

MAIN FEATURES OF THE 2001 POPULATION CENSUS IN HUNGARY

In Hungary – as in other European and UN countries – much importance is attached to successfully implementing the full-scale decennial population and housing censuses. Long and thorough preparatory work comprising legislation, field activities, and data processing were necessary to carry out this huge operation that requires enormous personal, technical and material resources.

Preparations by the Central Statistical Office for Hungary's 14th population census – carried out in February 2001 – were started some four years beforehand. To ensure international comparability, UN and EU recommendations for the 2000 census round were widely taken into account.

The legal basis

Hungarian legislation requires a specific act to govern the implementation of a population census. The act adopted in December 1999 defined the census day, the duration and scope of the census, the characteristics of the individuals to be enumerated, as well as the main topics of the census. It provided for a response obligation but exempted a number of specific topics (nationality, mother tongue, religion, and infirmity) from this obligation. Law also ruled the cooperation of the different central and local authorities involved.

The topics

The census enumerated the total of Hungary's 10 million population as well as dwellings, other housing units and institutional households. The topics covered were:

- on natural persons: sex, date of birth, place of residence, marital status, family status, number of live born children, school attendance, educational attainment, source of livelihood, households, occupation, employer and place of work, commuting, citizenship, religion, nationality, mother tongue, knowledge of languages, occupancy status in the dwelling and infirmities;
- on housing units, residential buildings and holiday houses and institutions for collective accommodation: type, ownership, number of rooms, floor space, communal facilities, level of comfort, maintenance, kind of heating, year of construction, walls, characteristics of the living environment.

The information collected thus allows to analyse the substantial developments of Hungarian society over the last decade such as changes in family life and cohabitation, modifications in the ownership structure and use of the housing stock, developments of the educational system, trends in the working environment, etc. At the same time, it was a must to be able to compare the results with the past, as well as with the data of the international community, given that a millennium census round was in progress all over the world.

Introducing new tools

With view to legal limitations in the use of administrative data sources, the 2001 census was carried out as a traditional survey based on direct interviews with questionnaires and enumerators. However, we introduced several new features and techniques: in the geographic preparation phase, on the census forms in terms of structure and content, in PR activities and in the data processing and dissemination technology.

As far as geography was concerned, an updated census list of addresses was established by matching and merging the actual (really enumerated) 1990 census addresses with the present state of affairs taken from the relevant registers checked and/or corrected on the spot before the data collecting phase. Moreover, digitised maps were used in the case of localities with over 2000 inhabitants.

Besides the traditional and compulsory sets of demographic, educational, occupational, family, household and housing topics, the question of legal nationality (citizenship) and religion were reinstated in the questionnaire, as well as a block on disabilities. These topics and those on ethnic nationality and mother tongue are regarded as sensitive characteristics and require careful legal consideration. For this reason, we guaranteed the anonymity of the questionnaire and gave respondents the option of not answering these questions.

Unlike in the past, the census was carried out in anonymity, i.e. without names and exact addresses on the questionnaires in order to take into account legal requirements on ethnic minorities and on personal data protection. After the input of the coded census data into the system, all questionnaires were destroyed.

For the first time, optical reading devices after the pre-coding of the questionnaires were used, a system that the HCSO elaborated in cooperation with a private company. The structure of the census questionnaire was adapted to this new data entry system to ensure that several million multisided questionnaires could be scanned.

The actors

The Hungarian Central Statistical Office has been professionally responsible for the census as a whole, while the execution of the fieldwork including recruiting and contracting interviewers was the task of local municipalities. The HCSO trained the interviewers and contracted directly the supervisors.

The county directorates of the HCSO carried out the local professional control while HCSO staff performed the training of the interviewers basically.

Costing aspects

Population censuses are very costly operations from both the workload and financial points of view. The 2001 Hungarian census involved about 50 000 well-trained interviewers and some 10 000 supervisors and nearly 15 million four-sided questionnaires not to speak of the processing and publication of the data, which will take some time to work through.

Financially speaking, the costs of the central and territorial preparatory works, the collection, processing and dissemination of the data have amounted to cca. 40 Million Euros, i.e. somewhat less than 4 Euro per person enumerated.

For the moment being, there is no equivalent alternative to a full-scope census in Hungary.

Moreover, no evaluation exists to establish the consequences and costs implied by a lack of census data! So, a census is well worth some investment. However, Hungary is seeking to study the possibilities of alternative solutions, too.

A wealth of information

Not only do the processed data represent valuable information, the results of the census will also serve as a source for further statistical and socio-economic studies and will be used as a sample base for future, in-depth surveys and thus provide a unique possibility for a balanced description of the Hungarian society of the millennium.

A first wave of national, regional and locality level preliminary housing and population data were published in mid-2001 in a volume and on CD-Rom. More detailed data of the most important census characteristics were released at the end of 2001.

The geographically detailed dissemination of full-scope data started at the end of 2002. In addition to standard publications, geographic and thematic details have become available under the strict restrictions of the data protection law.

To consult the main data of the 2001 Hungarian population and housing census, visit the census homepage of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (also in English): www.nepszamlalas.hu. Other, more recent census-like information is found on the 2005 Hungarian microcensus, at www.mikrocenzus.hu.