

# Another bicentennial — 200 years of census

By Tom Henderson  
staff writer

The year 1990 will mark the latest in a series of bicentennials — this one the bicentennial of the first U.S. census.

Why have a national census every 10 years? After all, this one is costing \$2.6 billion, which will work out to about \$10 for each American counted.

For one thing, it says so in the U.S. Constitution — Article I.

For another, the census is the basis for an incredible array of political and social decisions. How many U.S. representatives will Michigan have in the year 2000? How will political power be apportioned in Lansing? How will the billions of dollars in federal aid and grants be divided among the states?

No longer just a simple head count, the modern census seeks information on economic development and social issues and is crucial for government planning, at national, state and local levels.

This census is particularly crucial. Policies that grow out of it will determine the course of this nation

as it begins the trip through the next century.

Here, then, is everything you ever wanted to know about the census:

## BEGINNINGS

In the beginning, there was just Adam and Eve and not much need to count heads.

Later, the Old Testament mentions various censuses, but these were primarily military inventories. Later, censuses were taken in Egypt, Rome, Babylonia and China for fiscal reasons.

The modern concept developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, with the U.S. census of 1790 being one of the first national censuses. In 1801, the British followed suit.

When the Second Continental Congress assembled after the battle of Lexington, it was clear that a system was needed to raise money for the forces in the field. But would the states be taxed according to their ability to pay? Or would there be a head tax? And if there was a head tax, would you count slaves, too.

On April 18, 1783, a compromise was reached. Alexander Hamilton

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proposed that all whites and freed slaves would count as one each. Slaves would count as three-fifths. Indians would count as zero, unless they paid taxes; then, they would count as one.

And Hamilton's language made its way into the Constitution five years later, after long debates about whether a census should count voters, property owners or free inhabitants. Each state would have two senators, but representation in the House of Representatives would be based on a head count every 10 years, with some heads worth less than others.

It might have made sense to count just voters; but some states had more women than men, and women couldn't vote, so those states would be underrepresented. And then there were those disparate laws between the states as to who could vote.

New Hampshire restricted voting rights to those males who were at least 21 and who weren't paupers. New Jersey let you vote if you were worth 50 pounds. You had to own 50 acres in North Carolina to vote for a senator, but just pay taxes to vote

for a member of the U.S. House. Most states had religious qualifications, so much for the separation of church and state. In North Carolina, you couldn't run for office if you "denied the truth of the Protestant religion."

In New York, Jews could run for office, but not Catholics. Jews lived in Rhode Island "as strangers." Maryland permitted Catholics to run for office, but not Jews or "freethinkers." Massachusetts limited office holding to Christians, including only those Catholics who "renounced the superiority of papal authority in any matter, civil, ecclesiastical or spiritual."

## ALIENS

All aliens are counted in the census. Illegal aliens — whether they came across the border from Mexico or flew in from Asia — are counted. States with more illegal aliens, such as New York and California, end up with more representatives.

That bothers some politicians, and at least four bills were introduced in the 100th Congress to bar the counting of illegal aliens. They were un-

successful because most constitutional scholars agree that the wording is unmistakably clear in Article I, section II. The count shall include "all persons."

Of course, there were no immigration laws in 1788, and the U.S. was a vast country with few people and a beckoning frontier. Immigration was encouraged.

Illegal aliens place demands on society. They ride public transportation; their children go to school; they hold jobs, pay taxes, enjoy various government-supported services.

They should then be counted, say proponents, when it comes to allocating federal resources and determining representation.

In 1990, as in all previous censuses since slavery was abolished, all heads count, even those here illegally.

## THE UNDERCOUNT

Demographic experts, sociologists and census officials all admit there is an undercount in any census. But the undercount is worse for minority populations, who tend to be more mobile, harder to locate and likely to fall through the cracks.

Census officials say the overall undercount in the 1980 census was about 1.5 percent. Bureau estimates of the black undercount range from 5.6 percent to 6.5 percent, and some experts say it could have been as high as 11 percent in central cities and could be as high as 22 percent in Detroit in 1990.

Huge sums of money are at stake. The city of Detroit, where conservative estimates place the undercount in 1980 at 35,000, unsuccessfully

sued the federal government, demanding upward adjustments so as not to lose out on federal funds and representation in state and national government.

(In 1970, fewer than just 300 people switched the 435th seat in the House from Connecticut to Oklahoma.)

Census officials were confident they had devised a statistical model to greatly reduce the undercount in 1990, but high federal officials ordered the plan scrapped, according to U.S. Rep. William Ford, D-Taylor, whose district includes Garden City, Westland, part of Livonia and Canton Township.

"This may be the first time such partisan bickering has involved the census," said Ford.

In 1980, blacks were 11.7 percent of the U.S. population. Yet, they accounted for 53 percent of the undercount.

Bills have been introduced in both the U.S. Senate and House to require future census counts to include statistical revisions to allow for the undercount.

In 1970, half the state was under 25. In 1980, the median age was 28.8; by 1985, it was 30.3; in 1990, it will be about 31.6. (And 34.2 in 2000.)

Statistics and background information in this report came from testimony from last summer's hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service. The hearing was conducted in Ypsilanti by U.S. Rep. William D. Ford.

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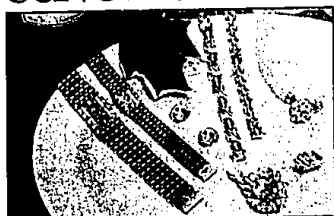
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