

## DISCUSSION

Daniel Melnick, Congressional Research Service\*

The authors of this paper have helped us to understand the limitations as well as the benefits of using administrative records to conduct a census by describing how such a census might be conducted. There remain a number of unresolved issues that would discourage us from making a complete shift to administrative census taking. These are best stated in terms of questions:

1. What would replace the small area census information on the characteristics of population and housing?
2. What privacy safeguards would be needed to ensure that the census was not used as an occasion for enforcement by agencies such as the IRS?
3. How would the contemplated changes affect comparisons of census results from decade to decade? Would the evaluation of coverage and content still be possible?
4. What impact would shifting to administrative records have on the current surveys conducted by the Census Bureau and by other government agencies? What about the survey research work performed in universities and private companies?
5. How accurate and appropriate would the geographic coding of the data be? How would we know that the address used in the administrative records is the residence of the person being counted?

Though the paper does not address the possibility that the administrative records could be used as a part of a field census rather than as a substitution for one, this concept is worth exploring. For example, the address list that serves as the frame for the census might be generated from administrative records. A preliminary list of names would also be available. By starting this compilation earlier than in the past, the Census Bureau could complete a tentative count before Census Day and reduce the enumerators' job to checking it and filling in the holes. Some checking could be done through the mails -- following the 1980 procedures. But starting with a list might reduce the number of tasks assigned to the enumerators (now checkers) and make it possible to close down the field operations earlier.

The Census Bureau might find that the monetary savings would only be a small part of the benefit. Their recruitment and training problems might be reduced by using teachers or other permanently employed educated citizens to check the names and addresses. Some characteristics could be added to the file from administrative records. Surveys could be used to check their accuracy. Resources now used for enumeration might be devoted to more detailed sampling of the population over the decade, improving the current surveys program. And the reports could be produced more quickly.

The Census Bureau might want to explore these possibilities to identify their limitations and problems. To implement some of these ideas, major changes in census taking would be required. The Administration, Congress, local governments, school boards, unions and the individual teachers would have to see the benefits of a cooperative effort.

Problems might arise if the Census Bureau's control over the procedures was diluted. Would eager checkers, knowing the stakes for their schools and local areas, try to increase the count? Would they find themselves in difficult and dangerous situations? Would people believe a census that was based on information the government already has?

An experimental program to evaluate Alvey and Scheuren's procedures and some other alternatives (including, perhaps, some mentioned here) would provide a base of information upon which decisions could be made. But the time is short. Decisions that change the way the census is conducted require changes in the Census Bureau's computing and processing equipment, their map making procedures and their organization. A sudden and radical shift in a long established procedure would require a major effort. Census users would have to be convinced that the changes would not disrupt the oldest American statistical series. While Alvey and Scheuren's work has opened a new vista on census taking, it is by no means certain that (as a practical matter) any of their ideas or those listed above could be implemented by 1990.

\* Daniel Melnick is a Specialist in American National Government and Head of the Survey Research, Public Opinion and Statistical Policy Analysis Section, Government Division, Congressional Research Service. The views expressed in this Discussion are his own and do not represent an opinion of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.