

Lessons Learned: How the New Administration Can Achieve An Accurate and Cost-Effective Census

**Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
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Written Testimony of

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I am Barbara Everitt Bryant. I was Director of the Census Bureau from 1989 to 1993 and of the 1990 census. You have asked several of us to report on lessons learned from prior censuses and our views on conducting an accurate and cost-effective census.

Lesson 1: Timely Appointment of a Director

My first recommendation to this Subcommittee is that you do everything in your power and use your influence on the Administration to get a new Census Director nominated and confirmed as soon as possible. The hour, one year before the census, is already late and on this I speak from experience. Twenty years ago I became Director very late in the same election cycle we are in now. That is, a Presidential election in the year ending in "8," and nomination in the year ending in "9." But I was not in office until December 7, three weeks before the census year was to start. I got in office only by a recess appointment when my administration—who had not sent my nomination to the Senate until early October--realized when Congress adjourned for the Thanksgiving-to-New Year recess that there would not be a Director in place for the Census, as my confirmation hearing had not been scheduled. I was eventually confirmed by the Senate in the summer after the count.

Would census procedures been different if I had been in office sooner?

Definitely! With 25 years of survey research experience, I found the worst designed questionnaire I had ever seen already rolling off the presses. The Census Bureau had been so concerned about capturing the data, that they had designed a questionnaire that was data processing-friendly but not user-friendly. The graphics were poor, and the questionnaire was covered with marks used for registering cameras that transferred answers to microfilm, but may have made the questionnaire look complicated to the user. The lesson of good questionnaire design has now been thoroughly learned by the Census Bureau. In 1991 we brought in the national guru on mail questionnaire design, Dr. Donald Dillman, and began testing questionnaire versions. As a result, the 2000 census had an excellent questionnaire design.

I also learned the difficulties of needing to immediately straighten out major problems when one is not yet acquainted with the organization's personnel. To promote the census, the Census Bureau had produced many promotional materials—posters, brochures, pencils and other handouts. When I arrived in office in December I discovered these were sitting in the Census Bureau's warehouse in Jeffersonville, Indiana—undistributed and influencing nobody. With the help of the Deputy Director—because I was at the disadvantage of not yet knowing census personnel and their talents—we shifted some personnel and put two excellent mid-level executives in place to take over distribution. For expediency, they had to do one-size-fits all shipments to the 496 offices across the country set up for taking the census. This had some amusing side effects, such as “Alaska Natives Be Counted” posters being sent everywhere, including Puerto Rico, and posters designed for Indian communities by the Institute for American Indian Arts becoming well-loved art work on walls in every part of the country. However, the materials were moved in time to be used starting January 2 of the census year.

I am a supporter of making the job of Director of the Census Bureau a 5-year appointment, starting in the years one and six. The planning cycle for operations as large

as the decennial and economic censuses are long and only with a several year lead-time could a Director have meaningful input to operations. Had I been in office earlier in 1989, it would still have been too late to save the 1990 questionnaire. It is no fun for a Census Director to sit before Congressional committees, such as this one, defending operations in which he or she has had no input.

Lesson 2: A major, professional, coordinated communications and advertising campaign is vital to census success and accuracy. Such a campaign requires major financial outlay.

Such a campaign has two major components and their theme needs to be coordinated: 1) a large volume of inexpensive promotional materials that can be handed out at the local level; and 2) radio, TV, and newspaper spots professionally produced with goals of reaching both a mass national and targeted audiences.

The advertising campaign has to be on a scale comparable to what a large private sector company would use to launch a new product. After all, the census is a new product to those in their 20's. It is a 10-year old, half-forgotten product to those 30 and over.

We learned in 1990 that the Census Bureau can no longer depend on free public service air time. Whereas that had worked in prior years, by 1990 TV and radio stations were no longer required to give free air time around the clock to keep their FCC licenses. Good and prime time space must be purchased, whatever the cost.

Lesson 3: Outreach to Hard-to-Count Segments of the Population through Partnerships with Geographic, Ethnic, and Racial Organizations Can Help Reduce Undercount

When we talk of undercount, let me put the proportions in perspective. There is very little overall undercount. The problem is differential undercount. The census historically has fully counted some segments of the population, such as homeowners and

older Americans. It falls short of fully counting the very mobile, renters, young people, and particularly those in Hispanic/Latino, African American, and American Indian communities. Those hard-to-count are best reached with one-on-one contacts from local people and organizations they know and trust. Communicating the fact that the Census Bureau will not give information from their census forms to any other organization or individual is a very hard message to get across. Only trusted sources can convince the reluctant, fearful, or uninformed that the Census Bureau does not give information to the INS, the IRS, landlords, ex-spouses, or mothers-in law.

Factors That Will Help Improve Accuracy in 2010

In addition to implementing these three lessons, three other factors will help improve accuracy in 2010: 1) The American Community Survey; 2) The downturn in employment that should make it possible to get better qualified temporary personnel; 3) The undercount research and coverage measurement done after recent censuses.

1) The American Community Survey. The census will no longer send out the long form with nearly 50 questions to 17% of households. This has always had a response rate several percentage points lower than the short form with only the 7 or 8 questions about each person needed for reapportionment and redistricting. The long form is now replaced by the American Community Survey which acquires the demographic, social and economic data formerly on the long form from a survey of one percent of households every year throughout the decade.

2) The Downturn in Employment. In 1990 when the census was fielded, unemployment was at 5%. The pool of available non-employed persons had dried to a puddle. While the downturn in employment is a national tragedy, it does have the effect of making temporary census jobs look very good to those unemployed, and it will create a more qualified pool from which to draw.

3) Undercount Research. Post-census research measures coverage at a very detailed level geographically. It pinpoints both the level of coverage and the undercount. The Census Bureau makes good use of this research to target the hard-to-reach in the subsequent census because it knows where they are. Without good coverage measurement, the Census Bureau could not learn lessons from each census to improve the next one.

The Big Inhibitor to a Good Count in 2010

Fear is very apt to inhibit a full count in Hispanic/Latino and immigrant neighborhoods in 2010. The current Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raids on employers and neighborhoods to identify and deport undocumented immigrants is bound to make residents unwilling to be found or, if found, to give information to the government. Imagine if you were a census taker and went to the door of a household that housed both legal and undocumented persons. I flew in yesterday from Phoenix where some family households include both, and where there have been a number of recent raids to find and arrest the undocumented. Imagine that you introduce yourself and say, "I'm from the Census Bureau and I want to ask you a few questions." What kind of cooperation do you think you will get?

A Cost-Effective Census.

Finally, with emphasis on counting every person and household the decennial census will never be a cheap operation. With its experience in the logistics of the operation and its magnitude, the Census Bureau probably does as cost-effective a job as any organization could. Current staff, not the Director of a \$2.6 billion census conducted 20 years ago, must report to you on present efforts to be cost effective.

A large, and not predictable expense of each census is following up on non-responding households. This follow-up requires repeated and labor intensive calls. This expense could be greatly reduced if the Census Bureau could statistically sample the non-

respondents and estimate the rest, a method that I personally recommended after 1990.¹ However, doing so was precluded by a bill sent by Congress to the Supreme Court before the 2000 census. The Supreme Court ruled against using sampling and estimation for apportioning Congressional seats.

¹ Bryant, Barbara Everitt and William Dunn, *Moving Power and Money: The Politics of Census Taking* (Ithaca, New York: New Strategist Publications, Inc., 1995)