

UNECE

Keeping Count

Conducting the 2020 round of population and housing censuses during the Covid pandemic



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KEEPING COUNT: CONDUCTING CENSUSES
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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1 Introduction

1. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic. At that time, preparations for the 2020 round of population and housing censuses were well underway for most countries in the UNECE region. Azerbaijan and Belarus conducted data collection in 2019, thus escaping the impacts of the pandemic on data collection (although this is not to say that they necessarily escaped all impacts on their censuses, since collection is only one aspect). The United States of America was starting census operations as the pandemic was declared. Their census collection took place from March to mid October 2020. Tajikistan proceeded with enumeration in October 2020. Most censuses for the other countries in the region are or were planned for later in 2020, or for 2021.

2. The effects of the pandemic on social and economic activity in the countries in the UNECE region are still unfolding and their magnitude and duration remain to be seen. Most countries not exclusively relying on registers for their censuses will therefore see the plans for their next census impacted in some form or another, whether in the form of delayed census collection, in preparatory activities, or in the processes undertaken to ensure quality of the outputs.

3. This analysis aims to shed some light on the impacts of the pandemic on the 2020 round of censuses in the region, to the extent that these impacts are currently known. Information on changes being implemented by some countries because of the pandemic was presented at the [UNECE Online Expert Meeting](#) in September 2020. Other information was collected in a survey of census experts in each country in the region conducted in October-November 2020.

4. The observations in this paper complement the recent work conducted by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Steering Group on Population and Housing Censuses, [New Frontiers for Censuses Beyond 2020](#). In combination, these two analyses are intended to serve as a guide for updating the CES Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses for the 2030 round.

2 Reviewing the impacts of the pandemic on the current round of censuses in the UNECE region

2.1 Gathering information from countries about impacts of the pandemic on censuses

5. A meeting of census experts in the UNECE region took place online from 29 September to 1 October 2020, with specific emphasis during the first day on the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, followed by sessions for all countries of the region on the next two days. Many of the presentations and discussions at the meeting focused

on the current state of preparations for upcoming censuses, and on changes being introduced to deal with the actual or anticipated effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

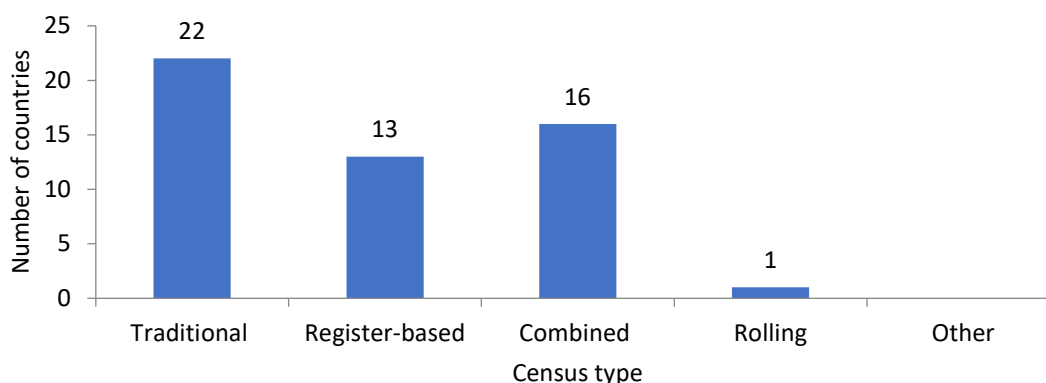
6. Complementing the information presented during this meeting, all countries in the UNECE region were also sent a survey in October 2020 which had the dual purpose of gathering information to update the publicly-available [UNECE Census wiki](#) and of investigating more deeply the impacts of the pandemic on censuses¹.

7. The survey asked whether any changes have been made or are planned for the current round of censuses because of the pandemic, across several areas: collection mode, field operations, data processing, use of administrative data, questionnaire(s), timelines for dissemination, communication and outreach activities, and any other changes. Where changes were reported, countries were asked to give details. They were also asked about their perspectives on the overall level of risk to the successful completion of a census in this round, and relatedly their thoughts on whether and how the CES Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses may need to be revised in future in the light of the current experiences.

8. Fifty-two countries² from the region responded to the survey. Of these, 22 reported conducting their census using a traditional approach, 16 are using a combined approach which involves some direct collection from respondents, one is using a rolling census approach, and 13 are conducting a register-based census (see Figure I).

9. The methods used for the production of census information are especially important in the current circumstances. Any approach requiring direct contact with respondents is liable to be impacted by the pandemic to some degree. Some countries using a register-based approach also indicated that they rely on some sample survey data as part of their approach. Sample survey data could also be impacted by the pandemic. Hence even those countries with a fully register-based approach are not fully protected from the impact of limitations on in-person contact.

Figure I: Responding countries by main census type



¹ Countries are not identified by name in this section, except for when referring to census dates and main census methodologies, since some of the anticipated changes to censuses have not yet been publicly communicated at the time of publication of this report.

² The United Kingdom is considered here as one response, although the answers to some questions are different for England and Wales, Scotland and/or Northern Ireland, each of which conducts a separate census.

2.2 Impacts of the pandemic on censuses of the 2020 round

2.2.1 Delayed collections and census reference dates

10. Fifteen countries indicated that they are moving their census to a later date. Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Israel the Russian Federation, all of which had planned a 2020 collection, have moved their censuses to 2021, while Albania and Ukraine, also with planned 2020 censuses, have decided upon a longer delay (2022 for Albania and 2023 for Ukraine). Some countries with censuses planned for 2021 also announced delays: either to a later date within the same year (Luxembourg, Portugal, Serbia, Romania, Greece), or to 2022 (Ireland, Scotland³ and Germany). Uzbekistan has delayed its planned 2022 census to 2023.

2.2.2 Changes in methodology

11. Countries which do not rely on registers for their census generally indicated that they are attempting to move away as much as possible from approaches requiring direct collection from respondents. Many countries that rely primarily on self-response will be attempting to increase the uptake of their online questionnaires. The push for this approach will be supported by the addition of specific messaging in census communication campaigns. Some countries will also attempt to conduct more interviews or follow-ups by telephone (e.g. Canada, France), with the challenge that sources of up-to-date telephone numbers may be difficult to obtain as the quality of this information may have suffered during the pandemic.

12. Many countries indicated that they will increase the use of administrative data, either as a direct replacement for non-response during collection, or to support data processing and estimation activities. For some countries the extent to which they will use administrative data will depend on actual conditions at the time of collection; they are treating the use of administrative sources as a contingency in case direct collection becomes impossible or unreliable. In those cases, the aim will still be to maximize response at the time of collection.

13. Existing administrative sources that remain available for statistical purposes during the pandemic may sometimes show a reduction quality because of less timely updates, resulting from administrative delays. Nevertheless, using these existing sources presents less of a risk for use in the current censuses than using newly-created administrative sources, which may be subject to the same kind of limitations as sample surveys and traditional censuses. If newly-created administrative sources are used for census purposes, thorough testing is needed.

14. In many cases, changes being introduced to deal with the anticipated effects of the pandemic actually represent an acceleration of original plans for the implementation of such changes, as is the case for example for online questionnaires solutions or the use of administrative data. In most cases, the implementation of such changes will be challenged by limited opportunities for extensive testing before census operations. Countries delaying their census collection may benefit from the extra time to prepare for operational changes, on condition that they conduct the requisite tests and make the necessary changes to their plans in the meantime.

³ Not included in the 15: see footnote 2.

15. The survey asked whether census operations are being or have been impacted by the pandemic, in nine different areas of operations. Table 1 summarizes the impacts reported by the experts.

Table 1: Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on census activities

Area of operations	Census method for 2020 round				Total
	Traditional	Register-based	Combined	Rolling	
Census date	9	-	6	-	15
Collection mode	4	-	3	1	8
Field operations	9	-	5	1	15
Data processing	3	1	1	1	6
Use of administrative data	5	-	-	1	6
Questionnaire(s)	5	-	-	-	5
Timeline for dissemination of results	5	-	3	-	8
Communication & outreach activities	8	1	8	-	17
Other changes in plans or methodology	3	-	1	-	4

16. The activity most impacted is communications and outreach, with 17 countries indicating some changes in this area. In most cases, the changes will aim to adjust communications campaigns to promote self-response, particularly via the Internet, as countries look to minimize direct contact with respondents. Relatedly, eight countries are also making changes to their collection mode, primarily to increase the use of self-enumeration, or to increase collection approaches by telephone such as Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

17. For those requiring some field operations, 15 countries indicated that they are making changes to this part of their census. These changes vary in nature, including partially or entirely eliminating in-person follow-ups; changing the field structure by implementing remote offices; virtual training; and providing personal protective equipment to field staff in cases where some in-person collection will continue to take place.

In data processing, six countries indicated some level of change; only one of which is a country that uses a register-based approach. The reported changes in data processing include system adaptations because of changes in collection tools, and increases in the use

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