

Introduction

Why is the Census taken?

Census taking first happened in the ancient world. The Babylonians, Chinese, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans counted their people to provide them with information for military and taxation purposes. The first time any kind of Census was taken in Britain was the Domesday Book of 1086. However, this was really to collect information on land rather than on people.



No further official attempts to count the population were made until the late 1700s. At that time, there was general worry about the rise in population and a fear that the country would not be able to feed itself. Since no one had any accurate information on the number of people living in the country, the government ordered that a Census take place. As a result, the first modern Census in this country took place in 1801.

Knowing how many people were living in the country was obviously helpful to the government but over time it was realised that having other kinds of information would also be of use. For example, knowing how many people were living in overcrowded conditions would help the government in making new laws to deal with the problem. Today the Census form asks for information on topics such as age, ethnic background, housing, size of family, work and transport so that the government and local authorities can draw up plans to meet the needs of all the population.

The Census in history

Counting people and collecting information about a country's population is not a new idea. In ancient times, the Egyptians used this type of information to help them build the pyramids and to give out land following the annual flooding of the Nile. The Romans also had regular Censuses. In the nativity story, Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to take part in the Census ordered by Caesar Augustus which required every man in the Roman Empire to return to his birthplace and be counted.



In more recent time, other countries have attempted to carry out a Census of their population. La Nouvelle France (Quebec) and Acadie (Nova Scotia) carried out sixteen surveys between 1665 and 1754. There were also Censuses in the eighteenth century in Sweden, Denmark, Austria and various Italian states.

Quiz 2

1. The first Census taking appeared in the ancient world

True or False?

2. Why was the first Census taken in Britain in 1801?

- A. The government was worried about the population being able to feed itself.
- B. The King – George III was interested in how many people lived in his country
- C. The government wanted to tax people properly

3. Which people in the Bible took part in a Census?

- A. Moses
- B. Joseph and Mary
- C. Jesus

Answers

1 = True, the Babylonians, Chinese, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all counted their people.

2 = A The government needed to know how large the population was to make sure there was enough food to go around.

3 = C In the nativity story, Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to take part in the Census ordered by Caesar Augustus which required every man in the Roman Empire to return to his birthplace and be counted

Extra Information on Census Taking in Britain

Although the first official Census was not taken until 1801 there had been a number of previous attempts to estimate the size of the population. The most famous of these was made by a man called Gregory King. He estimated that in 1696 the population of England and Wales was 5.5 million. Debates regarding the size of the population continued throughout the 1700s but it was not until the end of the century that people started to see the need for a full Census.

It has been argued that the first Census was prompted by the publication of a book called *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which was written by Thomas Malthus in 1798. Malthus argued that the population was growing so quickly that the country would soon not be able to feed itself. The publication of the book coincided with a period of war, bad harvests and food shortages and many people became very worried. How would they know if the country could feed its people if it didn't know how many people it had to feed? This concern may have persuaded the government to pass the Act, which authorised the taking of the first official Census.

As the nineteenth century progressed, it became clear that the government needed to know more than just the overall number of people living in the country. This was reflected in the questions asked by different Censuses. For example, the introduction of a question relating to age in 1821 was designed to find out how many men able to bear arms lived in the country and to improve the tables on which life assurance schemes were based. More detailed questions on occupations from 1831 provided the government with information which could be used to discuss economic theory.

Using the Census to collect information for use in developing government policy has continued to this day. For example, questions in the 1991 Census enabled the government to discover how many elderly people were living alone and what type of accommodation they lived in. By collecting the same information from all over the country it makes it easy for the government to look at similarities and differences between different parts of the country and decide on what action needs to be taken.