

Inside the Capitol

By JAY MILLER
Syndicated Columnist

SANIA FE — The 2000 U.S. Census badly undercounted New Mexico's population, according to a recent study released by New Mexico Voices for Children.

An undercount of almost 36,000 individuals shortchanged New Mexico by \$110 million in funds for eight federal programs. Of those individuals, more than 30 percent were children.

The study, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, a professional consulting firm, noted that the undercount for Hispanics and Native Americans was higher than for the overall population.

New Mexico has the highest percentage of Hispanics and the second-highest percentage of Native Americans in the nation. "This undercount must be corrected so that the 2010 census is accurate," said Lisa Adams Shafer, Kids Count program director.

But correcting the undercount does not appear at all likely according to the news so far this year. New Mexico appears to be in for an even greater undercount, similar to 1990, when it led the nation.

Since the beginning of the year, the Census Bureau news has been bad and getting worse. In January, Charles Louis Kincannon, longtime director of the census, announced his retirement. That came on the heels of resignations by five top bureau employees during the previous two years.

Kincannon was succeeded by Preston Jay Waite, architect of the plan to use wireless handheld computers to collect information door-to-door from people who do not return census forms.

In March that program was scrapped because of problems. In April, Waite announced his surprise re-

tirement. Later in April, the bureau announced that it had drastically scaled back its dress rehearsal for the national head count.

Congress is worried these problems will delay the census and make it even less accurate. By law, the Census Bureau is required to submit population numbers to Congress by Dec. 31, 2010.

Members of the U.S. House are vitally interested in the numbers. They determine which states will gain representatives and which will lose. The census determines each state's allocation of the 435 representative seats in Congress. State legislatures then begin meeting in January to determine congressional district boundaries.

It is easy to understand that nothing is more important to members of the U.S. House than accurate, on time, census data.

Every decade the Census Bureau tries a new twist to make the data more

accurate. In 1980, it hired thousands of additional temporary employees to scour street corners and alleys to count the homeless. People living in the country were given street numbers to make them easier to pinpoint.

That didn't help much, so in 1990, computers were brought to the rescue. Computer wizards somehow figured out a way to estimate how many people they miss. That formula then was applied to the actual count from census takers and resulted in something called the statistical estimate.

But lawsuits, brought by the losers, disadvantaged by the statistical count, argued that the constitution doesn't allow computerized corrections.

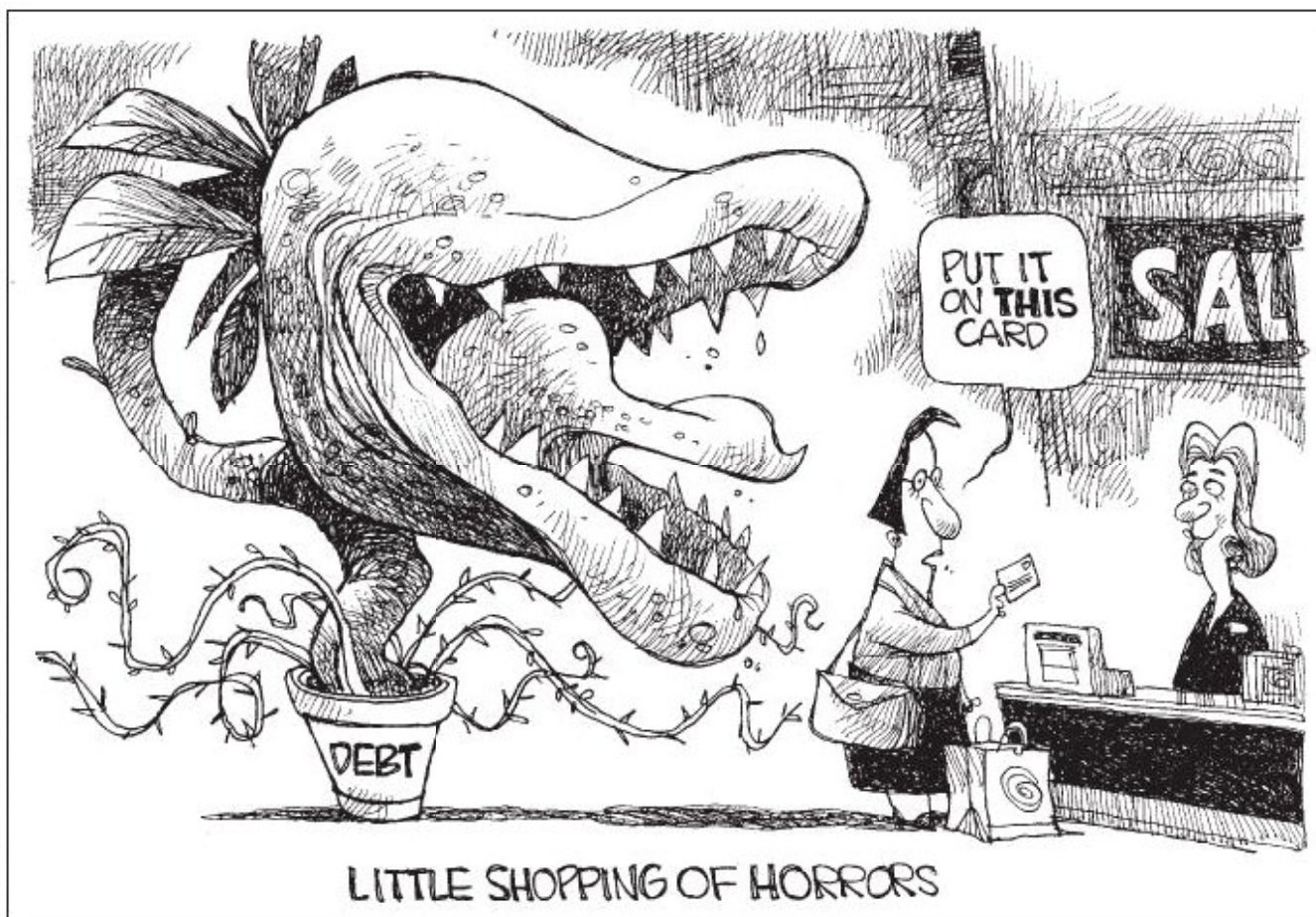
In 2000, the Census Bureau tried a national ad campaign, including a \$2 million ad during the Super Bowl. Evidently the undercounted don't pay much attention to advertising

It has been suggested that the undercounted are intimidated by the lengthy questionnaires. Maybe they don't trust the government or maybe they figure it's just as well if the government doesn't know that much about them.

Many Indians may feel they don't have much historical reason for trusting the government. And why would illegal aliens want to fill out one of those forms. They can get the free services anyway.

So this decade's solution was wireless handheld computers. If UPS could track packages that way, why couldn't the federal government? But technology glitches and a bungled government contract has us back to paper and pencils and a multitude of additional employees to use them.

At least this year we know ahead of time that the census won't be any more accurate.



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2010 census will be no more accurate

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