



Urban League of
Philadelphia

TESTIMONY

of

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On

“MAKING THE CENSUS COUNT IN URBAN AMERICA”

before

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services
and International Security

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Subcommittee, I am pleased to be invited to provide testimony on the topic, "Making the Census Count in Urban America." My testimony will focus on the importance of community based partnerships in counting the undercounted.

The National Urban League with its 100 affiliates nationwide and the U.S. Census Bureau have a history that dates back to the 1970 Census Project launched by Whitney M. Young, Jr., National Executive Director at that time. Founded in 1910, the National Urban League (NUL) is the nation's oldest and largest community based movement devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream. The Urban League is a non-profit, non partisan community based movement headquartered in New York City that reaches more than 60 million people in urban communities nationwide through direct services programs, advocacy and research, with the services of 100 professionally staffed affiliates in 35 states and the District of Columbia.

The mission of the Urban League is to empower African Americans to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights. Utilizing policies and tailored services, we carry out our mission by closing the equality gaps in five (5) key areas: economics, education, health, civic engagement and social justice. According to the Urban League of Philadelphia's recent "State of Black Philadelphia" report, African Americans comprise 44% of the population in Philadelphia. This report statistically measures the disparities between blacks and whites in Philadelphia in these five (5) key areas.

Philadelphia Inquirer journalist, Dick Polman, reported on February 22, 2009, "the census is a flash point. Numbers are power. The population count determines who will most benefit from billions in federal aid, and where it will go; it determines which states will gain congressional seats and which states will lose. Both political parties have a huge stake in the census," says Polman. Since we know that census data, such as race, sex, age and educational level, directly affect African-Americans in virtually all decisions made in education, employment, veteran's services, public health care, transportation and housing, and we know that using the census data to develop, evaluate and implement programs, means that the data is used to determine how to divvy-up more than \$300 billion in funds each year.

These facts underscore the importance of African Americans being counted. In fact, Philadelphia has a unique history with regard to counting African Americans for the census.

In 1837, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), appointed a committee to conduct a census of the entire black population in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs. At the 1837-1838 convention to amend the Pennsylvania state constitution, there was significant debate surrounding the issue of whether or not free blacks should continue to have voting rights. The constitution that existed prior to the convention was ambiguous with respect to the right of blacks to vote. To remove the ambiguity that surrounded the question of blacks' voting rights, Benjamin Martin, a delegate to the Reform Convention to amend the state constitution, proposed that voting rights be limited specifically to whites.

The PAS actively lobbied to prevent this change to the constitution, and the African-American Census was an important component of these efforts. According to both Thomas Hershberg and Gary Nash, historians of African-Americans in Pennsylvania, the census was intended to demonstrate that blacks were valuable contributors to their communities. However, despite the efforts of the PAS and of other activists, the constitution, which was ratified in October of 1838, excluded blacks from the franchise. African-Americans in Pennsylvania would not gain legal voting rights again until after the Civil War.

Today as it was, the census data is used to prevent African Americans from being disenfranchised. African Americans have been systematically and disproportionately undercounted by the census. Urban centers and high-poverty areas, immigrant and minority communities are most susceptible to miscounts.

The 1990 Census included a net undercount of 4 million out of the total population of 248 million, or 1.6% of the population. Most of those left out were urban, nonwhite and generally poorer than the mean of those counted. Hispanics were roughly twice as likely not to be counted; African-Americans three times as likely not to be counted; Native Americans five times as likely not to be counted. The consequences of the undercount could be serious for many urban areas. According to one Philadelphia official, the 1990 undercount could cost the city \$10-\$15 million annually.

Since the basic Census questionnaire takes less than 10 minutes to complete, why then during the 2000 Census, were millions of people not counted—including disproportionate numbers of African Americans and other minorities? As a result these communities lost out on political representation and needed funding for services. The Census Bureau estimated that only 59.7% of African Americans, 64.5% of Latinos and 69.8% of Asians returned their initial mail questionnaire, compared with 77.5% for whites.

Minorities tend to be undercounted because some, especially immigrants, are mistrustful of and avoid sharing information with the government. Many people just don't feel a part of the American system. Therefore, we need community organizations to be a bridge, a connector to these undercounted communities. According to Robert Hill, who served as Chair of the African American Advisory Committee for the 1980 Census, the 2000 Census and in the initial planning for the 2010 Census, "President Obama and members of Congress should be congratulated for including an additional \$1 billion in the President's Stimulus Bill to enhance the Bureau's enumeration activities in the 2010 Census. I was especially pleased that the Bill stipulates that the Bureau can spend up to \$250 million for its Partnership Program and outreach efforts to minority community's and hard-to-reach populations," says Hill.

With adequate resources, community-based partnerships can reach the undercounted through their current services and programs, as well as direct outreach to neighborhoods and constituents. For example, a key strategy to increase participation is to recruit Census workers who reflect the community. The Census Bureau will hire about 1.4 million temporary workers to help collect the data and follow up with households that do not return their forms. Here locally, the Urban League of Philadelphia has already assisted our local Census Bureau office by recruiting and assessing more than 50 qualified individuals through the Urban League Career Center for these temporary jobs. We could potentially be an even greater partner for the Census Bureau to ensure an ethnically and racially diverse workforce from the staff in district offices to the enumerators in the neighborhoods and barrios.

In conclusion, with this history and these numbers as a backdrop, "Making the Census Count in Urban America" is critically important for African Americans and other minority groups. Thank you for this opportunity to share my views on this important issue.