans and non-veterans differ in relation to their legal partnership status and religion

Percentage of the population aged 16 years and over by previous service in the UK armed forces, religion and legal partnership status, with adjusted non-veteran estimates, 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Sexual orientation

The sexual orientation question was a voluntary question in Census 2021, which 92.8% of UK armed forces veterans answered. The majority of veterans, 91.3%, identified as straight or heterosexual. A further 0.9% identified as gay or lesbian and 0.5% identified as bisexual. A smaller proportion (0.1%) said they identified with another sexual orientation.

Once non-veteran estimates were adjusted to show what, if any, difference would exist between veterans and non-veterans if the two populations had the same age, sex and regional distribution, there were no notable differences in relation to sexual orientation. This pattern was similar for both England and Wales.

There was some variation between men and women who were veterans, with proportionally more female veterans identifying as gay or lesbian than men (3.0% compared with 0.6%) and proportionally more female veterans identifying as bisexual than men (1.2% compared with 0.4%), which is possibly related to age. This may reflect the fact that female veterans have a younger age profile than male veterans (17.9% are aged 16 to 39 years, compared with only 10 % of male veterans) and there is a known relationship between age and self-reported sexual orientation. For more information, see our [Sexual orientation: age and sex. England and Wales: Census 2021 publications](#).

As with non-veterans, London was the region of England with the highest proportion of veterans stating that they identified as gay or lesbian (2.0%) or bisexual (0.9%), and this may also be related to the veteran population in London being younger.

Gender identity

Gender identity refers to a person's sense of their own gender. This was a voluntary question answered by 94.1% of all UK armed forces veterans, and 0.3% (6,195 veterans) described their gender identity as different from sex registered at birth. This was slightly smaller than the non-veteran population (0.5%). The remainder (93.8%) of veterans that chose to answer the question indicated that their gender identity was the same as sex registered at birth. This pattern was similar across both England and Wales and across men and women who were UK armed forces veterans.

London was the region of England with the highest proportion of veterans indicating that their gender identity differed from sex registered at birth (0.9% or 940), representing 15.2% of all veterans in England and Wales that described their gender identity this way.

Of UK armed forces veterans aged 16 to 24 years, 1 in 100 described their gender identity as different to sex registered at birth, for those aged 25 years and over this proportion was smaller (0.3%).

5 . Previous service in the UK armed forces by self-reported general health

Of all UK armed forces veterans in England and Wales, 27.5% (509,645) said that their general health was very good and 36.9% (682,995) said that their general health was good. A quarter of veterans in England and Wales said their health was "fair" (24.2% or 448,720). The proportion who said they had bad health was 8.6% (160,190) and 2.8% or 51,660 veterans said they had very bad health. This pattern was very similar across England and Wales.

The non-veteran population showed a different pattern, with non-veterans much more likely to say they have very good health and less likely to say they have very bad health. However, the veteran population is much older than the non-veteran population and is mostly male. Since health is typically strongly related to age and, in some cases sex, we provide adjusted estimates for the self-reported health of the non-veteran population to understand what the estimates would be if the non-veteran population had the same age, sex and regional profile as that of the veteran population. Figure 5 shows that when we make this adjustment, all differences in self-reported general health between the two populations substantially decrease. This suggests that while veterans are less likely to say they have very good health than non-veterans, this difference is a result of age, sex or geographic factors and not a result of previous service.

Figure 5: Veterans and non-veterans are similar in relation to self-reported general health if we account for differences in age, sex and location

Percentage of the population aged 16 years and over by previous service in the UK armed forces and general health with adjusted non-veteran estimates, 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

6 . UK armed forces veterans by type of service, age and sex

The regular and reserve veteran population showed some differences in relation to age and sex. Only 11.2% of those who had served in only the regular armed forces were women, compared with 24.6% of those that had served in only the reserve armed forces. Women made up 5.5% of those that had served in both regular and reserve UK armed forces. Women's formal involvement in the UK's armed forces goes back more than 100 years, including the First and Second World Wars. However, the roles open to women have evolved over time, as have the conditions under which they serve, and historically they may have been more likely to enter service through routes classed as reserves. This is also in line with [Ministry of Defence statistics on currently serving personnel](#), which reflect a higher proportion of women in the reserve than regular UK armed forces.

Figure 6 shows the population of those who had only served in the reserve forces were also younger than the rest of the veteran population. Among all veterans saying they had served in the reserve forces only, 35.9% were aged 65 years and over, compared with 57.0% of veterans that had only served in the regular UK armed forces and 59.5% of those that had served as both a regular and reserve.

This may reflect the fact that individuals are able to leave the reserves at any time (unless mobilised), and those who have not already served as a regular may join as a volunteer reservist while holding other full-time roles or sources of main income. Changing work or life circumstances may affect the age that volunteers leave.

Figure 6: Those who had previously served in only the UK reserve forces were younger than the rest of the veteran population

Percentage of UK armed forces veterans by type of service and age groups, 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

7 . Future publications

Read more about our [UK armed forces veterans analysis plans](#) and the [release plans for Census 2021](#) more generally.

8 . UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: data

[Characteristics of usual residents aged 16 years and over by whether they have previously served in the UK armed forces, England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 3 February 2023

Characteristics of usual residents by whether they have previously served in the UK armed forces, with adjusted estimates for the non-veteran population, Census 2021.

[Characteristics of UK armed forces veterans by whether they served as a regular, reserve or both, England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 3 February 2023

Characteristics by previous service as a regular or reserve in the UK armed forces from Census 2021.

9 . Glossary

Country of birth

The country in which a person was born. For people not born in one of the four parts of the UK, there was an option to select "elsewhere". People who selected "elsewhere" were asked to write in the current name for their country of birth.

Ethnic group and high-level 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 1 out of 19 tick-box response categories, including write-in response options. High-level ethnic group refers to the first stage of the two-stage ethnic group question. High-level groups refer to the first stage where the respondent identifies through one of the following options:

- "Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh"
- "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African"
- "Mixed or Multiple"
- "White"
- "Other ethnic group"

Gender identity

Gender identity refers to a person's sense of their own gender, whether male, female or another category such as non-binary. This may or may not be the same as their sex registered at birth.

General health

A person's assessment of the general state of their health from very good to very bad. This assessment is not based on a person's health over any specified period of time.

Legal partnership status

Classifies a person according to their legal marital or registered civil partnership status on Census Day, 21 March 2021.

Religion

The religion people connect or identify with (their religious affiliation), whether or not they practice or have belief in it.

This question was voluntary, and the variable includes people who answered the question, including “No religion”, alongside those who chose not to answer this question.

This variable classifies responses into the eight tick-box response options. Write-in responses are classified by their “parent” religious affiliation, including “No religion”, where applicable.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is an umbrella term covering sexual identity, attraction, and behaviour. For an individual respondent, these may not be the same. For example, someone in an opposite-sex relationship may also experience same-sex attraction, and vice versa. This means the statistics should be interpreted purely as showing how people responded to the question, rather than being about who they are attracted to or their actual relationships.

We have not provided glossary entries for individual sexual orientation categories. This is because individual respondents may have differing perspectives on the exact meaning.

UK armed forces veteran

People who have previously served in the UK armed forces. This includes those who have served for at least one day in HM’s Armed Forces, either regular or reserves, or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations. It does not include those who have left and since re-entered the regular or reserve UK armed forces, those who have only served in foreign armed forces, or those who have served in the UK armed forces and are currently living outside of England and Wales.

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.

For a full glossary of terms, please see our [Census 2021 dictionary](#).

10 . Data sources and quality

The census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned National Statistics status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. Item non-response rates can also be found in our [Measures showing the quality of Census 2021 estimates methodology](#). We ensure the census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of people who were not recorded on a census response. This means that the census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical uncertainty associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. All counts in this article have been rounded to the nearest five.

Census 2021 asked the question about previous service in the UK armed forces for the first time. Previously published estimates in the [Ministry of Defence's Census 2011: Working age UK armed forces veterans residing in England and Wales publication](#) relate to the working age veteran population and are not directly comparable. As expected and in line with mortality data, Census 2021 estimates for UK armed forces veterans in older age groups are lower than estimates derived in 2017 derived using the [Annual Population Survey](#).

We are working to understand how differences in the UK censuses affect our ability to produce harmonised statistics on UK armed forces veterans across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A question relating to previous service in the UK armed forces was asked on the 2022 Census in Scotland. The census in Northern Ireland did not ask a question about previous service in the UK armed forces, but Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency are exploring administrative sources to understand their veteran population. An estimate for Great Britain may be produced with the relevant caveats.

Quality

Quality considerations along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the specific quality considerations for [UK armed forces veterans](#).

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

We have not directly measured uncertainty of the estimates as part of this analysis. We would expect uncertainty to be small given the nature of census and [associated published confidence intervals](#) for Census 2021. However, some caution is advised in inferring genuine differences in estimates based on small variations in proportions.

11 . Related links

[UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 10 November 2022

UK armed forces veterans population who have either previously served in the regular forces, reserve forces or both, Census 2021 data.

[UK armed forces veterans in Wales \(Census 2021\)](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 10 November 2022

Census 2021 data about UK Armed Forces veterans in Wales.

[UK armed forces veterans topic quality webpage](#)

Methodology | Released 10 November 2022

A summary of the quality assurance processes used to generate the census estimates, as well as quality considerations to be aware of when interpreting the data.

[Census Data Dictionary](#)

Methodology | Released 10 November 2022

Variable definitions, output classifications, glossary terms, and geography metadata.

[Census maps](#)

Interactive content | Released 2 November 2022

Interactive map tool that visualises Census 2021 data on different topics down to a local authority area and neighbourhood level.

[Armed forces community \(veterans\) question development for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 27 January 2021

Information on how we researched, developed, and tested the Census 2021 question on the armed forces veterans community, including extra detail on the definitions of key terms.

[Harmonised standard for previous UK armed forces service](#)

Methodology | Released 16 March 2022

Detail on how the measurement of previous UK armed forces service has been made more comparable, consistent, and coherent.

[Census 2011: Working age UK armed forces veterans residing in England and Wales](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 27 September 2018

A bulletin which estimates the size and characteristics of UK armed forces veterans (16 to 64 years of age), linking armed forces leavers' data with data from the 2011 England and Wales Census.

[Help Shape Our Future: The 2021 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales \(PDF, 967KB\)](#)

White paper | Released December 2018

This White Paper sets out the independent UK Statistics Authority's proposals for the 2021 Census for England and Wales.

12 . Cite this article

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