

## **Household survey data cannot reflect the complexities and realities of life**

Survey and census data are collected for social units (called households) for a variety of theoretical and practical reasons : humans live in small domestic groups, they raise and socialise their children in such groups and provide mutual support to each other and to many vulnerable members of society. These small domestic groups can be seen from either a residential (under one roof) or an economic perspective (producing and consuming for the common unit), which may, or may not overlap totally or partially. Having collected data on the people who live / cooperate together it then makes sense to collect further data on their living conditions under the assumption that they are all subject to the same constraints or wealth.

Collecting data on households presents economies of scale and increases the depth of data used for both dependent and independent variables. But there are problems with the ways in which these data may be analysed which assume that the residential group on which data are collected is coterminous with the economic unit and that people are members of one household and one household only. Those individuals who do not fit the household membership criteria are forced to do so in the data either by eliminating data on some aspect of their lives (such as the other households that they may be members of) or by making unjustified assumptions.

Many people who live in relatively small domestic units (e.g.: nuclear families) may be well represented by household survey data because they are in largely closed and relatively simple units. However those people who have more complex and messy lives are not well represented. They might even be forced into apparently nuclear household configurations because that is the easy default of most data collection approaches.

### **Questions:**

Does it matter if household survey data cannot capture the complexities and realities of life?

What particular populations or livelihoods are poorly represented by household data in surveys?

Re: by [Jenny Boag](#)

Whether it matters depends on the purpose of the survey. A general survey with only a relatively small sample cannot be expected to do other than classify the broadest household types, leaving more complex ones as some sort of "other" category. What perhaps we ought to do is to devise a classification which allows people to say if their household does not fit into one of the broad general categories, for example if it has part time members such as children living part time with each parent separately. If the

numbers in these groups seems to be growing then perhaps we should look at revising our classifications.

I think the purpose of the survey is an important determinant of what the required household classification is. For a survey looking at the dynamics of households, a much more complex classification would be required than in a general household type survey like the APS or SHS.

Re: by [Guy NDEFFO](#)

Hello everyone, I would like to share my views on this question as a statistician. Is it a problem if household surveys do not capture the complexities of social arrangements? It would be tempting to say yes, until one recalls that a survey usually has particular objectives and does not aim to satisfy all interests or to capture all the complexities. Nevertheless when certain realities which are more than “marginal” are not captured, this can be a serious problem. For me the evaluation of this “marginal” effect can be achieved via the impact of letting go of certain hypotheses which are sometimes formulated during household surveys, and by respecting the sacrosanct principle of statistics of non-omission and non-duplication. The hypothesis according to which all members of the household who have the same living conditions also have equitable access to household resources can be let go from a certain point of view: individual preferences vary even within the same household, and utility is not the same for all members – the head of the household may derive certain advantages from the power his position confers on him etc. Letting go of this hypothesis may lead us instead to ask questions about the influence of individual characteristics on access to household resources.

Re: by [Elwood Carlson](#)

B. Riandey (in the "data comparability" thread) establishes a valuable focus on the underlying logical dimensions on which we base strategies for sampling in populations. We sample coresidential households as units precisely because they bring together individuals and provide the setting for coherent social processes--as he points out, economic and demographic cooperation (production, consumption, reproduction). If people do not organize such processes around coresidential units, we need not study them. If they do, we should. Sometimes the people in these coresidential units share other social bonds, chiefly kinship in many cases. However, these other institutionalized aspects of life may not map comfortably onto the residential units we call "households" (however we decide to define and categorize them).

To the extent that kinship (or some other non-residence-based social bond, such as religious identity or occupation) structures our important interactions, and to the extent that such alternative connections cut across coresidential boundaries, household-based data may miss these other important dimensions of social life. One might imagine a society in which coresidence was of no social or economic significance at all, and all important interactions and identities came from other aspects of life. However, the

reliance of most current social science research on individuals set in the context of households has developed over a long period of time as a practical response to the empirical reality that these households combine two key attributes: 1) they exist at defined spatial locations, so we can find them (and find them repeatedly if we want to study change), and 2) they actually do capture a considerable (but variable) amount of salient social and economic interactions.

How could we capture "trans-household" social patterns and/or patterns organized on completely different principles, without regard to residential choices? One alternative would be to sample places where people do other things besides eat and sleep; we could sample people in their places of employment (except that employers would virtually always object). We could sample them (and have done so) in their churches and temples where they worship. We could sample them (and have done so) in the institutionalized contexts where they engage in consumption--interviewers with clip-boards are among the modern scourges of shopping malls and other public places. But households continue to capture a major part of the social contexts that individuals regard as most significant in their lives, which is why we continue to study them.

Alternatively, we could look "up" from the individual and household level to larger spatial units. This is the approach of intensive community studies such as those conducted by family planners over decades in Bangladesh, or by ongoing projects in Thailand, Nepal, and other places. The phrase "it takes a village" comes to mind, in this case in order to understand the social contexts of people's lives. If you study an entire village, neighborhood or other supra-household context (still, however, defined in spatial terms!) you will capture some of the connections people have beyond their household units. Even within such a study, however, households probably will continue to be important theoretical and empirical constructs, and the extent to which various kinds of social processes are contained within them or diffused beyond them constitutes an important research question in its own right. If you don't study households as units, you cannot address such questions.

Re: by [Bruno KAMGHO](#)

Hello everyone

I agree very much with the concern expressed by Benoit Riandey, who believes that current reflection on the idea of household is a result of the weakening of the notion of principal residence in the context of social change. However in Africa (particularly in Cameroon), non-cohabiting families are marginal in terms of numbers of couples, and same sex couples are practically non-existent.

In our context, although families appear to be becoming more nuclear in form, traditional factors continue to play a visible role, in that our household surveys find that extended households continue to exist. In this way household surveys could still give an account of social complexity.

Re: by [Natacha Compaore](#)

Hi everyone. Guy has brought up something important in his post, and I would like to respond to the question he has asked, as a socio demographer rather than as a statistician. I would be inclined to say, Yes, survey data has to capture the complexity of social arrangements because most household surveys are used in policy formation and decision making. These data are also used by other kinds of users for different programmes of action or academic research. But if the surveys fail to reflect social realities, this is largely due to the fact that the definitions of “household” often used in our countries, especially in Africa, combine many criteria: eating together, sleeping under the same roof, sharing resources and recognising the authority of a household head, so that it often becomes difficult to fulfil all these criteria for belonging to a household. The same problem faces the researchers who often have difficulty in deciding whether an individual belongs to a household or not because of the variety of criteria used in the definition. Presumably the aim of most surveys is comparability. But one can only compare things which are really comparable.

Re: by [Roseline sidibé kany](#)

As a demographer if one asks oneself about the definition of the concept of a household, the first thing to determine is who are the persons who are considered to belong to any particular household: those who are present on the day of the survey or those who usually live in the household but who may be absent for a longer or shorter time at the time of the survey? The most common practice is to record everyone in the household he or she usually resides in, but this is not universal. In most cases there is then a problem of defining the notion of usual residence based on precise criteria.

A related difficulty is to do with how to delimit the population belonging to a household. In some countries it is more usual to refer to private households or ordinary households rather than to households as such, thus stressing the fact that individuals living in communities such as religious communities or prisons are not part of household populations. But what about schoolchildren and students who are boarders and who usually reside in their educational establishment, but who may also be attached to their household of origin which they visit during the holidays? And also the case of soldiers living in barracks but who also have private houses elsewhere? There is no good or bad way of deciding on these questions, so long as care is taken to avoid double counting in statistical analyses. It is usually a result of tradition or of statistical convention that in one country these questions are dealt with in one way while in a neighbouring country they are treated differently. But of course while this creates few difficulties when it comes to comparisons in time and space within one country, it makes international comparisons harder.

Re: by [Jacques Emina](#)

Dear all,

Thank you for this useful discussion on the complexity of household definition particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Among other issues, I would like to raise:

(1) Households with multiple residences. This is the case with worker migrants and their family;

(2) People belonging to more than one household. For example, students who can be considered as fostered child in one household and as resident absent in his/her parent household. Some old parents can live with one child, but financial support is provided from other children. Some Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSS) collect information on whether a household receives financial support from other households. In addition, Vicky showed limitation of questions on Guardian.

I think there are needs to: develop tools (questionnaires) that will allow capturing different types of household structures and to test them through household surveys. Indeed, in most SSA there are no household' specific survey. The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys and Censuses first objectives are not to collect information on household structure. This will allow updating definitions and typologies.

Re: by [Guillaume Le Roux](#)

The responses are very interesting but are scattered across the different forums, although they all contribute to discussion of this issue. Here are my reactions.

Faced with the complexities of group social, economic and spatial organisation, whereby the different units commonly referred to do not fit together (so that an individual may belong to more than one household or to several dwellings in cases of multi-residence, and to several different families in cases of re-constructed families, a household may be made up of a number of different families, and a family may be divided into several households depending on the definition of family being used, one dwelling may house numerous households depending on the definition of household, one household may possess several dwellings, etc....), it seems necessary to distinguish what is due to the statistical units being used for sampling purposes from what has to do with the information being collected to enable this organisational complexity to be reproduced.

In this sense, then, I think that innovations should focus on this second part, and a household survey seems to me a priori not to be completely redundant, so long as it does not obscure complexity through using definitions of statistical units which are too narrow. In terms of survey costs it has major advantages. The definition of the household depends on the definition of dwelling and that of resident. The former is not much more straightforward than the latter. It has to take into account complex forms of living space (such as that of the courtyard in Africa or mobile living spaces), and

complex cohabitation (such as the sharing of former colonial mansions by poor households in Bogota) and forms of transformation of dwellings (for example by subdivision). My work on census data from Bogota from 1993 to 2005 shows that with a single definition of dwelling there can be very different applications to real life circumstances by census agents faced with complex situations.

One needs to think clearly about this subject, which seems to me to vary from one context to another, and then to go on to determine the definition of the household. When looking at the definition of a resident, I find that it is best not to be too afraid of double counting but to manage this through detailed questions about the residential practices of individuals. With a wider definition of residence (usual, temporary, present or absent), there is a better chance of being able to detect the complexity of arrangements, and with detailed questions about residential practices (in order to detect multi-residence and the rhythms associated with having several dwellings), it should be possible to control the tendency to double counting. Then one can go on to create categories of resident which take into account residential practice, as in the *Enquêtes Mobiles Spatiales* carried out in Ouagadougou in 2007 and 2009.

To convey the kinship relationships between members of households, I believe we should re-think the use of definition by relation to the head of the household alone; this often fails to show up the complex forms of arrangement. I think it would be good if each member of the household could define the kinship links which exist between him or herself and the other household members.

Finally, if we aim to reflect the complexity of social, familial and economic relationships going beyond the boundaries of the household, specific modules need to be designed to build up the picture of this information for each of the members of the household.

Then there are the issues of the time depth to be given to the definition of the household, in the knowledge that households change: this is not a straightforward decision but there needs to be a certain level of consistency between the definition of a household member and the study of residential practices.

An article by Laurent Toulemon (2011) « Individus, familles, ménages, logements : les compter, les décrire », *Travail, genre et sociétés* (2) : 47–66 seems to me to have much to contribute to this debate.

Re: by [Sara Randall](#)

I think that there is a wide gulf between those who work (or have worked in the past) at the actual fieldwork end of survey data collection and those who are trained in survey design and / or analysis or who have largely undertaken secondary analysis. The former (whilst still appreciating sampling and other needs of surveys) tend to be much more concerned about the people / situations who are poorly / mal-represented in surveys. The latter focus much more on the theoretical dimensions of the survey – the sampling frame, comparability, issues of double counting.

The problem therefore is how to reconcile these two, and, as Ernestina says, focus on some of the problems raised by the extensive secondary analysis of data. Guy Ndeffo said early in this debate “une enquete a generalement des objectifs bien précis” - a survey usually has well-defined objectives. This is true – but in a context where data collection costs are enormous, where there is often respondent fatigue and where many data sets are now easily available to a wide range of users, data are being used more and more for a huge range of purposes which were never envisaged when the survey was designed. And this is how it should be – data really should be used as much as possible in order to justify the collection. The problem is that users often only look for the questions they want to find in the data set without seriously asking whether these questions have been really rigorously evaluated.

One of my concerns is the ever-increasing elaboration of complex and sophisticated statistical analyses teasing out cause and effect at different levels – yet so often such analyses barely mention the underlying validity and reliability of the data – let alone the implications of the definitions and concepts used .

As Natacha points out, data are used by a wide range of users and their analyses often inform policy directions. HOW can we set up systems that somehow require analysts to demonstrate that they have looked at definitions (and other aspects of the data set) and have thought through the implications for their work – in the same way that now many journals require authors to make ethics declarations. Does anyone have any suggestions?

Re: by [Setephen Wandera](#)

From the experience i had interviewing Key Informants during this project in Uganda, it was clear to them that polygamous households or families are a bit complex. For example, the issue of household headship in a polygsmous setting is tricky.

Using a defacto approach in data analysis for the surveys can exaggerate the number of female headed households in a country yet when using a dejure approach kind of presents a closely realistic picture.

As researchers, special consideration should be given to polygamous households whose realities can be easily misrepresented.

Re: by [Horman Chitonge](#)

The concept of household is very tricky in many African rural settings. My experience of conducting household survey interviews in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape in South Africa was that a household is a fluid unit depending on the context. Using a very rigid definition, as is often the case with household surveys, can have significant impact on what the actual characteristics of a household are.

For example the resource or income sharing rule becomes difficult to apply in cases where a person has lunch and supper in different households almost every day. This is a common occurrence in many rural areas in Africa. It is also common to find that people in a village often share at least one meal although they have separate cooking and graineries. We also found that high prevalence of migrant labour in the Eastern Cape implies that applying the de facto or de jure residence rule can lead to different sizes of a household, and it is not easy which size to settle for.

The other complication we found was around the idea of a household head. Again here traditionally, the head of household is often taken to be the eldest member of the household even if that person, in terms of making decisions in the house, is not the head. But the respondent is often likely to report the eldest person as the head of household, especially if that person is male, for the simple reason that the eldest male person often has the last word on many decisions in the household. We had a relatively high number of households with household head of more than 90 year even in households that had younger members. This can be a complex terrain which requires some flexibility to capture basic household characteristics than is often the case with large household surveys.

Re : by [Celio Sierra-Paycha](#)

Hello

I would like to draw attention to the problems of counting mobile people such as sailors (those who live and work on board), travellers or vagrants and the homeless in censuses and household surveys. These persons are not considered by the statistical service in France as belonging to households, and are thus the subject of a special count. How does this happen in other countries where mobile forms of living are more widespread, such as in the context of widespread nomadism or seasonal labour migration linked to agricultural work?

Apart from this problem of definition which attributes a fixed residence to every household, the enumeration of mobile persons creates another problem in that it can be biased by local governments whose financial allocations are dependent on their number of inhabitants. These communes may be tempted to attract travelling people such as fairground families on a temporary basis for the duration of the data collection, in order to boost their budgets.

What do you think?

Re: by [Paolo Valente](#)

Hello,

With regard to population censuses, the Recommendations of the Conference of European Statisticians for the 2010 round of censuses (available in English and French



here: <http://www.unece.org/stats/census.html>) include specific provisions for some of the cases mentioned by Celio. The general rule is that "The place of enumeration should be taken as the place of usual residence of homeless or roofless persons, nomads, vagrants and persons with no concept of usual residence" (para. 162. g)

For the purpose of the enumeration, barges (péniches) should fall in the category of "other housing units" (see paragraphs 602-604). Persons can have usual residence in these units if they meet the requirements for having usual residence there (para. 159). They may form households as if they were living in conventional dwellings. According to para. 603. a), even nomad camps should be included in this category, although I imagine that identifying households in these cases can be a challenge. The CES recommendations also include provisions for the homeless (see paragraphs 490-492 and 608-621), in an attempt to improve their enumeration in the census.

I should mention that the CES census recommendations reflect the reality and specificity of CES countries (including countries in Europe, North America, Central Asia and other countries members of OCED). Countries in other regions including Africa generally refer to another set of recommendations, the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/census3.htm>). The two sets of recommendations have been developed in parallel and are consistent with regard to general concepts and definitions.

Re: by [Zacharie Ngueng](#)

Hello everyone. As far as surveys in our countries (in Africa) are concerned, it is difficult to capture the realities and the difficulties of life through household surveys. In these surveys all we look for are the relationships between the household members and the household head, and all the household expenditure is attributed to the household head. It is difficult for example to capture the ways in which households managed by elderly people meet their daily financial needs – very few older people have pensions; or to grasp the problem of inter-generational transfers (in both directions). Furthermore much of expenditure on health care for household members is not reported to the household head (remembering that fewer than 5% of people in Cameroon have health insurance), which makes it difficult to appreciate the contribution made by other members of the household. Older people are particularly likely to be left out in this way.

Re: by [Sadio Gning](#)

Hello everyone

I am following with great interest all these discussions of the household, which as your contributions make clear is often treated as a given, whereas surveys in different field situations show that the household is above all a social construct – and a statistical one of course, but still very difficult to operationalize when it has to be defined for the

benefit of the respondents themselves. The surveys we have conducted in France and in Senegal, two countries which share a common statistical tradition, are a good illustration of how difficult it is to delimit the boundaries of the household, especially where rural households are often “disarticulated” between a number of compounds, and intergenerational relationships are embedded in the logic of kinship, of financial exchanges etc.

Re: by [C. Duchene-Lacroix](#)  
(Not translated)

Quelle ménage lorsque les membres habitent en plusieurs endroits ?

Avec des chercheurs de Suisse, d'Allemagne et d'Autriche nous avons fondé le réseau multilocalité\*. Notre questionnement sur les pratiques d'habitation multilocales infranationales et transnationales en Europe (habiter habituellement au moins deux endroits) nous a conduits au questionnement des ensembles ménages et de leur pertinence pour rendre compte de ce que nous observions. Nous avons été confrontés au double problème déjà évoqué ici :

1- manque de catégories pour nommer les ensembles ménagés que nous avons observés : ménage à géométrie variable, ménage centré sur le lieu d'habitation, sur la mise en commun d'un budget (such as Ben wilsons Key family members), sur les liens familiaux et amicaux, patchwork-family, etc. et ce pour une situation européenne (et non pas une situation où le concept de ménage n'est pas établi ou culturellement adéquat comme en Afrique comme cela a été soulevé)

2- manque de possibilité d'observation à partir des données secondaires, car déjà formatées

L'une des premières intervenantes proposait des enquêtes spécifiques pour approfondir ce questionnement. A travers notre recherche sur « l'habiter multilocal en Suisse »\*\* nous entendons questionner aussi ces ensembles ménagers. Pour ne partie quantitative, nous sommes confrontés à un troisième problème :

3- La question du lieu de résidence principal est problématique pour notre recherche. Nous cherchons à dépasser cette distinction entre principal et secondaire. Pour permettre un redressement des données selon les structures de la population de base, il faut caler les résultats selon le lieu de résidence principal des ménages. C'est le problème que pose autrement Sara Randall entre saisir la « représentativité » de pratiques (question de méthodologie) et saisir des pratiques (émergentes) dans la société.

Cédric Duchêne-Lacroix

\*« Netzwerk Multilokalität » \*\* L'habiter multilocal en Suisse/Multilokales Wohnen in der Schweiz/Multilocal dwelling in Switzerland est une recherche de trois ans financée par le Fonds National Suisse et menée par Nicola Hilti (ETH-Zürich), Helmut Schad (Hochschule Wirtschaft Luzern) et Cédric Duchêne-Lacroix (Universität Basel) sous la direction de Margrit Hugentobler.

