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In less than two months Texans will receive their 2000 Census forms. Previously in this column, it was noted the 2000 Census likely will show a Texas population of more than 20.3 million persons, making the 1990s the decade with the largest numerical growth of any decade in Texas history. It is critical to recognize, however, that such a count will not happen automatically.

It will happen only if Texans answer the Census.

Although there is legislation requiring that residents of the United States respond to the Census, failure to respond has never been prosecuted and, thus, response largely is voluntary. Why is responding to the Census important? Why is obtaining a complete count so difficult?

Redistricting is the major constitutional purpose for the Census. This involves not only deciding how many congressional representatives each state will have but also where state senate and house districts will be located and where county commissioner, city council, school district and numerous other jurisdictional lines will be drawn.

If Texans fail to answer in sufficient numbers, Texas' representation at the federal level could be reduced, and the distribution of representation relative to the population could be inaccurate. With Texas appearing likely to obtain two new U.S. representatives and with Texas' 254 counties, nearly 1,200 towns and cities, more than 1,000 school districts and many other jurisdictions potentially changing their voting areas, it is evident that responding to the Census is important to Texas.

Responding to the Census also is important if Texas is to receive its fair share of federal funds. The Government Accounting Office (GAO), in a report released in February 1999, indicated the likely loss of funds for various states as a result of undercount (the failure to count all of the people who should be counted). The Census Bureau estimates that Texas' undercount in 1990 was more than 482,000 persons.

According to the GAO, Texas lost roughly \$1 billion in federal funding during the 1990s as a result of the undercount. In fact, Texas' undercount rate of 2.76 percent was the second

# Count me in!

## Filling out census makes sense



By Steve H. Murdock

highest in the nation. If that undercount rate were to prevail with the expected population of more than 20.3 million, the number of persons missed in the 2000 Census would total more than 560,000. This would be roughly equivalent to missing the population of El Paso in 1990. It would also clearly mean a loss of more than \$1 billion in federal funds during the first decade of the next century.

Accurate data from the Census also is important for business planning, marketing and other efforts. Although periodic estimates and projections of the population are completed between Censuses, the Census provides the one period to which demographic and economic models can be matched to actual data.

The Census is the most complete source of information on home ownership and rental patterns. It provides data on value of owner-occupied and rented occupied units, the age and condition of units and other factors of importance for real estate development. Data on income,

education, poverty and numerous other factors that are needed to plan effectively for business expansions,

advertising and other business activities come from the Census. There is no adequate substitute for Census data, and such data are more valuable if they are complete and accurate.

Why is obtaining an accurate count difficult? The answer lies in the complexity involved in completing a Census and the size and diversity of the population. The 2000 Census is an enormous enterprise. Census-related expenditures, through the end of calendar year 2000, are expected to exceed \$6.2 billion, with processing and dissemination to require additional expenditures through 2003. During the 2000 Census, more than 500 local Census offices will be opened to collect data, and more than 800,000 persons will be employed nationwide.

In Texas, 32 local Census offices will operate with nearly 45,000 employees during the most intense part of the work. More than 118 million nation-wide questionnaires will be mailed (with an estimated 7.4 million in Texas) to households during the first part of March 2000 with followup and other efforts continuing through fall 2000. By law, the first of the Census data, the apportionment data, must be delivered to the President by January 1, 2001. Counting a national population expected to be nearly 275 million is obviously a complex task.

Accentuating the difficulties is the fact that American society is highly mobile, with numerous language and cultural differences in sub-populations of the overall population. There is a growing cynicism related to responding to questionnaires, and busy schedules are likely to mitigate against responding to the Census. Undercount rates vary substantially by population characteristics, with undercount rates for minority populations, the fastest growing part of U.S. and Texas populations, being several times those for Anglos. Mail response rates have declined during each of the last several Censuses. There is substantial concern about the response rate for 2000.

Controversies about the best procedures for completing the Census and about the appropriate role of sampling

in collecting Census data also have arisen. There is disagreement on whether Census data should be adjusted for undercount before being used for redistricting (the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that unadjusted Census values must be used for federal apportionment in 2000). Concern over the allocation of

federal funds have been highlighted in the press and is likely to continue.

What is often not said is that most of this controversy is irrelevant if Texans all complete and return the Census forms. Support Texas by taking the time to complete and return the Census forms and encourage others to do so. Now is

the time for Texans to stand up and be counted. ♣

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