

Census 2000

A Status Report for Local Governments

James Bourney

So what is the big deal about counting how many of us there are in cities, counties, and states? Are the issues surrounding Census 2000 only matters that federal bureaucrats could care about? As local government administrators are aware, preparation for Census 2000 has been a major challenge for the Census Bureau and the subject of significant controversy.

Certainly, much is at stake in the method and accuracy of this next decennial census. It has been estimated that each household counted could mean at least \$10,000 in aid to local governments from federal and state governments. And because the census is used to reapportion the House of Representatives, its figures will mean potential additions and deletions to the number of members of the House from each state. When we examine undercounts from the 1990 Census, we see quite clearly that some states lost a potential House member, while others retained a seat based on inaccuracies in the figures.

The census also will be used to redistrict federal, state, and local bodies. Redistricting obviously can change the representation that various groups have in our political process. Too, census data will be used for a tremendously wide variety of analyses and planning efforts that are vital to local governance.

This article is intended to provide an update on controversial and important issues surrounding the 2000 Census. It offers a general description of how the census is conducted and how local governments participate in that process, touching on issues that include race and ethnicity choices, tabulation, and reporting; updating of the Master Address File; statistical adjustments to actual accounts; and the inclusion of a post-census local review. There follows a brief description of census products output.

A Big Deal

The challenge of attempting to count every individual in the United States results in the largest single peacetime activity in the nation. It is estimated that 860,000 people will be hired to collect and process data. The information is collected via questionnaires that are distributed to every household through direct mail or delivery by census workers.

Most households get the short form, which collects certain basic data, while approximately one out of six households receives a long form that asks for much more extensive information. This information forms an essential database that local governments can rely upon for a wide array of activities. Clearly, the census is the single most vital source of information within our communities.

A net overall undercount in 1990 was estimated to be 1.8 percent. However, the undercount for various segments of the population was a great deal higher. The estimated undercount for blacks was 4.4 percent, while the undercount for American Indians residing on reservations was approximately 12.2 percent. The 1990 Census was the first to be less accurate than its predecessor. Further, it is estimated that the census in 2000 will have a much lower response rate, leading to an even less accurate count. There are essential roles that many jurisdictions

and groups must play in ensuring the most accurate census possible.

Local government's participation in the census process is vital to its success and accuracy. Through the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) process, localities have been able to ensure that questionnaires get mailed out or delivered to the most complete list of households possible. Participating localities have supplied additional addresses to augment the address list, which originated with the U.S. Postal Service. This activity has been absolutely critical in many jurisdictions, where the initial Master Address File has had a large number of missing addresses. In some jurisdictions, as many as half of the addresses are missing.

Local governments also have been able to help provide an update of census tracts and local boundaries. Tracts change because of significant growth or changes in the population within them, and localities have been able to provide input to obtain a reasonable splitting or reconfiguration of tracts to conform with their local conditions.

Updating of local boundaries also is essential, as population outside the boundaries on record with the bureau will not be included in the local totals. Residents will be included for areas known to exist as of January 1, 2000. Thus, localities must complete any annexations by the end of this year in order to get credit for the population within these areas.

In addition, local governments can play an important function in encouraging the response of residents through the formation of complete count committees and other activities. Because local governments are the closest jurisdictions to the people, they can provide terrific leadership in reaching certain groups to increase response rates. While much of this input and process has already occurred, there still are significant opportunities for participation by local governments.

Until the upcoming census, individuals have had a single choice on race and

ethnicity, with no option for people who consider themselves multiracial. Census 2000 will offer the option of selecting from multiple categories of race. This change has created a significant dilemma over how to tabulate and report these results for use by a variety of interested parties.

Major Issues

The Office of Management and the Budget has produced guidelines for how the tabulation and reporting will take place. One of the major issues has been to ensure that the "multiracial" category does not result in totals that exceed 100 percent of those counted. Local administrators who want to investigate this proposed procedure can refer to the document by the U.S. Office of Management and the Budget entitled *Draft Provisional Guidance on the Implementation of the 1997 Standards for Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*, which was prepared by a Tabulation Working Group Interagency Committee for the Review of Standards for Data on Race and Ethnicity.

Another major activity that potentially holds tremendous interest for local governments is the development of the Master Address File. This file will be used as a distribution list for census questionnaires for residential units with city-style addresses. Thus, an accurate list will help foster a more accurate and complete count. As mentioned earlier, many local governments have been involved in updating this address file, which originated with a U.S. Postal Service address list. Because local governments' input into this list occurred more than one year before the census, a method needed to be developed by which the Census Bureau could further update the list.

The bureau has provided another opportunity in the process for local governments to submit lists of housing units that have been constructed before April 1, 2000. While this list will not be used actually to mail out questionnaires,

it will be used in the bureau's follow-up field activities and thus will help ensure a more complete count.

A third major issue, the subject of the most controversy, relates to the Census Bureau's proposal to arrive at housing and population counts through a statistical adjustment based on a sampling of a portion of the population. This proposal has been divisive within the U.S. Congress, becoming a hotly contested partisan political issue. Many Republican representatives believe that this procedure would allow opportunities for the Census Bureau, working for a Democratic administration, to manipulate population figures so as to help establish more Democratic-controlled congressional districts.

The proposal was subjected to two lawsuits and ultimately became the basis of a Supreme Court case. In a split 5-to-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that statistical sampling was not allowed, based on the census law previously passed by Congress for purposes of congressional apportionment. While ruling out this method for determining the number of congressional seats for each state, the court decision left the door open and even implied that statistical sampling must be used to develop the most accurate number possible for actual congressional redistricting, the distribution of federal assistance, and other purposes.

Based on this decision, the Census Bureau has issued an operational plan that relies upon a statistical adjustment for developing a second set of numbers to be used for purposes that could include redistricting and grant funds distribution. This new procedure is called the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (ACE). ACE will encompass a sampling of 300,000 households and a statistical adjustment to the raw counts based on this sampling.

At this time, the issue has not been fully resolved. There are some who would like to change the law to allow for statistical adjustments to be used for apportionment, as well as for

It has been estimated that each household counted could mean at least \$10,000 in aid to local governments from federal and state governments.

other purposes, while others believe that no statistical adjustment should be used for any purpose. This issue still could be hotly contested within Congress and even in the courts. Certain state legislatures already have weighed in on the matter, some restricting the use of the adjusted count for redistricting or grant distribution purposes and others requiring this adjusted count to be used for all purposes other than reapportionment.


Post-Census Local Review

Another major issue is post-census local review. The 1990 Census allowed for local governments to review the preliminary housing counts before they were finalized. In this process, local governments were given 15 days to provide recommended adjustments in housing counts. This allowance did result in the addition of housing units and thus population in many areas of the country, although the actual amount of adjustment was a relatively small percentage of the overall population.

The bureau's operational plan does not allow for a post-census review by local governments for the 2000 Census, arguing that this is an unnecessary and inefficient process for achieving a more

accurate count. The bureau believes that the upfront input of local governments in developing an accurate Master Address File and in further updating this file through the new-construction program will alleviate the need for the post-census local review. In addition, the bureau feels that the cost of this activity does not justify what was a relatively small adjustment to the population as a percentage of the total count. While this procedure still may have validity, and though many local governments have expressed an interest in retaining the provision, it apparently will not be part of the Census 2000 procedures.

In addition to the major changes in how the census will be conducted in 2000, the output also will be substantially different. Approximately 90 percent of the information will be accessible via the Internet, which will greatly change the dissemination and use of census data.

The time for the 2000 Census is rapidly approaching. While much of the planning work has been done, much work remains to be completed. There still is a substantial opportunity for local governments to assist in the development of as accurate a count as possible. This activity is vitally important to local jurisdictions and deserves the attention of managers and staffs throughout the country. 

James Bourney is executive secretary of the Maricopa Association of Governments, Phoenix, Arizona.