

Beacon Hill Byline

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The Return of the Census (Forms)

There seems to be a tremendous amount of talk about the census this year, both from the mass media and from general conversations. Is it always like this? Everybody knows that the United States census is taken every ten years, but somehow we seem forget about it between times. That might explain the calls I have received asking about this year's census notices. Another explanation might be that the census bureau is trying so hard this year to maximize the count of our country's residents.

The only specific recollection I have of participating in a previous census is filling out the form as a college student. It must have made a deep impression as a result of my belief at the time that I did not really live in the college dormitory. Once informed that it was the right thing to do, the form was filled in and sent off, as it has surely been sent off from wherever I have lived every ten years since then.

This year's census does seem to be making a stronger impression on people, judging from the calls that have come in to my office over the past month.

What is different about this year? The first change to draw a lot of interest, curiosity and objection from residents was an envelope that arrived a few weeks ago. It contained a letter stated that census forms would soon arrive in the mail. It also contained a postage paid return envelope, although there appeared to be no reason for the return envelope. A few inquiries provided an answer to that question. The envelope was to be returned if the recipient wanted to receive census forms in a language other than English.

Another complaint was from a caller who received multiple forms. I can't explain that away, except to offer in jest the comment that the resident must have received the form destined for a third caller whose census form never did arrive.

The highest number of calls has come from residents who have been asked to fill out the long form, a ten-page questionnaire filled with questions for personal and financial information. The form has been sent to 10% of the population. It is intrusive and upsetting to recipients, so I will try to explain its function.

We all know the census counts the population and is the basis for establishing both federal and state legislative districts. Less well known is that the Census Bureau is a massive repository of statistical data about the nation. Even the short census form provides information about the racial makeup of the population. The long form asks questions about your house, your income, your last year's vacation. Your answers, without your name attached, feed into the repository. The whole exercise is like an opinion survey on a massive scale. A Gallup Poll might survey several thousand persons throughout the nation and report its findings with a margin of error to compensate for the small sample. With its survey of 10% of the nation, the census compiles highly accurate information.

As a state official, I have no more control of the federal census than anyone else. I am devoting this column to the discussion because the results of the census are so important to Massachusetts. Our statewide population will determine whether we lose representation in Congress. Our regional population will determine Springfield's level of participation in federal programs. Our county's population will determine the level of our representation in the State House.

Please make sure that you and your family are counted.