

THAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Black Census More Important

By Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.

The 1980 Census officially began April 1, and it is the most important event of the year for minorities, perhaps even more important than the outcome of the presidential election.

That's because the census results will affect just about every area of minority life. Part of the problems faced by minorities in the seventies derived from the fact that so many were counted out, affecting a wide variety of federal and state aid programs.

The Census Bureau itself admits that it missed five million people in the 1970 census. But while only one out of fifty whites was not counted, one out of fourteen blacks and one out of seven Hispanic-Americans were not counted. Almost one out of five young black men were missed by the census-takers.

Over the course of the decade that undercount cost minority communities billions of dollars in job programs and other social services allocated in part on population figures based on inaccurate census numbers.

Apologists for the undercount claim that minority suspicions of official documents and government probers were the main cause.

But more important was the failure to design procedures to ensure that everyone is counted. Major efforts were not made to penetrate suspicions and convince people that it was in their own interests to fill out and return the census forms.

It is questionable whether the 1980 census will do much better on that score. There's been little evidence of concentrated advertising campaigns directed at minorities. Some urban neighborhoods that are predominately Spanish-speaking will be mailed forms in English.

This year's census will rely more heavily on mail returns than ever before, although pilot tests show this method results in lower compliance rates.

The forms themselves could be simpler. Most families will get a form that supposedly takes fifteen minutes to fill out,

but many will get a longer form taking nearly an hour.

But do those time figures reflect the fact that many poor households are disadvantaged educationally? For them, even the short form will be a test of perseverance, and many may just ignore it.

These and other shortcomings place a heavy burden on minority community organizations, churches and others to ensure that people in their neighborhoods are counted. And that means providing information and assistance so that everyone gets their cen-



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sus questionnaires filled out and mailed in.

People have to know why their cooperation is important.

One key reason is

year from now the Census will release the official population figures to states and localities for the purpose of redistricting legislative seats. Without maximum minority participation in the census, Congressional and legislative seats may be redistricted out of black and brown communities and given to predominately white suburbs.

Already, experts are predicting a massive shift in Congressional seats away from the big northern states to California and the South. If that shift is based on un-

dercounting both northern minority com-

munities and those of the South and West, then the little political power may be used to justify minorities now wield will decline even further.

Census figures will also decide the distribution of some \$60 billion in population than actually

Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. is president of the National Urban League

federal funds for revenue sharing, job training, education aid and other programs. They'll help set guidelines for equal employment opportunity programs.

State and local programs are also at

exists. So minorities have a special stake in being counted in 1980. We've been counted out in previous censuses, and that meant being counted out of jobs and programs too. We can't afford to be counted out again.

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