Side Event at the 52nd Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

IMPLEMENTING THE 2020 WORLD PROGRAMME ON POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

25 February 2021
9:00–10:45 AM (New York time)

Overview of:

(i) Results of the UNSD survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of PHCs

(ii) Conclusions and recommendations of the UN Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Conducting PHCs and on Census Data Quality Concerns
Introduction

- On 11 March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic

- While the magnitude/duration of the effects of the pandemic on social and economic activity in countries were unknown at that time — UNSD, as secretariat for the 2020 World Programme:
  - recognized public health measures (social distancing, restrictions on mobility, etc) and possible redeployment of budgetary resources may have implications for statistical activities
  - recognized the need to continuously monitor the impact of COVID-19 on PHCs
  - identified some areas of concern:
    - census timeline, budget, questionnaire, method of collection (multi-mode), quality of results (coverage, comparability)
  - particularly worrying was the situation of countries preparing to conduct census in the peak census years of 2020 and 2021
2020 census round (2015-2024) - census calendar
UNSD surveys on impact of COVID-19

1st survey in March/April 2020
- 3 questions for NSOs with census in year 2020; response from 46 countries
- tentative information on impact

2nd survey: UNSD-World Bank collaboration, September 2020
- included 6 questions on PHC addressed to NSOs w/ census in 2020/2021; response from 119 countries, providing more information on impact

3rd survey in December 2020/January 2021
- 11-question survey sent to 121 NSOs with census expected in year 2020 or 2021
- response received from 104 countries (86%): 47 countries (2020), 57 countries (2021)
Overall impact of COVID-19 (3rd survey)

- Total number of responding countries: 27% No, 73% Yes
- Census in 2020: 17% No, 83% Yes
- Census in 2021: 35% No, 65% Yes
Reason for no impact: Response = “No”

- Field work completed before the arrival of COVID-19: 4%
- Using administrative registers as source of census data: 61%
- Other: 36%

Other:
- Impact of COVID-19 not significant/controlled/not yet clear (for censuses planned for later in 2021)
- Census impacted by factors other than COVID-19: economic/budgetary reasons, political instability, census law not being adopted
Impact on preparations

Total number of responding countries reporting impact of COVID-19

- 7% Completed these activities before the arrival of COVID-19
- 22% Proceeded / will proceed with these activities in spite of COVID-19
- 21% Yes, had to postpone or cancel SOME preparatory activities
- 50% Yes, had to postpone or cancel MOST/ALL of the preparatory activities

Census in 2020

- 13% Completed these activities before the arrival of COVID-19
- 23% Proceeded / will proceed with these activities in spite of COVID-19
- 18% Yes, had to postpone or cancel SOME preparatory activities
- 46% Yes, had to postpone or cancel MOST/ALL of the preparatory activities

Census in 2021

- 0% Completed these activities before the arrival of COVID-19
- 22% Proceeded / will proceed with these activities in spite of COVID-19
- 24% Yes, had to postpone or cancel SOME preparatory activities
- 54% Yes, had to postpone or cancel MOST/ALL of the preparatory activities
Impact on field-based enumeration

- Yes, had to postpone to later in 2020 (or extend period of enumeration by weeks/months): 28% in 2020, 50% in 2021
- Yes, had to postpone to 2021 (or later in 2021): 51% in 2021
- Yes, had to postpone to 2022 or beyond: 24% in 2020, 15% in 2021
- No, neither stopped nor postponed: 26% in 2020, 5% in 2021

Total number of responding countries reporting impact of COVID-19 on Census in 2020 and Census in 2021.
Impact on census method(s)

Total number of responding countries reporting impact of COVID-19

- Census in 2020
  - No: 42%
  - Yes: 58%

- Census in 2021
  - No: 43%
  - Yes: 57%

- Total: 43% No, 57% Yes
Change/adaptation made to census method(s)

- Use administrative data: 26%
- Internet (CAWI) data collection: 51%
- Telephone (CATI) data collection: 58%
- Self-enumeration with paper questionnaire (mail-out/mail-back, drop-off/pick-up): 23%
- Other changes/adaptations: 16%

Other changes to census procedures:
- Changes in the prioritization of modes of data collection (by area/population group)
- Adjustments to the system for listing households (e.g., only quick count and eye estimation for number of household members)
- Changes to plans and procedures for data verification and post-enumeration surveys
Challenges

Challenges to the 2020 and 2021 Censuses included:

- Reducing face-to-face interaction (79%)
- Personnel not available/ill (32%)
- Funding limitations/constraints (45%)
- Procurement difficulties (29%)
- Mobility restrictions/problems with transportation (37%)
- Closure of establishments (17%)
- Other difficulties (16%)
- No/minor difficulties (3%)

“Other” challenges:
- Households not permitting interviewers access to their dwelling because of the fear of COVID transmission
- Internal migration patterns of some population groups (eg. students not being present at a term time locality)
- Increase in item non-response with self-enumeration by paper questionnaire or Internet (CAWI)
- Low response rate with CATI
- Operational challenges in managing multi-mode data collection
- Adapting to changes to new working arrangements (eg. working from home by data processing staff may have implications for data confidentiality)
Additional measures to minimize impact of COVID-19

- Request additional budget for:
  - PPEs for field staff
  - Enhanced publicity campaign to assure public, increase awareness/safety about COVID, educate the population on new modes of data collection, etc.
  - Establishment of register of addresses/population

- Revise census law to extend the time/duration of census and reflect changes in data collection methods

- Coordinate with health authorities to enhance safety protocols to mitigate against the spread of COVID-19

- Produce guidelines on how to prevent/mitigate COVID-19 during field operations; and, train field staff

- Develop special procedures for areas under lock-down or designated as red zones, and for institutional HHs

- Shorten the census questionnaire to minimize face-to-face contact between enumerators and the public

- Include questions about COVID-19 in the Census Questionnaire to study its spread in the population

- Enhance data collection via self-enumeration options (over the internet, by post)

- Maximize self-enumeration by sending reminder letters to respondents

- Arrange face-to-face visits upon request/by appointment, after health and travel declarations were obtained from HHs

- Establish help desks and call centers (data collection; support to self-enumerating HHs; appointment for f-2-f visit)

- Provide online training for field staff; where training is not online, train in small groups

- Adapt mobile devices to work in both CAPI and CATI modes

- Train enumerators to collect data in both CAPI and CATI modes
United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Conducting PHCs and on Census Data Quality Concerns

- 9-12 February 2021, virtual
- 100+ experts from 24 NSOs, regional & international organizations
- 20+ country presentations

Objectives:
- discuss potential problems of conducting censuses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to assess impact on the quality of census outputs
- discuss the benefits and challenges of redesigning census activities in response to the effects of Covid-19 pandemic (such as the adoption self-enumeration modes to reduce face-to-face interview, use of administrative data, changing census questionnaires or extending the duration of field enumeration)
- discuss the potential challenges in comparing the results of censuses conducted during the pandemic with the results of previous censuses

United Nations
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Statistics Division
Demographic and Social Statistics Branch
Demographic Statistics Section
Conclusions and recommendations

- **Impact on census operations**
  - majority of countries either postponed census activities or extended the enumeration period
  - modified census procedures and data collection modes in order to reduce direct contact with respondents
  - countries relying on administrative registers are also facing challenges with regard to receiving administrative records timely; raising concern about delays in dissemination of census results as scheduled
  - **recommended** that before adjustments are made to the census design (such as the enumeration modes), sufficient time be allocated for testing new processes, applications and systems

- **Impact on data quality**
  - data quality concerns may arise due to: changes in the design of field operation to reduce face-to-face interview; extension of the duration of enumeration (recall effect); under-coverage of hard-to-count pop groups (due to increased reliance on self-enumeration)
  - noted that applying the concept of “usual residence” may be challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic as some respondents may have difficulty in remembering where they were living and how many people were residing at a given address on the census reference date (especially when the enumeration period is extended by several weeks/months)
Impact on census topics/subject matters
- shortened the census questionnaires (to reduce interview time, to adjust to budget cuts)
  → lead to not having enough data for computing a number of indicators, such as measures of poverty (e.g., Multi-dimensional Poverty Index) needed for monitoring the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- certain census subject matter areas are at particularly susceptible: internal and international migration, labor force participation (number employed/unemployed, hours worked, place of work, commute time), school enrolment and attendance, and housing and living arrangements

Coordination with health authorities
- recommended NSOs produce guidelines on how to prevent & mitigate COVID-19 during field operations
- train field staff with the procedures, including on use of PPEs and other precautionary actions
- develop special procedures for areas under lock-down or designated as red zones, and for institutional HH

Data comparability
- noted that comparability of census data over time might be challenging due to changes in questionnaire data items (shortening); shifting of census reference date (recall effect); changes in methods of collection (use of multi-mode including self-enumeration modes)
- certain census subject matter areas might be more susceptible
United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Conducting PHCs and on Census Data Quality Concerns

- **Quality assessment**
  - highlighted importance of carrying out well-designed quality assessments to understand whether PHCs conducted during the pandemic are of reasonably good quality
  - **recommended** that quality assessment should be undertaken using independent data sources, such as PES and available administrative records to estimate coverage and content errors

- **Communication with data users**
  - census data quality assessments need to be reported transparently and completely so that users are fully informed on the quality of census data (in terms of accuracy, timeliness, relevance)
  - **recommended** NSOs provide detailed metadata on changes in the design, modifications in census questions, adjustments in census counts, and imputation of data for non-response

- **Recommendations for UNSD**
  - requested UNSD to develop a methodological guideline on using administrative data and registers, based on existing regional experience and national practices
  - endorsed UNSD initiative to continue documenting the impact of COVID-19 on census-taking and its plan to organize a follow-up EGM later in 2021
Report on survey results


Conclusions and recommendations of EGM