A Snapshot in Time: How The Census Measures America

Infographic 2 Supporting Documentation

The Census Questions

1940

There were 65 questioned asked on the 1940 Census to the entire population.

34 were asked for the Census of Population

31 were asked for the Census of Housing (the first ever Census of Housing)

In addition, 5% of the population was asked an additional 16 supplemental questions .

Hence, five % of the population were asked all 81 questions.

2010

In 2010, every household was asked the same basic 10 questions, a return to the short form

The more detailed questionnaire (previously asked on a sample basis once every ten years during the census) are now asked annually in the American Community Survey which was sent to about 3 million households in 2010.

Census Firsts

1940

First census to have a special day transients were counted. Persons in hotels, tourist camps, trailers, and flophouses were enumerated where they spent the night of April 8.

First Census of Housing (31 questions were asked) at the same time the Census of Population was conducted.

First use of an income questions – 1) the amount of money wages or salary received during 1939 and 2) if the person made more than $50 from sources other than wage and salary.

Supplemental questions were asked to 5% of the population (16 additional questions). This was the first use of sampling in the Census.

2010

First use of social media as an outreach tool.

First time there was an English/Spanish bilingual form that was mailed out instead of the English-only form in some areas of the country.

GPS coordinates were collected by a handheld computer for all structures during address canvasing.

Introduction of the American Community Survey to collect detailed characteristics from a sampel of households. This replaced the long form used in previous censuses to collect these data only once a decade. The American Community Survey is conducted on an annual basis, and was sent to 3 million households in 2010. This allowed the 2010 Census to be a simple, 10-question form for all households.

Contacting Housing Units

1940

37.2 million housing units were visited by 120,000 enumerators. Enumerators canvased the entire country and were told to visit every house, building, tent, cabin, hut or other place in which a person might be living, and then to complete a census form.

2010

There were 134.4 million housing units in the pre-census workload estimates for the 2010 Census.

120.9 million Received mailings of Census forms delivered by the U.S. Postal Service, with a request to fill out and mail it back.

12 million forms were hand delivered to housing units by census workers, with a request to fill it out and mail it back.

1.5 million housing units were visited and enumerated directly by the Census Bureau in an operation similar to the 1940 single-operation approach.

635,000 enumerators were hired to visit and complete forms for households that did not mail back a questionnaire. The enumeration took place over 6 weeks.

Processing Responses and Disseminating Results

1940

Workers had to manually transfer the information on the Census schedules onto 175.6 million punch cards.

Results were tabulated on machines that evolved from those used during the 1890 Census.

Census workers card punch accuracy - Samples were taken of each card punch clerks' cards to verify accuracy. Clerks were disqualified if the average error rate for any week, determined on a sample basis, exceeded 3 wrong cards per 100 cards punched in a week or if they exceeded 2 wrong cards per 100 cards punched for 2 weeks out of a 4-week period.

For archiving, the paper forms also had to be microfilmed.

The results of the 1940 Census were made available through a series of print bulletins and publications.

2010

Prior to the 2010 Census results being tabulated, an optical scanner read response entries and any handwritten entries on the forms and converted all these responses to electronic format for tabulation.

These devices also created a digital image of each form that will be used for archiving.

All results were made available online through the interactive tools at the Census.gov website. FactFinder 2 is the primary online tool to access data from the 2010 Census.

Looking Ahead to the 2020 Census

There were 308.7 million people counted from the 2010 Census. It is projected that there will be 341.4 million people for the 2020 Census.

The Census Bureau is currently researching how to use the mail, the Internet, face-to-face interviews and other electronic response options that may emerge to improve participation in the Census.

The Census Bureau also created a 2020 Census directorate to study other ways to change operations and systems that may allow us to achieve similar quality in results while containing or reducing costs.

Sources: 2010 Census, 1940 Census. Some information came from the publication “Procedural History of the 1940 Census” by Robert M. Jenkins.