

The Politics of the Undercount

The ongoing saga of the 2000 Census

By **Barbara Everitt Bryant**

The US Census redistributes too much power and money not to be fought over. The census was put in the Constitution in 1790 to redistribute power in the House of Representatives among the states every decade. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 extended its use to the redistricting of legislative bodies ranging from state assemblies to city councils. And the growth in federal funding programs in the latter half of the 20th century has meant that census counts also figure as some part of the formulae for distributing about \$180 billion annually to states and localities.

Although controversies about the size and accuracy of the census are historic, what's different for 2000 is that both Republicans and Democrats have tried to affect in advance the methodology of how the census will be taken, and thus affect its results. The controversy centers on the role of statistical estimation of the numbers and characteristics of the small percent of the population who cannot, or will not, be counted.

Following the 1990 census, a post-enumeration survey was conducted both to evaluate the census and for the purpose of its possible statistical adjustment. Estimates based on the post-enumeration survey indicated, as expected, that African Americans had been undercounted in greater proportion than whites (-4.4% compared to -1.2%). However, for the first time there were also data on the undercount of Hispanics (-5.0%), Asian Americans (-2.3%), American Indians (-4.5%), and renters (-4.3%) compared to homeowners (-0.1%). The survey also provided geographic detail on the total net undercount, initially estimated at 2.1% and finally at 1.6%.

These new estimates, using both demographic analysis and the post-enumeration survey, confirmed what has been known since Thomas Jefferson delivered the 1790 count to George Washington: it is impossible to enumerate directly every single resident of the United States. They also confirmed the Democrats' view that the uncounted were "their kind of people"—minorities, renters, and residents of large central cities. On this the Republicans agreed. Hence, the battle lines over census-taking methodology were drawn.

Republicans in Congress have already succeeded in changing Census Bureau plans for 2000. Their lawsuit contesting proposed changes in methodological practices to address the undercount led to a January 1999 Supreme Court decision

Barbara Everitt Bryant is managing director, American Customer Satisfaction Index, University of Michigan Business School, and former director of the Bureau of the Census (1989-93).

barring the use of sampling to produce the population counts on which the apportionment of the House of Representatives is based. The high court ruled that the population count for apportionment must be based on a direct physical enumeration of the population, although sampling could be used for other applications of census data. House Republicans also appointed as chairman of the subcommittee overseeing the census Representative Dan Miller of Florida, who is ardently opposed to the application of an estimate of the uncounted. For the past several years he has created a continuous barrage of publicity disparaging the accuracy of any estimation technique.

Caught in this imbroglio is the apolitical Bureau of the Census, with its unblemished record for statistical integrity. The Census Bureau's goal, as it has always been, is to get the most accurate count possible without regard to winners and losers.

Driven by this desire, the Census Bureau has long been trying to reduce the undercount, first measured by demographic analysis in 1940. The impetus for the original analysis was that more young males, and particularly young black males, ages 18 to 45, registered for the draft than had been counted in the 1940 census. By a continuous cycle of following each census with evaluation and research and introducing method changes, the Census Bureau successfully reduced the total undercount from 5.4% to 1.2% between 1940 and 1980. Then, in 1990, it crept back up. More disconcerting than the 0.4% increase—which might have been the result of better measurement—was that the gap between the proportion of blacks and non-blacks counted widened, after having progressively narrowed for five censuses.

The problem stemmed from societal changes that had been taking place for over two decades. In 1970, the year the method of census-taking shifted to predominantly using mailed questionnaires rather than making house calls, over three-fourths of households were maintained by married couples, and 78% returned census questionnaires mailed to those households. By 1990, only 56% of households were maintained by married couples, and only 65% returned questionnaires.

The proportion who return mailed questionnaires is anticipated to decline further in 2000. Further societal change might be offset to some extent by improved questionnaire design and the use, for the first time, of a paid advertising campaign. To enumerate directly those who don't send back their census forms will require half a million census takers calling on 46 million households.

All of this, of course, will cost money; and if Congress was

dismayed by the four million undercount in 1990, they were just as upset by census costs that were rising at a rate greatly exceeding the inflation rate and population growth. Much of the increased cost came from efforts to reduce the undercount. Pressure to reduce costs came from both parties in the congressional subcommittee that oversees the Census Bureau budget.

In 1995, after five years of research, the Census Bureau publicly announced its plan for a 2000 “one-number” census that would combine direct enumeration, statistical sampling of those who do not return census forms, and a sample survey estimate of those who are unable to be found or counted. The need for a single, best possible number grew out of the political tension that had resulted when the census of 1990 had produced two numbers, the enumerated count and the statistically enhanced count of 1991. The 2000 plan met the stated goals of improving accuracy and reducing cost and was endorsed by several expert panels of the National Academy of Sciences, plus much of the statistical research community. The Clinton administration also supported the plan. This support would lead to Republicans later tagging it as a “Clinton Plan,” ignoring the research work the Census Bureau had done to develop it.

With Republicans holding the majority in the House of Representatives since the 1994 election, blocking maneuvers to thwart the plan began immediately after its unveiling. Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, charged Republicans in general and House members in particular to oppose any plan to add estimates of the uncounted, claiming these could cause Republicans to lose control of the House. And with the House’s successful lawsuit in 1998, the Census Bureau will have to return, for the purpose of House seat apportionment, to the method used in 1970, 1980, and 1990 to take the 2000 census—mailed-out questionnaires followed by labor-intensive house calls at the households that don’t return questionnaires.

The Census Bureau now plans to conduct what may be the largest and most interesting statistical experiment in history, providing comparative counts from direct enumeration and from enumeration augmented by a sample survey estimate of those not enumerated. This is contingent on budget approval for fiscal 2000. Quite different from the Congress of 1991 that charged the Census Bureau to find cost efficiencies, the most recent Congress has had an open purse for any activities that might improve direct enumeration.

In 2000 the Census Bureau will conduct an all-out effort to do the best possible job of enumerating the population, an effort aided by partnerships with communities, local agencies and advocacy groups, the previously mentioned advertising campaign, and improved questionnaires and mailing procedures. This will provide the Constitutionally-mandated apportionment count that determines how many seats each state gets in the

House. Immediately after enumeration, the Census Bureau will survey a sample of 300,000 households (compared to the 150,000 used for the 1990 post-enumeration survey). This Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (ACE) survey will determine who in those households was counted correctly in the census, counted erroneously (for example in the wrong geographic location or counted twice), or not counted. The results will be combined with the enumerated count, with undercounts added and overcounts eliminated, to provide a second count, a best estimate of the population. This will be completed in winter 2001 in time to be used for redistricting and federal funds distributions.

Thus the Census Bureau will end up producing two counts for 2000, not the “one number” census the Census Bureau hoped would end political controversy. Now, which count to use within states is already causing political controversy; and two counts will not become the less costly census the Census Bureau was directed to plan earlier in the decade. The Supreme Court decision, according to the Census Bureau, adds \$1.7 billion to the cost of the original plan by requiring more enumerators and a longer time period for enumeration with attendant overhead costs. The 10-year cycle price tag for the 2000 census will thus be \$6.2 billion, compared to \$2.6 billion for 1990.

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While faults can be found in estimation methods, and estimation is much more accurate for larger geographic areas and constituencies than for smaller ones, the second count, while introducing to the census some small errors inherent in sampling, will reduce the largest errors produced by direct enumeration.

Enhancing the official apportionment count with the estimate of those not counted, as the second count will do, has civil rights implications much demanded by advocacy groups for African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and American Indians. It is important to education planners who need to have the best estimate possible of the numbers of children who will enter school systems. It will be used by the federal statistical system as the framework for the sample surveys that produce economic and social indicators. In fact, the federal statistical system has been using adjusted 1990 census numbers for this purpose since mid-decade. But, most of all, the second count will provide a truer—although never perfect—picture of the number and characteristics of the people of the US as we enter the next millennium. In the long run, the nation is best served by accuracy. ●