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Innovations in census methodology and use of new data sources**Future EU census programmes: beyond 2021****Note by Eurostat***Summary*

This document describes the work of Eurostat and members of the *Task Force on future EU censuses of population and housing* to prepare for the collection of census-type population data after the next census round in 2021. The issues that have been discussed as part of this work – such as the stated need by users for more frequent data and the difficulties of predicting 10 years into the future what access will be possible to administrative data – are likely to have wide relevance to many countries. These issues are described here to inform further discussion by the Expert Group on the development of the census after 2021.

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I. Introduction

1. In 2016, representatives of France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK on the *Task Force on future EU censuses of population and housing* drafted jointly with Eurostat a vision for the post-2021 census. This vision was a result of the consultations with key users that showed a growing need for more frequent census-like data, especially on core population and migration topics. The vision is made possible by the fact that the vast majority of European countries have made, or are planning or considering, major changes to the data sources and methods used for the census; most widely, the increased use of data from administrative sources and a move away from a traditional door-to-door census enumeration. The Directors of Social Statistics of EU Member States approved this vision and asked Eurostat and the Task Force to prepare a strategy that gives more detail about how this vision might be achieved.

2. This strategy builds upon Eurostat's plans for a fundamental redesign of European census-type statistics after the 2021 census round. These changes to the census are separate from – but must be consistent with – the wider on-going modernisation of European social statistics. A key aspect will be to ensure a complementarity of data to meet key user needs, while avoiding duplication of data collections. After the initial vision and having in mind the richness and importance of census data, first reflections about the future of the censuses after 2021, have been developed into a strategy for a way forward after the 2021 census round.

II. Strategy for “Beyond 2021”

3. The strategy document provides a framework for the development of census-type population statistics over the coming 10-15 years, covering the more frequent (annual) statistics to be introduced and expanded after the completion of the 2021 census programme (from around 2024), as well as consideration of the likely needs for a full census programme in 2031. Within this framework, some short- to medium-term actions can be defined more concretely. Longer-term developments (such as the need for and potential content of the 2031 census) may be noted tentatively, with further review and development to be considered in detail at a later stage.

4. This strategy can be seen as a response to the changing needs of data users and an indication of a possible route towards meeting these needs. Although this is being considered as part of the long-term future of the census, the developments proposed will also encompass existing data collections (such as the annual demographic statistics, among others). The census should be seen within the wider context of existing population and social statistics.

A. General overview

5. The post-2021 census can be defined in the form of two separate collections: one annual to be introduced in the mid-2020s and one decennial to take place in the form of the recurring decennial census first to be done in 2031. The challenge is to define the content of these two collections, and the extent to which data that are currently collected in a decennial census might, in the future, be feasibly and usefully collected on an annual basis. The content of the annual collection can continue to evolve as user needs and data availability change.

6. Although some general trends can be identified (an increasing availability over time of administrative data, a growing interest in having key data available on an annual basis),

it is currently unclear exactly which data will be collected annually and when these data could be added to the developing annual data collection. Given this uncertainty, and the need to look ahead for a period of up to 10-15 years in the future, it is necessary that the framework for the post-2021 development should be implemented in a flexible manner. At the same time, NSIs require firm information about forthcoming priorities and obligations to allow appropriate methods to be developed, tested and implemented.

7. At this point, the strategy for the post-2021 census for EU and EFTA countries implies the following:

- A census round every ten years supported by annual updates on relevant topics;
- Annual updates starting with a core set of demographic and migration topics (e.g. age, sex, country of citizenship, place of residence 12 months previously) with limited cross-tabulations and less detailed disaggregations;
- Flexibility regarding the topics of the annual updates, and the timetable for increasing the amount of data available on an annual basis. Developments will be subject to ongoing review of (primarily administrative) data availability, costs and user needs and priorities;
- Timeliness of the publication of annual census data (within one year for some of the more simple demographic tables and in the following calendar year for some other, slower to produce, census tables);
- Data provision of annual updates on a detailed regional level (LAU 2 or NUTS 3) and of annual population counts for a geographical grid (1 km² or possibly smaller grid squares in densely populated urban areas);
- Integration of annual census updates into the annual work programmes of the national and European Statistical systems. This implies a convergence and merging with the annual demographic statistics (and possibly other data collections such as those on urban centres), as well as coherence with other European social statistics developments (e.g. in the area of social surveys, such as the Labour Force Survey). The close involvement of NSIs and Eurostat teams responsible for demographic statistics will be important at every stage in the planning and implementation of the annual census statistics.

B. Key issues identified

8. The details of what must be collected post-2021, as well as the frequency and timetable for introducing new parts of the data collections, will be subject to ongoing review since duplication of work must be avoided. This implies a clear need for coordination of development work with other areas of statistics, leading to convergence and a merger in the data collections. There may be opportunities to streamline data collection processes and to remove any existing overlap between data collections.

9. As already mentioned, future availability of administrative data is unclear at this point since no one knows what data will be accessible by the mid-2020s. However, it is clear that national differences in data accessibility and use are likely to remain. Moreover, it is difficult even for key users to define with certainty at this point what will be their data needs in next 10 years.

10. Another issue is the reference date and timeliness of outputs: existing annual demographic and migration data relate to a single reference date and are supplied within 12 months of this reference date. However, some census topics will be hard to produce to this

schedule. A move to a merged annual census must aim to maintain at least the current level of timeliness and harmonisation.

11. Population bases and residence definitions: the usual residence definition is preferred under Regulation (EC) 763/2008, however, some flexibility is allowed. As NSIs move towards using administrative data, “Usual residence” may be less readily applied and may no longer be the natural definition to use. Annual census data should be based on the same population base as annual demographic statistics.

12. However, the main issue that needs to be resolved is how to preserve what makes a census such a valuable data source? e.g. individual enumeration, availability of small-area data, etc.

C. Possible way(s) forward

13. Given the abovementioned issues and the need to plan for a period of up to 10-15 years in the future, it is necessary that the framework for the post-2021 development should be implemented in a flexible manner. At the same time, NSIs require firm information about forthcoming priorities and obligations to allow appropriate methods to be developed, tested and implemented.

14. One option would be to follow a similar approach to that adopted for the regulation on Integrated European Social Statistics (IESS) whereby elements of the development framework are established in a European Parliament and Council regulation, with a rolling implementation plan being set and updated by legal acts. This approach, as outlined below, provides NSIs with certainty about the details of data to be provided in the next few years, together with more tentative plans for future requirements.

15. Under this approach a European Parliament and Council regulation would be introduced, setting the long-term framework for the collection of population statistics. Among other aspects, this would specify the statistical domains and topics to be covered, as well as issues such as data sources and quality. As such, this could be seen as a replacement for the current Regulation (EC) 763/2008 (and Regulation (EU) 1260/2013 on European demographic statistics when this expires), although this would apply both for an annual data collection to be introduced in the mid-2020s and a decennial census in 2031. However, the framework regulation would not define which data were to be collected annually from the beginning and which would be retained either for later inclusion in the annual collection or only included in the full decennial census.

16. Defining the content of this framework regulation would be the first step to implementing this approach. As a starting point, it could be assumed that this should cover all of the topics currently included in the 2021 census, as well as those topics included in the existing annual demographic statistics collected under Regulation (EU) 1260/2013. The framework regulation should also include some or all of the migration data collected under Regulation (EC) 862/2007, and other relevant areas of statistics.

17. An advantage of this approach would be to increase the harmonisation of population data across different data collections. In effect, this could be seen as an overall framework regulation for population statistics.

18. The framework regulation could also retain the existing flexibility that Member States have in the selection of data sources, while also recognising, for example, the importance of administrative data for the annual data collection.

19. The content and subsequent extension of the annual data collection would then be defined on the basis of rolling work plans to be set in legal acts (to be allowed for under the European Parliament and Council framework regulation). In common with the approach

taken for Integrated European Social Statistics (IESS), the acts could define rolling multiannual plans. (In the case of the IESS, the rolling plans look eight years ahead.) The data to be collected for the first few years covered by the plan would be fixed, with tentative plans for the rest of the planning period that could be amended by subsequent acts.

20. The rolling plans would be defined in close consultation with NSIs and data users. The framework regulation would define the conditions under which the acts could be formulated –for example, assessing the availability of appropriate data sources to avoid excessive burdens or costs on NSIs.

21. A starting point for the annual collection could be to ensure that those data already collected annually – including the annual demographic data – should be available annually from the beginning of this data collection. The priority migration-related variables should also be included at an early stage. The detailed initial programme of the first annual data collection would be discussed and established in the process of drafting the new framework regulation, or in parallel as a first implementing act.

22. This approach would also allow for the collection of some data at an intermediate frequency -for topics where annual data were not necessary or feasible, but where decennial data were not sufficient. This could allow for an *ad hoc* collection of data on a particular population-related topic to be collected if there was an emerging need for such data that could not wait until the 2031 (or subsequent) full decennial census.

23. As with Regulation 763/2008, the framework regulation would also allow for legal acts on the detailed technical specification of the datasets and statistical topics, covering aspects such as the disaggregations and cross-tabulations required, geographical detail, quality measures and metadata. The legal acts might also be used to set and, if necessary adjust, the population base definition to be applied.

24. All legal acts could be developed in parallel but some would be expected to be applicable semi-permanently (e.g., quality measures, metadata) as opposed to the rolling plans that would be updated regularly.