

A Billion Here, A Billion There: How the Census Bureau Has Bungled the 2010 Census

BY DANIEL CASTRO | APRIL 11, 2008

On Thursday the Commerce Department admitted what others, including the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have said for some time now: the U.S. Census Bureau has horribly mismanaged its investment in technology for the 2010 Census, costing taxpayers billions of dollars.¹

First, a quick review on how the census works. From a citizen's point of view, the census takes place in three stages:

1. In mid-March 2010 the Census Bureau will send out a questionnaire to every household on file.
2. In mid-April 2010 Census will send out a second questionnaire to households that did not respond to the first questionnaire.
3. From July to November, temporary census workers will canvass neighborhoods and conduct follow-up interviews with households that have not responded.

Originally, the Census Bureau contracted with the Harris Corporation to develop wireless handheld computers for census workers to use in the field during follow-up interviews. The contractor was to provide 500,000 of these devices at a cost

of \$600 million dollars. That means that each device cost \$1,200, or about twice what a laptop computer costs.

Now Census Bureau says, "never mind" we are not going to use these handheld devices because of technical problems and cost overruns.² Instead, the canvassers will go back to the old method of paper-and-pencils.

Most people might think that by eliminating the expensive technology the Census Bureau might save money. However, by scrapping the handheld devices the census will actually cost an additional \$3 billion dollars, with the total bill for the American taxpayer at almost \$15 billion. That will make the 2010 Census the most expensive census in history – more than three times the total cost of the 2000 Census.

To help pay for its mistake, the Commerce Department has proposed pulling funding from other department initiatives such as the Technology Innovation Program (TIP), the successor to the successful Advanced Technology Program (ATP).³ TIP provides grants for high risk, high reward research that addresses areas of critical national need. For example, these grants have funded everything from advances in digital signal processing to more efficient solar cells.⁴ These government officials seem to miss the irony

The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) is a nonprofit, non-partisan public policy think tank committed to articulating and advancing a pro-productivity, pro-innovation and pro-technology public policy agenda internationally, in Washington and in the states.

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in reducing our investment in technology and innovation, just when the government seems to need it the most.

The first mistake that the Census Bureau made was, believe it or not, to eliminate the Internet response option for the 2010 Census. You can renew your driver's license online and use software like Turbo Tax to pay your taxes, but you won't be able to use the Internet to fill out your census form. Even more unbelievable is that in 2000, respondents could use the Internet to complete their census form. Even though Census Bureau never promoted the online option, a later review by the Census Bureau marveled at the Internet option's success, stating:

“The software and hardware developed for this program could have handled tens of millions of records instead of the tens of thousands it did handle. ... The Internet option in Census 2000 was an operational success.”⁵

Sadly, just as the U.S. has fallen behind in broadband over the last 8 years, it has fallen behind in government use of IT, being one of the few nations not allowing its citizens to fill out their census forms online.⁶ Most developed countries that conduct questionnaire-style censuses have a totally secure and trustworthy Internet option. For example, 19 percent of Canadians used the Internet to complete its 2006 population census.

Even local communities have turned to the Internet for their surveys. For example, in Virginia all school districts must conduct a census of their residents to verify the number of school age children in their jurisdiction. This year the Arlington Public School system offered

residents the option of completing the census online.⁷

By implementing an Internet response option the Census Bureau would have almost certainly saved money. As the recent ITIF report found, assuming a 20 percent response rate, the Census Bureau would have saved about \$35 million.⁸

More importantly, if Census Bureau had used the Internet, it would not have needed to spend hundreds of millions of dollars developing a custom mobile handheld device for canvassers. Instead, canvassers could have simply submitted responses through the website using off-the-shelf laptops when conducting door-to-door interviews.⁹

But it gets even worse. After the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau had no plans to reuse their custom handheld devices, so these devices were likely headed to a landfill, probably next to where FEMA is storing its trailers.¹⁰ But by using standard off-the-shelf laptops, the Census Bureau would not only have saved around \$300 million, the government could have turned around and donated these PCs to low-income schools that qualify for the government's "E-rate" program. Donating these PCs would not pose any privacy risks because these computers would have only been used to access the Internet and would have no sensitive data stored on them. But it would provide half a million of our neediest kids free laptops on which they can learn and engage with the digital world.

But that's all a pipe dream now as we will be filling out our census forms like it's 1999.

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Endnotes

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2. "Statement of U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez Before the United States House Appropriations

- Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science,” (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 3 Apr. 2008): <www.commerce.gov/NewsRoom/SecretarySpeeches/PROD01_005468>.
3. “Decennial Census Progress Review and Program Replan,” U.S. Department of Commerce. <www.commerce.gov/s/groups/public/@doc/@os/@opa/documents/content/prod01_005469.pdf>
 4. “ATP Gems and Success Stories,” Advanced Technology Program, National Institute of Standards and Technology, U.S. Department of Commerce. <www.atp.nist.gov/gems/listgems.htm>.
 5. Erin Whitworth, “Internet Data Collection,” Census 2000 Evaluation A.2.b (14 Aug. 2002): <www.census.gov/pred/www/rpts/A.2.b.pdf>.
 6. Daniel K. Correa, “Assessing Broadband in America: OECD and ITIF Broadband Rankings,” (Washington, DC: The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2007): <www.itif.org/index.php?id=57>.
 7. “School Census,” Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA: <www.apsva.us/1540102710312730/site/default.asp?>.
 8. Castro, op. cit.
 9. Although the United States has widespread cellular network coverage, in some locations a wireless data connection may not be available. In these locations field workers could use the standard paper form. Processing paper forms is a significant operational expense for the Census Bureau, but by using computers for field data collection, the Census Bureau could have substantially cut down on this cost.
 10. “FEMA auctioning off trailers at fire-sale prices,” MSNBC.com (8 Mar. 2007): <www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17509045/>.