

PRIVACY AND THE 1990 CENSUS

By Simson Garfinkel

Americans are not any more concerned with issues of privacy on the 1990 Census than they were in 1980, says William Butz, associate director for demographic programs at the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

"We don't have any evidence from our field tests and focus groups that privacy concerns have increased from 1980," says Butz.

Nevertheless, the Census Bureau is going to great lengths to lessen whatever fears might exist. Through a massive campaign that includes advertisements, public service announcements, and messages inserted into TV situation comedies, the Census Bureau is aiming two basic messages at the American people: that the Census is important and that "the Census is safe."

Butz said that the appearance of confidentiality is as important as confidentiality itself to the proper functioning of the Census. Without it, Butz said, people might be hesitant to answer their questionnaires truthfully or even to return them. Public concern about confidentiality delayed the last West German national census until litigation brought about safeguards, and there was concern among census officials in the rest of Europe and in the U.S. that the public concern about census-taking might spread.

Butz said that the Census Bureau does not ask many questions that it would like to, on the grounds that people might see them as undue violations of their privacy. There are no questions about people's pets, for example, even though they would be helpful to public health officials and pet food manufacturers. "Many people would see that as trivial and would want to know why their government would want to know this about them," Butz said.

Questions about abortion and contraception do not appear for the same reasons. Nor are there questions about people's legal status of residence. "Those are very important questions...[but] we think a great number of people would not appreciate that question and that the presence of that question on the form might affect their responses to other questions on the form."

The Census couldn't be conducted without computers -- indeed, the very first Hollerith punch cards were developed to tabulate Census statistics. And in this era of computer fraud, break-ins, and viruses, the Bureau goes to great lengths to protect the information once it has been acquired. There is no way for employees -- and therefore computer "hackers" -- to call into the Census systems and access confidential information, Butz said.

Preying on the Vulnerable -- A psychologist testified in federal court last month that he sold names and Social Security numbers of patients in psychiatric hospitals in New York and Vermont to a drug smuggler. After the testimony, Stuart H. Newton was convicted in Rhode Island of smuggling 10 tons of hashish into the U.S. in 1983. He used the patients' identities to obtain fraudulent passports for himself and his confederates. Because they were confined at Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island and a psychiatric institution in Brattleboro, Vt., there was little chance that the rightful owners of the identities would discover the fraud. Before he testified, the psychologist, Roger Kramer, poked. He did manage to say on the stand that it never occurred to him that Newton might use the names illegally. Testifying under a grant of immunity, Kramer said in federal court in Providence that in 1977 he sold six New York names, birth dates, and Social Security numbers for \$600. In 1980 in Vermont he sold another ten identities for \$3000.