Tribes and the Census

The 2020 Census and the ACS: The Same and Not the Same

The data collected in the 2020 Census will be very much like that from the 2010 Census. Just a few questions, asking only basic information on how many persons are living in a household, their relationship to the householder, their ages and genders, whether they are Hispanic or not and the racial group or groups with which they identify. "Ten questions, ten minutes to complete" was the motto for the 2010 count. The only major exception for 2020 might be the addition of a question asking every person whether she or he is a US citizen. (More on this below.)

The most recent analysis, by a researcher at George Washington University, shows that nearly $900 billion in federal funding in Fiscal Year 2016 was distributed in some way that involved Census data. Most of this amount was distributed based on the income or other characteristics of the persons to be served by the programs.

However, the decennial census no longer collects any information on personal income or other social and economic characteristics. Nor is data collected on specific housing conditions. Then where does this data come from, if it is not collected in the decennial census?

The answer is that most of it comes from the American Community Survey, known primarily by its initials, ACS. Like the decennial census, the ACS is planned and conducted by the Census Bureau.

The Bureau says that the ACS is part of the decennial census program. Funding for the ACS is lumped together with money for the decennial census in the "periodic censuses and programs" line item in the agency's budget.

The ACS is a continuation of data collected in each decennial census until 2010. From 1940 through 2000, the decennial census involved two questionnaires, a "short form" with the basic questions still collected in the decennial and distributed to most households and a "long form" distributed to the remaining households with the short form questions along with all the characteristics questions now on the ACS. In 2010 the decennial "long form" was discontinued. Instead, the same information was collected only on the ACS.

But the ACS is a very different operation than the decennial census. It is planned differently and implemented differently. Decennial census questionnaires are
distributed and collected only once every ten years. ACS questionnaires are mailed to a sample of households every month of every year.

The ACS and the decennial census operations are so different that some households receive both questionnaires in the decennial year. They are required to fill out both even though the ACS repeats the same questions on the size of the household and on the persons living there that are asked on the decennial form.

**What Links the ACS and the Decennial Census?**

While the ACS is a separate operation, collecting, tabulating and releasing its data separately from the data obtained in the decennial census, it depends to a large extent on the decennial census.

*A major link between the two separate Census Bureau operations is the "sampling frame."* The sampling frame, the total universe from which the ACS addresses are drawn, consists of all households in the US. It is the decennial census that provides this sampling frame.

Unlike the decennial census which tries hard to count every person living in the US on Census Day, the ACS is a survey of only a sample of that total population. However, in order for the ACS to be useful and provide an accurate profile of the total population it must be representative of the total population.

For the ACS to be representative of the total population, it must reflect where the population lives -- the geography -- down to the level of the smallest communities. The decennial census provides the locations.

The decennial census also provides exact numbers of residents as of Census day. Those numbers then go into the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program (PEP). PEP data is used to weight the individual responses of the ACS sample in an effort to produce representative data on the characteristics of the population, like income, employment and education and on the condition of the housing stock.

*If American Indian and Alaska Native people are not counted in the 2020 Census, they are very likely to be missed in the annual ACS estimates for the next ten years.*

The all-important geographic sampling frames for all Census Bureau population surveys are drawn from the agency's "Master Address File." The Bureau file, consisting of all mailing addresses and the actual physical location of all housing units in the US has been created over many years and is fully digitized. The primary source of its information is a file furnished by the US Post Office on all addresses to which the USPS
delivers mail. It is supplemented by address information from other sources, including commercial firms.

Although updated continuously, the Master Address File (MAF) is most extensively revised in the preparation for each decennial. For 2020 local governments, including all tribal governments, were given the opportunity to review the addresses in the MAF for their own lands. Most participated, including a number of tribes.

In preparation for 2020, Census workers are also reviewing data from other sources, including aerial photographs. The purpose is to identify any housing structures that have been built recently and may be occupied by April 1, 2020 -- Census Day. It is also to identify any structures that have been demolished and will not be occupied on Census Day.

In addition, Census staff, supplemented by temporary workers now being recruited, will actually walk the streets and travel the roads to resolve any questions about what housing units are where, including their latitude and longitude coordinates.

This extensive effort to update the MAF is made before each decennial census. It produces the most complete data on the location of every occupied housing unit to which a Census questionnaire or invitation to respond to a questionnaire will be sent.

The MAF, updated for the decennial, produces the sampling frame for the ACS.

The links tying the ACS and its detailed data on personal social and economic characteristics along with its data on housing conditions are complex. But they are very real and make it essential that every American Indian and Alaska Native person be counted in the 2020 decennial census.

**Update on the Status of the Citizenship Question**

The preparations for the 2020 Census were already very involved as a result of the attempt to automate every possible procedure. They became much more difficult late last March when the Secretary of Commerce ordered the Census Bureau to include a question on the citizenship on the 2020 questionnaire.

The danger is that persons who are not citizens but may be in the country without the proper entry papers will refuse to let their illegal presence be known by answering the 2020 Census questionnaire. Other members of that household who may be legal residents along with other community members may also refuse to fill out a Census form. The Census Bureau's own research showed that this is a very real concern for immigrant populations and other groups affected by the current anti-immigrant rhetoric.
Any undercount that results will have very serious ripple effects on the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population. Undercounts at the state level will reduce federal aid that provides important benefits for all populations. Reduced state aid for programs such as Medicaid and SNAP (Food Stamps) is likely to result in restricted and reduced benefits for every population group in need. As the AI/AN population is one of the most in need, it will feel the effect of cutbacks regardless of its American citizenship.

The decision by the Secretary of Commerce to add a question on citizenship immediately generated a number of lawsuits. Recently federal District Court Judges in two different parts of the country issued decisions in several of these cases. Both decisions were lengthy. **Both judges ruled that the Census Bureau could not include a citizenship question on the 2020 Census.**

In a decision filed in New York in January, Judge Jesse Furman minced no words when he reached that conclusion. He said that Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross "alternately ignored, cherry-picked, or badly misconstrued the evidence in the record before him; acted irrationally both in light of that evidence and his own stated decisional criteria; and failed to justify significant departures from past policies and practices." The judge called these "a veritable smorgasbord of classic, clear-cut Administrative Procedure Act violations." (The Administrative Procedure Act, APA, enables judges to overrule Executive Branch agency decisions that they find "arbitrary and capricious.")

More recently a federal District Court Judge in California ruled that the citizenship question not be included on the Census questionnaire for 2020. His ruling was even broader than that of the judge in New York. In addition to finding that including the question would violate the Administrative Procedure Act, Judge Richard Seeborg found that the proposed citizenship question would result in a significant undercount, particularly of immigrant and Latino communities, and violate the provision in the Constitution requiring an "actual enumeration."

The US Supreme Court is to take up this issue in April, skipping the usual Appeals Court stage of the appellate process. Time is pressing since the 2020 Census questionnaire must be printed this summer.

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