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What Was The Population Of The United States In 1940

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Introduction: A Nation on the Brink of Change

When we look back at the year 1940, we see the United States standing at a pivotal crossroads. The Great Depression was finally receding, and the clouds of World War II were gathering over Europe and Asia. American society was evolving rapidly, shaped by economic hardship, technological innovation, and shifting cultural norms. To truly understand this moment in history, one fundamental question offers a powerful lens: **What was the population of the United States in 1940**?

The answer to that question reveals far more than a simple number. It tells a story of resilience, migration, urbanization, and the changing face of a nation. The 1940 census, the 16th federal census conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, captured the American people at a unique moment between two great crises: the Depression and the war. In this article, we will explore the official population count, the demographic trends that shaped it, and why this data remains significant today. By the end, you will have a rich understanding of what the 1940 population meant then and what it continues to mean for historians, demographers, and anyone curious about America's past.

The 1940 United States Census: A Historical Overview

The 1940 census was not just another decennial count. It was the first census to employ advanced sampling techniques, making it a landmark in statistical methodology. Enumerators visited every household in the nation, asking detailed questions about income, employment, education, and housing. This was the first census to ask questions about wages and salary, reflecting the government's urgent need to understand the economic impact of the Depression.

The census also introduced the concept of "supplementary questions" asked of a sample of the population, a practice that would become standard in future decades. For those researching family history or social trends, the 1940 census is a treasure trove of personal and demographic data. The information collected provides an extraordinarily detailed snapshot of American society at a critical juncture.

What Was the Population of the United States in 1940? The Official Number

The official population of the United States in 1940, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, was **132,164,569**. This count includes the 48 states and the District of Columbia, but excludes territories and possessions. For context, this represented an increase of approximately 8.9 million people, or 7.3 percent, from the 1930 census total of 123,202,624.

This growth rate was the lowest in American history up to that time, a direct reflection of the Great Depression's impact on family formation, immigration, and even life expectancy. Birth rates had fallen sharply in the early 1930s, and immigration had slowed to a trickle due to restrictive laws and economic conditions. The 1940 population figure, therefore, is not just a statistic but a testament to a decade of struggle and adjustment.

When people ask, "**What was the population of the United States in 1940**?", the answer of 132 million serves as a baseline for understanding America's subsequent demographic explosion. In the next two decades, the post-war baby boom would drive the population to over 150 million by 1950 and past 179 million by 1960. The 1940 number marks the low point before that dramatic surge.

Demographic Breakdown of the 1940 Population

Age and Gender Distribution

The age structure of the 1940 population reflected the economic hardships of the previous decade. The median age was about 29 years, slightly higher than in 1930, as fewer children were born and more people lived into middle age. The male-to-female ratio was nearly balanced, with slightly more males overall due to higher male immigration in earlier decades. However, among older adults, women outnumbered men, a pattern that continues today.

Children under the age of 15 made up about 25 percent of the population, a lower proportion than in earlier censuses. This decline in youth share was a direct consequence of lower birth rates during the Depression. In contrast, adults aged 65 and older represented roughly 6.8 percent of the population, a figure that was slowly rising as medical advances and improved nutrition extended lifespans.

Racial and Ethnic Composition

In 1940, the United States was far less diverse than it is today. Approximately 89.8 percent of the population identified as white, while African Americans made up about 9.8 percent, totaling roughly 12.9 million people. Other racial groups, including Native Americans, Asians, and people of mixed heritage, accounted for less than 1 percent of the total.

The African American population was still heavily concentrated in the South, though the Great Migration had already begun shifting millions to northern industrial cities. This internal migration would accelerate dramatically during the 1940s as war production created jobs in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York. The 1940 census captured a moment just before this massive demographic transformation.

Immigration and Foreign-Born Population

The foreign-born population in 1940 was about 11.6 million people, or roughly 8.8 percent of the total. This was a significant decline from previous decades, when immigration had been much higher. The restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 had dramatically reduced new arrivals, and the Depression discouraged even those who might have come. The foreign-born population in 1940 was also older on average, as many immigrants had arrived decades earlier and were aging in place.

Urban vs. Rural Distribution in 1940

One of the most telling aspects of the 1940 population was its geographic distribution. For the first time in American history, the census revealed that a majority of the population lived in urban areas. Approximately 56.5 percent of Americans lived in cities and towns, while 43.5 percent lived in rural areas. This milestone represented the culmination of a century-long trend of urbanization driven by industrialization and the decline of farming as the primary occupation.

However, the Great Depression had temporarily slowed rural-to-urban migration. Some people even moved

back to farms as city jobs dried up. This "return to the land" was a short-term phenomenon, but it is visible in the 1940 data. Suburban growth was still in its infancy, limited by transportation infrastructure and the lingering effects of the Depression. The great post-war suburban explosion was still a decade away.

Regional Population Distribution in 1940

The Northeast and Midwest

The Northeast remained the most densely populated region, with about 28 percent of the total population. States like New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts were industrial and financial powerhouses. New York City alone was home to over 7.4 million people, making it the largest city in the world at that time. The Midwest accounted for roughly 30 percent of the population, with states like Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan serving as the heart of American manufacturing.

The South

The South, despite its large land area and high birth rates, had a lower population density overall. It held about 31 percent of the U.S. population, but much of that was rural and agricultural. States like Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama had some of the highest percentages of rural residents. The South was also the poorest region, with incomes far below the national average. The 1940 census documented these inequalities in stark detail.

The West

The West was still sparsely populated in 1940, holding only about 11 percent of the national total. California was the clear exception, with a booming population of 6.9 million people, fueled by migration from the Dust Bowl and other parts of the country. The rest of the West, including states like Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada, had very low population densities. Nevada, for example, had fewer than 110,000 residents. The West's big population boom was still a few decades away, though the seeds had already been planted.

The 1940 Population in Context: Historical Trends

To fully appreciate what the population of the United States was in 1940, it helps to see it in the longer arc of American history. In 1790, the first census counted just 3.9 million people. By 1850, the population had reached 23 million. The 1900 census counted 76 million. The growth from 1900 to 1940 was driven by massive immigration and high birth rates, though both slowed markedly in the 1930s.

The 7.3 percent growth rate between 1930 and 1940 was the smallest increase in any decade up to that time. For comparison, the 1920s had seen growth of 16.1 percent, and the 1910s had seen 15.0 percent. The Depression decade was a demographic anomaly, a period when economic hardship suppressed family formation and slowed population growth to a crawl.

Factors Influencing the 1940 Population

Several key factors shaped the 1940 population:

- The Great Depression: Economic hardship delayed marriages and reduced birth rates. Many couples simply could not afford to have children, leading to a "baby bust" that lasted through much of the 1930s.
- Declining Immigration: The Immigration Act of 1924 and the Depression drastically cut immigration. Fewer newcomers meant slower population growth.
- Internal Migration: The Dust Bowl and mechanization of agriculture pushed people off farms and into cities, especially in California and the industrial North.
- Improved Public Health: Despite economic hardship, life expectancy continued to rise slowly, thanks to better sanitation, vaccines, and medical knowledge. This helped offset some of the decline in births.
- World War II (approaching): By 1940, the U.S. was not yet fully mobilized for war, but defense spending

was already beginning to stimulate the economy. This would soon have a massive impact on population trends, though the full effects were not captured until the 1950 census.

Comparisons with Subsequent Decades

When we ask "**What was the population of the United States in 1940**", it is natural to compare it with later figures. The 1950 census counted 151,325,798 people, reflecting the post-war baby boom and renewed economic prosperity. That represented growth of over 19 million people, or 14.5 percent, from 1940. The 1960 census counted 179,323,175, a further jump of 18.5 percent.

In contrast, the 1930s had been a decade of stagnation. The 1940 population was, in many ways, a demographic "reset" before the explosive growth of the

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