My Time Working the 2020 US Census

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The United States Census, conducted every ten years, is mandated in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution. The Census is important for many reasons. An accurate count of the country’s population determines how many seats each state receives in the House of Representatives. Calculations for federal funding of schools, hospitals, roads, and other public services are also based on Census data. For these and other reasons, it is important that all people in the US be counted. Population undercounts lead to skewed seats in the House and contribute to the marginalization of certain groups of people.

The 2020 US Census’ validity was hit on two fronts: governmental bureaucracy and COVID-19. The Census was slated to start on April 1, 2020—enumerators knocking on doors, counting residents at their homes—and completed by the end of July. But when COVID-19 hit, tallying halted-going door-to-door and counting people in the middle of a pandemic was a very dangerous task—and the Census was suspended. I was hired in February to work for the 2020 Census and a couple weeks later was supposed to begin training. Instead, I received a call from my supervisor notifying me the Census had been postponed. Finally, I received word I would start work in mid-July, meaning the 2020 Census had been delayed three months, closing on October 16 instead of July 31.

Because of the approaching presidential election, the Census was supposed to have ended in July in order to give the US Census Bureau sufficient time to total the population count and apportion seats in the House of Representatives. With the Census delayed by months and the election process underway, President Donald Trump arranged a court order to halt the Census on October 16 instead of October 31. Cutting the Census short contributed to an inaccurate population count on election day. It also meant that a percentage of the US population remains uncounted.

The first week of October, my supervisor at the Census Bureau asked if I was interested in flying from my home state of Washington to another state where populations counts were far behind. Seven states desperately needed enumerators because their counts were too low. I agreed. So, in addition to my work in Washington, I served as an enumerator in Arizona.

My work for the Census Bureau gave new, sometimes unsettling insights into US population

Racial Discrimination as an Enumerator

That is how author Erendira Hernandez titled a Reddit thread in which she recounts the following incident:
I am Guatemalan-American, and my skin is brown. Even more tan than my usual skin tone because of the whole “walking in the sun” job I had as an enumerator. I had my badge, my Census bag, the Census phone, and a happy attitude to be out in the sun after WEEKS of being indoors because of COVID. I came upon a house that was covered in Trump propaganda and a slogan caught my eye: “Build the Wall.” I ignored it, I had to do my job. I approached the door and said, “Hi, my name is Erendira Hernandez.” I showed my badge. “I work for the US Census, and I…” “Look ma’am were not interested in your Mexican questions.” Slams door.
I’m wondering if anyone on here experienced anything like that?”

The thread has around 20 responses retelling stories, good and bad, of working as a US Census enumerator. Check out the thread at www.reddit.com/r/Census/comments/kfthoz/racial_discrimination_as_an Enumerator/
geographies. I became more aware of underrepresented communities in our country, some avoiding Census workers out of fear. Enumerating in Washington and Arizona, I walked house to house and occasionally encountered undocumented residents. Many were Hispanic.

Because I am fluent in Spanish as well as English, I was able to converse with many of them. When I explained that I represented the federal government, often folks from this undercounted population informed me that they did not want to fill out the Census because they were afraid of the government. Most expressed fear that, were they to give personal information, immigration would show up on their doorsteps. I would try persuading them to complete the form, informing them that the Bureau only uses the information for statistics. The agency cannot, by law, share any personal information. My efforts sometimes succeeded. But most often, the undocumented residents remained too scared to speak with me, let alone complete the Census.

In Arizona, I met an enumerator who had been working for the Census in Palm Springs. I spoke about my experiences with undocumented residents, describing how deeply they feared deportation. My coworker was surprised to hear of such encounters because, she reported to me, undocumented residents in Palm Springs, like those I encountered in Arizona, were acting out of fear: They reported that they feared being deported for not filling out the Census.

Wanting to know why some residents opted not to partake in the Census, I designed a survey directed at my fellow enumerators, posting it on Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. The survey results, from a total of 297 responses delivered from across the country, astounded me.

***Reported by Census enumerators, percentage of answers to question: “What reasons did residents give you for not wanting to partake in the Census? (Check all that apply).”***

- Did not trust government
- Immigrant, afraid of authorities
- Refugee, did not want to share info
- Did not know what the US Census is
- Thought enumerator was a salesperson
- Refused to open door
- Not interested
- Other

Four-fifths (79%) of responding enumerators stated that residents do not trust the government. More than one-fifth (21%) reported this reason was offered to them at least a couple of times a week or once a week, just under one-fifth (19.7%) said it happened at least once every day, and 13% said almost never.

- I do not trust the government.
- I do not want to buy anything (thinking I was a salesperson).
- Refused to open the door.
- Not interested.

My survey opened with the question: “What reasons did residents give you for not wanting to answer the US Census? (Check all that apply).” Respondents were then posed the follow-up question: “How often did someone refuse to answer the US Census because [followed by each individual reason]”

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discontinuities in those spaces. In many areas, forests are suffering because of severe overgrowth, a hazardous condition for wildfires. In other areas, clear cuts leave few—if any—trees standing.

While California law enforces some of the country’s strictest logging practices, my experience this past summer suggests that many hurdles remain on the path to proper, sustainable timber management. In recent years, Californians have witnessed devastating wildfires which result from longstanding forest management policies that have ignored traditional forestry practices of indigenous peoples.

By going into the field and conducting research, I learned how to read forest landscapes and think critically about the history of a region. Last summer, I fostered a love of nature. And I took part in a research project that helped develop my applied geographic skills, methodology, and my interest in sustainability. My internship has been instrumental in setting me on my current course. The morning drives through mountain roads and past verdant meadows allowed me to apply my recent geographic education to better understand the valuable ecology that surrounds us. With another fire season fast approaching, I hope we can learn from our past mistakes and implement more stringent regulations in order to minimize the damage to California’s biodiversity, ecology, and people.

Of responding enumerators, 27.8% reported encounters with residents who were afraid of immigration/government authorities. And just over one quarter (26.1%) reported interactions with residents who thought the enumerator was trying to sell them something.

The US Census is critically important. We cannot have miscounts or forgotten communities. The 2020 Census was abridged by unprecedented circumstances, leading to an inaccurate and potentially biased population survey. It is important to remember the former integrity of the Census, and aim to return it to a proper, accurate count.

Demystifying the goals, repercussions, and implications of the Census is crucial to ensure that the already underrepresented peoples in the US do not fall further into the cracks.