

# U.S. census nears; results to be questioned

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It is the largest peacetime activity of the United States government, and since its inception in 1790 takes place every 10 years. It will employ, at its peak, 860,000 workers who will receive a major portion of the \$4.5 billion that Congress recently appropriated for the task. And the total population will be recorded for one day, a far cry from the 18 months that were necessary for U.S. Marshals who tried to find everyone in 1790.

The nation's 22<sup>nd</sup> census of the population, just six months away, will take place on Saturday, April 1, 2000, at which time the numbers of people in the country should reach 275 million, an increase of approximately 10 percent over the 249 million recorded in 1990. For Rhode Island, which just reached the 1 million mark in 1990, the numbers are projected to be lower, and we will be just one of two states likely to have a population loss over the 10 year period.

But a larger question, at the national, state and local levels, is not only population gain or loss, but rather which figures will be the "official" count in these respective areas. These numbers are important because each person not counted represents a loss to local communities of approximately \$100 in federal and state population-based funding.

The United States Supreme Court, in a landmark decision early this year, ruled that sampling of the population could not be used to reapportion the number of Representatives that would come from the states to Congress, a method endorsed by the Census Bureau and several professional organizations, but rather that an actual head-count of every individual has to be taken. But the Court did not rule out sampling by the Bureau in order to obtain a comprehensive count of the country's population for use in allocating other governmental social and economic resources. Therein lies the prob-

lem.

To conduct the census, next March the Bureau will mail out nearly 120 million questionnaires to all addresses, and it is expected that only 55 percent of the completed forms will be returned (a rate of return less than 1990). Then begins the most expensive part of the census, finding those who did not respond. This will be the job of 860,000 enumerators who will go to the addresses that did not respond to the question-

## Commentary

CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

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The Non-Response Follow Up will be combined with an intensive post-enumeration sample survey of 300,000 households, called the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation, where names will be matched with the original national census, populations estimated and corrections made, all in the name of reducing errors from the original counts. This will give an adjusted second set of counts, one likely larger than the initial raw count. Further, many low income and minority persons who were missed in the first count will likely be the beneficiaries of this adjusted count.

An example of this from the 1990 census is the Robert Taylor Homes in downtown Chicago, the largest single public housing project in the nation. The actual census count was 8,787, yet the administering housing agency, the Chicago Housing Authority, estimated the population at more than 12,000, an undercount of more than 36 percent.

The numbers from the initial raw count of the nation's population and from which the number of Representatives from each of the states will be determined, must be released by December 31, 2000. Numbers for smaller geographic areas, such as cities and towns, gained by sampling and which will be used for local redistricting, will be released by April 1, 2001, by law, one

year after the census. And what an April Fool's joke that will be! Why? Because the sum of the parts will likely be larger than the initial total.

Christopher Williamson, geographer and planner, writing on this problem in the August 1999 issue of *Planning*, claims that the lawsuits will be filed on April 2, 2001, the day after reapportionment counts are released. Civil rights groups will argue for the post-enumeration adjusted higher numbers which attempt to find non-reported persons, while other groups will insist that the initial number counts be used.

To confuse the matter even further, other authorities may try to introduce numbers that fall between the two counts. In the end, Williams claims that "it may be up to the Supreme Court to decide which census data are 'official.'"

Finding answers to these seemingly simple questions will have to be addressed by local councils, state legislatures, the courts and perhaps the Supreme Court again. The decision on January 25, 1999 by the land's highest court, as ordinary as it may have seemed at the time, will likely open up a Pandora's Box.

Saturday April 1, 2000 will be the date it all begins.

*Chester E. Smolksi is professor emeritus of geography and urban studies at Rhode Island College.* ■

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