

# New populations in the British city centre: Evidence of social change from the census and household surveys

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## Abstract

Encouraged by government policies to promote city centre living and to increase residential land use on brownfield sites, there has been considerable repopulation of the city centre. Through detailed small-area census analysis of Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff and Swansea, supplemented by household surveys and key informant interviews, the research points to a range of population characteristics and changes occurring in the British city centre. Certain characteristics such as a high proportion of lone person households, fewer children and low car ownership remain fairly consistent. However, substantial population expansion affirms that a large part of the population is “new”. Between 1991 and 2001, men came to outnumber women, and each of the city centres saw a relative expansion of its young adult population. The new residents have a higher appreciation than longer term residents of proximity to work and leisure facilities, and of the stylishness of city centre living. Most of the new residents rent their accommodation, generally in flats, and the predominance of renting is associated with a transient attitude to city centre residence among the new population. Socio-economic evidence indicates a striking rise in social status or gentrification in all the city centres investigated, especially where high status private housing developments encourage the trend. With policies promoting residential development, the city centre is becoming increasingly socially exclusive.

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## 1. Introduction

In city centres across the world, new central housing schemes are signs of an expanding central population. In the UK, just as elsewhere, there has been a marked turnaround from the concerns about loss of population from the city centre which had dominated the last few decades of the 20th century. Although some European city centres managed to retain a substantial residential population, this was not the case in most North American cities, and even in parts of the developing world city centre population losses

were noted (Bromley and Jones, 1996; Champion, 2001; Pacione, 2005). The population losses prompted policies to revitalise and repopulate city centres. Cities such as Denver and San Diego in the United States successfully combined retail regeneration with historic conservation and repopulation in the central area. In Britain, also, after decades of disinvestment, the late-20th century saw concerted attempts to regenerate and revitalise the city centre, not only by boosting retail and other service functions, but also by encouraging more people to live there. Policy has specifically encouraged the re-peopling of the British city centre. However evidence of the extent to which repopulation has occurred and of the current characteristics of the city centre populations has remained thin. It is only with the recent availability of the 2001 census output area statistics that a more detailed assessment focusing specifically on the city

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centre has become possible. This paper not only uses census data, but also draws on two household interview surveys to investigate the city centre population. By exploring the evidence on selected British city centres, the paper may identify common trends likely to be occurring in other British cities and in other parts of the world, where similar central regeneration policies have been pursued.

The recent change from depopulation to repopulation in many city centres corresponds with the later phases of urban development conceptualised by van den Berg and Klaassen (1987). Thus, after early stages of urbanisation and suburbanisation, cities embark on a period of disurbanisation involving absolute and then relative decentralisation (van den Berg and Klaassen, 1987). This is followed by the most recent phase of reurbanisation, characterised by relative and then absolute centralisation. Lever (1993) outlined some of the first evidence for this late-20th century reurbanisation phase within the older industrial cities of Western Europe. He drew (amongst other factors) on explanations based on the growth of business services in the central areas and the cultural attractions of city life to the new work force. Using French census data, Ogden and Hall (2004) confirmed the trends towards reurbanisation in France during the 1990s. They similarly showed how this reurbanisation was associated with the emergence of a distinctive population structure for the central areas of French cities by the end of the 1990s. However a study of metropolitan regions in Canada between 1971 and 1996 suggested that Vancouver was the only city demonstrating a strong recentralisation of its population by the mid-1990s (Bunting et al., 2000). Although the trend towards recentralisation and repopulation of the central city in many parts of the developed world is widely recognised (Ogden and Hall, 2000) there remain many variations and uncertainties.

In Britain, evidence of a reversal of the trend of population loss from the central zones of cities, at least in limited areas, began to emerge during the 1990s. Initially, population growth was restricted to isolated new developments and small areas of converted warehousing in cities such as London, Manchester or Liverpool. Central accommodation became fashionable, particularly with young professionals, because of its proximity to central office areas, and arts and cultural facilities, so avoiding lengthy commuting trips (Evans, 1997). In cities such as Manchester, population in the city centre increased substantially from 200 in 1993 to over 6000 by 2000 (DETR, 2000c). In Liverpool, population growth in the city centre was also marked, although in this case the rise was from around 2300 in 1991 to about 9000 in 1999 (Madden et al., 2001). By the second half of the 1990s the pattern of city centre population growth had spread to many regional cities in Britain. This population growth can now be identified more precisely by careful analysis of the 1991 and 2001 census data.

The recent trend towards repopulation of the British city centre has been encouraged by policies which promote city centre living, in a context of rising demand for small urban dwellings associated with changes in household structure

and significant lifestyle shifts which favour central city living (Couch, 1999; Hamnett, 2000). The process has been facilitated by a ready supply of vacant city centre sites and premises for housing, for which more profitable uses did not exist. While regeneration of the central city with new housing schemes, especially associated with docklands, had been a feature prior to the 1990s, a strong national policy drive for city centre housing did not take off until the 1990s. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) 6 on town centres (DoE, 1996) specifically encouraged mixed use developments to bring residents back to the city centre by advocating a mixture of small businesses, houses and offices in or near to city centres and the occupation of flats above shops. The later PPG on housing (DETR, 2000a) continued to promote the re-use of previously developed land and the conversion of non-residential buildings for housing. Policy statements from central government throughout the 1990s and in 2000 (DoE, 1995a,b; DETR, 2000a,b) thus demonstrated an emerging emphasis on housing development and repopulation of the city centre. The vitality and viability of city centres, which had suffered from the earlier decentralisation of retail and office facilities was seen as enhanced by an enlarged residential population (URBED, 1994). New residents, as well as workers, were seen as stimulating retail activity, restaurants and cafés and thus contributing to the vitality of the centre, and improving safety by introducing more eyes on the street. This new residential policy for the city centre came at a time of rising housing need resulting from increasing family fragmentation and declining household size (Oc and Tiesdell, 1997), and coincided with the debates about where the additional houses might be provided. An additional 4.4 million households were expected to be formed between 1991 and 2016, and it was hoped that many might be accommodated in existing urban areas which already possessed buildings and land suitable for conversion (DoE, 1995a; Allinson, 1999). Better use of these urban resources would not only revitalise city centres but would also reduce the pressure for new housing on greenfield sites. Sustainability concerns were clearly served by the policies for city centre housing (Bromley et al., 2005).

The policy initiatives of the 1990s and 2000 to encourage an urban renaissance and a repopulation of the city centre would be expected to have an impact on actual population changes revealed by the 2001 census. More recent post-census initiatives indicate a continuance of the pressures, albeit indirect, for city centre repopulation, suggesting that any identified population trends are likely to continue. The Kate Barker (2004) review of housing supply was commissioned to explore ways of encouraging the UK housing supply to meet the increased housing needs. The government responded by proposing a package of measures to reform the planning system and to deliver increased investment in infrastructure (HM Treasury, 2005a,b). The government commitment to achieve 60% of new housing development on brownfield land was emphasised (HM Treasury, 2005a) and guidance on identifying suitable brownfield sites was provided (ODPM, 2005a). The culmination of these initiatives is

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