

Project for the Regional Advancement of Statistics in the Caribbean



Adjusting the Census of Population for COVID-19

September 28, 2020

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 censuses in the Caribbean region planned for 2020 have been postponed to 2021. It is possible that some, including ones planned for 2021, may be postponed further depending on the status of government finances, national priorities and the availability of adequate funding as well as on the continuing status of the pandemic.

Led by their governments, populations have had to make numerous adjustments in an effort to conform with recommended public health measures. These adjustments to our lives and behaviours have an impact for census plans in multiple ways. Naturally there are impacts for the entire programme of statistical activities of NSOs as well and offices have already had to adapt and alter strategies in light of this very unusual environment. Some will already have been considering what needs to be done to best prepare censuses for success under the circumstances. At this point it is urgent that census plans be reviewed and updated in their entirety in light of the pandemic circumstances; a vital goal is to concurrently reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 while also reducing risk to the census programme. In this context a thorough risk assessment process will be important.

To supplement or emphasize strategies already identified by NSOs, this note provides some guidance and suggestions from PRASC, guided in part by adjustments Statistics Canada is making for its 2021 Census of Population.

A second valuable reference is the recently released Technical Guidance Note on PPE Recommendations for Census from the UNSD/UNFPA.

It is predicated on the assumption that even for censuses postponed to 2022, they will be conducted in what will be a “pandemic environment”; even if the pandemic is largely “under control” and/or a vaccine has become widely available, appropriate public health measures will still be needed.

Risks

The census risks we are addressing here all arise from the pandemic risks associated with close personal contact. This arises in multiple ways in a census. Some foremost examples are: recruiting, training, supervision and support of temporary staff; mapping field work, personal interviewing both at private dwellings as well as at collective dwellings (e.g. long term care facilities), work in an office environment whether by permanent NSO staff or by temporary staff hired for tasks such as coding.

Taken together these have multiple risks for the census of population. Important examples include:

- Challenges associated with adapting modi operandi, plans, budgets and schedules
- Challenges associated with procurement and supply chains
- Reduced data quality
- Increased difficulty with hiring and retention of temporary staff
- Increased difficulty with training and supervision of mapping or data collection staff
- Increased difficulty in safely doing office work
- Increased unit non-response
- Increased partial non-response
- Increased data collection cost
- Slowed data collection
- Ethical risk -- COVID-19 transmission attributable or thought to be attributable to census activity and so reputational risk for the NSO

Key Adjustments

In the context of an overall review of plans, schedules and budgets there are a number of key areas where adjustments most need to be considered.

1. **Seek advice from Public Health authorities.** It is likely that most offices will already have done this but it's included here since it is so important. See also UN/UNFPA (Sep 2020).
2. **Management processes including risk management and change management.** COVID-19 related risks will need to be added to the risk register, along with mitigation and contingency plans. They will need to be continuously monitored and adjusted given how fast the situation can change even at local levels. Other management processes and tools need to be able to quickly, route, assess and address operational risks, issues. This implies an enhanced level of agility beyond the norm. Significant changes need to be shared with stakeholders.
3. **Adjust field operations.** The goal is to minimize face to face contact with the public without reducing response. This is a challenge in a census conducted primarily via PAPI or CAPI. Provide

enumerators with personal protective equipment. Train them in relevant best public health practices, including especially maintaining appropriate distance from respondents. Adapt training of enumerators to also cover respondent queries about safety. Even within the parameters of dynamic data collection strategies strive to minimize travel by enumerators.

Some NSOs may wish to consider implementation of self-response strategies in certain circumstances or for certain sub-populations. The UNFPA discourages NSOs from shifting to new census approaches that have not been planned well in advance. PRASC supports this view. Any such adaptation should be undertaken with a great deal of caution as data collection then becomes multi-mode and so more complex and more challenging to plan, develop, implement, test, monitor and control.

4. **Adjust data collection for collective dwellings:** This is important since some collectives, such as long term care facilities, include populations who may be particularly at risk for COVID-19. Such facilities are likely to have in place special practices and restricted access constraints. Such practices may prevent access by enumerators. Strategies involving contact only with facility administrators are likely to need consideration. Consultation with such administrators in planning would be wise.
5. **Minimize group activities in data collection.** Consider training strategies for new and temporary employees that use videoconferencing. Consider having field area managers and supervisors set up offices at their homes. Adopt strategies for distribution of materials that minimize groups. Consider cancelling plans for call centres and instead have such staff work from their homes.
6. **Data Processing at Headquarters.**
Normally this involves a large team of employees working in an office environment doing editing as well as coding, possibly computer assisted, and other related tasks to produce a final clean file of census data ready for analysis. It may be necessary to consider work from home strategies. This would entail resolving concerns re computer networking, security and confidentiality, supervision, data quality management and others. Alternatively approaches involving some combination of shift work, more widely spaced workers in the same space, or larger amounts of space may need to be considered.
7. **Ensure adequate staffing, including hiring locally.** Consider whether higher rates of hiring of temporary staff are needed to allow for increased attrition. Strive to hire locally. Consider whether pay rates should be adjusted to better attract applicants or to better reflect the nature and risks of the work under the circumstances.
8. **Communications with stakeholders.** This includes major funders, partners in implementing the census, data users and others including local levels of government who can be supporters of data collection efforts. Governments will be facing multiple concurrent challenges and census advocacy will be critical. Further strengthening of these relationships and collaboration with

these groups can only help in adapting to the circumstances. The importance of census including for informing preparedness and response should be emphasized. See also key messages below.

9. **Public Communications.** The public will need to be made aware that the NSO is doing everything it can to safely conduct a census that will produce the best quality data as possible. See key messages below.

10. Non-response management and adjustment

Increased non-response and slower response are significant risks in conducting a census during a pandemic or even in the months following its conclusion. Dynamic response management directed to ensuring good quality response everywhere will be important. And at the stage of processing at headquarters a good quality strategy to adjust for dwelling level non-response will be more important than ever. See references noted below.

Key Messages

NSOs will already have developed communications plans and key messages that, amongst other things, emphasize the importance and value of collecting census information. Consider adapting these messages to reflect that collecting these data remains important, even during the pandemic. There are a number of key messages to be included as it concerns COVID-19 concerns. Here are some examples to use in your communication strategy.

- The National Statistical Office recognizes that data collection operations for the Census will likely occur at a time when there will be real and or perceived concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the agency is making changes in the Census to ensure a successful enumeration with strong response and high quality data.
- These adjustments will ensure the health and safety of <insert nationality >, as well as the staff working on the Census.
- When a face-to-face visit with a dwelling is needed, it will be different than in the past. Enumerators will be provided with Personal Protective Equipment and will respect physical distance (2m) when talking with dwelling occupants.
- Methods will be adopted to use local enumerators and minimize travel.
- As applicable – To minimize the risk of an outbreak in crowded office environments, the Census will follow best practices for such work. To the extent possible work at home approaches will be used.
- The NSO still plans to hire several hundred enumerators and temporary office workers. This team is needed to ensure a high response rate and high quality data. The protection of these employees and so also their points of contact will have the highest priority.
- Modern and innovative statistical methods will be used to adjust for any non-response.

References

PRASC (March 2020), "A Strategy for Census Response Management"

PRASC (March 2020), "On Adjusting for Dwelling Non-response in a Census"

UN/UNFPA (Sep 2020), "Technical Guidance Note on Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) Recommendations for Census"