

Census critical: The relevance of South Africa's largest survey

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With the fast-approaching Census, Synovate takes a look at some of the detail and complexity surrounding such an enormous project.

"The Census, for all the criticism it receives, is still the largest and most accurate survey of the South African population and yields vital information with regards to the demographic, household and community dynamics in South Africa," states Debbie Amm, Synovate's Research and Insights Director.

The intention is to visit and speak to all the households in the country over a period of 21 days (10-31 October 2011) and obtain a population count and gather specific information, and this is obviously a massive undertaking for Stats SA.

"One does not realise the complexities around organising a Census. Visiting houses within defined communities appears to be straightforward, but keep in mind that this extends to prisons, hospitals, holiday venues and other 'temporary' residences. Field workers will also be confronted with issues of security and mistrust which are part of society. There is also the very complex issue of informal communities and settlements, as well as homeless people, where clearly defined areas are very difficult to identify. These sorts of factors make counting people within these communities very difficult logistically and it is an admirable task to take on," says Synovate's Amm.

The level of effort and hard work that goes into a Census is not widely publicised but it is a massive undertaking that requires enormous resource," she continues. 156 000 fieldworkers are employed to physically go out and complete the survey in 13.5 million housing units, with 25 million questionnaires in hand. Questionnaires are translated into eight languages and 69 offices are set up around the country. The Census uses a budget of R2 billion in the year it is conducted.

It is a little known fact that the results get used far beyond just demographic information. Various secondary reports are generated from Census information - spanning education, fertility, migration, employment, community information such as service delivery, e.g. housing, provision of water and electricity, etcetera. This provides vital insight to governmental bodies, companies and of course economic information for distribution beyond South Africa's borders.

Another relatively unknown fact is that once the Census is complete, another survey is conducted to ensure the accuracy of what has already been done. This is to guarantee that data collected from the Census is representative and that all the enumerator areas and housing units have been included to yield accurate results.

"In our capacity as a research company, the Census yields very valuable information," continues Amm. Although companies and businesses might not be using the broader Census information directly, the Census informs the likes of research suppliers which can utilise the demographic and geographic information to ensure correct research practices in terms of:

- drawing of survey samples;
- contextualising findings;
- understanding the implications of research results beyond the group that participated; and
- drawing conclusions to broader population groups or sub-groups.

Although the Census information itself is not obtained on an annual basis, it feeds into models developed by various institutions, which allows continuous updated estimates of the population. These estimations themselves again feed into

relevant marketing information systems and GIS systems, which are key for marketers to understand their target markets.

"The last Census was conducted 10 years ago in 2001 and so it is with much excitement that we look forward to updated information to use within the research industry, along with all of its other important uses," concludes Amm. "We wish the Census team all the best in this great and significant undertaking."

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