

Statement of John H. Thompson

Subcommittee on Federal Financial, Management, Government Information, Federal
Services and International Security

United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

March 5, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you regarding the 2010 census. The experience that I draw upon for my statement is based on a 27 year career at the Census Bureau. Throughout this period, I held a number of management positions with increasing responsibility for the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses, the most significant being from 1997 through June 2001 when I served as the Associate Director for Decennial Censuses – the career executive with responsibility for all aspects of Census 2000.

My discussion will first cover the major components that contributed to the success of Census 2000, and then will focus on how these may be useful in reducing the risks facing the 2010 census effort.

However, before I begin, I would like to recognize the staff at the Census Bureau. They are highly motivated to carry out high quality non-partisan work. They are very creative and are the most significant source of the success of not only the decennial census, but the myriad of other demographic and economic programs the Census Bureau conducts. I know that for the 2010 census they are trying their best, and my remarks are intended only to assist their effort.

Census 2000 Success factors

Unprecedented support – Census 2000 received the support of a wide array of stakeholders at the local, city, state, tribal, and national levels that encouraged response and participation in the census. The Census 2000 final mail response rate of 67 percent exceeded the 65 percent figure for 1990, reversing a trend of declining census mail response.

Three key factors led to this success, in my opinion. First, Census 2000 was the first census to use a paid advertising and promotion campaign. Second, an extensive partnership program directed at actively involving local communities was funded. Third, an effective communications strategy was established with key stakeholders to generate additional support for census participation. Stakeholders included the Congress, state, local and tribal governments, and numerous advocacy groups.

In addition, the non-response follow-up contact of households that did not respond to the mail was completed in approximately 9 weeks, a first for census taking in the era of

censuses based on a strategy of mailing households a questionnaire to complete and a mail-back document prior to conducting an in-person follow-up for those households which did not respond via mail. There are several important factors underlying this achievement, including a high level of public motivation to respond to the census when an enumerator visited the households of those that did not respond to the mail.

A Director of the Census Bureau was in place in time to provide leadership and direction during critical periods – Dr. Kenneth Prewitt was confirmed as Director in 1998. He arrived in time to provide leadership and direction through several challenging periods. He was instrumental in establishing the communications strategy with the stakeholders mentioned above. In addition, Dr. Prewitt also put in place additional communication vehicles directed at providing timely and accurate information to the administration, the Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, other federal agencies, and a number of oversight bodies. The strategic vision and leadership was instrumental in the ultimate success of Census 2000, and created an environment where I and other career staff could be most effective.

A strong experienced management team was in place well in advance of Census 2000 – The management team that led Census 2000 was very strong and experienced. In addition, much of the team was in place in time to make significant contributions to the planning effort. The team not only included persons with lengthy decennial experience, but was enriched by outstanding managers with different backgrounds. While my own experiences had been exclusively associated with the decennial census, other managers including the Deputy Director and the Principal Associate Director for Administration had come to the Census Bureau from other government agencies. This blend of experience created a synergy that led to creative thinking and problem solving from a very broad perspective.

The Census 2000 field effort was well managed and well funded – The Field organization at the Census Bureau is led by a central office in Suitland, Maryland and by 12 outstanding Regional Directors in offices across the United States. I simply cannot say enough about the efforts of this group for Census 2000. They were charged with recruiting and directing a staff that at its peak numbered close to 500,000. For 2000, early studies that linked enumerator pay to performance provided the information necessary to request higher relative pay rates than in previous censuses as a means of reducing turnover and overall costs. Once approved by the administration and Congress, these locality based pay rates gave the Field management group an additional tool to recruit a workforce that was highly motivated.

As I mentioned above, the ultimate result was that the non-response follow-up operation was completed in a much shorter time frame than in prior censuses. In addition to the public outreach, two other factors contributed to this outcome. First, enumerator turnover was low (relative to previous censuses) and second, the management provided by the Field organization was outstanding.

Effective usage of private sector contractors – For Census 2000 a strategy was employed to rely on the private sector for expertise in advanced technology. Thus, contracts were awarded to private sector information technology companies to support some of the major census processing operations. The result was that the receipt, scanning, and processing of all of the census questionnaires was carried out by private sector contractors using optical scanning coupled with intelligent character recognition. Over 80 percent of the handwritten questionnaire entries were captured electronically with extremely high accuracy rates. In addition, three large (200,000 square foot) temporary processing centers were set-up, staffed, and managed by private sector contractors. There was an associated significant effort within the Census Bureau to manage these large contracts.

Thorough testing of all operational systems – The dress rehearsal for Census 2000 occurred in 1998 and allowed for a final testing of all major operational systems, including the linkages between private contractor and internal Census Bureau developments. This became very important when the Bureau was forced to redesign the census processes in early 2009 as a result of the decision that sampling could not be used to produce results that would be used for apportionment. The redesign required the development and fielding of a number of new operations aimed at improving coverage. However, the core systems had been thoroughly tested, and protocols for testing system modifications were in place. The end result was that the new procedures that emerged from the redesign were incorporated and tested prior to fielding. In summary, we were as prepared as possible from a systems testing and monitoring perspective when the major operations started with the mail-out of questionnaires in March 2000.

The 2010 Census Risks and Recommendations

From my perspective, the risks for the 2010 Census fall into the following areas:

Systems development and testing – The Census Bureau is very late in the development and testing program to support the non-response follow-up operation. The reasons for this are well documented – the Census Bureau will forgo the previous plan to use handheld computing devices and revert to a paper-based methodology. In addition, the operational control systems necessary to support this operation were shifted from a contractor to internal Census Bureau developers. The paper-based procedures and systems were simply not available in time to be used during the dress rehearsal. Therefore the dress rehearsal did not include a paper-based non-response follow-up operation.

The situation is very serious since the non-response follow-up operation is the most expensive, labor intensive and critical operation that must be carried out for the 2010 Census. The systems to control and manage this operation must provide information to assign work to and monitor the progress of over 500,000 enumerators. This information must be available for a number of levels of management including central office, regional office, local census office and crew leaders. In addition, the systems must closely link

with other key systems including data capture and cost and progress. A failure in these systems would be catastrophic, potentially causing a loss of control of the enumeration, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, and putting not only the accuracy but the ultimate delivery of the census at risk.

The Census Bureau must conduct a complete test of these systems including assignment preparation, a significant in-person data collection operation (involving a local census office, crew leaders, and enumerators), transmittal and receipt of completed questionnaires, information exchanges with other key systems, and provision of management information.

Director of the Census Bureau vacancy – Currently, there is no (to my knowledge) nominee to take over as the Director of the Census Bureau. It is critical that a Director be named as soon as possible to provide leadership and vision for not only the 2010 but the 2020 census as well. One of the most important contributions that a Director makes is establishing lines of communication and credibility with stakeholders, advocacy groups, and oversight bodies. As stated above, one of the most important factors in the success of Census 2000 was the widespread support it received. The 2010 Census would benefit greatly from a similar outpouring of support. A well respected Director is a key necessity for such an outcome.

Communications – Establishing strong lines of communication with the administration, the Office of Management and Budget, the Congress, oversight entities and the other state, local and tribal stakeholders is critical for a successful census. The Census Bureau has a good core staff in this area. However, an administration appointment to lead this effort is essential.

Management staff – I know personally the senior management staff at the Census Bureau. They are all accomplished and extremely effective, and I am certainly not directing any criticism toward their performance. However, I believe that they are stretched very thin and could benefit from an infusion of additional personnel. One of the lessons that I learned from the build-up for Census 2000 was that there are excellent managers throughout the federal government who can not only step in to help immediately but can offer fresh perspectives. I encourage the administration to work with the Census Bureau to reach out to other agencies for additional management assistance.

Coverage Measurement – The Census Coverage Measurement (CCM) program is an important tool in assessing the accuracy of the census. For the 2010 Census the CCM is targeted at measuring the components of errors underlying the census process as well as providing measures of undercount (and over-count) for various population groups and areas. I believe that the current design falls short of meeting the goal of measuring component error. I also believe that the schedule of the CCM places key operations too far from Census Day, putting the entire program at risk due to respondent recall errors. I have communicated my concerns to the Census Bureau and I understand that some of them are being considered.

Experimental Program for 2020 – Dr. Brown will express concerns related to the Census Bureau’s planning for the 2020 Census. I fully endorse his statement. The administration and the Congress should challenge the Census Bureau to develop plans for a different kind of census in 2020. The Census Bureau has a long history of developing new methodologies to meet both challenges and opportunities that arise as our nation changes and grows. A new look now at the census for 2020 is very important in order to make use of the 2010 Census as a testing platform.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee thank you for the opportunity to make a statement regarding the 2010 Census.