

TRENDS IN HOUSING CENSUS CONTENT--PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Arthur F. Young and staff at the Housing Division

INTRODUCTION

In 1931, President Herbert Hoover expressed the opinion of many regarding the importance of housing to the strength and health of the nation. "Adequate housing goes to the very roots of the well-being of family, and the family is the social unit of the nation....Nothing contributes more to happiness or sound social stability than the surroundings of their homes." This concern for the adequacy of America's housing was heightened as the length and severity of the Great Depression of the 1930s increased.

The effect of the Depression on all aspects of American life was severe and far-reaching. Housing was not spared. Construction of new homes came to a virtual halt. Between 1930 and 1939 an average of only 273,000 units a year were built. Foreclosures on homes occurred at the rate of 1,000 per day. The quality of existing structures deteriorated because there was little money for repairs and upkeep. Families were forced to double-up with relatives or seek makeshift shelters in hopes of coping with the crisis. The poor condition of the nation's housing and the need for corrective action was voiced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his second inaugural address when he stated, "I see a third of the nation ill-housed...."

HOUSING PAST

The first Census of Housing took place in 1940. It contained questions on the structural condition of the nation's housing stock; its equipment, facilities and financial characteristics. It provided a comprehensive foundation for the future housing censuses with much of its content asked in each subsequent housing census. Specifically, the 1940 Housing Census content had the following inquiries:

1. farm/nonfarm
2. tenure (owned or rented)
3. value of home
4. rent
5. estimated rent for an owned nonfarm home
6. type of structure (units in structure)

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7. original purpose of structure
8. exterior material
9. structure in need of major repairs
10. year built
11. water supply (piped water)
12. toilet facilities (flush toilet, exclusive use or shared)
13. bathtub or shower (exclusive use or shared)
14. electric lights
15. refrigeration
16. radio
17. heating equipment
18. heating fuel
19. cooking fuel
20. furniture included in rent
21. estimated rent unfurnished (for furnished apartment)
22. utility costs
23. market value of property
24. present debt on 1st and 2nd mortgage
25. payments to amortize the principal
26. taxes included in mortgage payment
27. interest rate on mortgage
28. type of mortgage holder
29. vacancy status
30. vacant seasonal or non-seasonal
31. asking rent (vacant for rent)

These questions were asked by enumerators in a door-to-door census at all dwelling units. The 1940 census documented the consequences of the Depression and focused attention on the poor condition of the nation's housing.

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Some of the findings of the 1940 census were: almost one-half of all units lacked complete private plumbing facilities, 31 percent had mechanical refrigeration, 21 percent lacked electric lighting and 43.6 percent of the units were owner-occupied.

The 1950 housing census content was similar to the 1940 content. However, the changes showed more deletions than additions. The following items were not asked:

1. estimated rent for an owned home
2. original purpose of structure
3. exterior building material
4. the six items on mortgages were shifted to the sample Residential Finance Survey
5. need of major repairs

The new questions asked in the 1950 census were:

1. dilapidated/not dilapidated rating given by an enumerator
2. trailer (mobile home)
3. kitchen sink
4. television
5. asking price (vacant for sale)

The 1950 census was a door-to-door personally enumerated census. But many of the equipment items and the year-built question were asked at a sample of 20 percent of the dwelling units.

Examples of data from the new items: trailers made up 0.7 percent of the occupied stock, 85 percent of all units had kitchen sinks and 12 percent of the occupied units had television. Mechanical refrigerators had increased to 80 percent, while homes without electric light dropped to 6 percent of the total during the decade.

The 1960 housing census incorporated substantial changes in content and in procedures. The scope of the inquiries was broadened, but the extended use of sampling held the total time required by the average American household to answer the census to approximately the 1950 levels. The following items were dropped:

1. mortgage on property
2. electric lighting
3. refrigeration

4. kitchen sink
5. furniture included in rent
6. estimated rent unfurnished (for furnished apartment)

The inquiries added in the 1960 census were:

1. access to unit
2. number of bathrooms
3. number of bedrooms
4. source of water
5. sewage disposal
6. water-heating fuel
7. basement
8. telephone available
9. mobile home foundation
10. clothes washer
11. clothes dryer
12. home food freezer
13. air conditioning
14. automobiles available
15. stories in structure
16. elevator
17. kitchen or cooking equipment (exclusive use or shared)
18. duration of vacancy

In 1960, the post office delivered an advance census form to all residential addresses. The basic 100 percent population and housing items were obtained through a door-to-door enumeration at which time a booklet containing the sample questions was left at every fourth housing unit to be mailed back by the respondent.

Examples of data from the new items in 1960 were: 12 percent of all occupied units had air conditioning, 18 percent had a home food freezer, 79 percent could be reached by phone and, while 22 percent did not have an automobile available, the same percentage had two or more. Television ownership had increased to 87 percent in the 1960s.

The 1970 housing census showed modest changes in content.

The following items were dropped:

1. mobile home foundation
2. dilapidated/not dilapidated (enumerator evaluation)
3. radio

Items added to the 1970 census were:

1. second home
2. condominium or cooperative ownership
3. dishwasher
4. UHF television sets
5. battery-operated radios
6. the stories in structure had increased detail

The majority (over 60 percent) of American homes were enumerated in 1970 by a mailout/mailback procedure. The remaining parts of the country and vacants and nonresponses were enumerated by personal interview.

The new items in 1970 showed that 0.9 percent of the owner-occupied housing units were cooperatives or condominiums, 19 percent of the occupied units had dishwashers and 5 percent of the households had second homes. Air conditioning had increased to 37 percent, home food freezers to 28 percent, telephones to 87 percent and television to 96 percent.

The 1980 housing census had few, but nonetheless important, changes in content. First, the housing unit definition was changed to include vacant mobile homes. It added almost 800,000 housing units to the inventory. Second, the following appliances and other items were dropped:

1. clothes washing machine
2. clothes dryer machine
3. home food freezer
4. dishwasher
5. television
6. battery operated radios
7. basement
8. second home

9. running water
10. bath or shower (see new items)
11. flush toilet

The new items involved a group of questions to measure the out-of-pocket expenses of single-family owners for shelter costs:

1. mortgaged/not mortgaged
2. mortgage payment
3. real estate taxes
4. fire and hazard insurance on home
5. utility costs (previously obtained only for renters)

The other new items were:

1. light trucks and vans
2. one question on complete private plumbing facilities which replaced the three former questions on the components of complete private plumbing.
3. year householder moved into the unit (this item was asked in the previous 2 censuses as part of the population content).

The 1980 census procedurally was much the same as the 1970 census. It was a mailout/mailback operation to enumerate around 90 percent of American homes, with personal enumeration of the sparsely settled areas and personal followup of vacants and nonresponses.

The new home owner shelter costs inquiries showed that, for the selected items, the median expenditure for households with a mortgage was \$366 and \$128 for households without a mortgage. The median percent of income spent for these costs was 19 percent for households with a mortgage and 12 percent for households without a mortgage. Approximately one in four households reported having a light truck or van available at home.

The changes in the content of the housing census from 1940 to 1980 reflect changes in our housing and in our concerns about housing. The changes made between 1970 and 1980 shifted the content emphasis towards the economic and away from the structural or equipment inquiries.

1. Were we correct in shifting our data collection emphasis in 1980 from the structural and equipment aspects to the financial/ economic aspects of housing?
2. Did this change meet your current data needs?

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3. Did the deletion of the items mentioned above present any problems for data users?
4. Were the new items asked on mortgages, taxes, and insurance useful? If so, how were they used?
5. Were the financial items presented in the most effective manner in 1980 publications and tapes?

HOUSING PRESENT

Many housing analysts and policy makers believe that the major issue for the 1980s and beyond will be "housing affordability." They look at census data from 1940 to 1980 and at current surveys and see tremendous improvement in the structural adequacy and mechanical equipment of the housing stock. They also note, however, rising prices and monthly costs for shelter, an increasing proportion of earnings spent on housing and a declining rate of home ownership. Home buyers are faced with fluctuating mortgage rates and a tremendous variety of mortgage instruments. Should the Bureau continue the trend toward more economic characteristics and fewer structural/equipment inquiries?

1. Is housing affordability an issue which needs to be addressed?
2. What data items are needed to measure and define affordability?
3. Should we expand our inquiries to include mortgage type, interest rate, new or assumed mortgage?
4. Should we limit these inquiries to housing units purchased within the last 10 years? 5 years?
5. Can these types of data be collected accurately from home owners?
6. If so, can they be collected in a decennial census environment?
7. At what geographic level are they needed?
8. Would a sample survey be a more appropriate vehicle for collecting these characteristics?
9. What are the programs or policy needs for these data?

Information on financial characteristics--value, rent, homeowner costs--are provided only for specified universes. Statistics on rent are shown for "specified renter-occupied" units which include all renter-occupied housing units except one-family houses on 10 or more acres. Value is presented for "specified owner-occupied" housing units and for condominium housing units separately. The "specified owner-occupied" housing units include only one-family houses on less than 10 acres, without a commercial establishment or medical office on

the property. The shelter costs of home owners are presented only for specified owner-occupied housing units. Shelter costs were not collected for condominium owners or owners in multi-unit structures or owners in mobile homes.

1. Should the rent universe be expanded to include all renter-occupied housing units?
2. How would this expansion of the rent universe affect your work and data needs?
3. Should the value universe be expanded to include all owner-occupied noncondominium housing units in multi-unit structures?
4. Should the value data be obtained for mobile homes or trailers?
5. Should the value data be obtained for single-family homes regardless of the acreage or existence of a medical office or commercial establishment on the property?
6. Should shelter costs be obtained for the expanded universes discussed above?
7. How would you use the data from these expansions in your work?
8. What programs require these data?

HOUSING FUTURE

Should early benchmarks be established for future censuses to measure 21st century technology and its influence in housing? The areas identified as influencing the future housing are: information and communication, the home as workplace, and the home as an energy consumer.

1. What items relating to advances in information and communication--microcomputers, cellular telephones, cable television, VCRs, satellite communication (dish antennas), electronic mail--should be given consideration in the 1990 or future censuses?
2. Will there be an increased use of the home for business or as a workplace?
3. What energy-related items should be added to future census inquiries?
4. How will these affect the future of housing and its geographic dispersion?
5. What are the housing data needed to measure these trends?

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6. Are there any other trends that you foresee that may have an effect on future housing data needs?