How Many People Groups Are There?

How many people groups are there in the world?

Some say 24,000. Others say 17,000. Some suggest 12,000. The many different answers to this question often cause confusion. If we are commanded to make disciples of all people groups, just how many are there?

Before trying to answer that, an example might help illustrate why the confusion exists. Suppose someone innocently asked, “What is the largest country?” The answer 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. The underlying issue is definitions. What is meant by “largest?" So the core question of this article 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 highlights the role of language 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. Acceptance barriers can include differences of caste, religious tradition, location, histories and traditions, and other subtle cultural distinctives.

Examples of **understandability** being the highest barrier	Examples of **acceptance** being the highest barrier
• Hazara in Afghanistan • Bambara in Mali • Hadrami Arab in Yemen	• Jat in India • Hui in China • Haratine Moor in Mauritania

Table 1. Understanding and Acceptance

The 1982 definition began a process of identifying the unreached peoples of the world that is still not complete. Because of various interpretations of the definition, several lists of people groups have developed and differing counts of people groups has caused confusion.

Differing Definitions Produce Differing People Group Lists

People Groups Defined By …	Resulting List	Examples	Totals
Language	Linguistic peoples (by country)	Ethnologue.com	~10,900
Language / Dialect Ethnicity	Ethno-linguistic peoples (by country)	PeopleGroups.org World Christian Encyclopedia Operation World	~12,000 to ~13,000
Language / Dialect Ethnicity Religion Caste Culture	Ethnic peoples (by country)	Joshua Project	~17,500
Language / Dialect Ethnicity Religion Caste Culture / Customs Education Politics Ideology / Worldview Historical enmity	Unimax peoples (by country)	Ralph Winter (original estimate)	~24,000

Table 2. Resulting Tallies Based on Various Definitions of People Groups

Ethno-linguistic Peoples Lists

Utilizing the remarkable language research compiled in the last 100 years, the first people group lists were generally ethno-linguistic—that is, they generally defined people groups by language and/or dialect. Due to the somewhat definable nature of language, these lists largely overlap. 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.

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 2,500 ethnic people groups when caste, religion and cultural factors are considered.

Ethnic categories are more subjective than language categories. Researchers may evaluate the barriers of acceptance differently. However, even with these limitations, an ethnic peoples list can help clarify the church planting task of the Great Commission.

Is the Joshua Project list a unimax peoples list?

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 list of ethnic peoples. In certain parts of the world (e.g., 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, some barriers of acceptance will only be determined once workers are on-site. While the Joshua Project list observes some such barriers, it is not a complete unimax peoples list.

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 "pure peoples" model counts the Tatar living in 21 Central Asian countries as one people group. By coding people groups across countries (PGAC), the Joshua Project list allows country boundaries to be counted or ignored as desired. The current Joshua Project count for people-groups-by-country (PGIC) is approximately 17,500 and the count for people-groups-across-countries (PGAC) is about 10,400.

Resulting List	Counting Method	Total Peoples	Unreached
Peoplegroups.org	Peoples-by-Country	12,500	~7,300
Joshua Project	Peoples-by-Country	17,500	~7,500
Joshua Project	Peoples without Country boundaries	10,400	~4,500
Unimax peoples	Mixed	24,000	~8,000

Table 3. Summary of People Group Counts (as of 11/2025)

Model Strengths and Weaknesses

The various models have different strengths and serve different purposes. An ethno-linguistic peoples list has a quantifiable criterion—namely, language—and helps establish targets for language-oriented ministries such as radio broadcasting, Jesus Film production, Bible translation, etc. An ethnic peoples list considers non-language distinctives that create significant barriers of acceptance, which helps identify church planting strategies.

Other Factors in People Group Counts

When comparing lists of peoples care should be taken to understand all factors. For example, the some lists for India only counts groups with a population of at least 10,000, yielding about 950 groups in India. The K.S. Singh / ASI list often breaks people groups by state boundaries,

yielding about 4,700 groups for India. Understanding such factors helps explain the very different counts that result.

So What Is the Answer?

So, how many people groups are there? It depends:

- Ethno-linguistic peoples around 12,000 to 13,000
- Ethnic (cultural-ethno-linguistic) about 17,500
- Unimax peoples around 24,000
- Ethnic (cultural-ethno-linguistic) peoples disregarding country boundaries about 10,400.

All are right answers depending on the perspective. May the Lord grant wisdom and discernment to all those seeking to clarify the unfinished task of the Great Commission.