

The National Census: What's in it for Me?

The early days of census

The word "census" is Latin, and it means "to tax". Archaeologists have found ancient records from the Egyptians dating back as far as 3000 BC. Thus the idea to count and account for is certainly not new.

In 1787, the USA became the first nation to make a census mandatory in its Constitution, with the first census started in the year of 1790.

The first US census consisted of only six simple questions:

- ◆ Name of the head of the household
- ◆ Number of persons living in the household
- ◆ Number of free white males who are sixteen years old or older living in the household
- ◆ Number of free white males who are under the age of sixteen living in the household
- ◆ The sexes and colours of all of the other persons who were living in the household.

The census of population has been established in Canada since 1666. The National Archives of Canada has letters and schedules indicating that the early Canadian censuses were taken by enumerators going from door to door. The nominal census of 1666 covers 154 pages of manuscript and includes the age, conjugal status and occupation of each person.

In 1810 US Congress decided that while the population needed to be counted, other information needed to be gathered also, such as in the field of manufacturing, agriculture, construction, mining, housing, local governments, commerce, transportation, and business.

Initially US federal marshals visited every house and every establishment and filled out the paperwork, taking 18 months to complete.

Canada instituted a regular census in 1851, taking its first dominion-wide census in 1871. Returns for 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881 are generally nominal, meaning that each person of the family is listed individually, with details as to age, sex, country or province of birth, religion, racial origin, occupation, marital status, education and physical disabilities where applicable.

The modern census

Over the years, the census changed and evolved many times over, moving from a personal visit, to using postal services, to the internet.

Today the US and UK conduct a census every ten years, while Canada and Australia conduct one every five years. The reason for every question being asked on the census is well described and widely published to ensure absolute clarity on the intent.

Today's Canadian census asks questions under the following headers:

- ◆ Basic population information
- ◆ Activities of daily living
- ◆ Socio-cultural information
- ◆ Mobility
- ◆ Education

- ◆ Place of birth of parents
- ◆ Household activities
- ◆ Labour market activities
- ◆ Income
- ◆ Housing

The most recent population census information available dates from 2001. For many countries the next census is due in 2006. Canada's next census will take place on 16 May 2006.

The 2006 Canadian census will have close to 30,000 jobs (both supervisory and non-supervisory) both in field and office locations. Most of these jobs will involve field work and will last from four to ten weeks.

The census will continue to provide data on all of the social and demographic themes it had in the past. The changes that have been made to the 2006 census questionnaire ensure that the census continues to respond to the needs of data users. The new and modified questions were developed through in-depth consultations with data users and extensive testing by Statistics Canada, the agency in charge of the census. While responding to user needs, they have managed to maintain the overall questionnaire length and thus the overall response burden in comparison to previous censuses.

Why do we conduct a census?

Although the official purpose of the census is to count everyone for the purpose of congressional representation and for being a part of some countries' Constitution, its broader significance involves more than just "counting people".

The census is useful for:

- ◆ The Government to find out the number of the population
- ◆ Obtaining a country's geographic, demographic, social and economic characteristics
- ◆ Developing a statistical portrait of a nation and its people
- ◆ Information seekers, such as historians, genealogists businesses, journalists, researchers, health professionals, students and citizens alike
- ◆ Tracking of a nation's history, revealing the mode of live of years ago.
- ◆ Counting a great number of heads – particularly useful in social science research
- ◆ Benchmarking against a recent, reliable source that provide lots of detail – not only for a country, but also for each province and territory, and for smaller geographic areas such as cities or districts within cities, and tiny population subgroups
- ◆ Its ability to provide a record of change in the nation's population, household and housing characteristics over time.

Unlike small surveys, the census information is rarely limited by having too few observations to be statistically representative.

How can I best use census information?

Summarised from Statistics Canada, detail questions on census topics hold the following advantages:

People living in each household:

- ♦ We can learn about the living arrangements of people living in Canada, family size, the number of children living with one parent or two parents, and the number of people who live alone.
- ♦ This information can be used for planning social programs, such as Old Age Security and the Child Tax Benefit. It can also be used by towns and cities to plan a variety of services such as day-care centres, schools and senior citizens' homes.

The number of people in Canada whose activities are reduced because of a physical condition, a mental condition, or a health problem:

- ♦ The results are used to help Statistics Canada find out more about the barriers these persons face in their everyday lives.

The social and cultural profile of Canada's population:

- ♦ Geographical specifics tell us about population movements within Canada, and between Canada and other countries. It also provides information about the diversity of Canada's population.
- ♦ Citizenship status helps in electoral planning; by combining it with age data, we can calculate the number of potential voters. This also provides information used to plan citizenship classes and programs.
- ♦ The number of immigrants and non-permanent residents in Canada, and the year people immigrated to Canada is often used in combination with other census data to compare the socio-economic conditions of immigrants over time; to review immigration and employment policies and programs; as well as to plan education, health, and other services.
- ♦ Social and cultural information are also used to implement programs that protect the rights of Canadians under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In addition, it helps to determine the need for language training and services in English or French.
- ♦ Ethnic and cultural diversity of Canada's population is required under the Multiculturalism Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is also used extensively by ethnic and cultural associations, as well as by agencies and researchers, for activities such as health promotion, communications and marketing.
- ♦ Information about Aboriginal or First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples is used to administer legislation and employment programs under the Indian Act of Canada and the Employment Equity Act. The information is also used by researchers and Aboriginal governments and associations to explore a wide variety of demographic and socio-economic issues.
- ♦ Information about the visible minority population in Canada is required for programs under the Employment Equity Act, which promotes equal opportunity for everyone.
- ♦ Religion is used to assess the need and potential for separate religious schools in some provinces. In addition, federal and provincial human rights legislation depends on this information to protect Canadians from discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

Where people living in Canada are moving to and from, both within and outside Canada:

- ♦ This information is used to help estimate the population between censuses at the national, provincial and regional levels. It is also used to identify future needs for housing, education, transportation and social services, and contributes to programs administered under the Fiscal Arrangements Act.

The education and training of people living in Canada and their specific job skills:

- ♦ Governments and employers use this information to evaluate whether there are enough people with the required education, training and job skills in particular areas of the work force. They are then able to develop training programs that meet the changing needs of our work force.
Information on school attendance is needed for planning and financing post-secondary and adult education programs under the Canada Student Loans Act. It is also used to develop incentives and programs that help people remain in school or return to school.

The number of persons born in Canada, whose parents were born outside Canada and the places of birth of these parents:

- ♦ This information can be used to assess the socio-economic conditions of second-generation Canadians.

The time people spend on unpaid household activities:

- ♦ When combined with data on paid work, this information will provide a picture of how people living in Canada balance their paid and unpaid work activities.
- ♦ Information on paid work done by people aged 15 and older is important for both businesses and governments at all levels to plan for education and training programs, assess language uses, to forecast future job opportunities, to plan efficient transportation and commuting systems, and to develop job creation measures in communities throughout the country.

The income of individuals in Canada, their families and households:

- ♦ Income tax records neither cover all people nor do they provide some important information on the characteristics of persons with income.
- ♦ Governments use income statistics to develop income support programs and social services, such as Old Age Security Pension, provincial income supplements, social assistance, and welfare payments. They also use these statistics to ensure that programs supplementing family incomes do so efficiently and also to identify specific geographic areas that need assistance.
- ♦ Businesses, large and small, use these statistics to locate stores near consumers and to develop new products and services.

Housing:

- ♦ Government planners and private developers use this information to develop housing communities and projects. This information contributes to many programs administered under the National Housing Act and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Act.
- ♦ Information on the number of rooms and bedrooms in homes and on housing costs is combined with data on the number of persons in households to assess the economic situation of families in different regions. Provincial and municipal governments use this information to measure levels of crowding within households and to develop appropriate housing programs.
- ♦ Information on the age of dwellings and their need for repairs is used by municipalities to develop neighbourhood improvement programs.

The census: A cost saving

An endeavour with the magnitude of the census' magnitude comes with considerable expense. US Census 2000 cost approximately \$6.5 billion, or \$56 per housing unit (figures in US Dollars). Field data collection is by far the most expensive component of the Census' costs, accounting for nearly 60 percent of total costs. Technology, data products, postage, marketing, and communications make up the majority of the additional cost.