



The Second United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Conducting Population and Housing Censuses and on Census Data Quality Concerns

Virtual meeting, 2 – 5 November 2021

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Expert Group Meeting was organized and conducted by the United Nations Statistics Division and took place online from 2 to 5 November 2021. More than one hundred experts from over forty national statistical offices took part, as well as participants from regional and international organizations and UN regional commissions.
2. The first meeting on the topic was organized by the UN Statistics Division in February 2021 and its conclusions and recommendations were submitted to the 52nd session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2021 and are available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2021/egm-COVID19-census-20210209/conclusions.pdf>.
3. The present (second) meeting focused on potential adjustments of census questionnaires; modifications in census design and procedures to reduce the adverse impact of the pandemic; assessment of the quality of population and housing censuses in terms of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on process and output quality; and, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on data analysis and comparability over time.
4. Listening to the presentations delivered at the meeting, the experts concluded that a number of countries were successfully adapting their census-taking operations to the epidemiological circumstances and were able to conduct the population and housing censuses amidst the pandemic – and these experiences shared at the meeting are extremely valuable in terms of lessons learnt. At the same time, the meeting concluded that not all countries/areas are in a position to implement those adaptations resulting in repeat postponements of their national censuses.
5. The experts highlighted increased costs as one of the major impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on census-taking in the majority of countries. Postponing enumeration activities implied that the costs of field staff and storing census materials and devices would be much higher than initially planned for. Furthermore, adoption at a later stage of new data collection modes, including those that do not require direct contact with respondents, increased the census budget beyond that originally planned. The meeting also noted that, in addition to the modifications in data collection procedures, census-taking during the pandemic increased the costs due to additional measures to minimize the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic such as the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPEs) for field staff, and enhanced publicity campaigns to inform the public and educate the field staff on new modes of data collection. The cost of telecommunication for telephone interviews and data for mobile devices also further impacted the census budget in several countries. The experts further noted that



census budgets in several countries saw reductions as governments shifted budgets to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. The participants noted challenges in enumerating certain population groups, such as homeless persons or people living in residential care facilities for older persons, particularly in lockdown areas. Simplified procedures focusing on the provision of a minimum set of data, the use of administrative data and increasing the time available for counting homeless persons and people living in residential care facilities could be considered for improving the census coverage. It was also pointed out that there might be a significant undercount if face-to-face interview has not been offered to certain population groups such as indigenous people, homeless persons, people living in remote or rural areas.
7. The meeting noted that the concept of usual residence may prove ambiguous for certain population groups such as (a) people who moved several times during the pandemic, (b) students who usually live away from their family home but staying with their family during the pandemic and (c) workers who had to move back to their family house from their place of usual residence because of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Countries that are yet to undertake the census in the 2020 round should consider providing additional clarification and guidance to enumerators/respondents.
8. The experts noted that collecting information on exact date of events for certain census topics (deaths, births, and migration) rather than asking questions about the occurrence of events during a reference period is advantageous in terms of analyzing the changes in the level and pattern of such events during the pandemic, particularly for countries that do not have reliable registers for such events. For example, when the question on household deaths (recommended core census topic for the 2020 round of censuses) is included in the questionnaire, the information on date of deaths in addition to age and sex of deceased persons should be collected and a reference date covering a 12-month or longer period should be used.
9. The meeting noted that for the majority of census questions, for example those on sociocultural topics, there would be little or no impact of the pandemic on responses. The topics where the coronavirus pandemic could potentially affect response, either through a change in circumstances, or because of a change in interpretation and understanding, may include those who usually live in the household, visitors, migration, economic activity, occupation, industry, hours worked and travel to work. The experts emphasized that providing additional guidance to explain how to answer specific questions should be provided to self-respondents and cautioned that comprehensive testing was required before making any changes.
10. The experts emphasized that the census provides a snapshot in time and therefore the consistent message for respondents should be to answer the questions about their current circumstances. For a limited number of questions, a valid answer based on current circumstances may not be possible. For example, questions on hours worked, and travel to work where the respondent is currently away from work on furlough. In these cases, respondents might be advised to answer these questions based on their situation immediately before the current period away from work.



11. The meeting noted that the majority of national statistical authorities conducting a census during the pandemic are not planning to adjust the questions in their census questionnaires, as they considered such a move at a later stage to be risky or because they are constrained by legislation already in place. However, the meeting observed that some countries are exploring options to make adjustments motivated by the need to reduce respondent's burden, and in the case of self-enumeration, to eliminate inconsistencies in how people interpret questions and to reduce the impact on call centers. In those cases, the meeting underscored the importance of conducting first a rigorous analysis and testing of which census topics and questions are likely to be impacted before making adjustments (see para 7 above).
12. The meeting underscored the challenges in adjusting census procedures to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the adjustments pertained to the adoption of new data collection modes (CAWI, CAPI and CATI) and other activities related to field enumeration such as changing training methods and plans for enumeration of special population groups that are difficult to enumerate. In some cases, the participants pointed out that preparing plans and actions for different scenarios would allow statistical authorities to be flexible and responsive to the situation during the pandemic. The meeting recommended that before adjustments are made to the design of the enumeration modes, sufficient time be allocated for testing new processes, systems, and actions. The meeting further recommended that considerations be also given to overcoming the difficulties in resolving double records when using multiple collection modes. With regard to countries utilizing administrative records in the census, the meeting pointed out challenges related to availability of updated administrative records due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
13. The experts noted that administrative data, even if not universal but of relatively good quality for some census variables may be considered as an alternative source for improving census coverage and for adjusting of the population count for non-responding households. Administrative records may also be used for data quality control and consistency checks for the data collected from the field.
14. The meeting highlighted the importance of carrying out well-designed quality assessment for field enumeration as well as for data processing to ensure high quality of data. It is recommended that assessing the quality of data in terms of coverage and content error should be undertaken using independent data sources, such as post enumeration surveys and comparing with administrative sources, and quality indicators such as coverage error and item non-response and imputation rate at variable level should be produced. It is strongly suggested that the results of quality assessment and quality indicators should be publicly available to inform users about the quality of data.
15. The experts had an extensive discussion on potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on census results and comparability of the results over time. The meeting noted that the pandemic circumstances, including mobility restrictions within the country and between countries, would have a significant influence on population distribution, the level of fertility, mortality and internal and international migration, employment, and unemployment rates. It is expected that the census data collected during the pandemic could show some extraordinary



patterns, but it is currently unclear to what extent those patterns are attributable to the pandemic and whether they are short-term changes or more permanent ones.

16. Similarly, different approaches to lockdowns within a country would introduce inconsistencies in census results. Closing borders to immigration and emigration will affect time series and may create challenges in comparing the 2020 round of censuses with previous census results. Furthermore, changes in census procedures, particularly increases in online responses would improve data quality but can potentially cause some breaks in the time series.
17. The meeting noted that as the census provides a snapshot and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still an evolving situation, census results may not describe the full impact of COVID-19 on societies. Consequently, before releasing census data it would be of paramount importance to contextualize the findings from the census by contrasting them with recent data and analysis from other sources.
18. The experts outlined that communication with stakeholders and data users is extremely important when it comes to data analysis and release of censuses conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with stakeholders and data users ahead of data releases, especially on census subject matter areas more impacted by the collection of the data during the pandemic, is key to managing the expectations of data users and explaining trends, changes and patterns not seen in previous census results and in other statistical data collections.