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General Government Division

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May 31, 2000

The Honorable Dan Miller
Chairman, Subcommittee on the Census
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

Subject: 2000 Census: Answers to Hearing Questions on the Status of Key Operations

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter responds to your request for additional information on census operational issues following the Subcommittee on the Census' February 15 hearing on the status of key census-taking activities. The enclosure contains our response to questions that we received from the Subcommittee. Because our response is based primarily on our previous work, we did not obtain comments from the Department of Commerce on a draft of this letter. However, we asked senior Bureau of the Census officials to review the letter's technical accuracy. In their May 24, 2000, reply, Bureau officials provided us with additional information on problems that occurred during the 1990 nonresponse follow-up operation and the steps the Bureau took to avoid similar difficulties for the 2000 Census. The Bureau also gave us further perspective on its use of proxy data. We incorporated this information as appropriate in our response to questions 6 and 7.

We are sending copies of this letter to the Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney, Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on the Census; the Honorable William M. Daley, Secretary of Commerce; and the Honorable Kenneth Prewitt, Director of the Bureau of the Census. We will make copies available to others upon request. If you have any questions concerning this letter, please contact me on (202) 512-8676.

Sincerely yours,

J. Christopher Mihm
Associate Director, Federal Management
and Workforce Issues

Enclosure

Responses to Subcommittee Questions Following the February 15, 2000, Hearing on Key Census-Taking Operations

1. The General Accounting Office (GAO) has suggested that the Census Bureau adopt some alternate form of contingency planning instead of relying on the Congress for a supplemental appropriation. Have you received any correspondence from the Census Bureau regarding your requests and have you been asked to make any recommendations?

In our December 1999 report, we recommended that the Director, Bureau of the Census, develop a contingency plan of actions the Bureau can take to address the operational challenges that would result from a questionnaire response rate that is lower than anticipated.¹ We also noted that the Bureau's plan should (1) address the budgetary, scheduling, staffing, and other logistical implications of collecting data from a larger number of nonresponding households and (2) include options and procedures to balance the pressure to complete nonresponse follow-up on schedule without compromising the quality of census data.

The national, initial response rate to the 2000 Census was 65 percent—4 percentage points above the 61-percent response rate that the Bureau had anticipated. However, not surprisingly, several local census offices are facing lower-than-expected response rates and, therefore, a larger than expected follow-up workload. Thus, at certain local census offices, completing nonresponse follow-up on schedule, without compromising the quality of census data, could be a concern.

In his written response to our recommendation, the Secretary of the Department of Commerce noted that Bureau officials share our “awareness of the challenges inherent in conducting a complete and thorough nonresponse follow-up operation.” However, the Secretary added that the current plan for the 2000 Census will produce the most accurate enumeration possible, and that the Bureau must devote its full attention to carrying out each component of that plan. The Secretary's comments echo those that the Bureau made on a draft of our December report. The Bureau noted that the only serious contingency would be to request a supplemental appropriation.

¹ 2000 Census: Contingency Planning Needed to Address Risks That Pose a Threat to a Successful Census (GAO/GGD-00-6, Dec. 14, 1999).

2. Please explain why the census is such a local endeavor, as I predominately hear reports from the Census Bureau of how the census is progressing on the national scale.

The census is in many respects a local endeavor because the key ingredients of a successful population count, such as a complete and accurate address list and timely and accurate field data collection, are carried out by locally recruited census employees going from one neighborhood to the next, often door-to-door. Moreover, critical tasks, such as building public awareness of the census and motivating people to respond as well as locating pockets of hard-to-count population groups, are accomplished in large part by partnerships between the Bureau and local governments and community groups. As a result, national-level data, although useful for providing an overall perspective on the census, tends to obscure operational challenges and successes at the local level that can affect the quality of the census.

3. In Mr. Mihm's testimony he talked about the difference between public awareness of the census and motivating the public to actually participate. Based on data from the 1990 Census and the dismal results from the 1998 dress rehearsal, do you have any reason to believe that the Census Bureau will be able to translate the high level of public awareness into participation for Census 2000? Do you have any other recommendations?

As we previously noted, the response rate to the 2000 Census was 65 percent—4 percentage points higher than what the Bureau had anticipated and equal to the 1990 Census response rate. The Bureau's accomplishment in this regard is particularly noteworthy given various attitudinal and demographic trends, including concerns over privacy and a larger non-English-speaking population, that act against a high response rate.

Still, preliminary data suggest that the Bureau was unable to translate high levels of census awareness into census participation. Indeed, although the response rate was 65 percent, various polls have suggested that the public's awareness of the census was significantly higher.

We will continue our assessment of the Bureau's outreach and promotion program and examine possible refinements and recommendations as data on the impact of the program become available.

4. Mr. Mihm also stated that the Census 2000 “Partnership Specialists,” the “Media Coordinators,” and the interaction of the Complete Count Committees are key to the success of Census 2000. Past experience from the 1998 dress rehearsal tells us that the partnership specialists were stretched too thin to make any sort of difference. Do you have any reason to believe that things will work better in this regard for Census 2000?

Bureau partnership specialists appear to be more thinly stretched, on average, for the 2000 Census, than they were for the dress rehearsal.² The Bureau hired over 600 partnership specialists to initiate and sustain local outreach and promotion initiatives, including Complete Count Committee activities. According to the Bureau, there are around 12,000 Complete Count Committees; thus, on average, each partnership specialist is responsible for assisting approximately 20 committees. During the South Carolina dress rehearsal, the Bureau’s two partnership specialists were each responsible for assisting an average of six Complete Count Committees. However, some committees never formed, while others became inactive, partly because the Bureau’s two partnership specialists were spread too thin to provide meaningful assistance.

We are assessing the impact that partnership specialists and Complete Count Committees had on the census as part of our longer-term review of the Bureau’s outreach and promotion program, and will report back to the Subcommittee as data are available.

5. Mr. Mihm testified that the Census Bureau could be challenged to complete nonresponse follow-up on schedule without compromising data quality. Please explain this further. What are the immovable deadlines?

Nonresponse follow-up began as scheduled on April 27, 2000, and is to be completed 10 weeks later on July 7, 2000. Completing the nonresponse follow-up workload within this time frame will be critical to collecting quality data because the census is progressing on a very tight schedule and the Bureau needs time to complete other census operations, including coverage evaluations that will be used to estimate census undercounts and overcounts.

² The dress rehearsal for the 2000 Census was held at three sites: Sacramento, CA; 11 South Carolina county governments and the city of Columbia; and Menominee County, WI, including the Menominee American Indian Reservation. The dress rehearsal tested the Bureau’s operations and procedures planned for the 2000 Census and was conducted in April 1998.

Moreover, the Bureau has found that the quality of data collected during its field follow-up efforts declines over time in part because people move or tend to forget who was residing at their households on Census Day. Further, to complete nonresponse follow-up on schedule, the Bureau may need to rely more heavily on data collected from secondhand sources, such as neighbors. Such data are not as reliable as data collected directly from household members.

6. As I understand it, the Census Bureau has to follow-up on roughly 46 million nonresponding households during the nonresponse follow-up stage of Census 2000. They plan to do all of this in 10 weeks. On the other hand, it took the Census Bureau 14 weeks to finish nonresponse follow-up for 34 million households in 1990. That seems like an unreasonable time frame to do considerably more work. Please discuss how the Census Bureau could intentionally or unintentionally cut corners to get this larger workload done in a shorter period of time.

During the 1990 Census, the nonresponse follow-up operation was scheduled to last for 6 weeks—from April 26 through June 6. However, because of an unexpectedly sharp decline in the mail response rate, many local census offices had to cope with follow-up workloads greater than those offices originally planned to handle. High turnover and other staffing difficulties also hampered the timely completion of nonresponse follow-up in 1990. Thus, according to the Bureau, by June 4, 1990, the Bureau had finished just 70 percent of its 34 million housing unit follow-up workload, and did not fully complete the operation until July 30, about 14 weeks after it began.

The Bureau's nonresponse follow-up workload for 2000 is about 42 million housing units, and it has scheduled 10 weeks to complete the operation. Thus, compared to 1990, the Bureau has less time to complete a larger workload. However, in planning the 2000 nonresponse follow-up operation, the Bureau took steps to avoid the problems it encountered in 1990. For example, to address expected turnover, the Bureau planned to hire two people for each of its 146,000 enumerator positions. Most local census offices met this goal.

In addition, the Bureau's nonresponse follow-up operation was helped by a higher-than-expected response rate. Indeed, because the response rate was 65 percent as opposed to the anticipated 61 percent, the Bureau needs to collect data from about 4 million fewer households than initially planned.

Nevertheless, with a follow-up workload of 42 million households, the Bureau still faces a tremendous task. Therefore, as the 10-week time frame allotted for nonresponse follow-up winds down, it will be important for the Bureau to monitor proxy data use to ensure that enumerators are complying with proper procedures so as not to reduce data quality.

7. We have recently learned that there were alarmingly high levels of proxy data collected during the nonresponse follow-up stage of the dress rehearsals for all three of the sites. Why did the Census Bureau have to cut corners and collect proxy data to get out of the field so early to finish nonresponse follow-up?

During the dress rehearsal, nonresponse follow-up operations were completed on schedule in both Menominee and Sacramento and 6 days ahead of schedule in South Carolina. However, the Bureau relied more heavily on proxy data than it had planned. As shown in table 1, although the Bureau hoped to limit the portion of the nonresponse follow-up universe enumerated by proxy to less than 6 percent, the Bureau did not achieve this objective at any of the three dress rehearsal sites.

Table 1: Dress Rehearsal Households Enumerated by Proxy

Dress rehearsal site	Percentage of the occupied nonresponse follow-up universe enumerated by proxy
Sacramento	20.1%
South Carolina	16.4
Menominee	11.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

According to the Bureau, one reason for the comparatively high use of proxy data was that obtaining interviews with household members proved to be more difficult than the Bureau had anticipated.

The Bureau has not set a specific goal for the level of proxy data for the 2000 Census because, according to the Bureau, data from the dress rehearsal and other census experience were insufficient to determine what a reasonable proxy rate should be. However, the Bureau wants to minimize the use of proxy data as much as possible.

8. Mr. Mihm stated in his testimony that it may cost at least \$57 to enumerate each housing unit for 2000 compared to about \$31 in 1990. This is an increase of 84 percent in 1999 dollars. Do you agree that the Census Bureau could have planned better to help mitigate this tremendous cost increase?

We have not reviewed the extent to which better planning could have mitigated the substantial increase in census costs that the Bureau experienced. However, this issue will be examined as part of our ongoing review of the 2000 Census and lessons learned for 2010.

9. Mr. Mihm testified during a recent data processing test in Pomona, CA, Census 2000 employees were only able to check-in 54 percent of their goal for census short forms. Short form questionnaires go to 5 out of 6 households across the country. If this situation is not remedied do you foresee any significant risks that could jeopardize the release of timely data?

Checking-in census forms, both short and long, is one of a series of interrelated steps in the Bureau's process for capturing census data; thus, any material delay in checking-in forms could adversely affect the timeliness of downstream activities, such as determining nonrespondents and tabulating final results. To correct the problems that surfaced during the Pomona site operational test, the Bureau's contractor provided additional training and practice time for the personnel who perform the check-in activities. Subsequently, during the actual census, the operations at the Pomona data capture center, as well as at the Bureau's three other data capture centers, have received and checked-in the required number of forms. For example, according to Bureau data, as of May 14, the Pomona data capture center received and checked-in over 24 million questionnaires, which is about 2 million more than planned.

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