Detroit, at its population peak, was home to 1.85 million people, making it the fifth largest city in the country in 1950. That figure marked the height of the Motor City’s population boom during the first half of the 20th century.

Fifty years later, estimates show that the U.S. 2000 Census could mean the culmination of a more recent trend in Detroit — plummeting population figures that might drop the city under 1 million residents for the first time since 1920.

No one is more aware of the consequences than Derrick Hale, who represents Detroit in the Michigan House and who experienced redistricting nine years ago as a staff member in the state Capitol.

“The Census is vitally important to Detroit,” Hale, a Democrat, said. “The population increase or decline is tied to state and federal revenue the city can receive for services such as health care and roads. And it also determines political clout. If Detroit falls under a million, it will possibly lose one or two state representatives and possibly one state Senate seat. On the congressional
level, a loss of numbers could shift the districts around in a dramatic way.”

Every newsletter Hale sends to constituents includes a reminder about the Census. He and other Detroit leaders recently shot television advertisements with one bottom-line message to residents: Be counted.

“The closer you get to the actual count, the full-court press will begin in terms of educating people about how important it is,” Hale said, noting that poor, urban areas traditionally have been undercounted in past U.S. Census reports.

Republican Gov. John Engler is leading a statewide initiative called Census 2000. Michigan will spend at least $450,000 to recruit workers and help “hard-to-count” populations fill out and return Census forms.

“All state agencies will be involved in promoting this effort through internal and external communication with their employees and the customers they serve,” Engler said. “I fully expect support from every member of the Legislature in this effort, as they understand the importance and the consequences of securing the best Census count possible.”

Politically, the consequences of the Census already are being felt. Lawmakers are well aware of what effect this year’s population numbers and elections will have on redistricting — the arduous, often politically divisive task that will begin in 2001 based on the 2000 U.S. Census.

“How redistricting goes will be dependent on two things: the population and who has control of the Legislature, whether it’s going to be Democrats or Republicans,” Hale said.

Michigan Sen. William Schuette, the Midland Republican who chairs the Senate Reapportionment Committee, said the combination of an election year and redistricting inevitably has an effect on the work of state legislatures. “That’s going to happen; it’s a fact. It’s as old as the Republic.”

Preparation for redistricting

Census questionnaires were sent to people around the country in March, and nonrespondents will begin getting knocks on their doors in April. By April 1, 2001, state legislatures will have the population data they need to begin the redistricting process, which must be completed in a year’s time. So while state leaders make sure their constituents take part in the Census, they also are preparing themselves for reapportionment.

A Nebraska task force made up of senior legislators has been meeting since late last year on the subject. The committee is charged with making sure that the personnel and computer software needed to complete redistricting is in place, and it also is setting up guidelines and policies for the process.

“We want to be up and ready by September, so whenever the feds release preliminary data from the Census, we can move forward,” said Nebraska Sen. George Coordsen, who chairs the legislative task force.

In December, the Michigan House and the Senate passed a series of measures in advance of the redrawing of political boundaries. The bills deal with issues such as keeping congressional districts contiguous, trying to keep cities and counties within the same district and determining how challenges to any legislative plan will be handled by the courts.

The most contentious issue, though, concerns exactly which U.S. Census figures should be used. Traditionally, the Census has used actual enumeration to total the population. The U.S. Department of Commerce wanted to change its approach this year and replace actual enumeration with statistical sampling, which some say would provide more accurate population numbers in undercounted urban and rural areas. But because of a U.S. Supreme Court decision, states will be provided with numbers based on both actual enumeration and statistical sampling. Each state will then choose which numbers to use.

“No matter which set of numbers you use, you’re probably going to get blasted from the opposite camp, so it’s kind of a no-win situation,” said Gary Rudicil, senior computer systems analyst with the Iowa Legislative Service Bureau, the nonpartisan group in charge of that state’s redistricting efforts.

As of early March, a plan in Michigan to use actual enumeration was still in a joint conference committee.

“The question is whether a statistical sampling or a guesstimate of how many people live in a neighborhood is good enough,” Schuette said. “I don’t think it is, and I think it has the chance of defeating the goal of better counting underserved members of the population. It certainly doesn’t solve the problem of undercounting.”

Michigan Democrats claim Republicans in the House and Senate want
to use actual enumeration for political gain.

"It is wrong to use 19th century counting for a 21st century Census," said Michigan Rep. Laura Baird, a Democrat from Okemos, adding that actual enumeration would result in Census figures "far less accurate and less advantageous for our state."

Fairness in reapportionment

The Nebraska Legislature is officially a nonpartisan body in which state senators don’t have party affiliations, but that doesn’t mean reapportionment always goes smoothly. In 1991, the Legislature’s original plan led to a lawsuit and a court order overturning the redistricting map.

Since then, Common Cause of Nebraska — a political watchdog group — has pushed for laws that would create a nonpartisan redistricting task force and take much of the process out of the hands of the Legislature.

Several states have created reapportionment commissions in charge of developing new legislative and congressional boundaries. Governors and representatives from the states’ two legislative bodies usually serve on the commission. The size of the task force varies greatly from state to state. In Arkansas, only three people serve on the commission, while 18 members make up the redistricting task force in Missouri.

In Minnesota, a constitutional amendment has been proposed to create a seven-member redistricting commission that would be composed of the governor and three members from each legislative body. At least one of the representatives from the state’s two legislative bodies would have to be from a minority party. The commission would make the final decision on legislative and congressional redistricting.

In the past, Minnesota’s reapportionment maps have been stalled by gubernatorial vetoes and challenges in court. For example, the state’s 1991 congressional district plan was reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court. And Minnesota’s eventual congressional redistricting map was drawn up by a panel of federal judges.

The constitutional amendment aims to ensure that redistricting can be completed successfully by the Minnesota Legislature.

Iowa has a unique reapportionment process in place. Prior to 1981 redistricting, in an attempt to reduce partisan bickering and ensure an equitable reapportionment, Iowa lawmakers agreed to give the state’s Legislative Service Bureau the task of redrawing political boundaries.

The bureau’s redistricting map is presented to the Iowa Legislature, which cannot make any changes to the plan. It must simply accept or reject the proposal. If rejected, the map goes back to the Legislative Service Bureau for a second and, if needed, a third time.

Only after the third map is rejected can the Legislature create its own redistricting proposal, which cannot be a piecemeal version of the previous plans offered by the Iowa Legislative Service Bureau.

“Our goal is to keep the districts as compact as possible and to get the population as close to the ideal size as you can," Rudicil said. “We don’t look at any demographics, we don’t look at any incumbent information, and we don’t look at any partisan information.”

Other states have been hesitant to follow Iowa’s lead, including Nebraska.

“I believe very sincerely that the members of any legislative body are elected in a representative democracy to do their best for the people, and that redistricting in the open is the way to do it,” Coordsen said. “No secret meetings, no caucuses, no backroom meetings. We do it in front of God and everybody.”

Schuette agrees that redistricting — despite the political squabbling it can sometimes cause — should not be taken away from state legislatures.

“It goes right to the heart of our system,” he said. “I think it would be wrong to take it out of our hands. It should be our responsibility as elected officials.”

WE'RE CHANGING OUR AREA CODE.

The area code for Lexington, Ky., home to CSG’s national office is changing to 859. The change took effect April 1. While both the old 606 area code and the new code will work until Oct. 1, after that only 859 will reach Lexington numbers.

To reach our Lexington offices dial: (859) 244-8000, fax (859) 244-8001.