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Policy Matters: The Decennial Census Underway

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The entire concept of redistricting is dependent on the result of the decennial census. And the 2010 census is now underway. The United States Bureau of Census Public Information Office released material on the initiation of the census count as of March 1, 2010. According to the Census Bureau, on the 1st of March, 56,000 census workers began delivering about 12 million census forms to residence addresses across the nation, mostly in rural areas where residents do not receive mail where they live. Ninety-plus per cent of American households will receive their census forms via the U. S. mail around the middle of March.

In addition to the rural areas where the forms are customarily hand-delivered, the Census Bureau is also hand delivering forms to the areas of the Gulf Coast which were affected by Hurricane Katrina. U. S. Commerce Deputy Secretary Dennis F. Hightower met with local government officials in and around New Orleans on Tuesday, March 2, to speak about the Bureau's efforts to ensure a complete count on the Coast. According to Hightower, census workers will be hand-delivering the 2010 questionnaires to "any housing unit that is or may be habitable". The hand delivery will be concentrated in Louisiana and particularly in the following parishes: Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines, and parts of Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. John and St. Charles. These parishes had logged response rates lower than the national average in the 2000 census. While the national average of responses – defined as census forms which were mailed back or completed on a visit – was approximately 72% nationwide, the response in Jefferson Parish was 71%, the response in Plaquemines only 54%, and the remaining parishes ranged from 58 to 69% response rates.

The Census Bureau is confident that all American households will receive the census form during the month of March 2010, whether by hand delivery or mail. Interestingly, there is no "due date" for responding to the census, but the Bureau asks that the census form be mailed back "as soon as possible." If a household does not mail the census back, it is anticipated that a census worker will visit the non-responsive homes after April 2010. This process should be completed by the end of July. The Census Bureau has been subject to criticism for mailing letters to each household **before** it mails the census to the household telling the resident that the census form is coming. Though this may be a valid criticism, the Bureau was undeterred. With the extra mailing and the extra personnel required for a competent count in the Katrina-hit areas, the U. S. will be spending more on the 2010 census than in previous decennial years.

Article 1, Section 2 of the United States Constitution initiated the concept of census in America – though not in the world: the *Bible's* recitation of the manger story has Joseph and Mary responding to a census. The constitutional concept dealt specifically with the number of individuals living in the USA. But Congress has added various additional requests for information. And federal courts have upheld the right of the federal government to obtain this additional information via census, and have also upheld the right of the federal government to require complete and truthful responses to the census.

An interesting aspect of this year's decennial census is the Bureau's interactive map which it plans to launch on its website on March 22. This map will allow residents to view the percentage of census responses in the resident population on a moment to moment basis.

The link is:

<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/take10map/>

Currently this link will take you to the 2000 census response. As indicated, the 2010 responses will be tracked in real time beginning on March 22.

Census participation has been declining decennially since 1970. Most criticism in the past has focused on an undercount of African Americans, Hispanics and the homeless. The Bureau has worked to respond to these criticisms effectively – apparently so effectively that conservatives are now reacting to the efforts to count every resident: precisely what the federal Constitution requires. Some are even suggesting sampling and survey work, rather than an attempted census count, for fear that the emphasis on those traditionally undercounted will result in a “white” undercount.

Various other countries have also experienced a decline in census response; the U. S. is not alone. The 1980 census responses in Germany and the Netherlands was so dilatory and inconsistent that the counts were determined to be virtually invalid and were replaced with sampling and surveys, thought to be more accurate. In the last decade, census counts in Australia, Iran, Nigeria, Poland, Kenya and Sudan have caused riots between groups of political adversaries and caused the least riotous of the population to seriously question the validity of the results procured.

Sampling has been suggested as a less expensive and even more accurate alternative to decennial census since public participation began to wane in the 1970s. Particularly as mapping and mathematical science have become more sophisticated and combined to make sampling easier, quicker and with lower margins for error than a traditional census response, perhaps sampling is worthy of reconsideration. However, the U. S. Supreme Court has rejected the concept of statistical sampling before. This case is worthy of note: in *Department of Commerce, et al. v. United States House of Representatives, et al.* (1999), the Supreme Court affirmed a lower court's interpretation of both the federal constitution and the Census Act, noting that the mandates are for “an actual enumeration of the American public every 10 years.” As a result, the Census Bureau's determining to use statistical samplings in 2000 was quashed.

What may be more significant in the 1999 litigation is what is inherent in the language of the Court's opinion: there would be a difference in the “actual enumeration” and the statistical sampling and the difference would be significant enough to alter the apportionment of Congressional representatives and state legislators. While acknowledging the power, utility and validity of statistical analysis in a census operation, the Court affirmed the lower court's strict construction of the U. S. Constitution and federal statutes.

The litigation's minority opinion suggested that supplementing the traditional “actual enumeration” is now *demande*d in order to obtain the accuracy required by the intent and scope of the Constitution and existing census legislation, but this argument was to no avail. In 2010 there will be an “actual enumeration.” And with emphasis on the “actual enumeration” focused on the South and Katrina-damaged areas, conservatives who have traditionally been over-counted in comparison with other demographic groups are now concerned that they will be under-counted in 2010. Various reasons have been posited including: baby-boomers are getting older and may not be responsive; a significant number of conservatives have two homes and may not respond at either; extra census employees are targeted at demographic groups other than traditional conservatives at the expense of an accurate count of traditional conservative households.

Expenditures by the Census Bureau for the 2010 census to placate complaints of conservatives include an ad on Greg Biffle's NASCAR # 16 Ford Fusion, contracting with Marie Osmond to mention

the census in her Las Vegas One-Woman Show and on QVC, one of the very expensive TV ads during the Super Bowl, as well as NFL and AFL Super Bowl commentators' gratuitous plugs for the census. The Bureau is even running ads during "Dora the Explorer." (Children under age 5 have a higher undercount than under-counts for African Americans or Hispanics.)

Census results are used to distribute over \$300 billion in federal funding. The picture of the overall American community created by census results determines funding levels. Included in federal funding objectives are: grants to public school districts; family support programs for women, infants and children (WIC); housing; community development block grants (CDBG); road rehab and construction; programs for the elderly in our community; and funding for emergency food and shelters, among others.

One thing that the 1999 Supreme Court decision did not do was prohibits the Census Bureau from the use of "imputation", a statistical procedure which allows the Bureau to count people about whom it has incomplete or no direct information. Imputation has been used since the '60s. The principal method of imputation preferred by the bureau is called the "hot deck"; it imputes information that has been successfully collected from nearby housing units for information missing from neighboring units. Simplified, the "hot deck" works by assembling a data table which contains responses stored by donors and updated as response availability occurs. The details contained in the data table are assigned to residents in residential units which did not respond by imputing the responses from their nearest neighbors with similar characteristics. Imputation is commonly used when respondents answer some questions and omit answers to others, or when residence is confirmed but no responses can be obtained either by a response to a form or by a visit from a census worker.

According to the Census Bureau, imputation resulted in a reduction in net undercount for the decennial census of 1990; an additional 2.4 million people were added to the census count through imputation. The use of the term "reduction in ... undercount" seems like a double-negative. What the Bureau is saying is that 2.4 million individuals who were not included in the census because a failure to respond and/or to answer one or more questions in the census form were included in census numbers because the Bureau imputed residence, appropriate response, and then counted them.

Of course, accuracy of "actual enumeration" is questionable; so, too, is the absolute accuracy of sampling. But no matter how we are counted, census results are vitally important to our state and nation. And so is a reconsideration of statistical sampling, which has been demonstrated to be more accurate than "actual enumeration".

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About the Author

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Lydia Quarles is a Senior Policy Analyst at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government, Mississippi State University. She received her Juris Doctorate from Cumberland School of Law, Samford University, and her MA and BA from Mississippi University for Women, in 1972 and 1971 in political science and communication. After over a dozen years in the private practice of law in Alabama and Mississippi, she joined the Mississippi Workers' Compensation Commission as an Administrative Judge in 1993. Eight years later, in 2001, she was appointed Commissioner of the agency. In 2006, she resigned to join the Stennis Institute. Quarles remains active in bar work, and currently chairs the Women in the Profession Committee, a standing committee of the Mississippi Bar. She is a fellow of the Mississippi Bar Foundation, a recipient of the Mississippi Bar's Distinguished Service Award, and was recently honored by the American Bar Association for her lifetime contribution to Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice by receipt of the Mary C. Lawton Award which recognized her contributions to the Mississippi Workers' Compensation Commission in the areas of alternative dispute resolution and access for Hispanic labor. Quarles serves as a member of the Mississippi School for Math and Science Foundation Board and parliamentarian of Mississippi's First Alumnae Association. Quarles has been named one of Mississippi's 50 Leading Business Women by the Mississippi Business Journal; the Journal recognized her service to the State as a Commissioner as well as entrepreneurial skills developed in her property management business in Starkville, Spruill Property Management, LLC.

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