Press Briefing -- March 14, 2000
Director Prewitt

MR. JOST: Good afternoon. My name is Steve Jost. I'm with the Census Bureau's Communications Office. Today we are holding a press conference to talk about the questionnaires arriving in the mail. For those of you who cover us on a regular basis, I would like to announce that we will have our next operational press briefing Tuesday the 21st at 11a.m. There we'll have a lot more data about the status of census operations and we'll talk about regional issues, as well as national issues.

Today we are going to focus on the questionnaires arriving in the mail. Getting them mailed back quickly will generate some top-line national data on the status of census operations. When we get to the question-and-answer-section of the conference, we will alternate taking questions from reporters calling in and those who are present. When you ask your question, please identify yourself and your affiliation. With that, I give you Director Prewitt.

DR. PREWITT: Thank you, Steve. For those of you who are veterans of our operational press briefings, I might start by reminding you that we've moved out of the local office where we've had the last, I think, 10 or so briefings. Because by now, of course, the local offices are doing the census. Even a three-hour interruption by a press conference -- the time that it takes to set up, have the press conference and disassemble -- is more than we want to allow.

So from now on we will not have any of our press briefings in our own local offices.

After years of preparation by the Census Bureau and thousands of partner organizations in the public and private sectors, Census 2000 is now in the hands of the American people. Indeed, last week, I testified before Congress that all systems were ready to go. And today I can report a successful launch.

By now, I hope many of you in the audience will have received your census forms. If it is this size envelope, you're getting the short form. If it is this size -- smile, you're getting the long form.

Of course, the task now before us is to get everyone in America to open those envelopes, fill out the form and send it back before April 1st. In fact, as of this morning, we have already had 2.4 million census forms returned to our four data capture centers in Pomona, Calif., Phoenix, Ariz., Jeffersonville, Ind., and Baltimore, Md. That covers more than 2 percent of all households, but we still have 98 percent to go.

About 1.6 million of the 2.4 million we have already received have already been scanned by our

data capture system. Indeed, just yesterday, we processed 800,000 of the census forms. We recorded a better than 99 percent accuracy rate when we checked the character recognition quality. Obviously these are still very early results, but it is very, very reassuring that our data capture system is functioning as anticipated.

We have logged over 600,000 calls to our toll-free telephone questionnaire assistance line. About 13 percent of those calls went to our Spanish-language line and a small number to our other language lines. More than 1,000 people have already completed their form over the phone, and we've also recorded more than 1,000 Internet forms.

Incidentally, speaking of the Internet, following the advance letter -- which, as you will recall, identifies our Web site for job purposes -- the hits to that job site shot up from a base of about one-half million a week to 3 million in the period 3/2 through 3/9, which is rather strong evidence that the advance letter is having its desired effect.

Further evidence along that line is we have already received over 800,000 requests for forms in one of the five foreign languages: Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog.

Also, the number of people in our qualified job applicant pool has now crossed 2 million, which is 85 percent of our goal and, indeed, 7 percent ahead of our current schedule -- as of yesterday.

Currently we have 120,000 employees working on the decennial. And I pause to say that 120,000 is already a substantial number. And many of those persons are engaged in the Update/ Leave operation.

I also want to let you know that not all of the people who we hire take to this task and we have already begun to experience some turnover. That is, about 2.5 percent have already decided this is not for them, which is why we frontload so heavily: because not everyone that we recruit and train will stay the course. On the other hand, 2.5 percent is well within our tolerance level for turnover.

And, of course, with any national number, there are local units which will lag. Indeed, I remind you that the law of large numbers tells us that most phenomena are normally distributed. We all remember the bell-shaped curve.

We have 520 local offices. At any given time, along almost any dimension that you can imagine, 13 of them will, by definition, be two standard deviations below average. These will be our trouble spots and we will be working on them.

For instance, with respect to recruitment, we have already modified the wage rates in five offices and have a modified wage rate under consideration in seven others, which is to say about 12 of the offices are lagging sufficiently behind our target that we're taking or considering taking emergency action.

But I do suggest to you that 12 or 13 out of 520 is well within our expectations if you believe, as I do, in the law of large numbers -- that things are normally distributed. And only in Lake Wobegon can everyone be above average.

The majority of our current employees are conducting Update/Leave, where we deliver forms in rural areas that do not have city-style addresses. That operation began on March 3rd and is currently on schedule.

Approximately 77 percent of the assignments have been made and this work is scheduled to be completed at the end of the month.

Also, our Road Tour vans are now in their fifth week of traveling the country, spreading the message of Census 2000. Our 12 vans have, as of now, made over 850 stopovers and our estimate is that we've directly reached 525,000 people at various events that are stimulated by the Road Tour.

Yesterday we kicked off the start of "Teach Census Week" in classrooms all over the country. We are encouraging every participating teacher, from Head Start through K-12, to teach a lesson on the census this week. We have argued all along that the census is a teachable moment for the entire nation and have stressed the four Rs -- that is, we should teach lessons about representation, about resources, about respect, about responsibility.

Indeed, we also hope that that lesson, as it takes place in the schoolrooms across the country this week, stresses that Census 2000 provides the cornerstone of knowledge about the people of our nation. Private businesses, large and small, have come to depend on the census for population, income, education, housing data, in terms of where to locate new offices, shops, factories and to market new products.

Federal, state and local officials study patterns of detailed census data in anticipation of constructing hospitals, highways, bridges and schools. Indeed, as we stress so often, for the next 10 years, approximately $2 trillion in federal funds alone will be distributed to states and localities based on the data collected in Census 2000, and I suggest to you that a $6.5 billion

investment in helping to give some sort of intelligent direction to the expenditure of $2 trillion in federal funds is a good investment. That comes out to about $1.50 for every $10,000 of federal funding. And that's just federal funding, not including, of course, private investments.

Indeed, there is so much that is essential just captured on this short form. There you have a blow-up of a short form. And it is amazing what seven simple questions will tell us about our society. We ask name, date of birth, gender, age, Hispanic origin, race and whether the home is owned or rented. And that provides the basic data for us for our representational system. That's all.

That is, there's less information on this census form than there is on your driver's license. We don't ask your weight or your height or the color of your eyes or whether you are an organ donor. And indeed, as we've said before, this short form takes about 10 minutes for the normal household to complete.

Of course, some of our residents, 1 of out 6, will get the long form, which covers about 34 subjects: education, ancestry, employment, disability, transportation, housing details. And it's our estimate that the normal household will take about 38 minutes to complete this.

Census Day, of course, itself -- as a reference date -- of course, is on April 1st, only 18 days from now. And we would like it if we had heard from every household in the United States.

We do expect in the next two-week peak period to receive somewhere between 40 and 70 million forms in the mail. As we've announced before, starting March 27th, in just two weeks, we will post the response rate by county and place every day on the Internet through the period until April 11th.

Our goal is ambitious but achievable: to increase the U.S. mailback response rate by at least 5 percentage points over the level in 1990. That is, increase it from 65 percent to 70 percent. So that's the message today: Mail the form back. It's not junk mail. In fact, it's mandatory and required by U.S. law.

But most of all, do it for your family's future, your community's future. Make sure that you do count. This is why we say "This is your future. Don't leave it blank." There are many sources of assistance. If you need help filling out the form, you can visit one of our 31,000 walk-in questionnaire assistance centers. The questionnaire is printed in six languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog. And you can obtain language assistance guides in any of 49 additional languages from the centers or from the Internet, <www.census.gov>.

You can also use the toll-free number that's printed on the form and you can file over the phone.

We don't encourage that because it burdens a phone system which is designed to offer assistance to as many people as possible.

Now just to remind you of all the operations. As I have just said, we do hand-deliver the form to about 24 million households in rural areas, including those in Puerto Rico. This operation, which we call Update/Leave, does continue through the entire month. So not everyone will have their form this week, in rural areas; the delivery system has not yet completed its task.

Beginning yesterday, census enumerators started to visit about a half a million households in remote, sparsely populated areas, an operation similar to that which began in Alaska on Jan. 19th. And here the enumerators actually complete the form at each household. And this operation will actually run all the way through April.

We also began yesterday to conduct similar operations in communities with very special enumeration needs, where most housing does not have house numbers. These include some American Indian reservations, some unincorporated Spanish-speaking communities called "colonias" along the Texas border with Mexico and in resort areas which have high concentrations of seasonally vacant housing units.

I want to conclude this quick summary of things by stressing one point that is well known. Nevertheless, we cannot stress it enough. Census data are confidential.

No census information, individual-level information is shared with anyone inside or outside of government.

There is an absolute firewall between a statistical operation, which is what the Census Bureau performs, and enforcement operations, such as those conducted by the FBI, the INS, the IRS, local housing or welfare offices.

No court of law, not even a President of the United States can find out your answer. Obviously, this is the message which we're trying to get out as forcefully as we can. And in this we are delighted with cooperation of religious leaders, community advocates and, of course, even our baseball heroes.

Answering the census is important. It's easy, it is safe. As the saying goes, "Just do it." The census is now in the hands of the American people. Fill out the form, mail it back. It is your future that is at stake. Don't leave it blank. Thank you very much for your time and I'm delighted to take your questions, which Steve Jost will field.

MR. JOST: Okay. If I may, for the reporters that are on the phone, if you want to get in the question queue, you have to punch number "1" on your keypad. And we'll start with a question in the room.

Q Hi. I'm Jane Kilburn with Conus Communications. My question concerns getting out the mailings and making sure minorities are counted. I understand in the last census a big chunk of specifically Latinos, African-Americans and Native Americans -- millions of those were missed. My question is why and what's being done to rectify that?

DR. PREWITT: Yes. In 1990, the estimates of the Census Bureau itself were that 1.6 percent of the population was not counted. But that was very differentially distributed across certain demographic and geographical areas. Our own calculation is that the African-American undercount was about 4.5 percent; the Latino undercount, about 5 percent; the Asian, about 2.3 percent; American Indians living on reservations, about 12 percent.

The issue of the differential undercount has vexed the Census Bureau for a half-century, since we have been systematically measuring it. And we have invested a great deal of effort in every census trying to improve coverage, especially of those groups which are not well-counted.

What we've done in 2000 of course is focused heavily on the areas where these population groups are concentrated, with paid advertising, with partnership programs, with outreach programs, with Census in the Schools. And if you go into those neighborhoods today, you will find a great deal of census messaging, stressing the importance of the census.

We have said before that it's extremely difficult to count your way out of the undercount problem.

There will always be a small -- there will be pockets of this population which will be difficult to locate and, even if located, will be perhaps unwilling to respond. We can do everything we can.

But at a certain point, the responsibility really does go to the people themselves. And if they refuse to be counted, there's not much we can do about it.

We do have another procedure called our "Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation," which follows the census. That is a very substantial survey of 300,000 households. And we use that to calculate the characteristics and numbers of people who were missed in the basic census. And on the basis

of that, we are able to report to the country who was missed, what their characteristics are and we're able to correct the basic census.

We think of this as a progressively more accurate census. The first census is the basic enumeration, which gets done in the next four or five months. And then we do the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation later in the summer and early fall. And on the basis of that, we correct the numbers which will be available approximately a year from now.

These corrected numbers then can be used for purposes of redistricting and purposes of federal funding. They cannot be used for purposes of reapportionment.

Q A lot of people don't mail it back. But another reason in terms of the Census Bureau, because you just couldn't find a lot of the people. Is that a big reason, why a lot of people...?

DR. PREWITT: No. We actually do find most people. There are obviously some populations which are extremely difficult to find. Highly mobile people, people who are linguistically isolated. But in 2000 we start with an address file that we have reason to believe is quite accurate. Obviously, at the edges there will be some duplicate addresses and some addresses that are missed.

But we start with an address file of about 120 million households in the United States. We've walked the streets, we've spent about nearly a billion dollars constructing that address file. And we think it is accurate and we think the mail will get there.

If they don't come back through the mail, we certainly don't stop at that point. We then go out and knock on those doors. We make as many as six visits to a household -- six visits -- or three visits plus three phone calls, plus asking neighbors when they're likely to be home, when can we catch them and so forth.

So we spend about 10 weeks doing that kind of work, trying to contact the people who don't mail the questionnaire back in. So, no, the census isn't just dependent upon who mails it back in.

Obviously, it's a much more successful census if the form is mailed back in. It's also a much less expensive census.

MR. JOST: We'll go to a question on the phone. Sherri Sylvester from the San Antonio News Express.

Q Dr. Prewitt, just first a quick question and then a more sensitive one. Can I just confirm that you began in the colonias yesterday?

DR. PREWITT: Yes.

Q ...going door to door?

DR. PREWITT: That is correct.

Q Okay. Are you -- and I'm sure you are -- testing the effectiveness of your ad campaign? And at what point would you be able to link that to the mailback rates that you get? Or are you? How are you going to test that?

DR. PREWITT: Well, we're doing, yes, a number of evaluations, some of which won't be reported until later this summer. We are also trying to do some real-time survey work, which does try to assess the impact of the advertising campaign and other promotional efforts. I'm hopeful that we'll have some preliminary results from that as early as our operational briefing next week. So I will be reporting that at that time.

I might also cite other poll work, other survey work that's undergoing -- been produced -- particularly the USA-CNN poll results that were reported on Monday morning, which indicated that about 85 percent of the American public was already aware of the census. Those are poll results that occurred actually before the advance letter went out.

This is, in our judgment, very, very high -- to have that much general awareness of the census that early in the census process. So, we imagine, with the advance letter and the other work that's going on right now, that overall awareness is certainly going to approach 90-95 percent. That's a real accomplishment.

That doesn't necessarily turn into a willingness to send it back in. But every indication we have is that the advertising campaign is reaching into the hard-to-count population groups. And I will report more on that, I hope, as soon as early next week.

MR. JOST: Dee Cohn, the Washington Post.

Q Hi. Have you had any reports of problems with the mailings of the form or delivery by the Post Office?

And, as a follow-up question, if someone lived at a city-style address, when should he or she begin to get concerned about not getting a form and what should they do about it?

DR. PREWITT: The initial design was to mail three days March 13, 14 and 15. And, so, if by the end of the week or early next week, people in city-style addresses have not received their mail, then there is cause for concern and we would hope that they would be in touch either with the local office or with headquarters. And we will take whatever action we can.

I'll give you one problem that came to my attention just this morning, in terms of the mailing out of the forms. This was someone who got their form and their reminder card on the same day. The reminder card is scheduled to be mailed on March 20th, but, obviously, in some post offices it's being prematurely mailed.

We know that some forms were also prematurely mailed -- most of Vermonters got their form last week. We have a schedule. We hope the local post offices will follow it. But in some instances, they don't.

But those are not serious problems. I think the serious problem would be, of course, if we had indications that the forms themselves weren't getting there.

One thing indeed that we picked up a little on -- and this we expected. We're certainly getting some duplicate mailings, that is, two mailings going to the same address. We know why that happens. We tried to be very, very inclusive in constructing the address file. We took it from the 1990 records, we took it from our own block canvassing work, we took it from the post office, we took it from local governments. And obviously in a process where there are 120 million different discreet things and you're getting it from four or five different streams, in some instances you will have duplicates.

And we're telling respondents who call us, who say, "Look, I got two forms. What should I do?" We say, "Take the one which has the address which is most accurate or that you normally believe is most accurate and complete it. Simply destroy the other questionnaire so they will be accurately counted."

This is not systematic, it's not large-scale, but it is one of the little things that will happen in an operation this vast.

MR. JOST: Okay. We'll go back to Texas on the phone. Joanne Zuniga of the Houston Chronicle. Joanne, are you there?

Q I needed to check with you in regards to the homeless count. I understand the March 27th through the 29th is when the homeless count will be in various shelters. How will this operation differ from the 1990 count for the homeless?

DR. PREWITT: Well, it has two major differences, one of which is the way in which we have -- one of which has to do with our planning for this operation. You're correct. The shelter count, as we refer to it, the shelter space enumeration count, is the 27th through the 29th.

This time around, we have constructed a list of all of the shelters that we can find in any given city, in any given area. And we've also gone to local advocacy groups and to the mayors and said not only, "Where are the shelters?" and "Where do the people get their meals," but also "Where do they sleep if they don't come to the shelters?"

And so, on that key night, we will visit not only shelters, but also parks, under the bridges, in whatever areas we believe that the homeless people are congregating.

So the big, big change is that we have simply anticipated and mapped out all of the places where we believe we will find homeless on that night. I visited, for example, in Charlotte just last week, two homeless shelters and talked to the leadership there. And some are very engaged and very concerned and committed. They've already been visited. They knew what the plan was.

And that's true all over the country. These leaders are very insistent that they want everyone counted. And I met with a group of about 85 people in one of the shelters, which were rehabilitating themselves from drugs, alcohol and so forth. And I was quite pleased with their of level of understanding. One of the gentlemen said he was particularly hoping he'd get the long form because he wanted to send a message back to the Veterans Affairs Department. He saw the long form as a way to record his disability so they would have a better sense of his disability.

So, I thought that was a fairly high level of sophistication -- requesting the long form so he could send a message back.

The other big change, by the way, in how we're going to do this -- this is slightly technical but let me explain it. We have a multiplicity factor. What we will do is we will visit a shelter on the

night and we will ask someone: How many nights a week do you use shelters? And if they say "seven nights," then they get counted as a single person.

But if they say they only visit shelters on three nights, then we will weight them accordingly. Because, in effect, the night that we happen to capture them has to stand in for all of the rest of that week. And so if they only use the shelter for say three or four nights, then we will weight them accordingly. So we will weight them. If it's three nights, it's seven over three, which means they would be weighted slightly over two times.

So, this is a multiplicity procedure that makes us believe we will get a better and more accurate and complete count of the homeless.

That number, by the way, cannot be used in the apportionment, of course, because that is using a statistical procedure which was not allowed for the purposes of apportionment numbers.

But it will be used in the subsequent data products, which can be used for federal funding purposes.

MR. JOST: Okay, Herb.

Q Herbert Sample, Sacramento Bee.

To follow up on that, can you give us the status of the disagreement between the Census Bureau and the Salvation Army over mobile kitchens and soup kitchens?

DR. PREWITT: Yes. The question really refers to the concern of the Salvation Army about whether we count in their dining halls. Let me go back to the homeless count.

We do it two ways. We first count people -- try to count people where they sleep. In that sense, we're treating the homeless just like everyone else in the United States. Fundamentally, the census is based upon residency. It's based upon where people sleep. And if the homeless people sleep in a shelter, that's where we want to count them. If they sleep outside, that's where we want to count them.

We do not count people where they eat. But because the homeless people are not as easy to find, of course, where they sleep, but they nevertheless sometimes come for food, we are also having a back-up system or a redundancy system where we're counting the homeless where they get their

meals: soup kitchens and so forth.

Now, when we count them there, we ask them if they have been using shelters. Because if they have been using shelters, then we will not count them where they're eating because that would run the risk of a double count. If on the other hand they've not been using shelters, and we have reason to believe we probably weren't able to catch them, then we count them where they eat.

In this particular instance, the Salvation Army has a big residency program and almost all of the people that it feeds are also in its residency program. So, we will count them in the shelters, and the Salvation Army is very cooperative on that score.

But the Salvation Army has concluded that it infringes on people's privacy to interrupt them during their meals. It's not a confidentiality issue, it's a privacy issue, an issue of human dignity. And they really believe that it's not fair to come in while people are eating their meal and ask them census questions.

So what we have worked out with them in almost all of these instances if people do queue to get into the dining areas, and in that queue, that is, in the line, before they enter the dining facility we will be able to count them.

So we think this is a fairly small problem. And that I'd just insist that this is only for people who already aren't using shelters. Because if they're using shelters, we would have caught them in the shelter.

Q If I could follow up.

DR. PREWITT: Sure.

Q Does that mean that you won't be counting at the mobile shelters -- I'm sorry -- the mobile feeding centers, because presumably it's not a building where there'll be a...

DR. PREWITT: If they're lined up to get in a building, inside the building, if there's a dining hall, then we'll count them when they're lined up outside -- before they enter the dining hall.

If they're lined up on the street for a mobile kitchens or a mobile soup kitchen operation, then we will count them as they're lined up, because after all, they're in a public space. So, as long as

they're not inside the dining room of the Salvation Army itself, we will be able to count them.

That's only the Salvation Army, of course. That is, we've had no one else who's expressed this concern. And there are thousands of churches that provide meals and many, many other sort of forms of soup kitchen and mobile vans and so forth. And none of those persons -- and none of those groups expressed this concern.

MR. JOST: Okay, we will go back to the phone. Mae Chang of Newsday.

Q Dr. Prewitt, hi. I have a question about the INS guidelines that were released yesterday. Are you satisfied with the guidelines that they released concerning their enforcement operations? And do you think it's sufficient to encourage immigrants, particularly the undocumented, to participate in the census?

DR. PREWITT: Yes, I am pleased with the INS guidelines. I think they have been as responsive as they can be. They obviously have a law to enforce. As I read those guidelines, they are obviously saying that if there's criminal activity going on, if there's a drug ring, if there are other kinds of especially criminal activity that they have to take action on, that they will have to do so.

But there will be no general purpose raids for the entire period of the census, as I read the guideline that extends even into August, which is almost all of the field work -- all of the field work, really to the basic census. So I think that the INS has really gone quite far in trying to make certain that none of their activities interfere with the census itself.

They obviously also have a very strong statement saying that they have no interest in census data, they never have, they never will. They never collect, they never get information from the Census Bureau. That is, they've also recognized, of course, the fact that all census data are confidential.

Will that help with the undocumented? Certainly it will help. But I think what will help more, really, are the ministers, the religious leaders, the priests and the schoolteachers -- the local leaders who will be stressing that the census data are confidential. I do remind us all that the census itself does not ask any questions about legal status; it only asks the citizenship question on the long form. And then it doesn't ask -- if someone says they're not a citizen it doesn't ask if they have documents, documentation or not.

So there is no census evidence anyway available for purposes of INS. So the INS has no interest whatsoever in our data. They collect their own data. So no, I do think they have done what they

can, and yet be consistent with their own obligations to try to make certain that their activities do not interfere with a successful conduct of the census.

MR. JOST: Haya el Nasser, USA Today.

Q Yes, just two questions. Has the Census Bureau set a target response rate for March 27th which you'd like to see if you're on track? And also, could you address the problem with people getting through to the toll-free line?

DR. PREWITT: Yes. On the first question, no we actually haven't. We don't have a target for that particular time. That is, our target really, as you know -- not our target, but our estimate -- is a mailback response rate of 61 percent. But that is through the April 11th period.

I will be very attentive to what we know by March 27th, of course, as I think the entire country will be. And I will certainly try to characterize it at that moment. But it's a fair question. I haven't -- we haven't sat down and asked ourselves, "Well, what number will make us anxious, what number will fill us full of encouragement?"

I do have a Congressional hearing two days later on March 29th before our appropriations committee. And I'm certain that hearing will address the question of whether we're adequately funded for the census. And that, of course, will turn on our response rate as of that date. But no, we don't have a target right now. We might give some consideration to that.

The other question that was asked had to do with the Telephone Assistance Centers. As I said, we have processed -- we have received something like -- yesterday it was I think 636,000 phone calls. That is more than we anticipated for this early.

Indeed, our Telephone Assistance Center is equipped to handle throughout its entire lifespan -- that is, budgetarily and in its personnel -- is expected to take about 11 million calls. We peaked sooner than we had anticipated. We had a higher number on a daily number sooner than we anticipated.

We know that that has created some inability to get through. We've tested it ourselves. And we are now trying to staff it up much more rapidly than we thought we would have to. We are quite worried, I will honestly say, about the Telephone Questionnaire Assistance Program.

It is designed to help people complete their form when they have their mail form in front of

them. It's not designed as a general purpose complaint number. And, of course, it is being used that way. It is being used by people who simply -- it's not that they need help. It is that they want to complain about one or the other of the questions. And, of course, they want to talk to a real person, because if they really wanted help, they could almost use our menu and get help. But they keep calling to get through to an operator in order to make a complaint about the census.

And, of course, we have these several thousands of operators sitting there who are, again part-time, recently hired, trained to answer certain kinds of questions and they get other kinds of questions they have to try and bump that up to their supervisor.

So, it is a bit of a problem that the system is being misused. We will cope as best we can. We hope that people who actually want help will be able to get through, because that's what it's for. And we are not encouraging, as I've just said, people to use this as a way to complete their form on the phone because it's just as easy to do it themselves. Obviously that will take five, six, seven, eight, nine minutes of an operator's time, which then is subtracted from the time they would have had available to answer legitimate questions.

So, if people do misuse it, and try to turn it into something else, we will have a very difficult time making certain that the people who really need it get through.

It's the same thing with the job number. The job number is, of course, a number for people who want to get jobs. But if the job number is used for people who simply want to make other kinds of statements about the census, then the people who actually want to use it to get a job will not be able to get through.

It's simply a problem that anyone who has an 800 number knows. And especially an 800 number which allows you eventually to get to a live operator. People will use it for purposes other than that for which it's designed.

I would say of all of our operations, right now, it is the one that we are most concerned about over this next three-or-four-week period or really even shorter period of time -- over the next two-to three-week period.

MR. JOST: Before we go back to the phone, Director Prewitt, we've got a request for you to hold up the short form one more time.

DR. PREWITT: I am happy to hold up the short form endlessly to try to get the American people to recognize its importance, to complete it and mail it back in or use the Internet, but not our

phone line to complete it, if at all possible.

MR. JOST: We'll go to the phones. Ellyn Ferguson with Gannett.

Q Hi. One, I have gotten my census form and I filled it out. It will be going into the mail.

And two, I had a question about the kinds of complaints you say that the people are making when they call in. What are they? And how many calls have you gotten at peak time?

DR. PREWITT: I'm sorry, I didn't get that last part. How many calls, What?

Q At the peak, how many calls was that?

DR. PREWITT: Well, as I said, I think it was 636,000 that we handled yesterday. And that is close to our peak. That is, if we keep running at that level -- we are only budgeted for 11 million calls. We calculated that on the basis of roughly how many people would actually need help completing this form.

And, of course, that's the entire census period. That is around till early April. So, if we start running at peak level this early in the process and continue at peak level, it will not be long before we have to find other resources.

There are two issues, one of which is making sure that we have enough operators on. This is the largest telephone operation system that's ever been established in this country. There are something like, I think, 36 different units that have been brought together by EDS, which is the contractor for our telephone system.

There's no place in the country where you can get this service, of course. There's no contractor who has these many telephone lines, especially in six languages. So we have assembled that with our contractor -- as I say, EDS. And it's got a very complicated set of software which routes calls to try to find a free line, but also simultaneously routes them to different language lines.

Right now, as I say, it's functioning, but it's functioning at its current capacity. And if the capacity, if the demand on it simply suddenly really exceeded the current capacity, we would find that there will be people out there who are very unhappy because they cannot get through.

You ask about the kind of complaints. You get a large number of different kinds of complaints. There are people who simply complain about the fact that there is a census. You know, what right is it of the government to ask me these questions?

And then there are the more specific complaints. There certainly is a lot of focus on the race item. I get a lot of e-mail traffic -- (laughs) -- directly addressed to me saying that in this society we should not even be asking a race question of anyone. And sometimes in rather sharp language that point is made.

So, that's the pattern. And then there are, on the long form questions, a number of people who will be asking, "Why do you want to know this? This isn't any of your business," and so forth and so on.

So it's a scattering. But it's primarily about individual items, for the most part. And as I say, since the race item is, of course, on 100 percent of the forms, that one attracts the most attention. And there's a lot of concern, as you know, out there because of activity by different kinds of civil rights groups talking about the importance of the race item. There's a lot of concern about how they should complete it.

The Census Bureau has no position on how people should complete that item. It's self-identification. If people want to identify themselves as multiracial, this is the opportunity that has been presented to them. But we are not urging people to do one or the other. That is, only use it as a single race item or use it as a multiple race item. That really is up to the individual.

MR. JOST: Okay, right here in the front row.

Q Yeah, Randy Schmidt with the Associated Press. I have two questions. The first one is quick. Have you sent in your Census form?

DR. PREWITT: Am I sending mine?

Q Have you sent yours in?

DR. PREWITT: I filled -- I did mine on the Internet. In fact, if you really want the story, I'll tell you. I did not want, of course, to be treated in any other way from anyone else and wasn't. But I

got my advance letter right on schedule, to my address, correctly addressed. And since I knew that my advance letter identification number was the same as the short form identification number, I went into the Internet on the basis of my advance letter identification number and filed in about two minutes.

And then I suddenly panicked, because what if I didn't get a form? (Laughs.) But I did. I got my form yesterday.

Q Okay, the second one. Some of the gay and lesbian groups have been encouraging their people to check off the "Unmarried Partner" box. I assume you don't have any guesstimates on how many people might do that. But is there a possibility that in the future, in future surveys the Census Bureau might begin collecting more data on gay and lesbian ...?

DR. PREWITT: Obviously it's hard to state what might happen. But I would say that the movement from 1990 to 2000 already represents a movement forward. That is, what we are doing in the 2000 census of course is coding the "Unmarried Partners of the Same Sex Living Together." So that becomes a category. That category did not exist in 1990.

So that's already, I believe, a reflection of the attempt to maintain a census operation, which is somewhat consistent with the changing social dynamics of this country. The multiracial item is obviously another indicator of that.

Right now, for example, we're doing some quite important research -- ethnographic research -- on family composition and family structure. What constitutes a household today is not the old nuclear family concept. We still are running a census as if the nuclear family construct is the dominant construct in the relationship and so forth.

But we are doing some investigation in the census environment, in anticipation of probably having to change that by 2010. And that includes, of course, unmarried partners of the same sex, who sometimes have children. They sometimes have children from a previous heterosexual marriage, sometimes an adopted child. There are lots of different ways in which, of course, gay or lesbian couples can have children.

And our form doesn't recognize that very well. And so we are studying right now how better to reflect really the changing nature of household composition and family structure. But as of now, I do believe that what we've done is reasonably responsive by putting this unmarried partners living together of the same sex.

MR. JOST: Okay, we'll go back to the phones and Judi Hasson of Federal Computer Week.

Q Hi, Dr. Prewitt. It's Judi Hasson from Federal Computer Week. Getting back to the Internet for a moment, you knew that you could file on the Internet, but there is nothing on the short form, which I got yesterday, that says I can. How will people know they can file on the Internet?

DR. PREWITT: That's again a fair question. We debated that at some length -- about how heavily to publicize the idea that you could file on the Internet. And we hesitated to do it for two reasons, one of which, of course -- much of our publicity has focused upon the hard-to-count population groups. And these are the population groups least likely to have Internet capacity or facilities.

And so we simply didn't want to suddenly focus our publicity or promotional effort on a population group from which we believe we will get a reasonably high response rate at any rate.

There is some advertising on the Web itself for the fact that you can do this on the Internet. The way it actually happens is you go to the homepage of Census 2000. If you go into the Census Bureau Web site, and then go to the Census 2000 homepage, and if you go to something that's ... -- with the Internet. But it also includes help on the questions. That is, you can actually use the Internet.

If you have the long form, for example, you can go to the Internet on how to think about a correct answer to a given question.

So you're right, it's not widely publicized. The primary reason was that we did focus our publicity on the hard-to-count.

The other thing is we've got to build in all kinds of safeguards to make sure the Internet is not misused. We have to be certain that we're only getting legitimate responses. It's obviously very easy to program a computer to generate responses. And so we wanted to be certain that we had all of our encryption quite well in place. We believe we do. Certainly early indications are that we're having no trouble with any attempt to manipulate an Internet response in order to distort the count.

But those are the -- they're complicated and we were still planning this as recently as several months ago, how to best respond to the fact that many people do want to respond by the Net.

MR. JOST: Okay, I think we have time for a couple more. One over here.

Q DR. Prewitt, Chuck Holmes with Cox Newspapers. To what extent will the advertising campaign, what's left of it, be tweaked or reguided based on the response rate?

DR. PREWITT: There is a phase of our paid advertisement campaign which is targeted on our Non-Response Follow-Up period. That is, we'll go ahead and run the current advertising campaign for another week or two, but then we will close down for a week or two in mid-April.

And then it will come back on the air in late April through May and June during the nonresponse follow-up period. Then it will be even more focused upon the areas and the population groups where we have low response rates and therefore we have to be knocking on the doors. So that's basically the design.

Q A follow-on?

DR. PREWITT: Sure.

Q What percent of the paid campaign has been spent so far and how much -- what percentage is left to go?

DR. PREWITT: I'll let Steve answer you.

MR. JOST: It's roughly 80 percent, Chuck, at this point. I believe the Non-Response Follow-Up phase is about 17 percent. And those are actually some -- many of the same executions would have a revised ending when the enumerator is pictured and the message is "Please cooperate when the census taker, when we come to your door." In addition, we have funding to begin to plan to extend that advertisement should the response rate indicate that we might be in the field longer or with a larger population.

And we'll go to the phone to Coleman Warner with the Times Picayune of New Orleans.

Q Yes, I just wanted to double-check your summary figures for this census in terms of the gross volume of forms going out and the total cost for the operation this year. And also wanted to double-check the date on which the survey of the homeless individuals living in parks or under bridges or what not will occur.

DR. PREWITT: Right. Your latter question -- that's March 27, 28 and 29. And I'm not exactly certain which operation is which of those three days, because we have two or three different operations. One is shelters, one is what we call transit night, where we're not in the shelters but out on the street. And the other is where we're doing the soup kitchens and the dining halls.

But it's across that period. And if you want to be more specific, we can certainly get you that information.

Then you asked -- sorry, now I've forgotten the other two questions.

MR. JOST: How many outforms, how many --

DR. PREWITT: Oh, the total number of forms. We started with an address list of 120 million addresses. However, we know that somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 million of those will probably be non-deliverable as addressed. That is, we were quite inclusive, as I've stressed before, in constructing our address list, because we got it from more than one stream.

We got it from our 1990 records, we got it from our work with local governments, we got it from our own block listing and we got it from the Post Office. And all told, we know that does include some addresses that won't work very well when we actually try to mail.

Where we mail and get another address of "Undeliverable as addressed," we go back and knock on the door in our follow-up -- Non-Response Follow-Up period. That is, no address, no household is taken off of the census roll until it has been subjected to what we call a double kill.

That is, two things have to happen to prove to us that it's not there. So if it comes back "undeliverable," that just becomes one kill that is not confirmed until we go out and make certain that it's not there.

On the other hand, if the household we already thought was not there and for whatever reason, partly to be responsive to local governments we went ahead and mailed, and then it comes back as "undeliverable," then we will have considered that two kills.

That is, we have already inspected that space on the city street or in the rural area and thought that there was not a household there, even though the city has come back and said, "Well, yes,

there is." So we went back out, mailed it anyway. So we do subject it to two tests.

But our best guess is that there will be about somewhere in the neighborhood of 4 or 5 million of those addresses that will not really be functioning addresses. So we really think that the base number is closer to 115 million legitimate households.

We also, have a new construction program. There are housing units that have been built since the address file got completed, which was late summer. And we have a special procedure for incorporating those addresses into our address file and that is occurring right up until April 1st itself -- that is, through this week. And then we go back out into the field with these new constructions.

There will be people, for example, who say, "I never got a form," because they're living in a housing unit or housing complex, let us say, that has been built in the last two or three months. They moved in the last two or three months. And that's true -- they will not have gotten one, because we did not have their mailing address. But they will get a visit during Non-Response Follow-Up, and that's how we'll catch them.

MR. JOST: Time for one last question.

DR. PREWITT: There was one back there, a couple back in back.

MR. JOST: Mark Wegner. I'm sorry. Bright lights.

DR. PREWITT: Also, the gentleman behind Mark Wagner had his hand up a long time.

MR. JOST: Oh, okay. Let's go to the gentleman behind Mark Wegner first, and then Mark, because Mark's a nice guy.

Q You're very kind. Bill Small, Bloomberg. It's simply just a quick wrap-up kind of question, doctor. You started off the news conference describing that this is a successful launch. I'd be grateful if you could express in a nutshell what the factors are that make you call it "successful." Is it just that things have gotten into the mail or are there things that you are seeing that are far more encouraging than that?

DR. PREWITT: Yes. Well, I think what makes it a successful launch is that we have three or

four big systems out there, and they're all functioning as we would have anticipated them to function at this stage. That includes certainly the mail system, that includes the Update/Leave -- the fact that we are on schedule, slightly ahead of schedule in Update/Leave. That's a big operation. That's something like, all told, 24 million addresses, including Puerto Rico. So that's on schedule and on track.

The payroll system. We're now testing our payroll system, because we're paying 120,000 people. And obviously that's a big system that we have to make certain works well, and it is working.

And the other thing that I would stress is the data capture. Look, we've tested the data capture system. It is a huge innovation in 2000 to do optical character recognition data scanning. And the fact that we have already processed 1.6 million -- and as I say, yesterday about 800,000 which is really close to peak. We're capable of processing about 1 or 2 million a day. But the fact that we were in one day already processing at that level of 800,000 -- and that we're getting -- and what happens when we process is, we pull a sample off, of course, and key those and then compare the keyed results -- that is, the operator-keyed results to what had been scanned by the optical scanning system. And our accuracy level is 99.6 percent.

That is, the system is actually reading the handwriting of the American people who are scrawling in their answers on these forms. And it is being read at the level of 99.6. That is a very encouraging sign.

You know, about any successful launch, when you're only 2 percent to the moon, a lot of things can go wrong before you get there. And getting to the moon, getting to 100 percent is our goal.

But when I say that it's successful, I really mean our big systems are working. And the fact that our recruitment number -- that we've now crossed 2 million at the national level -- is a very encouraging sign to us.

We've got more than a month to go to get those remaining 15 percent. That is, we're at 85 percent of our overall goal of 2.4 million. So those are all the big systems. They're all successfully under way right now, as we speak.

Tomorrow could be a different day. You know, I could get back to the office this afternoon and find out that something's gone wrong. The one area as I did indicate to the question from USA Today where we have the most concern is the capacity of our Telephone Assistance Centers. And we will be very unhappy if we learn through the next two or three days that we have a large number of abandoned calls. That is, callers where people call in, they get tired of waiting, they hang the phone up. We will be recording that as we go.

Thus far, it's tolerable. But it's an area that we're monitoring almost on an hourly basis. And it will be very difficult at this stage to do much about it. And that really will be a result of people misusing the telephone system -- or not misusing it, but using it for purposes other than what we designed it to accomplish.

But with that small exception, I would say all of the big systems are functioning exactly as we would want them to be functioning at this stage of the Census.

MR. JOST: Mark, you get the last word almost.

Q Hi. Mark Wegner with Congress Daily. Is there any other background noise out there right now that might interfere with the census? And I refer specifically to a fundraising campaign issued by a private foundation. And more generally, the political debate with the presidential, Congressional elections -- does that interfere with what you're trying to ...?

DR. PREWITT: Yeah. The question of the letter that mimicked if you will -- or at least announced on its envelope that important census information is enclosed -- has been looked at by the U.S. Postal Service. And I would direct you to them for their investigation of that. But I do believe they've taken a somewhat strong stand on that mailing.

They are -- I, of course, wrote to the Postal Service in general about asking them to pay particular attention during this key period to any mass mailings that might confuse the public by attempting to mimic a census envelope.

Again, that could happen tomorrow. But as of now, we don't see any indications of that. But you don't know. There could be someone somewhere right now preparing such a mailing. It will almost be too late if it doesn't get out fairly quickly, because at least the forms are already out there.

And I do think the Post Office will be vigilant on that. More generally, Mark, there's nothing right now that I see in the political environment which is destabilizing to or otherwise disruptive of the census process and where we are right now.

As some of you know, there's an ongoing conversation about the appropriate level of oversight of a census operation. And I'm actually confident that we will resolve that reasonably comfortably. There's a GAO hearing this afternoon, for example. And my hope is that even in

that hearing, there will be some sort of sense of forward movement on that score.

As I've said before, the Census Bureau believes that it should be responsive, of course, to the oversight operation. But there is -- at a certain point, we actually have to be doing the census itself. And that's what we're engaged in now. We're trying to report to a number -- you know, the IG, the GAO, the Monitoring Board, the Subcommittee, the National Academy of Sciences as rapidly and fully as we can and we'll continue to do so.

But, at a certain point, we really have to make sure our people are primarily doing the census.

MR. JOST: Okay, thank you very much. We'll see you next Tuesday and please mail back your form. Thank you.

DR. PREWITT: Yes. Who has -- we're off record. How many of you got a form and sent it back?

[END OF EVENT.]

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