

**Interview with Prof. Dr. Heike Trappe, Member of the Census Commission  
Professor of Sociology and Demography, University of Rostock  
First Managing Director of RatSWD (2005-2006)**

## **"Improving the Data Situation "**

*In the year 2011, the next census will be carried out in Germany. It is hoped that the results will provide new facts about Germany's population. Medien-mittweida.de spoke with Prof. Dr. Heike Trappe.*

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*Dr. Trappe is a professor of sociology at the University of Rostock whose research focuses on family demography. Since September 2007, she has been an honorary member of the Census Commission, which was appointed by the Federal Ministry of the Interior to provide scientific advice on the census.*

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### **What are the concrete tasks of the Census Commission?**

First and foremost, the Commission has the task of providing scientific advice to help in preparing, carrying out, and evaluating Germany's first register-based census in the year 2011. This includes, for example, addressing specific methodological questions, organizing research on related scientific themes in preparatory sub-projects for the Census, and work on the questionnaire concept for the sample drawn to evaluate the register. Representatives of various social scientific disciplines, such as macroeconomics, geography, sociology and demography, were appointed to the commission.

### **How far along is the planning for the census so far?**

Since we are breaking new ground with the first register-based census in Germany, a comprehensive census test was first carried out to determine whether this procedure was even possible with the available register data. Based on the findings, twelve project groups took up work in the federal and state statistical offices to address specific problems of census preparation such as sample selection and public relations work. In December 2007, the Bundestag passed a census preparation law dealing with the compilation of an address and building register. A law mandating the census, which stipulates the details of running the census, is currently being discussed in parliament.

### **In recent times, there have been cases of data theft in commercial enterprises. Many citizens fear that similar things could happen with the census. Are these fears justified?**

Data protection is of extremely high priority in running the census. This can be seen

in the fact that, in line with the census verdict (*Volkszählungsurteil*) of 1983, the work of the official statistical offices is strictly separated from government administration. This means that data can only flow into the statistics in one direction. So if inconsistencies appear when comparing various register data in the process of carrying out the census, this information will be used only for the census, and not to correct the register. The anonymity of the people in question will be maintained consistently in the sample selection as well.

**What was your personal motivation to work on the Commission on a voluntary basis?**

Since I frequently deal with official statistical data in my research and teaching as a family sociologist, as well as with social science surveys [editorial note: regular observation of the population], I am well aware of the often-unsatisfactory situation regarding the aspects that interest those of us working in family research. Thus, my work on the Census Commission is motivated mainly by the hope of making a small contribution to improve the data situation for the social sciences.

**Do you understand the misgivings of some citizens that huge sums are being invested in the census without any real payoff?**

I don't share those misgivings. Given that we haven't had a census in Germany for many years, the current data no longer allows us to determine with any reasonable degree of certainty how many people live in the different cities and counties. As such, we can assume that the "fiscal equalization scheme" between the EU, federal government, and state governments, as well as between smaller regional entities, is based on obsolete data. Furthermore, this is the first time that Germany is attempting a modern type of census. This also means that next time, a census can be carried out with much less effort.

**Where do you see the value of the 2011 census?**

The main value is in closing the basic data gaps that exist due to the fact that the last census in West Germany took place in 1987 and in East Germany in 1981. First, this will mean determining as precisely as possible the population of cities and counties, since about 50 federal government decisions await official population data. Furthermore, data on the population structure are needed for federal and municipal planning purposes. For scientific purposes, the census has the main function of making it possible to generalize findings from a number of smaller sample surveys to the entire population.

**Do you expect resistance and protest from the population as with the previous census of 1987?**

I do not expect any significant resistance since in my opinion major social developments have taken place in the last 25 years that make a census look relatively harmless. Today, the publication of personal data by individuals themselves, especially on the Internet, is practically a fact of everyday life. As studies have shown, people have astonishingly few qualms about providing personal data. An important difference between a register-based census and a traditional census is that the former means significantly less effort for the population since only the

building and apartment owners as well as less than 10 percent of the population will be interviewed personally.

**What distinguishes the 2011 census from the last West German census of 1987?**

First of all, the 2011 census will be the first-ever census of the unified Germany as a whole. In contrast to the 1987 census, this time the focus will be on using data on individuals that are already on file in the various agencies. Furthermore, there will be a building and apartment census in which the residents will be surveyed by mail, and a random sample survey of seven to nine percent of the population, who will be surveyed by interviewers.

*We thank Dr. Trappe for the interview.*

[By: Juliane Henze]