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Q1(c)

Discuss the challenges involved in collecting data through census method

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the challenges involved in collecting data through census method
- Keep the discussion within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

A census seeks complete enumeration; coverage of migrants and the homeless is weak.

Definitions of work and household threaten comparability.

Trust, NPR-type list fears, and enumerator quality shape answers.

Census 2011 stands; Census 2021 slipped in the pandemic.

Official completeness is organised, not natural.

Introduction

A census aims at complete enumeration of a defined population at a moment. The Indian Census is the largest such file. Completeness is a claim, not a gift. Coverage, definition, politics, and logistics all leak.

Body

Coverage and mobility

- Homeless persons, nomads, and circular migrants are easy to miss. The 2020 lockdown reverse flow showed how many workers had no stable urban address for a house-list.
- Dual counting and omission both rise when households split across village and city.

Definition and comparability

- "Work", "household", and "head" are sociological decisions. Small wording shifts wreck time series, which is a reliability problem, not a social miracle.
- Caste and religion items are politically sensitive. Undercount, over-claim, and boycott all distort cells.

Organisation and trust

- Cost, training of enumerators, and literacy of respondents produce non-sampling error.
- Debates around the National Population Register after Census 2011 raised fear of how lists would be used. Fear is a data-collection fact.
- The 2021 Census was delayed in the pandemic, so the "moment" of the nation slipped.

Method limit

- **Durkheim** already treated official counts as constructed. A census is a social organisation of knowledge, not a photograph.

Flow diagram

Census complete count -> Migrants homeless
Census complete count -> Work household caste
Census complete count -> Trust NPR politics
Census complete count -> Cost training delay
Migrants homeless -> Constructed data

Conclusion

Census challenges are coverage of mobile labour, unstable definitions, political trust, and huge logistics. **Census 2011** and the missed 2021 round make the Indian case plain. Treat the file as indispensable and as constructed.

Facts & figures

Indian Census 2011

Last completed decennial count used for work, household, and religion tables still in public debate.

Census 2021 delay

The round was not completed on schedule during COVID-19, breaking the usual ten-year rhythm.

NPR

A population register linked in public debate to identity lists; fear can depress or distort response.

Circular migrants

Workers with two places of stay; a classic undercount risk that lockdown made visible.