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Numbers may be dry, but interpretations aren't

By David Mendell

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July 15, 2001

Perhaps no greater truth can be said about human nature than this: Everyone has an agenda.

In politics, agendas form on the left and right. These extreme viewpoints typically find consensus when a foursome in knit slacks convenes in the "vital center" of the seventh fairway and hashes it out between iron shots.

In marriage, husband and wife wake up each morning with individual agendas. These often collide at great speed as the day progresses, sometimes providing divorce lawyers with an agenda.

But there is a place that one would think political and personal agendas have little standing: the reading of cold, hard numbers from the U.S. census. After all, who can argue that on April 1, 2000, America contained more or less than 281,421,906 people?

The answer: Plenty of people, who put forth compelling arguments of an undercount.

Ever since 2000 census data began spewing out of the Census Bureau in early March, agendas have blossomed like dandelions. Media pundits, special interest groups and political advocates of all stripes have looked to census data to bolster their cause or poke holes in the opposition's rhetoric.

Stereotypes have been debunked, later confirmed, and then debunked once more.

Seemingly non-partisan researchers and high-minded journalistic institutions have come to wildly varying conclusions about



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everything from the direction of racial segregation to the state of the American family. Consider these headlines from two of the nation's leading newspapers, both on stories about new census data:

The Los Angeles Times on June 24: "A Comeback for Two Words: I Do. The Nuclear Family May No Longer Be Declining."

The New York Times on May 15: "For First Time, Nuclear Families Drop Below 25% of Households."

Statistics long have been manipulated to further an agenda. But how census numbers are used by reporters, marketers and politicians is significant in modern society. These interpretations can determine how we view ourselves and how we set public policy on all levels for the next decade and beyond.

In some glaring instances, it's hard to conclude that the media, with its own relentless agenda to attract an audience, has done anything but bungle major segments of this story.

The single-mom issue

Take the so-called single-mother phenomenon.

Some media and interest groups played up the fact that the number of single mothers grew 27 percent in the 1990s.

Newsweek slapped a single mother and her daughter on its cover and featured a story supporting this "trend." The magazine paired that 27 percent growth with the New York Times' favorite statistic: Also in the 1990s, the number of nuclear family households in the country fell below 25 percent for the first time.

These media bites would make one wonder whether the nuclear family--Mom, Dad and at least one Junior--is going the way of the low-riding Buick station wagon.

But a deeper look into the data shows that the growth rate in the number of single moms leveled off in the 1990s compared with past decades--when it was as high as several hundred percent.

And even though the number of traditional family households fell below 25 percent for the first time, it was just 26 percent through the 1980s. Citing that statistic is like saying a baseball player whose batting average has fallen from .301 to .299 is no longer a .300 hitter. Technically, it's correct, but it gives a less-than-accurate view of a player's performance.

Looking at 2000 census data, "I don't see how you can come to any other conclusion but that the single-mother growth phenomenon is reaching its end," said Martha Farnsworth Riche, a demographer and former Census Bureau director.

Most researchers will concede that somewhere between 60 percent and 70 percent of U.S. children live in a home with two married parents--which has changed little since the 1970s.

But who would believe this if you paid attention to the news?

"The decline of the nuclear family is a long-term demographic trend that we think has come to a halt and we've moved on to figuring out why," said Wendell Primus of the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington.

Primus and colleague Allen Dupree recently issued a report arguing that families with lower incomes are more likely to be headed by a single mother but that this trend is abating, especially among blacks.

Conservative columnist John Leo of U.S. News & World Report seemed to agree with these two researchers from a liberal group. Leo wrote, "The use of household stats to make nuclear families seem anachronistic and irrelevant is an old story in the 30-year war over the family."

Leo, however, injected his agenda into the debate. He took aim at the Census Bureau under the Clinton administration. Leo fretted over a government conspiracy to frame the numbers in household terms to propound a liberal agenda--downplaying the strength of the family.

Status of segregation

Another area of sharp dispute is racial and ethnic segregation.

Census data clearly showed that black Americans--traditionally the most isolated of all racial groups--in general lived in more diverse communities than they did a decade before, although there was little progress in many big Midwest and Northeast cities. Meanwhile, Hispanics and Asians became more segregated in many regions, including Chicago, as the ranks of these immigrants swelled and as the newcomers carved out ethnic enclaves.

Thus, demographers are divided about whether overall integration, particularly noticeable in the nation's South and West, should be regarded as significant, incremental or merely a numerical mirage.

They also disagree whether the data indicate a clear trend away from segregation or simply offer a blurry snapshot taken during a fast-paced economy and a flurry of housing movement.

Again, the media has sent mixed messages.

In Chicago, it came down to interpreting, on deadline, whether the glass is half empty or half full. In March, headline writers at the Tribune and Sun-Times took opposing tacks on stories reporting the same news about local segregation--data showed that the Chicago region took small steps toward integration in the 1990s.

The Sun-Times headline: "Chicago clinging to color lines." The Tribune's cheerier headline: "Segregation falls in city, suburbs in last two decades."

Advocates for the homeless, meanwhile, were the hands-down winners at pushing their census agenda.

They persuaded the Census Bureau to withhold a detailed count of states' and cities' homeless populations, arguing that homeless people are too difficult to count because of their transient nature.

Therefore, the advocates said, a specific count would be inherently inaccurate and could be used to reduce services for homeless people. The non-partisan Urban Institute has estimated 800,000 people are homeless at any time, although the Census Bureau found just 280,257 in its national head count.

Agency's mea culpa

The bureau itself is not without fault when it comes to misleading the public.

When reporting data on same-sex couples, the bureau was forced to issue a mea culpa of sorts. It explained in a press release, dubbed a "Technical Note," that because of changes in data processing from 1990 to 2000, comparing same-sex stats from decade to decade was not "substantively valid."

That, in essence, invalidated a cavalcade of overly simplistic news stories about an apparent surge in the number of homosexual partners living together.

It doesn't help matters that, in truth, the census is far from a precise count of a country with so many residents and increasing demographic nuances.

In many respects, it is nothing more than a grand estimate. Yet it is still considered by many to be the most accurate portrait of the United States and its ever-moving parts.

So maybe the moral of the census tale can be summed up this way: If you want to know the real story, always read beyond the headlines. And always be mindful of lurking agendas.

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