

# Census: To recount or not to recount?

**W**hether to adjust or not to adjust, that is the critical question facing the US Census Bureau in the next six weeks, when it decides if it is necessary to make some type of accommodation in the figures from the April 1, 1990, census count.

Deemed "not the best census ever" by the New York Times, the count, as detailed by an embarrassed Census Bureau, missed between four and six million of the country's residents, an undercount even greater than that of 1980. Sadly, more than one half of the undercount included blacks or Hispanics, a population that needs to be enumerated in order to receive full benefits appropriate to their numbers.

This undercount figure was released by the Census Bureau, based upon a post-enumeration survey (PES) and demographic analysis (DA) to determine the accuracy of its original count. Because the state of New York anticipated an undercount, it took the bureau to court in 1988. The pre-trial settlement decreed that the bureau would publish guidelines to the adjustment process and select an advisory committee, and each of the eight members would submit an individual recommendation regarding adjustment.

By July 15, Secretary of Commerce Robert Mosbacher must decide whether this undercount can be rectified, and if so, how will it be done. In addition to considering the recommendations of the two sources of data and, most importantly, the accuracy of these two sources.

The first source of data is the already mentioned post-enumeration survey. This PES is a sample survey taken after the census to determine the accuracy of the original count. In the months following the April 1 count, the Census Bureau took a sample of 5290 clusters of census blocks (a city block is also a census block) and interviewed people at 165,000 housing units. The original forms filled out by those interviewed were then matched to determine if these people had been counted in the original census. To determine the accuracy of the PES, the bureau conducted 19 evaluation studies that address various sources of potential error in this count.

The second source of data to check is the demographic analysis. Births, deaths, emigration and immigration data are used as a check on population totals.

The preliminary results of these two processes, because they are subject to further analysis and modification, were released as a range of numbers. At the national level, for example, while the April 1 residential count was 248,709,873, the population based on the PES and DA analyses gave a low estimate of 253 million to a high of 255 million.

In the case of Rhode Island, whose population on April 1 came to 1,003,464, the low estimate came in at 995,000 and the high estimate count was 1,023,000.

Does this mean that there will be an adjustment, based upon these two methods? Consider what happened after the 1980 census. In a March 19, 1991, joint testimony before a Senate and House subcommittee, Michael R. Darby, undersecretary for economic affairs and administrator for the Economics and Statistics Administration, and Barbara Everitt Bryant, direc-

tor of the Bureau of the Census, testified, "From the 1980 census, high rates of missing data in the post-enumeration program (PEP) contributed to uncertainty in coverage estimates. This uncertainty was one of the reasons for the Census Bureau's recommendation that the 1980 coverage estimates were not sufficiently accurate to adjust the census."

In the same testimony, Darby and Bryant alluded to some of the sophisticated statistical methods that might be used to ensure accuracy of the sample PES, as well as pointing out the problem of missing data from the past in doing the DA. In either case, statisticians will have a field day in trying to determine the accuracy of samples, analyses and conclusions drawn.

But no matter whether there is an adjustment or not, the Census Bureau will have its days in court. Right now there are six court cases against the Census Bureau that deal with the issue of undercount and overcount, four of which want an adjustment in the count—the state of Washington does not want an adjustment. Another case was dismissed but is now on appeal, and there are three cases that deal with procedures residency requirements and voting lists. Attorneys have already started to reap the rewards of the census count even before the many redistricting maps

have started to appear and to be challenged.

In further attempting to garner numbers that might prove useful, the Census Bureau also conducted, for the first time, a count of the homeless population on March 20-21, 1990. Going into shelters and counting people on the street was an effort to include people who might not have been counted using standard procedures. It backfired.

Advocates for the homeless had been using figures of one half to two million homeless when they talked about these disadvantaged people. The 228,621 count for the nation, 178,828 in shelters and 49,793 visible in street locations (figures for Rhode Island were 469 and 44) was far below estimates, and raised a maelstrom of protest from homeless-advocates who felt that such figures were grossly inaccurate and would defuse their efforts to obtain help for these people.

The Census Bureau went to great lengths to explain that their position was not to count all the homeless, given that no definition of the condition existed, but just to count people who were not normally counted. But they did not endear themselves to the advocates.

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