

Census 2021 Briefing Approximated Social Grade

GMCA Research
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Dataset: Approximated Social Grade, Geography, Ethnicity

Datalink: The data used in this briefing can be found at [Approximated Social Grade, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk).

Definitions: Social grade groups people by their social and financial situation. The definitions for these grades are:

- AB: higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations
- C1: supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations
- C2: skilled manual occupations
- DE: semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations.

Census day: The 2021 census was held in England and Wales on 21 March 2021. Census 2021 was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic so may not show normal population and household patterns due to temporary changes in living circumstances during the pandemic for some households.

Key points

- This briefing explores the class structure of Greater Manchester. It uses 'social grade' – an approach to classifying residents based on their occupation, education level, household tenure and various other factors. It is a companion to a separate briefing on social class which employs the NS-SEC classification.
- According to the 2021 census, around 583,000 working-age residents (aged 16-64) were in the C1 social grade (i.e., those in supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations), accounting for 33.9% of all 16-64-year-olds in Greater Manchester. This was similar to – though slightly above – the national figure (33.5% of 16-64-year-olds).
- In Trafford, 35.2% of residents were in the AB group in 2021 (i.e., those in higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations). This compared to 14.0% in Oldham and 14.7% in Tameside.
- The number (and proportion) of C1s has risen considerably in Greater Manchester, from 28.7% in 2001 to 33.9% in 2021. Alongside this rise, there

has been a fall in the proportion of residents in the DE social grade (i.e., those in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations or unemployed).

- Social grade disparities exist across different ethnic groups; for example, non-white residents are more likely to be in the DE social grade, and less likely to be in the AB group.

Introduction

Britain is often said to be a class-based society. But class is famously difficult to define. Wealth, education, culture and taste all play a part. GMCA census briefings cover two aspects of class. One briefing covers the NS-SEC classification; this briefing concentrates on 'social grade'.

Social grade is a way of analysing the class structure often used for marketing purposes. It aims to understand consumer attitudes and spending habits. In addition, it is used by election pollsters to analyse voting behaviour. Primarily, social grade relies on occupational information. But other factors also play a part. These include the number of cars and vans owned, household tenure, the highest qualification level, employment status and responsibility for supervising others.

Social grade has six classes: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. Grade A (higher managerial roles, administration or professional occupations) and Grade E (non-working) are the least common. For census purposes, a combined four-class system is used (AB, C1, C2, DE). The full definitions for these grades can be found above.

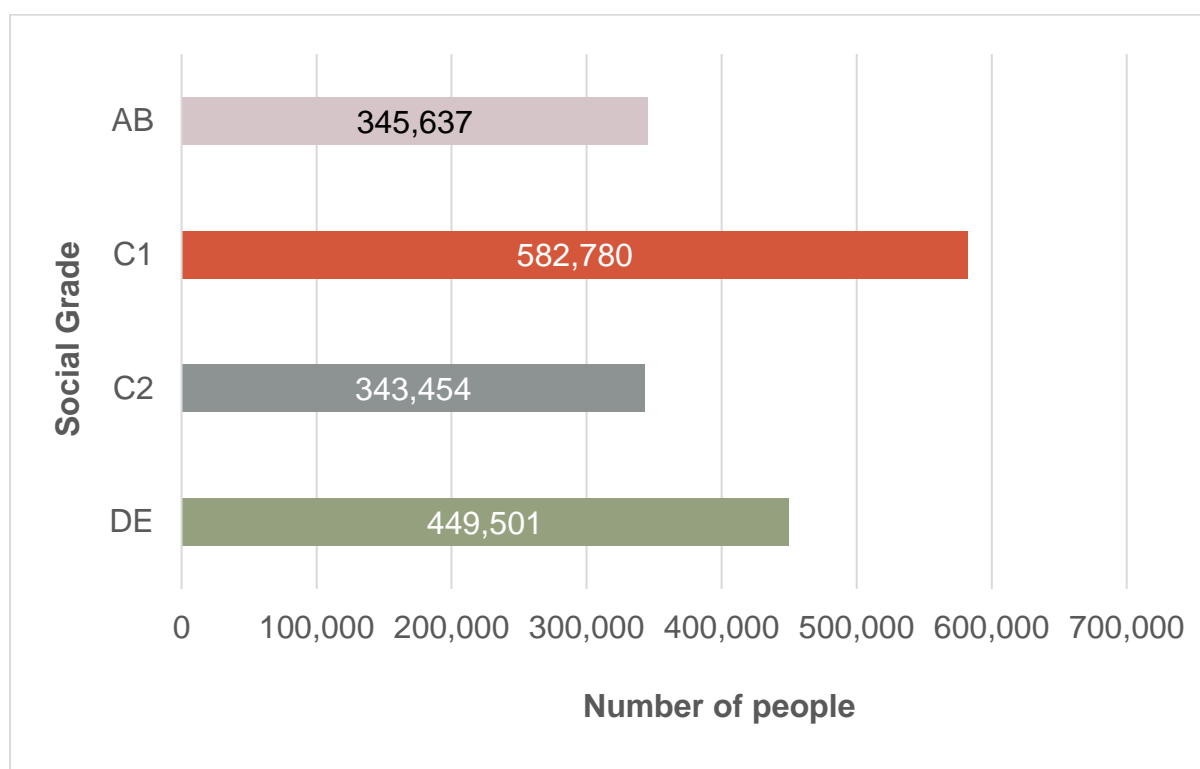
Social grade analysis provides an important insight into the lifestyles, views and day-to-day experiences of individuals and households across Greater Manchester.

It is important to note that the 2021 census was not designed to directly measure social grade, which typically requires more comprehensive survey questions than were covered by the census. To inform Approximated Social Grade (ASG) for the Census 2021, the Market Research Society (MRS) modelled social grade based on data from the 2021 National Readership Survey (NRS).

Main Findings

C1s were the most numerous of the 'grades' in Greater Manchester in 2021, accounting for nearly 583,000 working-age residents (aged 16-64), according to the census. The least common were C2s (343,454), with ABs only slightly above (345,637). DEs are the second most common at 449,501.

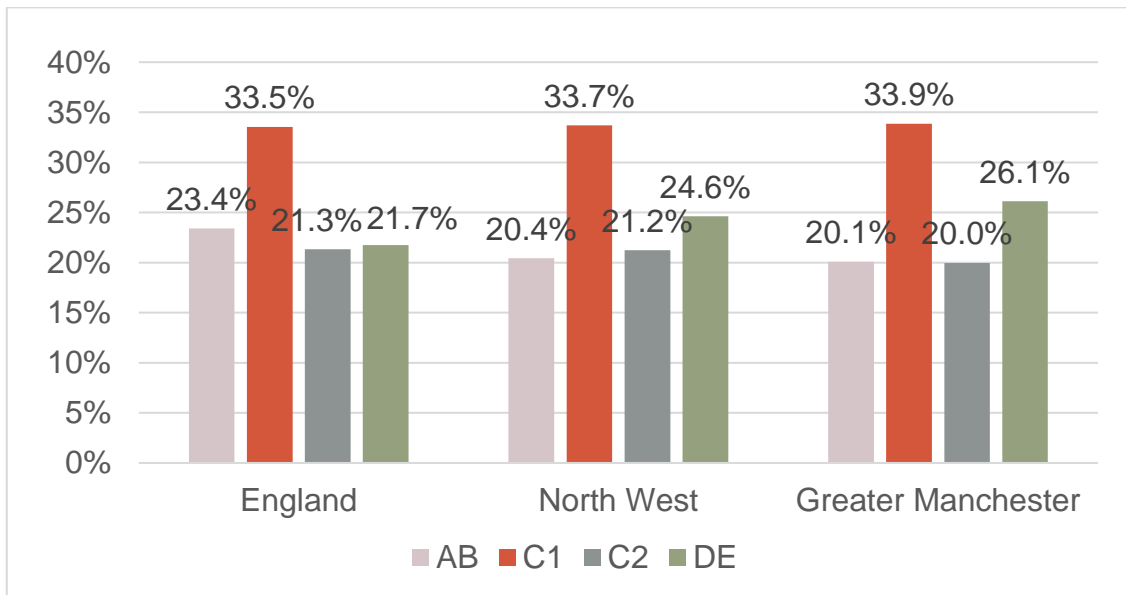
Number of working-age people (16-64) by social grade, Greater Manchester, 2021



Source: Census 2021, NOMIS ([Approximated social grade by sex by age](#)).

Compared to England and the North West, Greater Manchester has a much higher proportion of DEs with a notably lower proportion of ABs. GM was 3.1 percentage points lower than England in the proportion of ABs, and 4.4 percentage points higher in terms of proportion of DEs.

Percentage of working-age people (16-64) by social grade, Greater Manchester, North West and England, 2021



Source: Census 2021, NOMIS ([Approximated social grade by sex by age](#)).

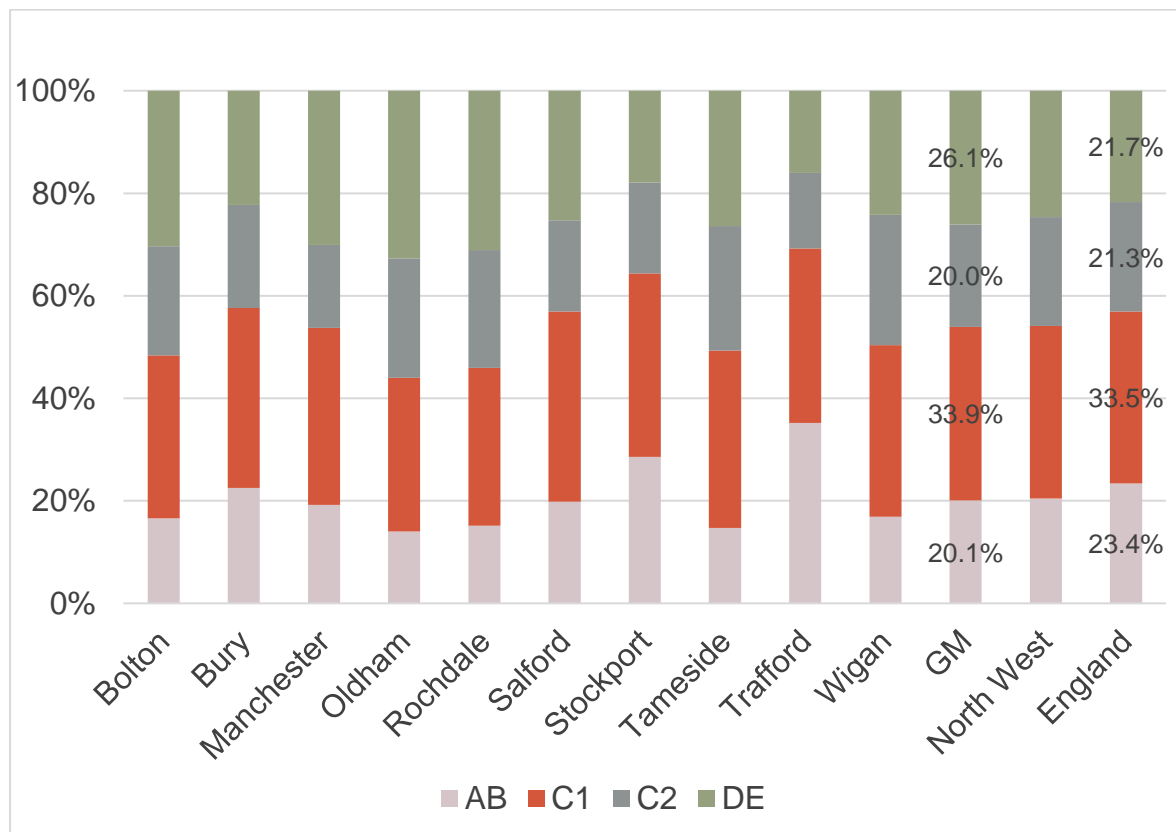
Social grade by district

The prevalence of each social grade varies quite substantially by local authority. The chart below shows the percentage of residents in each social grade across the ten districts of Greater Manchester.

In seven out of ten districts, C1s were the most common social grade. The exceptions were Oldham and Rochdale (where the highest proportion of working-age residents were DEs) and Trafford (where the highest proportion of working-age residents were ABs).

Every local authority saw at least 30% of its residents classed as C1, with Salford having the highest proportion (37.1%). The proportion of DEs was highest in Bolton, Manchester, Oldham and Rochdale. Trafford was the only district where ABs accounted for more than 30% of 16-64-year-old residents.

Percentage of residents (16-64) by social grade (% of total), by district, 2021



Source: Census 2021, NOMIS ([Approximated social grade by sex by age](#)).

Social grades over time

Percentage of residents by social grade over time, Greater Manchester (2021)



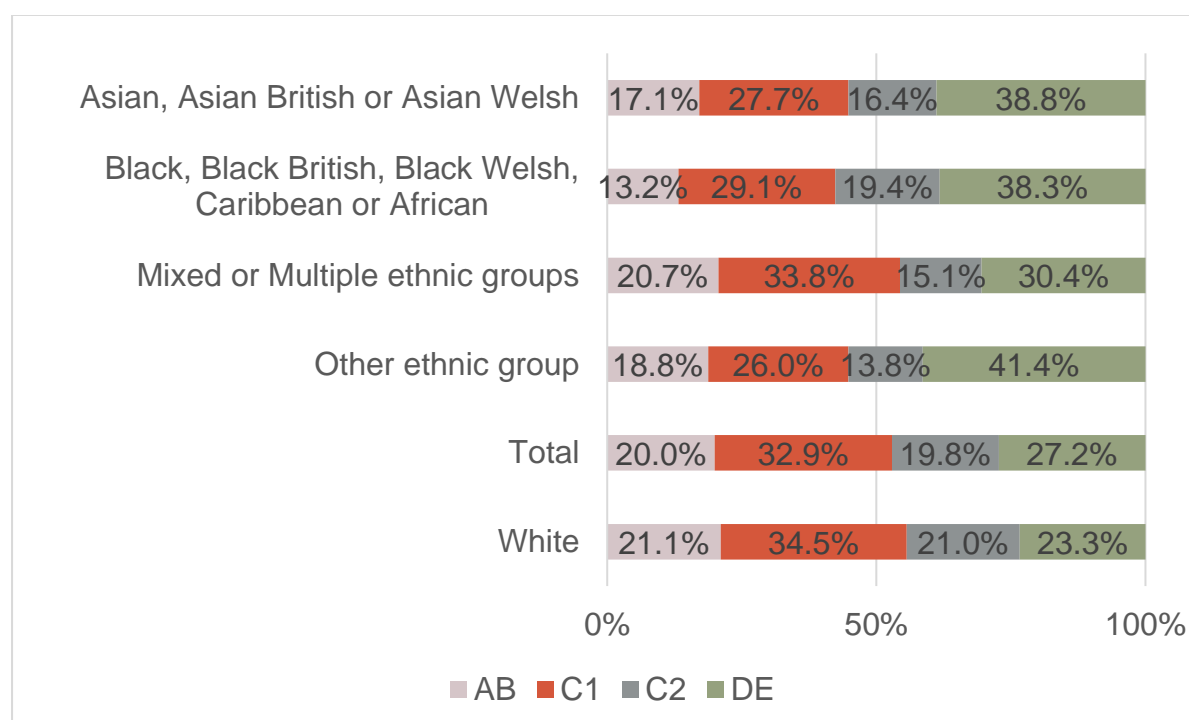
Source: Census 2021, NOMIS ([Approximated social grade by sex by age](#)).

Over the last twenty years, the rise of C1s and the fall of DEs have been the standout trends.¹ Since 2001, the proportion of Greater Manchester residents in the C1 social grade rose from 28.7% in 2001 to above the national average in 2021 (33.9% vs 33.5% nationally). The proportion of DEs has seen a consistent fall: from 31.0% in 2001, to 29.3% in 2011, and 26.1% in 2021. These trends have been mirrored at the regional (North West) and national (England) level.

Trends amongst AB and C2 social grades are less clear; the proportion of ABs rose from 2011 to 2021, but fell from 2001 to 2021. On the other hand, the proportion of C2s fell from 2011 to 2021, but rose from 2001 to 2021. As with C1s and DEs, these trends have also occurred across the North West and England.

Social grade by ethnicity

Social grade by ethnicity (% of each ethnic group's 16-64 population), 2021



Source: Census 2021, NOMIS ([Approximated social grade by ethnic group](#)).

¹ Approximated Social Grade (ASG) in 2001, 2011 and 2021 are broadly comparable. However, different methods were used to derive ASG in 2021 compared with previous years. As a result, any changes in ASG distribution may be partly due to methodology changes, and partly indicative of real change. Care should therefore be taken when using this data to assess trends over time.

Social grades vary significantly by ethnicity. For example, 38.8% of asians were in the DE social grade in 2021, compared with 23.3% of white residents in Greater Manchester. Other notable comparisons are amongst the ABs; a much larger proportion of white residents were in this grade (21.1%) compared to residents identifying as black (13.2%).

DEs are the most common social grade amongst asian, black and other ethnic groups, whilst C2s were the least common social grade amongst every ethnic group, with the exception of black residents (AB was the least common amongst this group).

Reflections

- Social class, and wider social structures, are highly complex. However, social grade allows us to get a better understanding of the broader class make-up. One notable finding is that Greater Manchester has fewer people at the 'top end' of the social spectrum and more at the 'bottom' in the DE social grade.
- There are substantial geographical dimensions to social class. The relatively high concentration of ABs in Stockport and Trafford, and of DEs in Bolton, Manchester, Oldham and Rochdale, illustrates the spatial dimensions of social class. Equally, varying social grades can be observed across different ethnic groups, with non-white residents more likely to fall into the DE group.
- There are also notable long-term trends across the 'middle' social grades, particularly from 2011 to 2021. Indeed, the substantial rise of C1s over time, and fall of C2s, is probably a reflection of broader economic trends; namely, the decline of industry and manufacturing across the city region (explaining the reduction of C2s), combined with a rise in services and sales industries, and with them, an increase of lower professional roles (explaining the rise of C1s).
- Comparisons with England and the North West show that Greater Manchester has a slightly higher proportion of C1s and significantly higher proportion of DEs. On the one hand, this could speak to a slightly younger workforce that tends to be in lower professional occupations. On the other hand, the high concentration of DEs in GM speaks to the prevalence of those at the 'bottom' end of the labour market – whether in work or unemployed.