

Census Information



WHAT IS THE CENSUS AND WHY IS IT TAKEN?

The first national census was taken in August 1790 and has been conducted every decade since. Why? Because of the representative nature of our government. The Constitution established that the Senate would have two members from each state, but in the House of Representatives, the number of elected officials would be based on population. To apportion representatives fairly among the states, the Constitution called for an enumeration of the population at least every ten years (the Decennial Census.)

Today the census is even more important than it was in 1790. The “one person, one vote” Supreme Court decisions, which required congressional districts within states to be of equal population, added a new demand for small-area census data. Revenue-sharing and distribution of other Federal and State funds, to some extent, also depends on census data. In addition, many other agencies -- public, private, charitable, and governmental -- rely on census data for marketing studies, academic research, government planning, social programs, and many other activities.

The census has changed considerably since the first questions were asked over 200 years ago. No two censuses have been exactly alike. These changes reflect the changes in our society, economy, and technology. The first census asked for simple head counts of free persons and slaves. For example, the census asked for the name of the “head of the family”, number of people in each household and their status (free or slave), and age. As the need for statistics for planning and legislative decision-making increased, so did the number of questions.

Census-taking has also changed in almost every aspect: in who conducts the census, the types and numbers of questions asked, the methods of enumeration and data tabulation, and the means of dissemination. New technology, particularly the computer, has allowed for easier tabulation of larger amounts of information. The 1960 census was the first to be tabulated completely by computer and was also the first to use the self-enumeration method (mail-out questionnaires). Machine-readable data, in the form of expensive magnetic tapes, could be purchased from the Census Bureau for the 1960, 1970 and 1980 Censuses. The Bureau and private vendors also provided extracts of the data, but again for high cost. The 1990 Census was the first to be distributed in CD-ROM format. With CD's, census information was available at a relatively low-cost and could be downloaded to a floppy disc or personal computer to load into a software package for manipulation. Thomas Jefferson Library received the 1990 Census information in both CD and paper format. For the 2000 Census, information will be distributed mainly in CD or DVD format, with a smaller number of products available in paper.

Also beginning with the 1990 Census and continuing with the 2000 Census, information is available from the Census Bureau web-site (<http://www.census.gov>) and through the Bureau's search service called American FactFinder (http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en). This relatively new service allows individuals to create tables and reports, as well as browse pre-formatted data.

Though the techniques of the census change, its aims are still the same – to prepare accurate statistics, to keep confidential information on individuals, to balance the government's and public's need for facts against the burden of responding, and to tabulate and publish results as quickly as possible.

The issue of accuracy has become somewhat controversial. Over the decades, certain groups and areas have been much more likely to be undercounted for various reasons. For example, males, the South, blacks, and possibly

other minority populations have been traditionally among those that have been undercounted. The use of statistical sampling to improve accuracy has been hotly debated in recent years.

Confidentiality of census information is a major concern of the Census Bureau. Confidentiality means that only sworn employees of the Bureau may have access to individual census information for a period of 72 years. Only the individual who completed the form and his/her heirs or legal representative may obtain transcripts of past census returns. Sometimes these are requested from the Bureau when other record sources have been destroyed and the individual needs to show information to qualify for Social Security or retirement benefits, obtain a passport, prove family relationships, or resolve other situations in which a birth certificate may be needed, but is not available. After the required 72-year period has passed, the National Archives makes the records available on microfilm for genealogical and other research.

Individuals are less likely to complete the Census questionnaire if they feel that it places an undue burden on them to do so or if they feel that their privacy is being compromised. The Census Bureau carefully selects the type and number of questions included in order to encourage individuals to complete and return the forms. It also considers the processing complexities, the costs of collecting and tabulating the data, and the practical limitations on the size of the form.

CENSUS GEOGRAPHY

The census provides data for more types of geographic areas than any other major data source. It provides data on the following familiar governmental units: states, counties, and cities. The Bureau also provides data for geographic areas defined for statistical purposes: MSAs (Metropolitan Statistical Areas), census tracts, and census blocks.

METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS (MSA)

Most MSAs consist of a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants and the county in which it is located. Contiguous counties are included in an MSA if they are socially and economically integrated with the central county. The inclusion of contiguous counties in an MSA is based primarily by census data on commuting patterns. Effective with the 1980 census, a central city (as in the case of St. Louis) can be any size as long as it has an urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants and a total metropolitan area population of at least 100,000.

INCORPORATED PLACES

These concentrations of population, such as cities, have legally prescribed boundaries, powers and functions.

CENSUS TRACTS

Census tracts are statistical areas averaging about 4,000 in population, although they can have between 2,500 and 8,000 residents. Tracts generally have stable boundaries. When census tracts are established, they are designed to be relatively homogenous areas with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions. Tract boundaries are established with the intention of being maintained over a long time so that statistical comparisons can be made from census to census. When sufficient population increases occur, tracts are subdivided. It is easy to recombine the new tracts for comparison with older tracts. Other changes have included combining two or more tracts and minor realignments of tract boundaries to reflect new or better recognized physical features. Census tracts observe county lines and cover all of the territory within each tracted county. Within a county, tract boundaries may be split by other geographic boundaries. In the case of independent cities, like the City of St. Louis, which is not in a county, the independent city is treated like a county and appears at the end of all of the county tables.

BLOCK GROUPS

These are groups of blocks, as defined below, averaging approximately 1,100 in population. They are the second smallest type of census area.

BLOCKS

These are the smallest type of census area. They average about 70 people and most commonly are small rectangular areas bounded by four streets. Only populated areas were previously assigned block numbers. With the increased need to track population shifts and trends and the advent of computer technology making this easier, the Census Bureau has created block and/or block numbered areas (BNA) for the entire nation beginning with the 1990 census.

Using the *American FactFinder* to find Census data.

The *American FactFinder* main page is located at:

<http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?lang=en>

This is one of many ways of accessing the information in the *American FactFinder*.

Fact Sheet Choose this link on the left side of the screen if you are looking for general population or housing information about the U.S., a state, county, city or town. Fill in as little or as much of the information for the location in which you are interested. For example, to view information about the state of Missouri, click on the drop down menu and select “Missouri”, and click on

GO The **Results** section will then display the information for Missouri. Or you may type in the name of a city, select the state and click **GO** to view the information about that city.

Data Sets If you are looking for more detailed information, select this button on the left side of the screen. Look for the item **Census 2000 Summary File 3** and choose by clicking in the circle to the left of it. On the next screen, on the right side will be a list of options. Click on **Detailed Tables**. When the next screen appears, select the drop-down menu for geographic type. Wait for the screen to reload, and then choose the state from the drop-down box labeled —select a state—. The next screen will allow you to select and Add as many of the desired “geographic areas” as needed. Geographic areas must be added one at a time. (Caution/hint: Please be patient with the system and allow the screens to completely reload after each selection. This must be done step-by-step in order to retrieve the desired data at the geographic level needed.)

Next Once all locations have been selected, click on the **Next** button. On this next screen, select one or more tables for the type of information needed. There are 160+ tables dealing with population characteristics and over 50 tables dealing with housing characteristics.

Add You must add each table individually. Again, be patient with the system and let each screen reload before trying to add additional tables.

Show Result When all desired tables have been selected, click on this button. The tables will appear, one under another, on the next screen.*

* The *American Factfinder* system cannot cross-tabulate data. For example, if you select the individual tables for Income, Race, and Age, the results will appear on one page, but as separate listings. A combined table would only be available if the Census had pre-created one with those criteria.