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Topic (v): Statistical disclosure control methods for the next census round

**CONFIDENTIALITY ISSUES IN THE EU POPULATION AND  
HOUSING CENSUSES OF 2011**

**Supporting Paper**

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## CONFIDENTIALITY ISSUES IN THE EU POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES OF 2011 \*

### I) INTRODUCTION

1. The Council of the European Union and the European Parliament have adopted in 2008 the Regulation (EC) No 763/2008<sup>1</sup> on population and housing censuses, acknowledging the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing. This Regulation states that "Member States shall take all measures necessary to meet the requirements of data protection. The Member States' own data protection provisions shall not be affected by this Regulation." The transmission of data subject to statistical confidentiality is governed by specific EU regulations, ensuring the physical and logical protection of confidential data and that no unlawful disclosure or non-statistical use occurs when Community statistics are produced and disseminated. In particular, the new "EU Statistical Law"<sup>2</sup> devotes an entire chapter to statistical confidentiality. In other words, what is considered confidential at national level, it remains such also once transmitted to Eurostat and, if a country wants to transmit confidential data, this has to be done in accordance with the EU regulations in force.
2. The programme for data dissemination that Eurostat is implementing for the census round 2011 is based on an innovative approach. The basic data input is in the form of hypercubes, which are multidimensional tables with several dimensions. The size of these hypercubes has a relevant impact on confidentiality issues: while for a set of predefined common bi- or tri-dimensional tables the disclosure control for census data could be considered (relatively) feasible to implement, such control becomes a real challenge as more dimensions are added.
3. In order to minimise the risk of disclosure, the size of the hypercubes has been kept as small as possible; nevertheless, it remains very likely that methods for confidentiality will have to be applied. If these methods will be different from one country to another, the comparability of the data might be affected. Moreover, for the users it would be easier to understand the constraints deriving from the application of one single method for all the countries rather than the consequences of several national methods for confidentiality. It has thus been considered worthy to explore the margins of action for a common approach at EU level for disclosure control of census data.
4. In order to assess the state of the art on disclosure control methods for census data in Europe, a quick survey was launched in May 2008. The questionnaire, addressed to 45 countries, explored the following dimensions:
  - a. whether a specific regulation on the confidentiality of census data existed in the country;
  - b. the implementation of the national confidentiality requirements;

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\* This paper has been prepared by Giampaolo Lanzieri (Eurostat) and Eric Schulte Nordholt (Statistics Netherlands).

<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EC) No 763/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 July 2008 on population and housing censuses (Text with EEA relevance). OJ L 218, 13.8.2008, p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 on European statistics (Text with relevance for the EEA and for Switzerland). OJ L 87, 31.3.2009, p. 164.

- c. which institution was responsible for the definition/implementation of the disclosure control;
- d. the availability of a methodology for confidentiality of the census 2011 data;
- e. if there was support for an action at EU level aiming to identify a common methodology.

The full set of answers from 32 countries is available in the Interest Group “Population” in CIRCA<sup>3</sup>.

5. Normally, there are not specific provisions for the confidentiality of census data, as this is covered by the restrictions applied to all statistical data. If mention is made in the census law, this is usually recalling the more general national regulations on the subject. The practical implementation of these general provisions is in general a task of the national statistical offices; however, not many of them had already defined a methodology for disclosure control for the next census. There was therefore a large support for an action by Eurostat for analysing the feasibility of a common methodology for disclosure control of the census data.

## **II) THE CHALLENGES OF AN EU HARMONISED APPROACH FOR DISCLOSURE CONTROL**

6. On the basis of the survey results above, Eurostat has thus set up a Task Force on “EU Methodology for Census Data Disclosure Control” (CENSDC), composed by experts in the field of disclosure control from Germany, Estonia, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Its specific objective is to identify and resolve areas of difficulty relating to the confidentiality data treatment of population and housing census data, adopting or developing a harmonised methodology which respects the national regulations. The Task Force CENSDC has already met two times, and it is expected to present the results of its work at the Eurostat Working Group on Demography and Census to be held in the first half of 2010.
7. The Task Force CENSDC has to deal with several conceptual challenges. First of all, the relatively high number of dimensions of the hypercubes makes complicated the application of the standard methods of disclosure control. Secondly, given the approach of the Eurostat Census Hub, it has also to be decided where these controls should take place, in the national databases or “on the fly”. Third, consistency of the tables' results should be ensured between hypercubes and between extractions. Fourth, as the expertise and tools for disclosure control available in each Member State can be rather different, a common approach should be as easy as possible to implement. Fifth, the method should possibly be easy to understand for the common user. Sixth, as one of the added values of a census is the availability of detailed information, the loss of data should be minimised. Last, but certainly not the least, each country has its own regulation on confidentiality that has to be respected.
8. For the next census round, there is a more ambitious programme of census data dissemination. More information than in past rounds on all the EU Member States (and other countries willing to be part of the census dissemination programme) will be put at disposal of the users by means of a single interface, the Eurostat Census Hub. This system transmits any user's query to the national databases, retrieve the information, and display it all together. From the confidentiality point of view, the other side of the medal is that,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/dsis/population> (access restricted to registered members).

given the high number of dimensions and the freedom of the user to build the tables of interest (including repeated queries), the risk associated with standard methods for disclosure control need to be carefully assessed.

9. One basic choice is if the national data on which the extraction is made have to be already "cleaned" for confidentiality, or if the disclosure control can be made "on the fly", just before the data are displayed to the user. The latter option would be justified by the fact that the number of dimensions displayed to the user would be much less than the total number of dimensions available in the related hypercube, thus reducing the risk of disclosure. On the other side, such an approach would mean that confidential data are somehow being transferred from the national database (with all the implications from the IT security point of view), and that the risks connected to multiple queries, helpful for potential intruders, are increased. In fact, the levels at which the data can be treated for confidentiality are three: microdata, hypercube or extraction.
10. Whatever the level at which the disclosure control is implemented, it is considered important that the results disseminated to the users are consistent between selected tables and between extractions. The large use is made of census data and the fact they are queried for a long period require that the users will not be confronted with different results depending on the time of the extraction or on the hypercube of reference. Although some confidentiality methods could be very effective, it should also be assessed whether they generate undesired consequences in terms of data comparability.
11. Methods and tools for disclosure control have reached a certain level of complexity. Several European projects have been devoted to this domain, among which the CASC project (2000-2003, see <http://neon.vb.cbs.nl/casc/>), the CENEX project (2006) and the ESSnet project (2008-2009), and UNECE and Eurostat organise regular Work Sessions on Statistical Data Confidentiality (see <http://www.unece.org/stats/archive/04.06.e.htm>). However, it can not be assumed that the same level of expertise is available in all statistical offices. If the statistical disclosure control has to be applied at national level based on a common approach, then the harmonisation of the confidentiality methods has to take into account additional requisites such as the easiness of implementation and the ready availability of tools (possibly without excessive costs). In periods of scarcity of resources, countries can not be asked to sustain relevant additional expenses.
12. Besides the above challenges pertinent to a harmonised approach, there are also other elements to be considered part of the exercise, regardless if the method is applied to all countries or if it is country-specific. Whatever the disclosure control applied, the user should be informed of its characteristics and consequences on the data. The easier a method, the easier for the common user to understand the implications (and likely the easier to communicate this information). For the sake of transparency and overall data quality, this aspect should not be totally neglected.
13. One of the major features of the census is that it provides information at small geographical level and/or for small groups of persons, sometimes even being the only available source. Such a richness should be preserved as much as possible vis-à-vis the need to ensure the data confidentiality. Although the extensive application of rigorous methods of statistical disclosure control may help preventing (to the possible extent) confidentiality breaches, at the same time it can significantly reduce the availability of information. It is in the interest of the users to try minimising the impact of disclosure

control methods on data availability. The filters for confidentiality should be applied to a reasonable extent, bearing in mind the related unavoidable loss of (detailed) information.

14. Finding a satisfactory solution for each of the above-listed challenges risk to be a hopeless task, and adding the national constraints makes things even more complicated. However, despite of the large number of national requirements on data confidentiality, it still makes sense to look for a common solution because the national regulations are often only setting general principles, leaving in many cases the practical implementation (and related methodological choices) to the national statistical offices. If these statistical offices agree on an harmonised approach, there is no infringement of the national provisions, as these bodies are the technical responsible of the appropriate disclosure control to the national data. The wide support expressed by the statistical offices to a joint action at EU level on confidentiality of census data can be seen as an expression of the need of exchange of experiences and/or assistance on technical issues: on this, the Task Force CENSDC can certainly play an important role.

### **III) TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF AN EU METHODOLOGY**

15. The Regulation (EC) No 763/2008 is output oriented, i.e. it is open to the use of different data sources, but requires the respect of the essential features of population and housing censuses, the use of harmonized definitions, technical specifications, topics and breakdowns. The Census regulation foresees unified reporting years (the first being 2011), a common EU dissemination programme, technical standards for the data transmission and the establishment of quality reports for European purposes. Concerning the statistical confidentiality, the following aspects are of particular importance:
  - a. Article 4 (2) foresees that the "Member States shall take all measures necessary to meet the requirements of data protection. The Member States' own data protection provisions shall not be affected by this regulation." That means that the protection of census data comes under the responsibility of the Member States, and has to be done at their level rather than by the Commission. Article 4 (2) provides further that the European Commission is not entitled to issue legislation on the disclosure protection of census data on the basis of the Census regulation. However, Article 6 (4) stipulates "The Commission (Eurostat), in cooperation with the competent authorities of the Member States, shall provide methodological recommendations designed to ensure the quality of the data and metadata produced, acknowledging, in particular, the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing". Consideration 3 to the regulation explains that "in view of methodological and technological developments, best practices should be identified and the enhancement of the data sources and methodologies used for censuses in the Member States should be fostered".
  - b. Article 5 (2) of the Census regulation foresees that the "Member States shall provide the Commission (Eurostat) with final, validated and aggregated data (...)". This excludes the transmission of microdata. Although aggregated data are not necessarily protected against disclosure of sensitive data, the spirit of Article 5 (2) implies that no confidential data shall be transmitted to Eurostat.

- c. Considerations 5 and 7 stipulate that the Statistical Law, respectively the European Statistics Code of Practice, constitute the framework for the Census regulation, both containing provisions on statistical confidentiality.
- d. Consideration 6 recalls the regulations on the transmission of data subject to statistical confidentiality. This means that, if Member States transmit data they feel is subject to statistical confidentiality, Eurostat has to ensure the physical and logical protection and that no unlawful disclosure or non-statistical use occurs when Community statistics are produced and disseminated. However, the census regulation does not foresee the transmission of confidential census data from the Member States to Eurostat. In a broad sense, Consideration 6 reminds indirectly that everything must be done to avoid inadvertent disclosure of any confidential data.

16. In principle, the Task Force CENSDC follows up two major branches of thinking:

- a. A recommendation on the pre-tabulation noise protection at the microdata level. This seems to have advantages in the context of both a national and a European dissemination of 2011 Census results. However, this protection can only be done at the NSI (National Statistical Institute) level and Eurostat would have no means of even verifying that such a protection has been executed.
- b. A recommendation on post-tabulation protection (hypercube level). For the time being, the work is split into "cell suppression" and "post-tabulation noise protection". A simple solution would be to check which cells cannot be published (the so-called primary suppressions) and protect in addition a number of cells to prevent recalculations from the margins (the so-called secondary suppressions). However, the Task Force might also consider whether synergies between these two methodologies are achievable — given that the objective is limited to preventing the identification of individuals, i.e. to prevent certainty about cell values in frequency tables. This prevention action should ideally take place with minimum information loss.

17. As the real data of the 2011 Censuses are of course not yet ready, test hypercubes of a few countries are being used by the Task Force CENSDC. In the two examples below two dimensional subtables of higher dimensional Italian test hypercubes are shown<sup>4</sup>. For obvious reasons variable names are replaced by names like var2, var3 and so on. In the first example (Figure 1) some cells have to be protected, but the confidentiality problems seem to be solvable. If even more cells contain no observations a proper protection strategy will probably lead to many cells without a real frequency score.

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<sup>4</sup> These pictures were produced by Sarah Gießing (Destatis, Germany).

Figure 1

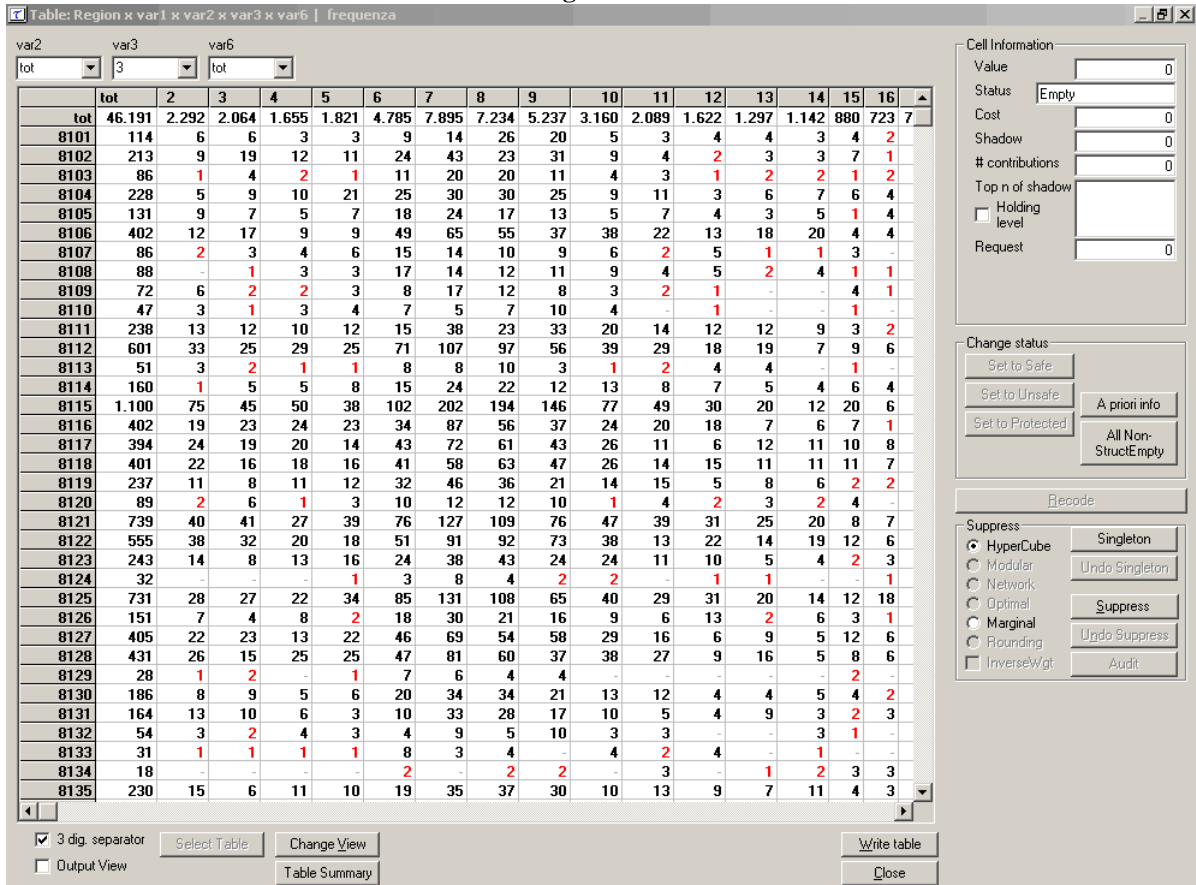
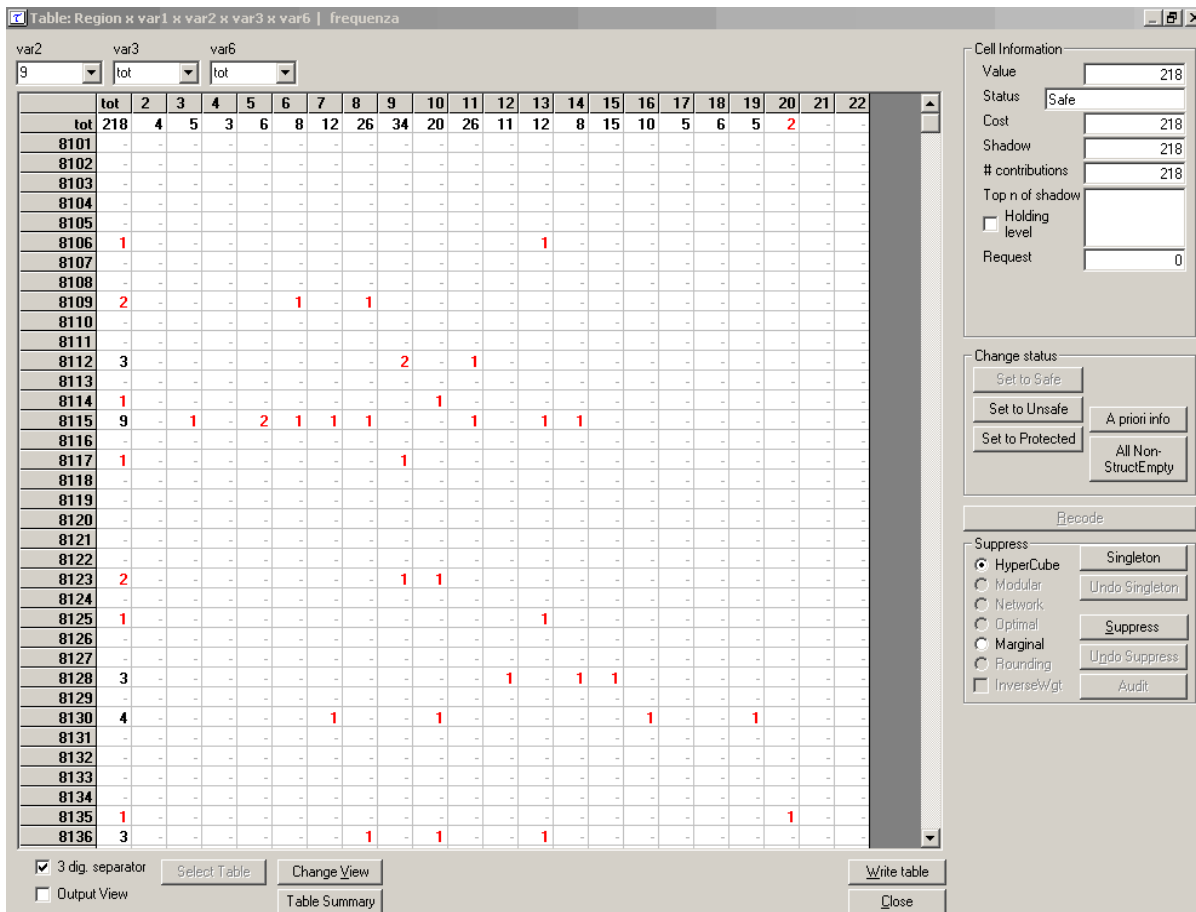


Figure 2



18. In the second example (Figure 2) even all interior cells are zeroes or have to be suppressed. It is clear that this problem will occur more often for countries that make use of survey information (instead of complete enumeration or register information) for some of the 2011 Census variables.
19. What is the lesson we can learn from these pictures? For all Census hypercubes it will be important to verify whether most cells can be published. It does not make sense to produce and publish hypercubes with only or mainly zeroes and suppressions. Although confidentiality rules may differ between countries, this problem plays a role in all European countries. Larger countries tend to have more regions and thus face the same problem at a more detailed level as smaller member states at their national level.
20. The Task Force will compare different confidentiality rules that countries apply and analyse the effects on the primary suppressions. To prevent recalculating primary suppressions from marginal totals some extra cells have to be suppressed. These extra suppressed cells are called secondary suppressions. A common method to decide on the secondary suppressions in an optimal way is the so-called hypercube method which is implemented in Tau-ARGUS and used by many countries. The software package Tau-ARGUS can be downloaded free of costs from the website <http://neon.vb.cbs.nl/casc/>. On that website also test data and the manual of the software can be found and downloaded.

#### **IV) SOME PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS**

21. On the basis of the outcomes of the first two meetings of the Task Force CENSDC, and considering the timetable of the censuses, the current orientation is towards a simplified approach. Unless a clear and full agreement is quickly reached by all Member States on a proposed methodology, the EU implementing regulation regarding the statistical data to be transmitted to Eurostat will not contain any provision on the disclosure control method to be applied to census data. This means that the countries can send cells of the hypercubes blanked for confidentiality reasons.
22. However, it should be taken into account that not all topics may be considered by the Member States as confidential. For instance, thoughts should be given to assess whether characteristics like sex or age have to be subject to disclosure control according to the national regulations. It may well be indeed that some topics are more “sensitive” than others. Considering that the topics listed in the EU regulation – thus mandatory for the Member States - are in fact the CES core topics, which do not include any characteristic on – e.g. - health or income, it may be worthy to consider – already at national level and respecting the national provisions – whether confidentiality applies to all topics and all enumeration units<sup>5</sup>.
23. The Task Force CENSDC will continue to work on a harmonised approach to be recommended for adoption to the countries, taking into account to the possible extent the constraints expressed above. Whether this will lead to an increased comparability of the census data will depend also on the degree of flexibility the national statistical offices will apply in considering the "fit-for-all" proposal of the Task Force. In any case, its outcome will contribute to the discussion in this domain.

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<sup>5</sup> If confidentiality is clearly an issue for persons, this is not straightforward for data on other kinds of enumeration units, like households, dwellings, etc.