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Census Data: A Necessity in Antipoverty Planning

The letters of Irving Crespi and Congressman Jackson E. Betts (31 May), regarding the 1970 Census give the views of those who employ census data for secondary analysis and of the public servant who is concerned with individual privacy and a simple headcount of the population for apportionment purposes.

In the Office of Economic Opportunity, the geographic allocation of funds for supporting antipoverty programs is dependent on headcounts of the population in poverty, using information from surveys about each person's family living arrangements and income. In the so-called "small areas," which are census tracts in large communities or administrative areas and minor civil divisions in smaller communities, similar data are needed for planning and evaluating neighborhood-based activities in areas of concentrated poverty. Without such data, how can these substantial and expensive programs be responsibly administered? Social statistics for these "small areas" on a national basis are available only when an extremely large survey, such as a decennial census, is taken because the data required are comprised, as it were, of the results of thousands of surveys of localities and small places taken simultaneously throughout the country.

As of now, it is 8 years since we've had up-to-date small area data. If Betts proposes as an alternative, say, a national 25-percent sample survey every 2 years (for which 50 million people would be surveyed), that would be an adequate substitute for purposes of securing data. However, before any attempt is made to reduce the number of questions in the 1970 Census, I propose that a clearly adequate alternative be developed which satisfies the small area data needs of public and private agencies.

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