Part 1: Census Questions I: Dropped or transferred

Welcome to the first week of the Alaska Library Association’s Government Documents Roundtable Census 2000 tutorial. I’d like to take this opportunity to take care of a couple of “housecleaning items:”

1. These tutorial e-mails are being sent plain text so that no one should have difficulty with scrambled text.
2. Any URL you see in these e-mails should be cut and pasted into your web browser in order to work. If I send you all a broken link by mistake, please notify me immediately and I’ll send out a correction.
3. Some of the documents I refer to are in pdf or Adobe Acrobat format. For these items you will need the free Adobe Acrobat reader available at . I strongly believe that you will get good value out of this tutorial even if you never read any of the documents I refer to. The links are there for enrichment, not homework!

This week we are going to cover questions that were either dropped since the 1990 census or transferred from the Short Form to the Long Form. Knowing these changes will help you in two ways. First, you won’t have to knock yourself out trying to find data that is no longer collected. Second, topics that have been transferred to the Long Form may not be directly comparable to prior censuses for reasons I’ll explain later.

Here are the dropped questions:

- Children ever born (fertility)
- Source of water
- Sewage Disposal (Special concern to Alaska)
- Condominium status
- Year last worked

For us Alaskans, the loss of the sewage disposal question was a loss for us. In prior censuses, our state had used this data to demonstrate the need for federal dollars to build better sanitation facilities in our rural areas. In 1990, over 27,000 Alaskans did not have access to either a public sewer or a septic tank (Source: Table H024. SEWAGE DISPOSAL - Universe: Housing units Data Set: 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) - Sample data)

Why were these particular questions dropped? As a partial result of the perceived intrusiveness of the 1990 Census questions, 2000 Census questions were limited to those topics which had a specific federal legislative mandate. Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Census Bureau all played a role in reviewing existing and proposed questions for the current Census.

Other Census questions were transferred from the Short Form (the form that everyone fills out) to the Long Form (which nationwide, only 1 in 6 had to fill out.) The topics moved to the Long Form were:

- Marital status
- Units in structure
- Number of rooms
- Value of home
- Monthly rent

Why the transfer? For the 2000 Census Short Form, a topic not only had to have a specific Federal,
legislative, mandate; there also had to be a need for that data at the Block level. A Block is the smallest unit of Census geography. Any question that met the first test but not the second was sent to the Long Form to relieve the burden of filling out the forms for the rest of us.

Shifting these questions from 100% data to sample data has changed the methodology under which these question responses have been collected. Caution may be in order when comparing statistics from these topics with prior censuses.

More information on how Census 2000 was structured can be found on the Census 2000 Frequently Asked Questions site at http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/genfaq.htm#questions. If you want to see the gory details on the exact, federal, legislative reasons a question was asked, please see http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/content.htm. Please note that you will need the Adobe Acrobat Reader to read the documents on this page.

Next week we will examine the one brand new question in Census 2000, and a preexisting question that has been expanded for the current Census. Until next time, happy data gathering!

Daniel Cornwall, Member Alaska Library Association Government Documents Roundtable.

If you find any part of this tutorial useful, you may use it in training materials with proper attribution, and if you drop me a line at dan_cornwall@eed.state.ak.us telling me how you're going to use it. Thanks!

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