PEOPLE GROUPS: HOW MANY UNREACHED?

■ For many years evangelicals have struggled to give an accurate answer to the question posed above. Here an honest and compelling attempt is made to bring together many streams of research. The author untangles the individuals strands and gives us a broadbased answer to the difficult question he himself poses.

By Patrick Johnstone

This vexed issue has provoked much discussion among missions researchers, and complaints from others: "Why can't you researchers get your act together?'!

Hopefully we are now in a better position to provide some answers and a more unified picture as well as explain the confusion. We need such answers to know who the unreached are and to reach them as quickly and effectively as possible.

The catalyst was the July 1989 Lausanne II Congress in Manila. Two significant developments helped towards this:

1. The pre-Congress Statistics Task Force chaired by David Barrett [1] provided a plethora of statistics relating to World Evangelization; and more specifically on people groups, reachedness and evangelization.

2. Wide representation at the Unreached Peoples Track of the Congress of key contributors to the discussion on unreached peoples—such as Ralph Winter, John Robb, Bob Waymire, Niyi Gbade, Patrick Johnstone and many others. (The absence of David Barrett was a great loss.)

Enlightening papers and earnest breakfast conferences brought us to a delightful oneness in formulating a composite answer. The conclusions are shared in this article. I first prepared a draft and circulated this to about 22 people interested in the subject. I have had excellent responses from most of these recipients. I have sought to include all their perspectives, and trust that I have been fair to them. However the conclusions are mine. I therefore

submit this to my readers in the hope and expectation that this will further the discussion to the point where action results!

The Historical Background to the Problem

During the '70s, six major sources for information on peoples were being developed. The result was the publication of much useful material in the '80s.

1. The painstakingly (and often painfully) developed Unreached Peoples Database of *MARC-World Vision*. The results were published in a series of seven *Unreached People Annuals* between 1974 and 1987. [2] Both socio-economic and ethnolinguistic people groups were listed. The total number so covered was not considered as important as making known the concept of people groups. However 3,800 people groups were reported as being unreached.

2. The *Ethnologue* of SIL edited by Barbara Grimes [3] with 11 editions between 1951 and 1988. In the 1984 edition 5445 living languages and their Bible translation status were recorded. Further research raised this figure to 6170; largely through careful analysis of inter-dialect intelligibility, the spread of bilingualism and hindering inter-language attitudes. The series is continuing.

3. The language and dialect lists of *Gospel Recordings International* had attained a total of 12,398 by 1985 (this being the total number of dialects listed in the *Ethnologue*). By that time gospel messages had been prepared in 4300 of these. [4]

4. David Barrett's research and

writings in Kenya and later in USA led to the publication of many surveys and books, culminating in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982). [5] This research provided the basic data for the development of the *Peoples Database* which has yet to be published. The total number of peoples listed is 11,500. This listing is ethnolinguistic peoples within countries, or, to coin another phrase, 'ethnopolitico- linguistic peoples'. Work has continued on analysing the extent of reachedness of each of these peoples.

5. *Operation World* [6] in its various editions between 1974 and 1986 became a widely disseminated and popularised analysis of the unreached peoples of the world. In the 1986 edition the total number of peoples counted was 12,017 of which 3000 were estimated to be "unreached" (much depending on cut-off points and definitions!).

6. The U.S. Center for World Mission under Ralph Winter's leadership has concentrated resources, information and expertise at the Center to stimulate churches and agencies to vision and strategies for reaching unreached peoples. Winter's energetic ministry and writings have done much to focus the Christian world on hidden or unreached peoples. [7] One resident agency, Global Mapping International under Bob Waymire's leadership, has been developing a massive database on global evangelization as well as mapping the needs of the world. One product of their labours is the *Peoples File Index*

(1986) edited by Allan Starling. This synthesises the findings of the *Ethnologue, Gospel Recording Lists* and MARC's *Unreached Peoples Annuals* mentioned above. This was the first reasonably comprehensive published listing of the world's peoples.

It was Ralph Winter's challenge at the 1974 Congress in Lausanne which electrified many to the concept of hidden (or unreached) peoples.[8] Winter's famous figure of 16,750 has been quoted again and again. It has motivated many Christians, churches and agencies to do something for the forgotten peoples with no exposure to the gospel. Unfortunately because the definitions of people, people group, unreached and hidden were not clear and consistent, considerable confusion resulted.

There were two problems with the 16,750 figure:

1. *There was no list of these peoples.* Winter could only point to the above sources as his justification. This is not to say that this figure was wrong, but the research and analysis needed to verify it was and is beyond our ability to provide. This figure is a global estimate, a macro-extrapolation, and also a wonderful mobilizing concept. Thousands were motivated and churches and agencies around the world re-evaluated their priorities to give greater emphasis to unreached peoples. However frustration grew without the check-list of peoples—how could they become targeted and reached?

2. *There was no unifying definition for a "people" or "people group".* Every researcher used a definition which fitted the type of ministry envisaged; a perfectly valid approach. Just to give two examples:

   a) *Church planting.* Church planting agencies are vitally interested in *maximum "gatherability"*, so ethnolinguistic barriers becomes the predominant reality. Local churches are often more concerned with *maximum coverage* for evangelizing their area, so analysing all the social, occupational and cultural segments of their local populations becomes the vital element. Differentiating between ethnolin-

guistic and sociological people groups is strategically fundamental to the former, but not essential to the latter. This two-pronged approach is essential as Schreck and Barrett have clearly shown [9].

   b) *Language use.* The conflict in interests is well shown by differing specialized mission agencies. In general terms radio ministries are more concerned with *maximum audiences*, Bible translation agencies with *maximum intelligibility* of the written word, and audio cassette agencies with maximum *acceptability* of the spoken word. Their language totals differ widely for perfectly sound reasons!

   Radio ministries must concentrate on larger languages— few radio programmes are made for any language with under one million speakers. Bible translators must decide if a language has the distinctiveness, number of potential readers, and viability to warrant the immense effort required. Audio cassette agencies can more easily target all the dialects and all the minority languages because the overall investment of effort and personnel is not so great. Their total will naturally be the highest.

In their various ways, each perspective has contributed uniquely to the present interest and concern for making disciples of every biblical "ethnos" or people/people group. Can we reconcile all of these definitions and numbers? I believe we can. We owe it to the burgeoning world missionary movement to do so. Here is an attempt!

My aim is twofold:

1. To indicate numbers of people/ people groups and their categories globally.

2. To indicate the extent of reachedness of these people/people groups.

I will need to give definitions along the way—and apologise for the fact that my terminology may differ a little from that used by fellow researchers simply because I cannot otherwise reconcile the apparently irreconcilable. However I submit the ones included here as part of the attempt to attain a degree of

consensus.

How many people groups are there?

An illustration from atomic physics.

Nearly 200 years ago a British scientist named Dalton published his Atomic Theory. It was a major scientific advance! In this theory all atoms of the same element were the same, and indivisible. The theory was helpful but inadequate! Only years later did scientists find out that they were not the same (isotopes) and were divisible (nublear bombs). In those early days no one could conceive the complexity of the structure of an atom. The electron and proton were discovered, and then the neutron. But as atoms were bombarded with various forms of radiation, dozens of other sub-atomic particles such as quarks, muons, positrons, pions, mesons, etc. were discovered. It would appear that the harder you look the more "bits" you find!

This is like people groups. Their numbers depend on how hard you look.

We therefore have to make helpful criteria and definitions which will enable us to analyse the world's people groups at whatever level is required for most effective communication or for the type of ministry envisaged. We should therefore take care to specify our criteria and ministry with every listing of unreached people groups. Perhaps we could replace 'unreached' with more narrowly descriptive terms such as 'Bibleless' or 'unrecorded' or 'unchurched' or 'undiscipled'.

An explanation of people groups

First of all, what is a people group? This term has become widely used, but we often imply different things, or change the definition. Here are several variations of the most accepted definition evolved since the original form was proposed in March 1982. [10]

   "*A people group*" is a (significantly large)* sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest

of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread [*as a* {viable, indigenous}@ *church planting movement*]# without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."

NOTE variations:

\# This important phrase used at the 1982 Chicago meeting sponsored by the LCWE defined people groups in church planting movement concepts. Later in the year this phrase was omitted by the LCWE Strategy Working Group so as to include sociological people groups within the concept.

@ Ralph Winter has proposed this sharpened definition.

* Barbara Grimes has suggested that this phrase is both superfluous and dangerous—because the real needs of very small language groups which may otherwise be overlooked.

Within the varieties of this definition lay two important and fundamental perspectives—the global involving non-overlapping ethnolinguistic *peoples* and the particular involving overlapping *people groups* ably described by Barrett and Schreck. The proposal was to differentiate between peoples (ethnolinguistic) and people groups (more sociological).

In practice, many of us have begun to use the two terms almost interchangably. Can we look for a better umbrella term which includes all people groups? The suggestions I have received are "people groups", "ethnolevels" and "human societies". I favour using "people group"—it is a specialist term, and implies an almost exclusively missiological use. "People group thinking" has become part of our understanding of the Great Commission. [11]

However there are various categories which *could* be well covered by the term. For these categories I lean heavily on the terms and figures produced by the Statistics Task Force chaired by David Barrett for the 1989 Lausanne Congress in Manila. [12] I have selected those illustrated in Table 1.

Column 3 (nations, peoples, minipeoples and sociopeoples) shows that each successive category is an elaboration of the preceding one. The fourth of these can only be illustrated in three di-

Table 1. Categories to consider in World Evangelization				
LCWE Statistics Task Force		People group application here	Availability of name lists	Sources of lists
Name	Number	Name		
Countries [13]	250	Nations	Complete	UN, Secular sources
Macropeoples [14]	432	-	Complete	WCL (1)
Ethnolinguistic peoples [15]	11,500	Peoples	Almost	Barrett, GMI, OW, (WBT)
Minipeoples [16]	60,000(?)	Minipeoples	Only an estimate	[GRI]
Micropeoples [17]	250,000(?)	-	Rough estimate	MARC,
Sociopeoples [18]	1,600,000+(?)	Sociopeoples	e.g.s., open-ended	MARC,

mensions—and even this is an oversimplification.

Diagram 1. (See diagram on page 38)

1. *Nations* are more often the concern of denominations, national evangelistic and support agencies such as Bible societies, evangelical fellowships, etc. But we cannot revert to subsuming this category under our umbrella term "people group".

2. *Peoples* are the chief concern of cross-cultural church planting agencies and such supportive ministries as Bible translation, radio, etc., congregations depending on the situation.

3. *Minipeoples* can be either the major interest of cross-cultural agencies or local congregations depending on the situation. Supportive agencies developing audio-cassettes are interested in dialect differences of such minipeoples. Many minipeoples may prove to fall more into category two in that cross-cultural church planting by outsiders may be required.

4. *Sociopeoples* are the major concern of local churches and specialized teams or agencies e.g. for prisoners, drug addicts, taxidrivers, businessmen, etc.

Note that the first two categories in the table above (nations and macropeoples) cannot fit our definition for people groups, but the remaining four can. Can we not use the umbrella term *people group* to cover these, and to use a prefix to further define them—as in column one in the table above? In this way we can all use the term *people groups*

prefixed by the term *ethnolinguistic*, *mini-* or *socio-*. Some respondents to my original draft objected to the above categorizations but only by so doing will we include the terminology and figures by us all!

What is a Reached or an Unreached People Group?
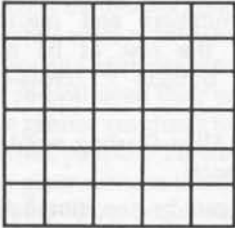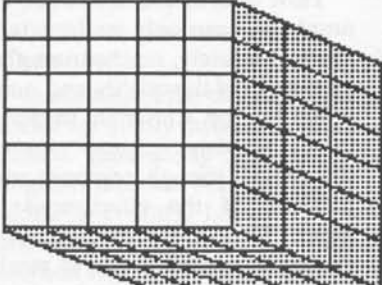
We need to go back to definitions again.

Unreached - a people or people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize* the rest of its members without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.

* note: Allan Starling would prefer the word 'reach'.

Yet we can be too simplistic. An unreached people group does not suddenly become reached by some magic statistic being attained! We are dealing rather with shades of grey rather than black or white.

How does one then *measure* reachedness? This can only be done indirectly. More accurately, reachedness should be a measure of the quality and quantity of input by the Christian *reachers* rather than response from among the unreached, though response may be a measure of the effectiveness of the input. The commonly used, though inadequate, quantification of reachedness is by response only, i.e. by the number of professing Christians. The original Chicago 1982 definition of people group (see above) is more demanding—for professing Christians is no guarantee that there is a viable, indigenous church

People Groups - how many?

Category	World Totals
Nations	
Political	250
Peoples	
Language	11,500
Tribe	
Culture	
Mini-peoples	
Dialect	60,000 (?)
Caste	
Class	
Socio-Peoples	
Social	1,600,000 (?)
Occupational	
Residential	

that there is a viable, indigenous church planting movement, but at this stage we do not have adequate information globally to give such an assessment.

Various efforts have been made to measure evangelization and unreachedness:

1. David Barrett with his Percentage Evangelized scales—widely used in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

2. Barrett and Johnstone with the three codings of: measuring extent of response, intermingling with alien Christians, and the total missionary input. This is incorporated into the Peoples Database being developed at the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptists in Richmond, Virginia USA and is the basis used for figures below.

How many UNREACHED People Groups are there?

Of our four categories of people groups used here only one can be usefully measured—the 11,500 *peoples* within a nation. The number of minipeoples and sociopeoples is so imprecise and subject to educated guesswork that any number given for "unreached" is only indicative. So in this article I concentrate on the one category where we have reasonable data and a nearly complete list—that of ethnolinguistic peoples; though much confirmatory grassroots research work is needed to refine this.

Table 2 (above right) gives a breakdown of the four categories. Here I have *only* used the criterion of *response* i.e. how many would call themselves Christian, and for the 10,235 peoples with populations in excess of 100. This is not to say that there are no valid and distinct ethnolinguistic people groups below this figure, but our data is not extensive enough for some of these smaller peoples to give consistent results. I must also stress that for the sake of consistency these figures include all ecclesiological streams of Christians—not just Protestants or Evangelicals.

So far I have only used the criterion of response for measuring reachedness. This is inadequate. Using the coding developed for the Barrett Peoples Database, greater refinements are possible. Three codes are used on a scale 0-10 for:

Table 2. Percent Christian in Various People Groups

Category	Christians less than			Totals	
	0.1%	1%	5%	Used here+	Absolute
Nation	20	37	49	208	250
People	1111	1739	2540	10,235	11,500
Minipeople		?12,000*			?60,000
Sociopeople		?300,000[19]			? 1,600,000

* This is used by Ralph Winter as a modification of his 16,750 unreached peoples figure. In his writings he had majored on minipeoples statistics—hence the apparent confusion with Barrett, Johnstone and Waymire who major on ethnolinguistic peoples.

1. Discipling of the peoples of the world.
2. The presence of "alien" disciples from other cultures living among them.
3. The input of cross-cultural missionaries whether residential or non-residential.

These codings enable us to assess the combined effect of exposure as well as response to the gospel. I produced preliminary findings from these codes for my presentation in the Unreached Peoples Track at the Lausanne Congress in Manila.

Here I only give a few figures to indicate the approximate situation. Table 3 (below right) shows all people where there are few Christians and no resident missionary team witnessing to them according to information now available to us. I stress that revision and adjustment will be necessary. However the final picture is unlikely to be substantially different from these figures.

The conclusions are interesting:

1. The number of unreached will vary greatly according to both definitions and parameters chosen. So these are to be seen as approximate. Note that the above does not include the vital component of availability of the Scriptures in the indigenous language.

It is interesting to count the figures again, but allowing for the availability of a New Testament in the indigenous language as in Table 4 on the next page.

Note how this show how many peoples have begun to respond to the Gospel, but still have no Scriptures in their tongue.

2. The total number of truly unreached peoples is far less than most had realized. This means that cooperation is essential if we are to avoid duplications and competition in reaching them. This is not to minimize or simplify the enormity of the task ahead, but his fact makes the task achievable.

3. There are few peoples of over 10,000 population which are not being targeted for outreach by some Great Commission Christians—hence again

Table 3. Percent Christians within Various Population Sizes

	People without resident missionary witness teams and Christians less than		
Population more than	0.1%	1%	5%
50	1119	1747	2555
1000	1068	1629	2354
10,000	732	1108	1574
100,000	307	478	627

Table 4. Percent Christian in Relation to Scripture and Population.

Peoples within nation Population more than	Peoples <5% Christian without NT	All peoples without NT	All peoples
50	1443	5742	10412
1000	1364	4455	8574
10,000	873	2165	4909
100,000	304	571	1727

Commission Christians—hence again the need to cooperate and not compete.

4. The growing momentum for global cooperation in research, and sharing information makes it imperative that we produce accurately researched lists and totals. The "Adopt-A-People" movement will flounder in confusion without it. Statistics may be a Western weakness, but I believe it is a global need if we are to get the job done.

5. The world by AD 2000? If it means obtaining a gospel bridgehead in every one of these peoples—possibly. If it means seeing viable, nationally led churches with the Scriptures in their own tongue, and reaching out to the extremities of their own group— unlikely. The Lord knows His own criteria, and He may overturn all our gropings! Yet what a wonderful goal is before us!

May this article hasten the day when God sees the task is achieved! ■

Endnotes

(1) The Lausanne Statistics Task Force was convened at a late stage before the Lausanne Congress in Manila. Much of the work was done by David Barrett in producing a large body of statistics directly or indirectly pertaining to World Evangelization. Other members of the STF contributed to the process, but due to shortage of time there was no opportunity for consensus before the issue of the statistics in the Congress Note Book for participants.

(2) Dayton, Edward R & Wilson, Samuel, eds.. *Unreached Peoples '79, '80, '81, '82, '83, '84, '87*. Monrovia: MARC, World Vision.

(3) Grimes, Barbara, ed. *Ethnoloque* Dallas:SIL '51, '52, '53, '58, '65, '69, '74, '78, '84, '88.

(4) *Gospel Recordings Language Lists*, Gospel Recordings Int., Pasadena, 1985.

(5) Barrett, David B, etc. *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982.

(6) Johnstone, Patrick J. *Operation World*, Bromley Kent, England: STL, 1986.

(7) Winter, Ralph D, numerous papers and articles on the subject in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions, Mission Frontiers*, etc.

(8) Winter, Ralph D, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. The 1974 Lausanne Congress Report, p. 213.

(9) Barrett, David B and Schrack, Harley, *Unreached Peoples: Clarifying the Task*. MARC Monrovia, 1987. (This gives a clear explanation of the validity of the two approaches.)

(10) The Unreached Peoples meeting convened by the LCWE, and chaired by Ed Dayton in Chicago, March 1982.

(11) Robb, John D. Focus! *The power of People Group thinking*. MARC, Monrovia, 1989.

(12) The Statistics Task Force listed 15 such categories in the Global Statistics Summary. I have selected the ones most relevant to our definition of "people group".

(13) *Country* is a term covering the 180 sovereign nations and 70-75 territories or dependencies. All are politically defined, but in some cases the political boundaries also define a very homogenous unicultural society which is almost equivalent to people—hence our use of the term "nation" under people groups. These are relatively few (most small) some being: Maldives, the Koreas, Malta, West Samoa, Comoros, Tonga, etc.

(14) Listed in *World Christian Encyclopedia* pp. 786-790. Each of these macropeoples may consist of anything up to 500 or more ethnolinguistic peoples.

(15) *Ethnolinguistic peoples* are defined by language, culture and national boundaries. They are thus peoples within a nation. Many peoples live in areas bisected by politically drawn frontiers, or have migrated to other countries—such are counted more than once in these lists.

(16) *Minipeoples* are defined more by dialects, tribes within ethnolinguistic peoples and regions. Their numbers are imprecise, and no full lists could be compiled without a major research effort into all the ethnolinguistic peoples.

(17) *Micropeoples* are defined by clans, castes and localities. Evangelistic strategies by local congregations rather than cross-cultural ministries are generally more appropriate for those that are unreached.

(18) *Sociopeoples* are defined by class, occupation, area of residence, hobbies, politics and so on. The more complex and urbanised a society the more important are these complex and multiple webs of overlapping affinities and relationships. These realities may, in fact, become more important than nationality and mother language. One individual may be part of several or more of such sociological people groups — each presenting its own unique challenges and opportunities for evangelization. The total number of such people groups is, of course, enormous and open-ended.

(19) The figures used in the Statistics Task Force statistics sheets in Manila July 1989.

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