

Harmonised Concepts and Questions for Social Data Sources

GSS Harmonised Principle

Demographic Information,
Household Composition and Relationships

About This Document and Update History

GSS Harmonised Principle

About this document

This document forms part of a series of GSS Harmonised Principles, designed to provide approved harmonised questions, definitions and outputs for a variety of social and business related topics. The use of harmonised questions, definitions and outputs will provide greater consistency for survey producers and comparability when using data.

For more information, please see the Introductory Document, available on the GSS website:

<https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/statistics/methodology-2/harmonisation/>

This is Version 3.3 published in March 2018

This document has been updated to Version 3.3 to reflect the change to the Harmonisation Team email address. There has been no change to the harmonised questions

Previous versions:

Version 3.2 published in June 2017

This document has been updated to Version 3.2 to reflect the change away from 'Primary Principles' and 'Secondary Principles' to 'GSS Harmonised Principles'. This version also includes a revision to the Harmonised Principle for Age to include additional age bands and are now presented as two alternative groupings (Age Bands Group 1 and 2

Version 3.1 published in May 2015

This document has been updated to Version 3.1 to correct minor formatting errors and to change the term '*Harmonised Standards*' to '*Harmonised Principles*' as agreed by the National Statistics Harmonisation Group

Version 3.0, published in May 2012.

This document has been updated to remove references to working and retirement age, given the increasing age to 65 at which women are able to draw their state pension, the abolition of the default retirement age in 2011 and the proposed increase in state pension age to 68 by 2046. The second change is to remove references to 'legal partnership status', using 'marital or same-sex civil partnership status' instead. This change provides more clarity to the term and removes any notion of any type of partnership being 'illegal'. Further, some of the answers to this question were only noted by interviewers if provided spontaneously by the respondent. This version removes the spontaneous factor from the answers. The final change is to remove the spontaneous nature of the answer to whether a couple is living together as a same-sex couple. This has been replaced by two questions, depending whether the data source uses a household relationship grid or not.

Version 2.2 published in October 2011.

This document has been updated as a result of the changing of the definitions of a household and household response unit from 2011 onwards.

Version 2.1 published in December 2008.

This document has been updated as a result of re-formatting the document so that 'inputs' appear before 'outputs' for each Harmonised Principle.

Version 2.0 published in April 2008.

This document has been updated to recognise the same-sex 'Civil Partnership' status. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 came into operation on 5 December 2005 and enables a same-sex couple to register as Civil Partners of each other. Contact details for the Harmonisation Team have also been updated.

Version 1.0 published in June 2004.

This document is part of a series that replaced the Harmonised Concepts and Questions document. We have been working to make our guidance easier to find and clearer to use. Other than the formatting and layout changes, there are no new changes to questions or outputs in this version.

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Introduction

GSS Harmonised Principle

The United Kingdom has a wide range of Government surveys that provide sources of demographic information. The Census of Population is the largest and best known, but there are many others covering topics such as economic activity, income, expenditure, food, health, education, housing and transport. Most of these are continuous household surveys. Others, covering topics such as crime, dental health and house condition, are repeated regularly. Most of these surveys include sections on the demographic characteristics of respondents.

These surveys were designed at different times, to meet different needs, and have been commissioned by a range of departments. Consequently, the surveys were developed mostly in isolation from each other.

This resulted in a lack of cohesion. Differences arose in concepts, definitions, design, fieldwork and processing practices, or 'inputs', and also in the way results are released, or 'outputs'. This lack of cohesion was a source of frustration for many users.



A cross-governmental programme of work is looking into standardising demographic inputs and outputs. This is known as harmonisation. For several years, the ONS has led this programme of work. The aim is to make it easier for users to draw clearer and more robust comparisons between data sources.


Contact us

For more information about Harmonisation or to join our mailing list, please visit our website at:

<https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/statistics/methodology-2/harmonisation/>

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Household and Household Response Unit

Definitions

The harmonised definition of a household for the purposes of analysis and publication is identical to that of the household response unit, which is used in defining the sample and data collection.

The definition of a household is:

One person living alone; or
a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area.

This definition of the household response unit has been used for the 2011 Census and used in social surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics since the start of 2011. It differs only slightly from the definition used for the 1981, 1991 and 2001 Censuses which was:

One person or a group who have the accommodation as their only or main residence and (for a group of people) either share at least one meal a day or share the living accommodation.

In order to measure the impact of the introduction of the changed household definition, the Office for National Statistics developed a set of questions to be asked to interviewers for each address they visited. The questions were initially asked on the Opinions (OPN) survey in May and June 2010. Early analysis of the data collected highlighted issues in the comprehension of the existing questions related to housekeeping arrangements. A revised set of questions was therefore developed to be asked in the OPN questionnaire in July, August and September 2010. Overall only two addresses out of 2,188 productive cases (less than 0.1% of interviewed households) would change classification under the new household definition. As the two households change classification in the opposite direction, there was no overall change in the total number of households under the two definitions.

There may be other groupings which are required for analysis, such as family units, benefit units and domestic consumption units, but these are wholly contained within this household response unit.

As in the case of harmonised questions, where a survey needs to add information it can do so, provided that it can also identify the harmonised information (i.e. in this case, the harmonised response unit). For example, the Labour Force Survey adds students who live in halls of residence in term-time and residents in National Health Service accommodation to the coverage allowed in the harmonised definition, but these are clearly identified and the harmonised definition can be derived (details are given in Appendix A).

Residence

If a respondent has more than one address, their assessment of which is the main address is taken except in the following circumstances:

1. Adult children, that is, aged 16 and over who live away from home for purposes of either work or study and come home only for holidays should not be included at their parental address.
2. Anyone who has been away from the address continuously for 6 months or more should be excluded even if the respondent continues to think of it as their main residence.
3. Anyone who has been living continuously at an address for 6 months or more should be included at that address even if they have their main residence elsewhere.
4. Anyone who is searching for a permanent address in this country should be included at their temporary address, unless they are making a holiday or business visit only and remain resident abroad.
5. Addresses used only as second homes, that is holiday homes, should never be counted as the main residence.

Characteristics of Those Living in the Household

Inputs

There should be a single grid covering all persons in the household. The grid should have explicit questions rather than mere headings to denote implicit questions, except in the case of name (or other identifier) and sex, which will often be volunteered or observed. However if it is not volunteered or observed "What is your sex?" should be asked. The grid should contain the following questions:

NAME

ALL PERSONS

- **Name or other unique identifier within the household**

SEX

ALL PERSONS

- **Sex**

CODE FIRST THAT APPLIES

1. Male
2. Female

DATE OF BIRTH

ALL PERSONS

- **What is your date of birth?**

FOR MONTH NOT GIVEN....ENTER 6 FOR MONTH

FOR DAY NOT GIVEN....ENTER 15 FOR DAY

AGE LAST BIRTHDAY

IF YEAR OF BIRTH NOT GIVEN

- **What was your age last birthday?**

Interviewer instruction:

If respondents refuse to give their age, then give your best estimate.

AGE

ALL PERSONS

- **Derived variable for age, computed from date of birth or age last birthday.**

This variable is used in questionnaire routing.

The codes for sex and the amendment of the harmonised question from age at time of survey to date of birth are in line with decisions taken at the European Union Workshop on Harmonisation of Survey Variables held in London in November 1996.

Surveys imputing day or month of birth where these are not given by the respondent, can do so by a subsequent question for the interviewer if the day or month element of the date of birth is an imputed value, e.g. day = 15; month = 6. If the year of birth is not given, it may be possible to obtain a best-estimate of this key classificatory information by asking about age last birthday and, as a last resort, estimating age (see Interviewer Instruction). For simplicity in routing, age is computed from date of birth; in paper-and-pencil surveys it may be asked, as it was for many years in the Labour Force Survey (and still is, under computer assisted interviewing, as a useful check)

'Marital or Same-sex Civil Partnership Status' and 'Living Arrangements'

Inputs

MARITAL OR SAME-SEX CIVIL PARTNERSHIP STATUS

IF AGE >= 16

– **Are you ...**

ASK OR RECORD

1. single, that is, never married and never registered in a same-sex civil partnership
2. married
3. separated, but still legally married
4. divorced
5. widowed
6. in a registered same-sex civil partnership
7. separated, but still legally in a same-sex civil partnership
8. formerly in a same-sex civil partnership which is now legally dissolved
9. surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership

Interviewer instruction:

A person whose spouse/same-sex civil partner has been working away from home for over six months, for example on a contract overseas or in the armed forces, should still be coded as married and living with husband/wife or same-sex civil partner if the separation is not permanent.

LIVING IN A COUPLE (FOR DATA SOURCES WITH A HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIP GRID)

IF (AGE >= 16) AND

(MORE THAN ONE PERSON IN HOUSEHOLD) AND

(NOT EITHER MARRIED OR CIVIL PARTNERED)

– **May I just check, are you living with someone in this household as a couple?**

ASK OR RECORD

1. Yes
2. No

LIVING IN A COUPLE (FOR DATA SOURCES WITHOUT A HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIP GRID)

IF (AGE >= 16) AND

(MORE THAN ONE PERSON IN HOUSEHOLD) AND

(NOT EITHER MARRIED OR CIVIL PARTNERED)

– **May I just check, are you living with someone in this household as a couple?**

ASK OR RECORD

1. Yes – opposite sex couple
2. Yes – same sex couple
3. No

Interviewer instruction:

Only respondents who are living with their partner in this household should be coded as living together as a couple.

You may code No without asking the question ONLY if all members of the household are too closely related for any to be living together in a de facto partnership relationship.

Household Relationships

Inputs

A separate grid for relationships should make it easier for surveys that do not need the full matrix to substitute a single question asking relationship to the household reference person. The grid here assumes computer assisted interviewing.

ALL PERSONS

- **Name and person number**
Computed from previous grid

RELATIONSHIPS

ALL PERSONS

- **Code relationship of each household member to the others**

1. Spouse
2. Civil Partner **
3. Cohabiting partner *
4. Son/daughter (incl. adopted)
5. Step-son/daughter
6. Foster child
7. Son-in-law/daughter-in-law
8. Parent/guardian
9. Step-parent
10. Foster parent
11. Parent-in-law
12. Brother/sister (incl. adopted)
13. Step-brother/sister
14. Foster brother/sister
15. Brother/sister-in-law
16. Grandchild
17. Grandparent
18. Other relative
19. Other non-relative

The list is detailed, but interviewers should not probe for relationships that are not volunteered or queried by respondents. The full relationships grid, showing relationship of each household member to all the others, will enable the computation of units within the household, such as family units and benefit units. Coding of such units directly by interviewers is error prone and it is difficult to correct errors later in the office.

Notes

* Includes same-sex couples who are not in a registered civil partnership. Treat relatives of cohabiting couples in the same way as relatives of spouses.

** Treat relatives of Civil Partners in the same way as relatives of spouses.

Interviewer instruction:

You may want to introduce this section. A possible introduction is:

“There are a lot of changes taking place in the make-up of households/families and this section is to help find out what these changes are. I’d like you to tell me the relationship of each member of the household to every other member.”

The section must be asked for all households consisting of more than one person. Please ask in every case. You should not make assumptions about any relationship.

Household Relationships

Inputs

Treat relatives of cohabiting members of the household (both opposite and same sex) as though the cohabiting couple were married, That is, the mother of a partner is coded as mother-in-law. Other relatives include cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles.

You should probe on this question, but be sensitive. It may be that someone described as a 'son' or 'brother' earlier is actually a stepson or half-brother. Where possible, we want to know the true relationship. If you have doubts about any relationship, record as much information as possible to allow changes to coding later if appropriate.

Half brothers/sisters should be coded with step-brothers/sisters.

Edit:

Checks that the ages are consistent:

– A PARENT/GUARDIAN SHOULD BE OLDER THAN THEIR CHILD

hard check

– A CHILD SHOULD BE YOUNGER THAN THEIR PARENT/GUARDIAN

hard check

– A FOSTER-PARENT SHOULD BE OLDER THAN THEIR FOSTER-CHILD

hard check

– A FOSTER-CHILD SHOULD BE YOUNGER THAN THEIR FOSTER-PARENT

hard check

– A GRANDPARENT SHOULD BE OLDER THAN THEIR GRANDCHILD

hard check

– A GRANDCHILD SHOULD BE YOUNGER THAN THEIR GRANDPARENT

hard check

– A PARENT OR GRANDPARENT SHOULD BE OLDER THAN 15. CHECK AGE HAS BEEN RECORDED CORRECTLY

soft check

– A STEP/ IN LAW-PARENT IS USUALLY OLDER THAN THEIR STEP/ IN LAW-CHILD, CHECK AGE HAS BEEN RECORDED CORRECTLY

soft check

– A STEP-CHILD / CHILD-IN-LAW IS USUALLY YOUNGER THAN THEIR STEP/ IN LAW-PARENT, CHECK AGE HAS BEEN RECORDED CORRECTLY

soft check

Check that Partnership status is consistent:

– A MARRIED PARTNER MUST BE OF OPPOSITE SEX

soft check

– A CIVIL PARTNER MUST BE OF THE SAME SEX

soft check

– A COHABITING PARTNER IS USUALLY OF OPPOSITE SEX

soft check

– YOU HAVE RECORDED THIS PERSON'S RELATIONSHIP AS COHABITEE, BUT BOTH PARTNERS' LIVING ARRANGEMENTS ARE NOT STATED AS COHABITING WITH SOMEONE CURRENTLY LIVING IN THE HOUSEHOLD.

hard check

Household Relationships

Inputs

– YOU HAVE RECORDED THIS PERSON'S RELATIONSHIP AS SPOUSE, BUT BOTH PARTNERS' PARTNERSHIP STATUS IS NOT STATED AS MARRIED WITH SOMEONE CURRENTLY LIVING IN THE HOUSEHOLD - IS THIS CORRECT?

soft check

– YOU HAVE RECORDED THIS PERSON'S RELATIONSHIP AS A CIVIL PARTNER, BUT BOTH PARTNERS' PARTNERSHIP STATUS IS NOT STATED AS CIVIL PARTNERED WITH SOMEONE CURRENTLY LIVING IN THE HOUSEHOLD - IS THIS CORRECT?

soft check

– [PERSON] IS NOT MARRIED AND NOT COHABITING SO HE/SHE CANNOT HAVE A PARTNER IN THE HOUSEHOLD.

hard check

– YOU HAVE CODED THIS PERSON AS MARRIED, BUT AGE IS UNDER 16 - IS THIS CORRECT?

soft check

– YOU HAVE CODED THIS PERSON AS CIVIL PARTNERED, BUT AGE IS UNDER 16 - IS THIS CORRECT?

soft check

– YOU HAVE CODED THIS PERSON AS COHABITING, BUT AGE IS UNDER 16 - IS THIS CORRECT?

soft check

– HRP MAY ONLY HAVE ONE (MAIN) SPOUSE OR PARTNER.

hard check

Household Reference Person

Inputs

The household reference person is:

- the member of the household in whose name the accommodation is owned or rented, or is otherwise responsible for the accommodation. In households with a *sole* householder that person is the household reference person
- In households with *joint* householders the person with the *highest income* is taken as the household reference person.
- If both householders have exactly the same income, the *older* is taken as the household reference person.

Note that this definition does not require a question about people's actual incomes; only a question about who has the highest income.

NAME OF OWNER OR RENTER

IF MORE THAN ONE PERSON IN HOUSEHOLD WITH AGE \geq 16

- **In whose name is the accommodation owned or rented?**

HIGHEST INCOME

IF THERE ARE JOINT HOUSEHOLDERS

- **You have told me that [names] jointly own or rent the accommodation. Which of them has the highest income (from earnings, benefits, pensions and any other sources)?**

IF TWO OR MORE JOINT HOUSEHOLDERS HAVE THE SAME INCOME, OR IF DON'T KNOW OR REFUSAL AT HIGHEST INCOME, SELECT THE ELDEST.

IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR PERIOD TO AVERAGE OVER - LAST 12 MONTHS, AS CONVENIENT.

HOUSEHOLD REFERENCE PERSON CHECK

ALL HOUSEHOLDS

- **The household reference person has been computed as [name]**

Gender

Outputs

Output categories

Male	XXX
Female	XXX
All persons	XXXX

* Note: *The GSS has an agreed policy on the publication of sex-disaggregated statistics:*

“The GSS aims always to collect and make available, for example in publications, statistics disaggregated by sex, except where considerations of practicality or cost outweigh the identified need. All GSS publications contain the name and contact details of a person who can explain which, if any, of the statistics are available by sex and how they can be obtained.”

Age

Outputs

Single year of age is preferred, but if data quality does not allow this other groupings provided may be used.

Harmonised Principle Age Band Group 1

Harmonised Principles A - D are directly comparable and may be collapsed into each other. Principles A - D can be used as standalone age groups. Principle E may be appended to Principle C and D.

A	B	C	D	E
0-24	0-24	0-15	0-4 5-10 11-15 16-19 20-24	
	25-44	16-24 25-34 35-44	25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44	
25-64	45-64	45-54 55-64	45-49 50-54 55-59 60-64	
65-74	65-74	65-74	65-69 70-74	(85-89)*
75+	75+	75-84	75-79 80-84	90-94 95-99
		85+	85+	100+ /100-104
All ages	All ages	All ages	All ages	105+ All ages

Harmonised Principle Age Band Group 2 (only to be used for demographic outputs)

Harmonised Principle E and F are designed to be in addition to **Harmonised Principle Age Bands Group 1 (A - D)**. Most high profile demographic outputs, including the Census, produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) are at single year of age but when lower levels of geography are used they can be aggregated up to quinary age bands. Principles F may be used as a standalone age group or principle E may be appended to Principle F. Principle E may be used as a standalone age grouping when presenting data on older or high age estimates or may be appended to **Age Band Group 1 (C and D)**.

F	E
0-4	
5-9	
10-14	
15-19	
20-24	
25-29	
30-34	
35-39	
40-44	
45-49	
50-54	
55-59	
60-64	
65-69	
70-74	(85-89)*
75-79	90-94
80-84	95-99
85-89	100+ /100-104
90+	105+
All ages	All ages

***Use additional age band when appending to Age Band Group 1.**

For analyses related specifically to employment, a secondary classification may be appropriate, given below. Further detail (5 or 10 year bands) may be appropriate in some cases. Age groupings to choose will depend on:

- the sample size of the source used (narrower age bands will be more suitable for outputs from surveys with a larger sample size or large administrative sources)
- the subject of interest in the statistics. For example, employment analyses should start from age 16 in most cases.

Secondary harmonised output categories for employment and pension related analyses:

0-15	XXX
16-64	XXX
65 and over	XXX
All ages	XXXX

Changes to the state pension age came into effect from April 2010 and will continue progressively until 2028.

Users often require statistics for the state pension age at the reference date of any output. Producers of outputs are asked to consider their users and their possible need for outputs on state pension age basis. Given this, it is suggested that producers provide this in addition to the age groups suggested above, where it is both practical to do so, and does not present any disclosure control risks.

Age in years

We recommend that the date of birth input data is translated into age at time of survey for most published outputs. For specialist analyses other categories could also be presented. These might include analysis based on 'academic age' (i.e. age on the preceding August 31st), which is useful for studies concerned with education and issues relating to youth. Another example is 'rounded age', in which a child's age is rounded to the nearest integer (e.g. all children aged 14½ to 15½ are counted as being aged 15). Rounded age is used to calculate standard growth curves for children. Some health-related analyses may need to use this to allow comparison with published data on children's heights and weights by age.

Age

Outputs

Survey managers may wish to consider including derived variables on these definitions on their databases.

Aggregation of age groups for publication

The level of aggregation used in published analyses will depend on the purpose of the analysis and the quality of the data, including sample size in the different age groups. For general purposes, including reference tables, the categories above are recommended, though not necessarily with full breakdown.

'Marital or same-sex Civil Partnership Status' and 'Living Arrangements'

Outputs

We propose two sets of harmonised output categories: 'marital or same-sex civil partnership status' and 'living arrangements' which will be appropriate for different purposes. The former is based solely on the legal status of the relationship and the latter combines information on the legal status of the relationship and whether the respondent is living as part of a couple or not. It is hoped that both will be made available in publications and datasets where possible, but this will not be appropriate for all tabulations. Where only one set of categories is used, and in discussion, it should be made clear in a footnote or through a clear context whether 'marital or same-sex civil partnership status' or 'living arrangements' are being referred to, as some of the category names are the same.

Output categories: Marital or same-sex civil partnership status*

In a legally registered partnership	Married and living with spouse or registered in a same-sex civil partnership and living with same-sex civil partner	xxx
	Separated	xxx
All in a legally registered partnership		XXXX
Not in a legally registered partnership	Single (never married or formed a same-sex civil partnership)	xxx
	Divorced or formally registered in a same-sex civil partnership which has now been dissolved	xxx
	Widowed or surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership	xxx
All Not in a legally registered partnership		XXXX
All persons		XXXXX

Further detail (splitting 'married and living with spouse', and 'registered in a same-sex civil partnership and living with same-sex civil partner') may be appropriate in some cases.

* Note: Information for this analysis is derived from the question on marital or same-sex civil partnership status only. The term separated covers any person whose spouse or same-sex civil partner is living elsewhere because of estrangement (whether the separation is legal or not).

'Marital or same-sex Civil Partnership Status' and 'Living Arrangements'

Outputs

Output categories: Living arrangements**

Persons living in a couple		
	Married/ Civil Partnered	xxx
	Cohabiting #	xxx
All persons living in a couple		XXXX
Persons not living in a couple		
	Single	xxx
	Separated	xxx
	Divorced or formally registered in a same-sex civil partnership which has now been dissolved	xxx
	Widowed or surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership	xxx
All persons not living in a couple		XXXX
All persons		XXXXX

Further detail (splitting 'married', and 'civil partnered') may be appropriate in some cases.

*** Note: Information for this analysis is derived from the question on marital or same-sex civil partnership status and the question on living arrangements (i.e. whether the respondent is living as part of a couple or not). The living arrangements analysis differs from the marital or same-sex civil partnership status analysis in that cohabiting takes priority over other categories. For example, if a person is divorced and cohabiting they are classed as cohabiting.*

Note: This category includes same-sex couples.