Press Briefing -- March 21, 2000
Director Prewitt

MR. STEVE JOST: My name is Steve Jost. I'm with the communications office at the Census Bureau and this is another one in our standard operational press briefings where the director of the Census will be giving you information on the status of the census, especially now that we're in a peak period where the census is underway in the hands of the American public. Today, we're going to focus on the response rate project that we're going to launch next week to keep track of how America is responding to the census across the country. For those of you who are new to the process, the director makes some opening remarks and then today, we have a special presentation on the response rate project immediately following that. Then we'll open the floor to questions, and as we do that, we alternate between questions in the room, and then we have a queue of reporters who are online on the phone. We alternate to the phone and the room, back and forth.

With that, I'll give you Director Prewitt.

DR. KENNETH PREWITT: Thank you, and thank you for attending this morning. Last week, just a week ago, I did report to you that Census 2000 had successfully lifted off of its launch pad. Maintaining that metaphor, I can report today that all systems are functioning and our mission remains on course. Of course also, as I stressed last week, in some very major sense this census is now in the hands of the American people, and its success or nonsuccess will depend upon their level of cooperation, of course.

Indeed, every household that returns the form does strengthen the ties that bind us together as a civil society, and we really see each response as a link in the larger census operation. Our goal is ambitious and we have challenged every community to raise its response rate by at least 5 percentage points over that of its 1990 rate. In your press kit, I believe, is a map that does show the 1990 response rate for each state and the District of Columbia. It's the map that you see up here behind you.

The response rate challenge, if successful, won't by itself fix the problem of the differential undercount, but this challenge does address the reality that our first problem is to take care of the underreport problem. We've had an underreport problem that has grown over the last two censuses; and we are working very, very hard now to correct for that problem. If we are successful with this challenge, our national response rate to the census would rise from 65 to 70 percent, and we would, of course, save a significant amount of money since it is so much more costly to send an enumerator to a nonresponding household than to receive the form back in the mail.

But we will measure our success in far more than dollars and cents if we can move the response rate higher than 1990. We will also send a message that decline in civic engagement is reversing as we enter the new century.

The question can be simply put -- how does America know what America needs? And the answer is simple - that how America knows what America needs does come from the census every 10 years. With Census 2000, we've now begun the critical countdown to answer this key question. Starting on March 27th and continuing through April 11th we will post on the Internet each day a status report on the initial response rates for each state and most counties and places -- that is, cities and towns in America. And then every day for two weeks, we will update that number, and on April 18th we will issue a final report.

State and local officials will check the numbers, and we urge the news media, of course, to publicize how their area of the nation as a whole is doing. We are joined in this initiative by a number of major national organizational sponsors: the Council for State Governments, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the National Association of Towns and Townships, International City Council Management Association, National Association of Counties, National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Congress of American Indians and the National Association of Secretaries of State. All of those organizations are out there now pushing to get a higher response rate.

We have a large number of partnerships already with governments across every state, and we're still taking formal memberships. All a state or local government has to do is call our toll-free number, 1-877-642-5926, and you will find in your press kit a current list of our partners in this program. The same information is available on our Census 2000 Web site under the icon '90 Plus Five.

I will quickly update you on several of our major operations. Update leave, which is the process by which the Census Bureau delivers forms to approximately 20 percent of the population that live in rural areas, or as we say, noncity style address areas. Nearly 98 percent of all the assignments have been made. That means we have actually put them in the hands of our enumerators, and they're out now delivering them. And 55 percent are complete. That is, they've been delivered and reported back to headquarters. These numbers indicate that we are on schedule, slightly ahead of schedule with this major operation.

As I said last week, about 120,000 employees are engaged in this, and thus far our turnover has been quite low, and that's a very healthy sign for us. It means that our wage rate is working and our recruitment system is working because the kind of people

we are getting are sticking with the task. In previous censuses, we have had a much higher turnover than we're currently experiencing.

Just for a moment, let's stick on recruitment. We continue to receive a large volume of hits on our census job site and our Web page. Last week, 1.2 million hit that site and, of course, we're also hearing from people through our toll-free number. Last week, over half a million calls were reported by our toll-free number getting information about jobs. In fact, as of the end of last week, the number of people in our qualified job applicant pool has now reached 2.2 million, which is 91 percent of our goal of 2.4 million, and as you will recall, we need to reach that goal for operational purposes by April 19th. So a month ahead of time, and we're already at 91 percent.

Obviously, like always, that's a national goal. That doesn't mean that every local census office has reached its goal, but we do have special procedures that we put in place if there are any lagging offices. Indeed, last week when I met, I said that we were addressing key emergency problems in five of our LCOs. That number is now down to two. It doesn't mean there won't be some more tomorrow, but basically we are being quite successful in putting in place our emergency special operations where we have to in our LCOs.

Indeed, in order to reach our April 19th goal, that is, another .2 million in our qualified applicant pool, we need to receive about 45,000 new applicants each week. Last week we were getting that number of applicants every day. So I remain confident that we will have the labor pool we need to carry out the census.

Now as you know, the census forms have been out in many parts of the country. Not completely, but in many parts of the country now for almost a week, and we have scanned 7.3 million forms already in our data capture sites. Most importantly for us, 7.3 million forms have been scanned. We obviously have complicated quality checks on how well our data capture system is working, and our accuracy rate is in excess of 99 percent, which is actually slightly higher than what we had expected. So our optical scanning system, our intelligent character recognition software and hardware is functioning. Indeed, all told, about 1.5 billion pages containing handwritten entries will move through the data capture system. The challenge is to provide high quality conversion of this handwritten information into digital data. Our system is working today, and we are very pleased with that, and the fact that we've already done 7.3 million forms with 99 percent accuracy suggests the system will continue to work.

We have also received as of Sunday about 32,000 Census 2000 short forms at our Internet site. As you know, we didn't have an estimated target of the number of people who would choose to file by Internet; so, we're simply delighted to be running this as a

major experiment, in effect, a major test of how well Internet filing will work for Census purposes. For the most part, it's working very well. We have some indication that there are some browser incompatibilities, and that not everyone is able to get through, something like at least in one browser the number is about 10 or 12 percent, as we understand it. That is not a problem in our system. That is a problem with the incompatibility between the browsers. If people shift browsers, they are able to get in. If not, they should simply mail back the paper form.

(Remarks off mike)

DR. PREWITT: From our advance letter, we processed more than 1 million requests for questionnaires in the five foreign languages, and the majority of these requests, of course, have been for the Spanish form. All mail-back census forms that will have been delivered by the end of this month -- that's 98 million -- by the Postal Service, and 20 million by, as I say, the Census Bureau.

In addition, we will seek out and interview people who live in very remote areas. That's an estimated .4 percent, about half percent of all housing units. We will complete their enumeration and update their address and location on maps by about May 1st. That's a small number, but it's a huge job because the distances are so vast. We have enumerators that are driving as much as 500 miles a day just to try to find remote housing in the upper Midwest, for example, and, of course, in parts of upper New York in the Adirondack mountains, with very remote living conditions up there.

We also will begin our update/enumerate operation, which is targeted on traditionally very hard to enumerate areas such as the American Indian reservations, unincorporated Spanish-speaking communities along the Texas-Mexico border and resort areas with high concentrations of seasonally vacant housing units. That process also will take us through May. Again, it's a very labor-intensive process. Small numbers of people, but very labor-intensive.

We are now at the point, even though not all the questionnaires have been delivered, because in some of the rural areas we will be delivering until the end of the month, but we are now announcing starting tomorrow, basically, that if someone has not received their form they should call our toll-free number and solicit help on how to get a form sent to them. The number is 1-800-471-9424.

Speaking of our toll-free number, as we've announced before, we do have six different phone lines: one in English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog. They are open from 8 to 9 in all of our time zones. As of Saturday, we had logged about 1.8

million calls; of which, about 15 percent had gone to the Spanish-speaking line. When we met last week, I expressed some concern about the telephone assistance centers. We have now hired the necessary number of operators -- 9,000 people are now answering the phone -- and we did have an unexpected high spike last Monday. That problem has been completely resolved, and all evidence is that everyone is getting through fairly quickly without long waits.

Obviously, the primary purpose, of our toll-free number is to provide assistance to callers who need help in filling out the form. But in addition, we've opened about 27,000 walk-in questionnaire assistance centers. They are now open, and we secured a commitment for an additional 4,000 if they are needed from some of our partners.

The third phase of our mail strategy has also begun. Every mail-back household will receive a third and last piece of our postal outreach effort, a postcard thanking people if they've already returned the form and urging them to do so if they haven't. So let me repeat the Census 2000 message to those households that have yet to respond. The census is important, the census is safe. Your information is confidential, and we hope you will mail the form back and do it for your future and your family's future. As we say in our tag line, "This is your future. Don't leave it blank."

Let me now shift just a little bit from operations to how well we are doing with respect to trying to get the attention of the American people and motivating them to participate in the mail-back operation. We have some survey data that has been collected by a firm called Inter-Survey, based on the West Coast, founded by two Stanford University professors. This particular exercise is funded by private foundations, but they are making the data available to us for our own use as the census unfolds.

Just a few facts that we picked up from the survey results. They were in the field just before the advance letter went out. That is, about March 3rd and 4th, 5th, in that period, and then subsequently in the field just after the advance letters had reached most households, but before the form. So the date I'm talking about precedes the arrival of the form itself in the households, but it is pre- and post- the advance letter, but also pre- and post-, of course, the advertising surge that we had designed for early March. That is, just before the forms hit.

I should stress before I report these data that this survey does underestimate the number of less well-educated people in the population, so we report them to you with some caution, but nevertheless it is a survey that matches in quality the kind of survey you get using random digit dialing methodologies, with which most of the press is familiar.

The overall familiarity with the census, in the earlier phase of this survey, as I say, before the advance letter was sent out, was already at about 83 percent, and that has now jumped to 94 percent. Indeed, an even sharper jump, and for us a very important jump. The respondents were asked if they understood that the census was a mail-back census process, and prior to the advance letter about 58 percent understood that, and that jumped to 84 percent.

From the point of view of the census operation, that is very important. There is serious research that we have done, that our marketing firms have done, that suggests that if you know a form is coming, you're much more likely to complete it. The percentage of the population based on these survey data that say they do intend to participate also increased from about 65 to about 72 percent. Now that's not necessarily a predictor of behavior, but it's at least an encouraging sign.

We're getting very high levels of recognition of our television advertising campaign. For example, about a quarter of the population are reporting -- and this again is early, data that are about from a week to two weeks earlier than today -- a quarter of the population is reporting that they see more than 10 of our television ads.

The other thing I would mention in suggesting that our advertising campaign and our other parts of our promotion effort are working is when asked what is a persuasive reason for completing the census questionnaire, about 75 percent do mention the expenditure of public funds. And, of course, since that's been such a strong message in our advertising campaign, that message is clearly getting through. As I say, about 75 percent are reporting that a persuasive reason for cooperating with the census is the fact that so much federal funding does depend upon census data.

However, as many as 60 percent of the population are also identifying civic responsibility as a reason to complete the census form. Slightly more than that identify the fact that census data are responsible for the allocation of seats in the House of Representatives, which is about 55 percent. And there are other reasons as well about why people do it, but those are the strong reasons. I should say, as well, that based on these data we're able to track whether we're having the kind of luck we expect to -- not luck, but success, in reaching the hard-to-count populations; and when you compare some of the results by race, we get exactly the big bumps that we would expect to get in the black and Hispanic population.

For example, about twice as many in the black population are hearing about the census through the radio ads than in the white population, and that's because we have an unusually strong radio campaign going on in the black areas. Same thing with TV. Quite a bit higher rates are in the black and Hispanic population. A large number, of

course, of the white population is also getting TV ad exposure and other kinds of exposures, but we do know that some of our advertising, as you know, is targeted on the hard-to-count populations, and these are often in the black and Hispanic neighborhoods, and the material is getting through.

We're encouraged, for example, that not just advertising but other parts of our promotional activity -- that is, whether you have seen anything in the census from a community activity. We have a major road tour program out there with 12 vans, as you know. We have a schools program, we have community group activities, festivals, parades, so forth and so on. And again, we're getting now very high rates. These are all, by the way, as I say, data as old as a week or more, but we're getting very high rates of experience and familiarity with the census based upon these kinds of activities.

So all told, we have reason to believe that the promotion and advertising campaign is working. Obviously, these data will become more precise and defined as we continue to roll through the census process.

One thing that does come from the survey data that I do want to stress, we know and we've said this time and time again that there are pockets of the population who are extremely difficult to reach. What we have done is, we've created some measures of people who are socially isolated. That is, they don't have family, they don't have a lot of friends, they don't belong to organizations, they don't take part in social or community activities, they don't attend church and they are frequent movers. When we look at those kinds of patterns of social isolation, we find of course they're much less likely to know about the census.

However, insofar as we're able to reach them with our promotional advertising campaign, and we are reaching them, then their overall level of awareness and willingness to participate in the census is roughly equal to the rest of the population. So there's a very strong indicator that being able to reach with promotional activities, community-based activities into groups which are more socially isolated is beginning to have an effect. We also, however, measure what we call civic disengagement. That is, people who don't trust the government, do not believe that people go into public office intending to help others such as themselves and believe you can't be too careful in dealing with people. These are people who have high levels of mistrust, do not believe that public officials are interested in the problems of people like themselves. They don't believe they can influence the government. That is, general social mistrust, and even edges, of course, at anger.

The advertising campaign is also reaching them, but it's having a very difficult time converting them. That is, their level of willingness to cooperate with the census is still

around 50 percent. So we are dealing with a pocket of the population which remains very mistrustful of any kind of government activity, including the census. But from the point of view of the Census Bureau at this stage, we are pleased to report, based upon systematic evidence, that our overall promotional advertising campaign is building awareness and, in some important ways, also building motivation.

Let me then conclude with just a few remarks about some upcoming events, again sticking just for the moment with the promotional activities. We do have a major Census Sabbath that's coming up this month. Many churches, synagogues, other institutions of religion will be talking about the census in their services this weekend, and probably again the following weekend. We've been extremely pleased with the responsiveness of the religious leaders to the importance of the census.

Also, major operational tasks, starting on March 27th, less than a week, we're beginning our special place enumerations targeting the hard-to-count populations, of course, who use shelters, soup kitchens, mobile vans and so forth. That does start early next week. We, of course, have Census Day itself coming up, April 1st. That is our reference day, and we have obviously asked the American people to use that as the day that they use to reference what they actually put on the form. But also on April 1, we do start operations. We begin our group quarters operations. That's when we count people in college dormitories, boarding schools, nursing homes, prisons and so forth. And on April 1, we launch our military and maritime enumeration, and that takes about a month to do that work. I did go to military bases the week before and was very, very pleased with the level of engagement that the military leadership is showing to the census.

We will continue with our promotional effort right up through April 15th. I mentioned our road tour, and we're really trying to use that to signal that Census 2000 can become a national civic event. It's much more than just a statistical exercise, and we are making hundreds and hundreds of stops. Indeed, March madness is upon us, so we're about to drive the vans to the Final Four event and try to piggyback a bit on that.

What I would like to do now just for a few moments is turn the microphone over to Monique Sanders from our Decennial Management Division staff, who will give us a very quick demonstration on our response rate campaign. As I say, starting March 27th, we will be reporting to the country every day on the response rate by all the jurisdictions, and really what I want to do in just a few minutes is show you how that will work. So starting next Monday, those of you who are interested in this will begin to have access to it, and then I'll take your questions on this or any other topic.

MS. SANDERS: Thank you, Dr. Prewitt. I'd like to take a couple of moments today and just navigate you through our initial response rate site that we've developed. Before

I start, I want to introduce Rachel Taylor. She's our senior Internet technology architect who helped design this Web site.

Right here we have our home page, and on March 27th when this site is launched, you will visibly see the initial response rate link right here. So once you get on this home page, it will be right here for you to click on. And once you click on, you'll get to our introductory page, where you see when the site was last updated with numbers. And I want to caution you today, that these are test data. This is not live data.

You'll see the response rates for the United States, along with the target rate that we are hoping our nation will achieve, and I'll read you the introductory text that we have. It says, "Welcome to the Census 2000 initial response rates for state, local and tribal governmental entities. This site will be updated daily, including weekends, beginning March 27th, 2000, to April 11, 2000, with the final posting on April 18, 2000. Below are initial response rates for the 50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, along with state and American Indian menu boxes for customized searches."

Also we've added a feature where once a jurisdiction has met its rate, it will show up red, and that will be an indicator to everyone that they have done a great job and we congratulate them on that.

You'll also see on the introductory page a snapshot of the 50 states with the daily initial response rates. This is a static map, but the rates will appear every day. Also for more customized searches, you can go down to the state level, and we also have menu boxes for American Indian areas where you can search for the particular reservation and get their rate as well. But for this demo, we will focus on getting a rate for a state.

This leads you to the next screen, which produces the customized search for states. Here you see the menu boxes where you can show rates for all states, or you can click on individual states and get rates at the county and place level. For this demo, we're going to focus on California.

Once you've done that, you'll get this screen right here that pops up, and it shows you the state that you picked, which is California, and you'll also get the national rate for that particular day. As you go down, you can do a further search on counties and places within California, and you'll get a running list of all of the counties and a running list of all of the places which include minor civil divisions, consolidated cities, and incorporated places. At that point in time you can click on as many selections as you want. For today's demo, we selected three counties in California. They are Los Angeles County, Sacramento and Ventura County.

We've also provided some instructions on how to simultaneously select multiple entities at the same time. For places we're going to be selecting Anaheim city, Brentwood city, Long Beach city and Riverside city. Once you've found all the places that you're interested in, you click on "get rates" and you'll get a list of all the entities that you have selected. You'll get the name, the type of area, the initial response rate, the target rate, the default target rate assigned and if a boundary change since 1990 occurred.

Also we've developed another feature in the site, which is the listing of the geographic entities. You can refer -- people will be able to refer to get a definition of each of the geographic entities that are provided in this site. Another feature that we have provided for our users is Frequently Asked Questions. I believe in your press kit you all have a copy of the Frequently Asked Questions, and you can take a look and see what kind of information is available for users when March 27th comes.

We also have an e-mail address. There's an icon where people can e-mail with questions if they have any for this site. Basically this is the navigation group for this site. Again, it will be available starting March 27th to April 11th, and then there will be a final posting on April 18th. Thank you.

DR. PREWITT: Thank you, Monique. So the floor is open for questions. I really had just one sentence on the site. Obviously, it is still being perfected as we get ready for launching it on March 27th. We probably will have a feature that we don't yet have, but we hope to have it next week. It will not only be the response rate for each of the 38,000-plus jurisdictions, but it will also have a line every day which will indicate how many of the jurisdictions have hit their target. So you don't have to do the adding up yourself.

I think there are two really powerful indicators of whether the census is going to be able to engage the American population in a major way. One is the overall response rate, but also it's how many different places in the country will be able to improve their response rate by at least 5 percent. That's the most powerful, it seems to me, indicator of a reversal of years of decline in civic engagement.

So with that, we open it to questions.

MR. JOST: Before we start, Herb -- we'll go to Herb first -- for the reporters on the phone, if you want to get a question in, you have to punch one on your keypad. And

we'll start with Herb Sample of the Sacramento Bee. If everyone else would please identify themselves and their affiliation.

Q Hi. Good morning. Yes, it's still morning. There are signs that the sampling is going to become an issue in the presidential race between Bush and Gore, and I am wondering whether you are worried at all that, if it becomes an issue early on in the campaign, that that may drive people into thinking the census is a political football, even more than it already is, and may convince some people not to fill out the form, or not talk to enumerators?

DR. PREWITT: Yes, I do want to emphasize again -- we've emphasized time, and time, and time again, that as the Supreme Court ruled, we, as the Census Bureau, are under the obligation to count everyone without using any statistical methodologies, count everyone in the year 2000 for the purposes of the apportionment number. And that's what all of this effort is about -- the promotion, the advertising, the special response-rate campaign -- everything we are doing, we are running full out now to try to get as complete a count as possible.

I can't speak, of course, for the presidential campaign and what people will choose or choose not to emphasize. I would hope that whatever does emerge by way of debates, any kind of debates, political debates, that they will have no effect whatsoever on our response rate. That's the only thing that right now we are caring about, which is how to get a very high response rate. And I do think, quite honestly, that our own promotional efforts, our own campaigns, our own stressing of civic responsibility, that this is an obligation across the country, to try to get a census. My guess is that that message will swamp other messages. And that is the most powerful message that we know how to get out there. So, I'm not overly concerned right now that an alternative message will somehow be able to command a lot of public attention.

And, indeed, our early data, as I've just reported, does show very high levels of familiarity with the census and, I should say, I didn't read all of the information from the group that called in our survey. But the other piece of information about how much they actually knew about the census, the American people did, and we're getting fairly high rates that people understand it comes along every 10 years, they understand what its purposes are and so forth. So, my hope is that that will become the dominant message.

MR. JOST: Okay. We'll go to the phone line, and it's Adam Bell of the Charlotte Observer.

Q Hi, Dr. Prewitt. Are you still anticipating, given the data that you've been receiving, are you still anticipating an overall mailback response rate of 61 percent? And the second, smaller part of that question is, what will you have on the final posting on April 18th as opposed to the data from April 11th?

DR. PREWITT: Well, the only difference in April -- take that last one first -- the only difference between April 11 and 18 is a few more will come trickling in. That's why we will finally post it and clean up and make sure we don't have errors on the file and so forth. So, we don't expect there to be a big difference between April -- in terms of numbers -- between April 11th and April 18th. We think most of the forms will be in by April 11th. Now, of course, I just described to you two or three operations which take, take us all the way through April and into May; that is the military operation and the group quarter operation. So we will continue to get responses, but they won't be the mail-out/mail-back responses. That is, the group quarter effort is not a mail-out/mail-back procedure. The mail-out/mail-back procedures, that is the response-rate campaign, is really just targeted on the people, roughly 80 percent of the population who we mailed it to and the rural areas, which again, is close to 20 percent. Of course, 80 and 20 makes a hundred. But you've got to back out a percent, 2 percent of people do not get their form that way. So, that's a long answer, but we won't expect to see much movement between April 11th and April 18th.

Your question about are we still expecting 61 percent, the census has never been done the way we're doing it this time. And the best we could estimate as we planned this census, is that we would expect this response rate of 61 percent, based on our demographic analysis of other response rates and so forth. So, we have budgeted for, and staffed for, a census with a response rate of 61 percent. And we are certainly not changing our staffing plan or changing our budget expectations. If the numbers come in higher than that, that will be a bonus to the country, both a financial bonus, and it will be a bonus in terms of the operations.

But no, we do not have any independent information that would suggest that our target is an erroneous target. It's the best target we could come up with based up on the evidence that we had when we had to design the census.

The question, if I could just go on for a moment, because I think that's a question likely to come up sooner or later anyway in this press conference is, well, what do you expect to see by, say, March 27th? We're having that conversation out there at Suitland, as you can appreciate. But it's very difficult for us to model a census which we have never experienced before. That is, we can't use the 1990 data to create the response-rate line, that is the curve, and the shape of that curve, and extrapolate the 1990 curve to 2000, because in 1990, we did not have huge paid advertising. We did not have promotional activities. We did not have the '90 Plus Five kind of idea. So, everything is a

completely different environment. And we don't know -- we may get a very high spike early and then it flattens off. Or we may continue to get a line that goes up, and then it just drops off. We simply do not know what the shape of that response rate curve is.

As I said to you last week, we were surprised by the number of phone calls we got that first day. We had expected today to be the day that we would get our maximum number of phone calls, as a matter of fact, about three or four days after the form has been in the most of the hands. We got it a week ago, that spike. We've managed to, you know, get the people in place to now respond to the telephones, but the telephone calls are dropping off. It's not like 650,000 a day. It's more like 350,000 a day.

So I cannot tell you what we can expect. We don't have an expectation. We have a hope. We have our fingers crossed. We hope that by the time we close it down on April 11th, that we will have a response rate, as I say, of 70 percent. But that's not a prediction so much -- it's just a wish.

Q -- The 6-point -- the 7.3 million forms that have been processed so far, is that reason to be more optimistic about reaching that target rate? Is that --

DR. PREWITT: No. Again, I can't extrapolate from that, because again, the 1990 experience, the 1980 experience, we only -- look, you don't have very many data points because you only do a census every 10 years and so, by definition, we've only been doing a mail-out census of the sort we're doing now twice before, in 1980 and 1990 were roughly the way we're doing it now, but still roughly. But neither of those census had anything like the kind of effort we're having. I can put it this way, the levels of overall awareness, the fact that we're already in the high 80s, 90s of general familiarity and awareness with the census before the form is sent out is extraordinarily high. That means the campaign is working. I cannot turn that into motivation. I cannot tell you that because people know that the campaign, that there is a census, they will return their forms. And you meet people, as do I, who haven't sent it back yet, or maybe don't even think they're going to send it back in.

So, the good news about that 7.3 million for us is that it's a very strong indicator that our software and hardware data capture systems are all working at 99 percent accuracy levels. That's the important part of that fact. It doesn't tell us much about the response rate a week from now or two weeks from now.

MR. JOST: Back to the phone line. Gary Rosting (ph) of the Pittsburgh Gazette. Dr. Prewitt, around the country there are reports of people receiving the long form who have objected to the intrusive nature that they perceive of a number of the questions,

and that they may not respond because of that. I'm wondering if you can address the level of complaints the Bureau has received over that issue in the past week, and whether that seems to have grown at all over previous censuses, that there is any greater problem of mistrust of government that could affect the census count this year compared to previous years?

DR. PREWITT: No, that's again, a fair but complicated question, and it's so difficult to compare, again 1990 to 2000. We do know in general -- this has nothing to do with the census but I just know this from other kinds of survey data, that the level of mistrust of the federal government is higher than it was in 1990 across the country. And that's not about that census. That's just about the American people and their own judgment. And a lot of social scientists have tracked studies of what they call civic engagement for the last 30 or 40 years, and indeed, have watched that decline of confidence in the government occur. How that will translate into census responses is extremely difficult to predict.

I would say that certainly, speaking specifically on the long-form question, certainly we're getting a number of complaints. I get them directly. I get e-mails and phone calls complaining about the intrusiveness. I have no reason to think that's particularly higher than it was in 1990 as a proportion. We do know in 1990 that the mail-back response rate on the long from was about 6 percent lower, as I recall, than the short-form response rate. That's probably not the intrusiveness. That's simply the burden, and people did not do it. That doesn't mean that we didn't go out and get them in our Non-Response Follow-Up period. When we're finished with the census, our capacity to get long-form data is no less than our capacity to get short-form data, but the initial mail-back, is slightly, lower on the long form.

With respect to the issue of intrusiveness and the right of government to know these things, my strong answer is that the Census Bureau is governed by the law of the land. The United States Constitution says that we shall conduct a census every 10 years as Congress shall direct by law. Every question on the long form has been put there in response to either a mandatory, a law, a legal obligation to ask that question, or a law or social policy is in place and it can only be implemented if that question is there -- whether it's a question on disability, on veterans status, on transportation patterns, on education, on occupation. Every question on the long form has got purposes and functions that are associated with federal government obligations.

So I have to say to the American people who are complaining to us about the long form, their complaint is not with the Census Bureau. Their complaint is with the law of the land. And if they don't like a particular public program or policy, then they should indeed not argue with the Census Bureau but argue with the authors of those laws and policies, that we're only kind of carrying out the law with respect to trying to get as

much information as we can.

I also say to the people who complain that it is enormously more efficient to get the data from the long form as part of the decennial, right now, the way we're organized, than to do that independently of the decennial. Because, once you have created this apparatus to go out in the field and try to count everyone, then if you need additional information from the American public, then it's much better to make it part of the same operation. We do believe at the Census Bureau, believe strongly, that there is a better way to get the long-form data, and that better way is actually to collect it across the decade rather than just every decade -- that is, collect part of it every year. And so by the end of 10 years, you already have all of the long-form data, and you don't need to add it as part of the decennial census.

That program, we are now recommending, we're already testing it. It's called the American Community Survey. And we have recommended it in our next budget, our 2002 budget. I'll be testifying on that just next week before our House Appropriations Committee, that we really launch the American Community Survey as a way to minimize the burden that it places on the decennial of having also to do the long-form data. And at a later press conference, I'm more than happy to talk to you about the American Community Survey.

MR. JOST: In the back, yes.

Q Nancy Stellabotta with CBN News. In response to people not wanting to fill out or complete the survey, as I understand it, it's required by law to fill this, and is there any prosecution or fine for not cooperating? I mean, how do you respond to that?

DR. PREWITT: It is mandatory. And I believe the fine for not completing the form is $100, and for fraudulent, for fraudulent use of the form, deliberately misleading the government, it's a $500 fine, as I understand it. We do not prosecute. That is, the Census Bureau itself, of course, wouldn't prosecute anyway. We're not an enforcement agency. But the Department of Justice has not prosecuted people who do not send it in or who deliberately send it in fraudulently. It's actually very difficult to know if it's fraudulent. I got a talk show question the other day where someone said that he had deliberately, deliberately misrepresented facts on his census form in 1990, and he's been waiting for 10 years for a call from the authorities and why hadn't they ever come and gotten him. And I did him remind that Title 13 confidentiality rule protected and, therefore, there was no -- I wasn't about to take his form and go hand it to some enforcement agency, which, of course, we would never do. So, I was very, very reassured that he'd not received any call from an enforcement agency.

And so, I think there are laws, it is mandatory. It is obviously critical to the functioning of the government and the functioning of the economy to have good data. There will be parts, as I just read, there will be parts of our population, small groups of our population who will not understand that, or even if they understand it say, "Well, it's not for me." And there are campaigns out there right now urging people not to fill out the form. We deal with that every ten years. We will deal with it in 2000, and we hope it's small enough that it won't make these data less useful than they otherwise would be.

MR. JOST: Back to the phones. John McCormick of the Des Moines Register. John, are you still with us? Okay, then we'll skip ahead to Leslie Kasemer (ph) of the New York Daily News. And while we're waiting for Leslie to get into the queue, we'll go to the room. Pam Fessler.

Q Dr. Prewitt, last week you had given us two sets of numbers: how many forms you actually received back, and how many were processed. And I wonder if you could, you know, how does the 7.3 compare to how many you've actually gotten back? And I guess my other question, I mean, not to belabor the point too much, but even though it's hard to predict from these, the amount that you've received so far, I mean, you must have some response to this. Are you people, I mean, do you feel good about this, the response so far? Not so good? Are you worried?

DR. PREWITT: I appreciate the question. The first part of the question has to do with not how many have we actually processed, that is 7.3 million, but how many have actually been received. I don't have that number. I don't have it in my head because I didn't want to have it in my head. That is because I am so worried about it being misinterpreted as some sort of strong indicator of what to expect. We process very rapidly, but I would image that the number that has been received would be, as of when I had these data, it could easily be double that number received in our headquarters. But, I actually do not have the exact number or the percentage of responses. We will spend a lot of time on this this week. This is a key week. It's a big week in terms of getting responses back; not Monday - but by the end of the week - we will know. And by the time we announce on Monday, that is a week from today, we will try to give the public some indication of what our judgment is about the meaning of this. I hesitate to go very far for the reasons that I just mentioned. It's extremely difficult to model the behavior of 120 million households in an environment which is so different from one that we've ever experienced. nd so to try to say, "Well, my goodness, we are ahead of where we would have been in 1990, that means we're going to have a higher response rate." We could be getting a very, very high peak early, but then it just drops off.

The thing that we are most interested in following is the shape of the curve, which as

long as it's increasing every day, we feel good. If it starts to drop, then we worry, because then we know that we've already gotten most of the people who will send it back in. I think a lot of people will send it in right away. On the other hand, we certainly have anecdotal evidence that some people take the April 1st thing very literally. They don't want to mail until April 1st, so we might expect a slight bump associated with the April 1st deadline. I also think we could get a bump associated with the announcement of our mail-back response rates next Monday. That will be publicly known -- we'll announce it late Monday, it will be publicly known by Tuesday morning. A lot of the press coverage of that could also create a bit of a bounce.

So, it's very hard to know what the shape of the curve is. I'll put it this way, Pam, to be as responsive as I can -- I am certainly not relaxed because we're still in the middle of the census. But, I'm certainly not panicked about our capacity to reach, let us say, our 61 percent. If we could not reach our 61 percent, we would have, as I said before, staffing and budgetary challenges. But, as I now would be reading what we're getting, I would think it's not likely that we will be in a situation where we were having to report to the Congress that we've got a serious response rate problem. But again, like everything in this business, it could change tomorrow. We could have gotten, you know, several millions in today, and they we go tomorrow and it's a trickle. If that happens, that happens.

Q [Inaudible.]

DR. PREWITT: Actually, I can't exactly tell you. I mean, I literally don't know. I haven't seen the curve. I do know, based on my conversations this morning that senior staff are paying attention to that -- and I'm not, and I'm not for a good reason. I think my task is to keep telling the American people to do it. I don't want anybody to relax about this obligation or responsibility, and so forth. And, I think, if it's not increasing every day, it's not dropping off sharply. That, I think, I'm fairly certain in saying.

MR. JOST: Okay. We'll go back to the phones. Leslie, are you with us? New York Daily News.

Q Hi. Leslie Kasemer (ph) at the New York Daily News. My question involves race and ethnic identity. I've gotten several calls from people questioning how do they mark off their racial identity in regards to, let's say if you're black, however, you're from a different country, like Senegal or Jamaica? A very large populations here in New York are from the Caribbean, et cetera, and are not necessarily African-American. The question that is concerning many people is if they do mark off black, and there's no place to put in that you're from Jamaica or Haiti, how will that affect creating this true picture of the community?

DR. PREWITT: Yes. That's an important and complicated question, as you can appreciate. I should say that on the long form there is a question about ancestry, country of origin and so forth, and most of them reporting back on questions of country of origin will come from the long-form data. It will come from the sample data and not from the short-form race item. The short-form race item is primarily asked of 100 percent of the American population because it is critical data for the enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and that's why we have to get that data at 100 percent, because we have to provide to the Department of Justice, well, to the states, who, in turn report to the Department of Justice those states which are under preclearance rulings. They have to be able to show when they drew their district lines and other political jurisdictional lines, that they did not do so in such a way as to discriminate against racial minorities.

So, that's the reason those data are on the short form, in order to enforce civil rights legislation, the Voting Rights Act, and also other civil rights legislation, where you need data down at very low levels of geography. The proportions of Jamaicans who are living in New York, we will actually get that from the long form and not really from the short form. Nevertheless, I can appreciate the concerns and the confusions. I would say that, like we always have to say about the ethnic and race question, it's extremely difficult to know how to best measure this most complicated part of our social dynamic, extremely complicated, to write a question that allows everybody to identify themselves or describe themselves exactly the way they want to be described. I was in Queens over the weekend at a diversity conference, received many of the kinds of questions of the sort that you're alluding to, but including from European population groups who are not happy because there aren't more refined categories under the white category, and at least why didn't we ask about the difference between western Europeans and eastern Europeans, and so forth and so on. So, it's a very strongly felt concern on the part of many, many of the groupings.

I would say more specifically, finally, that in this instance it would be up to the person, but if they did use the "other" box to write in that they were African, but not African-American, that's how we would tabulate them; that is, if they, are Caribbean African rather than African-American, we would tabulate them. They could use the "other" box to identify themselves on the short form.

MR. JOST: I think we've got time for one more from the room.

Q Melanie Eversley from the Detroit Free Press. Dr. Prewitt, I was wondering if you could talk about enumerating the homeless population for a minute. I know back in 1990 there was one night when enumerators went out to abandoned buildings and other

outdoor sites to try and find folks, but you also had some advocates encouraging homeless people not to fill out their forms because they didn't trust the whole process. Now this time around, you have three nights, well three days and nights in which folks are going to go out to shelters, soup kitchens, outdoor sites. I also know in Detroit they've been working with the Census Bureau and they've been -- they're doing some things to encourage folks to come to the soup kitchens and other places on the days in which they can fill out forms, things that weren't done back in 1990. I'm wondering if you can talk about why the bureau felt that this would be more effective than what you did back in 1990.

DR. PREWITT: Yeah. I can only speak a little bit of the 1990 experience, except that I do think the Census Bureau recognized that it had not been a very successful count. It was widely misunderstood, that it is frequently thought of as a count of the homeless. The Census Bureau does not count the homeless. It counts everyone it can in the census, including people who live in irregular, different kinds of housing arrangements. So, because we count someone in a shelter, that will not become an official count of the number of homeless people in Detroit, or New York, or Los Angeles, or any other city.

So, I just want to start with that response, which is that it's wrong to think that our particular procedures are an attempt to go out and count the size of the homeless population. The problem with the homeless population, or the issue in terms of measuring it, has to do with it's a group in which people move in and out very regularly. You know, they're homeless maybe for a week or two, then they get a job or something else happens to them, or they move in with a relative or a friend, and so they're not homeless for that period, and then they become...

And so, the way in which to measure that is not with a census. The way to measure that is with much, much more sophisticated sampling and survey technologies, which the Census Bureau would know how to do, of course; but that's not what the census is about. The census is about trying to find everyone and attaching them to a geographic location on April 1.

So, what we will do with the count of the homeless or of the people who don't have regular housing in that period, March 27, 28 and 29; we first count at the shelters. That is, we try to count people where they sleep, because that's the way we count the entire population, which is where it sleeps. So we try to count at the shelters. In addition, because not everyone is in the shelter, we will count them in nonshelter locations -- city parks, under the bridges, where they're sleeping on the beaches, some of the many people who sleep in their cars -- and try to do that the best we can. The way we identify those locations is working with the advocacy groups and city government leaders. And, for example, Detroit has been enormously cooperative and helpful in trying to make sure we knew where everyone was. And we will send enumerators to those places.

And then as a special, additional redundancy in the system, we will also count people where they get meals. Now, if you're both in a shelter and getting a meal, you're only counted in the shelter, because otherwise you get double-counted. If you're in a nonshelter environment but you come in for the meal, then we may find you there more easily than in the nonshelter environment; you get hot meals and so forth. We will ask them, have they been in a shelter. And if so, we will not then count them because we are very worried about a double-count. So basically the counting in the soup kitchens is a way to try to capture, to collect, information on that small percentage of people who we have not found in a shelter and did not find where they were otherwise sleeping. And we will do that in a concentrated period of time.

Again, we have to worry about duplication for all populations. We have to worry about duplication for this population just as much as we do for families who have kids in college and they count them at home, and then they also get counted in the dormitory. We are very worried about the accuracy of data, and duplications obviously destroy the accuracy of data. So, we do everything we can to make sure that everyone gets counted, but everyone only gets counted once. And as you know, we have lots of complicated ways of trying to de-duplicate the data and make those kinds of quality corrections. Nevertheless, we think what we have in place, partly because -- not only partly, largely because of the enormous cooperation we're getting from the advocacy groups and from the local leaders. We think we will have a much, much better count in 2000 than we had in 1900.

And to my knowledge, with one small exception which we actually talked about in the session two or three weeks ago, we've had no trouble within the advocacy groups telling people not to cooperate. And this wasn't a case of not cooperating. It was a case of, as we mentioned before, where one agency, the Salvation Army, really preferred to have everyone counted in the shelter but not in the dining hall; and so, we've worked out a procedure with them. But we're getting no resistance on the part of either local leaders or advocacy groups, and service delivery -- not just advocacy, but service delivery groups, groups who actually do take care of this population have been working very closely with us.

I visited two shelters myself, in Charlotte a couple of weeks ago, and was very, very encouraged by the seriousness. Just like every place else you go, there were census posters up on the walls, people talking about the census, their leadership about how important it was to be counted. In that, in one of the meetings I went to, which was maybe 80 or 90 all male, in this particular shelter all male, many of them on drug or alcohol abuse programs, several of them were interested in getting jobs. And we took their names, and we think that we'll use them to help us count in those areas. So, we're getting job applicants from those populations, just like all other population groups.

MR. JOST: Okay. Thank you very much. One announcement. Tune in Monday for the response rates. As it looks now, we'll get something out to you formally probably at the end of the week. Those rates will be posted on the Web site at 6:00 p.m. each night, with the exception of Monday. It will probably be posted later than evening as we triple-check it for quality assurance and make sure all the procedures are in place. And we'll look forward to talking to you on Monday. Thank you.

[END OF EVENT.]

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
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