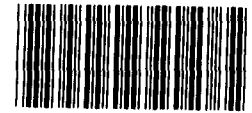


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Expanding the Role of Local Governments:  
an Important Element of Census Reform

Statement of  
L. Nye Stevens, Director  
Government Business Operations Issues  
General Government Division

Before the  
Subcommittee on Census and Population  
Committee on Post Office and Civil Service  
House of Representatives



EXPANDING THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:  
AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF CENSUS REFORM

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT  
L. NYE STEVENS  
DIRECTOR, GOVERNMENT BUSINESS  
OPERATIONS ISSUES

GAO believes that today's hearing, which is being held in conjunction with the United States Conference of Mayors' annual meeting, underscores the important role that many local governments played in determining the degree to which the census was successful in their areas. Local governments clearly benefit from actively participating in the census because they have a direct stake in a complete and accurate census. Census data are used to reapportion congressional seats, redistrict state and local political boundaries, and help guide the distribution of billions of dollars in federal funds.

Despite the obvious importance of participation, many local governments could not or did not take advantage of available opportunities to improve the accuracy of the 1990 census. For example, Census Bureau response data and a GAO survey showed that almost 32 percent of eligible governments participated in the precensus phase of reviewing the Bureau's preliminary housing unit counts for their areas. Still, the majority of eligible communities lost an important opportunity to help improve the census count in their areas.

Given the importance of local government participation, the Bureau needs to ensure that it creates opportunities for governments to work with the Bureau as fully as possible. Part of creating these opportunities should entail developing various strategies for working with communities of different sizes. Local governments themselves also can enhance their opportunities for participation by approaching the Bureau and engaging in a broad and creative dialogue on local government participation in the census.

To their credit, the Department of Commerce and the Bureau realize that the fundamental census reform needed for the 2000 census will require the active participation of a broad range of interested parties, including state and local governments. As key users of census data, state and local governments should continue to have an important role in the wide-ranging policy debate over what data will be collected through the census. The Bureau's plans also acknowledge that state and local governments have important input to provide on basic census design. Such participation in planning the 2000 census is important because many of the reforms under consideration may necessitate an even greater level of participation in 2000 than that needed for the 1990 census.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We welcome the opportunity to be here today to discuss local governments' participation in the decennial census. Today's hearing, which is being held in conjunction with the United States Conference of Mayors' annual meeting, is particularly appropriate because it underscores the important role that local governments played in determining the degree to which the census was successful in their areas. Furthermore, the active participation of local governments in the design, planning, and execution of the 2000 census may be even more important than it was in 1990, especially if substantial changes to the current census methodology are to be instituted.

My comments today are based on the work we have been doing over the last several years at the request of the Subcommittee to monitor the execution of the 1990 census and the initial planning of the 2000 census.

CENSUS BUREAU AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS  
BOTH GAIN FROM CLOSE COOPERATION

The Census Bureau relied on the active participation of local governments at several important points in the 1990 decennial census. For example, local governments had critical roles in --helping to determine what data would be collected on the census questionnaire,

--encouraging public participation through various publicity and outreach efforts, and

--helping to improve the completeness of the Bureau's address list and the accuracy of the population counts through the census local review program.

Local governments clearly benefit from actively participating in the census because they have a direct stake in the outcome. First and foremost, of course, an accurate census is important to ensuring the proper distribution of political representation among and within the states. In addition, census data are used to help guide the distribution of billions of dollars in federal funds. We reported in 1990 that in fiscal year 1989, 93 federal formula programs involving funds totaling \$27.5 billion used Bureau population data, in whole or in part, to determine program eligibility or distribute funds to state and local governments.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the obvious importance of participation, many local governments could not or did not take advantage of available opportunities to improve the accuracy and completeness of the census. For example, local government participation in the 1990 census local review program was limited. The program had two

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<sup>1</sup>Federal Formula Programs: Outdated Population Data Used to Allocate Most Funds (GAO/HRD-90-145, Sept. 1990).

phases: one before Census Day and one after Census Day. The Bureau provided eligible local governments with housing unit counts at the census block level and asked the governments to identify blocks where the Bureau's housing counts may have been incorrect. The Bureau recanvassed such blocks and added units it had missed. According to the Bureau, only 16 percent of the eligible local governments responded in precensus local review and about 24 percent responded in postcensus local review.

We surveyed a stratified random sample of 1,047 of the approximately 17,000 local governments that did not respond to precensus local review.<sup>2</sup> We found that the actual participation rate, as opposed to the response rate, was somewhat higher than the Bureau response rate data imply. We estimate that about 13 percent of local governments reviewed the Bureau counts and did not identify major problems. These localities did not contact the Bureau, while an additional 2.5 percent responded through another level of government. Our survey indicates that the documented participation rate was about 32 percent of the eligible governments. Still, the majority of eligible communities--those that did not participate in local review--lost

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<sup>2</sup>According to the Bureau, about 21,000 of the approximately 39,000 local governments were eligible to participate in precensus local review. Our sample was designed to provide estimates at 95 percent confidence, plus or minus 5 percent precision. See Decennial Census: Status of Housing Coverage Check and Postcensus Local Review Program (GAO/T-GGD-90-63, Sept. 25, 1990) for additional discussion of the survey results.

an important opportunity to help improve the accuracy and completeness of the census count in their area.

Local government participation also was important in counting hard-to-reach and traditionally undercounted populations. For example, as part of its efforts to enumerate components of the homeless population during the 1990 Shelter and Street Night (S-Night), the Bureau asked the nation's approximately 39,000 local governments to supplement its list of shelters and to identify street locations where the homeless could be found at night.<sup>3</sup>

While all but 19 of the more than 1,300 governments with populations of over 50,000 answered the Bureau's request, overall only 36 percent of all governmental units responded.

In cases where the government did not respond, the Bureau enumerated any shelters it had identified from other sources but made no independent attempt to identify and enumerate persons at street locations. In short, similar to the census generally the completeness of a community's S-Night count was directly influenced by the extent to which the local government assisted the Bureau by identifying shelters and street locations.

Given the importance of local government participation, the Bureau needs to ensure that, to the maximum extent feasible, it

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<sup>3</sup>Counting the Homeless: Limitations of 1990 Census Results and Methodology (GAO/R-91-29, May 9, 1991).

creates opportunities for governments to work with the Bureau. Part of creating such opportunities should entail developing various strategies for working with communities of different sizes. As a first step, the Bureau needs to intensively survey local governments that did not respond in local review to determine reasons for nonresponse and the specific Bureau and local government actions that are needed to increase participation.

If the Bureau pursues a local review program similar to the 1990 approach for the 2000 census, the Bureau will need to recognize that communities of different sizes have different abilities to participate. Our survey of local governments that did not participate in precensus local review, found that the absence of a local government response cannot be considered agreement with the Bureau's housing unit counts. On the basis of respondent answers, we estimate that 44 percent of the governments that did not review the Bureau's counts lacked funds, expertise, or staff to carry out the program; and 31 percent lacked the housing unit data of their own at the block level that were required to validate the Bureau's count. These problems were especially acute for small communities with populations under 12,500. As a result, we believe that the Bureau will need to consider allowing small communities to review counts at geographic levels higher than census blocks for the 2000 census.

While the Bureau must be sensitive to the diversity in the sizes and abilities of the nation's communities, local governments of all sizes also must fully appreciate the importance of working with the Bureau to ensure as complete a census count as possible. The widespread concern expressed by local governments and others about the nature and extent of the 1990 census undercount shows that there is a growing appreciation of the importance of an accurate and complete census.<sup>4</sup>

However, the results of our survey indicate that some local governments may not have given the census the priority attention it deserves. We estimate that 17 percent of the local governments were not sure if they had participated in the program. Other nonparticipating local governments incorrectly believed that they had not received precensus local review material from the Bureau. For example, 61 governments that responded to our survey said they had not received such material. However, in virtually all cases, the Bureau was able to document that the local government received the material.

The responsibilities for the partnership between the Bureau and local governments work both ways: The Bureau must provide realistic opportunities for the governments to participate, and

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<sup>4</sup>See 1990 Census Adjustment: Estimating Census Accuracy - A Complex Task (GAO/GGD-91-42, Mar. 1991) for a discussion of the 1990 census Post Enumeration Survey (PES), the primary methodology that the Secretary of Commerce is using to decide whether to adjust the census for over- and undercounts.



the governments need to take maximum advantage of available opportunities. Local governments themselves also can enhance their opportunities for participation by approaching the Bureau and engaging in a broad and creative dialogue on local government participation in the census.

CENSUS REFORM WILL REQUIRE INCREASED  
STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION

At the urging of the Office of Management and Budget and Congress, the Department of Commerce has committed to an ambitious reform program for the 2000 census. As you know, Mr. Chairman, we believe that such an effort is clearly needed given the longstanding and intractable challenges that the Bureau confronted in taking the 1990 census.<sup>5</sup> To their credit, the Department and the Bureau realize that fundamental census reform requires the active participation of a broad range of interested parties, including state and local governments. Most broadly, as key users of census data, state and local governments should continue to have an important role in the wide-ranging policy debate over what data will be collected through the census. As an acknowledgement of the importance of local government participation in the census, the Department's plans call for

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<sup>5</sup>Decennial Census: Preliminary 1990 Lessons Learned Indicate Need to Rethink Census Approach (GAO/T-GGD-90-18, August 8, 1990).

representatives from local governments to be on its advisory committee for the 2000 census.

The Bureau's plans also acknowledge that state and local governments have important input to provide on the basic design of the 2000 census. State and local government participation in planning the 2000 census is important because many of the reforms under consideration would necessitate an even greater level of participation in 2000 than that needed for the 1990 census. For example, efforts to streamline the census by gathering some data from state and local government administrative records would require the Bureau and the governments to work together to ensure that the data from the records are of high quality and comparable across areas. In testimony before the Subcommittee in February 1991, we discussed how administrative records were used in the 1990 census, particularly as part of efforts to improve census coverage among parolees and probationers.<sup>6</sup>

State and local governments also may have a key role to play throughout the decade in enhancing the quality of the Bureau's address list and devising strategies to count hard-to-reach populations. For example, the Bureau plans to examine the possibility of establishing closer relationships with state and local governments to gather building construction and demolition

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<sup>6</sup>Components of the 1990 Census Count (GAO/T-GGD-91-8, Feb. 21, 1991).

data. Further, there is a growing awareness that the Bureau will need to employ various data collection strategies to enumerate the nation's increasingly diverse population. State and local governments may have valuable insights into methods to effectively count an elusive population.

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In summary Mr. Chairman, the success of the decennial census requires a strong partnership between the Bureau and local governments--one probably much stronger than commonly recognized. Moreover, a successful 2000 census demands that the Bureau and local governments work even more closely together throughout the coming decade. It is in the best interests of both the Bureau and the governments to make sure their important partnership yields the most complete count possible.

This concludes my prepared statement. My colleague and I would be pleased to respond to questions.

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