

# The US Census: The Effective Silence of Underrepresented Groups

Marina Beshai

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544

## Abstract

This study seeks to explain how the US Census is hindering its own desires to count every US resident and outline the social, economic, and political fallout of their failure to accurately represent each and every socioeconomic group. This study also seeks to give light to a new form of national enumeration that is possibly more effective than the Bureau's current practice.

## Background

The US Census must take place every decade as dictated by the US Constitution under Article I, Section 2.<sup>1</sup> The original intention of the US Census was to capture data within the United States mainly for the purposes of federal government representation.<sup>2</sup> However, it immediately became apparent that if population directly translated into representation, less populous states (mostly rural ones) were to be overpowered in government and the size of Congress was to be unbounded. This led to The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929, where Congress capped the number of representatives to four hundred and thirty-five and regulated how these seats were to be apportioned (with a minimum of one per state).<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the Apportionment Act of 1929 contributed towards the

extensive use of US Census data beyond mere representation. In fact, US Census data now *directly* impacts the allocation of the federal government's budget towards local governments (state, county, and tribal).<sup>4</sup> Because the US Census was always a statistical tool used to put people on the map, this map effortlessly translated into a clear image of where federally-backed aid was greatly needed. Currently, the US Census provides a quantitative measurement of how each and every state is doing (by looking at their individual residents) and helps Congress provide relatively more money to the neediest states and helps to overwhelmingly represent the most populous ones.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Article I," Cornell Law School, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articlei>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> "The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929," History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1901-1950/The-Permanent-Apportionment-Act-of-1929>.

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau, "2010 Census Frequently Asked Questions" (Public Materials, Suitland, Maryland, May 10, 2010), 27.

## The Historical Issues with Enumeration

Over the past few decades, a debate over the practical definition *enumeration* took place within the United States.<sup>5</sup> *Enumeration* was used in the US Constitution to describe the collection of US Census data. It was unclear, however, if the intended purpose of the Founding Fathers was to count every single person or merely gauge an idea as to how many residents were inhabiting the United States. In 1998, the Clinton Administration, in an effort to save money and time, urged Congress to allow for the sampling of US residents for Census data.<sup>6</sup> Rather than knocking on every single door, only a few would even be attempted. Soon after, the US Supreme Court deemed this unconstitutional and stated that the Founding Fathers defined *enumeration*, as the counting of every single person – not simply counting a few and extrapolating the rest.

## The Present-Day Issues with Enumeration

The current issue that presents itself with enumeration, for the purposes of the US Census, is its failure to be all-encompassing. For instance, a portion of US residents, who do not live in their own home or any home, are not accurately represented in the Census. This is due to the fact that the Census is primarily a *mail*-based survey. Prior to the

upcoming 2020 US Census, the Bureau primarily conducted their enumeration through the mail, while the upcoming 2020 Census still plans on sending the referral for the online survey through the mail.<sup>7</sup> For those without a home, this means that if you do not physically interact with a US Census worker, are not counted by the owner of the home (if you live with someone else), or do not voluntarily appear to a “Be Counted,” center, you – more likely than not – will be excluded from the US Census.<sup>8</sup> Given that the homeless have scarcity-based issues, the mere idea of appearing at a “Be Counted” center, or talking to a US Census worker will be irrelevant with respect to the looming questions of *where is my next meal coming from*, and *where am I sleeping tonight*.<sup>9</sup>

Not to mention the other significant demographics like “racial and ethnic minorities, persons who do not speak English fluently, lower income persons, undocumented immigrants, young mobile persons, children, persons who are angry at and/or distrust the government, and LGBTQ persons,” who are consistently considered to be “hard to-count,” and most of whom are the groups that *should* be counted.<sup>10</sup>

## The Political, Social, and Economic Impact

---

<sup>5</sup> Carroll D. Wright, *History and Growth of the U.S. Census* (Washington DC: US Committee on the Census, 1899), <https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t21.d22.cmp-1900-cen-0001?accountid=13314>.

<sup>6</sup> James Bennet, “Clinton Speaks Up for Sampling in Census,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/03/us/clinton-speaks-up-for-sampling-in-census.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Alexis Farmer, “Digitizing the 2020 Census,” Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.brennancenter.org/digitizing-2020-census>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Mather, interview by Emily Howard, April 26, 2010, <https://earthsky.org/human-world/how-does-u-s-census-count-the-homeless-and-undocumented-immigrants>.

<sup>9</sup> Sendhil Mullainathan, and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means so Much* (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 147-166.

<sup>10</sup> National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations, “Administrative Records, Internet, and Hard to Count Population Working Group” (Final Report, Washington DC, July 19, 2016).

The US Census' political, social, and economic impact are interconnected. The socially underrepresented groups in the US Census will become the politically underrepresented ones in Congress, then they will be economically and materially hurt with comparatively lower federal funding in the long-run.

A family of color has a higher probability of living in poverty than a Caucasian or Asian family, yet has a lower chance of being represented in the US Census.<sup>11</sup> If a family of color is not accurately depicted in the US Census, chances are high that many more families like them in the area are not being represented, as well. Meaning, their state will receive less funding from the federal government, which will ultimately hinder their state's ability to help alleviate such circumstances. It is a vicious cycle. Those who could make one of the most compelling reasons for their state to receive more federal funding are the ones who fail to show up or be sought out by the US Census.

### What Is Next

Although the Bureau is making changes, none of them are driven by the continued underrepresentation of certain communities. This study aims to recommend *how* these communities can be represented in the future, and while it may be tempting to overlook *why* certain communities are not being represented in the US Census, doing so would be a mistake, because there is no possible blanket solution that will get both

the homeless and the LGBTQ community to be represented in the US Census. Each underrepresented community has at least one pivotal reason for not being represented, and to imply that there could be a blanket solution would be to strip away each and every one of those unique reasons. As such, this study recommends tackling each individual reason head-on. This study does not recommend a silver-bullet solution; but rather, this study recommends an ever-changing solution that depends solely on who you want to represent. To illustrate, about roughly half of the US homeless population receives government benefits, therefore this study recommends cross-referencing all of the names of people who receive benefits (using social security identification) with US Census data to ensure the homeless, who receive benefits, are being counted.<sup>12</sup> In order to count the other half, this study recommends physically seeking out the homeless, whether that be at a shelter, bus stop, train station, soup kitchen, etc. If a homeless shelter has a record of names, that data should be relayed to the US Census. If a church knows its "regulars," then the church should share their names.

In regard to those who do not speak English fluently, this study recommends using resources to find the community leader(s) in the area. Many people who do not speak English rely on the knowledge and expertise of others to help them navigate the United States. The Bureau's resources would be well-spent creating a bridge to those who do not speak English by seeking out the intermediary person(s). That could possibly

---

<sup>11</sup> Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014" (Public Materials, Washington DC, 2015), 13-14, cited in American Psychological Association, "Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status" (Public Materials, Washington DC), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Calsyn, Carol W. Kohfeld, and Laurie A. Roades, "Urban Homeless People and Welfare: Who Receives Benefits?," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 21, no. 1 (1993): 96, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF00938209.pdf>.

be a religious leader, a social worker, or the non-official community leaders in certain areas. For instance, many Egyptians immigrate towards Jersey City, New Jersey because of the well-known Egyptian network located there.<sup>13</sup> When a non-English speaking Egyptian arrives in New Jersey, they are introduced and welcomed to the United States by their fellow Arabic-speaking Egyptians. They help each other out and serve as their social workers, lawyers, and counselors. Although the Bureau can set up booths in Jersey City, the chances are low that a non-English speaking Egyptian would participate in the Census, due to their mistrust towards a government they are ambivalent towards, and the general lack of knowledge regarding the Census.

Although it may seem that this proposal will be a large financial burden on the U.S. government, the impact of providing the poor and the homeless with more resources is more than worth it. A study conducted in The Great Smoky Mountains showed that an increase in a poor family's income resulted in "emotional and behavioral health and positive personality trait development"<sup>14</sup> for their children.<sup>15</sup> Although government benefits cannot be considered an income, a family that can spend less of their hard-earned paycheck on housing, food, or health insurance can put their money somewhere else and have relatively the same effects as the study in The Great Smoky Mountains. In *Evicted*, American sociologist and scholar

Matthew Desmond argues "a housing voucher or a key to a public housing unit... would mean the difference between stable poverty and grinding poverty, the difference between planting roots in a community and being batted from one place to another."<sup>16</sup> Yet many fail to realize that *to be represented* in the US Census would mean a *higher chance* of gaining funds for housing vouchers, health insurance, and state benefits.

## Conclusion

While the US Supreme Court deemed sampling unconstitutional, the US Census Bureau might as well be sampling now. The current practices are insufficient to "count everyone once, only once and in the right place," yet many Americans and the Bureau continue to turn a blind eye.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the Bureau consistently fails to realize that the communities, who are systematically underrepresented in the Census, *connect* with the US Government somehow, whether that be through Medicaid, a friend, or the public-school system. The Bureau needs to locate these points of connection then exploit them for the greater good. Because once these communities are accurately represented in the Census, that is when they can receive the help they truly deserve. Because, as of now, many excluded Americans are not considered by Congress in legislative

---

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Gourse, "Jersey City Egyptians Keep Customs," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/15/archives/jersey-city-egyptians-keep-customs-we-are-all-brothers.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Akee, William Copeland, E. Jane Costello, and Emilia Simeonova, "How Does Household Income Affect Child Personality Traits and Behaviors?," *American Economic Review* 108, no. 3 (2018): 2, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21562.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Roberto A. Ferdman, "The remarkable thing that happens to poor kids when you give their parents a little money," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/08/the-remarkable-ways-a-little-money-can-change-a-childs-personality-for-life/?utm\\_term=.8a75dc822c96](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/08/the-remarkable-ways-a-little-money-can-change-a-childs-personality-for-life/?utm_term=.8a75dc822c96).

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown, 2016), 114.

<sup>17</sup> "2020 Census," United States Census Bureau, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2019/comm/2020-everyone.html>.

decisions that could effectively hinder their state's federal funding.

This study proposes to first understand the reason(s) as to why each underrepresented group is not included, then to properly respond to each individual reason. Only when the Census Bureau accurately represents every group, will the United States begin to fight other forms of inequality.

## References

- "2020 Census." United States Census Bureau. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2019/comm/2020-everyone.html>.
- "Article I." Cornell Law School. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articlei>.
- "The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929." History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1901-1950/The-Permanent-Apportionment-Act-of-1929>.
- Akee, Randall, William Copeland, E. Jane Costello, and Emilia Simeonova. "How Does Household Income Affect Child Personality Traits and Behaviors?." *American Economic Review* 108, no. 3 (2018): 2. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21562.pdf>.
- American Psychological Association. "Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status." Public Materials, Washington DC.
- Bennet, James. "Clinton Speaks Up for Sampling in Census." *The New York Times*. June 3, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/03/us/clinton-speaks-up-for-sampling-in-census.html>.
- Calsyn, Robert J., Carol W. Kohfeld, and Laurie A. Roades. "Urban Homeless People and Welfare: Who Receives Benefits?." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 21, no. 1 (1993): 96. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF00938209.pdf>.
- DeNavas-Walt, Carmen and Bernadette D. Proctor. "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014." Public Materials, Washington DC, 2015.
- Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown, 2016.
- Farmer, Alexis. "Digitizing the 2020 Census." Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.brennancenter.org/digitizing-2020-census>.
- Ferdman, Roberto A. "The remarkable thing that happens to poor kids when you give their parents a little money." *The Washington Post*. October 8, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/08/the-remarkable-ways-a-little-money-can-change-a-childs-personality-for-life/?utm\\_term=.8a75dc822c96](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/08/the-remarkable-ways-a-little-money-can-change-a-childs-personality-for-life/?utm_term=.8a75dc822c96).
- Gourse, Leslie. "Jersey City Egyptians Keep Customs." *The New York Times*. April 15, 1973. <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/15/archives/jersey-city-egyptians-keep-customs-we-are-all-brothers.html>.

- Mather, Mark. *Earth Sky*. By Emily Howard. April 26, 2010.  
<https://earthsky.org/human-world/how-does-u-s-census-count-the-homeless-and-undocumented-immigrants>.
- Mullainathan, Sendhil and Eldar Shafir. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means so Much*. New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013.
- National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations. "Administrative Records, Internet, and Hard to Count Population Working Group." Final Report, Washington DC, July 19, 2016.
- US Census Bureau. "2010 Census Frequently Asked Questions." Public Materials, Suitland, Maryland, May 10, 2010.
- Wright, Carroll D. *History and Growth of the U.S. Census*. Washington DC: US Committee on the Census, 1899.  
<https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t21.d22.cmp-1900-cen-0001?accountid=13314>.