

A prerequisite to conduct a census is that it needs a legal basis. In some countries like the USA the census is mandated by the Constitution. Usually also the census interval is determined by law. In most countries (eg., Belgium, France, USA, UK, ...) a census is undertaken every ten years. Canada is one of the few (the only?) countries(y) where a census is conducted every five years.

During time, countries did not undertake a population census just for military or tax purposes, but increasingly with the intent of planning purposes. Gradually, the most important component of a census undertaking became the collection of the socio-demographic characteristics of the population, their numbers, sex, age, but also socio-economic characteristics such as marital status, level of education and profession. For many countries a population census has for long time been the only reliable source for population projections. This is still the case for many less developed countries, especially in Africa. As such, many census questionnaires include the information on mortality (number of deaths in the household in the last 12 months) and fertility (the number of live births in the last 12 months for all women of reproductive age)³.

2. The decreased popularity of census undertaking

As indicated earlier, for centuries, for most countries the census was the only source providing reliable statistical (and therefore analytical) data on their population and their socio-economic characteristics. One of the apparent drawbacks of a census is that it is an 'inventory' at a specific point in time; a census does not permit a continuous observation of events (deaths, births, migrations, transitions in socio-demographic status)⁴.

With the advent and the development of population registers the 'classical' census has gradually lost in importance. In contrast to the census, population registers basically, the registration of births, deaths, marriage and migration, and the household composition permit the 'monitoring' of demographic behaviour. Indeed, population registers include both the information on the number of events as on the 'population at risk', the basic elements needed for the calculation of 'rates'⁵.

As could be expected, policy makers in many countries increasingly started to question the usefulness of a population census. The Netherlands and Denmark

³ In spite of this, many census questionnaires for African countries do not include any information on mortality and/or fertility. However, this is not because their importance is not recognised. The reason for not including the question(s) is normally related to the difficulty of obtaining reliable information.

⁴ E.g., from being single to ever-married, from being childless to becoming a parent, ...

⁵ We have deliberately omitted here the mentioning of an 'intermediate' stage, i.e. the linkage between vital statistics (providing the information on the number of births, deaths ..., corresponding to the numerator) and census results (providing the 'totals' or the 'population at risk', corresponding to the denominator).