

Evolution of ACS Questions

Margo Anderson (margo@uwm.edu) is considered the leading historian on census matters in this country. Below is a fact sheet she has written about the evolution of so-called long form questions on the decennial census. Many of these same questions are now part of the American Community Survey (ACS) which replaced the long form when it was first established in 2005.

- The constitution required a count of free and “other persons” (e.g., slaves) by state, and the exclusion of “Indians not taxed.”
- The 1790 statute, written by the same men who debated and wrote the constitution, met the constitutional requirements. Congress added breakdowns by race (“colour”), sex and age of the free persons, and specified that local geography needed to be included for drawing House districts. The 1790 census counted by household, not by individual, so only the householder’s name went on the schedule.
- The original race, age and sex breakdowns were expanded each decade, while questions on occupation, disability, veteran status, were also added. The schedule had 70+ columns by 1840, and was unwieldy. The procedures were reformed for 1850.
- From 1850 forward, each person merited a line on a form. Slaves were “numbered” not named in 1850 and 1860 (only the master’s name went on the form.)
- In 1850, the questionnaire for free persons asked name; age; sex; color; profession, occupation, or trade of each male person over 15 years of age; value of real estate owned; place of birth; whether married within the year; attended school within the year; if the person over 20 years of age could not read and write; whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper or convict. Household relationships, e.g., marital status, or family status of children, siblings, etc., were inferred by the order in which people were listed.
- Slaves had their owner’s name listed, were numbered in the household, and were distinguished by age; sex; color; whether a fugitive; whether manumitted; whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.

- In later years, the questions were refined or changed. The slave schedule disappeared after abolition. The occupation question was expanded to women and to include questions on the industry the person worked in, or whether they were an employer, employee, self-employed, or unemployed. The general thrust of asking detailed social, economic, and demographic questions remained.
- At least until 1930, the actual questions on the census were debated on the floor of the House and Senate, sometimes in extraordinary detail. Congress, for example, added a question on “mother tongue” to the 1910 census form just weeks before the enumerators went into the field.
- Congress recognized in the 1929 census statute that, some 30 years after they had established the permanent Census Bureau, these matters were best left to the experts, with guidance from oversight committees for specific issues, or for legislative authorization of particular innovations, for example the Census of Housing for 1940.