

# Five Steps for Reducing the High Net Undercount of Young Children in the 2020 Census

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By

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## Introduction

Data from the U.S Census Bureau show the net undercount for the population age 0 to 4 was 4.6 percent in 2010 U.S. Census (O'Hare 2015). This amounts to about one million young children. The net undercount of young children is much higher than any other age group. Since 1980, the net undercount for young children has grown from 1.4 percent to 4.6 percent, while census coverage for adults has gone from an undercount of 1.4 percent to an overcount of 0.7 percent in 2010. Clearly this is a problem that we need to address in the 2020 Census.

As Census Bureau Director John Thompson said at the Census National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic and Other Populations meeting on May 26, 2016 (*author's paraphrasing*), "The undercount of young children has been evident in the Census for several decades. If we keep doing the same thing in 2020 we should expect the same results. We need to try new methods for making sure young children are fully captured in the Census."

Below I offer, five steps for addressing the high net undercount of young children in the 2020 U.S. Decennial Census. I present a few of the key points and some examples to provide a sense of what could be done in each step. While there is some overlap among the steps, the recommendations outlined

here are meant to help organize activities into more distinct areas of focus.

Moreover, the work outlined here is heavily sequenced in terms of what needs to be done when.

### **1) Conduct more research**

In discussing the high net undercount of young children, the report from the Census Bureau's Task Force on the Net Undercount of Young Children (U.S. Census Bureau 2014, page I) concluded,

“Staff working on 2020 Planning need to ensure that development work this decade includes a more conscious effort to address this problem. Testing in the next few years should reflect a greater understanding of how to reduce this undercount.”

First, more research is needed to help identify which young children are missed and why they are missed. Second, there needs to be research into possible changes to census operations or outreach to see what changes would improve the count of young children.

The Census Bureau has responded to the need for more research on the high net undercount of children by assembling an interdivisional Children Undercount Research team that is currently conducting research on many of the questions identified in the 2014 Census Bureau report. Here is a partial list of the topics this team is currently researching (Konicki 2016):

- Estimating Census Omissions
- Census Coverage Measurement (CCM)
- Coverage of Young Mothers
- Coverage Follow-up (CFU)

- Complex Household Typology
- Subnational Population Estimates

The results of those research projects will be coming out in the next several months in a series of papers on the Census Bureau website (<http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/planning-management/memo-series.html>). One such report on the undercount of young mothers in the Census has already been released ([https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/planning-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2016\\_08.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/planning-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2016_08.html)).

These reports will help individuals gain a better understanding of the undercount of young children, and they will help leaders at the Census Bureau think about ways in which the census operations could be changed to improve the count of young children in the 2020 Census.

Researchers outside the Census Bureau also have conducted relevant studies. For example, several studies have identified what kinds of states, counties, and neighborhoods are likely to have the highest undercount of young (O'Hare 2014a and 2014b; O'Hare et al 2016a and 2016b; O'Hare 2016).

The stream of research discussed above is a good start, but additional research could help identify where to allocate resources in the operations phase of the 2020 Census. For example, one could examine the characteristics of counties that have higher net undercounts of young children to see what kinds of factors seem to be driving this phenomenon. This type of locational information will be extremely helpful for conducting the 2020 Census. If the

Census Bureau has a good idea which areas are likely to have high net undercounts of young children, additional resources can be allocated to those areas.

It is also worth noting that the research done so far focuses on characteristics of young children missed in the Census, but does not focus much on why they are missed. Conducting some focus groups with parents or grandparents of young children might help us understand why young children are missed at such a high rate.

As the research on which young children are missed and why they are missed is winding down, research on possible changes to census methods and operations should be increasing. Some of the research mentioned above could trigger potential changes in census operations, but such changes should be tested before they become part of the 2020 Census operational plan. It is critical that such research be done quickly. If possible, changes in 2020 Census operations should be included in the 2018 End-to-End Test, which essentially serves as a dress rehearsal for the 2020 Census.

2) Implement changes in Census operations for the 2020 Census to get a more accurate count of young children.

Census operations include activities related to data collection such as questionnaire design, internet response options, call back policies, imputation routines, and use of administrative records. I separate census operations from

the communication and partnership portion of the 2020 Census, which I will discuss in the next section.

One of the first steps is making sure people in charge of the 2020 Census are aware of the high net undercount of young children. A report by the Census Bureau Task Force on the Undercount of Young Children (U.S. Census Bureau 2014, page i) concluded,

“The task force found that many of the managers working on the development of methods and the design of experiments and evaluation in 2010 were largely unaware of this undercount problem and especially the degree to which the problem existed in 2000.”

As a result, many opportunities to learn more about the issue were missed. For example, in discussing the qualitative evaluations from the 2010 Census, a Census Bureau staff member (U.S. Census Bureau 2014, page 16) stated,

“...no one had highlighted this issue of undercounted young children as something worth studying so researchers did not optimize previous work to answer these questions.”

We should make sure this situation is not repeated in the context of the 2020 Census.

Over the past year, there have been a series of internal Census Bureau briefings to help raise awareness within the Census Bureau of the high net undercount of young children. This is a big and important change from the buildup to the 2010 Census.

Because census operations will be largely decided by 2018, time is running short to test new procedures that might reduce the net undercount of young children. Since the American Community Survey (ACS) also has the same kind of under-reporting of young children as the Census (O'Hare et al 2013; O'Hare and Jensen 2014), perhaps the ACS could be used to test new approaches to capturing data on young children. It is important that the research findings from step 1 are made available and used to improve the census operations for 2020.

Let me give a couple of examples to illustrate the issues I am talking about. In the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau added a set of “probe” questions to the questionnaire to remind people about household members they may have left off the Census questionnaire. One new instruction stated, “Count all people, including babies, who live and sleep here most of the time.” The 2010 Census questionnaire also asked if there were any additional people staying in the housing unit on April 1 that were not listed (see below).

“Were there any additional people staying here April 1, 2010 that you did not include in Question 1? *Mark all that apply.*”

- Children, such as newborn babies or foster children
- Relatives, such as adult children, cousins, or in-laws
- Nonrelatives, such as roommates or live-in baby sitters
- People staying here temporarily
- No additional people

Note the focus on babies and newborns.

O'Hare (2015, Table 3.1) shows that, compared to the net undercount in 2000, the net undercount of people under one year of age decreased between

2000 and 2010, while all other ages under age 5 increased. Perhaps the instructions added to the 2010 Census questionnaire regarding newborns resulted in more people under age 1 being included in the 2010 Census. It is worth testing an instruction that reminds respondents to include all young children, not just newborns.

Here is another example. There is evidence that some respondents do not think the Census Bureau wants data on young children included on the Census questionnaire (Nichols et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Engaging in research to examine this idea more directly and to determine if some groups are more likely than others to hold this position could help in designing a better questionnaire and help shape an educational campaign.

3) Implement changes in the Communication and Partnership Program of the Census Bureau to better reach households with young children in the 2020 Census.

Similar to the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau is planning to award a contract for managing the 2020 Census Communications and Partnership program (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a). The Census Bureau has stated that the winner of the award (about \$415 million) will be announced in August 2016.

The communication and partnership program associated with the 2010 Census showed little recognition or understanding of the high net undercount of

young children (NORC 2012). The Census Bureau has an opportunity to change that in the 2020 Census.

The Census Bureau staff should insist that the contractor pay special attention to reaching households with young children. Lack of attention to the undercount of young children was a major weakness in the 2010 Census outreach program. For example, the 2010 Census in Schools program (now called Statistics in Schools) only focused on school-age children. It should be expanded to encompass preschools, as well. There was a minor attempt to reach households with young children in the 2010 Census but that effort was not mounted until March 9, 2010, less than one month before the April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010 Census Day (Groves 2010). Such an effort needs to begin sooner.

A recent statement by the Census Bureau (Census Bureau 2016b) regarding the undercount of young children in the Census concludes,

“The Census Bureau is continuing to seek new ways to address the undercount of young children and is always engaging with stakeholders and partner organizations to tailor our communications strategies for the 2020 Census to ensure all children are counted accurately. “

One step in such a process was a meeting of the Census Bureau Director and key Census Bureau staff with a group of child advocates, which took place on April 28, 2016. Such interaction needs to be continued and expanded. For example, once the communications and partnership contract is awarded, the Census Bureau should arrange a meeting with children’s advocacy groups and the contractor. As the work of the communications and partnership contractor

unfolds over the next few years, it is important that groups representing the interests of young children have a voice.

Until very recently, there was no member on the Census Bureau's Advisory committees to represent the interests of young children. I am happy to say that in recognition of the high net undercount of young children, the Census Bureau has appointed two such people to the National Advisory Committee (NAC), Dr. Jerlean Daniel and Dr. Charles Bruner. I am also happy to say that several other members of the NAC have taken a keen interest in this issue as reflected in their past two meetings.

4) Develop a strong and coordinated effort by child advocates and organizations serving households with young children to increase awareness of the importance of participating in the Census.

The Census Bureau can't do it all. In the end, the Census Bureau (and people working for the Census Bureau) are often seen as just another government agency by many respondents. For many people, particularly those living in hard-to-count communities, such agents are not necessarily trusted. Leaders and organizations that are part of hard-to-count communities can play a critically important role. A successful effort to reduce or eliminate the high net undercount of young children will require the participation of key individuals and organizations outside the Census Bureau. One such grass roots campaign related to the 2010 Census is documented by Olson et al (2014).

The 2010 Census included more than 250,000 groups as partners. Many of these groups are the “trusted voices” that respondents need to hear to convince them that responding to the Census is important and safe. This is particularly true in “hard-to-count” communities. Groups such as the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, which were both very active in the 2010 Census, can play a critical role in the 2020 Census.

The Census Bureau and partner organizations must reach out to households with young children to increase awareness of the importance of participating in the Census, motivate such households to participate in the Census, and make sure young children are included on their census questionnaire when it is returned.

Another method for getting involved is through the Census Complete Count Committees (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Most jurisdictions form such a Census Complete Count Committee in the year or two prior to the Census to help coordinate the work of the Census Bureau and local agencies. Having leaders from low-income and hard-to-count communities on the local Complete Count Committees can help make sure the interests of such communities are protected. This is also a place to raise awareness about the high net undercount of young children.

We need to build on the efforts of the 2010 Census. There was a robust effort in 2010 to build a capacity among local groups to help mobilize hard-to-count communities to respond to the Census (Goldstein 2011). Much of this work

was funded by the philanthropic community (Crews 2011). In preparation for the 2020 Census, the foundation-funded Census Project recently released a toolkit for coalition building and mobilizing communities regarding the Census (Census Project 2016).

There may also be some opportunities for research activities by those outside the Census Bureau, as well. There are topics the Census Bureau is unlikely to touch. For example, developing a set of estimates for how much money a jurisdiction loses for each uncounted young child would help make this issue more salient for state and local leaders.

#### 5) Make sure there is a solid plan for evaluating the undercount of young children

While the assessment of the 2020 Census is down the road, it helps to start thinking about it now. Moreover, it is unlikely that the net undercount of young children will be completely eliminated in 2020, so it is important to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about this problem.

One of the most important things the Census Bureau can do is re-institute a report on the results of Demographic Analysis. The 2010 Census was the first one in several decades that did not produce an official report on the results of Demographic Analysis. This meant the only official data on the census coverage of young children was from Census Coverage Measurement, which greatly underestimated the net undercount of young children (O'Hare et al 2016b).

To expand our understanding of the undercount of young children in the Census we should consider conducting a reverse record check similar to what is done in the Canadian Census. A reverse record check would probably involve obtaining birth certificates and checking to see which young children were included in the Census. Perhaps this could be done on a test basis in a few states or cities.

Also, the Census Bureau should investigate the idea of adjusting data in the Dual Systems Estimate methodology to control for correlation bias related to young children similar to the adjustments for correlation bias made for young adult black males in the 2010 Census Coverage Measurement program. The Dual Systems Estimate methodology compares the results of a post-enumeration survey to the Census Count to gauge the characteristics of those missed in the Census and the characteristics of those double counted. Correlation bias refers to the idea that the kinds of people missed in the Census are also likely to be missed in the post-enumeration survey that is part of the Dual Systems Estimate methodology.

### Summary

A passage from a 1940 U.S. Census report (U.S. Census Bureau 1944, page 32), reads,

“Underenumeration of children under 5-year-old, particularly of infants under one-year-old, has been uniformly observed in the United States Census and in the Censuses of England and Wales and of various countries of continental Europe.”

With respect to the situation in the United States, this observation from more than 70 years ago is still largely true today. A recent report from an ad hoc U.S. Census Bureau Task Force on the Undercount of Young Children (U.S. Census Bureau 2014, page 1) concluded, “The undercount of children under age five in the Decennial Census, and in surveys like the American Community Survey (ACS), is real and growing.”

Without concerted efforts by multiple parties, it is doubtful that we will be able to improve the census coverage of young children, and the results of the 2020 Census will not be much different than what was seen in the 2010 Census.

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