

Distr.: General  
8 August 2023

Original: English

---

## **Economic Commission for Europe**

Conference of European Statisticians

### **Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses**

#### **Twenty-fifth Meeting**

Geneva, 20–22 September 2023

Item 4 (j) of the provisional agenda

#### **Revising the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses for the 2030 round:**

#### **Housing topics**

## **Preliminary progress report of the Conference of European Statisticians Census Task Force on Housing Topics**

### **Note by the Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on Housing Topics\***

#### *Summary*

This document offers an overview of the ways in which the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) task force on housing topics adapted the housing-related questions of the CES-wide questionnaire on censuses of the 2020 round, reflecting changes in measurement techniques, definitions and classifications, and policy priorities since the previous edition was prepared. The document also gives an overview of the Task Force's initial thoughts on potential revisions to the Recommendations. Areas that have been considered by the group include various indicators of housing quality and neighbourhood quality; energy efficiency; and changes in the designation of certain topics as core or non-core, reflecting changes both in their relevance and in how they are best measured. The main purpose of the document and presentation is to elicit meeting participants' thoughts on these topics, including other suggestions for areas where the Recommendations on housing should be expanded or revised.

---

\* Prepared by Fiona Willis-Núñez, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and members of the Task Force.

NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

## I. Introduction

1. Every ten years the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) issues Recommendations to guide countries in conducting their population and housing censuses. The Recommendations are developed by expert task forces overseen by the CES Steering Group on Population and Housing Censuses. Task Force 10, on Housing topics, consists of experts from Armenia, Austria, Germany, Romania, Slovakia, Switzerland, the University of Coimbra (Portugal), Eurostat and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).
2. The planned activities of the Task Force, as for all the others established for this purpose, are the following:
  - (a) contribute to formulating questions for the relevant sections of a **survey of national practices and experiences** in the 2020 round;
  - (b) **analyze the survey results**;
  - (c) use these analyses, among other sources, to **prepare revised text** for the 2030 Recommendations.
3. The present document reports principally on the first of these activities.

## II. Scope of the Task Force

4. The principal corresponding part of the 2020 Recommendations<sup>1</sup> is the section on Housing characteristics, 866-999, in Chapter XV. The scope of this Task Force is to check the continued relevance and descriptions of the variables in this section.
5. The Task Force was asked to pay particular attention to the concepts and definitions used for **types of housing** and **occupation status of dwellings**, given recent and accelerating changes in the ways in which dwellings are occupied. While already true at the time of preparation of the terms of reference of the group, this has become even more pronounced as living formats have evolved during and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The sharing of time between two or more dwellings, and the related dynamic interplay between housing and household, have become important features of this new era. The Task Force must consider how this evolution may affect spatial planning policies, and how censuses need to adapt accordingly to provide the most relevant information.
6. The Task Force was also given the task of considering the potential need for new sections in the Recommendations relating to **dwelling quality and ecological standards** for buildings and dwellings. Increasingly, sustainable development, environmental protection and wellbeing policies require information on housing quality and defects, energy efficiency/refurbishment status, carbon dioxide emissions from heating systems, and the degree of modernization of buildings. Many of these characteristics have impacts both at the level of immediate quality of life for dwelling occupants, and broader climate goals. The terms of reference of the Task Force highlighted a need to identify the policy demands which might be met by such information; to identify relevant indicators as defined by internationally-agreed frameworks and country experiences, and to determine whether censuses are a suitable source of information for such indicators and therefore whether any recommendations for their inclusion should be added to the 2030 Recommendations. It was noted that any such recommendations need to be applicable to and feasible for the full range of census methodologies employed across the region.
7. The scope of the Task Force also includes consideration of topics related to the **equipment and facilities** in (and around) dwellings. Currently the recommendations on housing include a range of topics (some core and some non-core topics) intended to reflect the characteristics and quality of the living conditions. These include, among others, availability of piped gas, air conditioning, hot water, bathing facilities, sewage disposal, etc.

---

<sup>1</sup> ECE/CES/41, *Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing*, available from <https://unece.org/info/Statistics/pub/21844>

Meanwhile, the chapter on household and family characteristics contains recommendations for topics such as durable goods, availability of car parking spaces and telephone and Internet connection. The Task Force, in close cooperation with Task Force 8 on Household and Family characteristics, is asked to review these various indicators of material circumstances to ensure that they are adequate reflections of current living patterns; that they offer the best available picture of the circumstances both of households and of homes; and that they are feasible for production in censuses of all kinds. The Task Force is cognizant of the diversity of situations among its member States: in some countries, such as many European Union countries, certain characteristics are universal or so nearly universal that it is deemed unnecessary to collect information about them—while in other countries, censuses are a valuable tool to identify continued variation in the availability of these facilities, goods and services.

8. The point of departure for the work of the Task Force is the existing content of the 2020 Recommendations, summarized in table 1.

Table 1  
**Housing topics covered in the 2020 Recommendations**  
*(Reproduced from ECE/CES/41, page 186)*

Topic	Enum. units <sup>2</sup>	Types of Housing and Housing Arrangements					Seasonal and secondary dwellings, vacant dwellings, dwellings with persons not included in census			
		Primary homeless <sup>1</sup>	Collective living quarters	Other housing units	Occupied conventional dwellings					
								(CONVENTIONAL DWELLINGS)		
								(HOUSING UNITS)		(LIVING QUARTERS)
Type of living quarters	LQ	●	Core	Core	Core	●				
Housing arrangements	I	Core	Core	Core	Core	●				
Occupancy status of conventional dwellings	D	●	●	●	Core	Core				
Characteristics of secondary, seasonal and vacant dwellings	D	●	●	●	●	Non-core				
Type of ownership	D	●	●	●	Core	0				
Occupancy by number of private households	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	●				
Number of occupants	LQ	●	Core	Core	Core	●				
Useful floor space and/or number of rooms	HU	●	●	Core	Core	0				
Density standard	HU	●	●	Core	Core	●				
Type of rooms	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Water supply system	HU	●	●	Core	Core	0				
Toilet facilities	HU	●	●	Core	Core	0				
Bathing facilities	HU	●	●	Core	Core	0				
Hot water	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Sewage disposal	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Kitchen	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Type of heating	HU	●	●	Core	Core	0				
Main type of energy used for heating	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Availability of electricity	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Availability of piped gas	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Availability of air-conditioning	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				
Accessibility to dwelling	HU	●	●	Non-core	Non-core	0				

Position of dwellings within the building	HU	●	●	●	Non-core	o
Type of building	D	●	●	●	Core	o
Number of floors in building	D	●	●	●	Non-core	o
Lift	D	●	●	●	Non-core	o
Period of construction	D	●	●	●	Core	o
Materials of the building	D	●	●	●	Non-core	o
State of repair of building	D	●	●	●	Non-core	o

● Not measured or not applicable in the census.

o May be difficult to measure in a census. Some countries may collect or have available this information. Information on seasonal and secondary dwellings and the information on vacant dwellings concerning all the characteristics should be shown separately.

<sup>1</sup> Including all persons who are not usual residents in any living quarter category (see paragraph 899)

<sup>2</sup> Enumeration units: I=Individuals; LQ=Living Quarters; HU=Housing Units; D=Dwellings.

### III. Reviewing the questionnaire used for the survey of countries' practices and experiences

9. The principal source of material to inform updates to the Recommendations will be the experiences and practices of countries in their most recent censuses. Any challenges that countries faced in gathering data and compiling accurate housing statistics may be suggestive of a need to review definitions and methods. Furthermore, any notable trends across countries—such as a reduction in the number that gather information on a particular topic, in spite of its presence in the Recommendations—could offer clues as to declining relevance of some topics, with others perhaps gaining in priority. Since the CES Recommendations are intended to be helpful guidance rather than prescriptive, it is in their interest to reflect reality.

10. Hence, as with all the other Task Forces, the first piece of work conducted was to check and (re)design questions to be included in the comprehensive survey of countries on their experiences and practices in the 2020 round of censuses. The questions used in the preceding survey, conducted in 2013 with reference to 2010-round censuses, served as the starting point.

11. It should be stressed that the decisions on which questions to keep, change, or remove in the questionnaire were not all unanimous among Task Force members; they were subject to debate. In general, if some members of the Task Force saw a good reason to maintain a question then it was kept, even if others were in favour of its removal. This was, however, weighed against the need to avoid expanding the length of the section appreciably.

12. Similarly, there was considerable debate about the addition of new questions. While a number of interesting housing-related topics were raised by Task Force members (see section IV below), only a very few of these were in the end considered relevant to include in the survey of country practices.

#### A. Questions maintained or slightly modified from the survey of 2010-round censuses

13. It was important to maintain an initial question asking whether each of a list of concepts was used, and if so, whether the definition used in the census was fully in line with that given in the Recommendations.

14. It was also important to know whether the housing census also covers dwellings occupied by persons who do not meet the criteria for being usually resident, as their inclusion or exclusion could potentially have a significant impact on result; so this question was maintained unchanged.

15. Minor changes were made to existing questions about the inclusion of a list of core topics and non-core topics, and the corresponding classifications, as well as the main data

source used for each. The changes were to reflect the differences in core and non-core topics between the 2010 and 2020 Recommendations.

16. A question on density standard (a measure of either floor space or rooms per occupant) was maintained unchanged.

## B. Questions newly added or removed

17. While an existing question was maintained on whether or not countries collected separate information on type of ownership (which refers to the status of a dwelling) and tenure status of household (which refers to the household), a new follow-up question was added to find out the reasoning for those who do not collect these separately. The intention is to elucidate whether there is confusion around definitions—which could be resolved with an improved explanation in the Recommendations—or a perceived lack of need for both indicators, which might suggest a more substantial revision to the Recommendations.

18. A new question was added asking whether any of a list of other housing topics, not currently included in the Recommendations, was collected in the census—plus a request for further details of any selected. These are:

- (a) Information on entire buildings intended for habitation;
- (b) Energy efficiency of buildings or dwellings (e.g. based on national efficiency classification or annual energy consumption);
- (c) Indoor air quality or related topics (e.g. presence of mould);
- (d) Characteristics of neighbourhood or local environment;
- (e) Subjective perceptions of housing quality;
- (f) Subjective perceptions of neighbourhood quality;
- (g) Any other housing topics not listed in the 2020 Recommendations.

19. A follow-up question was added, asking for details of any significant challenges or limitations experienced with the inclusion of these topics.

20. A question on the collection of characteristics of unoccupied dwellings was removed, on the grounds that such information can only be provided by countries with a register-based census (it remains necessary to identify unoccupied conventional dwellings in a housing census, but gathering information on their characteristics, such as useful floor space, number of rooms, etc., is a significant step further). In discussion among the Task Force it was not clear what was implications the answers to such a question might have for the revision of the Recommendations.

21. A question about plans for the inclusion of new housing topics in the next census was removed. This was in line with the decision of the Steering Group for the questionnaire as a whole, that hypothetical or subjective questions and those about possible but uncertain future plans should be eliminated to the greatest extent possible, given limitations in the comparability and likely usefulness of replies to these questions. Several alternative formulations proposed by the Task Force around future prospects and expected limitations were considered but discarded, on the same grounds.

## IV. Initial considerations for the 2030 Recommendations

22. In the early stages of its work, the Task Force has come up with several key threads of thinking:

- (a) The reasons for which society demands information about housing, and the policy needs that housing census data aim to meet, are evolving. International policy frameworks, especially those related to the **environment, climate and sustainable development, health and disaster resilience**, are key triggers for the articulation of new housing data needs. The heightened demands for

housing information during and following the Covid-19 pandemic have shone a spotlight on this, as housing characteristics serve as important predictors of risk and of outcomes. The Task Force has established a work stream devoted to identifying such policy drivers and frameworks. The group has compiled a list of relevant materials and will now work to distil from these any implications for future housing censuses, keeping in mind that the complex nature of censuses means that proposals for new topics cannot be made lightly and that the focus of censuses is to give an overview of the population and their living conditions.

- (b) In correspondence with the chair of Task Force 8 on household and family characteristics, it has become apparent that there is a need both to clarify the distinction between characteristics of a **household** and those of a **dwelling**; and to reassess how best to discern the **material quality of life** of housing occupants by means of indicators that are intended to be proxies of such quality of life. Currently the Recommendations include a range of both core and non-core topics with such an intention. The results of the comprehensive survey will be important in this regard. If few countries gather information on a given topic, it may be time to reconsider its inclusion in the Recommendations. On the other hand if most countries *do* gather it, but the facility in question is found to be universal or near-universal (or indeed universally absent), it may no longer serve a useful discriminatory function in distinguishing the better-quality dwellings (or households) from the less well-off.
- (c) Related to point (b), the Task Force is eager to reassess **which housing topics are designated as core or non-core**. A ‘core’ designation amounts to a strong Recommendation on the part of CES that something should be collected. When translated into national or regional policies, this may in some cases become a legally-binding obligation to collect it. It is therefore crucial that the CES designations are appropriate and realistic. It was decided that the questionnaire of country practices was not the appropriate setting to gather the views of the international expert community on this matter. Instead, the Task Force welcome comments at the present meeting or in connection with it, around the designation of any housing topic as core or non-core.

## V. Conclusion

23. While only in the earliest stages of its work, and without yet having access to the results of the comprehensive survey of CES countries’ practices and experiences, the Task Force cannot yet offer any firm conclusions on revisions to the housing section of the Recommendations. Instead, the group invites comments from participants in the 2023 Meeting of the Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses:

- (a) What, if anything, do policymakers and other data users in your country demand to know about housing, which cannot currently be answered using existing information produced from censuses conducted according to the CES Recommendations?
  - (b) If there are any such new data needs—is the census the right platform for providing that information?
  - (c) What have been the main challenges for collecting accurate data on housing in recent censuses?
  - (d) Are there topics in the 2020 Recommendations which are of reduced relevance now compared to in the past?
-