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Autor: Andermatt, Paul

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A census is just as anonymous as a crowd of people going by. But it can help solve many social problems. (Photo: Keycolor)

IMPRESSUM

Swiss Review, the magazine for the Swiss Abroad, is in its 21st year of issue and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in more than 20 regional editions. It has a total circulation of over 300,000. Regional news appears four times a year.

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The figures which take such a prominent place in this issue of Swiss Review and which represent one way of looking at Switzerland are based on statistics. The complexity of modern society makes statistical data ever more indispensable as a source of information for the public and as a basis for decision-making by those in politics, government, the economy and science.

Probably the most important aid for providing the necessary information is the federal population census. This gives comprehensive details on the situation, structure and distribution of the resident population and has been carried out every ten years since 1850.

But with all such series of figures, which seem on the face of it so practical and unassailable, we should not forget that they definitely have their limitations. For example, data material provided by individual states is not necessarily comparable at the international level. Details on surface areas may fluctuate substantially according to the way politically controversial areas are allocated or domestic waters defined. With data on resident populations, there must be awareness that groups such as refugees, foreign workers, cross-frontier workers and illegal immigrants may be treated differently in the very varied statistical concepts.

It is also true that there is a contradiction between the duty to provide unlimited information and comprehensive data protection. The former is in the interest of the government and the latter in that of the individual citizen. It is not easy to find an adequate compromise between their two standpoints. Doubts regarding confidential treatment of the data collected are not always unjustified. Such doubts were stirred up

in Switzerland in the run-up to the last census in 1990. At that time, the country was still reeling from the unfortunate "police files affair". The federal government and some cantonal authorities had been keeping secret records about perfectly respectable citizens for alleged reasons of state security. These were based on unsound information and dubious suspicions. One result was a call to boycott the 1990 census. There was talk of "statistics as an instrument of power in the hands of the ruling class", and it was said of opinion polls and censuses that "the questions – and the intentions behind them – are by no means harmless".

New federal laws have now come into effect in the areas of data protection generally and statistics in particular. One main objective of the Federal Law on Statistics is to ensure that data collected is used for statistical purposes only. But whether this has enabled the crisis of confidence between the government and society to be overcome is not clear. There is reason for scepticism, particularly since the government does not seem willing to restrict its state security activities in any large measure.

In spite of remaining doubts, statistics will always remain an indispensable source of information. You only have to think about a Swiss Review not very far in the future which will perhaps take up once again the subject of "Switzerland in figures" to present the results of the federal census in the year 2000.



P. Andermatt

Paul Andermatt