

HOW DO WE KNOW?

The U.S. Census Bureau: Measuring America's People, Places & Economy Through the Decades

The Decennial Census, the Economic Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) provide information about the make-up of our nation crucial for Congress and community leaders to make informed decisions that shape our democracy. Since 1790, the U.S. Census has been more than a simple head count — it has charted the growth and composition of our nation. The questions have evolved over time to address our changing needs.

1790 — 3.9 million people

The First Census

As mandated by the Constitution and directed by Congress, the first U.S. Census is conducted to **apportion the House of Representatives** among the states and to tell Congress the **number of military-age men** in the country.

“In order to know the various interests of the United States, it was necessary that the description of the several classes into which the community was divided, should be accurately known; on this knowledge the legislature might proceed to make a proper provision for the agricultural, commercial and manufacturing interests, but without it they could never make their provisions in due proportion.”

- James Madison, Summary of debate on 1790 Census Bill, Jan. 25, 1790

1800 — 5.3 million people

Adding Age Detail

The Census begins tallying **free white females** in several age categories. Indians, slaves and free black people remain listed in single categories and not divided into age groups.

1810 — 7.2 million people

Manufacturing

A precursor to the modern-day **Economic Census** begins when Congress approves a bill requiring the marshals and others taking the Census to **“give an account of the manufacturing establishments...in their district.”**

1820 — 9.6 million people

Industrial Age

Respondents are asked how many household members are engaged in **agriculture, commerce or manufacturing activities**. This period roughly marks the beginning of the **American Industrial Revolution**.

1830 — 12.9 million people

Disabilities

Congress adds questions about disabilities, including deafness and blindness. Today, the **American Community Survey** collects these data. This is also the first time a **printed, standardized form** is used to collect Census data.

1840 — 17.1 million people

Literacy

For the first time Census asks about **school enrollment and literacy**. Congress also directs the Census to collect data on occupation in seven categories: mines, horticulture, commerce, forest products, fisheries, manufacturers and agriculture.

1850 — 23.2 million people

Households

The Census begins recording the names of each free household member as well as **places of birth, deaths and value of real estate**. Congress creates a Census board to oversee the running of the decennial population and housing count.

1860 — 31.4 million people

Occupation

Occupation data are collected for every free person, male or female, instead of just males over the age of 15. The Civil War delays the release of some numbers from the South until after the war.

1870 — 38.6 million people

Heritage

Heritage questions about having a **mother or father born in a foreign country are introduced**. Chinese and American Indian **race categories are added**. Other questions reflect the recent passage of the **14th Amendment**: determining which male citizens were 21 and older and whether their **right to vote** would be denied for any reason.

1880 — 50.2 million people

Marital Status

Marital status (single, married, widowed, divorced) and the number of months unemployed are added. Census takes death counts from registration records in large cities, relieving enumerators of this responsibility. The **number of questions expands greatly** and it takes nearly a **decade to process the results**.

1890 — 63 million people

Punch Cards

To accelerate the processing of the results, Herman Hollerith, a Census Bureau employee, invents the **Hollerith tabulation system of punch cards**. He later goes on to found the Tabulating Machine Company that 20 years later would help form the basis for IBM.

1900 — 76.2 million people

Child Labor

Occupation data reveal the **state of child labor** in the country, eventually leading to the **Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916**.

“For the sake of good administration, sound economy, and the advancement of science, the Census Office as now constituted should be made a permanent Government bureau. This would insure better, cheaper, and more satisfactory work, in the interest not only of our business but of statistic, economic, and social science.”

— Theodore Roosevelt: *First Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1901*

March 6, 1902 —The Census Office becomes a permanent federal agency and is renamed the U.S. Census Bureau.

1910 — 92.2 million people

World War I

Statistics from the 1910 Census are used during **World War I** to **determine the number of draft-age men** and to evaluate **industrial capacities**. Questions about vital statistics are removed, while others are added about living veterans of the Civil War.

1920 — 106 million people

Native Language

Questions about unemployment or service in the Union or Confederate Army or Navy are removed. One question about the year of naturalization and three about **native language** are added. A **Census of Manufactures** is taken in 1921 and repeated every two years until World War II.

1930 — 123.2 million people

Unemployment

The stock market crashes in between the passage of the act authorizing the 1930 Census and the beginning of collection (April 1, 1930). The public and academics want quick **access to unemployment statistics** and the rushed statistics appear too low. Sample surveys of unemployment, taken in the 1930s, confirm the severity of the problem and the Census Bureau begins labor force surveys. To this day, these surveys provide monthly unemployment data.

1940 — 132.2 million people

Probability Sampling

Probability sampling is used for the first time to collect data from only a subset of households and is used for the next six decennial censuses. Beginning in 2005, the **American Community Survey replaces the decennial long-form and** takes over the role of collecting the sample data.

1947 — The Census of Manufactures is reintroduced. This later became part of the Economic Census, the official five-year measure of America's businesses and economy.

1950 — 151.3 million people

UNIVAC I Computer

The Census Bureau leads the way in computing technology by being the first to acquire and use a civilian computer, UNIVAC I. It weighs 16,000 pounds and utilizes 5,000 vacuum tubes.

1960 — 179.3 million people

Census by Mail

The Census Bureau **mails out census forms** to a portion of the country **for the first time**. Households are asked to fill out their form for a census taker to retrieve. Congress directs the Census Bureau to collect information on place of work and means of transportation.

"There are, according to our latest Census Bureau figures, over 25 million Americans who live in substandard housing. It is the ambition of this administration to try to provide decent housing for all American families..."

— *John F. Kennedy: Remarks at the Swearing In of Robert C. Weaver as Housing and Home Finance Administrator, February 11, 1961*

1970 — 203.3 million people---Sent new image

Hispanic Origin

The long-form questionnaire is **reduced from 66 to 23 questions**. A question about **Hispanic origin** is added and instructions in Spanish for filling out forms are distributed for the first time. The Census Bureau expands the use of **mail-out and allows respondents to mail back forms**.

1980 — 226.5 million people

Electronic Data

For the first time **data are available via electronic files and on CD-ROMs**. In 1981, Congress requests a proposal for a replacement to the long-form. The proposed rolling sample census sets the foundation for today's **American Community Survey**.

1990 — 248.7 million people

Electronic Maps

TIGER, a new digital mapping system, is employed to geocode addresses into census geographic areas and produce maps for data collection and data analysis. The Census Bureau's release of TIGER data helps propel the geographic information system (GIS) industry and sets the stage for the online mapping systems we see today.

“Those who suggest that filling out your census form isn't essential are plainly wrong. An inaccurate census distorts our understanding of a community's needs, denies people their fair share of resources, and diminishes the quality of life not only for them but for all of us. If we believe everybody in our American community counts, we simply must make sure everyone is counted.”

— *William J. Clinton: The President's Radio Address, April 1, 2000*

2000 — 281.4 million people

Paid Advertising

The first major testing of the American Community Survey is conducted concurrently with the Decennial Census. Also, the Census Bureau employs paid advertising for the first time to **raise awareness and encourage mail-back participation**, reducing the need for personal visits, the most costly part of the Census. This Census halted a three-decade decline of mail response rates.

2005 — As directed by Congress, the American Community Survey launches nationwide, providing up-to-date demographic and socio-economic information. It delivers new statistics equivalent to the census long-form every year for all neighborhoods and local communities. The American Community Survey is used by individuals, the private sector and all levels of government to influence spending, planning and infrastructure. **American Community Survey and other Census Bureau statistics are used to distribute more than \$400 billion in federal funds annually.**

“The Administration is concerned that, at the same time, the Senate bill reduces the request for the Census Bureau by \$150 million (17 percent). This reduction would suspend the American Community Survey, increase the lifecycle cost of the 2010 Census by over \$1 billion, and lead to a less accurate Census. Timely and accurate Census data are necessary for decision makers at every level of government for budgetary and planning purposes, and in recovery efforts for crisis situations.”

— *George W. Bush: Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 2862 - Departments of Commerce and Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, FY2006, September 8, 2005*

2010 — 308.7 million people

American Community Survey Estimates

American Community Survey statistics are released for the first time (and every year thereafter) for every community and neighborhood nationwide. A **short-form Census** with only 10 questions (made possible through the collection of long-form data via the American Community Survey) makes it easier and faster for the American public to complete their forms. Also a first: data products about same-sex couples and unmarried partners are released.

“Since our Nation's earliest days, the census has played an important role in identifying where resources are most needed. This procedure, enshrined in our Constitution, informs our Government's responses to the evolving needs of American communities.”

- Barack Obama: Proclamation 8488 - Census Day, 2010, March 31, 2010

Note: These figures include the territories of Alaska and Hawaii from 1890 to 1950

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Library of Congress; National Archives and Records Administration; National Institutes of Health; American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara