



STATISTICAL COMMISSION  
Eleventh Session  
Item 13(a) of the provisional agenda

PROGRESS REPORT ON ACTIVITIES IN THE  
FIELD OF DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS  
1958-1959

(Memorandum by the Secretary-General)

This document summarizes the work done and the progress made in the field of demographic statistics during the past two years.<sup>1/</sup> Activities during this period may be discussed under two principal headings: (I) demographic statistics; (II) population registers.

I. DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS (including migration)

A. Assembling, indexing, filing

1. The body of statistical knowledge of demographic conditions necessary for studying population growth continued to be systematically developed and enlarged during 1958 and 1959.
2. A rough indication of the increase experienced in the amount of statistical data available may be gained from a comparison of the geographic coverage of several series in 1948 and 1958. In 1948, time trends of population estimates were available for 128 geographic areas; by 1958 trends for 205 countries and territories were available. Distributions of population by marital status, age and sex were available in 1948 for 45 areas; by 1958 the coverage had almost quadrupled to 175. Births classified by age of mother were tabulated for

<sup>1/</sup> Except the 1960 World Census Programme which is reported in document E/CN.3/276.

42 countries in 1948; by 1958, 97 countries could provide these data. Similarly, deaths by age and sex were available in 1948 for 63 areas; by 1958, coverage stood at 146 countries and territories.

2. This ten-year growth in scope and complexity has its origin in the increased awareness of Governments of the need for demographic statistics as aids in economic and social planning and in the strengthening of statistical services by training and consulting. It may be assumed that still further improvements will be forthcoming.

4. The principal source of statistics on area, population, births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriage, divorce and migration continued to be the questionnaires circulated annually to 246 countries and territories. The secondary source is the series of official publications on file in the United Nations and other libraries. From these originated more than 75 separate demographic statistical series which have continued to be maintained currently for each reporting country and territory.

5. Statistics from 294 separate censuses of population taken between 1945 and 1959 have been collected, filed and indexed; these cover the whole range of demographic data required for planning and research, including inter alia distributions according to personal characteristics, fertility, educational level and economic characteristics.

6. In addition to census data, information from sample demographic surveys has also been assembled systematically. At the present time national surveys of this type have been carried out in at least 12 countries and territories; demographic data from these include population estimates by age and sex; fertility distributions, estimated birth and death rates and expectation of life values.

7. Time series of population estimates are maintained currently, including both national total figures and distributions by age and sex, and by age, sex and marital status. Current population estimates for national capitals and cities having 100,000 or more inhabitants are also collected.

8. Statistics of population movement, that is data on live births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriages and divorces originating in the civil registration systems were also assembled, filed and indexed. Estimated birth and death rates derived from sample surveys or from analyses of consecutive census returns were also recorded for comparison with registered returns.

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9. Beginning in 1959 responsibility for assembling statistics on international migratory movements was transferred from the International Labour Organisation to the Statistical Office. Questionnaires were despatched in 1959 to 171 countries and territories and returns are being examined critically, not only to construct tables for the 1959 Demographic Yearbook but also to develop ideas for a revision of the questionnaire.

#### B. Evaluation of Quality

10. To provide improved tools for demographic research, population and vital statistics are critically scrutinized on receipt to discover discrepancies and other aberrations which might impair proper use of the figures. These are usually resolved through library research or correspondence. Discrepancies which remain are explained in footnotes to the table of the Demographic Yearbook and in the Technical Notes; for the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, qualifications are set forth in the Supplement.

11. A new feature introduced in the 1959 Demographic Yearbook is the use of italics to distinguish data characterized as "unreliable" from that considered more or less "reliable". At its tenth session, the Population Commission requested "that consideration be given to differentiating the data given in the Yearbook according to their degree of accuracy" (E/3207/Rev.1, para. 48). The use of italics to achieve this differentiation is the subject of experimentation in the 1959 Yearbook; the establishing of a reliable and proper basis for the classification requires much more work and it is hoped that in subsequent issues, the differentiation may be substantially refined.

12. Population estimates: In addition to the usual qualifying footnotes, the latest population estimate in the Demographic Yearbook is given a code which describes the method by which the estimate was constructed. A quality code for population estimates has been included in the Yearbook since the 1949-50 issue but the current version appeared first in the 1958 issue. A detailed explanation of the new code's structure, the components of which are the type of base data, the method of time adjustment and an indication of the quality of each component, will be found in the text of the 1958 and 1959 Demographic Yearbooks.

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13. As noted in paragraph 8, an attempt has been made in the 1959 Demographic Yearbook to extend this evaluation technique to trends of population, with the intention of characterizing series as "reliable" or "unreliable". The classification was based essentially on the code developed for the latest estimate, on the assumption that the method of constructing a current estimate usually can be taken as indicative of the method employed in previous years, since procedures of this type are resistant to change. Estimates considered to be of questionable reliability have, for the first time, been made more easily identifiable by being set in italics. Further details on the method may be found in the text to the 1959 Demographic Yearbook.<sup>2/</sup>

14. Vital statistics: The evaluation of the reliability of vital statistics according to the completeness with which vital events are registered, was introduced in the 1951 Demographic Yearbook; it has been systematically refined and extended as additional information became available.

15. In general, the evaluation as "complete" or "incomplete" has referred to the status of registration in the current year. On the assumption that only in rare cases under special circumstances does registration completeness deteriorate, in the 1959 Demographic Yearbook, the evaluation has been extended to time trends. Vital statistics judged to be less than 90 per cent complete or of unknown completeness are characterized as "unreliable" and to distinguish them readily, are set in italics rather than roman type. It is hoped that more definite evaluations may be obtained as a result of the 1960 census programmes, after which the classification may be refined.

#### C. Dissemination of statistics

16. Publications: The chief vehicle for the dissemination of demographic statistics is the Demographic Yearbook - the eleventh issue of which is now in press.

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<sup>2/</sup> The special topic of the Demographic Yearbooks is selected so as to precede by one year the topic to be the subject of analysis in the Population Branch's Population Bulletin. Thus, the 1960 Demographic Yearbook will feature population trends and migration statistics (the latter for the first time in the series) while the 1960 Population Bulletin will be devoted to an analysis of natality statistics, the feature topic of the 1959 Demographic Yearbook.

Plans for each issue of the Demographic Yearbook are made in collaboration with the Population Branch of the Bureau of Social Affairs and World Health Organization in order that the needs of these services may be met by the Demographic Yearbook.<sup>2/</sup>

17. The contents of the Yearbook is planned on a rotation basis in such a way as to provide detailed coverage of each major demographic topic approximately each fifth year, and five tables of international migration statistics biennially. By this technique, historical series of population natality, mortality, and nuptiality and divorce can be obtained by reference to the several volumes devoted chiefly to the topic of interest. In addition, each volume contains a nucleus of tables showing area, population and vital statistics which are considered desirable on an annual basis.

18. The 1958 Demographic Yearbook was the first in the series<sup>3/</sup> devoted to marriage and divorce statistics. It contained 552 pages of statistics on area, population, births, deaths and foetal deaths plus tables showing marriage by age, and by previous marital status of bride and groom, as well as divorces by age, number of children involved, duration of marriage and so forth. A special text setting forth potential uses of marriage and divorce statistics completed the volume.

19. The 1959 issue is devoted to natality statistics, last featured in the 1954 volume. It will contain over 700 pages of detailed natality statistics for the period 1949-1958 as well as tables of migration statistics.

20. Population and "reliable" vital statistics continue to be published in the Statistical Yearbook, the 1959 issue containing one table showing population and area, one each of birth, death and infant mortality rates, and a summary table of expectation-of-life values.

<sup>3/</sup> The topics featured in the 11 issues are as follows:

1948	First	General demography
1949-50	Second	Natality statistics
1951	Third	Mortality statistics
1952	Fourth	Population distribution
1953	Fifth	General demography
1954	Sixth	Natality statistics
1955	Seventh	Population censuses
1956	Eighth	Ethnic and economic characteristics of population
1957	Ninth	Mortality statistics
1958	Tenth	Marriage and divorce statistics
1959	Eleventh	Natality statistics

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21. Annual data on population, births, deaths and infant mortality, continue to be published quarterly in the Population and Vital Statistics Report. This Report contains current data for every country and territory in the world (some 225 separate entities) as well as estimates of world and continental aggregates. It is issued as of the first day of January, April, July and October.

22. Annual population estimates together with annual and monthly birth, death, and marriage rates are published in the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics. Between January 1956 and January 1959, the coverage of the population series increased from 100 to 120 areas, while that for birth and death rates went from 50 to 59 and for marriage rates from 43 to 50. Since they are annual data published routinely in the Demographic Yearbook, infant mortality rates were omitted from the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics beginning October 1958.

23. Unpublished data: The data cards and the Demographic Yearbook questionnaire files continue to serve as a reference centre for international demographic statistics. During 1958 and 1959 special tables were prepared or tabulations reviewed and revised for several major publications of the United Nations and various governmental, intergovernmental and research organizations. To eliminate duplicate requests to Governments, some 2,100 separate tables from the 1959 Demographic Yearbook questionnaires were distributed in 1959 to the World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau and the Economic Commission for Africa.

D. Promotion of development and use

24. A progress report on the promotion of development of population census statistics during 1958 and 1959 has been presented in document E/CN.3/276. Technical assistance given in the field of vital statistics during this period is set forth in the review of international statistics (E/CN.3/263). Other activities which have been developed during 1958 and 1959 but which will mature in 1960 include three which may be of special interest to the Commission.

25. India: First of the 1960 projects is a Seminar on Evaluation and Utilization of Population Census Data in Asia and the Far East which is scheduled to convene in Bombay, India from 20 June to 8 July 1960.

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26. This Seminar is being organized under the joint sponsorship of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and the Government of India. It is being carried out on behalf of the United Nations and the Government of India by the Demographic Training and Research Centre in Chembur, Bombay, India.

27. Like its counterpart held in Santiago, Chile in 1959 (see E/CN.3/276 and E/CN.3/263) this Seminar is designed to provide assistance to countries of the region in the utilization of 1960 population census results, particularly in connexion with planning for economic and social development and the formulation of policies related to such plans. It will also concern itself with methods of evaluating census results with a view to making them more useful in programme planning.

28. Philippines: Plans are well advanced for carrying out a Training Course on Vital and Health Statistics for the benefit of the Western Pacific Region of the World Health Organization. The Course, which will be held in Manila from 17 October to 25 November 1960, is a joint project sponsored by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Statistical Centre at the University of the Philippines will also collaborate in the field project which will be built around a demographic sample survey.

29. The objective of the project is to assist Member Governments in the region in improving their civil registration and vital and health statistical services, so that the statistical data may fulfil national needs and attain international uniformity and comparability. This is in accord with the Commission's recommendation at its ninth session (res. 18 (IX), E/2876 para.115) "that the interchange of national experience be encouraged through the setting up of conferences and seminars". It is anticipated that some fifty government officials in the field of civil registration and statistics from the Western Pacific region and other parts of Asia will participate, many of them financed by United Nations and WHO fellowships.

30. Geneva: A Seminar on the Use of Vital and Health Statistics for Genetic and Radiation Studies is being organized by the Secretary-General's Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation with the collaboration of the Statistical Office of the United Nations, the Bureau of Social Affairs and the World Health Organization.

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31. The Seminar, which will be convened in Geneva from 5-9 September 1960, will seek to examine the current status and future potentialities of vital health statistics and civil registration as a source of data for genetic and other studies (particularly in relation to assessment of the genetic and somatic effects of radiation in human population) and to suggest practical means for overcoming present limitations. It will bring together for the first time geneticists, epidemiologists, civil registrars, vital statisticians and health statisticians to exchange information on what statistics are needed and how they may be best obtained. The contribution which population registers might make will also be investigated. It is anticipated that about sixty experts will participate either as speakers, chairmen or discussants.

## II. POPULATION REGISTERS

32. At its ninth session, the Commission recommended in resolution 18 (XI) ... "that a study and evaluation of continuous population registers be undertaken with a view to an examination of their usefulness as a statistical mechanism both in statistically developed countries and in those less advanced". (E/2876, para.115) At its tenth session, the Population Commission expressed the hope that such a methodological survey of population registration systems and their uses could be undertaken in the near future (E/3207/Rev.1, para.46).

33. In accordance with these recommendations, a survey has now been initiated, in which primary emphasis is being given to an examination of the usefulness of population registers as statistical mechanisms and the difficulties of keeping accurate and current records. At the same time the survey will investigate the usefulness of such registers to evaluate census returns and conversely the use of the census to verify the registers. It will also provide information for a paper to be presented at the Seminar on the use of Vital Health Statistics for Genetic and Radiation Studies (see: paras. 30-31). The initial working paper for this Seminar will contain an analysis of the structure of a number of population registers which have been successfully maintained for relatively long periods of time as well as some assessment of the feasibility of assembling from them family data useful for genetic studies.

34. From a preliminary inventory of information available in the Statistical Office, it appears that at least forty countries and territories have some type of

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continuous population register, a "register" being here defined as a list of or index to "families" or "individuals", on the records of whom births, deaths, marriages, divorces and changes in place of residence are inscribed systematically and continuously as they occur. Of these forty, not more than fifteen appear to have a traditional well-established population register, covering all persons in the population. However, the entire group of forty will be subjected to detailed study and analysis within the coming year in order that the various types of registers may be better defined.

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OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

(Report of the Secretary-General)

CORRIGENDUM

1. Page 2, "paragraph 2" should read "paragraph 3".
2. Pages 4 and 5: Delete foot-note reference in paragraph 13; foot-note 2 on page 4 refers to paragraph 16 and not to paragraph 13.
3. Page 7, paragraph 28, fifth line - a period should be inserted after "United Nations". The next sentence should read "The Statistical Center..."

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\* This Corrigendum is being re-issued for technical reasons.