

Teaching History with the 1920 U.S. Census

Missy McNatt

What do people think of when they hear the word “census”? For some, the word prompts them to think of representation in Congress; others think of genealogy and family history. For still others, the census is viewed as something strange or foreboding. Yet for teachers and students, census records can be a great jumping off point for engaging in a meaningful and relevant study of the past.

Questions on the census, which is taken every 10 years, reflect events of the previous decade. Thus the questions

on the 1920 census represent events between 1910 and 1920. During that 10-year span, the world and the United

States changed dramatically. A world war raged between 1914 and 1918, millions died, and empires collapsed. The U.S. entered World War I on April 6, 1917, with 4.7 million men and women serving in the regular armed forces and National Guard. Prior to the start of World War I, an average of 1,900 people poured through Ellis Island every day from



A male enumerator takes down information for the 1940 census. (Approximately 120,000 Enumerators were employed; 1940–1941. Records of the Bureau of the Census 1790–2007, Record Group 29. NAID 62007775)

1910 to 1914. An estimated 675,000 Americans died in the 1918 influenza (Spanish flu) pandemic. The 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote was passed on August 18, 1920.

The end of World War I caused the sudden halt of a wartime economy. As a result, businesses failed and people lost their jobs. Immediately following the war, a wave of strikes by labor unions spread through the United States. Some were successful, but the unions faced great hostility. The mayor of Seattle branded a 1919 strike in the city as communist. Management across the nation warned that foreign radicals in labor's ranks influenced unions. This was fueled by Moscow's Communist International, in March 1919, which sought to promote communist victories around the world. Hysteria mounted throughout the United States, and many people saw radicalism in everything and everyone foreign.

These events between 1910 and 1920 stimulated changes in the population and culture in the United States. Questions on the 1920 census reflected these changes, especially issues surrounding immigration, as immigrants were often associated with radicalism and labor unions. The census questions were only agreed upon after much comment and debate. A move to enumerate "all surviving veterans of any war in which the United States has been engaged" was defeated along with a suggestion to have a column titled "ancestry."

Congress passed "The Act Providing for the Fourteenth Census Taken January 1, 1920" on March 3, 1919. The Act is 15 pages long and included hiring provisions: "women and honorably discharged soldiers and sailors to be employed when practicable." For the first time, women were also able to be hired as census supervisors. Duties and compensation for the census takers—referred to as enumerators—were clearly stated, including "not less than 2 nor more than 4 cents for each inhabitant..."¹

The 1919 Act also included questions that would be part of the 1920 census. Of the 29 questions on that census, several

referenced citizenship and nativity. It also outlined two additions to the general census—one for agriculture and one for manufacturing.

On January 2, 1920, at 9:00AM EDT, more than 90,000 enumerators from the Bureau of Census began taking the 14th census of the United States. Enumerators were given a 55-page book of instructions about how to take the 1920 census. Sam Rogers, director of the Census, required enumerators to carefully read the instructions and to carry the instructions with them at all times.²

A challenge of the 1920 census for some enumerators was the question about where an individual was born. Due to World War I-related boundary changes in Europe, some individuals were uncertain how to identify their national origin. Enumerators were instructed to spell out the name of the city, state, or province, or region of respondents who declared that they or their parents had been born in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, or Turkey. Interpretation of birthplace varied from one enumerator to another. Some enumerators included an exact birthplace in countries not designated in the enumerator's instructions. Others simply named the country. In addition to the questions from the 1910 census about parents' place(s) of birth and whether naturalized or "alien," the 1920 census asked for the "Mother Tongue" of the individual and the individual's mother and father.

Census supervisors were allowed to hire interpreters to assist the census takers in collecting details from persons not speaking English, but "no authorization shall be given for such employment in any district until due and proper effort has been made to employ an enumerator who can speak the language or languages for which the services of an interpreter would otherwise be required."³ Clearly, there was an expectation that numerous residents of the United States and the territories did not speak English.

Director Rogers reported in 1920 that it was especially difficult to enumerate the foreign-born in cities, as many

were "inclined to be suspicious of the census." To publicize the importance of the census, the department distributed leaflets and press stories appealing to American patriotism. Over 20,000 letters and 300,000 circulars describing the census were sent to teachers and students in citizenship classes, encouraging everyone to respond to the census. However, it is unlikely that every household responded to this campaign.

The findings from the 1920 census, like every census since the first one taken in 1790, were a portent for change, were controversial, and told us a version of who we were as a nation. The in-depth examination of immigration in the 1920 census determined that almost 14 percent of the U.S. population had been born elsewhere. Data from the 1920 census also revealed that the majority of Americans, including most of the immigrant population, lived in cities for the first time in the nation's history.

The results of the 1920 census became a hot political topic in Congress. If the results of 1920 were applied for apportionment of representation in the House of Representatives, the political power and money would shift to the cities. The cities tended to be Democratic. Congress was dominated by Republicans in the 1920s, and many of the representatives were elected from rural districts who worked to derail the reapportionment process, fearful of losing political power to the cities. Reapportionment legislation was repeatedly delayed as rural interests tried to come up with ways to blunt the impact of the population shift. Congress finally passed a bill in 1929 that stated that reapportionment would be based on results of the 1930 census.

The nativist sentiment exhibited by some Americans prior to the 1920 census continued during the next decade. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, prevented immigration from Asia and set quotas (based on numbers from the 1890 census) on the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe. According to the 1930

STATE		1920 CENSUS — UNITED STATES										SUPERVISOR'S DISTRICT #		SHEET NO.			
COUNTY												ENUMERATION DISTRICT #					
TOWNSHIP OR OTHER COUNTY DIVISION				NAME OF INCORPORATED PLACE						WARD OF CITY							
NAME OF INSTITUTION				ENUMERATED BY ME ON THE _____ DAY OF _____, 1920						ENUMERATOR							
PLACE OF ABODE				NAME	RELATION	TENURE		PERSONAL DESCRIPTION			CITIZENSHIP		EDUCATION				
STREET, AVENUE, ETC.	HOUSE NUMBER OR FARM NUMBER	NUMBER OF DWELLING HOUSE	NUMBER OF FAMILY (VISITATION ORDER)	OF EACH PERSON WHOSE PLACE OF ABODE ON JANUARY 1, 1920, WAS IN THIS FAMILY	RELATIONSHIP TO HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD	HOME OWNED OR RENTED	IF OWNED, FREE OR MORTGAGED	SEX	COLOR OR RACE	AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY	SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED	YEAR OF IMMIGRATION TO U.S.	NATURALIZED OR ALIEN	IF NATURALIZED, YEAR OF NATURALIZATION	ATTENDED SCHOOL SINCE _____	ABLE TO READ	ABLE TO WRITE
1	2	3	4			5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

NA FORM 14095 (10-91)

STATE		1920 CENSUS — UNITED STATES										SUPERVISOR'S DISTRICT #		SHEET NO.	
COUNTY												ENUMERATION DISTRICT #			
TOWNSHIP OR OTHER COUNTY DIVISION				NAME OF INCORPORATED PLACE						WARD OF CITY					
NAME OF INSTITUTION				ENUMERATED BY ME ON THE _____ DAY OF _____, 1920						ENUMERATOR					
NAME		NATIVITY AND MOTHER TONGUE						OCCUPATION							
OF EACH PERSON WHOSE PLACE OF ABODE ON JANUARY 1, 1920, WAS IN THIS FAMILY (from other side of form).		PLACE OF BIRTH OF EACH PERSON AND PARENTS OF EACH PERSON ENUMERATED. IF BORN IN U.S., GIVE STATE OR TERRITORY. IF FOREIGN BIRTH, GIVE THE PLACE OF BIRTH, AND, IN ADDITION, THE MOTHER TONGUE.						ABLE TO SPEAK ENGLISH TRADE, PROFESSION, OR PARTICULAR KIND OF WORK DONE. INDUSTRY, BUSINESS, OR ESTABLISHMENT IN WHICH AT WORK. EMPLOYER, SALARY OR WAGE WORKER, OR WORKING ON OWN ACCOUNT. NUMBER OF FARM SCHEDULE							
													PERSON		FATHER
5		PLACE OF BIRTH	MOTHER TONGUE	PLACE OF BIRTH	MOTHER TONGUE	PLACE OF BIRTH	MOTHER TONGUE	25	26	27	28	29			
		19	20	21	22	23	24								

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

NA FORM 14095 (10-91) BACK

census, 11.6 percent of the population of the United States and its territories was born in other places.

The United States census has been in place since the establishment of the nation, and the results of the 1920 census were not the first to cause controversy. From the beginning (the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787), the concept of a census was mired in dispute. In that very hot summer, delegates to the Constitutional Convention built the decennial census into the Constitution. Although the delegates' goal was relatively straightforward—documenting the number of people in each state for representation in the House of Representatives—determining whom to count came with conflict and compromise.

Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution states:
Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct.

Two major topics, slavery and the status of indigenous people, are acknowledged within the first sentence. The issue of counting enslaved persons as three-fifths of a person was hotly debated by the delegates, with the Southern delegates winning a major victory for increased representation in Congress for Southern states. Native Americans were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924, and so were not enumerated in the general population until the 1930 census.

Census History Highlights

As the Constitution directed, the first United States census was taken in 1790. From 1790-1840, the census was organized by the State Department with assistance from the U.S. Marshals Service. A permanent Census Bureau was established in 1903 within the Department

Suggested Teaching Activities

1. Divide the class into small groups of 3-4 students. Download a blank copy of the 1920 census (Blank copies of census records between 1790 and 1940 can be found at www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms).
Download the questions for the 2020 census. (Go to <https://my2020census.gov/>) Make enough copies of both documents so that each group receives a copy.
Download the National Archives document analysis worksheet (www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf). Make enough copies for each group to have two copies of the document analysis worksheet.
Ask students to read the two census forms carefully and complete a document analysis worksheet for each census. Ask the students to read the questions from the two censuses. How are the questions similar and how are the questions different? (A Venn diagram may be helpful for keeping track of the information.)
Use the following questions as prompts for a class discussion about the 1920 and the 2020 census: Which census asks more questions about family background? Why might that be the case? Why might people consider a response to the census questions with caution or skepticism? How do the questions asked in each census reflect the events of the 10 years prior to the census?
2. A math challenge. The number in the House of Representatives was capped at 435 with The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929. That number had been established after the 1910 census, although it was not considered permanent until 1929. Go to the Bureau of the Census website (www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/decennial-publications.1920.html) to find the population of each state in the United States in 1920. Based on population, how many representatives does each state have? How does that compare to numbers today?
As a follow up. What if the first Article to the Proposed Bill of Rights had been accepted? For every 40,000 persons, there will be a representative in Congress. How large would Congress be today?
3. Use the DocsTeach activity "The Impact of the Immigration Act from 1924" www.docsteach.org/activities/teacher/the-impact-of-the-immigration-act-of-1924.
In this activity, students will analyze a map showing quotas established by the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. They will be prompted to think about which countries were favored and which were barred from entering the United States. Then they will reflect on attitudes toward immigration at the time, and the effect these immigration restrictions had on the demographics and cultural, ethnic, and religious makeup of the United States.

of Commerce and Labor. U.S. Marshals and their assistants also conducted the 1850-1870 censuses, while persons appointed by the census served as census takers/enumerators.

The first census takers did not have a printed form to use. Each enumerator was expected to make his own copies on whatever paper he could find. The information the enumerator included were: name of the head of the household, the number of free white males 16 years and older, the number of free white males under 16 years, the number of free white females, and the number of enslaved people. The enumerators were only required to make one copy of the census schedules to be held by the clerk of the district court in their respective area.

In 1830, Congress passed a resolution requiring the U.S. District Clerks of Court to return all decennial censuses from 1790-1820. This resolution was passed so that a compilation of statistics of population could be published. However, officials discovered that much of the 1790 schedules had been lost or destroyed. As a result, only about two-thirds of the 1790 census schedules survived.

The topic of naturalization first appeared in the 1820 census with the question “Foreigners Not Naturalized.” Notably, the naturalization process was different for men and women. For more than 130 years, a woman’s citizenship depended on her husband’s citizenship status. It was not until The Cable Act of 1922 (passed after the 19th Amendment in 1920) that women were allowed their own citizenship.

In 1850, for the first time in the history of the United States, enumerators of the census were given printed instructions and were also instructed to record the names of every free person in the household. (Enslaved people were generally enumerated by gender and age categories.) As a result, the 1850 census gives more detail on each family. Although that census did not ask about citizen-

ship status, it did ask where each person was born, specifically the place of birth, naming the state, territory or country.

The 1860 census asked for the place of birth and whether the person could speak and read English. The 1870 census asked whether the person’s mother or father was of foreign birth.

Two big “firsts” for the 1880 census were that (1) the form asked for the relationship of household members to the head of the household and (2) women were permitted to be enumerators.

The vast majority of the 1890 Federal Census was destroyed by a fire at the Commerce Department in Washington, D.C., on January 10, 1921. Only fragments of some states remain. The fire was additional motivation for the creation of the National Archives and Records Administration, in 1934, to safely store the permanently valuable records of the federal government.

Both the 1900 and the 1910 federal census requested extensive information about immigration and citizenship, reflecting the vast number of immigrants to the United States in the prior years. The 1900 census asked if the individual was “foreign born,” the year of immigration, the number of years in the United States, the citizenship status of individuals over 21, and whether the person could read, write, and speak English.

The focus of the 1940 census shifted to employment and unemployment as a result of the Great Depression. Of the 34 questions on the 1940 census, only two related to immigration and citizenship.

One hundred years after the 1920 census, the topics of immigration and citizenship again contributed to controversy about the census. In 2019, the secretary of commerce, the president and the Republican Party in Congress pushed to include a question about citizenship on the 2020 census. The matter eventually came before the Supreme Court in late June of 2019. The Court did not bar the U.S. government from asking the question on the 2020 census; however, the justices ordered the government to

reconsider the question after concluding the reason given for the citizenship questions was “contrived” and “pretextual.”⁴ This decision effectively barred the question because printing of the 2020 census began in early July 2019.

Census records provide an abundant source of information for historians, teachers, students, and genealogists. Census data can reveal migration and immigration patterns and the makeup of a community, including the jobs people held and where they were from. The census provides a snapshot of the nation on a particular date every 10 years. The massive advertising campaign to complete the 2020 census reminds us of the importance of the data both for today and the future. ●

Notes

1. United States Congress. *The Act for Providing for the Fourteenth Census Taken January 1, 1920*. Government Printing Office, 1924, pp. 1291–1302.
2. These instructions to enumerators are now available online at www.census.gov.
3. Instructions to Supervisors of Census, United States Congress, Bureau of the Census, Government Printing Office, 1919.
4. Supreme Court of the United States, Syllabus, *Department of Commerce et al. v. New York et al.*, www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/18-966_bq7c.pdf.

MARY CLAIRE (MISSY) McNATT is an education specialist for the Museum Programs Division in the Office of Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries, and Museum Services at the National Archives. She can be reached at Missy.McNatt@nara.gov. **ANDREA (ANG) REIDELL** and **KIMBERLEE RIED** served as editors of this article. Ang is an education specialist and Kimberlee is a public affairs specialist. Both are in the Museum Programs Division in the Office of Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries, and Museum Services at the National Archives. Ang can be reached at Andrea.Reidell@nara.gov and Kimberlee can be reached at Kimberlee.Ried@nara.gov.