

Data Explained

Ministry of Justice and Department for Education linked dataset - England

Discrepancies in gender/sex and ethnicity data between the National Pupil Database and the Police National Computer

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This Data Explained summarises experiences and learning from working with the National Pupil Database and Police National Computer linked datasets in the course of producing research into gender and ethnicity inequalities. This publication is intended to help guide future researchers using this data and to provide feedback into future dataset development and documentation.

The administrative data discussed in this Data Explained was made securely available through the Data First programme: a ground-breaking data linkage initiative, led by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and funded by ADR UK. The data used in this research project comes from the MoJ and Department for Education (DfE) and was accessed through the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS). The data was not originally collected for research and it is expected that there are gaps and inconsistencies in its recording, a number of which are detailed in the following.

Project details

National administrative datasets can capture whole populations and mitigate selection, attrition and recall biases that are common to conventional cohorts and survey approaches. Meanwhile, high quality recording of sociodemographic data is also essential for investigating inequalities in education and the criminal justice system. An issue with administrative datasets is that they can fail to consistently collect adequate sociodemographic data.

Linking administrative datasets presents an opportunity to tackle this problem – for example, missing sociodemographic information in one dataset could be supplemented using information available in another. This was highlighted in recent national guidance on using ethnicity data (Race Disparity Unit, 2023). But how confident can we be that this information is comparable between the two datasets, especially if they use different terminology and data collection methods (such as self-reported versus administrator-reported sociodemographic data)?

We investigated this using an individual-level data linkage between the Police National Computer (PNC) and the National Pupil Database (NPD). Gender/sex and ethnicity data were collected differently by the two datasets, and interpretation of how these constructs are defined might depend on the individuals supplying the data. While individual-level gender/sex and ethnicity recordings mostly align between the two datasets, they can diverge. Ethnicity recordings in the PNC may also vary according to offence type.

These discrepancies present a challenge for researchers who are investigating inequalities, as it may not be clear which dataset to draw sociodemographic data from. We offer recommendations to users of this linkage on how to handle such discrepancies, and to data owners for improving data collection and documentation relating to these variables.

Initial research question

Are there discrepancies in gender/sex and ethnicity data between the National Pupil Database and Police National Computer, and how can these be reconciled?

A note on language

The terms 'gender' and 'sex' refer to related but distinct constructs (Office for National Statistics, 2020). It is unclear exactly which of these constructs are primarily captured by the related variables and datasets used in this report, and this is discussed further in the "Data limitations encountered" section. To recognise this ambiguity and avoid any assumptions, we use the term 'gender/sex' throughout.

Ethnicity is a multi-faceted construct that refers to "the group to which people belong, and/or are perceived to belong, as a result of certain shared characteristics, including geographical and ancestral origins, but particularly cultural traditions and languages. The characteristics that define ethnicity are not fixed or easily measured, so ethnicity is imprecise and fluid" (Bhopal, 2004). In this report, we adopt ethnic categories and terminology used by the variables and datasets used in this report, or by their data owners; these might not always align with current standards and guidance on the collection and reporting of these data (Race Disparity Unit, 2023).

Research methodology

We used a data linkage between the PNC and the NPD, including the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), Spring School Census, and key stage 2 (KS2) attainment data tables. We requested an extract from the linkage comprising pupils born between 01/09/1990 and 31/08/1997, and focused on pupils whose educational records had successfully linked to the PNC, indicating that they had at some point been convicted of or cautioned for a criminal offence. After cleaning, de-duplicating, and linking each dataset, our analysis comprised n=638,228 individuals.

We used descriptive statistics to describe the availability of gender/sex and ethnicity data in the NPD and PNC. We also compared gender/sex and ethnicity as recorded at the time of each individual's first offence in the PNC with gender/sex and ethnicity most recently recorded in the NPD School Census (i.e. not missing or 'Unknown'). Finally, we analysed whether the extent and nature of recorded gender/sex and ethnicity mismatches between the NPD and PNC varied according to KS2 attainment and offence type.

[Read more about the methodology used in this study.](#)

Key variables

Dataset name	Variable	Variable categories	Additional notes
Police National Computer	Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female • Unknown 	
	Phoenix ethnicity code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White – North European • White – South European • Black • Asian • Chinese, Japanese or South East Asian • Middle Eastern • Unknown 	
	Broad ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Black • Asian • Other • Unknown 	This 4+1 classification was derived in accordance with a previous report (Ministry of Justice, 2021) by combining Phoenix ethnicity codes. This was to assist comparisons with the NPD.
	Offence type	Conviction or caution was for a serious violence offence (yes, no)	We derived this from Home Office Offence Codes using a framework developed in a previous publication (Department for Education and Ministry of Justice, 2022).
PLASC, Spring School Census	Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female • Unknown 	Collected by NPD 2001/02 onwards.
	Major ethnic group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Black • Asian • Chinese • Mixed • Any other ethnic group • Unknown (includes unclassified, refused, information not yet obtained, or any unrecognised code) 	Collected by NPD 2006/07 onwards. For previous years we derived this from other ethnicity variables.

	Minor ethnic group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White and Black African • White and Black Caribbean • White and Asian • Any Other Mixed Background 	Collected by NPD 2006/07 onwards. For previous years we derived this from other ethnicity variables. This variable was used to further understand some findings relating to the Mixed ethnic groups; hence only the Mixed ethnicity variable categories have been outlined.
	Broad ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Black • Asian • Other • Unknown 	This 4+1 classification was derived in accordance with a previous report (Ministry of Justice, 2021) by combining major ethnic groups. This was to assist comparisons with the PNC.
	Ethnicity source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided by the parent • Provided by the child • Ascribed by current school • Ascribed by a previous school • Other 	Collected by NPD 2001/02 to 2009/10.
KS2 attainment	KS2 attainment	Level 4 achieved in key stage 2 maths and English (yes, no)	We derived this from variables containing national curriculum levels achieved in maths assessments (collected by NPD 1995/96 to 2014/15) and English assessments (collected by NPD 1995/96 to 2011/12).

Summary of comments on specific variables

Variable name(s)	Comments
NPD school census – 'gender'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submitted by schools as part of the school census Recorded as a binary variable (male, female) Current guidelines require that gender is recorded according to the wishes of the parent or pupil, but this might not be the case for historical school censuses Interpretation might depend on the individual completing the record, and therefore may contain gender identity, sex assigned at birth, or something else
PNC – 'sex'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory field when logging an offence Recorded as a binary variable (male, female) Determined by the officer completing the record Interpretation might depend on the individual completing the record, and therefore may contain gender identity, sex assigned at birth, or something else
NPD school census – ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submitted by schools as part of the school census Recorded at a detailed level, but can be requested by researchers as broader categories, such as 'minor' and 'major' ethnic groups Current guidelines require that ethnicity must come from the parent or pupil, but this might not be the case for historical school censuses Interpretation of the construct 'ethnicity' might depend on the individual completing the record
PNC- ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory field when logging an offence Recorded as 'Phoenix ethnicity codes', comprising six broad categories (White North European, White South European, Black, Asian, Chinese/Japanese/South East Asian, Middle Eastern) Determined by the officer completing the record based on their interpretation of the individual's appearance Interpretation of the construct 'ethnicity' might depend on the individual completing the record Recording may be biased according to offence type Should be used in the knowledge that it may misrepresent an offender's cultural identity

Data limitations encountered

Gender/Sex

Data collection methods

In the PNC, 'sex' is a mandatory field when logging an offence. The field descriptor for 'sex' is 'gender of the subject'. It is declared by the officer completing the record. In the NPD, 'gender' is collected during the school census. Current NPD guidance is that gender is declared by the pupil or parent, but historically this has not always been the case. In both datasets, binary categories are used ('Male' and 'Female'), but interpretation of whether the field refers to sex assigned at birth, gender identity, or something else, may vary between individuals supplying the information.

Data availability

Of the total eligible sample (n=638,228), and excluding the 'Unknown' gender category, n=635,634 (99.6%) had gender/sex data available from the PNC at the time of their first offence, and n=636,013 (99.7%) had gender/sex data available from a previous school census. As a result, almost all of the sample had gender/sex data available from either source (n=638,225, >99.9%), and the majority had gender/sex data available from both sources (n=633,422, 99.3%). Table 1 provides the gender/sex breakdown of individuals with data available from both sources, as recorded by the NPD and PNC.

Table 1: NPD and PNC gender/sex of individuals with data available from both sources, n=633,422

NPD	
Male	452,882 (71.5%)
Female	180,540 (28.5%)
PNC	
Male	453,226 (71.6%)
Female	180,196 (28.5%)

Data consistency

Agreement on gender/sex between the NPD and PNC was very high among those with data available from both sources (n=633,422). The majority of those recorded as female in the NPD were also recorded as female in the PNC, and vice versa (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of gender/sex derived from the NPD and PNC, n=633,422

		PNC		
		Female	Male	Total
NPD	Female	180,037	503	180,540
	Row %	99.7	0.3	100.0
	Column %	99.9	0.1	28.5
	Male	159	452,723	452,882
	Row %	<0.1	>99.9	100.0
	Column %	0.1	99.9	71.5
	Total	180,196	453,226	633,422
	Row %	28.5	71.6	100.0
	Column %	100.0	100.0	100.0

In total, NPD and PNC gender/sex matched for n=632,760 (99.9%) of the individuals with gender/sex data available from both sources. This did not appear to vary substantially according to KS2 attainment or offence type (Table 3).

Table 3: Extent of matching between NPD and PNC gender/sex, stratified by KS2 attainment and offence type

	NPD matched PNC	
	Yes	No
Level 4 achieved in key stage 2 maths and English		
No (n=300,579)	300,274 (99.9%)	305 (0.1%)
Yes (n=301,820)	301,531 (99.9%)	289 (0.1%)
Conviction or caution was for a serious violence offence		
No (n=563,663)	563,059 (99.9%)	604 (0.1%)
Yes (n=69,696)	69,638 (99.9%)	58 (0.1%)

Note: Sample sizes in this table were limited to individuals with gender/sex data available from both the NPD and PNC, and with data available on either KS2 attainment or offence type.

Ethnicity

Data collection methods

In the PNC, ethnicity is a mandatory field when logging an offence. The field descriptor is "an indication of the ethnic appearance of a subject". It is determined by the officer completing the record, based on their interpretation of the individual's appearance against six ethnic groups known as Phoenix ethnicity codes.

In the NPD, ethnicity is collected during the school census using more detailed ethnic groups, which are sometimes re-categorised as 'minor' or 'major' ethnic groups. Current guidance is that

ethnicity is self- or parent-identified, but historically this has not always been the case. In our eligible sample of n=638,228, n=510,771 also had information on where ethnicity data in the most recently available school census was sourced from. Ethnicity was provided by the parent in the majority of cases, but in some cases, ethnicity was ascribed by a school (n=63,283, 12.4%) (Table 4).

Table 4: Source of NPD ethnicity data in the most recent school census, n=510,771

Ethnicity source	n	%
Provided by the parent	409,543	80.2%
Provided by the child	24,523	4.8%
Ascribed by current school	41,139	8.1%
Ascribed by a previous school	22,144	4.3%
Other	13,422	2.6%

In both datasets, interpretation of the term 'ethnicity' might depend on the individual completing the record (for example, individuals may classify ethnicity based on skin colour, cultural background, or nationality, among other possible interpretations).

Data availability

Of the total eligible sample (n=638,228) and excluding the 'Unknown' ethnicity category, n=613,926 (96.2%) had ethnicity data available from the PNC at the time of their first offence, and n=635,154 (99.5%) had ethnicity data available from a previous school census. As a result, almost all of the sample had ethnicity data available from either source (n=638,129, 99.9%), and the majority had ethnicity data available from both sources (n=610,951, 95.7%). Table 5 provides the ethnicity breakdown of individuals with data available from both sources, as recorded by the NPD and PNC.

Table 5: NPD and PNC ethnicity of individuals with data available from both sources, n=610,951

NPD	
White	512,800 (83.9%)
Black	35,682 (5.8%)
Asian	30,304 (5.0%)
Chinese	454 (0.1%)
Mixed	25,608 (4.2%)
Any other ethnic group	6,103 (1.0%)
PNC	
White – North European	512,011 (83.8%)
White – South European	8,230 (1.4%)
Black	52,523 (8.6%)
Asian	33,870 (5.5%)
Chinese, Japanese or SE Asian	1,475 (0.2%)
Middle Eastern	2,842 (0.5%)

Data consistency

To assist comparison between the NPD and PNC, we further categorised ethnicity into broad ethnic groups. Among individuals with data available from both sources (n=610,951), agreement on broad ethnicity between the NPD and PNC varied (Table 6). The majority of those recorded as White in the NPD were also identified as White in the PNC, and vice versa. Agreement between Black and Asian categories was also reasonable. However, agreement in the Other category was very low, with only 7.3% of those who were categorised as Other in the NPD also categorised as such in the PNC.

Table 6: Comparison of broad ethnicity derived from the NPD and PNC, n=610,951

		PNC broad ethnicity				Total
		White	Black	Asian	Other	
NPD broad ethnicity	White	508,226	2,522	1,104	948	512,800
	Row %	99.1	0.5	0.2	0.2	100.0
	Column %	97.7	4.8	3.3	22.0	83.9
	Black	846	34,211	479	146	35,682
	Row %	2.4	95.9	1.3	0.4	100.0
	Column %	0.2	65.1	1.4	3.4	5.8
	Asian	821	485	28,135	863	30,304
	Row %	2.7	1.6	92.8	2.9	100.0
	Column %	0.2	0.9	83.1	20.0	5.0
	Other	10,348	15,305	4,152	2,360	32,165
	Row %	32.2	47.6	12.9	7.3	100.0
	Column %	2.0	29.1	12.3	54.7	5.3
Total	520,241	52,523	33,870	4,317	610,951	
Row %	85.2	8.6	5.5	0.7	100.0	
Column %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	

In total, NPD and PNC broad ethnicity matched for n=572,932 (93.8%) of the individuals with ethnicity data available from both sources. This did not appear to vary substantially according to KS2 attainment (Table 7). However, the proportion of individuals whose NPD and PNC broad ethnicities did not match was higher among those whose first conviction or caution was for a serious violence offence (9.5%), as compared to those whose first conviction or caution was for any other offence type (5.8%) (Table 7).

Table 7: Extent of matching between broad ethnicity derived from the NPD and PNC, stratified by KS2 attainment and offence type

	NPD matched PNC	
	Yes	No
Level 4 achieved in key stage 2 maths and English		
No (n=291,821)	275,130 (94.3%)	16,691 (5.7%)
Yes (n=289,847)	272,027 (93.9%)	17,820 (6.2%)
Conviction or caution was for a serious violence offence		
No (n=542,896)	511,315 (94.2%)	31,581 (5.8%)
Yes (n=67,996)	61,563 (90.5%)	6,433 (9.5%)

Note: Sample sizes in this table were limited to individuals with ethnicity data available from both the NPD and PNC, and with data available on either KS2 attainment or offence type.

To further explore the nature of these mismatches, we then compared the more granular NPD major ethnic groups and PNC Phoenix ethnicity codes, stratified by offence type (Table 8). The most notable discrepancy was among individuals who were recorded as Mixed in the NPD – they were 10.6 percentage points more likely to be categorised as Black in the PNC if they were being convicted or cautioned for a serious violence offence compared to any other offence type.

Further checks indicated that this finding may not merely be an artefact of elevated serious violence offence convictions and cautions in Mixed ethnic groups incorporating Black ethnic backgrounds – those from Mixed, White and Asian ethnic backgrounds were also twice as likely to be categorised as Black in the PNC if they were being convicted or cautioned for a serious violence offence, compared to any other offence type (Table 9).

Table 8: Comparisons between NPD major ethnic groups and PNC Phoenix ethnicity codes, stratified by offence type

		PNC Phoenix ethnicity code					Middle Eastern	Total n
		White - North European	White - South European	Black	Asian	Chinese, Japanese or South East Asian		
NPD major ethnic group	White							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	96.8	1.6	1.0	0.4	*	0.2	48,661
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	98.0	1.2	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.2	464,089
	Black							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	1.4	0.4	96.9	1.0	*	0.3	8,506
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	2.1	0.5	95.6	1.5	0.1	0.4	27,166
	Asian							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	1.6	0.3	1.9	93.7	1.1	1.4	5,356
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	2.3	0.5	1.5	92.7	1.4	1.6	24,942
	Chinese							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	*	*	*	*	k	*	41
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	9.0	*	*	8.8	82.2	*	399
	Mixed							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	21.0	3.6	65.2	8.3	0.5	1.3	4,294
<i>Any other offence type</i>	29.2	4.6	54.6	9.4	0.9	1.5	21,310	
Any other ethnic group								
<i>Serious violence</i>	18.4	11.4	14.6	29.1	6.6	19.9	1,117	
<i>Any other offence type</i>	23.8	10.7	14.3	28.8	5.7	16.8	4,986	

Note: Row percentages are displayed. * = Figure suppressed to avoid potentially disclosive cell sizes. 'k' = Figure which is not 100% would appear as 100% due to cell suppression. The sample size for this table was limited to individuals with available data on offence type, NPD ethnicity, PNC ethnicity, and whose cells were not suppressed to avoid potentially disclosive cell sizes, n=610,867.

Table 9: Percentage of those in the NPD Mixed ethnic group who were categorized as different PNC Phoenix ethnicity codes, stratified by offence type

		PNC Phoenix ethnicity code					Middle Eastern	Total n
		White - North European	White - South European	Black	Asian	Chinese, Japanese or South East Asian		
NPD minor ethnic group	White and Black African							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	12.8	3.4	78.2	2.9	*	2.7	445
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	18.8	3.8	73.2	2.3	*	2.0	2,095
	White and Black Caribbean							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	15.7	2.7	79.9	1.3	*	0.5	2,210
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	20.0	3.5	74.5	1.5	0.1	0.4	9,818
	White and Asian							
	<i>Serious violence</i>	37.6	5.3	6.2	48.4	2.5	*	436
	<i>Any other offence type</i>	47.0	5.4	3.2	39.6	2.6	2.3	2,952
	Any Other Mixed Background							
<i>Serious violence</i>	28.0	4.9	55.2	8.8	0.9	2.3	1,195	
<i>Any other offence type</i>	38.6	6.0	41.6	9.7	1.6	2.6	6,445	

Note: Row percentages are displayed. * = Figure suppressed to avoid potentially disclosive cell sizes. The sample size for this table was limited to individuals with available data on offence type, NPD ethnicity, PNC ethnicity, and whose cells were not suppressed to avoid potentially disclosive cell sizes, n=24,401.

How you dealt with data limitations

For researchers using these datasets, there are several possible ways of dealing with the diverging data collection methods used by these datasets, and the resulting discrepancies in the gender/sex and ethnicity recorded for individuals:

- Where possible, researchers should consider using gender/sex and ethnicity recorded by the NPD in preference to the PNC. While data collection techniques are not perfect for either dataset, the NPD is more likely to contain gender/sex and ethnicity identified by the individuals themselves, or by their parents. Ethnicity data sourced from the NPD is also available at a more detailed level than the PNC.
- If researchers are still struggling to decide where to source gender/sex or ethnicity data from, they might consider conducting sensitivity analyses to determine whether the data source impacts on the analyses they conduct.
- Where gender/sex or ethnicity is missing from the NPD for an individual, it might be possible to supplement this information from the PNC. However, researchers should be vigilant of biases that might be introduced by using gender/sex and ethnicity data that is officer-identified.
- When reporting analyses, researchers should be transparent about the potential limitations of using gender/sex and ethnicity data from the NPD or PNC.
- Where research relates to gender/sex and ethnicity, researchers should consider conducting mixed methods research or engaging with advisory groups to ensure that conclusions and recommendations reflect the experiences and voices of individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Suggested improvements recommended to data owners

The Ministry of Justice and Department for Education could improve data documentation for the PNC and NPD by including details on how gender/sex, ethnicity, and other sociodemographic variables are collected. This would include summaries of who supplies the information, whether the field is mandatory, and whether and how data collection guidelines have changed over time. At present, the researcher has to request this level of detail via email. Unless these details are made explicit in data documentation as standard, researchers may not be aware of the limitations to their data. Additionally, researchers need to be able to report these details in their publications in order to adhere to journal reporting guidelines (Flanagin, Frey, Christiansen, & Committee, 2021).

Work is already underway to understand and improve how gender/sex and ethnicity data are collected, analysed and reported in various national datasets. For example, some recommendations for best practice have been drafted (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2021; Race Disparity Unit, 2023). The Ministry of Justice and Department for Education should continue to review how they can best capture gender/sex and ethnicity data in their datasets. In particular, efforts should be made to ensure that recorded gender/sex and ethnicity are self-identified, and that harmonised categories are used. It would also be useful for researchers to know what training

is provided to individuals responsible for completing records. Or, if there is no current training in place, then data owners might consider developing this as a way to reduce subjectivity and improve standardisation.

The Ministry of Justice is already aware of ethnicity biases pervading through the criminal justice system (Ministry of Justice, 2021). The issues identified by this report in recording ethnicity should be taken into consideration as part of ongoing efforts to tackle these issues. Future work could also investigate regional effects of these biases to identify whether there are particular areas of good or bad practice.

Additional data which would help to further develop the research

Triangulation with other datasets may give further insight on variation in gender/sex and ethnicity data. One area which could be further investigated is how gender/sex and ethnicity reported by individuals changes over time. This report compared these variables at reasonably proximate timepoints, and therefore did not seek to investigate how individuals might change how they report their identity over time. Linkages between the NPD and datasets collected during adulthood might give insight to whether and how identities evolve over the life course.

This analysis would also need to consider that the gender/sex and ethnicity that individuals report might depend on context and setting. Incorporating qualitative research into these investigations would give further insight to these issues.

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Disclaimer

This work was produced using administrative data accessed through the ONS SRS. The use of the data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or data owners in relation to the interpretation or analysis.

This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. National Statistics follow consistent statistical conventions over time and cannot be compared to Data First linked datasets.

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