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**Broader picture.** Census Bureau says sampling will improve on mail surveys, which undercount some groups.

## Census Plans More Sampling

The Census Bureau wants to increase the accuracy of the 2000 Census by sampling more people earlier in the process. Officials say the approach, outlined last week at a Senate hearing, would reduce the time and cost of tracking down people who don't respond to the initial mail survey.

The issue of sampling is politically sensitive. Last fall, a House report railed against its use on

the grounds that the U.S. Constitution requires an actual head count for the purpose of drawing up voting districts (*Science*, 1 November 1996, p. 713). And last week, the Senate had a chance to comment on the bureau's latest plan.

Previously, the bureau proposed to directly count 90% of households using mail-in forms and interviewer visits, then sample one in 10 of the remaining households. At the hearing, however, the bureau said it now expects to begin sampling as soon as the mail-in deadline passes, adjusting the sampling rate accordingly. If 60% of households in a census tract mailed back forms, for example, interviewers would be sent to 75% of the remaining households. The higher sampling

rate will yield a much more reliable portrait of the households not directly counted, says geographer Robert Marx, associate director for the decennial census, and still achieve the bureau's overall targets.

Most statisticians say sampling is the only affordable way to reduce undercounts of minorities and the poor, who tend to respond to mail-in forms at a lower rate. But some legislators object because exact enumerations are needed to shape House districts. "You still need to be able to place families in houses in order to draw district lines, and I don't believe [the new plan] addresses such concerns," says one House staffer. The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee plans further hearings this spring. Meanwhile, the bureau hopes to test its revised strategy next year in several regions.

## Another Try for NIH Trust Fund

Perhaps the third time is the charm for a biomedical research trust fund. Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Arlen Specter (R-PA) last week announced a plan to levy a tax on health insurance companies that would

add as much as \$6 billion to the annual budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which now stands at \$12.7 billion.

Such plans have been proposed before. In 1994, Harkin helped lead an effort to fold the idea into several health care reform proposals, and the next year

saw a bill to funnel income from excise taxes on tobacco to NIH. The new proposal, which will be introduced during the coming debate on Medicare reform, would put 1% of all health insurance premiums into a fund that would be disbursed to NIH institutes in proportion to their budgets.

## Panel Finds Compelling Need for FDA Research

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should resist pressure to scale back its research activities, says a high-level panel of academic, federal, and drug-company scientists. In a report released last week, the panel, chaired by Stanford pathologist David Korn, "unanimously and emphatically affirms" the need for a "vigorous, high-quality" FDA intramural research program with its own chief.

Congress and groups such as the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) are pushing FDA officials to focus on faster drug reviews and to contract out research and many other activities. A proposed "user-fee" plan, for example, would prohibit using drug-application fees for research and, thus, slash positions at FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (*Science*, 14 February, p. 915).

The panel, formed a year ago as a subset of FDA's science advisory board, agreed that FDA could make better use of research from external sources. But it rejected as "specious" the notion that

"most (or all)" of the agency's research needs could be met more efficiently using outside sources while still avoiding conflicts of interest. It also concluded, says Korn, that regulators "have to have some ongoing knowledge of" cutting-edge research "to ask the right questions."

All is not perfect within FDA's research shop, however: Korn's group found it is "uneven in quality, mission relevance, and efficiency," and recommended the appointment of a new chief scientist to oversee the research budget. The improvements would require an "incremental" increase in funds.

A BIO staffer declined to comment, saying he had not read the report. But one lobbyist expected it might come up this week at a Senate hearing on FDA. FDA Lead Deputy Commissioner Michael Friedman told *Science* he endorses the notion of a chief scientist, adding that he sees the next step as "[identifying] a core of really superb-quality investigators" and giving them "the resources to get the job done."

## Russian Science Shift

Scientists appear to have gained a stronger voice in the Russian government after a Cabinet reshuffle earlier this week. The Ministry for Science and Technology, downgraded last August to a state committee, was reconstituted as a ministry. As *Science* went to press, committee chief Vladimir Fortov—a physicist and, since last summer, Russia's most powerful science policy figure—will become minister. Observers laud the ministry's restoration. "I'm very glad," says former Science Minister Boris Saltykov.

But Russian politics is never so simple. Vladimir Bulgak, communications minister in the old Cabinet, will now spearhead a reform of Russian science. It's expected that Bulgak will be giving Fortov his marching orders. Fortov has fought hardest for the Russian Academy of Sciences; reform measures from Bulgak, therefore, could benefit researchers outside the academy.

## NASA Spins Off Science

NASA has moved to strengthen its bonds with the academic community by setting up two university-based research facilities.

Baylor College of Medicine in Houston will lead a consortium of six universities seeking ways to counter the deleterious effects of space flight on the human body and to disseminate space biomedical information. The 5-year agreement is for up to \$145 million over 20 years. Meanwhile, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and the Universities Space Research Association will run a new microgravity sciences center at Case to study fluid physics and combustion science. NASA will provide \$17.8 million for the next 5 years for the new center, the research of which will be managed by NASA's Lewis Research Center.

The new centers, announced last week, are remnants of a far more ambitious plan by NASA Administrator Dan Goldin to spin off much of the agency's science to private institutes to boost research quality and trim federal jobs. Goldin abandoned the idea last year after opposition from Congress.