



It Counts

By Christine Martin, Senior Research Analyst

Every ten years since 1790, the U.S. government has conducted an extensive systematic census or count of its population. The next census, Census 2000, is currently being administered. Every U.S. household will receive one of two questionnaires: either a "short form" or a "long form." Seventeen percent of all U.S. households will be randomly selected to receive a long form. This questionnaire is used to gather demographic and household information in addition to a count of the people in the household. The short form will be distributed to each of the remaining 83 percent of U.S. households to get an accurate count of all persons living in the household.



The census is very important for many reasons. People who answer the census help their communities obtain federal funding and valuable information for planning schools, hospitals, roads, and much more. Census data helps determine the need for free or subsidized public programs and services. These programs can range from low-cost housing initiatives to new roadways or programs to aid the elderly or disabled.

The census also affects our representation in Washington. Citizens elect congressmen to represent them in the U.S. House of Representatives. The House is responsible for

writing and passing laws that govern U.S. citizens. There are a total of 435 congressmen elected to the House of Representatives. The number of congressmen that can be elected to represent each state depends on the size of that state's population.



This connection between the census and representation in Congress was put in place when the first census was taken in 1790, which was the result of Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. Article I established that the apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives would be based on a count of the state's population.¹ The purpose for this enactment was to ensure

that all voting U.S. Americans had an equal right to be represented in Congress. Based on results from the 1990 census, Illinois lost two congressional seats, reducing the number from 22 in 1980 to 20 in 1990.²



Although a great deal of effort is made in counting the number of people in every U.S. household, significant undercounts do occur. Often times this is because people who are selected to complete a census questionnaire do not do so. The City of Chicago challenged the last (1990) census stating that it failed to count up to 250,000 Chicago residents. Because each Chicago resident is worth \$400 in state and federal aid, the city lost an estimated \$888 million in state and federal money over the decade.³



Undercounts typically occur in African American populations in large cities. In the 1980 census, African Americans were undercounted by 5.9 percent compared to 0.7 percent of other races.⁴ The 1990 census had an African American undercount of 5.7 percent compared to 1.3 of other U.S. Americans.⁵ One of the issues currently being debated for the 2000 census is determining a better way to count homeless citizens who are especially difficult to reach because they do not live in households.

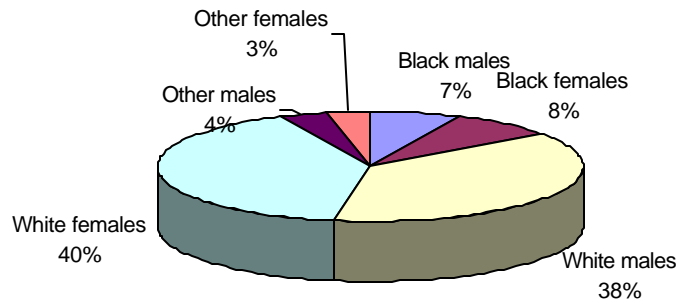
In addition to being a source of monetary and political gain, the census is the original source for population figures used in research. Census data is essential to tracking demographic and crime trends, as well as calculating intercensal (in-between census years) estimates, population projections and crime rates.

[Demographic Profile of Illinois' Population](#)

In 1990, roughly five percent of the U.S. population resided in Illinois. A sizable number of these 11 million plus Illinois residents lived in just one county—Cook, which includes the city of Chicago where much of the alleged 1990 undercount took place. There were 5,105,067⁶ people living in Cook County in 1990, which is 45 percent of the entire Illinois population.

The 1990 Illinois population closely resembled the racial and gender breakdown of the U.S. population. There were slightly more females than males in the U.S. and in Illinois and more than three-fourths of both the U.S. and Illinois populations were white. In Illinois, white females represented the largest racial/gender group at 40 percent of the

Figure 1
1990 Illinois Population by race and gender



population and females of other race/ethnicity, other than white or African American, represented the smallest racial/gender group comprising only three percent of the population (Figure 1)⁷.

[Racial Distribution by Region](#)⁸

In 1990, more than three-fourths (77%) of Illinois' African Americans lived in Cook County. Thirteen percent resided in other urban counties besides Cook and less than one percent lived in either the collar or rural counties. Other minorities, besides African Americans⁹ were also heavily concentrated in Cook County. Seventy-four percent lived in Cook, however there was a substantial percentage (17%) residing in the Collar counties as well. Less than one percent of these other residents lived in either urban or rural counties.

White residents were much more evenly dispersed throughout Illinois although more lived in Cook County than any other geographic region in the state. A little over one-third (36%) lived in Cook County, with about 20 percent living in either urban, collar or rural areas. Although only one-third of Illinois white residents lived in Cook compared to roughly three-fourths of other racial groups, white residents comprised 62 percent of the total Cook County population. African Americans comprised 26 percent and other minorities made up 11 percent of Cook County's population.

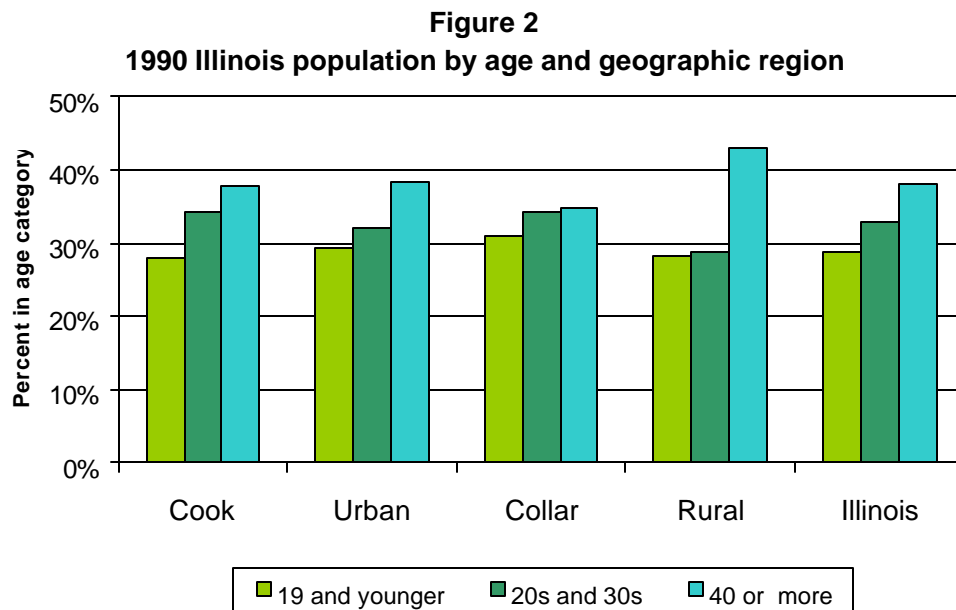
White residents comprised over 85 percent of the population in all other geographic regions, with the highest numbers in rural counties at 96 percent. African Americans and other minorities made up fewer than 10 percent each of the populations in all other

regions besides Cook, with the smallest numbers in rural areas. African Americans comprised three percent of the rural population and other minorities made up only one percent.

Age Distribution of Illinois Residents

In 1990, people who were forty years old or more represented the largest percentage of Illinois' residents by age. Nearly 40 percent (38%) of all Illinois residents were forty or older while less than 30 percent (28%) were 19 or younger. The age distribution in Cook County mirrored the age distribution for the state overall (figure 2).

The Collar Counties had almost an even distribution of residents in the 20s and 30s age category as in the 40 and older category. The Collar Counties also had the largest concentration of people who were 19 or younger, representing just over 30 percent of that region's population. All other regions had fewer than 30 percent of their residents who were under 20 years old. The largest concentration of people in their forties or older was



in the rural counties where residents in this age group represented 43 percent of the population in that region.

Census data is vital for research. If you have received a census questionnaire don't hesitate to complete and return it because doing so guarantees that money for programs and services will reach your neighborhood. It is also a way to make sure that all Illinois' residents have adequate political representation in Congress.

Notes

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census. 1990. *Strength in Numbers: Your Guide to 1990 Census Redistricting Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census*. January 1990.

² U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census. 1991. *1990 Census Profile: Population Trends and Congressional Apportionment*. No. 1, March.

³ Long, Ray and Fran Spielman. 1991. *Undercount may cost \$888 million, city says*. Chicago Sun-Times, January 24.

⁴ Choldin, Harvey M. 1990. Footnotes. American Sociological Association, March.

⁵ United States General Accounting Office. 1997. *2000 Census: Progress Made on Design, but Risks Remain*. July, GAO/GGD-97-142

⁶ University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 1997. *1997 Illinois Statistical Abstract*. Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. 1992. *1990 Census of Population: General Population Characteristics Illinois*. 1990 CP-1-15. June.

⁸ Illinois counties have been grouped into four regions; 1) Cook County, 2) Collar counties, which include five counties that border Cook—DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will, 3) urban counties, and 4) rural counties. The size of their population and whether or not they are part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) determine which of the counties are considered urban or rural. MSA's are regions designated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget that identify a county or groups of counties with a large population base. Counties are considered urban if their population consists of at least 50,000 residents or if they contribute at least 50,000 residents to a total MSA of 100,000. There are 28 Illinois counties that, by definition, are part of a MSA (Cook, the Collar counties and other urban counties) and 74 that are not part of a MSA. Those that are not part of a MSA are rural counties. See the 1997 Illinois Statistical Abstract for more information.

⁹ The racial/ethnic residents who make-up the other minority group include American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut, Asian or Pacific Islander, and all others who do not fit in the above mentioned categories. This group also includes Hispanics who are not counted as white or black.