Counting the Dust Bowl

Use census data and source details to test a historical claim.

OKH.P.3.1 "Comprehend, evaluate, and synthesize textual sources to acquire and refine knowledge in the social studies. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, evaluating features such as author, date..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details that identify when and by whom the evidence was produced. Circle two limits on what the evidence can prove, and number the table values you would cite in a claim about population change.

What Can a Population Count Prove?

1. In the 1930s, dry weather and intensive plowing left parts of the southern Great Plains exposed to wind erosion. Dust storms damaged farms, while the Great Depression reduced incomes. Some Oklahoma families moved west. Could a population change prove how many people fled the Dust Bowl? First ask what a source actually measures.

2. The table reports counts published by the U.S. Census Bureau, a federal agency, for 1930 and 1940. These counts are primary-source evidence of population at two dates, not a record of each person's moves or reasons for moving. Compare Oklahoma with the nation, then notice the ten-year gap. Births, deaths, and moves could all affect a population total.

POPULATION COUNTS REPORTED BY THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

Census year	Oklahoma residents	U.S. residents
1930	2,396,040	123,202,624
1940	2,336,434	132,164,569

3. This account, written for students in 2026, is a secondary source: its writer interprets older records. A dated letter from one migrant could reveal personal reasons for leaving, but not how many people left statewide. To defend a broader claim, compare sources from different origins, cite specific details, and explain what each can and cannot show.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Who published the table's counts, when were they taken, and why can't they prove how many people fled the Dust Bowl?

2. How did Oklahoma's population trend differ from the nation's between the two counts? Cite both Oklahoma figures and describe the national trend.

3. How could a migrant's dated letter add to the census evidence? What claim about statewide migration could neither a single letter nor the table establish alone?

4. Why is this account a secondary source? Use its date and what its writer did with older records in your answer.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A museum label claims, “The Dust Bowl caused Oklahoma's population to fall between 1930 and 1940.” Write 70 to 95 words revising the label. Cite two exact figures from the table, evaluate the dates and origins of the evidence, and name one additional primary source that could help investigate the cause.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · OKH.P.3.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline details that identify when and by whom the evidence was produced. Circle two limits on what the evidence can prove, and number the table values you would cite in a claim about population change. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Who published the table's counts, when were they taken, and why can't they prove how many people fled the Dust Bowl?	**The U.S. Census Bureau published counts for 1930 and 1940. They record population totals, not individuals' moves or reasons for moving.**
2	How did Oklahoma's population trend differ from the nation's between the two counts? Cite both Oklahoma figures and describe the national trend.	**Oklahoma fell from 2,396,040 to 2,336,434 residents, while the U.S. total rose from 123,202,624 to 132,164,569.**
3	How could a migrant's dated letter add to the census evidence? What claim about statewide migration could neither a single letter nor the table establish alone?	**A letter could give one person's reasons for leaving. Neither it nor the table alone could establish how many people statewide left because of the Dust Bowl.**
4	Why is this account a secondary source? Use its date and what its writer did with older records in your answer.	**Written in 2026, long after the 1930s events, the account interprets older records rather than recording the events as they happened.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The U.S. Census Bureau counted 2,396,040 Oklahoma residents in 1930 and 2,336,434 in 1940, so the state's population fell during that decade. However, these federal counts were taken ten years apart and do not record why anyone left. The 2026 account links dust storms and economic hardship, but it interprets earlier evidence rather than witnessing individual decisions. A more careful label would say that the decline occurred during the Dust Bowl, not that the Dust Bowl alone caused it. A 1936 migrant's dated letter could help investigate one family's reasons.

Accept revisions that distinguish a documented population decline from an unproven single cause. Additional primary sources may include dated letters, diaries, interviews, or government records, provided students explain how the source could help investigate migration.