

GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman,
Subcommittee on Census and
Population, Committee on
Post Office and Civil Service,
House of Representatives

April 1987

DECENNIAL CENSUS

Local Government Uses of Housing Data



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General Government Division

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April 8, 1987

The Honorable Mervyn M. Dymally
Chairman, Subcommittee on Census
and Population
Committee on Post Office and Civil Service
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

A May 23, 1986, letter from your subcommittee requested that we study local governments' need for 100 percent decennial housing data as a follow-up effort to our May 1986 report¹ in which we questioned the federal need for collecting certain housing data from 100 percent of the nation's households. As a first step in responding to the request, we performed a limited survey of local governments to determine whether the housing data were being used and whether they were being used at the block level. Upon completing this exploratory work, it was agreed with subcommittee representatives to report on the results and not to pursue the more time consuming and difficult issue of local need for the 100 percent housing data (see app. I). This report contains the results of our survey effort (see app. II).

Our work focused on 1) large and small cities and counties and 2) national organizations. We contacted officials from 34 locations comprised of the 20 largest cities and counties and 14 randomly selected small cities and counties (see app. III). We also interviewed the officials of 11 national organizations (see app. IV), including 8 contained in the May request letter.

Local governments reported using housing data collected from 100 percent of the households. Of the 34 cities and counties surveyed, 31 reported using 100 percent housing data, with 25 reporting data use at the block level. The 10 largest cities and the 10 largest counties all reported using 100 percent housing data, and 80 percent of these large locations reported using the data at the block level.

Local officials cited various uses of 100 percent housing data, such as for administering federal, state, and local programs and for small area planning. For example, 16 of the 20 largest

¹ Decennial Census: Issues Related to Questionnaire Development (GAO/GGD-86-74BR, May 5, 1986).

cities and counties surveyed reported using the data to help administer the federal Community Development Block Grant program. Other reported uses of 100 percent housing data included analyzing trends and characteristics of housing, and identifying and targeting areas of need for small geographic locations. Officials from national organizations also indicated that 100 percent housing data are being used by local governments, and they cited uses similar to those found in our survey.

While many local officials reported using decennial data, some noted limitations of certain 100 percent housing data. For example, some officials expressed concern about the reliability of rent and value data because of possible respondent biases and the degree of subjectivity involved. The Bureau's Chief, Housing Division, believes that these data, collected from the decennial census, are close to the actual values. Some users also reported that the usability of the data is diminished because of problems both with data obsolescence between decennials and with the difficulty of correlating decennial data with other federal survey data, such as the American Housing Survey.

While we found that local governments are making use of the 100 percent housing data, this use is only one factor among many that needs to be considered in determining the appropriate number of questions to be asked of all U.S. households during the decennial census. Other factors to be considered include the burden on respondents, mail response rates, quality of responses, the need for the data, and the escalating costs of the census. The Census Bureau currently estimates the follow-up costs for each 1 percent of the households which fail to return their questionnaires at about \$10 million. In our May report, we discussed these other factors and raised the possibility of testing a shortened questionnaire.

In order to conclusively decide the matter of whether the census form should be shortened to eliminate the housing questions, it will be necessary to obtain a reliable estimate of the savings that might be realized if this action were taken. If the potential savings were determined to be significant, we would recommend that the value of the benefits to local governments of using the data and the cost of other alternatives that may exist for obtaining this data be determined. The results of this analysis could then be weighed against the potential savings in reaching an informed decision on the need for the housing questions.

On February 12, 1987, we obtained oral comments from Census Bureau officials. Bureau officials said that our report provided the most complete picture to date of the use of 100 percent housing data by local governments, and that our review approach and methodology were reasonable. While the Bureau questioned whether a reduced short form would yield a higher response rate, it did acknowledge the need to simplify the form. Bureau officials offered a number of suggestions to correct technical details and to revise wording which we incorporated, where appropriate, in preparing the final report.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of its issuance. At that time we will send copies to the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Services, Post Office and Civil Service; other appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Commerce; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. Copies will also be made available to other interested parties upon request. If there are any questions about this report, please call me on 275-8387.

Sincerely,



Gene L. Dodaro
Associate Director

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OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

Our objective was to determine if local governments were using housing data collected from 100 percent of the nation's households during the Decennial Census, including data at the block level. To make this determination we (1) contacted the officials of the nation's 10 largest cities, 10 largest counties, and 14 other cities and counties (a telephone survey was conducted with the exception of New York City officials, with whom we met); (2) interviewed officials of 11 national organizations; and (3) reviewed information provided by 41 respondents to surveys conducted by the American Planning Association and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials and reviewed 6 additional letters we received from various housing data users.

In our survey of 34 cities and counties, we selected the 10 largest cities and the 10 largest counties, adjusting county population size if it contained 1 of the 10 largest cities, and randomly selected a sample of 7 small cities (population 25,000 to 50,000) and 7 small counties (population 50,000 to 100,000) located in the same states as the large cities and counties. We used 1984 U.S. Bureau of the Census population estimates--the most recent available at the time of our study. The selected locations were generally dispersed across the nation. The total population of the selected small and large cities and counties represented about 17 percent of the nation's population. Telephone interview guides were used to gather information on data use. We spoke primarily with officials responsible for planning who were familiar with the local government use of the data.

After identifying that local governments are widely using the 100 percent housing data, it was agreed with subcommittee representatives that additional work necessary to demonstrate local governments' need for this data would be more extensive than justified for the following reasons:

- There was insufficient time to complete the work and have an effect on the planning of the 1990 Decennial Census Questionnaire.
- It would also be very costly and difficult to evaluate local governments' need for this data and to determine the impact of not having data available at the block level.

Therefore, we did not pursue the question of local governments' need for 100 percent housing data. Likewise, our

telephone survey did not attempt to identify all the uses of the data. Our study was performed between June and November 1986 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

RESULTS OF SURVEY ON
LOCAL GOVERNMENT USE OF
100 PERCENT HOUSING DATA

Of the 34 cities and counties contacted, 31 reported that they used the housing data collected from 100 percent of the nation's households. The three not using the housing data were small governments that said that they do not need the data. Twenty-five of the 31 local governments using the 100-percent data also reported using the data at the block level.

All of the largest cities and counties in our survey reported using the 100 percent housing data and 80 percent of these locations reported using the data at the block level. According to the Bureau, data collected from 100 percent of the households are required to represent geographic blocks, and the long form sample¹ is not sufficiently large to estimate housing characteristics at this small geographic level.

TYPES OF DATA USES VARIED

Local governments reported many and varied uses of the 100 percent decennial housing data. Local officials in 17 of the 20 largest cities and counties contacted cited uses related to administering specific federal programs, and all 20 officials cited uses related to specific local concerns. As an example of federal program use, 100 percent housing data are used to identify eligible areas below the census tract level such as neighborhoods, for the Community Development Block Grant program. While data from the long form sample may be sufficient to estimate tract level data, local governments use 100-percent data for blocks or groups of blocks to show why they selected those areas for participation in the programs. Local officials said that these small areas could not be identified using sample data. As shown in table II.1, the largest local governments also reported using the data for the Rental Rehabilitation and other federal, state, and local programs.

In addition to programmatic uses of the data, officials from the large cities and counties reported using the 100 percent housing data for small geographic area planning including: land

¹ During the 1980 Census, the short form questionnaire was sent to 81 percent of the nation's households and a long form questionnaire sent to the remaining 19 percent. The long form questionnaire included all the short form questions plus many additional questions that are used to project various housing and population statistics.

use, infrastructure systems (e.g., sewer and water), project site selection, and transportation systems.

Table II.1:

Types of Data Uses Reported Most Often by Large
Local Governments Surveyed

	<u>Population size</u>	
	<u>Largest cities Over 800,000</u>	<u>Largest counties Over 1,300,000</u>
Number surveyed	10	10
	==	==
Federal programs		
CDBG	7	9
Rental rehabilitation	4	4
Other federal programs	4	5
State and local programs	4	5
Small area planning	7	3

The officials from the small cities and counties also reported using the 100 percent housing data for purposes similar to those mentioned above.

Other uses of the 100 percent housing data reported often by the officials from the large local governments include:

- analyzing trends in the housing stock,
- benchmarking (point of reference) small area housing characteristics,
- identifying and targeting areas of need (e.g., "pockets-of-poverty") below the census tract level,
- aggregating block data to represent locally defined areas,
- establishing sampling frames for conducting small area planning, and
- developing a computerized data base for analyzing small area housing trends.

Some of these uses were also cited by local government officials from the small cities and counties.

DATA ITEMS MOST
OFTEN USED

In our survey, local government officials reported using certain 100 percent housing data items, including number of units in structure, rent, value, and tenure (own or rent), more frequently than others. The following examples illustrate their use of 100 percent housing data items:

- Units in structure and tenure data are used to assess current and predict future area housing density and to detect illegal two-family dwellings.
- Rent data are used to survey rent control violations.
- Value data are used to evaluate decisions of eminent domain.
- Rent and value data are used as substitutes for income at the block level for the purpose of identifying "pockets-of-poverty."

SOME LOCAL CONCERNS EXPRESSED

While most of the comments local officials made dealt with the use of data, some officials expressed concern regarding the reliability, applicability, or usability of certain 100 percent housing data items. For example, some officials expressed concern about the reliability of rent and value data because of possible respondent biases and the degree of subjectivity involved. The applicability of certain data items was not of equal importance for all local governments. For example, complete plumbing facilities are not an issue in a growing residential area and overcrowding conditions are largely an urban issue. Some users also reported that the usability of the data is diminished because of problems both with data obsolescence between decennials and with the difficulty of correlating decennial data with other federal survey data such as the American Housing Survey.

VIEWS OF NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Officials from 10 of the 11 national organizations we interviewed reported that 100 percent housing data are being used by local governments. The official from the other organization

speculated that this was true. During the interviews, officials cited data uses similar to those found in our survey of local governments. For example, most frequently mentioned uses included administering federal programs, targeting small areas, benchmarking, and analyzing housing trends.

Officials from nine of the organizations commented that local governments would be adversely affected if the 100 percent housing data were eliminated. Many commented that local governments do not have alternate data sources for the 100 percent housing data and lack the resources to gather comparable data. Other comments received on the importance of the 100 percent housing data pertained to its

- credibility because the data are collected by the federal government,
- increased accuracy as compared with data collected from a sample of households, and
- ability to be correlated with the demographic data at small geographic levels.

In addition, the American Planning Association and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials provided us with the results of surveys they conducted of their members on the use of the 100 percent housing data. These organizations conducted the surveys to address some of the questions and issues we were reviewing in our current study. The responses to these surveys also showed use of the 100-percent data at the local level.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS SURVEYEDLarge cities

New York, New York
 Los Angeles, California
 Chicago, Illinois
 Houston, Texas
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
 Detroit, Michigan
 Dallas, Texas
 San Diego, California
 Phoenix, Arizona
 San Antonio, Texas

Small cities

Bloomfield Township,
 Michigan
 State College Borough,
 Pennsylvania
 Sierra Vista, Arizona
 Haverstraw, New York
 Duncanville City, Texas
 Tulare City, California
 Carbondale City, Illinois

Large counties

Los Angeles County, California
 Cook County, Illinois
 Orange County, California
 Dade County, Florida
 Cuyahoga County, Ohio
 Allegheny County, Pennsylvania
 Santa Clara County, California
 Nassau County, New York
 King County, Washington
 Suffolk County, New York

Small counties

Wayne County, Ohio
 Indiana County, Pennsylvania
 Madera County, California
 Herkimer County, New York
 Whiteside County, Illinois
 Santa Rosa County, Florida
 Lewis County, Washington

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS CONTACTED

National Governors Association
National Association of Counties
United States Conference of Mayors
National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials
National League of Cities
The Urban Institute
National Low Income Housing Coalition
National Neighborhood Coalition
American Planning Association
National Association of Regional Councils
Council of State Housing Agencies

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