

Roomers and Boarders: 1880-2005

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Abstract: The household relationship categories of roomers and boarders have appeared in all decennial census forms and published tabulations in various formats for over 100 years, but little has been written about this population. Currently comprising less than one percent of the total household population in 2000, people living as roomers or boarders made up about 2 percent (1 million people) of the household population in 1880, rising to 3 percent (3.8 million) in 1930 during the Great Depression. This paper uses data from the 1880, 1900-2000 Censuses and the 2005 American Community Survey, obtained from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series developed by the University of Minnesota Population Center, to highlight trends in this population between 1880 and 2005. We will present descriptive characteristics of both this population and the characteristics of householders who provide these living accommodations.

Introduction

The relationship to the householder question on Census Bureau surveys including the Decennial Census, American Community Survey (ACS), and Survey of Income and Program Participation, includes a category for roomers and boarders. The Census Bureau currently defines roomers and boarders as persons who live in the household of the householder (person 1) and make cash or noncash payments (e.g. chores) for their living accommodations (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Although data were collected for this population for more than 100 years, very little analysis has ever been produced on this population. This paper uses data from the 1880, 1900-2000 Censuses¹ and the 2005 ACS to highlight trends in the roomer and boarder population over time, present descriptive characteristics of the roomer and boarder population, and provide information on householders in housing units containing a roomer or boarder.

The following research questions will be addressed in this study

1. How has the number and composition of the roomer and boarder population varied over time?
2. What are the characteristics of roomers and boarders?
3. Who are the householders who rent to roomers and boarders?

Data and Methods

All of the data used in this paper was obtained through the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) available through the Minnesota Population Center (Ruggles et al.,

¹ Most of the 1890 Census schedules were destroyed in a fire in 1921 in the basement of the Department of Commerce. For a history of the 1890 Census see Blake (1996).

2004). Data are from the Census 1880, 1900-1960 one-percent samples, the one-percent 1970 form 2 state sample, 1990-2000 five-percent samples, and 2005 ACS one-percent sample.²

Roomers and boarders, and occasionally lodgers, are identified by their relationship to the householder/head of household question on the Census and ACS questionnaire. Because of the myriad of terms used over the history of the Census, the terms roomers, boarders, and lodgers will be used interchangeably in this paper. Appendix A presents a chart of the categories in the relationship question for the period under examination. In the 1960 Census, the relationship question moved from an open-ended question to a response-category question followed by a write-in option. Since then, the relationship question has included both check-box groups and an open-ended category. In the early years of the Census, the relationship item was asked of all persons, however in recent Census and ACS surveys, the relationship question is only contained on the household form and is omitted on the group quarters enumeration. Persons in group quarters were excluded from this analysis to maintain a consistent universe over time.

In addition to changes in the population enumerated, the way housing units have been classified has also changed over time. Before 1940 and in 1980 and 1990, occupied units that contained ten or more individuals unrelated to the householder were classified as group quarters, whereas in the 1940-1970 Censuses, this was lowered to units with 5 or more individuals unrelated to the householder.³ In order to present comparable time series estimates, the more restricted definition is used--roomers and boarders living in households with fewer than 5 unrelated individuals. Table 1 illustrates the potential loss using this definition and how that has changed over time. Between 1980 and 2005, about 5 percent to 7 percent of roomers and

² As these data are from different sample than used in the publication of Census Bureaus reports, the numbers in this paper will be different from those in official Census Bureau publications. See the IPUMS website for a full description of the samples <<http://usa.ipums.org/usa>>

³ For more detailed explanations of the relationship categories in the IPUMS files, see <<http://usa.ipums.org/usa-action/variablesDescription.do?mnemonic=RELATE>>

boarders lived in households with 5 to 9 unrelated individuals. These percentages were much higher for 1880-1930. Clearly, this restriction forced by the 1940-1970 definition underestimates this population for earlier decades when larger rooming houses may have been more common. In addition, although information is available for some censuses for roomers and boarders living in large households or group quarters, in recent years, information for persons living in group quarters were collected on individual forms, therefore relationship information is unavailable.

In addition to the restrictions noted above, in 1960-1990 foster children were included in the roomer/boarder/lodger relationship category. Foster children in the roomer and boarder category in 1960-1990 were estimated and removed from the analysis of roomers and boarders. Persons in the roomers/boarders/foster child category who were under 18 and living in households that contained no other unrelated people 18 and over who might potentially be their parent are estimated to be foster children. Although this procedure is not exact, it provides estimates of the roomer, boarder, and lodger population more consistent with estimates from other years. For example, there were approximately 196,000 foster children under age 18 in the U.S. according to the 1992 March Current Population Survey. Using the above methods, 173,472 children were removed from the roomer, boarder, and lodger category in 1990, similar to the CPS estimate⁴. In 2000 when foster children were enumerated in a separate category, 39,297 roomers and boarders (2.7 percent of all roomers and boarders) would meet the foster child definition using the above methodology.

The characteristics shown in this paper will utilize variables in the IPUMS file that are available for the time series under consideration. They include sex, age, Hispanic origin, and marital status.

⁴ The removal of persons under age 18 in households not including another unrelated person 18 and older results in the removal of 214,776 people in 1960, 235,600 in 1970, and 142,780 in 1980.

Principal Findings

- The number of roomers and boarders peaked in the 1930 at 3.8 million. Since 1970, the number has been between 1.0 and 1.5 million.
- As a percentage of the population, roomers and boarders made up about 3 percent of the household population between 1900 and 1930. By Census 2000, roomers and boarders comprised about 0.5 percent of the population.
- For all time periods, males always outnumbered females as roomers and boarders.
- As a proportion of all men, roomers and boarders made up approximately 4 to 5 percent of men from 1900 to 1930 compared with about 2 percent for women.
- During the 1930 census, there were 2.6 million households containing a roomer or boarder, representing 9 percent of all households. By Census 2000, the number fell to 1.1 million or 1 percent of all households.
- Female householders were more likely to take in roomers or boarders than male householders up until 1990 when the proportion recorded was about 1 percent for both male and female householders. In 1930, 17 percent of female householders took in roomers compared with 8 percent of male householders. It should be noted that before 1980, married women living with their spouses were not tabulated by the Census Bureau as being a householder.
- The majority of male householders who took in roomers from 1880 to 1960 were married and living with their spouse. Among women who were householders, the majority of these householders were widowed during this same period.
- Since 2000, more than one out of every five roomers and boarders were Hispanic.

- In 1960, a larger proportion (17 percent) of roomers and boarders were age 65 and older than in other years presented here. Persons age 18-24 and 25-34 make up the largest proportion of roomers and boarders in all time periods.

Summary

This project provides historical information on the number and composition of both the roomer and boarder population and of householders that rent to roomers and boarders. The numbers of roomers and boarders and their proportion of the total household population have declined since 1930. Preliminary results show that the composition of both roomers and boarders, and their householders have changed over time, particularly characteristics related to the marital status of householders and the proportion of roomers and boarders who are Hispanic. This analysis was unable to examine the reason householders rent a room to a non-family member, but the changing composition of the householders suggest that economic factors may have been important as the majority of female householders who took in roomers and boarders were widowed.⁵

⁵ Stories of widows taking in roomers and boarders to make ends meet have historical roots in the 19th century. See this story of a widow who remodeled her home in Bluff, Utah at the turn of the century. <<http://www.bluffutah.org/tour/adams.htm>>

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Table 1. Estimates of Roomers and Boarders by the Number of Unrelated Individuals in the Household: Censuses of 1880-2000 and the 2005 ACS

Year	Total roomers and boarders	Roomers and boarders by number of unrelated individuals in the household		Percent in households with 5 to 9 unrelated individuals
		Less than 5	5 to 9	
2005	1,133,761	1,072,350	61,411	5.4
2000	1,555,074	1,445,011	110,063	7.1
1990	1,219,114	1,135,667	83,447	6.8
1980	1,363,360	1,285,700	77,660	5.7
1970	1,534,000	1,534,000	NA	NA
1960	1,892,147	1,892,147	NA	NA
1950	3,162,627	3,162,627	NA	NA
1940	3,327,587	3,327,587	NA	NA
1930	4,592,773	3,828,001	764,772	16.7
1920	3,856,749	3,087,211	769,538	20.0
1910	3,950,483	2,911,759	1,038,724	26.3
1900	3,098,274	2,388,402	709,872	22.9
1880	1,249,689	951,212	298,477	23.9
Source: Samples from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Minnesota Population Center.				

Appendix A. Categories of Relationship Used in Decennial Censuses, 1880-2000, and the 2005 American Community Survey

Relationship category	2005	2000	1990	1980	1970	1960	1950	1940	1930	1920	1910	1900	1880
Relatives													
Head/Householder	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Spouse	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2nd/3rd Wife (Polygamous)										X	X	X	X
Child	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adopted Child		X							X	X	X	X	X
Stepchild		X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adopted, n.s.									X		X		
Child-in-law	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Step Child-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Parent	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Stepparent									X	X	X	X	X
Parent-in-Law	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Stepparent-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Sibling	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Step/Half/Adopted Sibling									X	X	X	X	X
Sibling-in-Law	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Step/Half Sibling-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Grandchild	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adopted Grandchild									X	X	X	X	X
Step Grandchild									X	X	X	X	X
Grandchild-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Other Relatives:	X	X	X						X	X	X		X
Grandparent		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Step Grandparent									X	X	X	X	X
Grandparent-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Aunt or Uncle		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Aunt, Uncle-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Nephew, Niece		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Neph/Niece-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Step/Adopted Nephew/Niece									X	X	X	X	X
Grand Niece/Nephew									X	X	X	X	X
Cousin		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cousin-in-law									X	X	X	X	X
Great Grandchild									X	X	X	X	X
Other relatives, nec			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Non-Relatives													
Partner/friend					X	X	X	X			X		
Friend									X	X	X	X	X
Partner									X	X	X	X	X
Partner/roommate				X									
Unmarried Partner	X	X	X										
Housemate/Roomate	X	X	X						X		X	X	
Relative of partner									X	X	X	X	X
Concubine/Mistress										X	X	X	X
Visitor									X	X	X	X	X
Companion and family of companion									X	X	X	X	X
Allocated partner/friend/visitor										X			X

Appendix A. Categories of Relationship Used in Decennial Censuses, 1880-2000, and the 2005 American Community Survey--continued

Relationship category	2005	2000	1990	1980	1970	1960	1950	1940	1930	1920	1910	1900	1880
Pre: 1940 System:													
Other non-relatives									X	X	X	X	X
Roomers/boarders/lodgers									X		X	X	
Boarders									X	X	X	X	X
Lodgers									X	X	X	X	X
Roomer									X	X	X	X	X
Tenant									X	X	X	X	X
Foster child									X	X	X	X	X
Employees:									X				
Servant									X	X	X	X	X
Housekeeper									X	X	X	X	X
Maid									X	X	X	X	X
Cook									X	X	X	X	X
Nurse									X	X	X	X	X
Other probable domestic employee									X	X	X	X	X
Other employee									X	X	X	X	X
Relative of employee									X	X	X	X	X
Military									X	X	X	X	X
Students									X	X	X	X	X
Members of religious orders									X	X	X	X	X
Allocated other non-relative										X			X
1940-2000 System:													
Household Members													
Roomers/boarders/lodgers and foster children			X	X	X	X							
Roomers/boarders/lodgers	X	X					X	X					
Foster children	X	X					X	X					
Employees				X	X	X							
Domestic employees							X	X					
Non-domestic employees							X	X					
Relative of employee							X	X					
Other non-relatives (1990 includes employees)	X	X	X	X			X	X					
Group Quarters Members													
Non-inmate 1990		X	X										
Head of group quarters							X	X					
Employees of group quarters							X	X					
Relative of head, staff, or employee group quarters							X	X					
Other non-inmate 1940-1950							X	X					
Military				X	X	X							
College dormitories				X	X	X							
Residents of rooming houses				X	X	X							
Other non-inmate 1980 (includes employees and non-inmates in institutions)				X									
Other non-inmates 1960-1970 (includes employees)					X	X							
Non-inmates in institutions													
Institutional inmates		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

(X) Indicates category available in that year.