GENERAL

what was the population of the united states in 1940

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Introduction

When exploring the rich tapestry of American history, one of the most revealing threads is the population data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. The 1940 census, conducted on April 1st, 1940, offers a snapshot of the nation just before it entered the global conflict of World War /II. Many readers wonder, **what was the population of the United States in 1940?** Understanding this figure not only satisfies curiosity but also provides insight into the social, economic, and political forces shaping the era. In this article, we will examine the 1940 census in depth, explore its key findings, and discuss why this data remains relevant today.

Historical Context of the 1940 Census

The 1940 census was the 19th decennial count in U.S. history. It followed the 1930 census, which had revealed a country still recovering from the Great Depression. By 1940, the economy was beginning to rebound, yet the looming threat of war in Europe and Asia was casting a shadow over the nation. The census served as a vital tool for policymakers, businesses, and scholars to gauge the country's demographic landscape amid rapid change.

Unlike previous censuses, the 1940 count introduced new questions that reflected contemporary concerns: questions on race, citizenship, and occupation were expanded, and a new emphasis was placed on urbanization. The data collected would later influence wartime mobilization, postwar reconstruction, and the eventual civil rights movement.

Key Figures from the 1940 Census

Total Population

According to the official count, the United States had a total population of **132,164,569** people on April 1, 1940. This figure marked a significant increase of about 20.7 % over the 1930 census, reflecting both natural population growth and the effects of internal migration.

Population by State

California led the way with nearly 8.5 million residents, followed by New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio. Southern states such as Texas, Georgia, and Alabama saw steady growth, while the Pacific Northwest experienced rapid expansion due to industrial opportunities.

Urban vs. Rural Distribution

Urbanization was accelerating. Approximately 61 % of the population lived in urban areas, a jump from 58.4 % in 1930. The largest urban centers—New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia—continued to draw people from rural regions and abroad.

Age and Gender Breakdown

The population was fairly balanced by gender, with 51.9 % male and 48.1 % female. The median age hovered around 29 /years, indicating a relatively young populace. However, the war would soon alter these demographics.

Ethnicity and Race

White Americans comprised approximately 90 % of the population, while African Americans accounted for about 7 %. Native Americans and Asians made up the remaining 3 %. Notably, the census included a question on citizenship that identified 3.8 /% of the population as non-citizens, primarily recent immigrants.

Population Distribution by State

Below is a concise overview of how the population was distributed across the 48 states (Alaska and Hawaii were not yet states). The figures are rounded to the nearest hundred thousand for clarity.

- California – 8,500,000
- New York – 7,400,000
- Illinois – 4,700,000
- Pennsylvania – 4,500,000
- Ohio – 4,200,000
- Michigan – 3,800,000
- Texas – 3,200,000
- Florida – 1,500,000
- Georgia – 1,400,000
- North Carolina – 1,300,000

These numbers illustrate the concentration of people in the Northeast and West Coast, while the Midwest served as a manufacturing and agricultural hub.

Urban vs. Rural Trends

The shift from rural to urban living was a defining feature of the 1940 census. Industrialization, the rise of automobile culture, and the promise of better wages in cities drew millions from farms and small towns. In 1940, the national urban population surpassed the rural population for the first time in U.S. history.

Key drivers of this trend included:

1. Expansion of the automotive industry, especially in Detroit and Chicago.
2. Growth of the textile and steel sectors in the Northeast.
3. The emergence of new manufacturing centers in the West, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco.
4. Government programs that encouraged internal migration, like the New Deal's Works Progress Administration.

These movements reshaped the cultural landscape, leading to greater diversity in cities and altering political dynamics across the country.

Immigration and Naturalization Impact

While the 1940 census occurred during a period of restricted immigration, it still recorded a significant number of newcomers. The Immigration Act of 1924 had limited the influx of immigrants from certain countries, yet the United States continued to attract those seeking economic opportunities.

Immigrants represented roughly 3.8 /% of the population. The majority came from:

- Mexico – 1.5 /% of the total population.
- Europe – 1.2 /% (primarily from Italy, Poland, and Germany).
- Asia – 0.5 /% (mainly Chinese and Japanese).

- Other regions – 0.6 /%.

These groups contributed to the cultural mosaic and provided essential labor for wartime production, especially as the U.S. prepared to enter World War /II.

Comparison with Previous Decades

When juxtaposed with earlier census data, the 1940 figures reveal notable trends:

- Population growth accelerated from 20.7 /% (1930–1940) to 23.1 /% (1940–1950), indicating a postwar boom.
- The proportion of the population living in urban areas increased from 58.4 /% to 61.0 /%.
- The median age rose modestly, reflecting a shift toward an older demographic as the baby boomers had not yet begun.

These changes foreshadowed the significant demographic shifts that would occur during the mid-20th century, including the Great Migration and the postwar suburbanization.

Legacy and Significance of the 1940 Census

The 1940 census data proved invaluable for wartime planning. Accurate population counts helped the government allocate resources, design military drafts, and forecast labor needs for defense industries. Moreover, the census set a precedent for future demographic research, providing a baseline for comparing subsequent changes in racial composition, economic status, and geographic distribution.

In the long term, the 1940 census helped scholars understand the roots of the civil rights movement, as it highlighted disparities in population distribution and economic opportunity across racial lines. The data also served as a reference point for assessing the impact of the Great Migration, which saw millions of African Americans relocate from the rural South to urban centers in the North and West.

Conclusion

In summary, **what was the population of the United States in 1940?**The answer is a precise figure of 132,164,569 people—a number that encapsulates a nation on the brink of global conflict and poised for rapid transformation. The 1940 census not only recorded this statistic but also captured the intricate patterns of migration, urbanization, and cultural diversity that would shape the American experience for decades to come. By examining these data, we gain a deeper appreciation for the forces that forged modern America and the enduring importance of accurate demographic records in guiding policy and preserving history.

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