

RESEARCH REPORTS

Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions

“The First American Census in Methodological Perspective”

A workshop, November 12–14, 1998, at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. The workshop was conducted with support from the

Donner Foundation.

The litigation and controversy over the prospective use of statistical sampling in the 2000 census have sent scholars back to the Constitution and the first U.S. census, in 1790, in search of guidance. The main conclusion to emerge from this workshop—cochaired by Margo J. Anderson, a Wilson Center Fellow and historian at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and Stephen E. Fienberg, a professor of statistics and social science at Carnegie Mellon University—seemed to be that, contrary to some claims, the Founding Fathers have precious little guidance to offer.

The GOP-controlled House of Representatives has challenged in court the Clinton administration’s plans to use statistical sampling to correct for the large number of black Americans—an estimated 5.7 percent in 1990, compared with 1.3 percent of whites—and other minorities who will not be counted in the census. (The uncounted are mostly in poor urban neighborhoods.) In November, the Supreme Court heard arguments in that case, as well as in a related lawsuit brought by private plaintiffs. Lower courts had ruled against the administration in both cases.

The Constitution originally provided (Article 1, Section 2) that members of the House of Representatives were to be apportioned among the states “according to their respective Numbers,” and that, “The actual Enumeration” would take place “within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress,” and every 10 years thereafter. Opponents of statistical sampling have put much weight on the phrase “actual Enumeration,” contending that the Framers wanted a head count, not an estimation. Thomas Jefferson, who as secretary of state was in charge of the first census, “was familiar with methods of statistical estimation, having used them effectively in his 1782 survey

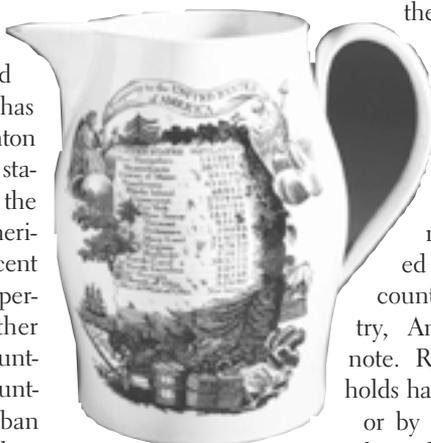
of Virginia’s population,” the House brief in the current lawsuit claims, but did not use them to adjust the 1790 census results.

However, while Jefferson had “demonstrated considerable practical ingenuity in producing estimates in the absence of a census,” says Daniel Scott Smith, a historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he did not draw inferences from a sample. The French mathematician Pierre Simon de Laplace was at work on probability theory in France, but Eugene Seneta, a professor of mathematical statistics at the University of Sydney, Australia, says, after an investigation of the matter, that there is no evidence that Jefferson had any knowledge of it.

The federal government has never attempted to make a physical headcount of everyone in the country, Anderson and Fienberg note. Rather, heads of households have been asked, in person or by mail, to report on their households. Nor does the phrase “actual Enumeration” seem laden with any great significance. The Framers, observes Seneta, “knew nothing

of sampling as such, and could not have rejected its use.” Reviewing the legislative history of the 1790 law authorizing the nation’s first census, Charlene Bickford, director of the First Federal Congress Project, points out that the Senate struck out the word *actual* from both the title and the text of the law. Apparently, the Senate did not consider the adjective as adding anything vital to the noun.

The Framers of the Constitution seem to have paid little attention to how the census was to be carried out. Indeed, censuses, conducted at England’s request and in various ways, were common occurrences in the colonies during the 18th century, notes Robert V. Wells, a historian at Union College.



A 1790 pitcher commemorating the first official census of the U.S. population

“The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions”

Princeton Univ. Press, 41 William St., Princeton, N.J. 08540. 472 pp. \$24.95

Authors: *William G. Bowen and Derek Bok*

Selective colleges and universities have taken a lot of heat for using race as a factor in admissions. Drawing on the records of more than 80,000 students at 28 such institutions, Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and a former president of Princeton University, and Bok, a former president of Harvard University, assess the impact of affirmative action.

Though the black-white gap in Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores has narrowed in recent decades, it still exists, the authors note. Among more than 40,000 applicants for admission in 1989 to five selective institutions that provided detailed data, the average combined SAT score for whites (1284) was 186 points higher than the average for blacks. While 29 percent of the black applicants had combined SAT scores above 1200, nearly three-quarters of the whites did. The black applicants were “highly qualified” (about three-fourths scored higher than the average white test-taker in the nation), the authors point out, but the white applicants were “spectacularly well qualified.”

Since the five institutions took race into account, only 25 percent of all the whites who applied were offered admission, compared with 42 percent of all the blacks. If race had not been a factor, the authors calculate that the overall probability of admission for black applicants would have dropped from 42 percent to 13 percent—about half the figure for whites. Looking at all 28 selective institutions studied, the authors estimate that using a strict race-neutral standard would have cut black enrollment at least in half. At Princeton and the seven other most selective schools, black enrollment would have dropped from seven percent of the total to about two percent. Moreover, the authors point out, the academic credentials of the (hypothetically) rejected black students “were very good when judged on any absolute scale and were only slightly weaker than those of the black students who would have been retained. Selective schools attract highly talented minority candidates.”

Most of the black students who entered the 28 institutions in 1989 did well. Seventy-five percent graduated within six years—a lower proportion than the 86 percent of whites who did, but much higher than, for instance, the 59 percent of whites who graduated from the 305 National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I universities. The black students at Princeton and the seven other most selective schools had a higher graduation rate: 85 percent.

Black graduates of the 28 institutions “have done very well after leaving college,” write Bowen and Bok. Forty percent of those who entered college in 1976 went on after graduation to earn professional or doctoral degrees. Twenty years after they entered the colleges, the male black graduates were earning an average of \$82,000—twice the average for all black men with bachelor’s degrees nationwide; black women graduates of the 28 selective schools were earning an average of \$58,500. Nearly 90 percent of the black graduates reported taking part in civic activities in their communities.

Bowen and Bok acknowledge that “race-sensitive” admission policies, simply by their existence, may cast doubts on the true abilities of even the most talented black students. “More than a few black students unquestionably suffer some degree of discomfort” from this. But the black students themselves are presumably the best judges of how significant this discomfort is, and those surveyed “do not seem to *think* they have been harmed.” Seventy-five percent of the 1989-entering students who scored above 1300 on their SATs believe their college should place “a great deal” of emphasis on racial diversity.

Would society be better off without affirmative action in college admissions, cutting by more than half the number of blacks at selective schools and only slightly raising whites’ chances of admission? “Considering both the educational benefits of diversity and the need to include far larger numbers of black graduates in the top ranks of the business, professional, governmental, and not-for-profit institutions that shape our society,” conclude the authors, “we do not think so.”