

**THE POLITICS OF COUNTING****J. Ronald Milavsky**

The preceding article by Barbara Bryant, Director of the US Bureau of the census, describes the massive projects undertaken to count the last person who could be counted in the 1990 census. In all, these projects added 2% to the total. But there is reason to believe that there still are some people living in the US who eluded all these efforts. Two separate studies mentioned by Bryant both indicate an undercount.

**A Difficult Choice**

One is the Post Enumeration Survey of a sample of 156,000 households covering 1400 separate subgroups of the population. The basic idea is that carefully done sample surveys might be more accurate than total counts of large complex societies. The survey then becomes a basis for making estimates of the number of people in the various subgroups. Sample surveys have errors too, however, and in this case, even though 156,000 households is a very large sample, it is not large enough to provide estimates with small error ranges for all of the 1400 groups. Nevertheless, this study indicates an undercount, especially of blacks and Hispanics, especially in major cities.

The other study is based on vital statistics record keeping. Begin with a good census number, add in births and immigration, including the illegal variety, and subtract deaths. Among the problems are the validity of the base census number, the quality and thoroughness of the record keeping of births, deaths, and immigration, and the accuracy of the estimate for illegal immigration. Record keeping is thought to be very good, but estimates always have a questionable range. Nevertheless, this study, too, indicates that the census missed people.

The study based on vital statistics was expected to show a greater undercount—on the theory that it is harder to hide from vital statistics keeping than from census or survey tables. But in this case, the Post Enumeration Survey showed a greater undercount. The two studies are a mere 600,000 people apart, representing about two tenths of a percent of the 254 million population—which is not a disparity of major proportions. There is not yet an official explanation for this difference.

So on the one hand it seems as though there is an undercount. On the other hand, the exact size isn't known and therefore must be estimated. Furthermore, after estimating there is the enormous difficulty of how actually to add the estimated people to each of the thousands of census tracts.

**A Political Choice**

The Secretary of Commerce has authority to make the decision to adjust or not to adjust the census for the estimated undercount. It should be clear from the above discussion that his decision cannot be made with exactitude based on the science of numbers. It is going to be a judgment call. And that means it will be a political decision. What are the politics of the decision?

Census undercounts did not become a major issue until the 1980 census, when the City of New York sued the Secretary of Commerce. The plaintiff's complaint was that the Census Bureau had failed to count all the people living in the city. If true, that was going to cost New York City a great deal in growth in aid. Representation in Congress was at stake.

It's not hard to see why the politics of the census count has become much more serious in recent years: The amount of money at issue has increased so markedly. Put in constant 1982 dollars, all federal grants in aid to state and local governments totaled \$25 billion in 1960. The figure then climbed sharply to \$61 billion in 1970, \$87 in 1975, and \$106 billion in 1980—at which point in constant dollar terms it actually dropped, standing at \$101 billion in fiscal 1990. The drop, though, only further increased the census count's political saliency, leaving state and local governments even more anxious to get all possible revenue. Not all, or even most, of the grant-in-aid moneys are allocated on formulas dependent on the census count, but as Barbara Bryant notes a whopping \$27 billion is affected.

The settlement reached in the suit growing out of the 1980 census required the Secretary of Commerce to establish a committee of experts to advise him on whether or not an adjustment for an undercount is warranted. Each member of the committee is required to provide an individual recommendation. For the 1990 census, the Secretary appointed a committee of eight, four of whom were the nominees of the plaintiffs in the 1980 census case. The members are Eugene R. Erickson, Temple University, Co-Chair; Lance Tarrance Jr., Tarrance Associates, Co-Chair; Leobardo F. Estrada, UCLA; William Kruskal, University of Chicago; J. Michael McGehee, McGehee and Associates; John W. Tukey; Princeton University; Kenneth Wachter, University of California-Berkeley; and Kirk M. Walter, A.C. Nielsen Co.

**New York City vs. the Sun Belt**

If this seems to you like a set-up for a split decision, you are quite right. The committee did split into two equal sized groups, each under a co-chair. As one member characterized it to *The Public Perspective*: One side is

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recommending that the Secretary adjust for the undercount no matter what, and the other side is recommending that the Secretary not adjust, no matter what. The "adjust" group are the people nominated by the plaintiffs in the 1980 case. The "don't adjust" side are the people appointed by the Secretary of Commerce. It's really the City of New York against the Sun Belt.

The fact that all the Secretary of Commerce appointees are arguing that there should be no adjustment to the undercount could be a tip-off to the decision that the Secretary is empowered to make. It certainly would be an ironic surprise for the Secretary to decide in favor of adjustment in the face of an opposite conclusion from his appointees. But there already are several ironies on display here. One is that politics will once again prove more powerful than science in deciding what is statistically accurate. Another is that the judgment in the 1980 case providing some hope of recourse to cities by allowing them to pick half of the undercount recommendation panel may come a bit short of actually helping them. A third is that the very legislation that Congresses of the 1960s and

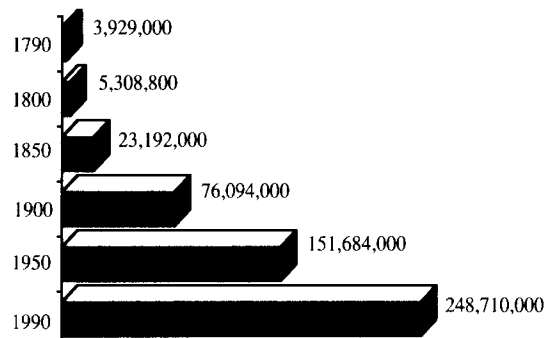
1970s enacted to redress the balance of power from rural to urban areas is proving to curb somewhat the monies going to the cities.

A final irony is that all this makes the Bureau of the Census look bad when it's actually very good. The 1990 count may be a little worse than the 1980 count—we still really don't know whether or how much—but the US has become much more difficult to count in that decade. In both 1980 and 1990, we are fighting over the last tiny fractions of the population—which are not at all important to most things. The business community, for example, is very satisfied with the census count as it is. It is the sharing of political power and the allocation of resources that make the last fractions important, and these only because of the way the legislation is written.

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*J. Ronald Milavsky is professor of communication sciences, and associate director of the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.*

### GROWTH OF A NATION: U.S. POPULATION, 1790-1990



### Race as a Percent of Population

	White	Nonwhite
1790	80.7%	19.3%
1800	84.3	18.9
1850	84.3	15.6
1900	87.9	12.1
1950	89.5	10.5
1990	84.1 (est.)	15.9

Source: US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, 1975); *idem.*, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1990* (Washington, 1990).