Session 7:
Population Censuses versus Registers – A Review of the 2000/01 Experiences
Organizer: Wendy Thomas

The census problems in the society passing from the totality to the democracy
Authors: Petra Kuncová, Jan Tuček
Czech Statistical Office, Sokolovská č.n.142, 186 04 Praha 8, Czech Republic

The population and housing census has a long tradition at our territory – the first modern census was organized in the year 1890. In the Czech Republic the census takes place regularly every ten years. That is why the regular ten-year census was realized soon after the political regime change in the year 1989 (but it was postponed for the next year because of the elections). In the year 1991 – during the first census after revolution – there was a real problem to persuade people to take part in it. They had a bad experience with a variety of lists and registers administered by the state authorities and especially by the security police. It was a newly regained liberty that influenced the results of the census, too – for example many people declared themselves as believers, declared a different nationality than a Czech one etc. (Ten years later we can see how these results had been “twisted”).
We were waiting - with impatience - for the year 2001 for the first population census in the democratic society where the people fully realized their rights (not their duties as well). Unfortunately - it appeared we had underestimated the change of atmosphere – it became evident with the problems accompanying the census. We could not influence all of the problems, but we could at least eliminate or moderate some of them. These days we have been trying - ex post unfortunately - to define the basic problems accompanying the census and to formulate everything we had underestimated.
We think we had underestimated the following problems and events:

1) The change of the public view (opinion) of the activities organized by the state authorities
2) The education of the public and publicity through the media (and the budget for it)
3) The preparation of the law
4) The birth (formation) of the Office for Personal Data Protection
5) The changes in the ownership of the houses and flats
6) The way of the executing and evaluating of the pilot surveys
7) The necessity of engaging other subjects in this activity – ministries, academic sphere, municipalities, etc.
8) The differences in the declaratory questions in the last days of the census

Further to these problems and events:

1) The change of the public view (opinion) of the activities organized by the state authorities

During last ten years the Czech Republic has passed through many changes - as well as the other countries of the east and central Europe – starting from the splitting of Czechoslovakia and finishing at disappointed from the politics. The people began to protect their private lives more and started to be more suspicious. The State is no more authority for them (even if without wanting to) as it was during the totalitarianism. The majority of the citizens understand the democracy as the possibility to do what they want. The appreciation the liberty represents not only the rights but also the duties has not matured yet. And if we want the State to take care of us – citizens, we should also provide the sufficient data so that the State could make his decisions competently. Unfortunately we got ourselves to the other side of the pendulum – from the situation when everybody must provide the State with all information (and as soon as possible) to the opinion that the State has nothing to do with the private life of each citizen. Simply from one extreme to another. The fact of the matter is that there were no private questions in the census at all.

2) The education of the public and publicity through the media (and the budget for it)

The census budget was prepared four years before the census. At that time the statistics didn’t feel such a necessity to execute the education and inform about its activity through...
the media. This became evident in the budget - the money for the publicity has been quantified on the lowest limit. We were thinking naively that everybody (including the politicians and journalists) would understand the importance and the necessity of the census. We didn’t inform in advance - neither the media nor the public - about the purpose of the results. We didn’t explained what they could serve for and that they could be useful for everybody. A bad mistake was made that we hadn’t published the contents of the census forms in advance. The terrifying rumours appeared that we would establish the earnings of the population and the property – it wasn’t true of course. We could avoid this situation by timely campaign. We didn’t explain the sense of some questions and above all the reason of using the birth number (the control of the age and the sex and the mean for removing duplicities). The basic mistake in the preparation of the publicity and the contacts with media was that all this hadn’t been planned in advance – it’s too late to start the preparation of the publicity and the contacts with the media only half a year before such a big event the census is. The other key moments represented the alternation of the responsible persons – there was not appointed the person responsible for leading the campaign during all the time. Four persons rotated during the last four months. Making the publicity you must - above all - precise the receiver of any activity – though we knew that we could not speak to the teenagers and the senior citizens at the same time, we were persuaded -because of the limited financial means - to try to speak to the broadest circle of people.

It is necessary to look for the roots of the negative perception of the population census by the public in the past – the publicity of the State Office is not a single matter and it takes a lot of time to win a good reputation – not only few months before the “big bang”. Although the Office had a lot to offer to the public (that is unfortunately presented by media) for decades among the censuses, publishing for a long time the “News Releases” in a very precise regime, the CZSO preferred just a ticking over when it is “better not to be seen than if anybody should write about us something bad”. And we must add the well-known journalist rule “good news is no news”. If we add up all these factors together, we cannot to be surprised at the fact that the unfavourable news concerning the population census began to appear and the public didn’t have the reason to accept it or to take it slightly at least.

3) The preparation of the law
The special law is prepared for each population census. In contrast with the common practice when only the economic subjects are obliged to tell the Statistical Office their information (the citizens only voluntarily), in the census law there is established the obligation to provide the CZSO with the data by all citizens. Just as the budget, also the law had been prepared a long time before the census. Now we can say that in the naive way. Some things were automatically adopted from the last laws and some things (for example the list of questions, respectively variables) were not explicitly specified in the law. The law could not envisage the existence of the Office for Personal Data Protection and the media anti-campaign as well.

4) The birth (formation) of the Office for Personal Data Protection (OPDP)

The unfortunate event the CZSO could not influence was that the Office for the Personal Data Protection was established – a year before the census. This office had to find the platform and to defend (explain) the reasons for its own existence. The census was exactly the “appropriate” action suitable for it to draw the attention. It is very advantageous to take the position of the defender (advocate) of the ”poor citizen” which is threatened by “this terrible statistical office”. The existence of the OPDP caused many totally absurd actions and activities resulting in the costs growth. For example we had to liquidate some collected data (“the number of children from the present or last marriage) because the law said “the number of live born children”. During the pilot survey the word “live born” seemed too sensitive, the formulation had been changed for “all children only”.

5) The changes in the ownership of houses and flats

The changes of distribution of property that passed in the last years before the census have caused many problems. The Czech census counts the persons “de iure”, according to the place of the permanent residence (domicile) from the identity card. The flat is inhabited (occupied) only in the case that not less than one person is permanently registered in it. Recently there are many so-called “speculative” flats, i.e. the flats purchased as an investment and rent by their owners. In the past such a situation was not possible. The owners cannot allow the tenants to declare the permanent residence in such a flat because it would aggravate the possibility to deal with the flat). The flat permanently resided with persons or the families who are there only “temporarily” but the permanent residence have in another place, was counted as not inhabited (not logically and against the reality). That came to the disproportion with another statistical data counting such flats (for example
from the house building statistics). That began the favourite theme for the querying of the results credibility.

6) The way of the executing and evaluating of the pilot surveys
The pilot survey had passed before the census. Now we can see (everybody is wise after event) that its results were underestimated and that we should occupy deeper with the different indications. The pilot survey was marked by the non-random ("quota") selection.

7) The necessity of engaging other subjects in this activity – ministries, academic sphere, municipalities, etc.
The statistics had lost control of the engagement of the other subjects (ministries, academic sphere, municipalities, etc. – i.e. the future users of the results) in the publicity of the census (although the majority of them have closely cooperated in the preparation and the education of public). So it could happen that at TV and in the newspapers appeared the people - who are now standing in front of the CZSO waiting impatiently for the results - with the invectives against the census. It is a case of the ministries, academic and business sphere, municipalities. Everybody felt the necessity to tell to the world that the census is expensive, that somewhere they used the registers, somewhere it was not organized at all and that he would do it another way. The enterprises, specialists and consultants that were not successful in the selection procedures (competitive examinations) comprise the separate chapter – they attacked the processes they originally proposed…

8) The differences in the declaratory questions during the last censuses
During the last ten years some changes appeared that were foreseeable and the statistics ought to be prepared to explain them and comment on them. During the census this problem had concerned above all the declaratory questions – the religion and nationality. In the year 1991 the question about the religion appeared for the first time since 1950 in our census. That is why perhaps more than 4,5 million of inhabitants declared their religion (the longing for the certain revolt, “the new wave”, many people began to demonstrate the freedom of worship visiting the churches). In that time nobody analysed it, perhaps even did not dare as there was nothing to compare with. It was a real mistake – although it is the declaratory question, it was distorted by the times. In the year 2001 only 3,3 million of the persons declared the religion, which was surprising for the church representatives in the least. The nationality went through the similar anabasis when the question of the Moravian
or Czechoslovak nationality was very current in the year 1991 and seemed totally not interesting 10 years after.

Of course we didn´t notice of all problems (we didn´t speak about the problems with the changes of the methodology of data collection during the census – for example the TV information about the possibility to send the questionnaires per post although we have not been thinking about this possibility at all and with the wide changes connected with it), but we spoke about the principle problems aiming at the public. The identification of the problems is only the first step to solve them.

**Did we do at least anything that would be worth following?**

**The logo** – in the tender with some tens of the authors involved in we have succeed in choosing the logo which made an impression on many people:

![2001 logo](image)

**Sčítání lidu, domů a bytí**

**The Internet presentation** – within the bounds of the standard CZSO presentation was created one big subsite for the population and housing census. It wasn’t created as the special presentation of a single action but as a system of pages which ought to present the census in its complexity and the history. Those interested could find here almost everything which is connected with the census in the Czech Republic – starting from the basic information about the censuses in the past, theresian registers of the men and women and the draught animals and finishing at the references to the foreign census servers. At this server we try to be as open as we can, and that is why the preliminary results were published there, in the dynamic application the continuous results (they appeared just after the processing for the particular regions and municipalities) and you can find there the definitive results as well.
Posters, leaflets, New Year cards – it came out that “archaic” method of the paper posters and propaganda leaflets has still its sense (justification). The posters were pinned up in the public transport buses, the stick-on labels with the logo were running in the buses and trams. There was a TV spot, the publicity on the radio, but how mentioned above, it was oriented too generally – we want to kill two birds with one stone.

Results
In spite of the enormous problems which we had to overcome during the data collection, in spite of the media crisis, and all that, we have succeed in the counting almost all the inhabitants of the Czech Republic – the homeless people, foreigners and the problem minorities inclusive (in our estimation we didn’t count less than 1 %). We succeeded in getting of the high-quality people for the questioners (four cases of disappointment in approx. 60.000 people in action). And for the present we are getting well with the processing schedule and the results publishing (the first results appeared on web three months after the census, than appeared the continuous partial results, a week ago the press conference was held about the definitive results publishing…).

And the future?
These days we try to restore our “damaged” reputation by the open manner towards the media, the specialists and the public. Unfortunately the good reputation is difficult to win
and easy to lose. We have learned from our mistakes (we hope so!) and in future (if there will be some future!) everything will be prepared better, harmonized more etc.

And what is the main lesson for the next generation? It means to begin with the preparation and the education of the public for the following census immediately after the publishing of the previous census results, to explain to all people how are the personal data useful even for them, what can bring to them and that it is correct to tell the truth to the statistics, and above all to persuade all about the importance to perform the census.