



Opening new frontiers in census taking in Europe: “To boldly go where no man has gone before”

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Abstract

Since ancient times, most countries across the world have been conducting regularly population censuses using basically the same traditional methodology, based on collecting information on paper questionnaires filled for the whole population over a relatively short period of time. This approach, however, has a number of disadvantages, including the huge costs and complexity of the operation, the difficulty to enumerate specific population groups, the relatively long time needed to produce the results, and the fact that in most cases these results are updated only every ten years. For these and other reasons, around the 1970s a number of countries, mainly in Europe, started developing alternative methods to carry out the population census, often taking advantage of information available in registers and administrative sources. Until the 2000¹ census round, however, only a relatively small number of pioneer countries adopted alternative census methods, and the traditional census was still the most common approach. Available data show that the 2010 census round, just completed, was a turning point: about half of the countries in Europe adopted an alternative census methodology, with a large number of variants developed and implemented for the first time. While in the past countries did not want to “risk” adopting innovative methods for such an important and expensive operation like the census, now they seem increasingly open to consider alternative methods. And by developing their own methodology, customized to their needs and requirements, countries are actually pushing further the frontiers of census taking. This paper describes the paths followed by European countries over the last decades in their quest for the best census methodology, looking in particular at the alternative methods adopted in the 2000 and 2010 census rounds. The analysis of these paths, together with information currently available about plans for the 2020 census round, seems to indicate that in Europe the trend of moving away from the traditional census is likely to continue in the future.

Keywords: population census; census methodology; traditional census; registers.

¹ In line with the terminology used in the United Nations World Census Programmes, in this paper the term “2000 census round” refers to the ten year period from 1995 to 2004. Similarly, “1990 round” refers to the period from 1985 to 1994, and “2010 round” to the period from 2005 to 2014.