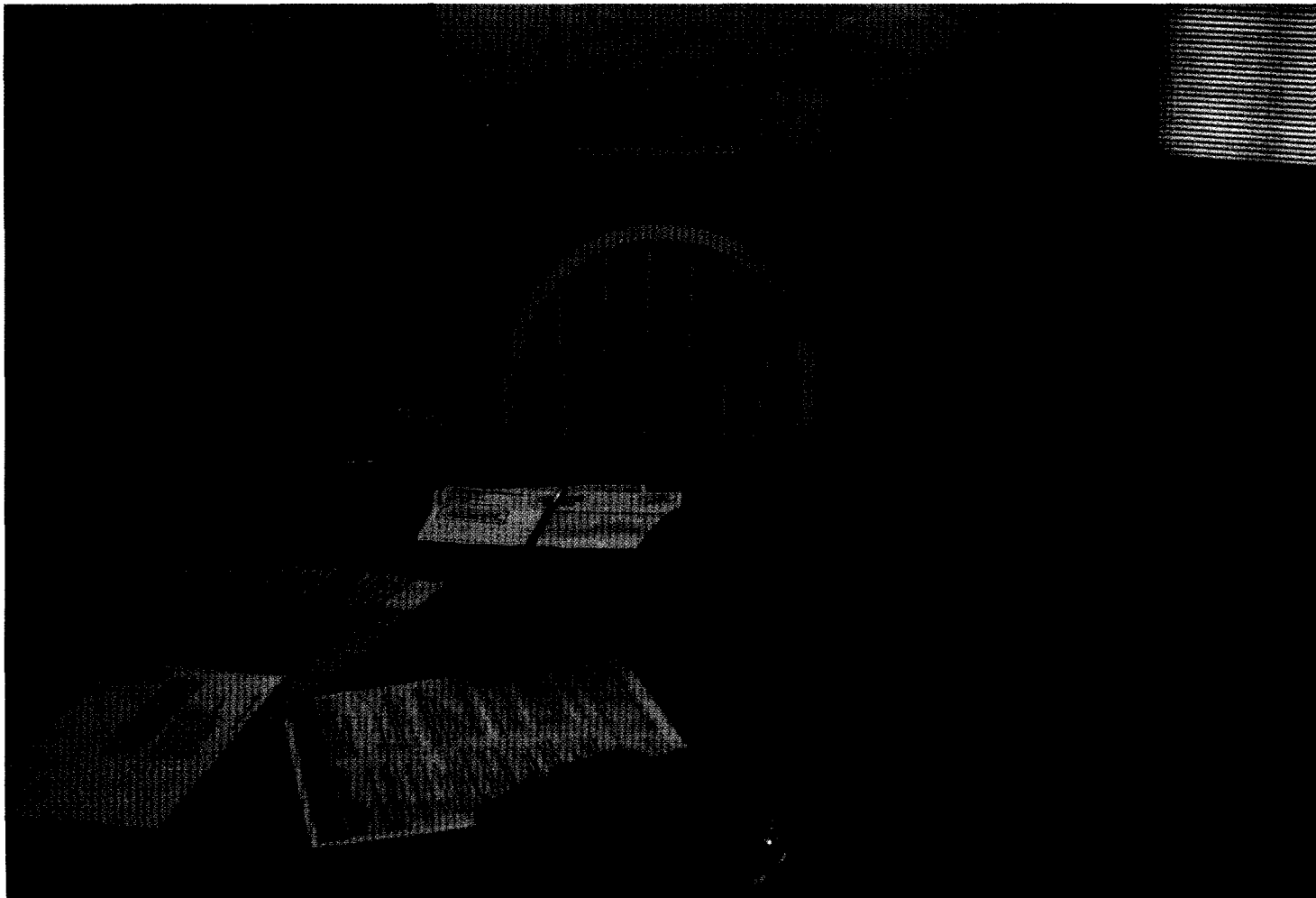


The Decennial Census Under Fire

By Howard Fienberg



Data produced by the Census underpins nearly all aspects of survey and opinion research. The Census forms the baseline sample units for virtually every survey performed in the United States; the innovative research methods that a well-funded Census can develop benefit researchers of almost every kind; and a properly financed Census can promote proper data use, minimize respondent burden, respect individual privacy and ensure confidentiality.

CMOR, a division of the Marketing Research Association, has been advocating for Census funding for years. We have also helped head off threats to the integrity of the decennial count and

promote an accurate, complete Census.

Funding for the 2010 Census Moving Along

The House of Representatives approved their version of the Fiscal Year 2010 (FY10) Commerce-Justice-State (CJS) appropriations bill (H.R. 2847) on June 18, including more than \$7 billion for the Census Bureau.

The Senate Appropriations Committee passed their own Census-funding bill later in June, allocating \$7.324 billion for the Census Bureau, meeting the full Administration budget request for all agency programs, except for a reduction in mileage reimbursement for temporary

2010 Census employees.

CMOR continues to advocate for Census funding in Congress, though we expect to be busy this fall. Congress is not likely to pass many of their appropriations legislation before the start of the new fiscal year, there will be a series of “continuing resolutions” designed to continue funding federal programs at the set level from FY09 until Congress can either agree to a compromise on funding between the House and Senate. Such a compromise is hard to achieve in any timely fashion, and the legislation funding the Census will likely be wrapped into an “omnibus” bill funding hundreds of different agencies all at once late in

the year.

Because increased funds are particularly necessary for the rollout of the decennial count, CMOR will be working with our allies to try to ensure that those funds are approved no matter what the overall legislative situation.

New Director for the Bureau

The Obama Administration delayed the nomination of a new director for the Census Bureau in order to first secure a nominee for Secretary of Commerce (the Department that oversees the Bureau). In the early spring, Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) was nominated for Commerce, but faced withering criticism, including for his previous criticisms of the Census Bureau. After Administration officials tried to reassure some groups that the Administration would oversee the Census rather than the Commerce Secretary, concern grew in other circles that the Administration would attempt to statistically adjust the results of the decennial Census (and increased interest in making the Bureau an independent agency, as you can read about on page 17).

Senator Gregg withdrew his nomination, Gary Locke was confirmed instead shortly thereafter, and then the survey and opinion research profession was thrilled to see one of our own, Robert Groves, nominated to head the Census Bureau. Dr. Robert Groves, who was Research Professor at the University of Michigan, is a long-time expert in survey methodology and statistics. He has also served as an associate director of the Census Bureau from 1990 to 1992.

CMOR worked with our coalition partners in the Census Project for months to help shepherd him to confirmation – which finally happened when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid broke a procedural “hold,” a Senate procedural quirk allowing a pair of Senators to delay activity indefinitely. After winning the “cloture” vote 76 to 15, the Senate quickly approved Dr. Groves’ nomination to run the Census.

Census Boycotts in the Making

In news interviews, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) has said she and her family would refuse to answer questions in the Census next year, aside from the number of people in her home. As she told the *Washington Times* on June 17, “We won’t be answering any information beyond [how many people are in our

home], because the Constitution doesn’t require any information beyond that.”

Article I, section 2, of the Constitution, as modified by the 14th Amendment, requires a census of population every 10 years for purposes of congressional apportionment, in “such Manner as they [Congress] shall by Law direct.”

Although Rep. Bachmann later told a Fox News interviewer, “I’m not en-

“The Census forms the baseline sample units for virtually every survey performed in the United States.”

couraging Americans not to fill out the Census,” concerns remain that she will encourage Americans, perhaps even inadvertently, to avoid responding to the decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS). Her comments have been reiterated by talking heads, including Glenn Beck.

Republican Congressmen Patrick McHenry (R-NC), Lynn Westmoreland (R-GA) and John Mica (R-FL), all members of the House Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census and National Archives, countered Rep. Bachmann on July 1, emphasizing that, “Boycotting the constitutionally-mandated Census is illogical, illegal and not in the best interest of our country.” The congressmen also suggested that refusal to answer all or most questions in the questionnaire would result in less accurate data and encourage the use of statistical adjustment of Census data.

Rep. Bachmann followed up her public comments by cosponsoring legislation with Rep. Ted Poe (R-TX). H.R. 3131 that would gut the ACS, limiting questionnaires to four questions: Name, contact information, date of response, and number of people living or staying at the same address. This mandatory survey administered by the Census Bureau is sent to 3 million households every year and covers many topics, including race, ethnicity, gender and education, and replaced the traditional Census long form four years ago.

The Bureau tested a voluntary response option to the ACS and discovered what any researcher could have told them: mail response rates dropped by more than 20 percentage points, overall response and completion rates tanked, and the survey’s cost would increase by more than 30 percent.

Conservatives are not the only groups threatening potential non-response havoc for the decennial count. The National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders (CONLAMIC), representing 20,000 churches in 34 states, has called for a boycott of the Census among illegal alien residents. An April 18 statement announcing the boycott said the CONLAMIC hoped to compel the Obama

Administration and Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform. They have been aggressively countered by Hispanic and other minority activist groups.

Preparations Continue

Door-to-door information gathering kicks-off Census 2010 in distant Alaskan villages in January of next year. Don’t forget to respond yourself to your questionnaires – and your responsibility as a member of the survey and opinion research profession to encourage others to respond as well.

Resources

- Information on confidentiality in the Census: <http://www.census.gov/privacy/>
- For more on conservative concerns about statistical adjustment of Census results, see this report from the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee (Republican Minority): <http://republicans.oversight.house.gov/media/pdfs/20090511Censusreport.pdf>

Photo courtesy of U.S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office (PIO).



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