

PLANS FOR THE 1980 CENSUS

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The roundtable discussion ranged over many aspects of the plans and preparations for the 1980 Census of Population and Housing, which will be conducted as of April 1, 1980. There were two elements of immediate interest to the participants. One was the newly introduced bill--H.R. 8871--which would make major changes in the format of the 1980 census; the discussion was necessarily limited since copies of this lengthy and complex bill had been available for less than a week.

The second was the recent announcement that the 1980 census dress rehearsal program would include censuses of the Richmond, Va. area (Richmond City and Chesterfield and Henrico Counties) and two small counties in Colorado (LaPlata and Montezuma) in April 1978; and a census of a portion of New York City (that part of Manhattan below Houston Street) in September 1978. The purpose of the dress rehearsal program is to use the planned final materials and procedures in locations which simulate various conditions the Bureau will face in counting everyone in the U.S. in 1980. After the dress rehearsal, only those materials and procedures which do not appear satisfactory for 1980 will be revised. This is different from the Bureau's test censuses in which alternative methods and questionnaires were tried out in a number of areas across the country during the last few years.

The discussion then turned to changes in subject content, touching upon such matters as the elimination of the word "head" from the question on household relationship; the problems in developing satisfactory questions on race and ethnic origin; the inclusion of a question on total income for all persons (instead of the traditional limitation to a sample) because of the need for more reliable data for very small places to use in revenue sharing and other government program allocation formulas; the continuing issue of how to measure housing quality; and the expansion of questions on housing shelter costs to include homeowners as well as renters.

Also mentioned was the fact that the Bureau was considering reducing the size of the sample from 20 percent to approximately 17 percent (i.e., from 1 in 5 to 1 in 6). During the discussion on subject content, a question was raised about the occupational classification system the Bureau expects to use in 1980 and information was provided to the particular participant by the Census Bureau after the meeting.

It was pointed out that the Bureau's major concern for the 1980 census is how to improve population coverage in the face of apparently increasing public apathy or even hostility. The coverage problem is especially great among

minorities as suggested by the 1970 experience where the estimated rate of omission for blacks was approximately four times the rate for whites. Overall, the omission rate was estimated at 2.5 percent. The Bureau has undertaken a broad-scale and costly program to improve procedures and public communications, with special emphasis on minority groups. The dropoff in questionnaire mail-return rates experienced in recent pretest censuses was discussed, from the viewpoint of its impact on costs and time since more enumerator work is required in the followup of nonrespondents, as well as from the viewpoint of the dropoff being a potential indicator of public disinterest in cooperating in the census.

Mention was made of the fact that the first mid-decade population census is scheduled for 1985, in accordance with the law passed in late 1976. In approving this legislation, the Congress intentionally avoided establishing by law the scope and content of the mid-decade census. Rather, the legislation is flexible so that as the time approaches for detailed plans to be drawn, the Bureau of the Census may take into account data needs as seen for 1985. The Congress clearly intended that the law does not require that the mid-decade census duplicate the decennial census, provided that certain basic objectives are met--updates of characteristics along with population totals, particularly for the distribution of Federal funds to State and local governments, and the administration of Federal program benefits to various segments of the population.

Finally, the participants were informed that the Bureau has begun publication of an informal quarterly newsletter--entitled 1980 Census Update--which is available without charge to anyone interested in keeping informed on the progress of the 1980 census.