

How Many People Groups Are There?

How many People Groups are there in the world?

Some say 24,000. Others say 16,000. Some suggest 13,000. Still others say 11,000. Which numbers are correct? Could they all be correct? The many different answers to this question often cause confusion. Different sources quote significantly different numbers. If we are commanded to make disciples of all people groups, just how many are there? But before trying to answer that, an example might help illustrate why the confusion exists. Suppose someone innocently asked ... What is the largest country? What is the answer? It all depends on what is meant by "largest." The answer is Russia if largest refers to geographic land area. The answer is China if largest refers to population. The answer is the United States if largest means financially. All are different, yet are correct answers to the same simple question. The underlying issue is definitions ... what is meant by "largest?" So the core question is what is meant by the term "people group?"

What is a People Group?

The Lausanne 1982 people group definition says:

"For evangelization purposes, a people group is the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance".

There are two barriers cited, (1) understanding, and (2) acceptance. The barrier of understanding suggests that language always is important when defining a people group. If for a particular situation the understanding barrier is more important than the acceptance barrier then defining people group by language, perhaps exclusively by language, is appropriate. And this seems to be the case in most cultures and situations.

In other situations the acceptance barrier may be as high, or perhaps higher, than the understanding barrier. The reasons for lack of acceptance may include caste, religious tradition, location, common histories and traditions, and other subtle cultural distinctives. In these situations the barrier of acceptance should be considered on an equal footing with the barrier of understanding, and sometimes acceptance is a higher barrier than is the barrier of understanding.

Understanding and Acceptance

Ministry Objective	Situations where understandability is the highest barrier	Situations where acceptance is the highest barrier
Language-based outreaches such as Bible translations, audio and video recordings, radio, TV, Internet, mass evangelism campaigns.	(I) Focus on linguistic groups, not ignoring local ethnic issues	(II) Focus on linguistic groups, not ignoring local ethnic issues
Planting, establishing and growing the Church within its local culture	(III) Focus on linguistic groups, not ignoring local ethnic issues	(IV) Focus on ethnic groups, not ignoring language

1982 peoples definition began a process of identifying the unreached peoples of the world that is still not complete. Various ways of defining people groups has lead to several types of peoples lists and sometimes confusing counts of peoples.

Ethno-linguistic Peoples Lists

Because of the remarkable language research compiled in the last 100 years, the first people group lists have generally been ethno-linguistic, meaning that a people generally was defined by language and/or dialect. Because of language research and the somewhat definable nature of language, ethno-linguistic peoples lists generally have uniform definitions across all countries and tend to be an "apples-to-apples" comparison. Ethno-linguistic peoples lists have great usefulness, particularly for language-oriented outreach and ministries.

Ethnic Peoples Lists

While language is a key barrier to understanding, in parts of the world factors other than language form barriers of acceptance across which the Gospel will not naturally flow. For church planting purposes, it is helpful to allow factors other than language to define the boundaries of a people group. An ethnic peoples list, in addition to language, allows distinctives such as religion, caste and culture to define a people group.

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Varying the Definition of a People Varies the Resulting Lists

Peoples Defined By	Resulting List	Examples	Totals
Language	Linguistic peoples (by country)	▪ Ethnologue	~10,900
Language / Dialect Ethnicity	Ethno-linguistic peoples (by country)	▪ PeopleGroups.org / CPPI ▪ World Christian Encyclopedia ▪ Operation World peoples lists	~11,500 ~ 13,000
Language / Dialect Ethnicity Religion Caste Culture	Ethnic peoples (by country)	▪ Joshua Project / Frontier Ventures	~ 16,400
Language / Dialect Ethnicity Religion Caste Culture Education Ideology Politics Historical enmity Customs Behavior	Unimax peoples (by country)	▪ Original USCWM / Ralph Winter estimates	~ 24,000

In parts of the world where peoples are defined by their language an ethnic peoples list and an ethno-linguistic peoples list are virtually the same. However in places like South Asia, parts of North Africa and China, where religion, caste and culture are more determinative than language in defining a people group, an ethnic peoples list and an ethno-linguistic list can be quite different. For example, in India there are approximately 450 ethno-linguistic people / language groups but over 2,100 ethnic people groups when caste, religion and cultural factors are considered.

Does moving to Ethnic Peoples list get messy?

Yes. Ethno-linguistic peoples lists tend to have uniform definitions and global standards and generally yield "apples-to-apples" results. However, an ethnic (cultural-ethno-linguistic) peoples list allowing language, religion, caste and/or cultural distinctives to define a people group can occasionally introduce a bit of "apples-to-oranges" comparison. National and local people group researchers in one area of the world may use slightly different definitions based on their perception of onsite realities compared to another area of the world. Each may differently evaluate the barriers

of acceptance. Even with these limitations, the hope is that an ethnic peoples list can help continue to define the church planting task of the Great Commission.

Is the Joshua Project list a Unimax Peoples list?

No, not fully. Unimax peoples may involve distinctives such as education, political and ideological convictions, historical enmity between clans or tribes, customs and behaviors, etc. that are not considered in the current Joshua Project peoples list. In certain parts of the world such as South Asia, where extensive caste research has been done, a much clearer church planting picture is emerging. In these areas an ethnic peoples list is moving closer to a unimax peoples listing. In other parts of the world, there will be barriers of acceptance that will only be determined once workers are on-site. Therefore, all lists of peoples will be estimates until the task is completed. While the Joshua Project list offers a certain level of understanding regarding people group church-planting needs, it is not a complete unimax peoples list. The original U.S. Center for World Mission / Ralph Winter estimates were approximately 24,000 total unimax peoples.

*"This gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations and then the end will come." **Matt 24:14***

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Summary of People Group Counts

Resulting List	Total Peoples	Counting Method	Least-Reached
Peoplegroups.org / CPPI	11,500	Peoples-by-Country	~ 6,800
Joshua Project	16,400	Peoples-by-Country	~ 6,600
Joshua Project	9,800	Peoples without considering Country boundaries	~ 4,000
Unimax peoples	24,000	Mixed	~ 8,000

What if Country Boundaries are Ignored?

All the above models consider country boundaries when defining people groups. For example, if the Tatar are in 21 Central Asian countries they are counted 21 times. Some hold that in the purest sense people groups should be counted without reference to political boundaries. The suggestion is that modern country boundaries did not exist when the command of Matthew 28:19 "to make disciples of all the ethne" was given. Others suggest that in many cases political boundaries do not distinguish peoples. The "pure peoples" model counts the Tatar living in 21 Central Asian countries as one people group, not 21. By following standard people group coding, the Joshua Project list allows country boundaries to be counted or ignored as desired. The current Joshua Project count for peoples-by-country is approximately 16,400 and the count for pure peoples is about 9,800.

Model Strengths and Weaknesses

The various models have different strengths and serve different purposes. An ethno-linguistic peoples list has a somewhat quantifiable criterion namely language, and serves as a helpful target for language oriented ministries such as radio broadcasting, Jesus Film production Bible translation, etc. An ethnic peoples list considers non-language distinctives which create significant barriers of acceptance and presents a church planting target that begins to quantify some of these acceptance barriers. An estimated model serves as a reminder of the yet to be quantified, ultimate task.

Other Factors in People Group Counts

When comparing lists of peoples care should be taken to understand all factors. For example, some lists have population cutoff points. The original Joshua Project list of approximately 1,600 peoples only considered people

groups greater than or equal to 10,000 in a given country. The India Missions Association (IMA) list for India cuts off the population at 10,000, yielding about 950 groups. Another example is the K.S. Singh list for India peoples which often breaks people groups by state boundaries, yielding a total of about 4,700 groups for India. Understanding these kinds of factors helps explain the very different counts that result.

So What is the Answer?

So after all that, what is the answer to the simple question of how many people groups are there? It depends, if referring to ethno-linguistic peoples about 13,000 and if referring to unimax peoples (the church planting perspective) about 24,000, of which about 16,300 are listed here as 'ethnic' (cultural-ethno-linguistic) peoples'. Or if referring to ethnic (cultural-ethno-linguistic) peoples without reference to country boundaries about 9,800. All are right answers depending on the perspective.

May the Lord continue to grant wisdom and discernment to all the efforts seeking to help clarify the unfinished task of the Great Commission.

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