

History of the United States Census

1790–Present

The United States Constitution requires a census every ten years. The United States Census is used to determine the growth of the country and the population in order to apportion congressional seats and electoral votes. It also is used to provide a foundation for government-based funding programs.

The first U.S. Census was taken after the Revolutionary War in 1790. The judicial branch of the government conducted that census and those that followed until 1870 when the executive branch took control of this important function. United States marshals and assistant marshals conducted the early censuses. Although figures were missing for many states, including Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Virginia, the estimated U.S. population in 1790 was 3.9 million people.

Census figures are based on actual accounts of citizens living in dwellings. Figures for the census include citizens, non-citizen legal residents, long-term visitors, and illegal immigrants. Homeless and migrating people also have been included in this figure.

General census records are found at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Although the census was established to gain an accurate picture of the country's population, it has not been without flaws. The process of including non-citizens has been extremely controversial in determining a state's representation in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College. The Prison Policy Initiative also has led to some problems. Counting prisoners as state residents of the jails where they are held rather than their pre-prison addresses led to inaccurate information concerning racial demographics and population numbers.

Until 1840 only the names of the heads of the household were recorded on the census. Only general statements about additional members within households were recorded. Later as the country's needs became more complex, additional information was recorded in order for improvements to be made. In 1810, for example, the first inquiry of manufacturers, quantity, and the value of products was placed on the United States Census. The 1840 census added inquiries about fisheries. That year the U.S. population was 17.1 million. In 1850 additional information involving churches, taxation, and crime was added; and the census

included new states and territories.

Between 1850 and 1880 the U.S. census recorded accurate portraits of life spans and causes of death. In 1860, 14,000 American Indians were counted among the total U.S. population of 31.4 million people. Twenty years later, the population reached 50 million, including women who were recorded by name for the first time. Census results for 1890 announced the frontier no longer existed and westward expansion was no longer tracked.

A tabulating machine was used for the 1890 census. This improved the time it took to process census results from six years to two-and-a-half years. The tabulated population of the United States that year was 62,622,250. In 1920 the U.S. population topped the 100-million mark for the first time when the number swelled to 106,021,537. In 2000 the official population of the United States was 281,421,906. The U.S. Census in 2010 is expected to show more than 300 million people living in the country.

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. What is the purpose of the United States Census?
2. Does conducting the census in ten-year intervals provide enough time to observe changes in the United States?
3. Who is included in the United States Census?
4. Should illegal immigrants be included in the census? Why or why not?

