

# *The 1950 Censuses—*

## *How They Were Taken*

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Procedural Studies of the 1950 Censuses, No. 2

Population, Housing, Agriculture, Irrigation, Drainage



Prepared in the Office of the  
Assistant Director for Statistical Standards  
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supervision of

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Washington 25, D. C. 1955

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## FOREWORD

At ten-year intervals the Government of the United States, through the Bureau of the Census, takes a complete inventory of its population and of its homes and farms. In similar fashion other inventories of manufacturing plants, mines, and service and trade establishments are taken at periodic intervals. These inventories, known as Censuses, are an important part of the work of the United States Government, since they provide the basic facts necessary for understanding and solving many public problems.

The censuses which enumerate and describe the nation's resources are large-scale undertakings. The 1950 Censuses involved visits to 45 million homes to get information on more than 150 million people and their dwellings as well as on more than five million farms. The total cost of this work was over 90 million dollars. More than 160 thousand people were involved in carrying out this program.

The experience in this activity has been summarized in this report to provide a public record of how the job was done. Such a record, even though condensed, is extremely important so that all who participated in any phase of the work or make use of the figures may have comprehensive understanding of the way in which the Censuses were taken. What could be a simple count in a small village becomes a highly complex operation when all the villages and cities, as well as the open country, are included. Millions of schedules and hundreds of millions of punch cards must be handled in such a manner that each person, house, or farm is counted in the right geographic area. Careful attention must be given to each step of the operation so that the relationships among the various items of information are properly shown for each area.

Although the Census Bureau has long specialized in handling the complexities of large-scale statistical operations, it has not always taken effective steps to insure that the experience gained in one census is fully utilized in planning the next one. This report is intended to cover all parts of the 1950 experience in order to assist in developing plans for the 1960 Censuses.

Census taking is a major national activity in many parts of the world. Increasingly attention has been focused on arranging for international comparability in census statistics. This record of procedures used in our 1950 Census is expected to be helpful to those taking Censuses in other countries in suggesting procedures adapted to their situation. Similarly, it is expected that comparable reports issued by the census authorities of other countries will prove of value in the formulation of our own census plans, as well as in our interpretation of the data provided by their censuses.

This report will also serve to meet the obligation of a statistical agency like the Bureau of the Census to provide its users with a full set of facts concerning the manner in which the information was collected and processed. Such information is invaluable in interpreting the census results and in suggesting uses, as well as limitations on the uses, of the data. It may also lead to suggestions from users which will be helpful in planning the next censuses.

For a full understanding of the various aspects of the census, there should be a comprehensive statement of the reasons for the methods used and an evaluation of the decisions made, in addition to the brief descriptions given in this report. Such evaluations, however, would have greatly increased the size of this report. Perhaps the most significant materials contributing to an evaluation of the procedures used in the censuses are those reflecting the quality of the data collected and published. Some of the Bureau's findings concerning the quality of the data have already appeared in the census reports. Additional findings are to be included in a report now in preparation which will present the results of an intensive quality check of the 1950 Censuses.

No report, however, can expect to answer all the questions that takers of Censuses elsewhere and careful users may wish to raise. To the extent that the Bureau has additional information, it will be glad to provide available detail to persons interested in pursuing particular questions.



Robert W. Burgess  
Director  
Bureau of the Census

June 30, 1955



"He's OK Boys. You can tell him everything...  
He's the Census Man!"

You're right, Rafael! The Census-Taker hasn't got any connection with the "Revenooers." Anything anybody tells him is strictly confidential. By law, Census facts and figures can't be shown to the tax people, the police, or anybody else.

Everything the Census-Taker asks is important to you and your family. Your answers will help leaders in industry, business, labor and civic groups to plan such things as better schools, better roads, better housing; better distribution of such services as telephones, gas, water, and electricity.

What's more, if you want to have a voice in the government you have to be counted in the Census. According to the Constitution, the number of Representatives your state is entitled to send to Congress is determined by the Census taken every ten years.

The Census man will come around to your house some time after April 1. Be ready to answer all his questions accurately, and honestly, and *quickly*. (Remember, it's a big job to count upwards of a hundred and fifty million noses!)

#### WHAT TO DO WHEN THE CENSUS-TAKER COMES

1. Ask him to show his official card. This identifies him as an employee of the Census Bureau.
2. Be friendly. Invite him in. He will stay only a few minutes.
3. In non-English-speaking homes, have an adult or older child ready to translate.
4. Answer all questions accurately and honestly. Remember—the information you give is strictly confidential. Under law, it is not available to any individual or any other Government agency.



Radio and newspapers will do their best to tell you beforehand what most of the questions are. Watch for them and have your answers ready.



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## PREFACE

In a very real sense this report is the product of the work of the 160,000 persons who were associated with the conduct of the 1950 Censuses of Population, Housing and Agriculture. Of necessity it cannot give a detailed account of all the actions that were taken, the reasons they were taken, or the reasons other actions which had been proposed were not taken. Many persons took part in the preparation of the report through supplying memoranda or other accounts of the work actually done, through assembling records which were made at the time, and through the preparation of drafts of sections of the report.

No attempt has been made in this report to evaluate the procedures actually used or to analyze possible alternatives. This is being done in other and more detailed technical reports. The fact that a procedure was adopted for use in the 1950 Censuses cannot be taken as a recommendation for future use, but is presented simply as a record of what was actually done. A great deal of analysis of past experience and current needs went into the development of the procedures in 1950 and similar processes will be used in developing procedures for later censuses.

For some readers the report will appear to be quite general and lacking in the specific detail which would be necessary to carry out a particular operation. Such material was omitted because of its limited interest to most readers, but it does exist in the form of detailed statements of specifications, flow charts, and work procedures, and can be made available to interested persons.

The first seven chapters, which are included in Part I, describe in relatively broad terms how the censuses were taken. Part II includes, in chapters 8 to 10, information on how specific subject items were treated. The appendixes present more detailed information on a number of the subjects treated in the main body of the report.

Since this report is a consolidation of the experience and efforts of many people between 1947 and 1953, it is difficult to give full acknowledgments. Most of the individuals who contributed directly through consultation, memoranda, reports, or first drafts of entire sections are included in Appendix G in the listing of key personnel. The material for this report was assembled and the final draft was prepared in the Office of the Assistant Director for Statistical Standards, by Morris B. Ullman and, during his absence on foreign assignment, by Edwin D. Goldfield. They were assisted by Elva Marquard and Bernard J. Marsh. Nat Grossblat and Nathan Krevor supervised the early stages of assembling material and the preparation of early summaries and drafts. Appendix A, containing the principal data collection forms, has been issued previously, and is still available as a separate bulletin, "Principal Data Collection Forms Used in the 1950 Censuses".