



FAQs on the Population Census

What is the population census?

Until 2000, the population census was conducted every 10 years as an exhaustive survey, i.e. the whole population was surveyed. In 2010 a fundamental change was introduced. Since that year, the population census has been conducted and analysed on an annual basis but as a register-based survey with complementary sample surveys.

The foundation of the census is the register survey that analyses available administration data. For this survey, the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) uses cantonal and communal population registers, federal registers of persons and the Federal Register of Buildings and Dwellings. Only essential information that is not kept in a register has to be obtained from the population through complementary sample surveys: from an annual structural survey of 200 000 people, thematic surveys of 10 000 to 40 000 people (one of five alternating themes per year) and an Omnibus survey of 3000 people on current topics.

This enables Switzerland to have a modern statistics system with which it can observe population and household structures and trends on a continuous basis.

Why is the population census no longer an exhaustive survey?

Official statistics has the mandate to compile the representative findings on the status of and trends in the population, the economy, society, education, research, the territory and the environment.

Furthermore, coverage of the different subject matters and policy areas should be balanced and meet users' needs. In a time of increasingly rapid economic and social change, the breadth and diversity as well as the timeliness of information is more important than its spatial depth.

For this reason the Federal Act on the Federal Census was completely revised and came into force on 1 January 2008. With the new Federal Census Act, the Federal Council and Parliament decided to modernise official statistics and mandated the FSO to modernize the population census.

What conditions had to be in place for the change of system?

Today it is increasingly possible to use data that are available in official registers. Through the harmonisation of the population registers and with the FSO's Federal Buildings and Dwellings Register, standardised and comparable basic data on the population structure, households, buildings and dwellings are available for the whole of Switzerland, i.e. covering all communes. This information no longer has to be collected by using questionnaires. More detailed information can be obtained from sample surveys.

Why are sample surveys still necessary?

The administration registers on which the population census is based do not contain all the necessary information. The question about the main language, for example, has been in the catalogue of questions for the population census almost since its inception. The registers do not keep any information about this subject, however. The question about the main language and also questions about the language most commonly spoken are collected as part of the structural survey.

What are the advantages of the new population census?

- Statistics on population structure and trends are available every year and not only every 10 years as previously. Findings can be published quickly and regularly.
- The statistics cover a broader range of subjects and are more up-to-date.
- The system of register-based and sample surveys is flexible and can be adjusted to meet new utilisation needs, for example by integrating new information sources.

- The new population census presents a clear reduction in the burden for the communes, cantons, home owners and the population in general.
- Thanks to sustainable investments, some CHF 100 million can be saved when compared with the traditional population census.

Why is a population census necessary?

The census is a very important source of information for population, politics, economics and science. In almost all countries in the world, censuses are conducted on a regular basis.

Statistics from the population census on the age structure, the percentage of foreigners in Switzerland, the labour market, commuter behaviour and many other subjects are an important source of information for many issues of current interest. They are used for planning, for developing strategies and for decision making in a wide variety of policy and economic areas. These include such diverse subjects as traffic, health, education, energy, environment, regional planning and social security.

What are population census data used for?

Information from the population census has a wide range of uses. Here are some examples:

- The population figures are used to allocate National Council seats to the cantons.
- The information is used to set up the financial equalisation scheme, which is intended to reduce the disparities between the cantons.
- The Federal Office of Health (FOPH) needs population data for the allocation of health insurance subsidies.
- The Federal Social Insurance Office (FSIO) uses population scenarios to model the future funding of the OASI.
- The Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEK) uses this data to distribute the revenue from the heavy vehicle fee to the cantons.
- Businesses use population statistics to conduct market studies, for personnel planning and to choose locations for new branches.
- The pension funds and life insurance companies need demographic data for risk assessment and to prepare their premium tables based on age and gender data.
- The cantons and communes rely on the information for the planning of school classes, school buildings or old peoples' homes.
- The statistical office of the EU (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) use the national census results for international comparisons.

Can the findings be compared with previous results?

The comparability of data from future surveys with the results of previous population censuses must be ensured. Registry data with information on the population structure (e.g. age, sex, civil status, nationality) and evaluations on households, buildings and dwellings are, with slight constraints, comparable with earlier population census data.

Compared to the population census 2000, some of the data is no longer available at commune and city district level. Questions that are asked in the Structural Survey (e.g. main language, highest educational level, mode of transport to work or school) are comparable with previous results for groups of persons comprising 15 000 people or more. By cumulating data for 3 and 5 years it is possible to calculate results for smaller groups of persons (3 years: groups from 5000 persons; 5 years: groups from 3000 persons).

Comparability is already paramount when phrasing the questions. Information on the subjects covered is more extensive than before as the new system of register analysis and the Structural Survey are complemented by thematic statistics. To increase the explanatory value of data with regard to the degree of spatial detail, cantons and towns can increase the sample size for their area.

Does the new concept really save money or are the costs simply passed on to the cantons and communes instead?

The costs for the surveys listed in the standard programme (annual register-based survey, annual Structural Survey of 200 000 persons, annual sample survey on alternating subjects of 10 000 to 40 000 persons, one Omnibus survey per year) were approximately CHF 69.2 million for the period

2008 to 2015. These costs are paid in their entirety by the Confederation. Provided that cantons do not plan to increase the sample sizes for the standard programme, no extra costs arise for cantons and communes.

Should the cantons decide against increasing their sample sizes, the costs arising are considerably lower than the staffing and financial burden that the cantons and communes had to bear for the 2000 population census (approx. CHF 68 million). A doubling of the sample survey sizes of all cantons for the Structural Survey from 2010 to 2015 would cost around CHF 9.2 million. The total costs of a population census in 2010 modelled on an exhaustive survey would have been around CHF 137 million, of which the cantons would have had to pay some CHF 37.5 million.

What is the register survey?

The register survey provides basic information about the entire population. It furnishes results on the size and structure of the population and of households, as well as of residential buildings and dwellings. The results of the preceding year are available at the end of August (population statistics), in October (household statistics) and in December (buildings and dwellings statistics, housing conditions).

Characteristics of the register survey

- information about people and households on age, sex, civil status, nationality, household size, etc.;
- information about buildings and dwellings according to age, building category, number of dwellings, number of rooms, area etc.;
- complete census based on available register data;
- the survey is evaluated annually;
- the data can be evaluated at a very detailed geographical level.

What is the Structural Survey?

In the Structural Survey, the FSO surveys a small part of the population in writing. The survey complements the information from the registers and provides additional statistics on the structure of the population. The first results are available one year after the reference day. Cumulative results will also be made available for the periods of three and five years.

Characteristics of the Structural Survey:

- information on the themes of population, households, families, housing, employment, mobility, education, language, religion and migration;
- sample survey of at least 200 000 people;
- response by internet or by completing a paper questionnaire;
- conducted annually with the reference day of 31 December;
- geographical depth of focus: Switzerland, major regions, cantons and communes with 15 000 inhabitants and more;
- the results can be cumulated over 3 and 5 years. This allows analyses to be made at a lower geographical level or in more detail on certain topics;
- cantons and cities can enlarge their sample.

What are the thematic surveys?

The thematic surveys are carried out through random sampling. The statistics from these surveys can be used to add considerable depth to the information from the structural survey. The first results are available one year after the collection of data from the respondents has been concluded.

Characteristics of thematic surveys

- telephone sample survey of 10 000 to 40 000 persons;
- one thematic survey conducted annually;
- cantons and cities can enlarge the sample;
- a repetition of the same theme every five years is planned;
- information on specific themes at the level of Switzerland and the major regions.

Schedule of thematic surveys

2018: Families and generations

2019: Language, religion and culture

2020: Mobility and transport

2021: Education and training

2022: Health

2023: Families and generations

What are the Omnibus surveys?

Omnibus surveys are multiple-theme surveys aimed at providing quick answers to current questions of interest to policymakers and the scientific and research community. The results are available about six months after the collection of survey data.

Characteristics of the Omnibus survey

- sample survey of 3000 persons;
- one Omnibus survey is planned every year;
- flexible selection of themes depending on need;
- information on specific topics at the national level

Topics covered by Omnibus surveys:

- 2010: Internet use
- 2011: Several topics on life in Switzerland
- 2014: Internet use / Nutritional habits
- 2015: Survey on the population's perception of the environment
- 2016: Survey on diversity and coexistence in Switzerland
- 2017: Internet use
- 2017: Diversity: Discrimination of black people in Switzerland
- 2018: Survey on diversity and coexistence in Switzerland
- 2018: Lifestyle: Opinion, knowledge and habits

Why have I been chosen for an FSO survey?

The people are selected at random from FSO's sample register. This register is based on the official population registers of communes, cantons and the Confederation.

Why have I/we been chosen again for an FSO survey?

Generally this should not occur, as the FSO has introduced a procedure that distributes the burden of surveys equally throughout the entire population. However, this procedure cannot eliminate completely the possibility of being asked more than once. Being asked again may be due to having moved home, having spent time abroad or because of the size of your household. Such cases are rare and the FSO tries to avoid them. We thank you for your understanding.

Why is participation in the Structural Survey compulsory?

The Structural Survey is the largest statistical survey on population and household structures in Switzerland and is therefore extremely important for policymaking, the economy, administration and planning. That is why the Swiss federal government has made participation compulsory. The legal basis for this decision can be found in Article 10 of the Census Act (CC 431.112), which stipulates that participation in the Structural Survey is compulsory.

Will I receive a fine if I refuse to give information for the Structural Survey?

While the Structural Survey is compulsory, the Federal Census Act does not stipulate a fine for non-respondents but instead an administration fee. Non-respondents create an additional workload such as reminder letters or inquiries. Experience with previous structural surveys show that respondents' willingness to participate is very high and therefore no such fees have to be paid.

Is the FSO allowed to pass on data to other authorities, such as the Tax Administration or the DI?

No, that is not allowed and is clearly governed by law. The data collected for the Structural Survey is anonymised and may only be used for statistical purposes.

Is the protection of data guaranteed?

Data protection and data security are among the most important concerns of the FSO. They are guaranteed by the [Federal Statistics Act](#), the [Federal Census Act](#) and the [Data Protection Act](#).

- All information is kept strictly confidential.
- Names and addresses as well as the completed survey documents are destroyed after the data collection phase is completed.
- The data are only used for statistical purposes defined by law.
- The published results do not make it possible to draw any conclusions about the individual circumstances of individual households and persons.
- The employees of the FSO and of participating survey institutions are subject to the obligation to maintain confidentiality.

Does the population census provide new information compared with the previous exhaustive survey?

Yes. The Swiss Adult Education Survey, for example, asks questions about basic education, retraining, informal training, continuing education etc. The Structural Survey has new questions concerning international migration and mobility (e.g. parents' country of birth, how Swiss nationality was obtained).

Can the general public access the results?

Anyone can access the results. A summary of the results (tables, maps, etc.) is available to the public. Anonymised individual data are only made available for research projects and following the conclusion of a data protection agreement.

The FSO publishes the information. However, the evaluation of data is up to the users, e.g. the cantons, federal offices, businesses or academics. The population benefits indirectly from these evaluations that are conducive to planning and may be used as the basis for decisions. Swiss Federal Railways, for example, uses data from the population census to help create its timetables.

Why are more surveys conducted by telephone than by internet?

Depending on the topic, the FSO chooses the most suitable means of conducting surveys. The Structural Survey, for example, is a written one, in which participants can choose whether they wish to complete the questionnaire on paper or online. The telephone interview is the best way of conducting the thematic surveys. This means that respondents can ask questions if they don't understand and interviewers can provide additional explanations.