

DEFINITIONS USED IN THE CENSUS OF HOUSING

Arthur F. Young and staff of the Housing Division

BACKGROUND

The first census enumeration of the population of the United States took place on the first Monday in August, 1790. There were no housing items in the population censuses of 1790 to 1840 or in the census of 1880. The 1850 census included one question on the value of real estate, while the 1860 census also collected data on the number of slave houses. The censuses of 1890 to 1930 obtained information on a limited number of housing characteristics. It was in 1940 that a Census of Housing was first conducted that obtained a variety of facts on the general conditions of the nation's housing. This first housing census was conducted in conjunction with the 16th decennial census of the population and housing.

The population census deals with people and their characteristics. While everyone knows what a person is, there is a need to define what is meant by a "housing unit." The same need of a definition exists for many of the housing items on the housing census. These definitions have to be understandable and meet the needs of the users of housing census data.

HOUSING UNIT DEFINITION

The unit of enumeration on the first census of housing was the "dwelling unit." A dwelling unit was defined as the living quarters occupied or intended for occupancy by one household. A household consisted of a family or other group of persons living together with common housekeeping arrangements, or a person living alone. In 1950, a dwelling unit was defined as (1) a group of rooms occupied or intended for occupancy as separate living quarters and having *either* separate cooking equipment *or* separate entrance or (2) a single room occupied or intended for occupancy as separate quarters if (a) it had separate cooking equipment, (b) it was located in a regular apartment house, *or* (c) it constituted the only living quarters in the structure.

Since 1960, the census of housing has used the concept of "housing unit" instead of "dwelling unit." Both concepts were essentially similar. However, the 1960 "housing unit" concept encompassed *all* private living quarters, whereas the "dwelling unit" concept did not cover all private living accommodations. This difference had the greatest effect on the separate living quarters containing one room with direct access, but having no separate cooking equipment. These units were "housing units" in 1960, but

Arthur F. Young is Chief, Housing Division, U.S. Bureau of Census.

were not "dwelling units" by the previous census' definition unless they were located in a regular apartment house or were the only living quarters in the structure. Approximately one-half million occupied units in 1960, amounting to about one percent of the total housing inventory in the United States, were one-room units with direct access, but with either shared or no kitchen or cooking equipment. It is not possible to determine what portion also qualified as "dwelling units" since there was no measure of the number of units in regular apartment houses nor the number that were the only living quarters in the structure. The evidence suggests, however, that the change in concept between the censuses had relatively little effect on the counts for large areas and the nation. The greatest effect was on the counts for individual tracts or blocks where many persons lived separately in single rooms in hotels, rooming houses and other light housekeeping quarters.

The 1970 housing unit concept expanded the 1960 kitchen or cooking equipment criterion to the existence of *complete* kitchen facilities in the structure for the exclusive use of the occupants of the unit. In the 1980 census, this 1970 definition was modified with the new definition based only on the concepts of separateness and direct access. The definition of housing unit in 1980 was: a house, an apartment, a group of rooms, or a room occupied as separate living quarters or, if vacant, intended for occupancy as separate living quarters. Separate living quarters were those in which the occupants live and eat separately from other persons in the building and which have direct access from the outside or through a common or public hall. At the fringe of this definition, about 1/6000th of the inventory consisted of boats, tents, vans, caves and the like occupied as someone's usual place of residence and, thus, considered to be housing units. These types of structures were not classified as housing units if they were vacant. In 1980, the complete kitchen facilities concept was deleted from the housing unit definition. This change eliminated between 40,000 and 50,000 potential units. It emphasized privacy over facilities and brought the United States' definition in line with the United Nations' definition.

Another, and more important, change in definition in 1980 concerned mobile homes. In 1980, vacant mobile homes were considered as housing units if they were available for occupancy on the site they were standing. This inclusion of vacant mobile homes into the 1980 count was the biggest absolute change made in the definition since 1940. It added 789,000 units to the inventory. In addition, in 1980 the living quarters shared by the householder and up to 8 persons unrelated to him/her or by 9 or less unrelated persons were also classified as housing units. Under the 1970 definition, the cut-off was up to 4 persons unrelated to the head or 5 or less unrelated persons. Living quarters with a larger number of persons unrelated to the householder or of unrelated persons were classified as non-institutional group quarters.

1. Have these modifications in the housing unit definition been responsive and adequate to your needs?
2. Is there a need for any other modification in 1990?

3. How can the definition be improved??

GROUP QUARTERS

Since the 1960 Census of Housing, the Census Bureau has used the concept of "group quarters" to identify all occupied quarters that do not qualify as housing units. These quarters are located most frequently in institutions, hospitals, nurse's dormitories, rooming and boarding houses, residential missions and flophouses, military and other types of barracks, college clubs, dormitories, fraternity and sorority houses, convents and monasteries. Housing characteristics data for group quarters were not collected in the housing census.

For 1990, a decision needs to be made whether some of the living quarters classified as group quarters in 1980 are not better classified as pseudo-housing units. In the decade of the '80s a number of living arrangements have surfaced in which privacy and direct access are present, but some or all of the residents of these quarters eat together at a common dining hall. An example of this is the housing for the elderly where separate apartments meet the housing unit requirement of direct access, and in some cases also have cooking facilities, but are a type of congregate housing because group meals are part of the rent.

1. Should quarters of this type be considered separate housing units rather than group quarters? If so, how should the group quarters definition be modified to identify these units?
2. Will this modification also apply to some other similar situations such as college dormitories?
3. Is there a need for housing characteristics data for these types of pseudo-housing units?

SEASONAL VS. YEAR-ROUND VACANTS

The housing census classifies vacant housing units on the basis of the use given to the units rather than other physical attributes. Thus, a vacant year-round housing unit is a unit available or intended for year-round use. Similarly, a vacant seasonal unit is intended for seasonal occupancy only. In 1940, seasonal units were mostly unheated summerhouses or bungalows habitable only at specific seasons of the year. However, by 1970, there was great difficulty trying to identify what a truly seasonal unit was. Structures suitable for year-round occupancy were occupied only at certain seasons of the year. These units were year-round in terms of their physical attributes and design, but seasonal only because of the use given to them.

For example, in a high-rise building at a beach resort, a modern self-contained, centrally heated, vacant condominium apartment is a seasonal vacant unit if its owner uses it only in the summer, while an identical vacant unit in the same structure is a year-round vacant classified as held for occasional use if its owner uses it at various

times throughout the year.

1. Are we adequately reflecting the housing vacancy inventory by basing the definitions on use rather than on physical attributes?
2. Would it be more useful to classify units by whether or not the structure is habitable year-round?

BEDROOMS

The census defines bedrooms on the basis of the use given to the room. A bedroom, by census definition, is a room used mainly for sleeping, even if used also for other purposes. This means that an "empty nester" household (a family whose children have all left home) that converts two of the original four bedrooms into a library and a den now has only two bedrooms. However, if the householder goes to a real estate agent to put the house on the market, the realtor would list it as a four bedroom house.

1. Is the census definition what you need or should we revise our definition?

BATHROOMS

The Census Bureau defines a complete bathroom as having a flush toilet, bathtub or shower and a wash basin with piped hot and cold water for the exclusive use of the occupants of the housing unit. These components must all be in the same room. A half-bathroom has at least a flush toilet *or* bathtub or shower for exclusive use, but does not have all the facilities of a complete bathroom. For the 1980 census, the equipment had to be inside the same building as the unit being enumerated. Units with bathroom facilities which were also for the use of the occupants of other housing units were considered to have "no complete bathroom." Similarly, units having the three components of a complete bathroom, but with these facilities located in different rooms were also considered to have "no complete bathroom."

1. Are these definitions of "complete" and "half-" bathroom adequate?
2. Should the half-bathroom definition be revised to agree with the realtors' concept of availability of flush toilet *plus* a sink?
3. Are we correct in requiring that all the facilities be located in one room?

MOBILE HOMES OR TRAILERS

The 1940 Census of Housing classified trailers and mobile homes as "other dwelling places." Only occupied trailers were enumerated. In 1950, a dwelling unit which was a trailer, but had been set on a

permanent foundation or had one or more rooms built onto it was classified as a "house, apartment, flat." Only those trailers that were still on wheels or had been set on a temporary foundation and had no additions built onto it other than a porch or a shed, were classified as "trailers." Again, only occupied trailers were enumerated.

The 1960 census introduced a refinement to the 1950 classification of trailers. Whether the trailer was mobile or on a permanent foundation was *not* a factor in the classification of trailers as "house, apartment, flat." Only if one or more rooms had been added to a trailer was it classified as a "house, apartment, or flat." All other trailers, whether mobile or on a permanent foundation, were classified as "trailers."

The 1970 and 1980 censuses classified trailers on the basis of the same definitions used in the 1960 census. However, while all the previous censuses included occupied trailers only, the 1980 census also enumerated vacant mobile homes and trailers if they were intended for occupancy at their location site at the time of the census.

1. Are these definitions for mobile homes and trailers adequate?
2. Have the modifications introduced for the 1980 census been helpful?
3. Is there a need to expand the definition to identify the various types of mobile homes, trailers or manufactured housing? If so, what are the definitions that will allow the respondents and the enumerators to identify the various types?

There were reports that in 1980 some respondents living in mobile homes on a permanent foundation misclassified their housing units as "a one-family house detached from any other house." What should be done in 1990 to avoid this problem?

CONCLUSION

The quality of the census data is affected by the adequacy of the definitions. Respondents need clear common usage definitions of the various concepts involved. The Census Bureau needs the data users to gauge the existing definitions and identify their adequacy in terms of terminology and as a vehicle for providing data needs. This may simplify the work of the respondent as well as augment the usefulness of the housing census data.