

*U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Office of Inspector General*



BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

*Re-enumeration at Three
Local Census Offices in Florida:
Hialeah, Broward South, and Homestead*

Final Audit Report No. ESD-13215-0-0001/September 2000

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Inspector General
Washington, D.C. 20230

SEP 29 2000

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Kenneth Prewitt
Director, Bureau of the Census

FROM: Johnnie E. Frazier

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnnie E. Frazier".

SUBJECT: *Re-enumeration at Three Local
Census Offices in Florida: Hialeah, Broward
South, and Homestead*
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As a follow-up to a series of briefings with senior Census Bureau officials, including William Barron, Deputy Director; John Thompson, Associate Director for Decennial Census; Preston J. Waite, Assistant Director for Decennial Census; Marvin Raines, Associate Director, Field Division; and James Holmes, Atlanta Regional Director; attached is our final report on our audit of enumeration activities at three local Census offices in Florida - Hialeah, Broward South, and Homestead. Our inquiry was prompted by an anonymous complaint that was forwarded to our office on May 30, 2000, by Congresswoman Carrie Meek. Although the complaint allegedly came from employees of the Homestead office, we expanded the scope of our audit to include both the Hialeah office and the Broward South office, that is, all three sites where Hialeah-trained enumerators had worked.

During our review of the procedures used at the Homestead office, we found that the Hialeah-trained enumerators were not making the required number of visits and telephone calls before contacting a neighbor for information. At the Broward South office, we found that the bureau's own quality control procedures had detected serious errors and irregularities on questionnaires that had been completed by Hialeah-trained enumerators. In Hialeah, we were unable to review any of the 63,000 questionnaires completed at that office because the office had already sent them to the bureau's data capture center in Phoenix, Arizona. Instead, we reviewed Hialeah's quality control documents, after which we concluded that controls designed to detect data falsification had not been properly implemented.

As we began reporting our findings to Census officials, these officials initiated a series of actions aimed at ensuring the integrity of the data at these three offices. Specifically, (1) at Homestead, all questionnaires completed by Hialeah enumerators were set aside and thoroughly reviewed to ensure the quality of data collected; approximately 1,400 questionnaires were re-enumerated; (2) at Broward South, all 3,200 questionnaires completed by Hialeah enumerators were re-enumerated; and (3) at Hialeah, approximately 63,000 questionnaires, the entire non-response follow-up workload, were re-enumerated.

Because we concur with the responsive actions taken by the Census Bureau, we are issuing this report in final. We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies extended to us during our review by Census Bureau staff at headquarters and at the regional and local offices.

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of the Census is in the process of counting every person in the United States. Census questionnaires were delivered to most houses, apartments, and mobile homes by either the U.S. Postal Service or Census enumerators. Occupants were requested to complete the questionnaire for their households and mail them back to the Census Bureau. If the bureau did not receive a completed questionnaire for a housing unit, a non-response follow-up enumerator was supposed to go to the address and interview a member of the housing unit. However, if the unit is not occupied, the respondent refuses to cooperate, or after six attempts the respondent cannot be contacted, the enumerator can complete the questionnaire by interviewing a knowledgeable respondent, or "proxy."

To ensure that enumerators are following proper enumeration procedures and are not going to a proxy too early, the bureau has established quality assurance procedures. First, enumerators meet daily with their supervisor or crew leader to turn in completed questionnaires. Crew leaders review questionnaires and use a checklist to ensure that each questionnaire is complete and accurate. The crew leader must also review the record of contact to ensure that enumerators made the required six attempts to contact a member of the household (three personal visits and three telephone calls) before going to a proxy. Once certified and accepted by the crew leader, the questionnaires are turned in to the local Census office, where they are subject to a reinterview process. The primary purpose of reinterview is to detect falsified data. Reinterview staff, on a sample basis, contact households to verify the original data collected by the enumerator. If properly implemented, these quality controls should identify enumerators not following proper procedures, including enumerators who have falsified data or collected proxy information before making the required number of visits.

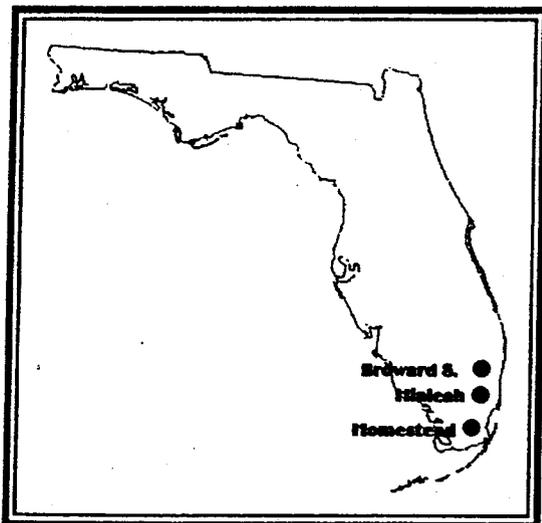
PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF AUDIT

On May 30, 2000, Congresswoman Carrie Meek forwarded to our office an anonymous complaint that her office had received from someone who apparently worked in the Homestead, Florida, local Census office. The complaint alleged that Homestead enumerators had been ordered to falsify information they reported on Census questionnaires and that the office manager of the Hialeah office, whose employees were assisting the Homestead office with its non-response follow-up workload, had encouraged his managers to do whatever was necessary to complete their work quickly, including falsifying data on questionnaires. Allegedly, the 209

Hialeah enumerators who had been reassigned to help at the Homestead office began filling out the questionnaires with "John Doe" and "Jane Doe" and using abbreviated enumeration procedures rather than following the prescribed enumeration procedures for non-response follow-up.

The purpose of our audit was to determine whether enumerators trained or supervised by Hialeah managers followed Census procedures and whether quality control procedures were in place at any office that employed Hialeah-trained workers. Other matters raised in the complaint received from Congresswoman Meek were referred to the OIG's Office of Investigations. To conduct our review, we examined (1) non-response follow-up procedures, (2) questionnaires completed by Hialeah enumerators, and (3) quality control documentation over completed questionnaires. We interviewed headquarters officials in Suitland, Maryland; regional personnel in Atlanta, Georgia; and field staff at six offices in South Florida – Broward South, Homestead, Hialeah, Miami East, Miami South, and Miami Dade NE.

We conducted our fieldwork in June through August 2000 at the six South Florida offices and at Census Bureau headquarters in Suitland. We reviewed the adequacy of internal controls over questionnaires completed by enumerators and found that Hialeah crew leaders did not properly review questionnaires and that the reinterview operation at Hialeah had not been properly implemented. We discuss these internal control weaknesses on pages 6 and 7 of the report. We did not use data in computer-generated reports.



Finally, during our fieldwork, as we reported our findings to Census officials, these officials initiated a series of actions aimed at ensuring the integrity of the data collected at Homestead, Broward South, and Hialeah. While we concurred with the intent of the actions taken, we have not verified the results. This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and performed under the authority of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, and Department Order 10-13, dated May 22, 1980, as amended.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Homestead: Proper Procedures Were Not Followed by Hialeah-Trained Enumerators

On May 30, 2000, Congresswoman Carrie Meek forwarded to the Inspector General an anonymous complaint concerning potential problems at the Homestead office. The complaint contained specific details and suggested a major breakdown in the procedures and controls essential to the integrity of the decennial census. The audit team sent to the Homestead office determined that enumeration practices used by Hialeah-trained enumerators working at the Homestead office did not conform to the policies and procedures designed by the Census Bureau to ensure the quality of non-response follow-up data. The auditors confirmed that enumerators transferred from Hialeah to assist Homestead were taking shortcuts with some 7,200 questionnaires that they had been assigned. They apparently were not making the required number of visits and telephone calls before contacting a neighbor for the information. Data collected from a neighbor (a proxy) can be less reliable because it often provides less detailed demographic data about the members of a housing unit.

A review of questionnaires completed by Hialeah enumerators disclosed that while population and housing unit data were usually captured, if the neighbor did not know the names of the residents, the enumerators were simply entering such names as John, Jane, Girl, and Boy Doe, along with approximate ages and birth dates.¹ According to the bureau's guidelines, if the neighbor does not know the name or age of the respondent, those spaces should be left blank.

During our audit, we contacted the Hialeah office manager concerning the questionable procedures used by his enumerators, that is, the extensive use of "Doe" in conjunction with the large number of questionnaires completed by proxy. The Hialeah manager explained that due to the high refusal rate in his area, abbreviated enumeration procedures were implemented at Hialeah and that "Doe" was simply intended to be used as a placeholder. According to the manager, Hialeah has a large Cuban population, the enumeration was taking place during the height of the Elian Gonzalez situation,² and many of the households were not very cooperative.

He indicated that, although he wanted to have an accurate population count, he was also concerned about the safety of the enumerators. Thus, starting in the second week of non-response follow-up in

¹For example, a respondent's age would be listed as 30 with a birth date of January 1, 1970.

²A major news story for the Miami area involved Elian Gonzalez's relatives, who had been taking care of the six year-old boy since November 25, 1999, when the boat carrying Elian Gonzalez's mother and other Cubans capsized, killing her and 10 others. Friends and relatives opposed the return of Elian Gonzalez to Cuba. Then, on April 22, 2000, federal agents took the boy from the home of his Miami relatives. This action occurred six days before the start of the Census Bureau's non-response follow-up operation.

neighborhoods where the refusal rate was high, the Hialeah manager said that he sent out groups of enumerators (a procedure called "blitz" enumeration) to complete questionnaires by at least finding out "unit status" and "population counts" for each assigned case. Collecting just unit status and population count information for a questionnaire is referred to as "final attempt" procedures, whereby a proxy is contacted because the enumerator has been unable to reach the household. When asked why he had gone to final attempt so early, the Hialeah manager said that he believed that he was just taking care of a difficult situation and did not realize that he was using final attempt procedures.

After reviewing Homestead questionnaires completed by Hialeah enumerators, we concluded that once the enumerators were transferred to Homestead, they continued using these same final attempt procedures. According to Census guidelines, questionnaires containing just unit status and population count data are not supposed to be accepted by the local Census office until a crew leader's district is 95 percent complete. Thus, going to final attempt before the 95-percent threshold had been reached may have adversely impacted the quality and accuracy of the data collected by these enumerators.

In addition to contacting the Hialeah office manager, we also discussed our concerns with the area manager, who is responsible for monitoring several local Census offices. Based on these conversations, it is unclear whether the Hialeah manager clearly communicated to regional management that he was using abbreviated procedures. The Hialeah manager contends that he informed the area manager that his office was blitzing neighborhoods where the refusal rate was high. However, according to the area manager, she did not recall that the Hialeah office was having problems collecting data due to the Elian Gonzalez situation, did not remember whether the Hialeah manager had even informed her that his office was blitzing neighborhoods, and was certain that the manager had not communicated that he was using abbreviated procedures to collect data.

Recommendation

We recommended that the bureau ensure that its own quality standards were adhered to when the data was collected. Specifically, we recommended that (1) questionnaires with data collected using inappropriate procedures be re-enumerated and (2) for the remaining questionnaires, a sample of questionnaires for each Hialeah enumerator transferred to Homestead be selected for reinterview.

Actions Taken by the Census Bureau

The Census Bureau concurred with our recommendations. The Homestead office re-enumerated all (almost 1,400) questionnaires where inappropriate procedures had been used and then selected a sample of questionnaires for each enumerator to put through the reinterview process to check for data falsification. We concurred with the actions taken by the Census Bureau, but have not verified the results.

**II. Broward South: Serious Irregularities Identified
in Work Completed by Hialeah-Trained Crews**

Quality control procedures were not properly followed by Hialeah crew leaders sent to Broward South. Specifically, numerous questionnaires containing errors and irregularities were submitted to the Broward South office for processing without having been properly reviewed by Hialeah crew leaders. These errors and irregularities were identified during check-in by office staff at Broward South. Census check-in procedures require office staff to review certain sections of the questionnaire for accuracy and completeness before they are shipped for processing to the bureau's data capture center in Phoenix. The Broward South manager was concerned about data quality for these questionnaires and did not ship any of the questionnaires turned in by Hialeah crews. According to the manager, he planned to have office staff review and manually pull Hialeah-completed questionnaires for reinterview. Approximately 3,200 questionnaires had been completed by some 160 Hialeah enumerators.

During our review of these questionnaires, we confirmed the problems identified by the Broward South office. For example, some questionnaires were certified as complete and accurate by the crew leader before an enumerator had even completed the questionnaire. In such cases, data quality has to be questioned when the crew leader is not properly reviewing the questionnaires. The Broward South manager explained that when he confronted Hialeah personnel about pre-certifying questionnaires, they responded that this was the way they were told to do it at the Hialeah office.

We also found one enumerator who turned in nine questionnaires with no data and recorded that he had visited each of the nine households six times (54 visits) but was unable to get an interview with anybody. On the other end of the spectrum, we found that an enumerator had completed 15 questionnaires in 3.5 hours, well above the bureau average of 1.4 questionnaires per hour. According to bureau personnel, the work from both of these enumerators appears irregular and should have been questioned by the crew leader. However, these questionnaires were initialed off by the crew leader and submitted to the Broward South office for processing.

Bureau procedures require crew leaders to use a checklist to review and certify every questionnaire. A crew leader must not accept a form that is incomplete, illegible, or inaccurate. In addition, crew leaders are instructed not to accept a questionnaire unless they are convinced that every attempt was made to obtain missing information. However, we conclude that several crew leaders from Hialeah did not follow these procedures.

Finally, as in Homestead, our review of questionnaires also disclosed the use of "Doe" as a placeholder for a number of respondents' names (see page 4).

Recommendations

We recommended that the bureau ensure that the data collected meet the appropriate quality standards. Specifically, we recommended that (1) questionnaires with data collected using inappropriate procedures be re-enumerated and (2) for the remaining questionnaires, a sample of questionnaires for each Hialeah enumerator transferred to Broward South be selected for reinterview.

Actions Taken by the Census Bureau

The Census Bureau concurred with our recommendations. However, due to the serious errors and irregularities, all 3,200 questionnaires originally assigned to Hialeah enumerators were re-enumerated. We concurred with the actions taken by the Census Bureau, but did not verify the results.

III. Hialeah: Quality Control Was Insufficient to Ensure a Reliable Enumeration

After reviewing the work completed by the Hialeah-trained enumerators that were sent to the Homestead and Broward South offices, we visited the Hialeah office to better understand the procedures used by that office. However, we were unable to review the 63,000 questionnaires completed at Hialeah because the office had already sent them to the bureau's data capture center in Phoenix. Instead, we reviewed the office's quality control documents.

To ensure that enumerators are not falsifying data, a reinterview enumerator routinely contacts certain housing units to verify the data collected by the original enumerator. After the reinterview enumerator verifies the data, the office's quality control staff will either accept or reject the original interview and also indicate whether rejected questionnaires resulted from error or falsification. We examined several reinterview forms and found that the quality control staff did not correctly fill out the accept/reject section or the error/falsification section.

For example, in a house listed as vacant by the original enumerator, the reinterview enumerator found that it was occupied by four people and that no one from the Census Bureau, except for the reinterview enumerator, had contacted the residence. Given the discrepancies between what was found by the original enumerator and the reinterview enumerator, this form should have been marked rejected. Next, the reinterview form should have been given to the Assistant Manager for Field Operations for follow-up to determine whether the original enumerator was in error, went to the wrong housing unit, or had falsified the data. However, none of this was done, and the original questionnaire inexplicably was accepted by the reinterview enumerator.

Furthermore, when we examined the reinterview documentation in Hialeah, we noticed that an enumerator who had been cited for falsifying data in Hialeah was subsequently sent to work at the Broward South office, where this enumerator was once again cited for falsifying data. The Hialeah office had never processed the paperwork to terminate this employee when the falsification first occurred.

After reviewing numerous reinterview forms, we concluded that the reinterview process – a key quality control designed to detect data falsification – did not function as intended at Hialeah. We discussed our concerns about the reinterview operation with the Hialeah manager, who explained that the person in charge of the reinterview operation was not properly managing it and had been replaced. Because the reinterview operation was not properly implemented, we believe fraudulent data could have been submitted, undetected, by enumerators and shipped to the data capture center for processing.

For a number of reasons, we were very concerned about the quality of data that had been collected by the Hialeah office. Starting the second week of non-response follow-up, the Hialeah manager admits that he instructed enumerators to use abbreviated, to just collect unit status and population counts for housing units, and to use Jane and John Doe as placeholders for unknown names. Based on our examination of the quality control documents, as well as the office manager's statements, we determined that controls were insufficient to ensure that widespread falsification had not occurred at this office.

Recommendation

We recommended that the bureau take the necessary actions to ensure that the data collected for Hialeah was in compliance with the Census standards for quality.

Actions Taken by the Census Bureau

After consulting with the Hialeah manager, the Atlanta Regional Director directed Hialeah to re-enumerate 20 percent of the city of Hialeah, or 160 assignment areas,³ and then sample the remaining 642 assignment areas in the city for data quality. We were concerned about this approach because we were not convinced that the problems were limited to the city of Hialeah. Headquarters, in turn, responded to our concern and agreed to go outside the city if the data within the city warranted such action.

However, we determined that the Hialeah staff did not properly follow the special procedures for sampling the 642 assignment areas. Hialeah staff were supposed to match the original questionnaire data to a re-enumerated questionnaire, thereby determining whether the original

³There are approximately 40 housing units in an assignment area.

questionnaire should be accepted or rejected. We found that office clerks were not properly following these procedures – that is, questionnaires that should have been rejected were often accepted. We brought this to the regional office’s attention. At this point, the bureau decided not to wait for the results of the matching operation and to re-enumerate all 63,000 housing units covered by the Hialeah office.

We concurred with the bureau’s decision to re-enumerate all 63,000 housing units. To ensure that the re-enumeration for Hialeah was complete and accurate, the bureau took the following steps: developed special procedures, assigned staff from Census Bureau headquarters to oversee the re-enumeration, and transferred the non-response follow-up workload for Hialeah to three independent offices in the Miami area – Miami South, Miami Dade NE, and Miami East. We reviewed the special re-enumeration procedures and visited each of the three offices conducting the re-enumeration. We believe that these special procedures, along with the oversight provided by headquarters, should have been adequate to ensure that the data collected was complete and accurate.

cc: Robert J. Shapiro, Under Secretary for Economic Affairs