

# US citizens will stand up and get counted in 1990

By Chester Smolski

The US Bureau of the Census, "Factfinder for the Nation," is starting to swing into high gear as Census Day, April 1, 1990, rapidly approaches. Ensuring that 106 million households receive their questionnaires before that date and then processing the numbers that will likely total 250 million people is one Herculean task.

The getting-ready process has actually been going on since 1984. By the time the data-gathering and collection period is over, some 470,000 workers will have been hired, 484 temporary field offices established, and 530 mini- and microcomputers put on line, as well as a host of other electronic devices—all at a cost of \$10.40 per resident, or a total of \$2.6 billion. Some congressional leaders are actually projecting a total cost of more than \$3 billion, or three times the cost of the 1980 census.

Census data will be used to apportion seats in the House of Representatives and to determine the annual distribution of some \$38 billion provided by the federal government to state and local governments. This distribution based on population is a sizable portion of the \$115 billion that was granted to state and local governments in fiscal 1988, of which Rhode Island received \$644 million.

The first census in this nation was taken in 1790 and took 18 months to complete. The purpose of the census, then and now, was to determine the number of representatives in the House from each state, but a second purpose of the first census was to determine the respective amount each state was to pay as its share for the war of independence.

The first census recorded 3.9 million US residents, 5 percent of whom were classed as urban dwellers. Rhode Island had a total of 69,000 residents, of whom 19 percent were urban dwellers. This greater percentage of urban population has continued up to the present: Rhode Island had an urban majority by 1850 while the United States did not reach an urban majority until 1920. In the 1980 census, Rhode Island was 92 percent urban while the nation recorded a 73 percent urban population.

Rapid population growth has characterized much of this nation's history, although it has slowed down over time. From 1790 until 1860, just before the Civil War, the rate of increase ranged from 33 percent to 36 percent every 10 years; from the Civil War era to 1910 (before World War I), the rate of growth ranged from 21 percent to 27 percent for each census; and from 1920 through 1960, the rate of growth has ranged from 19 percent to its most recent figure of 11 percent. The Depression era of the 1930s, an abnormal growth period when, in some years, more people left the country than came to it, the 10-year growth amounted to only 7 percent.

Not only is our rate of growth slowing down, but we are also getting older. The median age was first recorded in 1820, at which time it stood at 16.7 years. It slowly increased over time to 30.2 by 1950, dropped to 28.1 in 1970 because of the baby boom era and rose again to 30 by 1980. The current median age in the nation is 32.1 and it is expected to top 35 by the beginning of the next century.

The first census counted only the population, but since that time the Census Bureau has started to count nine other things that tell us about ourselves. The Census of Manufacturing and Agriculture in 1840; Governments in 1850; Business (Retail, Wholesale, Services) in 1930; Housing and Foreign Trade in 1940; and Transportation in 1963. It should be noted that many of these censuses are taken more frequently than every 10 years.

The 1990 Census of Population and Housing will consist of a short form that all households will answer. The long or sample form will consist of an additional 26 population

and 19 housing questions to be given to a sample 17 percent of households.

Compared with the 1980 form, some questions are new, some revised and some deleted. Stepchildren, for example, will be counted this time to estimate families formed by divorce and remarriage. Better data will be provided for the elderly and the handicapped, and questions on second mortgages and condominium fees will also be asked. Important to the political process as well as to singling out business opportunities of all types, data will be provided for the whole country down to city blocks, all 10 million of them.

The problem of homelessness is being specifically addressed by the Census Bureau in 1990, when, in a special nighttime enumeration on March 20, an attempt will be made to count all of those who are in temporary shelters or in the streets.

The Census Bureau makes estimates of the population during the periods between censuses, and it will be interesting to ascertain how accurate these estimates are. For example, it is estimated that the July 1, 1988, population was 245.8 million, an increase of 19.2 million—the result of migration and an increased number of births vs. deaths—over the 1980 population of 226.5 million.

Based on the previous trends in the state during the 1980s, Rhode Island should just top the 1 million mark in 1990. That makes it a landmark year, but Rhode Island will not likely change its ranking as the 43rd largest state in the nation, based on population.

The most important findings from the census will be the required reporting of state totals to the president of the United States by Jan. 1, 1991. The president, in turn, notifies Congress, which, in turn, notifies the governor of each state as to how many representatives the state will be allowed to send to the House.

This is what will cause many politicians to shake in their boots.

The state of New York, for example, will likely lose three seats, and this comes on the heels of a loss of five representatives after the 1980 census. California, on the other hand, will gain six seats, giving it a total of 51 of the 435 seats comprising the House.

These political changes of representation will extend to state and local jurisdictions also because the "one person, one vote" principle established in our Constitution and its amendments ensure that every person's vote has the same weight.

The schools have already received their census education kits, which teachers will use to explain the process of population enumeration to children. The general public will be reading about the process over the next year, and all of us will be extolling, criticizing and marveling at the numbers and conclusions generated once the figures have been compiled and interpreted.

The counting of Americans is an exciting and necessary part of the democratic process to which all of us should give our whole-hearted cooperation and support.

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