



Research Brief

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The Importance of the Census Long-Form

MIDDLETOWN, Pa—With the arrival of the official Census Day, April 1, 2000, there has been increasing discussion of the value of the Decennial Census Long Form. The information gathered from the collection of these data is extremely important and used daily over the next ten years.

“Census data has become completely integrated into the decision making process by all sectors of the economy, not just government,” according to Diane Shoop, Director of the Pennsylvania State Data Center (PaSDC) at Penn State Harrisburg. “While reapportionment and federal allocation of funds are an important part of the use of the Census data, it is used in thousands of ways each and every day that affect everyone’s lives.” The PaSDC, part of a national State Data Center Network, answers over 15,000 requests each year for this data,” she added.

Who Decided What Questions Should be on the Census Forms?

It is important to note, that every question on the Census form itself is tied to legislation passed by the U.S. Congress at some point in time. More than 120 federal programs use census data in funding formulas. Examples include WIC, Unemployment Insurance, Job Training Partnership Act, Airport Improvement Act, Highway Planning and Construction, Head Start, Medicaid and so on. The data collected by the Census is needed to administer, fund and/or monitor these programs.

In 1992 the Office of Management and Budget asked federal agencies to provide justification for their content requirements for the 2000 Census. This research and documentation has resulted in the shortest census in 180 years. Each question on the Decennial Census form has specific federal legislative justification. That is, federal law or case law criteria by the U.S. Federal Court System require this data. A subject is mandatory if federal legislature explicitly mandates the use of data from the decennial census on the subject. It is required if either federal legislation requires the use of data and the decennial census is the only or historical source of it or if there are case law requirements imposed by the U.S. Federal Court System that lead to data being provided by the decennial census.

Three years before Census Day (April 1, 1997), the U.S. Bureau of the Census is required to submit to Congress the subjects that will be covered on the Decennial Census forms. The actual questions that will appear on the Census forms are submitted to Congress two years before Census Day (April 1, 1998). The forms themselves are printed months and months in advance due to the enormous quantity needed.



Why are There Two Forms?

As in previous censuses, there are two different forms: the “long form” and the “short form.” About five of every six households will receive a “short form” containing about seven subjects: name, age, relationship, race, Hispanic origin and housing tenure. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. These questions relate to the Voting Rights Act and are used in reapportionment and redistricting.

The remainder, one of six households, will receive the “long form” which asks about 34 subjects: those mentioned previously and education, ancestry, employment, disability, and home heating fuel. This form takes about 38 minutes to complete.

The short form is also referred to as the 100 percent count, as everyone answers the seven subjects found on both the “short form” and “long form.” The “long form” is referred to as sample data.

Why Answer the Census?

Individuals may be reluctant to answer the Census or some of its questions. The Census is completely safe to answer. All individual answers remain confidential for 72 years. Only summary data is released. And it is used heavily.

The Decennial Census is the only uniform measure of population, socio-economic and housing data in the nation. It uses the same measures from the U.S. level down to every single census block in the country. That is what makes it so valuable and so useful.

Business

From the large corporation considering opening a new facility in a specific neighborhood to John or Jane Doe next door who dreams of starting his or her own business, both need census data to make their decisions.

Census data tells them if an area can supply the *customers or clients* they need for their product or service. It tells them if the area can supply the *workforce* they need. It gives them information about the area—is it growing, stable or declining, and how has it changed over the past decade? It gives them a good idea of location.

When making a decision to open a business, there are many demographic characteristics to review— population by age and possibly by gender or ethnicity, income levels, commuter patterns, educational attainment, nativity, occupations and industries.

Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Organizations and Small Business Development Centers all rely on this data to draw business to an area and help individuals start their own businesses. Combined with Economic Census data, it is powerful.

Non-Profit

Non-profits target areas where a specific population needs services. It is very important that the Census includes everyone to give an accurate portrait. Areas of poverty or low income and high concentrations of elderly or single-parent households may need to be identified. If opening clinics, shelters or senior centers, census data would need to be used to identify where these would best be located. Are after-school programs needed in a specific area? One needs to look at the number of children and number of working parents with children in a specific area.

Planners

Planners look at demographic, social, economic and housing trends over time to determine changes and their impact. They can then plan and prepare for the future. This would include whether new schools are needed, land

use, parks and recreation areas, public services, roads, traffic lights, transit, grants, and comprehensive plans. Virtually every census data item (and there are thousands) is of use. Planners cannot prepare for the future, without looking at today and comparing it to the past.

Government

All levels of government—national, state and local—use census data in the formulation, administration and evaluation of public policy.

However, state government makes daily use of this data as well. PA Emergency Management Agency has census data by latitude and longitude for emergency planning. They need to know where the population is located in case of floods, tornados and other emergencies. Housing data as well as population characteristics were used in determining where lead paint prevention programs should be directed across the state. It was used to determine what municipalities needed to implement recycling when that program began a number of years ago.

Local governments use it heavily as well. It is needed to determine if schools have sufficient space or if the tax-base is shifting, or if the area become a bedroom community for commuters working elsewhere. Does this community have a concentration of a population that needs some consideration — high elderly population may need geriatrics medical specialization, high number of persons speaking foreign languages may need English as a Second Language programs in schools. Are there programs for children — scouting, Head Start?

Research

The census is the only complete snapshot in time. It is how we measure ourselves to see how we have changed and plan for the future. We may sense changes in our neighborhoods or state such as more single-parent families, women in the workforce, single persons owning homes, grandparents as caregivers— but only the Census can provide the scientific objective measurement of that change. And one needs to base decision-making on that objective, scientific measure.

Census data is a big part in academic research. And as genealogy research is very popular, it is a way to unearth family history.

The Returns

The census is used in so many ways, every single day. It is easy to see the many valuable ways that Census data is used and how it brings big returns to each and every community. It affects us all in representation in government at the national, state and local levels and in dollars distributed by the federal and state government and, very importantly, in decisions made by businesses, non-profits, government and every community. It is worth expending the effort to get the most accurate and complete count possible.

The Decennial Census provides a wealth of population, social, economic and housing data that is used for many purposes by federal, state and local governments and the private and non-profit sectors. It has many uses, from where to open day-care or senior centers to economic development initiatives. It is the only data that is uniform from the national level down to the block level. But the Decennial Census is also a careful balance of minimizing respondent burden and collecting data that is necessary.

The Pennsylvania State Data Center is part of the national State Data Center Program, a cooperative program with the U.S. Census Bureau.

Questions relating to the Decennial Census may be directed to Diane E. Shoop, Director of the Pennsylvania State Data Center, at 717-948-6096.