Tribes and the Census

Native Population Missing in Poverty Report; But Data Shows Up in American Community Survey

Last week the Census Bureau released its annual report on poverty in America. The attention grabbing headline was that the poverty rate for the US population had declined from 2016 to 2017 by 0.4 percentage points to a low of 12.3 percent. This represented the third consecutive year that the rate has dropped. Overall, the median household income stood at $61,327, the highest on record.

Less noticed was a report from Bureau staff that a change in the wording of the questions on the survey instrument used to gather this data may have been partly or even largely responsible for the rosy report.

Although the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) only population has the highest poverty rate of any racial group in the country, last week’s poverty report did not have a single piece of data on poverty among the Native population.

The poverty report is based on the Current Population Survey (CPS). CPS is a survey meant to be representative at the national level and based on data collected from just 60,000 households. The coverage in the CPS is regarded as too small to produce accurate data for the AI/AN population.

Ironically, the day after the Census Bureau released its annual poverty report, the agency released a data set with national poverty data for each major racial group, including the AI/AN only population.

The data is based on questionnaires collected from over 5 million persons responding to the Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) during calendar year 2017. They are part of a much larger release of the data from the ACS 1-year estimates for last year.

The numbers and rates for the various groups are shown in the table on the next page. All figures are for the nation as a whole.

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1 The AI/AN only population consists of those persons who identify AI/AN as their only race in response to the race question on a Census form. The Census Bureau calls them the AI/AN "alone" population. Those who identify as AI/AN and also with one or more of the other races are called the AI/AN "in combination" population, referred to in this newsletter as the AI/AN multi-racial population. The combination of the AI/AN "alone" and AI/AN "in combination" populations are termed the AN/AN "alone or in combination" population by the Bureau.
### Poverty Rates by Race from 2017 American Community Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Estimate; Total for Whom Poverty Determined</th>
<th>Estimate; Income in the past 12 months below poverty level</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Only</td>
<td>230,282,950</td>
<td>25,668,489</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Only</td>
<td>39,704,014</td>
<td>9,122,033</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Indian/Alaska Native Only</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,635,398</strong></td>
<td><strong>670,571</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Only</td>
<td>17,880,798</td>
<td>1,975,913</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders</td>
<td>589,531.00</td>
<td>107,762.00</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Only Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>192,792,530</td>
<td>18,604,468</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>57,679,289</td>
<td>11,173,521</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The poverty rate for the AI/AN only population was not only higher than any other racial group, representing poverty level incomes for a full quarter of the estimated AI/AN only population, but the poverty rate for AI/AN only youth ages 0 to 17 was 32.7%, one-third of all such youth. Staggering numbers, totally missing from the official poverty report published by the same agency.

#### 2017 ACS Data on the AI/AN Only Labor Force

The 2017 ACS 1-year estimates include not only data on income and poverty, much of it provided for each of the major racial groups, but numbers on more than 40 other topics. One of those topics is labor force status -- employment, unemployment and participation in the labor force.

The unemployment rate for the AI/AN only population nationally was, like the poverty rate, the highest of any major racial group. It was officially measured at 10.2%. The only other racial group with a rate even close to that level was the Black or African-American population with a rate of 9.2%.
Equally striking, but much less noticed in the labor force figures was the labor force participation rate among the AI/AN only population. It stood at just 57.5%. All the other groups had rates from 62.1% to 67.4%.

This rate represents the percentage of the working age population (ages 16 and over) that is either working or has "actively" sought work within the previous four weeks. Those who don't actively seek work because they know that jobs for which they may qualify simply aren't available are dropped out of the labor force numbers.

The official labor force measurement system categorizes those with barriers to working or seeking work, such as a lack of reliable transportation, the need to care for children or elders, or simply not having the training or other qualifications to successfully seek work, as simply "not in the labor force" at all. Barriers like these are prevalent among Native people who really need jobs, in urban as well as reservation areas, and are reflected in the low labor force participation rates.

The ACS 1-year estimates released last week also show the continuing disadvantages of Native people in terms of educational attainment, the highest years of formal education achieved by those age 25 and over.

According to the ACS figures only 15% of the AI/AN only population age 25 and over had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. This was considerably less than half the 36% of the White, Non-Hispanic population. At the other end of the scale, 20% of the AI/AN only population age 25 and over had less than a high school diploma or GED, compared to just 7% of the White, Non-Hispanic population.

The lack of the education credentials needed for well-paying 21st century jobs continues to be a major hurdle for the Native workforce.

**But Do the ACS Numbers Tell the Full Story?**

Useful as the ACS numbers are with 1-year estimates available for the Native population at the national level and detailed data, down to the individual reservation level in the 5-year estimates scheduled to be published in December, there is a substantial question as to whether they include the entire AI/AN only population. And if they are missing a significant portion of this population, is that portion those who are most socially and economically disadvantaged?

The question arises when the ACS numbers for the total AI/AN only population are compared with the official annual estimates, produced by the same agency -- the Census Bureau. For years, the numbers from the two separate data series haven't matched.
In 2017 the ACS numbers are still missing nearly a half a million AI/AN only people, a 15% undercount that makes the undercounts from the decennial censuses look minor by comparison even though there has been no public controversy about the discrepancy.

The 2017 ACS 1-year estimate for the total size of the AI/AN only population was just 2.7 million persons, less than the 2.9 million actually counted in the 2010 Census. By contrast the official Census Bureau estimate of the size of the total AI/AN only population, adjusted for comparability with the decennial census numbers, was over 3.2 million as of July 1, 2017, a nearly 10% increase over the 2010 count.

The problem is illustrated in the graph below:

The Census Bureau is supposed to adjust (technically, to "control") the population counts in the ACS to match the counts in the Bureau's population estimates program. That obviously doesn't happen with the count for the AI/AN only population.

The Bureau appears not to be concerned about the undercount of the AI/AN only population in the ACS. It assumes that it is compensated by an overcount of the
AI/AN multi-racial population. That population was overcounted by roughly 350,000 when compared to the 2017 population estimates.

In a publication released in late 2012 and another in early 2013 the Bureau argued that the discrepancy in the AI/AN only counts in the ACS resulted from individuals identifying as AI/AN only in responding to the decennial census and as AI/AN multi-racial in responding to the ACS. However, there is no public record of the Bureau ever actually comparing responses from the same persons to both questionnaires to test whether its argument is valid.

This pattern of large undercounts of the AI/AN only population in the ACS is not new. It has existed since the ACS became a national survey in 2005.

The continuing undercount of the AI/AN only population in the ACS data provides one more reason why all tribes and Native organizations need to make a maximum effort to insure an accurate count of the Native population in the 2020 Census. Using an accurate count from a census of the entire population will provide the strongest argument for demanding a change to the way the Census Bureau produces the ACS numbers.

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