A Snapshot in Time:
Howe the Census Measures America

Then & Now
The 1940 Census was conducted during a momentous time in our Nation's history--as we recovering from the Great Depression and not long before our entry into World War II. It was notable for many reasons. Take a look at how the Census has changed over time…and how we've taken our snapshots of America.

1940 Census Form
81 Questions
A total of 65 questions were asked on the 1940 Census (34 for the Census of Population and 31 for the Census of Housing). Additionally, 5 percent of the population was asked 16 supplemental questions.

2010 Census Form
10 Questions
In 2010, every household was asked the same ten basic questions.

The more-detailed demographic housing and economic questions that were asked of a sample of households in the Census (through 2000) are now asked annually in the American Community Survey (ACS), which was sent to about 3.5 million households in 2010.

CENSUS FIRSTS
Both the 1940 Census and the 2010 Census marked important "firsts" in how we take our national snapshot.

1940
First to designate a day for counting transients.

First to include a census of housing.

First to include a question about income.

First to use a long-form and a short-form questionnaire. The long form included a set of supplementary questions asked of roughly 5 percent of the population.

2010
First to use social media outreach: Twitter, Faceblook, Flickr, YouTube, blogs.

First to use an English/Spanish bilingual form for some areas.

First to use GPS to collect latitude and longitude coordinates and structures.

First census to return to only a short-form questionnaire. The ACS was introduced earlier in the decade and replaced the long form.

CONTACTING HOUSING UNITS
How we contact people has changed.

1940
37.2 million housing units contacted via 120,000 enumerators.
Enumerators were told to visit every house, building, tent, cabin, hut or other place in which a person might be living.

2010
134.4 million Housing Units Contacted via 120.9 million mailings, 12 million hand-delivered forms or 1.5 million direct visits.
635,000 Enumerators were hired to count households that did not mail back a questionnaire over the course of six weeks.

PROCESSING RESPONSES AND DISSEMINATING RESULTS
How we tabulate and share data has changed

1940
Workers manually entered information from the 1940 schedule onto 175.6 million punch cards.
Results were tabulated on machines that evolved from those used during the 1890 Census.
Accuracy of card punch clerks: 98 percent
Results were made available through a series of bulletins and print publications.

2010
In 2010, optical scanners read handwriting on forms and converted it to electronic form. This allowed for faster tabulation of results.
Results were made available online through interactive tools at the census.gov website.

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2020 CENSUS
The Census Bureau is planning major innovations in the design of the Census in an effort to manage costs and improve efficiency.

2010
308.7 million, U.S. population

2020
341.4 million, projected U.S. population

Multiple Mode Response Options

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.

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