

Census 2021 Briefing

Religious identity

GMCA Research

June 2023

Dataset: Religion

Datalink: the dataset used for this briefing can be accessed [here](#).

Definition: A voluntary question on the census asks respondents for their religious faith. 'Religion' refers to how residents respond to this question.

Census day: The 2021 census was held in England and Wales on 21 March 2021. It 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.

Key points

- Slightly under half of Greater Manchester residents described themselves as Christian according to the 2021 census (47.8% compared with 46.3% in England). Wigan was the only district within Greater Manchester where a majority of residents described themselves as Christian (62.8%).
- However, the city region is arguably 'more religious' than most of England: the proportion of residents who said they had 'no religion' was lower and the proportion who described themselves as Christian, Muslim or Jewish was higher. (However, the proportion who said they were Hindu was lower than in England).
- There have been relatively rapid changes in the religious affiliations of residents in the decade since the previous census in 2011. The largest change was for those residents who said they had 'no religion' (up by 64% in Greater Manchester in the decade between censuses).
- There was a decline of 19% among residents who said they were Christian between the census years of 2011 and 2021. Residents who said they were Muslim increased by 61%; those who said they were Jewish rose by 12%; and Hindus by 19%.

Findings

The 2021 census offered nine possible responses to a question on religious faith – ‘no religion’, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, ‘other religion’ and ‘not answered’. The religion question was voluntary. Some 94% of census respondents answered it.

In Greater Manchester – as elsewhere in England and Wales – Christianity has become a minority religion. Some 47.8% of residents said that they were Christian (46.3% in England). The next most popular responses were ‘no religion’ (31.8%, compared with 36.7% in England) and Muslim (12.1%; 6.7% in England). Jewish people accounted for 1.2% of residents in Greater Manchester and Hindus for 1.0% (compared with 0.5% and 1.8% respectively for England). Other faith groups accounted for less than 1% of residents.

There were large differences between the districts of Greater Manchester in the responses of residents. For example, in Wigan, 62.8% identified as Christian. Meanwhile, in Oldham slightly less than a quarter of residents (24.4%) said they were Muslims. Jewish people accounted for 5.5% of Bury residents.

Stockport was the only district of Greater Manchester where the proportion of residents who said they had ‘no religion’ (39.6%) was higher than the English average. In all other districts the ‘no religion’ response was lower.

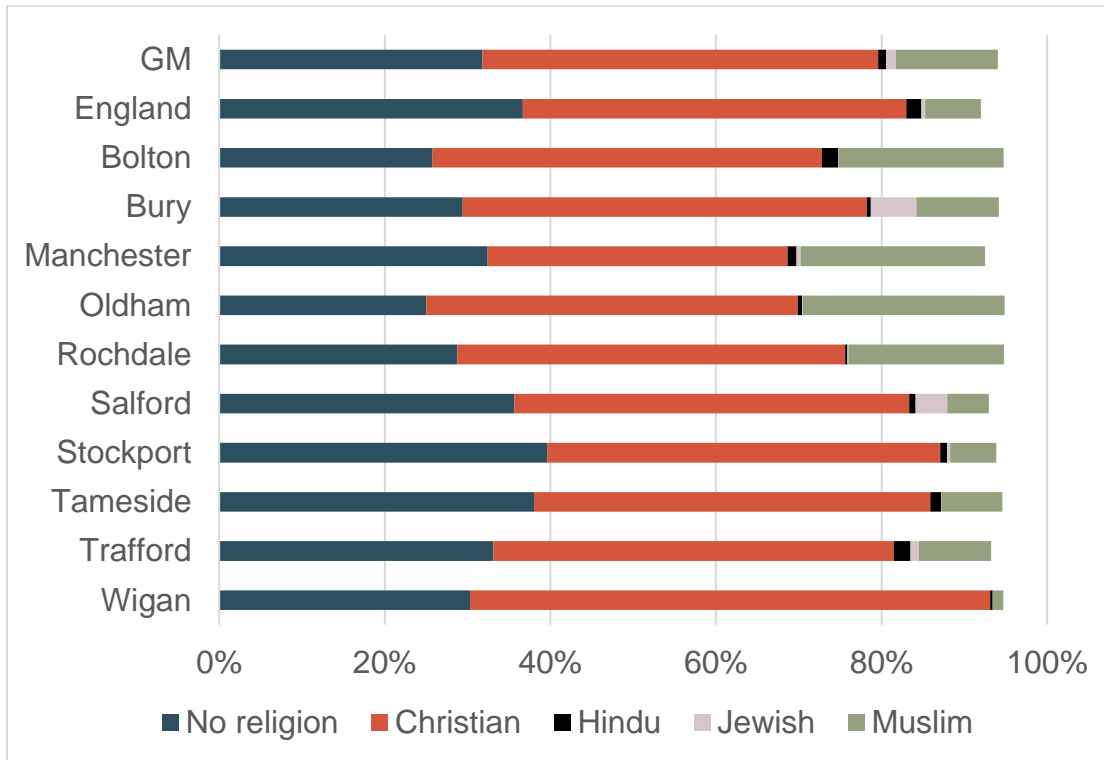
Overall, ‘people of faith’ – that is, all those who affiliated with one of the religious responses on the census - accounted for 63% of all residents, or just over 1.8 million people. Those with ‘no religion’ accounted for 32% (915,590 people). (The remainder declined to answer). This compares with 39% in England who said they had no religion.

Among faith groups with smaller numbers of adherents, there were 9,530 Buddhists in Greater Manchester, 7,350 Sikhs and 10,800 who chose ‘other religion’ for their response, according to the 2021 census.

Religious identity differs significantly by age. The most popular response among young people aged between 16 and 24 to the religion question was ‘no religion’ (40.6% in Greater Manchester; 47.5% in England). However, by far the most

common response among people aged between 65 and 74 was Christian (71.9% in Greater Manchester; 68.4% in England).

Religious identities of residents, 2021



Source: ONS, Nomis - 2021 Census

Note: religions accounting for less than 1% of responses have been removed from the chart for visual clarity. The 'not answered' category has also been removed. GM refers to Greater Manchester.

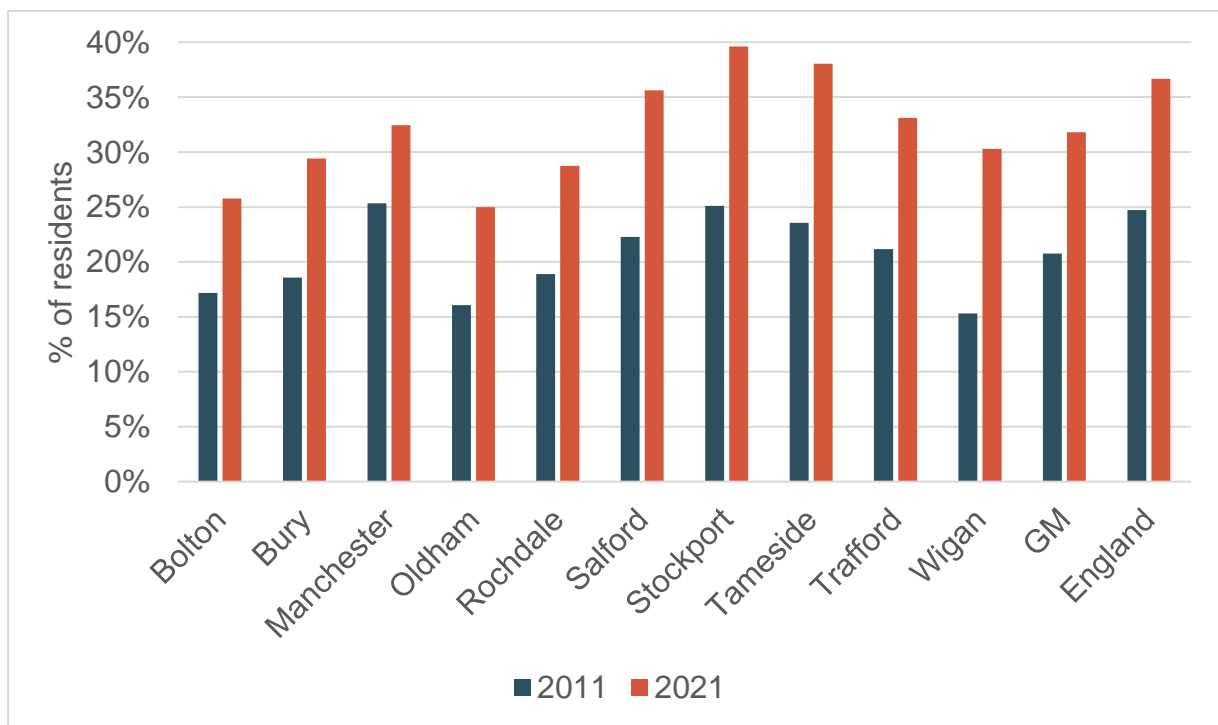
Change

Patterns of religious adherence have changed significantly in the city region since the previous census of 2011. The largest single change (in numerical terms) is the growth of residents who say they have 'no religion'. This response increased from 557,130 Greater Manchester residents in 2011 up to 915,590 (an increase of 64%).

Other significant differences between 2011 and 2021 included:

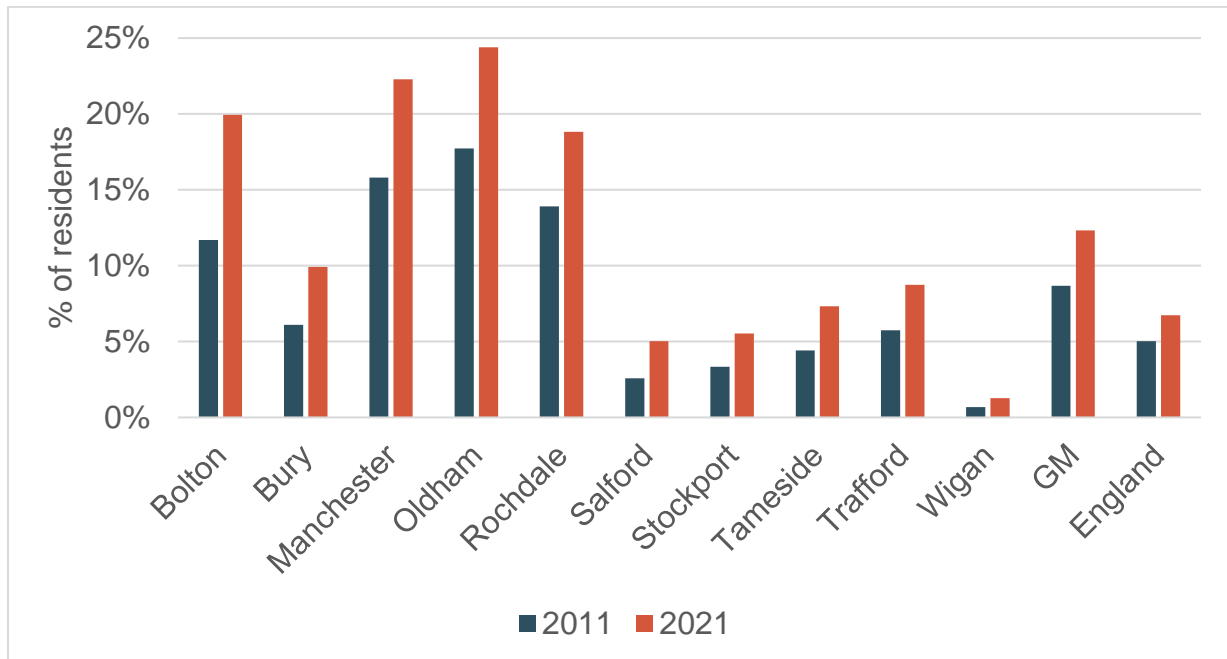
- A decline in the number of residents who said they were Christian. This response declined by -19% in Greater Manchester between census years (-17% in England). Among young people aged between 16 and 24 there was a much larger decline of 37.7% in those who described themselves as Christian in Greater Manchester.
- An increase in the population who said they were Muslim. Those who answered 'Muslim' increased from 232,790 residents in 2011 to 373,875 in 2021 (an increase of 61% compared with a 43% increase in England).

Residents who said they had 'no religion', 2011-2021



Source: Census, 2011, 2021; GM refers to Greater Manchester

Residents who described themselves as Muslim, 2011-2021



Source: Census, 2011, 2021

Reflections

Religious identity is not reported on as frequently as topics such as ethnicity or disability. However, it may well be important to how residents see themselves.

In common with many other English urban spaces Greater Manchester is religiously diverse, linking to its ethnic and cultural mix. Although ‘Christian’ remained the most popular response when residents were asked for their religious identity in 2021, a minority of residents described themselves as Christian in the census.

Changes in religious adherence in British society are sometimes described as a process of ‘secularisation’. There are trends that support this idea. For instance, a large increase among those who said they had ‘no religion’ between 2011 and 2021.

However, in some ways ‘secularisation’ is a poor description. Several religious groupings of residents increased sharply. Furthermore, when ‘people of faith’ are combined, over two thirds of residents (66.3%) who answered the religion question on the 2021 census (as opposed to all residents) said they identified with a religious faith in Greater Manchester (compared with 61% in England).