

# Population sampling issue still bedevils

How do you count, with accuracy, 275 million mobile people? That is the task of the U.S. Census Bureau in the year 2000. Unfortunately, the courts rather than the professionals have made this decision.

On January 25, 1999, in the case of Department of Commerce v. United States House of Representatives, No. 98-404, the nation's highest court ruled that statistical sampling of the population for the next census in the year 2000 cannot be used to apportion seats to the House of Representatives.

In a 5 to 4 decision that reflected the five member conservative majority and four member liberal judges of the U. S. Supreme Court, the Court used the constitutional mandate of "actual enumeration," i.e., a head count, as the basis for its decision.

The Clinton administration and the U. S. Census Bureau, with backing by such professional organizations as the American Statistical Association, the National Academy of Sciences and the Population Association of America, claimed that a statistical sample would be a more accurate and less expensive means of gathering the numbers for apportionment purposes.

As a recognition of this point, the Court

left open the option that sampling could be used for other purposes, including redistricting and determining the basis for federal grants to local and state governments. But the question still to be resolved is whether states and local governments should use actual or sample numbers, a predicted battle still to take place in Congress and in the courts.

As the first country that constitutionally mandates a decennial census of the population in order to determine how many and from where members of the House of Representatives shall come, this 22nd census may be the most politically contentious one ever to be conducted.

To better determine how sampling would work, the Census Bureau did three field surveys last year: one in Columbia, South Carolina to check rural counties; one on the Menominee Indian Reservation in Wisconsin to examine undercounted minorities in a rural setting; and one in California's capital city of Sacramento, an ethnically diverse city with a self-contained media market.

In Columbia no statistical sampling was used; on the Menominee Indian Reservation, where limited sampling was used, the two figures obtained were close; but in the city of Sacramento where full-blown sampling was used, the results were striking.

Using the traditional counting method, the Census recorded 349,197 people but with statistical sampling, the figure was 403,313, a difference of 54,116 or 15 percent. This means that one person was added for every seven persons counted under the traditional method.

Was the statistical sample of Sacramento accurate? A state population estimate done during the same time period, using its own projections and secondary

records, such as utility hookups and drivers' licenses, arrived at a figure of 392,834. The state figure was 10,479, or 19 percent, below the statistically derived population of 403,313 while the state figure was 43,637, or 81 percent, above the head count figure of 349,197. It would appear that the statistically derived population count for Sacramento is more accurate than the "actual enumeration."

California officials estimate that their population of 29.8 million was undercounted by as many as 800,000, largely made up transients, minorities, and non-English speaking persons. Officials also estimate that each person undercounted represents a loss of \$100 per year of federal money, or something approaching \$80 million for the state. And if that 800,000 were added to the state's population, California

would have added another representative to their total of 52 which now sit in the 435 member House of Representatives.

This process is still to be played out. Will the Administration be given the money by the Republican-controlled Congress to do a statistical sample of the population that it would like to do, in addition to the Court-ruled head count? Which set of numbers will the states use, since the national head count is mandated only for the national offices? Will the states do their own sampling in order to redistrict for state and local elections? Will these state and local cases end up in court?

The new millennium promises to start off with a considerable bang.

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## AMERICA AT WORK



*"When he says 'run it past legal'...  
he means go past the office without stopping."*

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