

Getting It Right in 2010: Ensuring a Proper Count in the U.S. Census

Brian Baughan 29 January 2010

Mandated by the Constitution, the decennial Census is a time-honored measurement as old as our country, and its accuracy is essential. Population data inform key decisions on congressional representation and state and federal funding, and an accurate head count can effectively guide the government's vision and economic planning. In Philadelphia and other cities, many leaders and advocates in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors recognize the significance of the impending Census count and feel the urgency of getting it right.

To carry out its decennial count, the U.S. Census Bureau employs a comprehensive strategy with 12 regional agencies, nearly 500 local offices, and, for the 2010 Census, a \$300 million communications budget. The agency also works through partnerships with government, nonprofit, corporate, and community actors. Cities serve as partners by forming Complete Count Committees, which coordinate local outreach campaigns and inform residents of the importance of the Census, regularly pointing out that population data help allocate hundreds of billions of dollars over the course of a decade. (Our

city's own Philly Counts! Campaign launched this past November.)

Despite the magnitude of the Bureau's operations and its partnerships, undercounting remains a pressing issue, as post-Census evaluations and surveys have revealed.

Undercounting may influence the redrawing of a legislative district that doesn't truly reflect its population, or it can miscalculate the total distribution of federal funds for a community. This article details the causes of undercounting among "hard-to-count" groups, and African-American males under 40 in particular, and explains how one multi-city campaign is working to increase Census participation by employing black males to deliver the message themselves.

The Dilemma

Undercounting is chronically prevalent in areas with high proportions of "hard-to-count" groups — renters, recent immigrants, those foreclosed upon, and minority groups such as Hispanics and African Americans. (U.S. Congress 2008). The 1990 numbers on the latter minority groups were especially dismal, with undercount rates as high as 4.57 percent for African Americans and 4.99 percent for Hispanics. The numbers improved for both groups between 1990 and 2000, yet the undercount totals for minorities and whites remained widely divergent (Ronizio 2007). Further analysis of the 2000 Census uncovers an even greater disparity among black males 18 and older,

who were undercounted by 7.67 percent (Bachleitner 2009).

Large cities well know the undercounting problem, and their dilemma is detailed in an instructive report published in October 2009 by the Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative, "Preparing for the 2010 Census: How Philadelphia and Other Cities Are Struggling and Why It Matters." The report closely examines the chronic undercount totals in Philadelphia, which undercounted more than 8,000 people, or about 0.5 percent of the total population, in 2000. Ten other large U.S. cities face a similar dilemma. The report delivers the case for improved counts, stressing that funding for tax-supported social services hinges on better tallies for the city's many hard-to-count groups. For Philadelphia and all of its residents, an estimated \$4 billion, or \$2,796 per capita, in population-based funds were distributed in fiscal 2008 (Philadelphia Research Initiative 2009).

What's at Stake?

As crucial as services like Medicaid, housing vouchers, and transportation funding are, there is even more at stake here. According to Thomas Ginsberg, author of the Pew report, "civic prestige," "political power," and "regional marketability" are also potential rewards for a robust population figure. He reports that in response to a recently introduced Census initiative, six cities challenged annual population estimates and won, securing additional

funding and some municipal pride in the process.

Philadelphia wasn't among those cities listed, though after a long delay it finally made its own challenge in 2009, through an initiative funded by the Citi Foundation and William Penn Foundation and implemented by the nonprofit research group Social Compact. In December, shortly after the Pew report was published, the city announced that it won the challenge, which meant that the population was larger than that indicated by the 2008 Census estimate. More importantly, the news confirmed that after a six-decade population decline, Philadelphia was finally growing, with 23,000 new residents since 2000 (Walsh 2009). William Penn Foundation president Feather O. Houston called the finding "a great tonic" and boost for the city's self-image (City of Philadelphia Blog 2009).

A growing Philadelphia is an exciting prospect, but in light of what we know about undercounting, it is crucial to remain vigilant. Of the many obstacles that stand in front of the Philly Counts! campaign, perhaps the greatest one is time. The Mayor's office, stalled by a budget crisis, delayed assembling a preparation campaign for several months. Planning and coordinating a Census campaign is no easy feat to accomplish between November and March when the Census forms are mailed out. A further encumbrance on the Campaign is that its 15 subcommittees are volunteer-led and can only accomplish as much as the level of goodwill available.

The Nonprofit Role

In consideration of the barriers before the public sector and the unique strengths of nonprofits, it is clearly unwise to expect the government to handle Census campaigns alone. The fruitful collaboration that enabled Philadelphia to announce its growth in 2009 is an illustrative example of how nonprofit actors can play a pivotal role. Major collaboratives like the Funders Census Initiative and the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network demonstrate how philanthropic dollars, cultural competency, and credibility in hard-to-count communities all can be critical assets in Census campaigns. Nonprofit grassroots groups have the advantage of the citizens' trust and can bridge existing gaps between the government and the people. Their operations help counteract the distrust and the skepticism over the government's intentions, which are often major factors in the low response rates of Census drives.

As a grantmaker with a wealth of resources dedicated to fostering civic participation and electoral reform, the Ford Foundation is also positioned to make a difference in this area. One of its Census-related initiatives, the iCount Campaign, is designed to reach, educate, and persuade black males under 40 to participate through grassroots outreach and multimedia strategies. Six cities with large black male populations have been selected to wage the campaign: Philadelphia; Oakland, California; Chicago; New

Orleans; Atlanta; and Jackson, Mississippi.

What distinguishes the iCount Campaign as a fundamentally new strategy is its relational approach to Census outreach. Young men of color ages 16 to 24 will be hired to carry the message themselves and persuade other black men in marginalized communities to fill out the Census form. Thus, institutions that ordinarily play the role of messenger will delegate the task to a more trusted one. In an empowering move that bridges the common between messenger and message recipient, iCount Campaign organizers anticipate a higher return with Census participation.

Up to \$40,000 per city has been designated for one lead organization in each city to train the young men in messaging tactics, focusing on the argument/counterargument approach. A majority of these organizations, all of which are distinguished for impacting the lives of black males, focus their efforts on advocacy and community organizing work. Subsequently, they will approach their participation in the Census campaign as part of the larger work of achieving real change in their communities.

Outreach will target sites in Census tracts for optimal impact, including barbershops, recreation centers, and other popular gathering spots. ICount researchers will also equip these groups with Census data, maps, and analysis to discern the "lay of the land." The maps and other useful

information about the cities' Census efforts will be available at the iCount website Whyicount.com.

Perhaps just as important as the identity of the messenger is the message itself, which is being crafted using Ford-supported research. According to the focus research, based on expert interviews and focus groups conducted by Hattaway Communications, the best approach to peer messaging employs aspirational ideas and "word-of-mouth language."

The focus groups also concluded that many black males as well as Latino immigrants seek out specific opportunities to help their local communities, which means individuals are more motivated when they hear the message, "Filling out the Census helps organizations that advocate for *our families and community* fight for *our fair share* of government money" (italics added). A less motivational message is one that references the more than \$430 billion in total federal funding that the Census helps distribute. The research shows that mentioning such an intangible sum doesn't help elicit concrete images or pressing concerns about "leaving money on the table" in the same way an invitation to support one's community does.

Sober Realities, New Prospects

Accomplishing a complete count of more than 300 million people is certainly not easy. Compounding the customary

challenges — apathy, distrust in government, skepticism — are the multiple political and economic woes troubling the country right now. This is the first Census since 9/11, and anxiety remains high over the government's respect for citizen privacy, in spite of continuous reminders that Census responses are confidential by law. Moreover, during a recession with more people out of work, individuals are less likely to have the kind of fixed living situation that is ideal for performing a count. Households facing foreclosure or repossession also may be reluctant to answer if a Census representative knocks on their door.

Skepticism about the Census is real among African-American males and stems from multiple factors. Minister Malcolm Byrd, Associate Director of the Mayor's Office of Faith-Based Initiatives and an active planner in the Philly Counts! campaign, cites "unfamiliarity, distrust of government intentions, and inaccurate information" as among the causes of nonparticipation, and says that past Census efforts have missed their mark by failing to target and educate black males. "Credible messengers and enumerators have been underutilized to develop effective engagement and participatory strategies," he adds.

The issue has not gone unnoticed on the national stage. In December 2009, a coalition of African-American groups including the National Urban League, the National Action Network, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, and the NAACP met with Commerce Secretary Gary Locke to demand from the Census Bureau a more accurate count of black

people in 2010 (Yen 2009). Specifically, leaders requested more support for those organizations positioned to promote the Census and more advertising dollars for media buys targeting African-American communities.

Advocates in this arena can find encouragement that these prominent leaders see the larger picture and are increasing public exposure to the issue. There is also the hope that African-American males under 40 will be more engaged in this Census, if figures of the 2008 presidential vote stand as an indication. The Census Bureau reported last July that there were 2 million additional black voters in 2008, an increase of almost 5 percent, and that black males showed an increase of nearly 7 percent in voting (Krunholz 2009; U.S. Census Bureau 2004, 2008).

Experts have drawn similarities between Census campaigns and voting campaigns, so if that analogy holds true regarding participation, more black male residents will grasp the significance of being counted.

For African Americans, other undercounted groups, and everyone working on their behalf, the challenges are serious. And it is hard to discern just how accurate the next head count will be in Philadelphia or nationwide, but it is clear that success hinges on every sector — public, private, and nonprofit — effectively performing its respective role.

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