



## Jack Lessenberry's Essays and Interviews

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### Essay: In the Numbers

We won't start to get official census figures till December. But Michigan Radio's Jack Lessenberry reports that a new outfit called Data Driven Detroit is already trying to give us the facts about ourselves, and tell us what they mean.

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Kurt Metzger, whose friends sometimes call him the Great Demographer, has a mission in life. He wants to discover the facts about life in Detroit and Michigan, and share them.

That's neither as simple, nor as non-controversial, as you might think. Over the thirty-five years he has been in Detroit, Metzger, a Cincinnati native, has too often heard comments like this from politicians and bureaucrats: "Data can only be used against you."

"People tend to live and work in their own little silos," he told me over lunch yesterday. "They keep the information they collect close to the vest, and don't like to share it."

That hasn't done much for anyone. Metzger, a man in his early sixties, is still an idealist at heart. After years with the Census Bureau, Wayne State and the United Way, he's now heading a new non-profit center called Data Driven Detroit, ([www.datadrivendetroit.org](http://www.datadrivendetroit.org)) which was initially funded by the Kresge and Skillman Foundations.

Their mission is simple in theory, yet sometimes terribly complex: "To provide accessible high-quality information and analysis to drive informed decision making to strengthen communities in Southeast Michigan," eventually, perhaps the entire state.

There's an whisper of an old 1960's idea here; give communities the information they need, and they'll be better able to "fight the powers that be." Unfortunately, these days we are too often more interested in fighting inconvenient truths.

The U.S. Census bureau counted us all, officially, on April 1st. But we won't get detailed population data for Michigan, including its cities, until next April. In the meantime, I asked Metzger, what's his best estimate of Detroit's real population?

Metzger shook his head. “Something less than eight hundred thousand, Perhaps between 750,000 and 775,000. The census may not even find that many. There will be an undercount.

There always is. It is hard to count people who have no fixed home. The undercount this year also may be made worse by groups who’ve urged people to illegally refuse to cooperate with the census.

They think the census itself is an invasion of their privacy. Metzger couldn’t disagree more. If we are ever going to improve things in Michigan, we have to have accurate data.

Data Driven Detroit’s goal is to uncover and bring together the information people need to make policy decisions. That will be critical next year. The state legislature and other units of government are going to have to draw new boundaries.

Additionally, Detroit is moving to a system where most council members will be elected by district. Metzger’s shop would be more than happy to help any government draw boundaries that not only have the right number of people, but which make sense from the standpoint of keeping communities together.

Metzger’s outfit is rigorously non-partisan, except in this sense: “We request that those who work here have a love for the city of Detroit, and want to help bring the city back,” he said.

He’s been here since 1975, and some things still baffle him: “How do we let the city go? How did our leaders allow the city to fall apart the way it did? How did we get away from seeing Detroit as so essential to the success of this region?”

Those are, indeed, the essential questions. Unfortunately, there are some answers which even the best data can’t provide.

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