

Stop Censuring the Census

Brooks Hanson and Floyd Bloom

Last year, U.S. Census Director Prewitt wrote here of his acceptance of the Supreme Court's ruling that Census 2000 could not include statistical adjustment for the enumeration of the population that is constitutionally required for reapportionment of seats in the House of Representatives among the states (*Science*, 12 February 1999, p. 935). However, Prewitt also explicitly noted that "there can be no national statistics on unemployment, housing, transportation, health, or education without [the] sampling [required for] the Census Bureau [to] fulfill its broad statistical responsibilities to policy-making, to business planning, and to scientific research." Now that the actual census process has begun, the political nature of the sampling issues at stake is once again reemerging, and political leaders are making statements that seem either purposefully ignorant of the requirements of the law or simply a luddite stance representing a misguided commitment to personal privacy. Indeed, Senator Hagel (R.-Nebraska) is reported to be preparing legislation to remove the existing criminal penalties for failure to answer all questions. Initial reports are that this campaign is already having an effect.

There are two forms of the U.S. Census. Each household gets the short form, which simply asks for the number of people living at that location, their ages, and their racial category. One out of six households also receives a long form containing an extra 53 questions about level of education, occupation, marital status, income, disability status, and housing conditions. It is this longer set of questions that has angered some Americans as an invasion of privacy and has fostered political pandering.

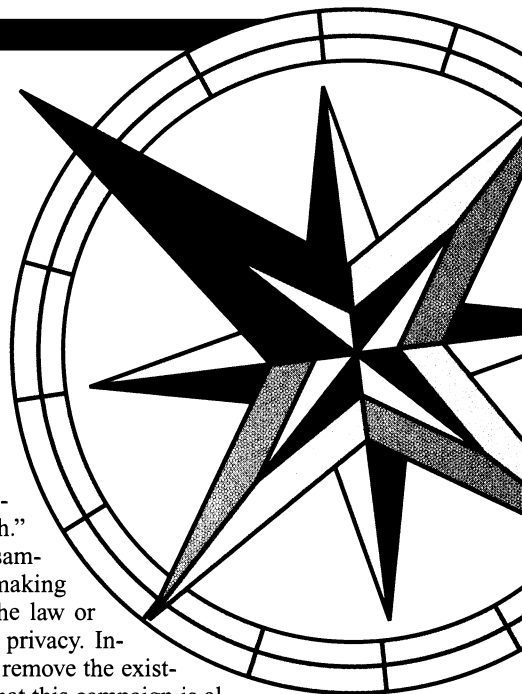
The questions on the long form are legally mandated as being critical for setting and evaluating social and economic policy at the federal, state, and local levels. None of these long form questions were generated covertly by the Census Bureau. Indeed, all were approved overwhelmingly by Congress and have been part of previous long forms or of the door-to-door census interview for decades (aside from one new question about grandparents performing child care). The data collected are used for many legally binding requirements imposed by Congress as well as to implement programs on education, housing, and voting rights, among others.

The census is the most extensive scientific survey conducted in the United States and perhaps the world. It is a huge, controlled, periodic, and systematic collection of basic data that is of fundamental use to a wide range of social scientists, policy-makers, economists, and businesses, including the very politicians that are subverting this data. Much basic research on social policies is grounded in data obtained from the long form, and many subsequent, more focused scientific surveys are spawned from and evaluated against the census data. Furthermore, the U.S. business community relies heavily on the census data

for critical market research, planning, and product development. Thus, Census 2000 will contribute directly to the economic health of the United States and the competitiveness of the nation's businesses—provided that the data are robust and accurate. Ensuring the integrity of such data is (and historically has been) of paramount concern in the social sciences because of the difficulty of collecting representative and accurate data from a large population. And it should thus be of concern to those who will be using the data, including Congress. Confidence in the integrity of the census is warranted. By law, the data on individuals are held confidential for 72 years and cannot be shared with any other government agency. Furthermore, in its entire history the Census Bureau has never revealed any individual's answer from the census form to any other agency or person.

The suggestions being made by some elected officials that nonresponses are acceptable, and possibly even patriotic, are derelictions of legal responsibility by those who should know better (including the apparent Republican presidential candidate) or are extensions of the assaults noted by Director Prewitt on the value and integrity of the census as the foundation of much social science and market research. In an era of international competition when the economy is in many ways driven by information, accurate demographic and societal data are essential. Our elected officials should speak now to assure the public of the impartiality and integrity of the census and instill confidence in it, and to emphasize the need and reasons to fill out the long form completely.

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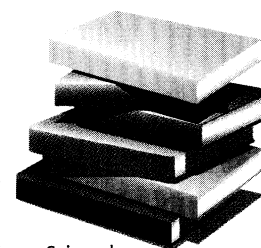
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