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THE NEW FRENCH POPULATION CENSUS

Submitted by INSEE²

SUMMARY

France is currently setting up a new Census. A law describing the principles of this census was passed in February 2002. It will be a "rotating" Census, with annual collections and recourse to a sample survey. The first wave of collection will take place in January-February 2004. As from 2008, it will provide data on the legal population and annual statistical results.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE CENSUS

1. The French Census has three objectives:

- To establish the legal population of the administrative districts (communes, cantons, districts, departments);
- To determine the socio-demographic structures of the country and of its territories;
- To serve as sampling base for the statistical surveys.

2. More than 200 legislative or regulatory texts refer to the legal population, in particular in the following fields: State subsidies to the local authorities; polling method in the municipal elections, number of advisers, number of communal jobs; salaries and allowances of the local officials; plans and work of town planning; rate of certain local taxes; legislation of rents; opening of pharmacies.

3. The figures provided by the Census concerning the socio-demographic structures of the population have many and varied uses, in terms of analysis, of research, of forecasting and planning, at the national level, of course, but especially at local level.

¹ The French version of the paper is also available.

² Paper prepared by Guy Desplanques.

4. The Census serves as sampling base for household surveys carried out by INSEE. It is also used by private survey institutes for constructing their samples.

II. PRINCIPAL CUSTOMERS TO BE SATISFIED

5. With the new Census, local persons responsible, territorial representatives and managers, will have regular 'images' of their territory, clarifying the developments and changes which happen and thus facilitating the implementation of prospective management policies: impact statements of infrastructure or construction projects, development of prevention plans of major risks, development of town and country planning. On a higher aggregation of geographical units, the Census will also deliver figures as basis for regional development and of the State-Region planning contracts .

III. PRODUCED RESULTS

6. Each year, the legal population of the administrative districts will be established, as well as detailed statistical results. The figures will be obtained by combining the information collected during the last five collections, including using administrative sources which make it possible to follow, on a yearly basis, the development of the number of dwellings (via the 'dwelling tax' register). The results published at the end of the year 'n' will refer explicitly to the 1st of January 'n-2' and therefore reflect the situation three years earlier. For the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants surveyed the two years preceding the 'n-2' ('n-4', 'n-3'), results will be obtained by extrapolation in relation to 'n-2'. For the communes surveyed the year 'n-1' or 'n', the results will be obtained by interpolation. For the big communes, results will be averages established from the five previous collections. The new Census will also provide estimates using only the results of the last annual collection. Published at the end of the year, they will cover approximately 8.4 million surveyed persons, i.e. one in seven. The figures will be submitted as estimates; and can be modified by the detailed results published two years later. They will only cover units where the surveyed sample of the year will be representative (essentially France and its regions).

IV. WHY MODERNISE?

7. The primary objective of the Census 'renovation' is to give more up to date information to the users. Censuses in France took place every five years until the Second World War, without exception. But since the war, the censuses have not respected the recommendations of the UN, because of the way they were organised: the involvement of the communes meant that election years were avoided as census years. Furthermore, the censuses have taken place with longer and longer intervals (1975..1982..1990 and finally 1999), for reasons of cost and of complexity.

8. At the same time, the data provided by the censuses are used more and more, especially at local level. At this level, changes are rapid and users want more recent information.

9. On the other side, France does not have a population register and it is uncertain that such a tool would ever be accepted.

10. Finally, enumerators encounter greater and greater difficulties in getting access to dwellings and in finding the inhabitants.

11. The new Census aims at taking these various developments into account, in particular the requirement of up-to-date information, without increasing the public expenditure.

12. The modernisation also has organisational objectives: with an annual collection, it will be easier to 'smooth' the work load related to the implementation of the population census, in the INSEE, of course, but also in the communes of 10,000 inhabitants or more. This should make it

possible to make increased efforts in contacting the dwellings surveyed a given year, especially in the bigger cities, where the problems of access to dwellings arise more often.

The decision-making process

13. INSEE launched a broad co-operation scheme with its partners, at national and local levels, in order to carry out the modernisation of the Census. Starting with the Interior ministry, co-operation widened to the local representatives, in particular in their national associations, to the other ministries concerned, to the scientific community and to all the statistical users organised in the national council of statistical information (CNIS).

14. Co-operation with the ministries covered legislative and regulatory aspects; the necessary legal adaptations should be accomplished between now and 2008, date of the first publication of the annual legal population, for all the texts concerned. An independent scientific committee has since 1999 examined the new methods as envisaged by INSEE. Meetings were organised with numerous mayors and decision makers for studying their expectations and questions (quality of produced information for the calculation of the annual legal population including taken into account the demands of the organisations which assure co-operation between more communes).

15. The extent of the modernisation called for particular legal provisions. Whereas the general population censuses rested on decrees, it is a law, passed on the 27th of February 2002, which describes the major principles of the new census:

- responsibility of the State for the organisation;
- taking into account the laws n° 51-711 of 7 June 1951, regarding the coordination of statistical activities and confidentiality and n° 78-17 of 6 January 1978 relating to information technology in regard to data files and their use;
- sharing of tasks between INSEE (which "organises and controls the collection of information") and the communes or inter-communal organisations (which "prepare and carry out" the 'census' surveys);
- collection methods differentiated according to the size of the communes: exhaustive surveys in the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants at five-year intervals, annual sample surveys in the others;
- annual publication of the legal population figures, where data resulting from other surveys or from administrative files can equally be used;
- a five-year interval general census will be held in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Mayotte, Wallis and Futuna islands.

V. THE NEW CENSUS

A rotating annual collection

16. The modernised Census rests on an annual collection of information covering successively all the communal territories during a five-year period. For the inhabited dwellings, this collection will take place in January and February of each year. As in the traditional censuses, it will be carried out using the 'deposit-withdrawal' method.

Exhaustive 'census' in the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants, surveys in the larger ones

17. France is characterised by a large number of communes (NUTS level 5): more than 36,000 in numbers, half of which have less than 400 inhabitants. The communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants will be surveyed exhaustively, at a rate of one in five each year. In each of the other communes, the territory will be distributed into five address groups, - the same street belonging to

several groups. Each group will be surveyed once every five years. A sample for a given year will then be taken at a rate of 40% of the addresses of this group. Any sampled address will be surveyed in an exhaustive way. Each year, the dwellings belonging to 8% of the addresses will therefore be surveyed.

18. Collected information will be updated yearly, including by the statistical use of administrative data.

Balanced samples

19. To determine the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants who have to be surveyed a given year, and, in the larger communes, the groups of addresses where the addresses to be surveyed will be drawn the same year, the survey method will be that of balanced samples, - permitting the constitution of samples which are not skewed by taking into consideration some important variables: age groups, sex and dwelling type (individual or collective). The data on which the balancing is based come from the 1999 Population Census.

20. For the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants, balancing will be carried out at regional level. Each rotation group will therefore be representative at regional level in terms of population by age groups, by sex and by dwelling type (individual or collective) and, at departmental level, in terms of number of dwellings.

21. In the communes of 10,000 inhabitants or more, the survey base will be the building register (RIL, 'le Répertoire d'Immeubles Localisés'), which lists all the addresses comprising dwellings. The addresses of the commune will be divided into five rotation groups according to a balanced drawing.

RIL, the building register RIL was created by a decree of 19 July 2000 and is a directory of individually located addresses geographically coded on digitalised cards. This directory, which was first made up from the addresses of the residential buildings surveyed in the 1999 Census, is updated continuously via various files (permissions to build and to demolish, post files (from 'La Poste', the public post office in France) etc.) and information provided by the communes to INSEE. Other updates would be the result from direct observations. In addition to buildings used for habitation, the RIL will also cover economic establishments and, in the long term, public supplies and the collective services. Access to RIL will be given to the communes, each one concerning its territory, within the framework of the implementation of the new census.

The division of roles between the communes and INSEE

22. *"The collection of information is organised and checked by the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies. The census surveys are prepared and carried out by the communes or the public establishments of inter-communal cooperation, which in this connection receive a flat-rate provision from the State"* (extract from part V of the law concerning 'neighbourhood democracy').

23. In practice, the collection will continue to be carried out according to the traditional questionnaire method including deposit-withdrawal by enumerators, who are communal agents (or from the public establishment of the inter-communal organisation), nominated and trained and possibly recruited for the needs of the cause. Approximately 8.4 million individual bulletins will thus be collected each year, 6 million in the communes of less than 10,000 inhabitants and 2.4 million in those of 10,000 inhabitants or more.

24. The responsibilities delegated to the communes will include controls of exhaustiveness in terms of surveyed dwellings. INSEE, on its side, will take charge of all the surrounding operations, from the determination of the sample design to the publication of the results, including defining the contents of the training to be given to the enumerators.

INSEE will survey Collectivities

25. A collectivity is a number of dwellings under the competence of the same administrative authority and where the inhabitants habitually share a common life. The population of the collectivity comprises persons who reside in the collectivity, except for those residing in dwellings provided as part of the job(service dwellings), which are counted as part of the private household population. In 1999, collectivities consisted of approximately 1,800,000 persons.

26. It is INSEE which will carry out the census of the collectivities, including service dwellings.

27. The data collection will be spread over four weeks during March. The collection method is the deposit-withdrawal, as for the 'census' surveys of the private households. It will be carried out each year for a sample, composed on the one hand of the collectivities of the communes with less than 10,000 inhabitants of the rotation group surveyed that year, and, on the other hand, the collectivities from a sample of communes with 10,000 or more inhabitants. The latter will be divided into five groups of approximate same size. The sample drawing will be done from a register of collectivities updated by INSEE.

VI. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE NEW METHOD

Advantages

28. The principal advantage of the new method will be, by its construction, the freshness of the detailed data (at geographical level). It will make it possible to have more for the same public expenditure. At the statistical level, it will provide annual estimates from a very big sample and thus making it possible to build annual series pertaining to various sizes, which are not currently available at such an interval: number of families and composition of these families, number of foreigners or of immigrants, structure of the dwelling stock, etc.

29. In the communes of 10,000 inhabitants or more, the existence of a survey base will make it possible to better check the quality of the collection and to carry out rectifications.

30. The new Census will constitute an up to date sample base and will make it possible to draw much more targeted samples, allowing major savings for specific surveys (surveys on persons of foreign origin, of the young adults, etc).

31. The new Census has a clear legal framework, which was not the case before.

32. The new Census will also have advantages as regards organisation: it will develop the professionalism of the players involved by its greater frequency and it will avoid the punctual charge connected with the organisation of the specific censuses with longer time intervals which often delayed other statistical operations.

Disadvantages

33. The loss of exhaustiveness is perceived by certain researchers, historians in particular, like a disadvantage: it will no longer be as easy to compare date to date the composition of a commune or of a district as before.

34. Recourse to a sampling survey also causes some concerns on the part of certain statisticians who fear that the response rate will decrease particularly in the communes of 10,000 inhabitants or more.

35. Moreover, in these communes, the quality of the census will be connected to that of the building register (RIL). Thus, the most recent addresses are likely to be absent. Under these conditions, the recently built dwellings and their inhabitants could 'escape' the Census. This is why it was decided that new addresses would be surveyed exhaustively during the five years following their location.

36. The complexity of the new Census oblige some pedagogical efforts both towards the population and towards the users. For example, in the case of a modification of the questionnaire, the technique consisting of building the detailed statistical results from the last five annual collections will lead to only a gradual provision of information by the new questions.