

*U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE*  
*Office of Inspector General*

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**PUBLIC  
RELEASE**

***BUREAU OF THE CENSUS***

*Public Awareness Campaign  
Is Meeting Program Objectives*

*Audit Report No. ESD-11755-9-0001 / September 1999*

*Office of Audits, Economics and Statistics Audits Division*





**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**The Inspector General**  
Washington, D.C. 20230

September 30, 1999

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** Kenneth Prewitt  
Director  
Bureau of the Census

**FROM:**

Johnnie E. Frazier

**SUBJECT:**

*Public Awareness Campaign Is Meeting Program Objectives*  
Final Report No. ESD-11755-9-0001

As a follow-up to our briefings with Census Bureau officials and the Under Secretary for Economics Affairs, this is our final report on our audit of the Census Bureau's decennial public awareness campaign, which consists of two major activities, the partnership program and the paid advertising campaign. Our audit objective was to evaluate the bureau's paid advertising campaign, as well as its partnership program plans, for increasing the mail response rate and reducing the undercount. In addition, because the two initiatives have similar goals, we also determined whether there was adequate coordination between them.

Our review found that the paid advertising contractor has developed a Census 2000 advertising message that is consistent with the goal of the public awareness campaign. The message was thoroughly researched and tested and met the objectives stated in the contract. We also found that the partnership program was implementing a comprehensive nationwide program directed at increasing the mail response rate and thereby reducing the undercount. To accomplish this, the program is coordinating with government, business, and community-based partners. These partners are often affiliated with the hard-to-count population and should be instrumental in getting undercounted populations to respond. Finally, we found that the bureau has undertaken several initiatives to coordinate the partnership program and paid advertising campaign for Census 2000.

This report is being issued in final, without first being issued in draft, because our review revealed no significant problems, contains no recommendations, and requires no action by bureau officials. We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies extended to us by bureau staff during our review.

Attachment

cc: Robert Shapiro, Under Secretary for Economic Affairs  
William Barron, Deputy Director, Bureau of the Census  
John Thompson, Associate Director for Decennial Census  
Steve Jost, Associate Director for Communications  
Marvin Raines, Associate Director for Field Operations  
Michael McKay, Associate Director for Finance and Administration

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Commerce Department's Bureau of the Census conducts a Constitutionally mandated enumeration of the nation's population every 10 years for the purpose of providing population data for congressional apportionment. Among many other purposes, population data is used for state and federal redistricting, and allocating federal funds. The next decennial census will be conducted on April 1, 2000.

Despite the importance of this data, the bureau has been confronted with a steady decline in the mail response rate. In 1980, the mail response rate was 75 percent. In 1990, it declined to 65 percent. For 2000, the bureau anticipates that only about 61 percent of all households will complete and mail back the census form. When households do not respond to the census, costs increase dramatically. This is because the bureau must hire enumerators to contact each non-responding household to obtain the data. In 1990, the average cost of enumerating a household that returned a questionnaire was \$2. But the cost quickly escalated to \$12 when an enumerator had to contact the household. And, for households that required additional follow-up contacts, the cost per household approached \$36.

Nevertheless, despite the bureau's efforts to follow-up, many individuals remain uncounted, particularly those who do not live in traditional households—the homeless, people living in group quarters, and those who will be moving on or around census day. As a result, in 1990, the estimated undercount was about 4 million persons. Furthermore, the undercount was not equally distributed across all demographic groups, resulting in what is called the differential undercount. For example, in 1990, the total net undercount for the nation as a whole was 1.6 percent. However, among African Americans, 4.4 percent were not counted; Hispanics, 5 percent; Asian and Pacific Islanders, 2.3 percent; and American Indians, 12.2 percent.

To boost mail response rates, especially among historically undercounted groups, Census 2000, in addition to the traditional mail-out/mail-back questionnaire, will undertake special public awareness efforts aimed at reaching every person. These efforts principally comprise two major activities:

- Conducting the first-ever *paid advertising campaign* aimed at increasing the mail response rate, including that of historically undercounted populations.
- Leveraging the value of local knowledge and contacts by building *partnerships* at every level: state, local, and tribal governments; community-based organizations; the media; and private-sector organizations.

The Office of Inspector General conducted a performance audit of the bureau's public awareness campaign. The purpose of our audit was to evaluate the bureau's advertising campaign and the partnership program. In addition, because both activities have similar goals—increase the mail

response rate and reduce the undercount—we also evaluated the coordination between them. It should be noted that during the period of our audit, only the creative concepts (advertising ideas) phase of the advertising campaign was available for review.

In October 1997, the bureau awarded a contract to an advertising firm to create and produce an extensive advertising campaign to inform and motivate the public to complete and return the census form. We believe that the actions taken by the contractor effectively addressed the required objectives. The contractor hired subcontractors familiar with the groups that had been historically undercounted, performed research and extensive testing across the United States and its possessions, and created a message aimed at getting people to respond by explaining its benefits. In addition, the creative concepts developed by the contractor were scrutinized by many groups, including the bureau, the Department, the Census Advisory Committee, and the Congress.

The goals of the partnership program are similar—to maximize the mail response rate, and reduce the differential undercount. To reach these goals, the bureau has been building partnerships at the national, regional, and local levels. The partners assist the bureau with data collection support, recruitment, and census promotion activities. As of mid-July, the bureau had secured nearly 22,000 partnerships. We believe that the bureau has developed and is implementing a comprehensive and effective program that is designed to increase the mail response rate and reduce the differential undercount.

Finally, we found that the advertising campaign and the partnership program are being effectively coordinated and that they support and complement each other. Whether the advertising campaign and partnership program will motivate households to participate by filling out and returning the questionnaire will only be known after the census is completed. However, the bureau is implementing plans to conduct evaluations to assess the effectiveness of both activities.

We commend the bureau for its efforts directed at increasing the mail response rate and reducing the undercount, especially the differential undercount. During our review, we saw firsthand the dedication of bureau and contractor personnel working to increase public awareness. Because our review revealed no significant problems, our report contains no recommendations and requires no action by bureau officials in response to the report.

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At the conclusion of our work, we discussed our findings in detail with the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs; the Deputy Director, Bureau of the Census; Associate Director for Decennial Census; Associate Director for Field Operations; and other Census officials.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Office of Inspector General has completed a performance audit of the partnership program and the paid advertising campaign for the 2000 Decennial Census. Together, these activities are directed at increasing the mail response rate and reducing the undercount, especially among historically undercounted populations.

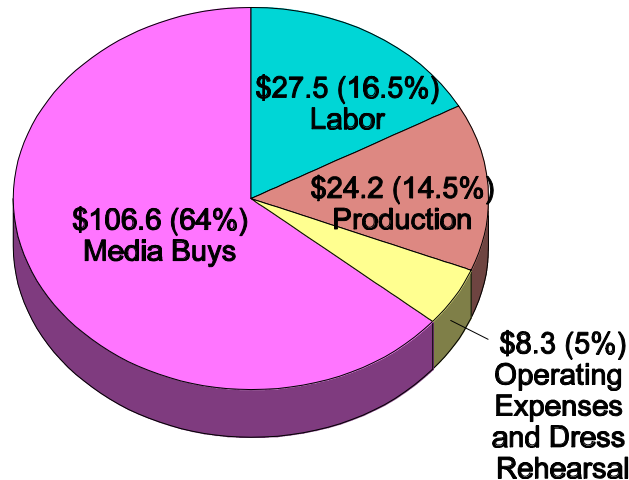
Although the Census Bureau attempts to count every resident in the country during a decennial census, some undercount of the population has occurred in all decennials. The challenge of counting all persons has become increasingly difficult as public cooperation with the census process continues to decline. This is evidenced by a decline in the mail response rate and an increase in the number of people undercounted. Between 1970 and 1990, the mail response rate declined from 78 percent to 65 percent. For 2000, the anticipated mail response rate has been set at 61 percent. In addition, demographic analysis shows that the net national undercount (the number of people omitted minus the number overcounted) rose from 2.8 million people in 1980 to 4.7 million people in 1990. To reverse both of these trends for 2000, the partnership program and paid advertising campaign are working to reach hard-to-count segments of the U.S. population and to encourage response to the decennial.

The partnership program is especially designed to reach populations that have been undercounted in previous censuses. Through the endorsement and support of trusted agents in the community, the bureau hopes to communicate the importance of participating in the decennial and motivate individuals who may otherwise be unfamiliar with, or distrustful of, the process. The partnership program for the 2000 decennial is considerably expanded over past decennials, with significantly more resources being applied. The program also began much earlier in the cycle than in prior decennials.

For the first time, a paid advertising campaign is being used to promote the decennial. In previous censuses, the bureau relied on public service announcements to get its message out to the public. However, these announcements did not reach targeted hard-to-count populations in a strategic, effective manner. Furthermore, ads often ran at off-peak hours because decisions about when to air public service announcements rested with local television and radio stations.

Under the current working plan, the paid advertising budget is \$166.6 million. Of this amount, \$8.4 million was spent in FY 1998, \$47.2 million was budgeted for FY 1999, and the President is requesting \$111 million for FY 2000. The chart on the next page shows how the budget is allocated by cost category.

## Advertising Budget



The Census 2000 advertising campaign will begin in November 1999 and run through July 2000. It will consist of three phases:

- **An educational phase.** Targeted at reaching hard-to-enumerate populations, this phase is intended to convey information about the decennial, the community benefits gained from participation in the decennial, and the confidentiality of the data recorded on the questionnaire. This phase will begin around mid-November and run into January 2000.
- **A motivational phase.** During this phase, which will begin in mid-January and run through mid-April, the public will be urged to complete and mail back their Census 2000 questionnaire.
- **A non-response follow-up phase.** The objective of this phase is to get the public to cooperate with the enumerators who will be visiting households for which questionnaires were not received. This phase will begin after the mail-back period has ended and will run through early July.

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF AUDIT**

The purpose of our audit was to evaluate the bureau's paid advertising campaign and partnership program and assess how well the two activities were coordinated. Our review covered only the creative concepts (advertising ideas) phase of the advertising campaign. The purchase of air time and running of ads will not begin until fiscal year 2000. We also assessed the operations of the partnership program at the Census Bureau's Los Angeles and Dallas Regional Offices.

We reviewed applicable laws, regulations, policies, and procedures; examined selected files and records; and reviewed appropriate documentation including the paid advertising contract, partnership training manuals, and a draft of the Census 2000 Partnership and Marketing Program Master Plan. We attended several conferences, meetings, and focus groups at which the paid advertising contractor presented Census 2000 creative concepts, answered questions, and asked for feedback. We interviewed partnership and advertising officials in Suitland, Maryland; regional and field personnel in Los Angeles, California, and Dallas, Texas; and several government, business, and community-based partners in the Los Angeles and Dallas regions.

We reviewed the adequacy of internal controls over the paid advertising contract and partnership program and found them to be functioning as intended. We did not assess the reliability of computer-generated data because such data was not used in our review. Our audit fieldwork was conducted from February to August 1999 at the bureau's headquarters in Suitland and its regional offices in Los Angeles and Dallas. We conducted the audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and under the authority of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, and Department Organization Order 10-13, dated May 22, 1980, as amended.



## RESULTS OF AUDIT

### I. Paid Advertising Campaign Is Meeting Contract Objectives

In October 1997, the bureau's Census 2000 Publicity Office awarded a task order contract to an advertising firm to create, produce, and implement an extensive public awareness campaign to inform and motivate the public to answer the Census 2000 questionnaire. The contract contained three objectives:

1. Reach hard-to-count populations.
2. Reach all households in the United States, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Marianas.
3. Motivate all households to participate by filling out and returning the Census questionnaire quickly.

The prime contractor hired four subcontractors that had significant expertise and experience in marketing to historically undercounted populations. The following table depicts the historically undercounted groups and the 1990 differential undercount for those groups.

**1990 Differential Undercount by Demographic Group**

Group	Undercount
African American	4.4%
Hispanic (all races)	5.0%
Asian and Pacific Islanders	2.3%
American Indians on Reservations	12.2%

Source: Census Bureau.

In addition, the prime contractor is responsible for developing advertising aimed at Diverse America, a Census Bureau term used to denote every adult, regardless of ethnicity, who receives information through the English language media.

As a first step in developing the Census 2000 campaign message, the prime contractor and its subcontractors conducted research to understand the specific challenges that hindered participation in the decennial. This research concluded that many people believe that the census is not relevant to their lives. According to the research, the census was negatively tied to government, its intentions were very often misunderstood, and its benefits were virtually

unknown. The prime contractor concluded that to overcome these barriers, it had to design a “benefits” message to make the decennial personally relevant to each person. Individuals needed to know what benefits they derived from filling out the census form.

Thus, the strategy of the advertising campaign focused on answering that question. The contractor developed a consistent message that directly addressed the potential benefits to the community, such as new schools, health care facilities, job training opportunities, and day-care facilities. This message was tested nationwide using 17 focus groups to ensure its relevance across all target audiences and to verify its superiority over other potential messages. Testing confirmed that the benefits message was the most universally appealing, particularly for individuals who are less likely to participate.

When tested again in the 1998 Dress Rehearsal, the benefits message was found to be effective. Dress Rehearsal results in Columbia, South Carolina, and Sacramento, California, showed that advertising raised awareness, increased knowledge, and increased positive attitudes about the decennial. In addition, exposure to advertising proved to have an indirect effect on participation. That is, advertising exposure was found to increase the anticipation of receiving a form, and thereby increasing the likelihood of a response.<sup>1</sup>

After receiving positive feedback on the effectiveness of the benefits strategy, the contractor and its four partner agencies then developed hundreds of creative concepts for advertisements using the strategy for Census 2000. Once again, all of the creative concepts developed for Census 2000 were tested with focus groups during March and April 1999. The purpose of these focus groups was to obtain insights about how individuals from different cultures respond to various concepts in order to maximize the impact of the Census 2000 advertising message. These focus groups were conducted across all target audiences in the United States, Puerto Rico, and its territories.

In New York, we attended four focus groups targeted at the African American population. Individuals in these groups were asked numerous questions about the creative concepts presented. For example, they were asked whether they understood the message the creative concept was trying to convey and whether it was effective. To ensure sensitivity to different cultures, individuals were also asked what they liked and did not like about the creative concepts and how to improve upon the concepts. The concepts were refined on the basis of the feedback received.

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<sup>1</sup>Census 2000 Dress Rehearsal Evaluation Results Memorandum E1b, *Effectiveness of the Paid Advertising Campaign: Reported Exposure to Advertising and the Likelihood of Returning a Census Form*, Nancy Bates, Planning, Research, and Evaluation Division, April 1999.

In early May 1999, these concepts were presented to Census Bureau and Department of Commerce officials, and then to members of the Census Advisory Committee, for comment and concurrence. Comments from each of the groups were considered, and the concepts were further refined. In total, about 100 creative concepts were agreed upon and are being produced for Census 2000. Advertisements are to be produced in 17 languages.

We believe the steps taken by the contractor in developing the Census 2000 message address the objectives stated in the contract. The prime contractor hired subcontractors familiar with the groups that had been historically undercounted; performed research and extensive testing across the United States and its territories; and created a Census 2000 message aimed at getting people to respond to the decennial by explaining its benefits for them. In addition, the creative concepts were scrutinized by many groups, including the bureau, the Department, and the Census Advisory Committee.

Whether the advertising campaign will motivate all households to participate by filling out and returning the Census questionnaire will only be known after the census is completed. To assess the effectiveness of the campaign, the bureau will be conducting evaluations as discussed on page 9.

## **II. Partnership Program Is Implementing a Comprehensive Plan Directed at Reducing the Differential Undercount for 2000**

The goals of the partnership program are to maximize the response rate, reduce the differential undercount, and communicate a consistent census message. The bureau's ability to reach these goals and conduct a fair and accurate census will depend on building partnerships with a diverse range of non-governmental organizations, businesses, and state, local, and tribal governments serving every segment of the U.S. population. Under the partnership program, these organizations and government entities will work collaboratively with the bureau to educate their constituents about the purpose of the decennial, the confidentiality of its data, and its impact on their communities. The partners will also assist the bureau with data collection, support, recruitment, and promotion. According to bureau officials, the partnership program is potentially the bureau's most effective mechanism for reaching the hardest-to-enumerate populations.

To achieve the program goals, the bureau plans to have a partnership specialist for each of its 520 local census offices. As of July 13, 1999, the bureau had hired 399 specialists. We believe the bureau has done a good job of hiring individuals with the skills necessary for going out into the community and establishing partnerships. In speaking with partnership specialists in the Los Angeles and Dallas regions, we noted that they were a diverse group with strong interpersonal skills. Some had held previous jobs in public relations, others had worked on the 1990 decennial, and some were already involved in their communities and had contacts in place when they began.

To ensure that partnership specialists receive proper guidance and support, each is assigned to a team leader located at each of the regional census centers. Team leaders serve as links between the partnership staffs at the local census offices and the regional census center. Team leaders assist partnership specialists in getting started in the right direction by helping prepare for meetings with partners, sharing effective partnering techniques, answering questions, and ensuring that the specialists have sufficient supplies. Partnership staffs at the local census offices that we visited in both the Los Angeles and Dallas regions agreed that the team leader approach was effective and helpful because the specialists had contacts and a direct line of communication with someone at the regional census centers. We believe that this approach is effective because it provides oversight of partnership specialists in the field and helps to ensure that a consistent message is communicated to the partnering agencies.

Another way the partnership program communicates a consistent message across all regions is through training. The bureau has a three-stage training program to prepare the partnership specialists for their duties. Stage 1 introduces the partnership specialists to the objectives of the Census Bureau and the regional office, the purpose of the decennial, and methods for accessing data at the regional office. Stage 2 focuses on building partnerships and explains how the partnership program fits into the context of Census 2000. Stage 3 training focuses on multi-cultural diversity and negotiation, presentation, and media skills. We asked the partnership specialists at both the Los Angeles and Dallas regions about the training, and all provided positive feedback concerning the content and setup of the training.

While a consistent decennial message is imperative, each region has been given some flexibility in administering the partnership program at the local level. This is important, for example, in an area like the Los Angeles region, which covers southern California, includes 9 million people that speak over 80 different languages. To reach such a diverse and large population, partnership specialists rely on the support of community-based organizations to translate decennial materials, place decennial articles in newsletters, and keep the specialists up-to-date on ethnic events such as parades and fairs. At these events, partnership specialists pass out brochures and answer questions about the decennial.

In contrast, the Dallas region covers three states: Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Challenges for this region include covering this large area, reaching illegal immigrants crossing the border from Mexico, counting a growing population of colonias (unincorporated, low-income settlements near the border), and finding ways to partner with poor communities with limited resources. In addressing these challenges, the Dallas region is seeking the help of government entities, with a heavy emphasis on complete count committees. Complete count committees represent a cooperative effort between state, local, and tribal governments. In Dallas, the state Complete Count Committee printed maps of hard-to-enumerate areas and was helping the bureau identify group quarters, such as assisted living homes for the elderly or handicapped.

The partnership program is also flexible in how it deals with its partners. Organizations vary in their commitment and capability to support the bureau in promoting and recruiting for Census 2000. The bureau encourages partners to participate in any way they can. For example, in Los Angeles, one community-based organization had the facilities to be a training and testing center, while another helped translate decennial materials and duplicate one-page flyers. To keep track of all these commitments, the partnership program has developed a national database. Every time a partnership specialist secures a commitment, relevant information is entered into a database. Tracking commitments allows the regions to monitor the progress of the partnership program in their area.

Based on our assessment of the partnership program, we believe the bureau has developed and is implementing a comprehensive program designed at increasing the response rate, reducing the differential undercount, and communicating a consistent census message. As of mid-July, the partnership program, through its specialists, had already secured nearly 22,000 partnership agreements.

### **III. Bureau Has Undertaken Several Initiatives to Coordinate the Partnership Program and Paid Advertising Campaign**

Because the paid advertising campaign and the partnership program have similar goals—to reduce the differential undercount and increase the mail response rate—we wanted to determine how well the two activities were coordinated. During the 1998 Dress Rehearsal, we learned that the partnership program was not always informed about decisions concerning the paid advertising campaign. For example, in Sacramento, it was unclear how local media had been used to promote the census, and in Menominee, Wisconsin, it was not clear to the partnership program why the prime contractor did not place print advertisements on the Menominee Indian Reservation.

After the dress rehearsal, the prime contractor for the advertising campaign met with all 12 regional offices to solicit regional input on the advertising campaign. The regions said they needed to be kept informed about what was happening with the advertising campaign and to have the ability to tailor the national paid advertising message to the local community and to have input into local media buys for advertising. To address these needs, the bureau has initiated several projects.

One project, the Partnership and Marketing Steering Group, is aimed at opening up the communication lines between the partnership program and the paid advertising campaign. The steering group includes personnel from the Field Division, which oversees the partnership program, as well as representatives from the regions and from the Census 2000 Publicity Office. The steering group meets biweekly to formulate strategy and policy on the coordination of the partnership program and paid advertising campaign. Through the steering group, the partnership program is kept informed about, and has input into, the advertising campaign.

In another project, aimed at localizing the paid advertising message, each region will be using software developed by the prime contractor. This will give the regions the capability to insert a picture of a local personality, such as the mayor or a well-known athlete, into a census poster developed by the contractor.

A third project will allow local input into the media buys. Each region has been given \$100,000 for local media buys that the regional partnership program has identified as critical. An example of a "critical buy" is a widely distributed local Hispanic newspaper that the paid advertising contractor had not targeted. After all 12 regions submit a prioritized critical buy list, the prime contractor will first ensure that the media outlet, radio station, or newspaper company is financially sound and then negotiate a reasonable price. During our review, each of the regions had just submitted its critical buy list to the Publicity Office.

Based on our review, it appears that there is sufficient coordination among the regions, partnership program, and Census 2000 Publicity Office.

#### **IV. Bureau Plans to Assess the Impact of Partnership Program and Paid Advertising Campaign for Census 2000**

During our review, we learned that the bureau will be conducting an evaluation study on the partnership program and the paid advertising campaign. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the overall effort for Census 2000. In addition, the study will attempt to isolate the impacts of the two initiatives. We believe this study to be very important because this is the first time the bureau is using the services of a paid advertising firm to promote the decennial, and the bureau is hiring more partnership specialists than in 1990. Given this unprecedented effort to increase mail response and reduce the differential undercount, we believe that it is imperative that the bureau thoroughly evaluate both the partnership program and the paid advertising campaign to determine which efforts should be changed, continued, or expanded for the 2010 decennial census.

### **CONCLUSION**

We commend the bureau for its efforts directed at increasing the mail response rate and reducing the undercount, especially the differential undercount. During our review, we saw the dedication of census personnel in the partnership program and advertising campaign, along with the personnel at the contractor firms. Specifically, our review found that the development of the Census 2000 advertising message was supported by a sound methodology and met the objectives stated in the contract. In addition, the partnership program was implementing a comprehensive nationwide program directed at increasing the mail response rate and thereby reducing the undercount. To accomplish this, the partnership program has coordinated with government, business, and community-based partners. These partners are closely affiliated with the hard-to-count population and should be instrumental in getting undercounted populations to respond. Finally, we found that the partnership program and advertising campaign were being effectively coordinated.