

The Census is Coming

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“Beyond the weapons and in the midst of the battles,” says Miguel Hernandez, “beyond the hustle and the fights, not everything is a crisis and a problem. There are also good news on the horizon.

For example, the 2010 Census, the population count by which the government counts every person living in the United States.

Men, women and children. People of every race, every age, every income. They count families in their homes and prisoners in their cells. Everyone. Citizens, residents and the undocumented.

It’s good news because it gives us all the opportunity to be a part of this society.

Every ten years, as mandated by the U.S. Constitution, a population count takes place. The next count will be next year and preparations are under way.

Interesting data are produced: how many people live in the country? (Currently the estimate is 307,066,846) How about in the state of California? (36,756,666) And in the city of Los Angeles? (3,694,820) My neighborhood? (That one is unknown, since I live in an unincorporated area of L.A. County, City Terrace. Some people have been trying to turn this area into the city of East Los Angeles, but they have had no luck for the last 40 years or so.)

What is the average age? Are there more women than men? (Yes, thank you.) The results of the count help decide how many Congressional seats California will receive (currently 53, but we may lose one). How many electorate votes we’ll have.

Additionally, the data helps to determine how more than \$400 billion in federal funds will be distributed each year.

True, it takes some time to tabulate and publish the results: weeks, months. But the results of the 1890 Census took seven and a half years. Patience, please.

The census brings up interesting questions. First, it recognizes races, a concept that the majority of experts consider obsolete, and the result of social trends.

But Latinos are not even in this category on the questionnaire. They are not a race. There are Latinos of every color, or no color at all, such as yours truly.

The city of Los Angeles, which is half Latino, according to the census is 75% white. The county is the same. You have to look deep to find Hispanics.

Another controversy: Congressional seats are apportioned according to population numbers and not citizenship; in other words, regardless of whether they vote, undocumented residents count. That's not bad. For the undocumented, I mean. This position has been challenged, appealed and debated in the Supreme Court. So if anyone is considering arguing this point, don't waste your time.

Complicated?

For them as well.

During the last 210 years that the census has been conducted, the categories have changed, as well as the questions, in accordance with cultural and political changes. Changes, everything changes.

In 1850 they counted slaves. But states that didn't practice slavery didn't want to fall behind on their numbers, so they protested, more for fear of losing political representation than for a moral objection to slavery. In the south, slave owners were allowed to count each slave they owned as 3/5 of a person, at least for census purposes, to determine electoral and congressional representation. Oh, and I'm speaking of the male slaves, because the women: white, black, Indian, had no value. They didn't count or vote. And all of this was in the Constitution: Article 1, Section 2, paragraph 3.

Things change. Even the Constitution.

To ensure that we are all counted the Census Bureau is hiring about 1.5 million workers. Thousands of enumerators who will be hired to work in their own neighborhoods. They will speak more than 100 languages, so they don't miss anyone. Organizations and corporations are signing up as "partners" to help convey the message of the census.

Beginning in February thousands of centers will open nationwide to assist in filling out the questionnaires. Among them some mobile centers, vehicles that will travel to remote rural areas such as in California's Central Valley. Schools will be provided with specialized instructional materials: lesson plans for every grade level that explain the census and its importance, so the children can take the message home to their parents.

In this country, as in others where immigrants tend to flock, integration and assimilation into society is in the hands of the children. Children teach their parents about the country, the language, what is feasible and desirable. The Census Bureau recognizes this process. This is how they want to educate our families.

But this is what is important: by law all census data is confidential. It is forbidden to disclose the information for 72 years. The penalty for breaking this law is five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, although I've asked census personnel and they tell me it has never occurred. Privacy is guaranteed and no one can change that.

Here is the proof: on August 13, 1980, the FBI stormed into census offices in Colorado Springs, Colorado demanding to see census documents. The Census refused and the matter went to the courts which sided with the Census Bureau. I rest my case.

They have already completed the phase where they verify addresses. Early next year they will send questionnaires to your home. Fill them out and send them back. There is nothing to fear. It will only take about ten minutes. If you do, your city, your state, your school district, your neighborhood will receive more money, more resources, more attention to your needs. If you don't do it, you won't get any of it, and you will be left in the shadows, you won't belong neither here nor there-for a long period of time.

Make the 2010 Census part of your civic duty: it's good for you.

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