



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on July 27, 2009

Bureau Says It Will Improve Census Accuracy

USA Today reported on July 27 that the U.S. Census Bureau is taking steps to ensure the accuracy of the next census in 2010. The need was highlighted when a review of the last census in 2000 showed that the count was too high for the first time in history.

The review took two years to identify the extent of the problem. According to the review, about 10.2 million people were not counted, but almost 11.6 million were counted twice, including the mother of then-Census Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt.

“My mother had moved April 1 (the day of the official tally),” Prewitt explained.

“Obviously, she got a form at the new house they moved into that day and at the old house they moved out of that day. She was so proud to have helped me by filling out her forms.”



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The incident with Prewitt’s mother shows how easily mistakes — let alone outright fraud — can creep into census data. Yet the importance of obtaining an accurate count cannot be overstated. As *USA Today* noted: “Counting people twice distorts the demographic and geographic profile of the population. Census counts are used to allocate federal funds, apportion seats among the states in the U.S. House of Representatives and redraw political districts.”

In 2010, the Census Bureau will focus on hard-to-count populations, which *USA Today* says includes illegal immigrants, poor people, renters, and “any population suspicious of government.” According to *USA Today*, the number in some of these groups “may be larger since 9/11 because of crackdowns on immigrants and covert surveillance.” One assumes that *USA Today* is noting an increase in the number of people who are skeptical of the federal government, which may not necessarily be a bad thing.

“Both undercounts and overcounts undermine the accuracy of the Census and the ability of policymakers to evaluate community needs fully,” *USA Today* quoted Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, as saying in an e-mail. To address the issue of double-counting, Daniel Weinberg, assistant director for next year’s tally, says the Census Bureau has “made a lot of changes in 2010 in ways that would reduce the errors.”

Census forms will now “specifically warn people not to include people in their households who are living separately even if they plan on returning home.” Another change will be a question that “asks if people in the household sometimes live or stay somewhere else and, if so, where. The choices include prison, college, a seasonal home or a nursing home.” For the first time, forms will be scanned to pick up duplicates in birth dates and names. Follow-up calls may be made and field workers may verify some addresses.



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To promote knowledge of and compliance with the census, the bureau is spending millions of dollars on a media campaign in 28 languages. The bureau is working with groups fluent in 69 languages and will have bilingual staff at information centers. In a move that may be somewhat indicative of the number of illegal immigrants in the country, “13 million households will get questionnaires in English and Spanish.”

If the Census Bureau focused solely on counting those who would otherwise be missed, its results would still rightly be viewed with skepticism. All the publicity may actually contribute to over counting, but Assistant Director Weinberg says the government is willing to take that chance because eliminating duplicates is easier than locating people who may not be counted. Angelo Falcón, president and co-founder of the National Institute for Latino Policy and a member of a census advisory committee, says the Census Bureau has workers dedicated to dealing with the issue of double counting. But this will do nothing to prevent illegal immigrants from being wrongly counted as U.S. citizens instead of as illegals. That’s a very serious problem the *USA Today* story didn’t even take into account.



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