Tribes and the Census

What Will Motivate Native People To Participate in the 2020 Census?

It has been clear for the last several years that counting every Native person in the 2020 Census is going to be an uphill task. An estimated 4.9% of the on-reservation population was missed in the last decennial census. In 2020 the picture could be worse unless tribes and off-reservation Native Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) become even more heavily involved than they did a decade ago.

Census Bureau research conducted earlier this year paints a grim picture of how difficult it has become to insure that everyone is counted in 2020. As is the case with every Census Bureau operation, this research is best known by its nickname -- "CBAMS." It stands for "Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Survey."

The research involved a survey with 61 questions distributed to 50,000 households nationally last spring. The questionnaire probed for whether people are likely to answer the 2020 Census, how much they know about a decennial census and what would motivate them to respond. Only 17,500 people answered the survey, even though there was a small cash incentive to participate and persons in the sample received multiple follow-up mailings. That means that just over 35% responded, a potentially ominous sign of what could be coming in 2020.

Comparing the results from this CBAMS survey with a similar one conducted prior to the 2010 Census, illustrates how difficult it has become to get the public to respond to the Census or to any survey. The CBAMS in 2008 found that just 86% of participants were "extremely" or "very" likely to fill out the 2010 Census form. A retrospective study found out that only 63%, a much lower percentage, actually self-responded. The current CBAMS found that 67% indicated that they are "extremely" or "very" likely to self-respond to the 2020 form. If that percentage drops like it did in 2010, this would mean that less than half the population may self-respond.

CBAMS also involved 42 focus groups, conducted in 14 different locations around the country. Forty-one of the focus group participants were American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) out of the total of 308 participants.

CBAMS found that familiarity with the Census varies, with over 21% of respondents not at all familiar or not very familiar with it. Forty-six percent said that they were somewhat familiar.
Several of the probing questions on the CBAMS survey turned up a high percentage of wrong answers about what's on the Census form. Only 45% of the respondents knew that the Census is used to determine how much money communities receive from the government. Almost half of the respondents either didn't know or falsely believed that the Census is used to locate persons living in the US without proper legal documentation.

The major barriers to turnout in 2020 identified in CBAMS included:

- Many people's belief that it doesn't matter whether they are counted or not.
- Concerns about whether responses to the Census might be used against them.
- Worries about whether information provided on a Census form will remain confidential.
- A general distrust in government, particularly the federal government.

For Native people participating in the focus groups, concerns involving privacy were the most widely cited barrier to participation in the Census. It was a matter of providing personal information to an unknown enumerator or giving private information to the government.

**The Citizenship Question: Source of a Potential Undercount**

A major cause for concern in the upcoming decennial involves the decision by the Secretary of Commerce to add a question about citizenship to the Census form. Such a question has not appeared on the decennial questionnaire since 1950.

The decision came in late March, after CBAMS had started. The reaction of many in the major immigrant communities -- Hispanic, Asian and Middle Eastern -- has been very strong, with a variety of voices cautioning their constituents in those communities not to participate.

The results of an undercount of these populations will have a real impact on the Native population. If there is a major undercount of the population in a state, that will cost the state dearly in terms of federal funding for major programs, including Medicaid and food stamps (SNAP benefits). With shrinking funding, such a state is very likely try to reduce the rolls in those programs by stiffening eligibility requirements, such as imposing strict work requirements that Native people have difficulty in meeting.
AI/AN people tend to be more dependent than other groups on such benefits and will be hard hit by such moves. (See the last issue of this newsletter, dated October 29th, for details.)

The CBAMS survey identified several reasons that might lead more people to respond to the 2020 Census questionnaire. The impact of the Census counts on the funding for public services was the top motivator. Thirty percent of all survey respondents said that funding for public services in their community was the most important reason to respond to the Census. That percentage went up to 34% for the AI/AN respondents.

Another 17% of all respondents said that the most important reason was that the Census contributes to a better future for their community. A better future translates into better hospitals, healthcare, fire protection, police protection, roads and highways according to the respondents.

Moreover, there needs to be tangible evidence of the benefits that Census counts bring to the individual's own community in order to persuade the hard-to-count to participate. This underlines the message from the story about the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's Census preparations concerning the need to localize the message, a story highlighted in the issue of this newsletter dated September 27th of this year.

CBAMS reinforced a message that the Census Bureau has been trying to communicate for some time: It will take "trusted messengers" within the hard-to-count communities to carry the word that the 2020 Census is important to the local community, brings tangible benefits to it, that participation is safe and that the information people provide will remain confidential.

In Native communities, that's clearly a role for well-respected community leaders and culture bearers, all of whom are vital to the effort.

Information from the CBAMS survey and its focus groups has been provided in several forums. A recent set of slides is available at: https://www2.census.gov/cac/nac/meetings/2018-11/mcgeeney-evans-cbams.pdf#.

A final Census Bureau report on the CBAMS test is expected in the first quarter of calendar 2019.

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