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

Subject: 2000 Census: Information on Short- and Long-Form Response Rates

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter responds to your request for information on response rates for short- and long-form questionnaires in the (1) 2000 Census, (2) 1998 Census Dress Rehearsal, (3) 1990 Census, and (4) 1988 Census Dress Rehearsal. Our information is based on historical data and 2000 Census preliminary response rates from the Bureau of the Census and is contained in the enclosure.

On May 17, 2000, we requested comments on a draft of this letter from the Secretary of Commerce. However, comments were not provided in time to be included in this letter. We performed our work in April and May, 2000, in Washington, D.C., in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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

Sincerely yours,

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

Enclosure

# Short- and Long-Form Response and Return Rates

## Short- and Long-Form Response Rate Differentials Have Been Increasing

The questionnaire response rate provides an indication of the scope of the Bureau’s field follow-up operation with nonresponding households. The response rate is defined as the percentage of all forms mailed or left by enumerators that are completed and mailed back by respondents.<sup>1</sup> Although response rate data include housing units that are later identified as vacant, uninhabitable, or nonexistent during nonresponse follow-up, such data provide a general indication of the level of public cooperation close to Census Day.

During the 1990 and 2000 Census cycles, questionnaire response rates were higher for the short-form questionnaire than for the long-form questionnaire. However, as shown in table 1, the gap between the two rates has generally widened over time. For example, the differential between the short- and long-form response rates ranged from 5.1 percentage points to 8.7 percentage points during the 1988 Dress Rehearsal for the 1990 Census. A decade later, during the Dress Rehearsal for the 2000 Census, the differential ranged from 8.2 percentage points to 14.7 percentage points. For the 2000 Census, preliminary Bureau data show that, continuing this trend, the response rate differential for the 2000 Census is 12.5 percentage points—over twice that of the 1990 Census.

**Table 1: Short- and Long-Form Questionnaire Response Rates, by Census or Test**

Census or test	Short form	Long form	Percentage point differential
<b>2000 Census (preliminary)<sup>a</sup></b>	66.6%	54.1%	12.5
<b>1998 Dress Rehearsal<sup>b</sup></b>			
South Carolina	55.4	43.7	11.7
Sacramento	55.4	40.7	14.7
Menominee	40.6	32.4	8.2
<b>1990 Census</b>	66.0	60.0	6.0
<b>1988 Dress Rehearsal</b>			
St. Louis City	50.3	44.4	5.9
East Central Missouri	57.7	52.6	5.1
Eastern Washington	56.5	47.8	8.7

<sup>a</sup>Final data are not yet available.

<sup>b</sup>The 1998 Dress Rehearsal was conducted in Sacramento, CA; 11 counties in the Columbia, SC, area; and Menominee County, WI, including the Menominee Indian Reservation.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

<sup>1</sup> For the 2000 Census, the Bureau used what it refers to as an “initial response rate” to provide a measure of the scope of the field follow-up operation with nonresponding households. This initial rate is defined as the percentage of all questionnaires that were completed and returned by April 18, 2000. The rate included the number of questionnaires that were mailed back, transmitted via the Internet, or completed over the telephone through the Bureau’s Telephone Questionnaire Assistance program. It also included “Be Counted Forms” that could be matched to a specific census identification number.

As shown in table 2, for the 2000 Census, the Bureau had anticipated a 6.2 percentage point response rate differential between the short and long forms. However, the actual difference grew to 12.5 percentage points because the response rate to the short form was higher than anticipated, while the response rate to the long form was somewhat lower than anticipated.

**Table 2: Anticipated and Actual Response Rates to the 2000 Census Short- and Long-Form Questionnaires**

<b>Response rate</b>	<b>Short form</b>	<b>Long form</b>	<b>Percentage point differential</b>
Anticipated	62.1%	55.9%	6.2
Actual <sup>a</sup>	66.6	54.1	12.5
Difference between anticipated and actual	4.5	(1.8)	6.3

<sup>a</sup>Final data are not yet available.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

After the 1990 Census, the Bureau expected a more difficult time obtaining public cooperation in 2000 because of many factors, including concerns about privacy, lack of confidence in civic institutions, non-English speaking immigrants, and illiteracy rates. In response, the Bureau took several actions designed to boost response rates—including developing streamlined and simplified questionnaires, a paid advertising campaign, and partnerships with local governments and other organizations. The overall (short and long form) initial response rate for 2000 was 65 percent—about what it was in 1990 and 4 percentage points above what the Bureau had anticipated. Nevertheless, the 1990 experience, the 1998 Dress Rehearsal results, and other demographic and societal trends that we, and the Bureau, have often noted throughout the decade suggested that there likely would continue to be a significant, and perhaps growing, short- and long-form questionnaire differential mail response rate for the 2000 Census.

As shown in table 3, short- and long-form differential mail return rates have followed a similar pattern to differential response rates—that is, increasing over time. The mail return rate is defined as the percentage of forms completed and returned for occupied housing units. Therefore, the rate is considered the more precise measure of public cooperation with the census and is calculated after the census is completed. Return rates for the 2000 Census are not yet available.

**Enclosure**  
**Short- and Long-Form Mail Response and Mail Return Rates**

**Table 3: Short- and Long-Form Questionnaire Return Rates, by Census or Test**

Census or test	Short form	Long form	Percentage point differential
<b>2000 Census</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>1998 Dress Rehearsal:</b>			
South Carolina	64.7%	51.9%	12.8
Sacramento	63.1	47.7	15.4
Menominee	59.1	48.3	10.8
<b>1990 Census</b>	74.9	70.4	4.5
<b>1988 Dress Rehearsal:</b>			
St. Louis City	62.4	56.6	5.8
East Central Missouri	73.4	69.2	4.2
Eastern Washington	64.0	54.2	9.8

Legend: N/A = Not available

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

## Response Rates Before and After Dress Rehearsal Replacement Mailing

During the 1998 Dress Rehearsal, the Bureau mailed a second, “replacement” questionnaire to all housing units located in mailout/mailback areas in South Carolina and Sacramento. The Bureau hoped that the second questionnaire would help improve the response rate.<sup>2</sup> The initial forms were mailed between March 28 and 31, 1998. Replacement forms were mailed between April 15 and 17, 1998. The cutoff date for determining mail response rates was May 7, 1998. Table 4 shows that although the response rates in both Dress Rehearsal sites increased after the replacement mailing, the differential response rates between the short- and long-form questionnaires did not change significantly—decreasing by 2.5 percentage points in South Carolina and increasing by 0.1 percentage point in Sacramento.

**Table 4: 1998 Census Dress Rehearsal Short- and Long-Form Response Rates Before and After the Replacement Mailing**

Dress Rehearsal site	Short form			Long form			Short- and long-form differential	
	Initial response rate	Response after replacement mailing	Difference	Initial response rate	Response after replacement mailing	Difference	Before replacement mailing	After replacement mailing
South Carolina	41.4%	56.8%	15.4	27.7%	45.6%	17.9	13.7	11.2
Sacramento	41.0	55.4	14.4	26.4	40.7	14.3	14.6	14.7

Note: The Bureau did not use a replacement mailing at its Menominee test site and rural sections of the South Carolina test site. The replacement mailing was used in Sacramento and the house number/street name area of the South Carolina site.

Source: GAO analysis based on Bureau of the Census data.

<sup>2</sup> The Bureau decided against using a replacement questionnaire for the 2000 Census because, among other reasons, it appeared to have confused the public.

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