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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

B-78395

December 22, 1978

The Honorable John Glenn
Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy,
Nuclear Proliferation and
Federal Services
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In accordance with your July 27, 1978, request and subsequent discussions with your office, we reviewed of the Bureau of the Census advisory committees. We found that the Department of Commerce will not establish an Advisory Committee on the Bureau of the Census after all and that:

- The committees generally comply with legislation and executive branch policy.
- The committees provide Census with assistance at a reasonable cost.
- The committees appear to be effective and useful.
- The overlap which exists among the committees provides Census with several perspectives on a given issue.
- Alternatives to advisory committees would not necessarily provide a better means of obtaining expert advice.

Our review included interviews with Commerce Department, Census Bureau, and General Services Administration officials and observing several advisory committee meetings. We also reviewed pertinent legislation, regulations, policies, procedures, and records at Census headquarters.

We discussed the results of our work with your office on November 27, 1978. As agreed with your office no further detailed work was deemed appropriate. The results of our inquiries are summarized below.

[RESPONSE to a REQUEST to Review
the Bureau of the Census Advisory Committees]
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PROPOSED ADVISORY COMMITTEE
WILL NOT BE ESTABLISHED

The Department of Commerce will not establish the proposed Advisory Committee on the Bureau of the Census. Subsequent to your request, section 606 of the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1979 (P.L. 95-431), dated October 10, 1978, prohibited the expenditure of any funds for the Advisory Committee on the Bureau of the Census.

CENSUS COMMITTEES COMPLY
WITH FEDERAL LEGISLATION

The Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972 (P.L. 92-463), OMB Circular A-63, "Advisory Committee Management," and a February 1977 Presidential memorandum prescribe responsibilities, guidelines, and regulations for the use of advisory committees by Federal agencies. The Department of Commerce has developed guidelines for compliance with these regulations. We found that Census advisory committees generally adhere to these guidelines.

A specific concern of your office was the substance of reports being issued by the committees. Committee recommendations are made at each meeting and each set is counted as a report. A General Services Administration official 1/ told us this is acceptable.

CENSUS COMMITTEES PROVIDE
ASSISTANCE AT REASONABLE
COST

The Bureau of the Census currently has nine advisory committees which were established by the Secretary of Commerce to advise the Director of the Bureau of the Census on various aspects of the decennial census, other statistical series, and the kinds of data Census should collect to satisfy its users. The committees may also be asked to respond to Census requests for opinions concerning Census operations. In general, committee members represent experts from such fields as economics,

1/ The General Services Administration is responsible for overall executive branch advisory committee management.

marketing, statistics, population, agriculture, and housing as well as leading authorities from the minority and consumer communities from all over the country.

Advisory committee costs appear to be reasonable and in line with the assistance they are providing. Estimated costs for the nine committees in calendar years 1977 and 1978 were \$306,600 and \$322,500, respectively. From available cost records that we reviewed, approximately \$65,000 of the estimated committees' cost in 1977 was spent on compensating committee members for their transportation and subsistence for attending meetings. An additional \$9,300 in reimbursable expenses was spent for certain members of the minority committees to visit the Oakland, California, pretest census site. Since committee members are not compensated for their services beyond travel expenses, all remaining costs are a function of operating the committees. The remaining costs generally consist of Federal support staff who prepare background papers, minutes, and correspondence and arrange for committee meetings, printing, reproduction, and supplies.

CENSUS COMMITTEES APPEAR TO
BE EFFECTIVE AND USEFUL

Census officials regard the advisory committees as a tremendous asset to their mission. According to these officials, the committees have contributed very significantly to policy formulation concerning the many aspects of the 1980 census preparation and other statistical series. Two contributions among many were noted as outstanding by Census officials:

- First, committees force Census to evaluate agency positions by providing professional scrutiny from the Nation's leading authorities.
- Second, committees offer a quality control service to ensure that Census efforts to collect and supply statistics meet the needs of data users.

Census representatives at the meetings generally included the Director and other high ranking officials. According to Census officials, even though committee recommendations are not always implemented, they are taken into consideration in formulating Census plans. We found Census receptive to committee ideas even though there is not always total agreement.

OVERLAPPING TOPICS PROVIDE CENSUS
WITH SEVERAL PERSPECTIVES

Census officials acknowledge that some overlap exists among the committees but believe it is necessary to get various perspectives on the same topics from persons with different backgrounds. While a number of committees are now discussing the 1980 census, the approach and focus of each committee will differ. For example, the American Statistical Association Committee focuses on sampling problems; the American Economic Association Committee on employment, occupation, and income; and the Population Committee on migration, marriage, education, and population estimates and projections.

Although Census believes that overlap is beneficial in some areas, it has terminated committees when advice could be sought from other means, including from other advisory committees. Since 1976 four committees have been either merged or terminated. In January 1976 two advisory committees--Small Areas and State and Local Government Statistics--were merged into the Census Advisory Committee on State and Local Area Statistics, which was later terminated in June 1977. Census terminated its Privacy and Confidentiality Committee in February 1976.

ALTERNATIVES TO COMMITTEES
ARE NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

Census acknowledges that committees are not the only means available for obtaining expert advice. According to Census officials, Census needs the interaction among the experts that only an advisory committee meeting could provide. Among the other means currently used are public meetings, paid ad hoc conferences, and consultants.

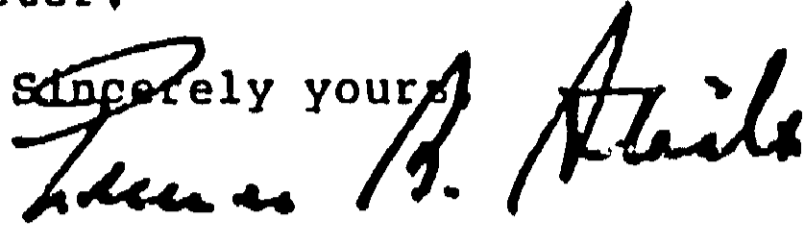
Disadvantages noted by Census officials in using public meetings and conferences as the sole advisory source include a lack of continuity and professionalism. According to Census officials, consultants also give only one viewpoint and their recommendations are not as readily accepted by data users as those of committees. Because of pay limitations, many committee members would not be available as consultants but serve on the committees in response to public duty and professional association responsibility.

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We discussed the letter contents with the Census Committee Liaison Officer who is responsible for advisory committee management matters and have considered his views in preparing the letter.

Sincerely yours,



Comptroller General
of the United States