



2020 CENSUS FACT SHEET

CENSUS ACCURACY AND THE UNDERCOUNT

Why It Matters; How It's Measured

Background

At a macro level, the 2010 Census appeared to be close to perfect. The Census Bureau reported a *net national overcount* of 0.01% in 2010, a number not statistically different from zero. Similarly, no state had a statistically significant net undercount, according to Census Bureau estimates. But the apparent precision can be misleading and doesn't tell the whole story. This Fact Sheet discusses what we know about census accuracy and why it matters to funders and their grantees.

The Census Bureau's goal is to "count everyone once, only once, and in the right place." If the census missed relatively equal percentages of people in *all* communities and demographic groups — urban, suburban, and rural; poor and wealthy; predominantly White and predominantly Black or Latino; young children and senior citizens — the result might not be 100% accurate, but at least it would be *fair* for key purposes for which census figures are used: allocation of political representation and government funding for vital services and programs. However, scientific measurements of census accuracy since 1940 have shown a persistent, *disproportionate* undercount of certain population subgroups, which skews the results in favor of some communities over others.

Measuring Census Accuracy

The Census Bureau has produced estimates of census accuracy going back to the 1940 count, when analysts discovered that 453,000 more men registered for the draft that year than were counted in the census. The 1940 census missed three percent of men age 21 to 35, but 13 percent of Black men in that age group. This disparity was the first objective evidence of what we now call the *differential undercount* — a disproportionate undercounting of some population subgroups, most notably people of color, young children, and renters (a proxy for lower income households), compared to non-Hispanic Whites, older Americans, and homeowners.

The first measurements of census accuracy, called *Demographic Analysis*, compared independent estimates of the population with the enumeration results. The independent figures, which the Census Bureau still compiles, are built primarily using birth, death, and immigration records, as well as emigration and undocumented immigration estimates and Medicare data. Later, the Bureau developed a second check on accuracy called a *post-enumeration survey*, or PES. This statistically representative, independent survey is conducted after major census operations are finished; the results are then matched, household by household, with the original census results, to determine how many people were missed, counted twice, or counted in the wrong place. Those findings are then applied to demographically similar census blocks across the country to derive broader estimates

of undercounts and overcounts. The survey specifics and title have changed each decade since 1980, but the underlying methodology remains the same.¹ The PES produces accuracy estimates by race and ethnicity, age cohorts, gender, and housing tenure (owner vs. renter), as well as for key census operations, such as bilingual mailing and Update/Enumerate areas. The measures are available for the nation, states, and large cities and counties. However, no State had a net under/overcount that was statistically different from zero in 2010. In general, accuracy figures below the national level should be cited with caution, if at all, because of PES sample size limitations.

The Differential Undercount

If the census missed relatively equal percentages of people in *all* communities and demographic groups — urban, suburban, and rural; poor and wealthy; predominantly White and predominantly Black or Latino; young children and seniors — the result might not be 100% accurate, but at least it would be *fair* for key purposes for which census figures are used: allocation of political representation and government funding for vital services and programs. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Demographic analysis and Post-Enumeration Surveys both show that the census misses racial and ethnic minorities, low-income households (indicated by the proxy of homeowner vs. renter), and children (especially ages 0-4), at disproportionately high rates.² In 2000 and 2010, non-Hispanic Whites were actually *overcounted*, according to the bureau's analysis. The *gap* between census accuracy for non-Hispanic Whites and for all other race groups, between low- and high-income households, is called the *differential undercount*. It is this disparity that deprives underserved communities of political power, government resources and, often, private sector investment.

For example, based on the PES results, the 2010 Census missed 2.06 percent of the Non-Hispanic Black population. It also overcounted the Non-Hispanic White population by 0.83 percent. Therefore, the *differential undercount* was about three percent. This *gross error* compounds the problem of inequality in the census, because wealthier, predominantly White communities receive more than their fair share of influence and resources, while poorer, non-White areas receive less than they should.

Improved methods and operations have improved census accuracy since the 1940 count. With the exception of the 1990 Census, which was the first to be measurably less accurate than the one before it, net undercount rates have generally declined. But differential undercounts, while also generally smaller, have persisted each decade, and duplication remains a serious challenge.

For 2020, the overarching goal for the Census Bureau and stakeholders alike is to eliminate the differential undercount. Funders can continue to play a meaningful role in achieving this outcome through robust, targeted grantmaking that allows "trusted voices" in vulnerable, underserved communities to promote the value of census participation and of civic engagement more broadly.

¹ In 2010, the program to measure census accuracy was called Census Coverage Measurement, or CCM; in 2000, it was the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (A.C.E.) program.

² Newer analyses reveal lower self-response rates for limited English proficient and single parent households, making it more likely that the census will miss these residents altogether.