

Honorable Kenneth Prewitt, PhD.

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**THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT,
GOVERNMENT INFORMATION, FEDERAL SERVICES, AND
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND
SECURITY AND
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

Thank you Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn and Members of the committee for this opportunity to testify today on addressing the differential Undercount in the decennial census as well as lessons learned from the 2000 Census to help prepare for the 2010 Census. I will touch on four points:

What is an accurate census?

What is a fair census?

How to achieve both.

How to know whether we did.

During the 2000 Census, at the Bureau we coined the phrase “the largest peace time mobilization in American history” to convey the size, complexity and sensitivity of the decennial plan, not to mention the significance of the Constitutional mandate we undertake every ten years to ensure the fairest, most representative democracy. The decennial is the first and indispensable step toward the competitive election system that clearly vests power in the hands of the American people. It does not exaggerate to say that a flawed census ripples through our democratic processes as well as through public policy making and the reliability of the picture we have of our nation.

Before turning to the specific issues on which you have asked me to testify, I digress for just a moment. The Congress is now dealing with Fiscal Year 2009 funding. The Decennial, precisely because it is conducted only once every ten years, is particularly vulnerable to funding uncertainties -- especially on the eve of the decennial launch. Those operations which are specifically designed to improve accuracy and to reduce the

Undercount, and the Overcount, are extremely sensitive to funding uncertainties. For that very reason, I encourage you to work to ensure the Census Bureau has timely, adequate and flexible funding.

The Meaning of Census Accuracy

In discussions of the decennial census we often hear the term accuracy. It was so in the first census of 1790; it was so in the most recent census of 2000.

In 1790, Thomas Jefferson, who as Secretary of State oversaw this first census, reported to President George Washington that the American people numbered 3,929,214. The President was not pleased. He had expected a population about five percent higher, and blamed the “inaccuracy” on residents who did not cooperate and on negligence among some of the U.S. Marshals who took the first census. Washington felt that the true, higher count would forestall the temptation in European quarters to think that the new America was weak, and its independence fragile. Thomas Jefferson, mathematical wizard that he was, made some upward adjustments on the state-by-state counts that America’s diplomats in Europe could cite when bragging about our robust and growing population.

In 2000, nearly a million temporary workers led by a professional staff of more than 5,000 Census career public servants were “mobilized” in 2000 and achieved what Commerce Secretary Evans described before the U.S. Senate in March 2001 as “...the most accurate census this nation has ever conducted.”

It is true that, in a very challenging environment, when by order of the Supreme Court we had to completely replan the Census just months after my arrival, the Census Bureau reversed an historical trend of declining mailback response rates that went back three decades. Much of the credit for the success of Census 2000 was deservedly earned by the career government employees who innovated and accommodated in the face of these challenges. We were greatly assisted by a ground-breaking national advertising, partnerships and promotion effort that reached into every community, small and large, urban and rural. This achievement was possible only because President Clinton and a Republican Congress came together in a crisis and provided us with full funding for our requests, provided it when it was needed, and built-in enough flexibility to deal with the

unexpected – floods in North Carolina, schedule difficulties in Chicago, technical issues in data capture, fraud in Hialeah, Florida.

But was Secretary Evans right to call 2000 the “most accurate census ever conducted?”

The truth of the matter is that we won the gold medal in 2000 because the number of people we failed to count was offset by the number we counted more than once. In 2000, the Undercount was 4.5 million people and the Overcount was 5.8 million. More specifically, while the white population was overcounted at 1.13%, the black population was undercounted at 1.84%, leading to a white/black differential undercount of nearly 3%. This was a modest improvement over earlier censuses but not something we want to celebrate.

It is an inescapable fact about census-taking is that it can be a huge success for the vast majority of the population and yet still have an undercount that differs from one population group to another. This can be hypothetically illustrated:

There are 120 million households, of which
 90 million mail back their forms, leaving
 30 million to be visited by enumerators, of which
 28 million are located, leaving
 2 million households not in the census, of which
 1.5 million are racial minorities

In this hypothetical census, only a percent or so of the households are missed, but those missed are disproportionately concentrated among minorities. The differential undercount occurs in the final one to two percent of the census. It is a stubborn problem. Its persistence undermines the fairness of the census, and thus the fairness of our entire system of representative democracy.

Perhaps I can make this clearer by suggesting why a census has to worry about two types of accuracy: numerical accuracy and distributional accuracy.¹ The former

¹ This text summarizes a more detailed discussion found in Kenneth Prewitt, *Politics and Science in Census Taking*. Russell Sage Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau, 2003.

measures how close the census approximates the true population size, which matters when absolute numbers are at stake (as they were for George Washington).

Distributional accuracy points to the *proportional distribution* of the population by geography or sub-population groups. This matters when benefits from a fixed resource are allocated proportionate to population shares, as of course is the case with apportionment, redistricting, and many formulae driven government funding programs.

A census can be numerically inaccurate but still achieve distributional accuracy. If, for example, the census misses the same percentage of the population in every state, then each state will still get the number of congressional representatives it would had the census counted 100 percent of the population. It is only when the percentage of errors differs from one state to the next that there is distributional inaccuracy. The simple illustration in the figure below shows two censuses that miss the same overall percent of the population, but those missed are proportionately higher in State A than State B. In the latter case, State B gets a higher share of the final census count and thus more congressional seats and Electoral College votes. Shares matter when a fixed pie is being sliced.

Distributional Accuracy Illustrated

	Census Misses 10 % of the Population But is Distributionally Accurate		Census Misses 10 % of the Population And is Distributionally Inaccurate	
	State A	State B	State A	State B
True Size	1 m	5 m	1 m	5 m
Census Count	.9 m	4.5 m	.8 m	4.6 m
Percent Missed	10%	10%	20%	8 %

The Meaning of Census Fairness.

If, as I urge, the Congress focuses on distributional accuracy, it is obvious that going forward we must improve our census systems, especially those that help cure *both* the Undercount and the Overcount. The Census Bureau should not add last minute,

untested operations or procedures that could worsen either the Undercount or the Overcount, for either reduces census fairness.

My experience directing the 2000 Census convinced me (and there is ample evidence to support the conclusion²) that the Census Bureau's historic paid advertising and innovative partnership programs, both of which were conducted in dozens of languages, were instrumental in helping us improve the count of historically Undercounted communities; the poor, minorities, recent immigrants, rural areas, folks living in unusual housing arrangements, and so forth. I feel strongly that the advertising and promotion and partnership efforts in 2010 should be as ample and robust as those in 2000.

But the census has to be equally vigilant about the Overcount. In the name of a "fair census," this Committee should closely examine the Bureaus operations designed to seek, detect, and remove duplicate responses. These typically come from households with more than one housing unit, or with students away at college, or where a husband and wife do not share information that each has responded to one of several response options. On balance, the challenge of reducing the Overcount is more manageable and achievable than the myriad of difficulties we must overcome to cure the Undercount.

A Reliable Report Card

Whatever our success at improving accuracy, numerical and distributional, the discussion is almost an academic exercise unless the Census Bureau has in place a timely, robust, and comprehensive report card on how well it did. In Census speak, this is generally known as coverage measurement. Historically the Census devises a companion survey of a sample of national households to measure how well the Decennial operation did in its mission of counting every resident and correctly assigning them to a specific household on April 1st. Without this vital diagnostic tool, we truly do not know how well we did. Probably no other Agency in the Federal Government takes as much professional

² Documented in *The Hard Count: The Political and Social Challenges of Census Mobilization*. New York, The Russell Sage Foundation. D. Sunshine Hillygus, Norman Nie, Kenneth Prewitt and Heili Pals) 2006.

pride in finding its mistakes as it takes in not making mistakes in the first place. Every decennial census is, or should be, a lesson in how to conduct the next decennial. At the Census Bureau, the decennial is not only a census; it is a science project, and, like all science, has embedded in it self-correcting and self-improving procedures.

I am concerned about reports I have heard that due to funding uncertainties and or management challenges that Census Bureau management has reviewed options about delaying or scaling back the coverage measurement operation for 2010. I strongly encourage this Committee to monitor those actions closely and to insist upon nothing less than excellence in this critical operation, if only to ensure that your oversight of the results of the 2010 Census are informed and useful.

In closing, I do not want to appear to gloss over the current management and contractor problems confronting my successors at Suitland. I am familiar with the scope of the problem as Secretary Guitierrez asked me to serve on his Expert Panel earlier this year to review and recommend a re-plan of the 2010 decennial design. I believe the 2010 census is at great risk of being only the second census in our history – the other being 1990 – that does not improve upon the prior census. However, I do have a great deal of confidence in the dedication and ingenuity of the career scientists, mathematicians, demographers, geographers and other professionals at the Bureau.

They mastered the challenge in 1999 and 2000, and I believe they can master it again today. Overlooked in the story of Census 2000 Mr. Chairman is another proud fact. At the end of the day, as we released the numbers to the Congress, I was pleased to be able to send a letter to the relevant appropriation and authorizing committees of the House and Senate that not only did we deliver a full count of the nation on schedule, we did so under budget. We reported a surplus in excess of \$300 million taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I do not doubt that Congress will fund the Decennial Census. I do worry that the funding may not meet the other two principles so critical to a good census: timeliness and flexibility. It was the combination of the three funding principles that made for a good census in 2000, and will make for a good census in 2010.