



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 22, 2009

## Census Bureau Wants to Know — Everything

Fewer of us got married, owned our own homes, drove to work alone, or moved to a new residence last year than the year before. More of us lived in overcrowded housing and suffered a decline in property values. Fewer of us are newly arrived immigrants. All of that is just part of the information released by the U.S. Census Bureau Monday in a report of its annual American Community Survey, containing what the New York Times describes as a "wealth of data comparing the nation's profile in 2008 with that of 2007."



If all that data, accumulated at taxpayer's expense, neither makes us any wealthier nor satisfies whatever curiosity we might have about our neighbors' homes, jobs, or living arrangements, be assured that myriad federal agencies make extensive and politically rewarding use of the data provided by the census takers. According to the Bureau's website, the information is used in allocating "\$300 billion in federal funds to local, state and tribal governments each year" for such things as "neighborhood improvements, public health, education, transportation and much more."

That is supposed to explain, among other things, why millions of Americans this year received a 28-page questionnaire asking remarkably detailed questions about who lives in their homes, the race and ethnicity of each, their relationships to one another, their marital status, the number of rooms in their homes, where they work and how they get to their jobs, the kind of work they do, and much more. The Census Bureau assures us that all answers are private and confidential. They're just going to your friendly federal government.

Part of what the Census Bureau does is constitutionally mandated. A population count is required every 10 years to determine proportional representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. But that has become a small part of the beehive of activity the Bureau has undertaken for 10, these many years at either the behest or acquiescence of Congress, the White House, and the Department of Commerce, of which the Bureau is a part. As the Bureau's website informs us: "Throughout the decade between censuses we are continually conducting surveys to produce a general view and comprehensive study of the United States' social and economic conditions."

In addition to its "Population and Housing" census every 10 years, the Bureau does an "Economic Census" every five years and the American Community Survey every year, and issues reports on various economic indicators, including quarterly financial reports on retail trade, monthly wholesale trade reports, housing starts, new homes sales, manufacturing inventories, and more. Perhaps the only thing the Census Bureau doesn't count and report is the reams of paper consumed and the number of hours spent by people in their homes and businesses filling out all of the surveys the Bureau creates.

The continual gathering of statistics and taking the temperature of the economy by the government no doubt makes sense to any and all who believe that government is and should be the source of economic progress, providing the "stimulus" for its development and directing its growth. But our national



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government apparently aspires to be the overseer, if not the custodian, of our "social conditions," as well. Either that or the Census Bureau has become a full employment-program for roving sociologists. Why else would the government need to know if any of the residents in your home is your grandchild or your mother-in-law, or whether another member of your household is your biological child, your stepchild, or was adopted? What could anyone in the Census Bureau see as the need to ask if "Person 2" on the survey form is your spouse, housemate, roommate, or "unmarried partner"? A landlord might get into legal trouble for asking a prospective tenant if his or her "housemate" is an "unmarried partner." But the Census Bureau asks questions like that all the time.

Why on Earth does the federal government need to know for how long and how many times a resident has been married and whether she has given birth in the last 12 months? Who needs to know how many rooms there are in your home and how many of them are bedrooms? Or how you heat your home and what you pay in mortgage or rent and how much for utilities? Condominium dwellers are even asked to report their monthly condo fees — harmless information, perhaps, but useless as well. How will the nation benefit from a government analysis of condo fees?

Housing codes and regulations are enforced, if at all, by local governments. Yet the Census Bureau amasses this statistical information for the federal government, thereby creating, intentionally or otherwise, an opportunity for Congress to pass a new program to alleviate, say, "overcrowding" in housing. The *Times* reports that overcrowding is defined by the government number crunchers as more than 1.51 people per room. The census report found 1.1 percent of all households in that wretched state last year, an increase of 0.4 percent from the previous year.

The definition may reflect a bias against large families. Not too many families with six children are likely to live in a 12-room house, as would be required for an uncrowded family of eight according to the federal standard. Even a smaller family of modest means might be considered overcrowded in a typical one-family house. I grew up in a family of five, and there were six rooms (not counting bathrooms) in our two-story home. I shared a bedroom with my older brother, which put us nearly half a person over the 1.51 persons-to-room ratio. Perhaps I should have slept in the doorway, half in and half out of the room.

Uncle Sam and Aunt Samantha in the Census Bureau are exceptionally curious. They want to know the extent of your education and even what your major was in college. They want to know where you work, your position there, and your "job activities." They ask if you go there by car, van, bus trolley, train, taxi, or subway, or if you go by motorcycle, bicycle, or walking. They want to know what time (hour and minute) you usually leave for work and how long it takes you to get back; and if you drive alone or travel with others.

According to the Census Bureau, all this information is useful to community planners in determining needs for things like elderly services or new schools or where roads need to be built or expanded. But town or city officials who would need a census report from Washington, D.C., to know what roads are crowded at what hour in their respective communities would already be in deep trouble. Chances are they can also figure out whether and where to build a Senior Center and where the growth in school-age population is likely to be without knowing how many children were born in the past 12 months to women whose second husbands leave for work on motorcycles at 7:10 a.m.



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