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EDITORIALS

Count foster kids

In a praiseworthy attempt to shorten its form, the Census Bureau is unwisely deleting the foster child category.

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THE GOOD NEWS is that the Census Bureau wants to make your 2010 census short and to the point, eliminating unnecessary questions. Complying with the Constitution's mandate for a census every 10 years and gathering the information the government needs to do such things as reapportion voting power and divide up tax dollars shouldn't mean needless pages and convoluted queries.

Which brings us to the bad news. To shorten the form yet still fit in questions about who's living under the roof of the person checking off the boxes, the Census Bureau decided to remove one of the categories: foster children, the people who through no fault of their own are most in need of government attention and assistance. Foster kids by definition are neglected or abused by their parents. Now that the government has become their parent, they're about to get neglected all over again.

Data on U.S. children living in foster care help lawmakers determine whether their efforts are helping. Where do most abused and neglected children live? Are those areas getting their fair share of federal resources? Los Angeles County has come a long way in tracking the children in its juvenile welfare system

and reducing their numbers, but not every jurisdiction does so well. With statistics about foster children out of official sight, the children are more likely to fall out of the official mind.

Other categories could easily be eliminated instead, without much loss to the figurative national databank. To the question, "How is this person related to Person 1?" – if not a spouse, child, adopted child, stepchild, parent, grandchild, in-law, roomer or boarder, housemate or roommate or unmarried partner, do we really need to add both "other relative" and "other nonrelative"? The form could simply say "other." That way foster children, who alone among those categories are our collective responsibility, won't have to be lost among the roomers and borders.

A congressional subcommittee is reviewing the proposed changes later this month. Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich is right, in advance of that hearing, to ask his colleagues to urge Congress to restore the "foster child" category. With one of the nation's largest concentrations of children in foster care, the county has an important stake in helping correct this mistake.