



## The Census: Inquiring Minds Want to Know . . . A Lot

by Lawrence W. Reed

### Summary

The U.S. Constitution requires the federal government to conduct a national head count every 10 years for the purposes of apportioning congressional districts. But as the government has grown in size and power, the census has expanded to include a large number of intrusive and irrelevant questions.

*Main text word count: 718*

What the federal bureaucracy calls “the largest peacetime mobilization effort in U.S. history” is now underway. It’s the 2000 census—and if you’re an American citizen, it’s got a few questions for you. As many as 53, in fact.

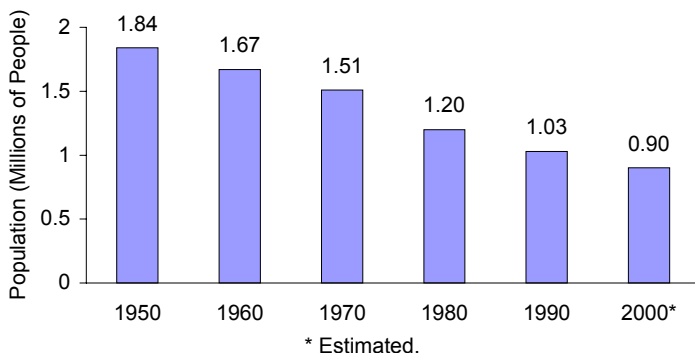
America’s founders felt it was important enough to know how many people lived in the country that they wrote a requirement for a census every 10 years into the fourth paragraph of the Constitution. That passage specifies that the federal government, under the direction of Congress, shall, for purposes of apportioning representation in the House of Representatives, count the number of people—*period*.

The first census in 1790 included a question about race, but that—plus where you lived—was about the sum of it. In the intervening 213 years, however, the census has morphed into much more than a head count. Indeed, it may now be the clearest index available of the growth and intrusiveness of the federal establishment.

In mid-March, a census “short form” was mailed to every American. Its eight questions are designed to find out the recipient’s name, age, sex, race, relationship to household, whether or not the recipient is Hispanic, and whether his or her housing is owned or rented. One in six households were mailed the census “long form”—a 53-query marathon asking about everything from disabilities to employment to income. Answering the census is not an option; under the law, it’s mandatory.

The folks who devise the long form every 10 years are particularly interested in your house. They want to know how many rooms it has, when it was built, where you get your water from, what your utilities cost, how you financed it, and how many cars, telephones and bathrooms you have. Other questions on the long form ask about your

### Detroit’s Declining Population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Census officials estimate that for the first time since the 1920 census, Detroit’s population will drop below one million, to 903,000 residents, half of what it was at its 1950s peak.

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education, your health, your job, and your ride to work (to find out if you drive a car or take a bus). To borrow a line from a famous magazine ad, “inquiring minds want to know.”

But *why* do these inquiring minds want to know all these things? Who and where you are is now a minor part of this decennial exercise; the census these days is much more about how to divide the loot. The distribution of nearly \$200 billion in federal largess depends on it. In Detroit, for example, the city stands to lose \$3,000 per person in federal funds if the head count drops below one million people.

In between each count, the Census Bureau is besieged with requests from private-sector interests who want to get their pet questions baked into the next one, at taxpayer expense. Marketing and health-research people want to get data on behavior and ailments. Internet-service firms want to know who’s wired and who isn’t. Sociologists push to find out more about who’s going to which church, and which individuals are providing support to their grandparents.

It all reminds me of the wisdom of Frederic Bastiat, the great nineteenth-century French statesman and philosopher who wrote in his magnificent primer on the proper function of government, *The Law*: “As long as it is admitted that the law may be diverted from its true purpose—that it may violate property instead of protecting it—then everyone will want to participate in making the law, either to protect himself against plunder or to use it for plunder.”

By its own admission, the government misses millions of people in its count. Yet, it wants to dole out our money based on such details as how many bathrooms we have.

While Census Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt says it’s your “civic duty” to complete the 2000 census form, not everybody thinks so. Noting the real purpose of most of the long form’s queries, Libertarian Party National Director Steve Dasbach made headlines recently when he stated, “Census information is used to forge the chains that bind Americans to failed government programs, meddlesome bureaucracies, and sky-high tax rates.”

As government’s share of our income rises, the census gets longer and more intrusive. In case you thought this was a coincidence, think again: A government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you have. To do all that for you and to you, it has to ask lots and lots of questions.

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(Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. More information is available at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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