

A KIDS COUNT/PRB Report on

# CENSUS 2000

## The Road to Census 2000: A Chronology of Key Issues

*By Terri Ann Lowenthal*



The Annie E. Casey Foundation and  
The Population Reference Bureau  
April 2001



## **KIDS COUNT**

KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for all children. At the national level, the principal activity of the initiative is the publication of the annual KIDS COUNT Data Book, which uses the best available data to measure the educational, social, economic, and physical well-being of children. The Foundation also funds a nationwide network of state-level KIDS COUNT projects that provide a more detailed community-by-community picture of the condition of children.

## **The Population Reference Bureau (PRB)**

Founded in 1929, the Population Reference Bureau is the leader in providing timely, objective information on U.S. and international population trends and their implications. PRB informs policymakers, educators, the media, and concerned citizens working in the public interest around the world through a broad range of activities, including publications, information services, seminars and workshops, and technical support. PRB is a nonprofit, nonadvocacy organization. Our efforts are supported by government contracts, foundation grants, individual and corporate contributions, and the sale of publications.

## **KIDS COUNT/PRB Reports on Census 2000**

This paper is part of a series of reports on the 2000 Census prepared for the nationwide network of KIDS COUNT projects. These reports have been guided by the recommendations of an expert advisory group of data users and child advocates, brought together in a series of meetings by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau. Members of the advisory group have provided valuable assistance about how to interpret and use data from the 2000 census.

A list of the advisory group members can be found at the back of this report.

For more information or for a pdf version of this report, visit the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT Web site at [www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org) or PRB's Ameristat Web site at [www.ameristat.org](http://www.ameristat.org).

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## BACKGROUND

The ink was barely dry on the results of the 1990 census when the U.S. Congress, external watchdog groups, various stakeholders, and the Census Bureau itself agreed that the census process was in need of fundamental reform. The 1990 census was the first to be measurably less accurate than the one before it, despite costing twice as much as the 1980 count. The 1990 census design was essentially unchanged from 1970, the first to rely primarily on mailed questionnaires. Voluntary response continued a downward trend, as the household mail-back rate dipped to 65 percent. The Census Bureau scrambled for more census takers and money to track down the higher-than-expected number of unresponsive households, a task that took twice as long as planned.

A post-census survey conducted in the summer of 1990 showed a net national undercount of 1.6 percent, or about 4 million people. A detailed analysis revealed that the census missed about 8.4 million people and double counted or erroneously included another 4.4 million. More troubling, the census missed a higher proportion of blacks, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics than non-Hispanic whites. In 1990, this difference in coverage, called the 'differential undercount,' was the highest ever recorded. In addition, children were twice as likely to be missed as the population overall. Census director Barbara Everitt Bryant recommended a statistical adjustment of the 1990 numbers, based on the survey's findings, but Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher overruled her, a decision challenged unsuccessfully in court by New York City and more than 30 localities and states.

Congress was concerned about other aspects of the census, as well. Some legislators concluded that the 57-question long form, sent to one in six households nationwide, contributed to the lower response in 1990. Others suggested that the Census Bureau could collect and publish important demographic and socio-economic data throughout the decade, thereby increasing the data's timeliness while refocusing the census on the population count mandated by the U.S. Constitution.

The 1990 census also launched an emotional and politically sensitive debate over racial and ethnic identification. A growing number of parents in interracial marriages objected when they were instructed to check off only one race for their multiracial children. Other people, such as Arab Americans, believed the limited number of racial categories did not properly reflect their heritage. Congressional hearings in 1993 led the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to conduct its first in-depth review of the categories since their adoption in 1978.

The Census Bureau and Congress each turned to the National Academy of Sciences for advice on reducing the cost and improving the accuracy of the count, as well as how best to meet the nation's data needs. Two expert panels convened by the Academy issued exhaustive reports in 1994. They concluded, among other findings, that the Census Bureau could not reduce the persistent, disproportionate undercount of racial minorities and the poor, or reduce costs, using traditional census methods alone. Both panels recommended incorporating scientific sampling procedures into the census design. The U.S. General Accounting Office (a legislative branch watchdog agency) and the Commerce Department's Inspector General agreed with the panels' assessments, but warned that the Bureau must move quickly to finalize a Census 2000 plan and

solidify support in Congress and among its many stakeholders, leaving adequate time to test and refine operations.

The chronology that follows, covering activities from February 1996 through March 2001, charts the progress of significant activities and controversies involving Congress, the Executive Branch, and the courts that affected the design, operations, cost, content, and results of Census 2000.

## **1996: A REDESIGNED CENSUS PLAN UNVEILED**

### ***Census 2000 Methods and Operations***

- In February, the Census Bureau unveils the Census 2000 plan, built around four strategies: a broad partnership program with state, local, and Tribal governments, and greater reliance on private sector expertise in key areas such as advertising; simpler census forms and more ways to respond; effective use of new technologies; and statistical methods to reduce costs and improve accuracy.
- The Census 2000 plan includes two major uses of sampling: to complete the count of households that don't mail back a form (called 'sampling for nonresponse follow-up'), and to make the initial count more accurate based on a large quality-check survey (called 'Integrated Coverage Measurement').
- In September, the congressional oversight committee adopts a report criticizing the proposed use of sampling and statistical methods. A largely party-line vote, with most committee Republicans opposing sampling and most Democrats supporting it, signals the start of partisan wrangling over the issue.
- The Census Bureau modifies its plan to sample the last 10 percent of unresponsive households, to ensure that minority households are not over-represented in the sample.

### ***Cost and Funding***

- Price tag on first Census 2000 plan: approximately \$4.0 billion.
- Congress allocates \$84 million of the \$105 million requested for census planning in fiscal year 1997, indicating continued congressional concern about census costs.

### ***Data on Race and Ethnicity***

- OMB continues to review federal categories on race and ethnicity, as the Census Bureau conducts field tests on alternative approaches to collecting data on race and ethnicity in Census 2000. The tests, which include variations of a "multiracial" option in the race question, show that about 2 percent of respondents identify with more than one race, although the numbers are higher for some racial groups than others.

## **1997: SAMPLING BATTLE TAKES CENTER STAGE**

### ***Census 2000 Methods and Operations***

- Sampling opponents in Congress try to attach a rider barring any use of sampling in the census to a disaster relief bill providing funds for Mid- and Northwest flood victims. President Clinton vetoes the bill, and congressional leaders drop the sampling ban.
- The sampling dispute holds up passage of the Census Bureau's 1998 spending bill, as the Clinton Administration and congressional Republican leaders negotiate a delicate compromise. The agreement provides for:
  - Two-track planning: one plan to include the proposed uses of sampling, and the other to rely only on direct counting methods.
  - Expedited judicial review of legal challenges to sampling in the census.
  - An eight-member Census Monitoring Board, with four members appointed by congressional Republican leaders and four by President Clinton. The Board will oversee census activities and issue recommendations, but will have no direct authority over census operations.
- Address list development for Census 2000 begins, with help from local governments and the U.S. Postal Service.

### ***Cost and Funding***

- Congress allocates \$392 million for fiscal year 1998 census preparations, \$40 million more than the Census Bureau requested. The additional funds are earmarked for planning an alternative census without sampling.

### ***Data on Race and Ethnicity***

- October: OMB issues revised "standards" for collecting and reporting data on race and ethnicity. The new policy retains "Hispanic" or "Latino" as an ethnicity (not a race), and includes five racial categories:
  - Black or African American
  - American Indian and Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
  - White
- Respondents to the census and other federal surveys may select more than one race for the first time, but OMB rejects pleas to add a new "Multiracial" category.

## *Content*

- April 1st: The Census Bureau transmits to Congress proposed subject matters for the census short and long forms. All proposed topics have a federal legislative basis.
- The proposed short form would cover six population topics and one housing topic, the fewest since 1820. Five 1990 short form topics, including marital status, shift to the long form.
- The proposed long form, sent to one in six households (17 percent) nationwide, would cover 27 additional topics for a total of 34, four fewer than in 1990. One new subject, concerning grandparents as caregivers, was added to meet the requirements of 1996 welfare reform law. Five 1990 topics, including ‘children ever born,’ are dropped.
- Some influential congressional overseers and appropriators criticize the length of the long form and suggest dropping it from the decennial census, but take no legislative action.

## **1998: PREPARATIONS BEGIN WHILE PLAN HEADS TO COURT**

### ***Census 2000 Methods and Operations***

- The U.S. House of Representatives recreates the Subcommittee on the Census to oversee the Bureau's activities.
- The Census 2000 Dress Rehearsal is carried out in three sites: Sacramento, CA; Columbia, SC and 11 surrounding counties; and the Menominee (WI) Indian reservation. In line with the congressional directive for "two-track" planning, the dress rehearsal in Sacramento and Menominee includes sampling, while the South Carolina dress rehearsal uses only "traditional" counting methods.
- Sampling opponents file two lawsuits challenging the use of sampling in Census 2000. One is led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (*U.S. House of Representatives v. U.S. Department of Commerce*); the other by the Southeastern Legal Foundation (*Glavin v. Clinton*). Plaintiffs contend statistical sampling violates the Census Act and the U.S. Constitution.
- Twenty cities, counties, and states, led by the City of Los Angeles and joined by 20 members of Congress, intervene in the House-filed case to support the Census 2000 plan.
- Two lower federal courts rule against sampling, concluding that the Census Act prohibits using statistical methods to count the population for purposes of congressional apportionment. The Commerce Department appeals the decisions directly to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- The Supreme Court joins the two cases and hears oral arguments in November.

### ***Cost and Funding***

- The Census Bureau requests \$848 million for final Census 2000 preparations in fiscal year 1999, more than double the previous year's funding level. Congress allocates \$1.03 billion to cover "two-track" planning, but only allows the Bureau to spend money through the following spring, setting up another confrontation over census methods and preparations.

### ***Content***

- March: The Census Bureau submits proposed short and long form questions to Congress.
- The short form has seven questions (compared to 13 in 1990); the long form has 52 total questions (compared to 57 in 1990).

## **1999: SUPREME COURT RULING LEADS TO NEW CENSUS PLAN AND HIGHER COST**

### *Census 2000 Methods and Operations*

- January: The U.S. Supreme Court rules 5-4 that a 1976 amendment to the Census Act prohibits the use of statistical sampling to compile the state population totals used for congressional apportionment.
- Sampling opponents contend the Supreme Court ruling also bars use of statistically adjusted numbers for redistricting, while supporters say that the decision allows adjusted numbers to be used for non-apportionment purposes such as redistricting and allocating federal funds.
- The Census Bureau issues a revised Census 2000 plan in February. Key elements include:
  - Direct count of all housing units, using mailed questionnaires and follow-up visits, to produce state population totals for apportionment of seats in the U.S. Congress without statistical sampling methods.
  - Verification by census takers of all addresses in the Master Address File.
  - New quality check efforts (called “coverage improvement programs”), such as revisiting vacant housing units, to improve the accuracy of the direct count.
  - Quality-check survey of 314,000 households in representative neighborhoods across the country, to measure the accuracy of the direct count approach and provide a basis for correcting undercounts and overcounts.
- The House census subcommittee chairman, a sampling opponent, proposes significant changes to the census plan in light of the Supreme Court ruling. The Census Bureau says some of the proposals, including local challenges to preliminary counts and questionnaires in 33 languages, would hinder counting operations. Other ideas, such as making it easier for federal aid recipients to take census jobs, were already in the works. None of the legislative proposals are enacted.
- Arizona becomes the first state to enact a law prohibiting the use of statistically adjusted census numbers to draw political boundaries. Colorado, Kansas, and Alaska follow suit, but Voting Rights Act “pre-clearance” requirements prevent laws from taking effect in Arizona and Alaska until the U.S. Justice Department approves.
- November: The motivational phase of the Census 2000 advertising campaign starts, aimed at historically hard-to-count population groups.

### ***Cost and Funding***

- The Census Bureau asks for, and eventually receives, an additional \$1.7 billion to implement the revised plan.
- Congress allocates a total of \$4.5 billion to conduct the census in 2000 after designating the money as “emergency spending” to get around budget caps set earlier in the year.
- The estimated ten-year cost of Census 2000 rises to about \$6.5 billion.

### ***Data on Race and Ethnicity***

- OMB issues extensive guidance on collecting and tabulating data on race and ethnicity under its new standards, and comparing data collected under the old and new policies.
- OMB’s guidance offers several approaches for tabulating multiple race responses. Federal agencies, not the Census Bureau, must decide which tabulation method(s) meets their legislative and programmatic needs.
- The Census Bureau announces that it will provide data for 63 race categories in the detailed population numbers it sends to the states (in March 2001) for redistricting purposes. The 63 categories represent all possible single and multiple responses to the Census 2000 race question (there are five distinct races, plus “Some other race”); each category is further broken down by Hispanic/Latino origin.

## **2000: LET THE COUNT BEGIN**

### ***Census 2000 Methods and Operations***

- Census 2000 officially kicks off in January with door-to-door canvassing of native Alaskan villages. A national advertising campaign to encourage census participation is launched during the Super Bowl.
- Most forms are mailed or hand-delivered to 120 million addresses nationwide in March. Non-English speakers can request forms in five other languages: Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. People who didn't receive or misplaced their questionnaire can use a 'Be Counted' form available at public locations.
- Sixty-seven percent of households mail back their census forms, exceeding the projected 61 percent response rate and reversing a three-decade decline in voluntary participation.
- Follow-up visits to unresponsive households end in late June ahead of schedule, reflecting the success of recruitment and hiring efforts and the paid advertising campaign, as well as the lower-than-projected workload.
- The Census Bureau conducts the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (A.C.E.) survey, which will be used to test the accuracy of the census results. The A.C.E. survey is conducted in pre-selected neighborhoods after follow-up visits to unresponsive households are completed.
- The congressional census oversight chairman criticizes the Census Bureau for a "rushed census" and requests investigation of the count in 15 urban areas. Internal and watchdog agency reviews conclude that these concerns are unsubstantiated.
- The state of Virginia enacts a law barring the use of statistically corrected census numbers for redistricting, and then sues to circumvent U.S. Justice Department approval of the law under the Voting Rights Act. A federal court dismisses the lawsuit after agreeing that the Justice Department cannot assess the effect of the new law on the voting rights of minorities until detailed census numbers are released in 2001.
- The Census Bureau releases the first numbers from Census 2000 on December 28—national (281,421,906) and state population totals. State numbers and the resulting reapportionment of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are transmitted to the President.

### ***Cost and Funding***

- The Census Bureau returns \$300 million of its \$4.5 billion appropriation to the Treasury, saying better mail response and efficient fieldwork helped achieve savings.

- Congress allocates \$391 million, the amount requested, to complete census operations and begin disseminating census data in fiscal year 2001.

### *Data on Race and Ethnicity*

- OMB issues rules for tabulating and reporting multiple race responses when the data will be used to administer or enforce civil rights laws.
  - Data reported to federal agencies for civil rights purposes will include five single race categories, four frequently selected double-race combinations, and a residual category for all other responses.
  - Data used to enforce and monitor civil rights laws may be tabulated according to allocation rules. Multiple race responses of white and a minority race are allocated to the minority race, while combinations including two or more minority races are allocated to the race that is cited as the basis of discrimination.

### *Content*

- A number of talk show hosts and several high-ranking members of Congress criticize questions on the census long form as an invasion of privacy, just as census forms are mailed to households in mid-March. The U.S. Senate approves a non-binding resolution suggesting that people need not answer questions they consider too intrusive.
- The mail-back rate for the long form is 12 percent lower than for the short form, but census takers close most of the gap in follow-up visits to collect the information.

## **2001: UNADJUSTED DATA RELEASED FOR REDISTRICTING**

### ***Census 2000 Methods and Operations***

- Results from the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (A.C.E.) survey show a national net undercount in Census 2000 of 1.2 percent, below the 1.6 percent net undercount measured by the Post Enumeration Survey in 1990. While the A.C.E. survey also indicates improved coverage of many racial and ethnic groups over 1990, the disproportionate undercount of people of color (called the “differential undercount”) was not eliminated.
- The Census Bureau’s Executive Steering Committee for A.C.E. Policy (ESCAP) recommends the release of unadjusted census numbers to the states for redistricting purposes. The panel cites a lack of time to complete analysis of disparities between A.C.E. results, Census 2000 numbers, and the Bureau’s independent demographic estimate of the population. The ESCAP confirms the existence of net and differential undercounts in Census 2000.
- The Commerce Secretary chooses unadjusted census data for redistricting purposes after the Census Bureau recommends against statistical correction.
- The Census Bureau sends redistricting data to the states on a flow basis. The detailed data include information on race and Hispanic origin for the total population and the population age 18 and over.
- The Census Bureau says further research in 2001 may confirm that adjusted numbers are the most accurate available and that they should be used for other purposes such as the allocation of federal program funds.

### ***Data on Race and Ethnicity***

- Census 2000 results show a racially diverse America. Relatively few people (about 2.4 percent of the population nationally), but more than pre-census tests indicated, took advantage of a first-ever option for respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race.

## CENSUS 2000 OPERATIONAL TIMELINE

**Feb. 28, 1996:** The Census Bureau unveils its Census 2000 plan, based on four strategies to improve accuracy and reduce costs.

**1997 – 1998:** Census Partnership Specialists in the 12 Regional Census Offices contact local officials to set up Complete Count Committees, local coalitions aimed at raising public awareness of the census in their communities.

**Jan. 1997 – Oct. 1997:** The Census Bureau sends maps to local governments to be updated for the 1998 Boundary and Annexation Survey.

**April 1, 1997:** The Census Bureau submits to Congress subject matters it will cover on the Census 2000 short and long questionnaires.

**Fall 1997 – Summer 1998:** Local officials submit mailing address lists to supplement the Bureau's own address list development work, in the first phase of the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) program.

**May 1998:** The Census 2000 Dress Rehearsal begins in Sacramento, CA; 11 counties in South Carolina; and on the Menominee American Indian reservation in Wisconsin.

**April 1, 1998:** The Census Bureau submits to Congress questions to be included on the census forms.

**Fall 1998:** The Census Bureau invites governors and state legislators to participate in Phase II of the Redistricting Data Program. Responding states receive block-level maps in the first half of 1999; they then overlay election precinct boundaries in preparation for the post-census redistricting process (Phase III) beginning in 2001.

**Late summer 1998 – Spring 1999:** Address list development for rural and remote areas proceeds. Census workers fan out across the country to verify information submitted by local governments and find additional homes in more remote areas.

**Winter 1998/9 – Spring 1999:** Address lists are verified for urban and suburban areas.

**Late 1998 – 1999:** Revised address lists are returned to local governments for final review.

**Feb. 1999:** Publicity campaign begins to raise understanding of and cooperation with the census.

**Nov. 1999:** Paid advertising campaign begins, with educational messages targeted at historically hard-to-count population groups.

**Fall 1999 – March 2000:** Local and Tribal governments submit evidence of newly-built housing units for inclusion in the census.

**Jan. 2000:** Census 2000 begins with door-to-door count of remote Alaskan Native villages.

**Feb. 2000:** The Census Bureau launches a national advertising campaign to encourage census participation.

**Early March 2000:** Letters are mailed to nearly 120 million residences announcing that the census forms will arrive soon.

**Mid-March 2000:** Census forms are mailed to most American households.

**Late March 2000:** Census takers begin visiting rural households and American Indian reservations to drop off forms and verify addresses. Letters are sent to all households reminding them to return census forms. People without a usual residence are enumerated at pre-identified shelters, food kitchens, and outdoor locations.

**April 1, 2000:** CENSUS DAY.

**Mid-April 2000:** Cut-off date for returning census forms by mail.

**Late April – June 2000:** Half a million census takers visit 42 million households that didn't mail back census forms.

**April – May 2000:** The Census Bureau enumerates people in remote areas, including group quarters (i.e. college dorms, migrant farmworker camps, prisons); military bases; and special places (i.e. colonias along Texas-Mexico border; seasonal resort areas, carnivals).

**July – Aug. 2000:** The Census Bureau conducts quality-check programs, such as revisiting all vacant housing units to check for occupants.

**June – Aug. 2000:** The Census Bureau re-interviews 314,000 scientifically selected households nationwide (the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation survey) to verify the accuracy of the initial count.

**Dec. 28, 2000:** The Census Bureau reports a national population tally of 281,421,906. Secretary of Commerce Norman Mineta submits state population totals to the President, along with resulting reapportionment of the 435 House seats among the 50 states. These counts are not adjusted using statistical sampling of respondents.

**Early Jan. 2001:** The President transmits apportionment to the House clerk, who issues a certificate to each state governor showing that state's number of seats.

**April 1, 2001:** The deadline is reached for the Secretary of Commerce to submit the Census Bureau's block-level census counts, including race and voting age breakdowns, to states for use in the redistricting process. Commerce Secretary Donald Evans decides to release unadjusted data for this purpose.

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