

Census numbers may mean money to cities

It looks like we are nearly there. The results of America's most costly census have been announced and many cities and states are not happy with them. A possible adjustment of figures will likely do little to placate them.

The announced total population of 249,632,692 is a 10.2 percent increase over that of 1980, and excepting the 1930s Depression, the smallest percentage increase in the nation's history of census taking, dating back to 1790. Yet, adding more than 23 million people in a decade is still impressive.

Part of this increase is attributable to a congressional ruling that the count should include Americans overseas. That has been done only twice in our history of census taking. These 922,819 people were added to the 248,709,873-resident population to arrive at the final figure.

As inconsequential as this number of overseas personnel might appear, it made enough of a difference in Massachusetts for the state to lose a congressional district, and for the state of Washington to gain a ninth congressional seat. Both of these changes resulted from the difference of fewer than 9000 people between the two states in their total overseas numbers.

Rhode Island's population total of 1,005,984 finally puts us in the class of states having more than one million, yet we are the smallest of the 43 in that grouping. This figure is used in determining the number of representatives for each district at the federal level, and includes the 2520 overseas personnel who claim the state as their home base. However, the resident population of 1,003,464 will be the figure used to determine state and local district representatives and is the official population of the state.

All of these numbers are subject to "possible correction for undercount or overcount," in the words of the Census Bureau, a decision that it will make by July 15 of this year.

It hasn't been an easy road for the Census Bureau. The release of preliminary figures last August gave a residential count of 245.9 million. The bureau's claim that higher numbers would likely occur in the final count did little to allay fears of the 39,000 local governmental jurisdictions, one-seventh of whom challenged these early counts.

Then in October of 1990, the bureau estimated the nation's resident population at 253.7 million, and critics are now charging that there is a possible undercount of up to five million. The bulk of this undercount is in the cities, especially among minority and inner-city residents.

The bureau has estimated undercounts in the past, but has not made any adjustments for them. In 1940, it estimated undercounting nearly 8 million, in 1960 the undercount was 6.2 million, in 1970 it was 6.1 million and in 1980 the bureau estimated an undercount of 3.2 million. That's a continuing improvement over time, but not good enough for economically depressed cities which view these numbers as lost revenue.

Several large cities have filed or intend to file court cases against the Bureau, challenging the 1990 numbers. In Boston, for example, state Rep. James T. Brett, chair of the legislative committee on redistricting, claims that the bureau missed at least 25,000 people. The financial loss to Boston from federal sources amounts to \$1500 for each person missed, and the city could also lose one representative in the state House of Representatives as a result of the undercount.

More than \$45 billion of federal money goes to cities and local governments, based upon population figures. The bureau has admitted that undercounts are most common in cities.

Because of the charges made against them, the Census Bureau will decide whether to use statistical methods to make adjustments, something it has never done before. The bureau, using data from a recount of 150,000 people to corroborate the initial count which it is still analyzing, will make its decision by July 15.

Here politics come into play. Some onlookers claim that a statistical adjustment helps increase

numbers of city residents who, traditionally, have been in the Democratic fold, while retaining the status quo works well for Republicans and the suburbs. The present Republican administration would therefore benefit if no further counts were made.

The real political battles will take place at the state and local levels when final counts are verified. There will be 21 states that must make adjustments in their congressional district boundaries, with eight states gaining and 13 states losing at least one member of the House of Representatives. These population shifts will mean a change of 19 House seats among these states and in makeup of the 435 members of the House.

Rhode Island, with its 5.9 percent population

gain, will keep its two congressional seats. Slight adjustments in boundary lines defining these districts will likely cause few problems, as was the case after the 1980 census. It will be at the local level where the sparks will fly.

Given our past 10-year record from the 1980 census when four court challenges took place—two state and two local—the process of redistricting bears close watching. Given the confusion of which numbers to use, with possible undercounts in the cities, there will likely be court challenges to both the numbers and the way district lines for state and local offices are drawn.

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