

Article

Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021

Detailed characteristics of children living in households without their parents but with other relatives in 2021.



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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Kinship care](#)
3. [Children living in kinship care](#)
4. [Employment status of potential kinship carers](#)
5. [Kinship care households](#)
6. [Geographical distribution](#)
7. [Kinship care in England and Wales data](#)
8. [Glossary](#)
9. [Data sources and quality](#)
10. [Related links](#)
11. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- Children living in kinship care are defined as people aged 17 years and under on Census Day who lived in households without a parent present, but with adults aged 18 years and over who were their sibling(s), grandparent(s), or other relatives, such as their aunt(s), uncle(s), or cousin(s).
- Of all children aged 0 to 17 years living in households of five people or fewer, 1.1% were living in kinship care (121,000 children).
- Most children living in kinship care (59.2%) lived with at least one grandparent, so the characteristics of potential kinship carers reflect that it is an older population.
- More than 1 in 10 (11.9%) children living in kinship care were disabled under the Equality Act, compared with 6.6% of children living in a household of five people or fewer with at least one parent.
- A quarter (25.3%) of kinship care households contained one or more residents whose long-term physical or mental health condition or illness limited them a lot, compared with 10.0% of parental households.
- A higher proportion of households containing kinship care were overcrowded (14.2%) than households containing people aged 17 years and under with parents (8.3%).

2 . Kinship care

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or close family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. For more information, see [Kinship's advice and information page](#).

In this analysis, children living in kinship care are defined as usual residents who were aged 17 years and under on Census Day, who lived in households without a parent present, but with adults aged 18 years and over who were their sibling(s), grandparent(s), or other relatives, such as their aunt(s), uncle(s), or cousin(s). Children living with adults who are all unrelated to them are excluded from this analysis. For more information, see [Section 8: Glossary](#). Households of six or more people are excluded because of incomplete relationships information. Read about incomplete relationships collected in larger households in our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021](#).

It is unknown who in a household provides care for a child. The methodology used to determine potential kinship carers assumes that all grandparents and other relatives aged 18 years and over are potential carers. Siblings aged 18 years and over are only assumed to be potential carers when there is no grandparent or other relative in the household.

The definition of child used in this analysis differs from other Office for National Statistics (ONS) definitions. For more information, see [Section 9: Data sources and quality](#).

3 . Children living in kinship care

Of all children aged 17 years and under living in households of five people or fewer, 1.1% were living in kinship care (121,000 children).

Assuming that the same proportion (1.1%) of children aged 17 years and under in households of six people or more are in kinship care, then the total number of children in kinship care was estimated to be around 141,000. However, this is only a rough estimate of the scale of kinship care in larger households. Only kinship care in households of five people or fewer are included in the analysis in this article.

Of usual residents who lived in households in England and Wales, 6.9% lived in households of more than five people. Excluding households of six or more people from this analysis is expected to have a relatively small impact on the characteristics of children in kinship care and their households.

Comparison to 2011 Census

From 2011 to 2021, there was a decrease in the number of children living in kinship care (from 145,000 children in 2011) when applying the same methodology as for Census 2021 (including only households of five people or fewer). However, the quality of household relationship data improved in Census 2021, so the 2011 and 2021 estimates cannot be directly compared for this reason. Read more in our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021](#).

Who children in kinship care live with

Half (50.0%) of children living in kinship care lived with one potential kinship carer, 41.2% lived with two, and 8.9% lived with three or more. Most (59.2%, 72,000) lived with at least one grandparent. Over a quarter (25.9%) of children living in kinship care lived with two potential carers who were grandparents, followed by one potential carer who was an "other" relative (24.5%), and one potential carer who was a grandparent (20.2%).

Figure 1: Over half of children in kinship care lived with one or more grandparents

Relationships between children and their potential kinship carers, living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Of all children living in kinship care, 8.8% stayed at another parent or guardian's address for more than 30 days a year. This is a higher proportion than children (aged 17 years and under) who lived with at least one parent (5.4%).

Age of children living in kinship care

The age profile of children living in kinship care was older than those living with at least one parent. Teenage children (aged 13 to 17 years) accounted for 4 in 10 children living in kinship care (41.8%), compared with 27.1% of children living with at least one parent. The proportion of children living in kinship care increases with age.

Nearly one-fifth (19.7%) of children identified as living in kinship care were aged 16 or 17 years. As it is unknown who provides care within a household, some of these children could be living independently with relatives who are not providing care.

Figure 2: 4 in 10 children living in kinship care were teenagers

Age distribution of children living in kinship care, and children living with at least one parent, including only children living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Health and disability status of children living in kinship care

Of all children living in kinship care, 11.9% were disabled under the Equality Act, compared with 6.6% of children living with at least one parent. Children living in kinship care were more likely to have their day-to-day activities limited either a little (7.3%) or a lot (4.6%). In comparison, of children living with at least one parent, 4.0% had their day-to-day activities limited a little, and 2.6% a lot.

Non-disabled children who had a condition that did not limit their day-to-day activities accounted for 3.4% of children living in kinship care, compared with 2.6% of those living with at least one parent.

Figure 3: Children living in kinship care were more likely to be disabled than those living with at least one parent

Disability status of children living in kinship care, and children living with at least one parent, including only children aged 17 years and under living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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When ranking their general health, a lower proportion of children in kinship care (94.8%) had good or very good health compared with children living with at least one parent (97.1%). Children living in kinship care were more likely to have fair health (4.2% compared with 2.3% of children living with at least one parent), or bad or very bad health (1.0% compared with 0.6%).

Country of birth of children living in kinship care

Most children living in kinship care were born in the UK (92.6%), which was a slightly lower proportion than those living with at least one parent (93.6%). The second most common country of birth for children living in kinship care was for EU countries that joined the EU between April 2001 and March 2021 (2.0%, compared with 1.4% of children living with at least one parent). That includes Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Croatia.

Figure 4: Children living in kinship care were slightly less likely to have been born in the UK (92.6%) compared with children living with at least one parent (93.6%)

Country of birth of children living in kinship care, and children living with at least one parent, including only children aged 17 years and under living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Ethnic group of children living in kinship care

Three-quarters (75.1%) of children living in kinship care were identified within the “White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British” ethnic group. This was a higher proportion compared with children living with at least one parent (71.0%).

A larger proportion of children in kinship care (3.6%) than those living with at least one parent (1.9%) were identified within the “Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean” ethnic group.

Children living in kinship care were more likely than children living with at least one parent to identify within the “Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African” ethnic group (6.1%) and within the “Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups” (8.7% aggregated categories than children living with at least one parent (4.7% and 6.9% respectively). However, there are differences within these aggregated ethnic group categories.

Children living in kinship care were less likely than those living with at least one parent to be identified within any “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” ethnic group, with 4.4% of children living in kinship care doing so, compared with 9.6% of those living with at least one parent.

Ethnic groups in England and Wales have different age and sex structures. For more information, see our [Ethnic group by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

Figure 5: Children living in kinship care were more likely to identify as “Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean” than children living with at least one parent

Ethnic group of children living in kinship care, and children living with at least one parent, including only children aged 17 years and under living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Religious group of children living in kinship care

Of all children living in kinship care, 46.8% reported having “No religion” compared with children living with at least one parent (45.7%). Children living in kinship care were more likely to be “Christian” (39.2%) compared with children living with their parents (36.5%).

The greatest proportional difference between children living in kinship care and those living with at least one parent was for children who identified as “Muslim”. Approximately 7.7% of children living with at least one parent identified as “Muslim” compared with 4.6% of children living in kinship care. Religious groups in England and Wales have different age and sex structures. For more information, see our [Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

Figure 6: Children living in kinship care were more likely than those living with at least one parent to be described as “Christian” or “No religion”

Religious affiliation of children living in kinship care, and children living with at least one parent, including only children aged 17 years and under living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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4 . Employment status of potential kinship carers

Potential kinship carers are defined as adults (aged 18 years or over) who live with a grandchild, sibling, or other relation who is aged 0 to 17 years old and who does not live with a parent. A sibling aged 18 years or over is not defined as a potential kinship carer if they live in a household where a grandparent or other relation is also present. All potential kinship carers in the household have been counted because it is unknown who provides care. This is expected to over count the number of kinship carers. Many children have more than one kinship carer.

Potential kinship carers were more than twice as likely than parents to be economically inactive (44.9% compared with 16.8%, respectively). This is partly explained by the age profile of potential kinship carers. They were over thirty times more likely to be retired than parents (16.3% compared with 0.5%, respectively). They were also more likely to be economically inactive because of long-term sickness or disability compared with parents (9.0% compared with 2.3%, respectively).

They were slightly more likely than parents to be economically inactive because they were looking after the home or family (12.9% compared with 10.6% of parents).

Figure 7: Potential kinship carers were more likely than parents to be economically inactive

Economic activity status with hours worked of potential kinship carers and parents, living with children aged 17 years and under, including only people living in households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Of all those employed, potential kinship carers were more likely to be employed part-time than parents (38.1% compared with 33.1%, respectively).

Evidence from the charity Kinship suggests that kinship carers reduce their working hours or leave work when they take on the care of a child. Read more in Kinship’s [8 in 10 kinship carers forced out of work or to reduce hours due to lack of support article](#).

5 . Kinship care households

Households containing kinship care arrangements are defined as those which contain a child aged 17 years and under living without a parent, but with at least one potential kinship carer (grandparent(s), sibling(s) or other relation(s) aged 18 years and over). Households of six or more people are excluded because of incomplete relationships information. In this section, households containing kinship care arrangements are referred to as “kinship care households”. Households containing a child aged 17 years and under and at least one parent or step-parent are referred to as “parental households”.

Deprivation and overcrowding of kinship care households

Households in England and Wales were also classified in terms of dimensions of deprivation, based on selected household characteristics. Households were considered deprived if they met one or more of the following four dimensions of deprivation:

- employment: where any member of a household, who is not a full-time student, is either unemployed or economically inactive because of long-term sickness or disability
- education: no person in the household has at least five or more GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications, and no person aged 16 to 18 years is a full-time student
- health and disability: any person in the household has general health that is “bad” or “very bad” or is identified as disabled. People who have assessed their day-to-day activities as limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses are considered disabled. This definition of a disabled person meets the harmonised standard for measuring disability and is in line with the Equality Act (2010).
- housing: the household’s accommodation is either overcrowded, with an occupancy rating of negative one or less (implying that it has one fewer room or bedroom required for the number of occupants), or is in a shared dwelling, or has no central heating

Kinship care households were more likely than parental households to be deprived in every dimension measured. They were also more likely to be overcrowded than parental households (14.2% compared with 8.3%, respectively).

They were more than twice as likely than parental households to be deprived in the education dimension (20.6% compared with 10.1%, respectively), and the employment dimension (22.3% compared with 10.0%, respectively).

Of all kinship care households, 46.8% were deprived in the health and disability dimension compared with a quarter of parental households (25.4%). This is partly explained by the age profile of kinship carers, who are older than parents.

Figure 8: Kinship care households were much more likely than parental households to be deprived in any of the four dimensions of deprivation

Deprivation dimensions of kinship care households and households containing children aged 17 years and under living with at least one parent, including only households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Of all kinship care households, over two-thirds (67.4%) were deprived in one or more dimensions, compared with 41.7% of parental households.

Kinship care households were more than twice as likely to be deprived in two or more dimensions than parental households (30.5% compared with 12.6%, respectively).

Figure 9: Over two-thirds (67.4%) of kinship care households were deprived in one or more dimension

Number of deprivation dimensions of kinship care households and households containing children aged 17 years and under living with at least one parent, including only households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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People in kinship care households with long-term health conditions

Compared with parental households, kinship care households had a larger proportion of people that reported having a long-term physical or mental health condition or illness that limited their day-to-day activities a little or a lot. This is likely to be because of the age profile of kinship carers, who tend to be older than parents.

A quarter (25.3%) of kinship care households had one or more people whose conditions limited them a lot, compared with 10.0% of parental households.

Over a quarter (29.3%) of kinship care households contained one or more people whose conditions limited their day-to-day activity a little, compared with 18.2% of parental households.

Tenure type of kinship care households

A third (34.4%) of kinship care households lived in a house that was social rented compared with 19.4% of parental households.

A smaller proportion of kinship care households lived in owner-occupied homes (44.7%) than parental households (56.9%). A higher proportion of kinship care households (20.7%) owned their home outright than parental households (8.1%). This could be because kinship carers are older and, therefore, will be more likely to have paid off a mortgage than parents, who tend to be younger.

Figure 10: A third (34.4%) of kinship care households lived in social rented homes, compared with 19.4% of parental households

Tenure of kinship care households and households containing children aged 17 years and under living with at least one parent, including only households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

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Kinship care households were less likely to have a car. Nearly one-quarter (24.5%) of kinship households did not have a car or van, compared with 15.2% of parental households.

Economic characteristics of kinship care households

Kinship care households were more likely to contain adults where nobody was in employment. This includes all adults in the household, and not just potential kinship carers. See [Section 8: Glossary](#) for the definition of adult used in this section.

A third (33.1%) of kinship care households contained no employed adults, compared with 13.0% of parental households. Just over a quarter of kinship care households (26.1%) had two adults in employment, compared with half (50.6%) of parental households. This is partly explained by more kinship carers being retired.

Figure 11: A third (33.1%) of kinship care households had no adults in employment, compared with 13.0% of parental households

Number of adults in employment in kinship care households and households containing children aged 17 years and under living with at least one parent, including only households of five people or fewer, England and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. Residents were classed as in employment if they were employed the week before Census Day 2021.

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6 . Geographical distribution

Kinship care households

Of all households containing five or fewer people that had children aged 0 to 17 years living in them in England, 1.5% contained kinship care arrangements. For Wales, the proportion was higher, at 1.9%. The North East had the highest proportion of kinship care households (2.3%), while the South East and the East of England had the lowest proportions (both 1.2%).

In England, six of the ten local authorities with the highest proportions of households containing kinship care were in the North East. Those were:

- Hartlepool (3.2%)
- Middlesbrough (3.1%)
- Redcar and Cleveland (3.0%)
- Sunderland (2.8%)
- Stockton-on-Tees (2.6%)
- South Tyneside (2.4%)

The rest were:

- North East Lincolnshire (2.5%) and Doncaster (2.4%) in Yorkshire and The Humber
- Blackpool (2.4%) in the North West
- East Lindsey (2.4%) in the East Midlands

In Wales, the local authorities with the highest proportion of households containing kinship care were:

- Merthyr Tydfil (2.7%)
- Blaenau Gwent (2.4%)
- Caerphilly (2.4%)
- Rhondda Cynon Taf (2.3%)
- Neath Port Talbot (2.2%)
- Isle of Anglesey (2.2%)
- Pembrokeshire (2.2%)
- Torfaen (2.1%)
- Conwy (2.1%)
- Bridgend (2.0%)

Figure 12: The North East of England had the highest proportion of kinship care households

Households containing kinship care arrangements as proportion of households of five people or fewer containing anyone aged 17 years and under by local authority, England and Wales, 2021

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7 . Kinship care in England and Wales data

[Kinship care in England and Wales dataset](#)

Dataset | Released 26 September 2023

Dataset covering the analysis of children living in kinship care, households containing kinship care arrangements, and the economic activity status of potential kinship carers for England and Wales, respectively.

[Estimates of kinship care in Census 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 19 July 2023

This table provides Census 2021 estimates that classify children in kinship care, kinship carers, households containing kinship relationships, children living with no relatives, carers that are not related to children they live with by kinship care in England and Wales. Geographical level: England and Wales level or country level or local authority level.

[Estimates of kinship care in 2011 Census](#)

Dataset | Released 19 July 2023

This table provides 2011 Census estimates that classify children in kinship care, kinship carers, households containing kinship relationships, children living with no relatives, carers that are not related to children they live with by kinship care in England and Wales. Geographical level: England and Wales level or country level or local authority level based on 2021 boundaries.

8 . Glossary

Adult

An adult is a person who is not a dependent child.

Children living in kinship care

Children living in kinship care are defined as usual residents who were aged 17 years and under on Census Day who lived in households without a parent present, but with adults aged 18 years and over who were their sibling(s), grandparent(s), or other relatives, such as their aunt(s), uncle(s), or cousin(s).

Children living with at least one parent

Children living with at least one parent are defined as usual residents who were aged 17 years and under who lived in households with at least one parent or step parent.

Dependent child

A dependent child is a person aged 0 to 15 years or a person aged 16 to 18 years who is in full-time education and lives in a family with their parent, parents, grandparent or grandparents. It does not include any person aged 16 to 18 years who has a spouse, partner or child living in the household.

Deprivation

The dimensions of deprivation used to classify households are indicators based on four selected household characteristics:

- education: a household is classified as deprived in the education dimension if no one has at least level 2 education and no one aged 16 to 18 years is a full-time student
- employment: a household is classified as deprived in the employment dimension if any member, not a full-time student, is either unemployed or economically inactive because of long-term sickness or disability
- health: a household is classified as deprived in the health dimension if any person in the household has general health that is bad or very bad or is identified as disabled. People who have assessed their day-to-day activities as limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses are considered disabled. This definition of a disabled person meets the harmonised standard for measuring disability and is in line with the Equality Act (2010).
- housing: a household is classified as deprived in the housing dimension if the household's accommodation is either overcrowded, in a shared dwelling, or has no central heating

Disability

People who assessed their day-to-day activities as limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses are considered disabled. This definition of a disabled person meets the harmonised standard for measuring disability and is in line with the Equality Act (2010).

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.

For more information, see our [Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#).

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.

Kinship care

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or close family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. For more information, see [Kinship's advice and information page](#).

There is a small number of children living in kinship care that have children of their own. In those cases, the child who is a parent is still defined as being in kinship care, but their own child is not defined as such.

Kinship care households

Households containing kinship care arrangements (kinship care households) are defined as those which contain a child aged 0 to 17 years living without a parent, but with at least one potential kinship carer (grandparent(s), sibling(s) or other relation(s) aged 18 years and over).

Parental households

Households containing parental relationships (parental households) are defined as those which contain a child aged 0 to 17 years living with at least one parent or step parent.

Potential kinship carers

Potential kinship carers are defined as adults (aged 18 years or over) who live with a grandchild, sibling, or other relation who is aged 0 to 17 years and who does not live with a parent.

A sibling aged 18 years or over is not defined as a kinship carer if they live in a household where a grandparent or other relation is also present. All potential kinship carers in the household have been counted because it is unknown who provides care. This is expected to over count the number of kinship carers. Many children have more than one kinship carer.

Religion

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

Census 2021 asked people a voluntary question about their religion, which was answered by around 94% of respondents. Those that did not answer the question were given a response of "Not answered".

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.

For more information, see our [Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#).

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
- 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.

9 . Data sources and quality

Reference date

Census 2021 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 of the people and households in England and Wales.

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

Quality of Census 2021

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 demography and migration in our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#).

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

Comparing Census 2021 household relationships with 2011 Census

Census figures relating to family and household composition draw on the “relationship matrix” on the census questionnaire, which records how members of the household are related to each other. This is one of the more complex parts of the census question and prone to response error. Data quality of Census 2021 is higher than 2011 Census. Census 2021 was largely collected online, whereas 2011 Census was largely collected through paper questionnaires. The online questionnaire included checks that reduced errors in completion, particularly on date of birth, from which age is derived.

For example, Census 2011 showed more than twice as many sibling relationships with age gaps of more than 30 years (which is still less than 0.5% of sibling relationships) than Census 2021. Many of these relationships are likely to be explained by response error (either to the date of birth question or the relationship matrix). This is unlikely to affect the household and family classifications for the vast majority of households. However, Census 2021 and 2011 Census relationships data may not be directly comparable when used to identify less common household and family types (for example, children living without parents but with adult siblings).

Differences in the definition of a child in this analysis

In this analysis, a child is defined as any usual resident aged 0 to 17 years. This differs to other Office for National Statistics (ONS) definitions of a child, which define children as “dependent” or “non-dependent” depending on their age, full-time education status, and whether they have a spouse, partner, or child living in the household. Standard definitions of dependent and non-dependent children can be found in our [Families and households statistics explained article](#).

10 . Related links

[Families in England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 10 May 2023

Change since 2011 and geography of family types: lone parent; multi-generational; same-sex couple; multi-family households; and children with a second parental address.

[Census maps](#)

Interactive tool | Updated 19 January 2023

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

[Household and resident characteristics, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 2 November 2022

Household size, household composition, household deprivation status, and people’s marital and civil partnership status, Census 2021 data.

11 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article, [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#)