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Lessons learned from censuses of the 2020 round

Polish experiences from the 2021 census

Note by Central Statistical Office of Poland*

Summary

The 2020/2021 census round has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread across the globe. Some countries abandoned plans to conduct the census on time and postponed their censuses to subsequent months or years. The Polish statistical office faced up to this challenge by providing solutions that made it possible to carry out the census successfully and with the necessary precaution.

Preparatory work for the census was carried out from 2017, prior to the pandemic. As part of this work, a plan for introducing modernizing changes was developed, based on experiences from the conduct of the census in 2011, and aimed at further facilitating respondents' participation in the census. At the stage of preparatory work, the pandemic was not taken into account, as no sign of it had yet appeared.

The pandemic circumstances – behavioural and psychological behaviours of the population prevailing during the implementation of the census, resulting from the threat to health and restrictions on basic freedoms – also influenced the conduct of the census. Hence, it was necessary to monitor the data collection stage on an ongoing basis and to take additional measures, where necessary, to support obtaining complete and top-quality census results, even more rigorously than under “normal” conditions.

All the factors mentioned above, both standard and extraordinary, are described in this paper. They are a compendium of experiences that must be taken into account when preparing for the next censuses.

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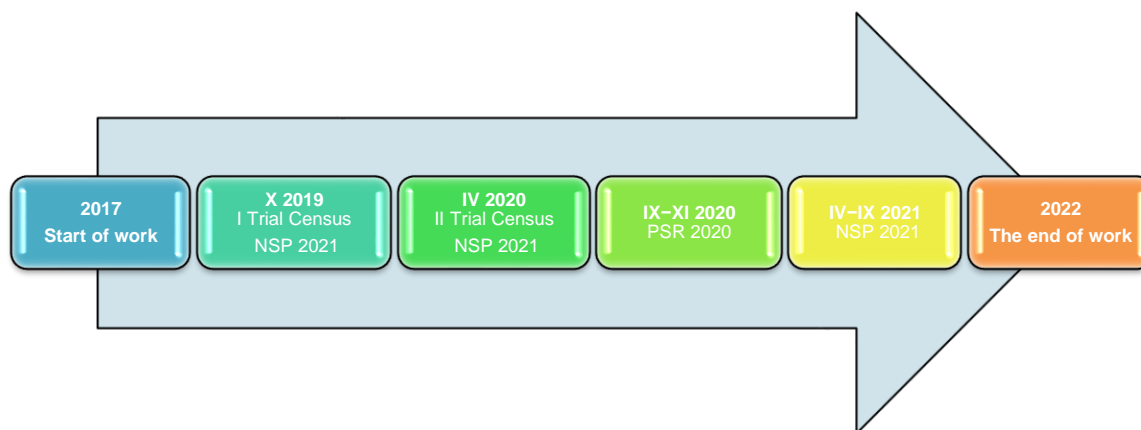


I. Introduction

1. The timeline for conducting the Polish census included two trial censuses at short intervals before the population and housing census; the agricultural census; and the population and housing census. On the timeline it looked like this:

Figure 1

Timeline for implementation of Polish census of 2021



2. On the timeline, PSR 2020 stands for the abbreviation of the Polish name of the agricultural census, NSP 2021 the abbreviation of the Polish name of the population and housing census.

3. This schedule implied a period of very labour-intensive and challenging tasks in a short space of time, but this intensity resulted in the development of the most optimal solutions. These solutions applied to both censuses, since both the agricultural and the population and housing census were carried out according to the same data collection scenario, using the same technology, the same methods (computer-aided internet, personal or telephone interviews, CAxI) and even using the same mobile devices. The management structure of both censuses was also the same – the Central Census Office and regional census offices. The success of both censuses proves the correctness of the solutions.

4. Given the similarities detailed in the previous paragraph and the time sequence of censuses, the trial censuses served as a testing ground for the agricultural census, and the solutions tested in the agricultural census were then also used in the census of population and housing. The only deviation from the described scheme was the methodology of the censuses, for which each of the censuses has its own separate characteristics.

5. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, a withdrawal from the second trial census was considered. However, taking into account the instability of the epidemic situation in the following months and the possibility of a resurgence of the pandemic during the implementation of the agricultural census in September–November 2020 or the population and housing census 2021, a decision was made to go ahead. It was decided to adjust organizational solutions to enable the implementation of such a complex task as a census in the face of extraordinary events. This also offered an opportunity to assess the flexibility of the management system and its resistance to crisis events. As a result, a decision was made to conduct a second trial census with the necessary precautions, limiting the methods of collecting data to those that would not endanger the health of respondents and census enumerators.

6. As it turned out after the censuses ended, this was one of the key operational decisions that contributed to the success of these censuses.

II. Changes introduced to the implementation of the population and housing census based on the experience of the 2011 census

7. The census was carried out from 1 April to 30 September 2021, with a census reference date of 31 March 2021, 00:00.
8. The census was carried out using the following methods:
 - (a) Internet self-enumeration (computer-assisted web interview, CAWI) – the channel was operational during the period 1 April to 30 September 2021;
 - (b) Computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) – the channel was operational during the period 4 May to 30 September 2021;
 - (c) “Interview on request” (telephone interview on the respondent’s request) – the channel was operational during the period 1 April to 30 September 2021;
 - (d) Direct interview (computer-assisted personal interview, CAPI) – the channel was operational during the period 21 June to 30 September 2021.
9. Internet self-enumeration was a mandatory form of participation in the census. Complementary methods were telephone or direct interviews conducted by census enumerators. If someone failed to self-enumerate online, interviewing by an enumerator became mandatory.
10. Each of the respondents could complete the online self-enumeration on their own, on their own electronic device (computer, tablet, smartphone) or at census points organized by municipal offices with the possibility of assistance from an employee from the office.
11. In cases where the only barrier to filling in the census form was a lack of the access to Internet, it was possible to visit a self-enumeration point organized by the commune office, the statistical office (US), or the Central Statistical Office (GUS). It was first necessary to check (e.g. on the website of GUS, commune office, US) to find out where, at what times and under what terms such points could be used. A full list of rooms for self-enumeration was published on 31 March 2021 on the website of the Central Statistical Office.
12. The use of the self-enumeration points was an option prepared both for those who used a computer on their own and for those who needed help using it. All respondents could count on the support of a specially trained and sworn office employee.
13. It should be emphasized that all self-enumeration points were made available in accordance with the sanitary regime, with provision of personal protective equipment adequate to the current pandemic threat. The stands were adapted to the needs of disabled people.
14. Self-enumeration points, both in statistical offices and in municipal/city offices were made available during office hours. At the end of the census, some of them were also available in the afternoon and on the last day of the census, even at night.
15. In situations where the health condition did not allow the respondents to independently participate in the survey, or to reach a census point, or they simply had a calendar so filled with tasks that they could only fulfil their obligation to complete the census at a certain time, the “interview on request” option was made available. By calling the census helpline, the respondent contacted a telephone enumerator who was able to conduct the survey.
16. New methods and tools were introduced for confirming the identity of census enumerators, thus giving respondents confidence when transferring data during an interview with an enumerator. An application was prepared for the verification of the enumerator. The application was available on the website dedicated to the census <https://rachmistrz.stat.gov.pl/formularz/> “Check the identity of the enumerator”).
17. On the websites of statistical offices it was also possible to check the enumerator (<https://spis.gov.pl> “Check the identity the enumerator”).

18. Having regard to the safety of all respondents, including those with limited Internet access, the identity of the enumerators could also be verified by calling the census helpline at 22 279 99 99.

19. An additional means of verifying the identity of the enumerator during an established telephone conversation was for the enumerator to give, on the request of the respondent, one freely chosen digit of the respondent's ID number. If the given digit was correct, the enumerator was properly authenticated.

20. The online self-enumeration application was available in four languages (Polish, English, Ukrainian and Russian) on the census website <https://spis.gov.pl>.

21. The website <https://www.spis.gov.pl> also includes a user manual for the online self-enumeration (in the same four languages) and many other tips for respondents, including a list of questions contained in the census questionnaire, answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ), explaining many substantive issues about which people may have doubts, and information about census data security.

22. Logging into the self-enumeration application was carried out using three possible methods:

(a) *National Node of Electronic Identification* – logging in using electronic identification means (Trusted Profile, online banking);

(b) *PESEL number (Powszechny Elektroniczny System Ewidencji Ludności: universal electronic system for registration of the population) and mother's maiden name*, which required the respondent to define an individual access password (during which the user account was created);

(c) *Email address and user-defined individual access password* (during which the user account was created) – this method was intended for foreigners without an ID number.

On subsequent login attempts users were required to use the same login method as for the first correct login.

23. The online self-enumeration was widely promoted in the media as the fastest and easiest way to complete the census.

24. An extensive information campaign about the census was conducted, as part of which we encouraged self-enumeration (there was a competition with valuable prizes).

25. The census implementers could monitor the census progress at the national and local level with an information dashboard. The dashboard was also used to calculate daily targets, i.e. the number of dwellings that should be listed by census enumerators in municipalities, voivodships and for the whole of Poland.

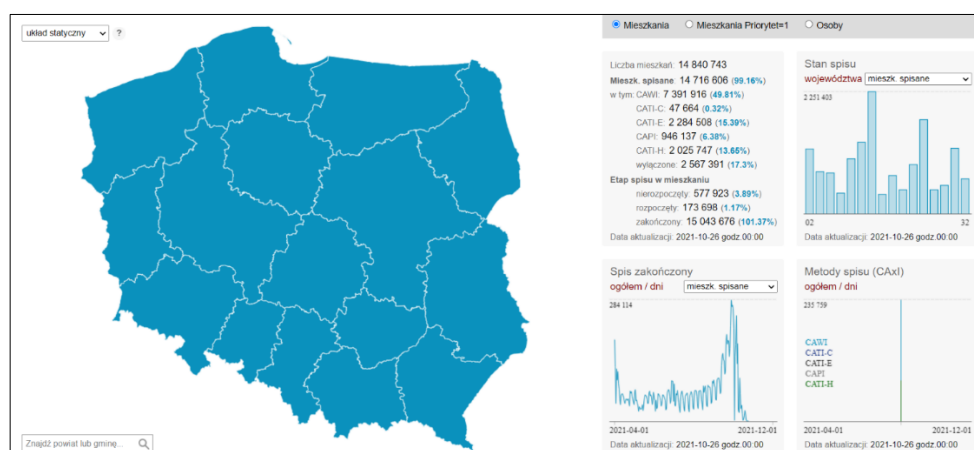
26. The information structure of the dashboard provided separate views for monitoring the list of dwellings and people. It included separate dedicated census progress indicators, quantitative data and charts showing changes in these values over time or showing the share of individual census methods used.

27. Various versions of the dashboard were prepared:

(a) For internal users from the Central Census Bureau and Voivodship Census Bureau (full version);

(b) For the Commune Census Bureau (with a limited scope of information concerning the commune).

Figure 2
View of the dashboard screen



III. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

28. In order to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19, solutions were introduced consisting of adapting the technology and organization of data collection to pandemic conditions, allowing for the avoidance or limitation of direct contacts, e.g. by replacing direct interviews with telephone interviews.

29. Flexibility was ensured in the use of the various modes of collecting data from respondents, by enabling substitution or combination of modes depending on the development of the pandemic.

30. The organization of enumerators' work was prepared in such a way as to enable remote or direct work, e.g. by providing the enumerators with the appropriate equipment to conduct interviews. It was important to plan properly the implementation of direct interviews and to guarantee safe telephone interviews in municipalities where the risk of COVID-19 was elevated.

31. Greater flexibility was ensured in the use of CATI and CAPI channels through the possibility of conducting both telephone and direct interviews by the same enumerator, using the same mobile device.

32. The work of census enumerators in the field was regulated on an ongoing basis depending on the number of COVID-19 cases in a given period, in a given region. Health and safety were a priority during the pandemic.

33. Census applications and systems were adapted and equipped with additional functionalities, enabling remote work and telephone interviews by field enumerators.

34. At the time when the greatest number of cases was recorded, the work carried out for the census was performed remotely, as in the case of remote recruitment of candidates for enumerators or remote training.

35. In order to maintain precautionary measures and in accordance with the applicable sanitary regulations, the census enumerators were equipped with personal protective equipment.

36. An amendment to the Act on the census permitted extension of the duration of the census by three months, which in turn made it possible to manage census methods flexibly, e.g. depending on the evolution of waves of the disease.

37. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment of candidates for census enumerators (including candidates for signing enumerators) took place remotely.

38. All training was conducted remotely, using Lync/Skype or Webex communication platforms.

39. Prior to the commencement of work by the census enumerators in the field, the principles of conducting the census by means of direct interview in the field were developed. The rules were prepared in accordance with standard sanitary recommendations and in accordance with the current legal regulations and recommendations available at a dedicated email address.

40. Before starting field interviews, the census enumerators absolutely had to familiarize themselves with these rules via the e-learning platform.

41. During the census work, many problems were faced, including: absences of employees caused by the disease, quarantine or holiday leaves in the summer season (due to the extension of the census), the reluctance of respondents to engage in direct contact for fear of becoming infected, etc.

42. Despite these difficulties, all the people taking part in the census work had to fulfil their duties in a timely manner (in accordance with the schedule) and reliably so that the entire census apparatus could function efficiently.

43. Ultimately, all the measures taken contributed to an increase in the efficiency of data collection, while ensuring the maximum safety of all people participating in the census work in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

IV. Changes introduced the census to increase participation opportunities for persons with disabilities and to increase completeness of coverage

44. The 2021 census was the first in history that allowed people with hearing disabilities to participate actively in it. This was possible thanks to the involvement of census enumerators with knowledge of sign language, the so-called “signing enumerators”.

45. The census application was also adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. Deaf people could use the online self-enumeration application or could request to be contacted in sign-language using a request form on the census website (<https://kontaktmigowy.stat.gov.pl/>).

46. People who did not have access to the Internet could use the census points at the nearest commune office (where, in accordance with the Act on Sign Language and Other Means of Communication, respondent services were also provided in sign language).

47. Blind and partially sighted people could fill in the census form on their own thanks to a properly prepared census application. These persons could also use the census helpline. Information materials for them were also prepared in Braille.

48. In order to meet the needs of the respondents, Regional Statistical Offices – with the support of municipal offices – organized mobile self-enumeration points. This was due to the great interest of the respondents in using these census points. These points were organized during numerous occasional events taking place in the field, i.e. family picnics, communal harvest festivals, meetings in village community centers or market squares, in shopping malls, leisure centres and libraries. During these events, the enumerators also helped people wishing to complete the census. Due to the great interest of respondents in these mobile points, they operated in the provinces until the end of the census enumeration period. Another variant of mobile points were the census buses running between localities and offering the possibility of completing the census through them.

49. Special events were organized throughout the country. In order to enable the respondents to complete the census at unusual times when the census points were closed (e.g. late afternoon, evening, night hours on Sundays), events such as “census night” and “Open days in municipalities” were carried out from 25 September 2021, closing down by midnight on the last day of the census, 30 September 2021.

V. Recommendations for future censuses as lessons learned from the 2021 census

50. The shift to electronic modes for the census in Poland, which began in 2011 and was further developed during the 2021 census, turned out to provide an excellent protection against the impact of uncontrollable extraneous events and the need to eliminate physical contacts. Poland would probably have had to postpone the census until the end of the pandemic, had it not been for the modern CAxI data collection method.

51. Further work should therefore be carried out on the development of key solutions for the census (e.g. health safety of census participants); solutions which made the implementation of the census possible, and, in practice, much more economical.

52. The most important solutions referred to in point 51 are:

(a) ‘Universality’ of enumerators, meaning they were all able to use all collection modes – telephone or direct interviews – depending on the epidemic threat;

(b) Adaptation of mobile devices to the possibility of conducting both telephone and direct interviews;

(c) The use of interchangeable telephone and direct interviews (depending on pandemic conditions) not only allowed us to collect information safely in the census, but also showed the strength of telephone interviews. Telephone interviews were performed by the same enumerators who would have conducted them directly, had it not been for COVID-19. The same people, having the same knowledge acquired during the training, conducted census interviews with people who were thus confident that they would not be infected. All these factors meant that 25 per cent of the information obtained from respondents came from the telephone collection channel. Only 15 per cent was obtained via the face-to-face method. The quality of the results obtained with both methods is the same, taking into account the design of the census application, which continuously examined the reliability and completeness of the answers provided;

(d) Census on request: this census method was chosen much more often than expected by the census organizers. Respondents could choose when to complete the census by calling the helpline at a time convenient for them. They were sure that they were contacting a real census enumerator and also received ongoing substantive support from the census enumerator in real time;

(e) Remote implementation of tasks where possible (e.g. recruitment and training of candidates for census enumerators);

(f) Calculation and transmission of daily targets for implementation in the field. This allowed for precise planning of individual census actions;

(g) Sharing self-enumeration posts among field census offices, providing respondents with assistance both in using the computer and filling in data in the application;

(h) Conducting a wide public information campaign about the census, focused mainly on online self-enumeration.

VI. Conclusions

53. By designing and implementing the activities described in this paper, the objective of the census was achieved. The census was carried out according to schedule, with the additional benefit of obtaining significant financial savings in relation to the planned census budget. The data obtained via the Internet accounted for 60 per cent of the data collected using CAxI methods. As in 2011, the use of paper questionnaires was completely abandoned. Significant experience was also gained, which should in the future allow the census to be carried out not only under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in the case of other hazardous external situations.