

*Statement
Of
Honorable Kenneth Prewitt
PhD*

*Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee
Wednesday, July 30, 2008
2247 Rayburn HOB*

“Critical Budget Issues Affecting the 2020 Census Part-2”

Thank you Chairman Clay, Ranking Member Turner and Members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify today on the importance of reliable, steady funding for the Census Bureau to ensure a well-managed Decennial Census that can be as complete and accurate as is achievable.

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 step toward the competitive election system that clearly vests power in the hands of the American people. A flawed census ripples through democratic processes, public policy making, and the reliability of the picture we have of our nation. The Decennial, precisely because it is conducted only once every ten years, is particularly vulnerable to funding uncertainties -- especially in the 9th, 10th and 11th fiscal hours on the eve of the decennial launch. It is those uncertainties which motivate this hearing. My testimony will emphasize three principles:

Adequate Funding....Timely Funding....Flexible Funding

The Census Bureau is always asking itself three questions: – Is there enough money? Will we have it when we need it? Can we adjust, in real time, when we encounter what could not have been planned for?

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 the most complete count in our nation’s history. Indeed, Commerce Secretary Evans paid tribute to these professionals and his predecessors in the Clinton Administration in testimony before the U.S. Senate in March 2001 as he delivered the results of what he termed “...the most accurate census this nation has ever conducted.”

That achievement must be set in context, especially in light of the management challenges now facing the 2010 Census. Just over 90 days following my confirmation in late October 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the plan for 2000 that had been in the making for almost a decade had to be scrapped. There was a great partisan divide over the census design between a Democratic White House and a Republican Congress, and, following the Court ruling, the career professionals went back to the drawing board and dramatically altered the decennial plan in the midst of intense partisan and press scrutiny. We faced highly critical oversight not only by Congress, the Commerce Inspector General, the General Accounting Office, but also a Census Monitoring Board and academic peer and stakeholder groups. Very few in these groups expressed much confidence in our ability to get the Census back on track. All the while the clock kept ticking towards our Constitutional deadline -- looming just 14 months away from the Supreme Court’s decision. As I recall, we were added to the GAO’s “High Risk” list of

government programs in 1997 and remained there through-out my entire tenure as Director and until we delivered the final numbers to Congress in 2001.

In this very challenging environment, we reversed an historical trend of declining 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 and a ground-breaking national advertising, partnerships and promotion effort that was diverse and reached into every community, small and large, urban and rural.

But I want to stress to you today that 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.

The President put his Deputy Chief of Staff in charge of working with the Congress to find common ground on a solution to the census crisis. The Congress granted us supplemental funding, emergency funding, and an “anomaly” in Continuing Resolutions. Indeed, the Congress even added to our requests for programs like the advertising and partnership efforts. Were it not for this bipartisan commitment to ensure the career professionals had all they needed to carry out their mission to measure America, we would not have reversed the decline in response rates; we would not have significantly reduced the differential undercount; and we would not have achieved the most complete census in American history. I need not emphasize to this knowledgeable Committee that the Congress shares in the credit for this achievement.

The support provided for the 2000 census met the three principles noted earlier. It was responsive to the Census Bureau requests. It arrived on a predictable schedule that matched the workflow. It allowed for enough flexibility to allow the Census Bureau to respond to the unexpected.

I am well aware of the current fiscal struggle between this White House and this Congress. I know it is likely that the Commerce Department will be part of a Continuing Resolution for at least part of Fiscal 2009. Therefore, I encourage you to prevail upon your colleagues in the Appropriations committees in the House and Senate to not insist on a request from the White House to exempt the Census Bureau from the flat line funding in a Continuing Resolution. The Congress can and should exercise the leadership to grant an exemption to the Census Bureau - whether or not it is requested. There is simply too much at stake to do otherwise.

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 another document to the Congress. That was a letter to the relevant appropriation and authorizing committees of the House and Senate. We reported a surplus in excess of \$300 million taxpayer dollars. *The Census Bureau in 2000 delivered a good census on schedule and under budget.*

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 Congressional faithfulness to the three funding principles that made for a good census in 2000, and will make for a good census in 2010.