

Using Community Engagement Approaches to Bolster 2020 Census Participation

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Introduction

Article 1, section 2 of the U.S. Constitution mandates a decennial census. Data are used for political apportionment of elected representatives. The first American census was conducted in 1790, and the next will be conducted in 2020. The administration and form of the census have changed over time, both reflecting changes in society and influencing those changes. The 2020 Census marks the first time that most people will be asked to participate online (although opportunities for paper form, telephone, and in-person enumeration will also be provided).

Over time, census data have become important for much more than political apportionment and districting (Anderson, 2015). Additional uses include policy and program planning, providing the base for sociodemographic and health indicators, and allocation of funding. The census provides a roadmap for distributing funds across the states, including 10 large programs that serve children and families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018a). These programs provide nutrition, public health insurance, foster care services, and education to children and their families through school lunches, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), Head Start, Title 1 education grants, special education, and child care vouchers. Nationwide, \$160 billion is allocated annually through these programs, \$2 billion of which is distributed in Mississippi (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018b).

For federal allocation to match actual need, states must have an accurate census count of children. However, children under the age of five are the group most likely to be undercounted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Researchers find this undercount results from the fact that young children are more likely to live in difficult-to-count households (Griffin and Konicki, 2017).

Households with young children are more likely to have young parents, rent, move frequently, and reside in multi-tenant buildings such as apartment complexes (Griffin and Konicki, 2017; Walejko et al., 2019). Each of these conditions decreases the probability that the family, and all members within it, will be counted. Additionally, households with young children are more likely to have one parent present, experience poverty, be Hispanic, or be raised by a grandparent, any of which can pose barriers to census participation (Griffin and Konicki, 2017; Jensen et al., 2018). Ironically, the children and families most likely to go uncounted are often the very ones relying on the services for which funding is allocated using census data. Estimates suggest that \$2,780 in federal funding can be lost per uncounted child per year (Mississippi KIDS COUNT, 2020).

It is estimated that Mississippi failed to count 4.6% of its young children in 2010 (O'Hare, 2014), and 27% of the state has been designated as "hard to count" based on 2010 Census returns and other predictors, according to the CUNY Mapping Service (<https://www.censushardtountmaps2020.us/>). The U.S. Census Bureau's Response Outreach Area Mapper (ROAM) (<https://www.census.gov/roam>) shows areas of concern based on demographic and socioeconomic indicators from the American Community Survey, including age, race and ethnicity, education, and income, among many others. Mississippi has several areas with expectations of low self-response to the 2020 Census. Among the important indicators, it is notable that Mississippi has the highest child poverty rate of any state in the nation at 28%; this number rises to 43% for black or African American children (KIDS COUNT Data Center, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/>).

Given the increased likelihood of undercounting young children in the 2020 Census and the need for federal program support in the state, Mississippi's two leading universities formed a partnership to address the issue. Mississippi KIDS COUNT, located at the Social Science

Research Center at Mississippi State University, and the State Data Center of Mississippi, housed in the Center for Population Studies at the University of Mississippi, received funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to form the Mississippi YOU COUNT! Collaborative.

Our collaborative had three primary goals: (i) to use data to identify areas in Mississippi where children could be hardest to count, (ii) to convene community engagement meetings in these locations, and (iii) to produce and disseminate census materials tailored to local audiences via the collaborative. Here we discuss the methods used for this project and the findings, followed by the insights we believe other organizations and states could use. We maintain that the YOU COUNT! process could be used to help facilitate community engagement, empowering Census Bureau partnership specialists, Extension leaders, and others for 2020 Census outreach, education, and promotion.

Strategies to Identify Areas Where Children Are Hard to Count

For this project, we combined a focus on public data utilization with community-based engagement (Green, 2012, 2018). With the goal of identifying areas at greatest risk for children being undercounted in the 2020 Census, our YOU COUNT! team used public data to analyze and later combine three indicators. The first two indicators had been precalculated by the U.S. Census Bureau. First, we looked at the Low Response Score (LRS) based on the 2016 five-year estimates in the Bureau’s ROAM program (the Census Bureau updates the LRS as new data are available before the decennial

census). This provided predictions of census self-nonresponse at the census-tract level using a variety of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (for the list of variables, see Erdman and Bates, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019); the final index ranged from 0 to 100. For the second indicator, we subtracted the 2010 Census Mail Response Rate from 100 to determine the percentage of households that did not self-respond via mail in the 2010 Census to reflect a Low Mail Response Rate (LMRR). The third indicator for the YOU COUNT! Initiative was calculated by aggregating nine variables identified through the literature as being associated with the undercounting of children, which we called the High Risk Index (HRI). We found the correlations among the three indicators to be strong (ranging from Pearson’s correlation coefficients of 0.390 to 0.881) but not perfect. Therefore, we maintained that a new composite score of these nine variables would provide a tool to help delineate areas of concern.

We combined data from the three sources (LRS, MRR, and HRI) to create an overall index (Table 1). Five of the variables that applied to families with children and living in poverty overlapped between the LRS and HRI, which effectively emphasized and weighted them in the final composite Hard to Count Index (H2C). We calculated the H2C by first recoding each of the indicators into quintile groups (each coded such that being in a higher group indicated greater likelihood of low response to the 2020 Census) and then adding the quintiles together across census tracts. Thus, a census tract with an overall score of 3 would be in the group least likely to have low responses across these data sources and a census tract with a score of 15 would be in the group

Table 1. Indicators Used for the Hard to Count (H2C) Index

Items	Sources
Low Response Score (LRS)	U.S. Census Bureau, Planning Database using American Community Survey (ACS) 2016 five-year estimates. A regression model derived estimate of predicted survey self-response rate using 25 independent variables (list of variables available from Erdman and Bates 2017; U.S. Census Bureau 2019)
2010 Census Low Mail Response Rate (LMRR)	U.S. Census Bureau, Mail Response Rate (reverse coded the value by subtracting from 100)
High Risk Index (HRI)	State Data Center of Mississippi, using data from ACS 2016 five-year estimates Percentage of population w/age <5*, Percentage of population w/ age 18-24*, percentage of households that rent, percentage of multi-unit structures, percentage of individuals with different address one year ago*, percentage of individuals living in complex household, percentage of families below poverty level*, percentage of grandparents responsible for child, percentage of single-person households*
Hard to Count (H2C) Index	LRS, LMRR, HRI each recoded into quintiles, then quintile scores summated to form H2C (15 = census tracts likely to be the most difficult to count)

Note: A single asterisk (*) denotes indicators also represented in the LRS.

most likely to have low responses. Figure 1 shows the distribution of H2C index scores across the state.

2020 Census Dialogue Sessions

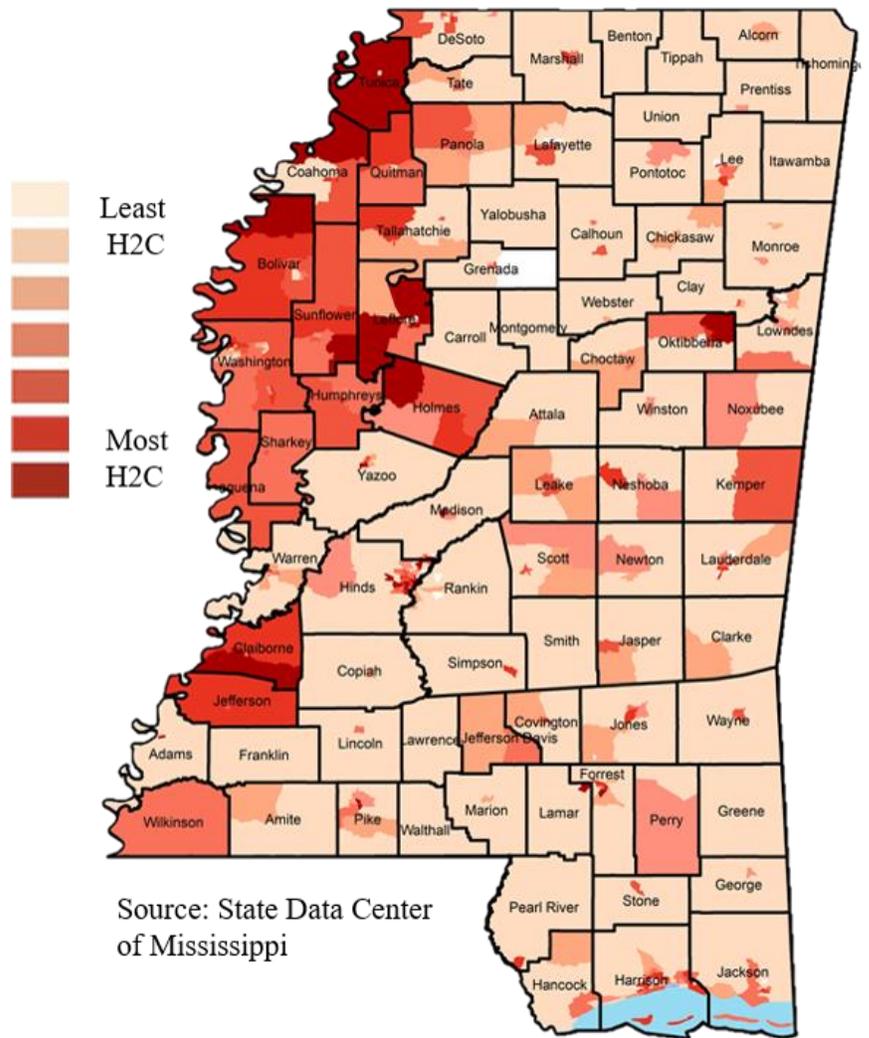
Directing our attention to areas in the state we deemed likely to have undercounts of children in the 2020 Census, the YOU COUNT! team focused attention on three towns and their respective counties (two rural—north Delta and southwest—and one urban) located in areas with multiple census tracts with particularly high H2C index scores. The team compiled a lengthy file of phone numbers and emails of community stakeholders from diverse organizations. We invited potential participants via the above methods, often multiple times. This list of diverse organizations and personal contacts included, but was not limited to, Extension offices, Head Start centers, libraries, community health centers, and a wide range of nonprofit organizations providing education, outreach, and direct services. In addition to our university-based team, Census Bureau partnership specialists also attended these meetings.

The team developed a participatory approach for engaging community stakeholders in active dialogue and workshop sessions modeled on the Problem Solving for Better Health™ (Smith, Fitzpatrick, and Hoyt-Hudson, 2011) pedagogy. The idea was to move from identifying challenges to planning for action. In addition to the four YOU COUNT! facilitators and three Census Bureau representatives, 73 individuals participated across the three meetings.

Following a presentation on the 2020 Census and concerns over the potential undercount of children, we guided participants through a series of four interactive conversations, with participants rotating between facilitators at each stage. Participants were randomly placed in groups based on a color code attached to their name tags. The topics addressed in 20-minute increments included

- Participation: What factors are likely to influence participation of families with young children in the 2020 Census in the communities you serve?
- messaging:
 - (a) What messages would resonate with families with young children to help them understand and participate in the

Figure 1. Hard to Count (H2C) Index in Mississippi Census Tracts



2020 Census in the communities you serve?

- (b) Review and discuss the Mississippi YOU COUNT! factsheets, asking participants to provide feedback.
- Engagement: How should stakeholders engage families with young children for participation in the 2020 Census in the communities they serve?

Each of the discussions involved a hands-on activity to stimulate dialogue and help document participants' ideas (drawings, writing on index cards, making notes on factsheets, etc.). After the discussions ended, census partnership specialists made a final presentation concerning Complete Count Committees.

What Community Members Had to Say about the Census

Using the previously described participatory community engagement methods, we present our findings obtained

from the dialogue sessions and workshops below. Notes from the activities were read and analytically coded to identify themes and patterns within and across locations (Table 2).

parties, rallies, and churches. Participants mentioned that having local pastors include information about the census in their sermons would enhance understanding and motivation to participate.

Table 2. 2020 Census Dialogue Session Topics and Findings

Discussion Topics	Themes Identified in Coding
Challenges to census participation	Overall feelings of distrust, especially distrust of government and outsiders Low levels of literacy and education Limited knowledge about the census and use of census data
Opportunities to enhance census participation	Partner with local people and organizations Disseminate materials through local places and at community events Spread information through trusted leaders and organizations, especially churches and schools Provide assistance to people and places with limited computer and Internet access

As previously described, the three locations were strategically chosen based on their history and estimated future likelihood of undercounting children in the upcoming 2020 Census. Two locations were in rural areas and one was in a city, and all three had high levels of poverty. Additionally, the populations in all three locations were majority black or African American. What emerged through the four exercises were many similar responses, beliefs, and feelings about the census and undercounting children. We aggregated the responses from all three places and major themes emerged in reference to barriers of census participation as well as the ways to enhance census engagement.

The first topic encompassed the challenges participants saw to census participation in their community. Across the three places, the major barrier identified by participants was an overall feeling of distrust, particularly distrust of the government and fear over how the data would be used. Distrust of outsiders coming into their communities also factored into the overall sense of fear toward the census. Another challenge participants identified in all three places was literacy and education issues. Reading, writing, and technological competency were all labeled as challenges to participating in the census. Coinciding with literacy competency, limited knowledge about the importance of the census and why and how enumeration affects their particular communities was pinpointed as major challenges to participation.

The second topic related to opportunities workshop participants saw to enhance census participation and demystify some misconceptions about the census. Across the three locations, the most common opportunities identified were partnering with local people and organizations to overcome the distrust of outsiders and government. Participants advocated for using new census promotion materials to display in local places and disseminate using social media, radio, and television. Part of local events included spreading these promotional materials at community events like fairs,

Participants said that census education needs to start with children, who can then spread this information in their homes. Head Start, teachers, and librarians were labeled as major pillars in the community who could help overcome misconceptions about the census through education about what it is, why it is important, and how it affects local communities. Part of this education was spreading knowledge about places with Internet access and how to navigate using a computer in order to complete the census online.

Three YOU COUNT! 2020 Census information sheets were drafted and disseminated at the dialogue sessions, and participants reviewed and critiqued them. Writing marginal notes and discussing at their tables, feedback included the need for more straightforward wording, graphics that are informative but not overwhelming, and more strategic placement of information.

The primary difference we observed between the dialogue sessions in different locations was the initial way in which participants discussed responsibility for enhancing census participation. While there was considerable attention given to how the U.S. Census Bureau could improve its approach across all sessions, participants in one location also seemed to assume a higher level of local responsibility for what could be done. Participants at the other locations appeared to feel that census participation was largely out of their hands; although they did identify local actions that could be taken, they tended to be conveyed as examples of what the Bureau should be doing to help them rather than feeling a sense of ownership for ensuring their communities are counted. That said, it is notable that participants at all three locations took on more sense of agency as each of the workshop sessions progressed through the day.

Following the analysis of findings and subsequent revision of materials, the YOU COUNT! team held a briefing with nine congressional and state office staff leaders. We also adapted the dialogue session process

for use in shorter meetings and piloted them with faculty at a conference and with university students. Additionally, we revised the three flyers, made additional documents, and shared thousands of copies through a range of venues, including mail-outs to workshop participants; tabling events in other communities, webinars, and conferences; and online. (Revised versions of the factsheets are available from Mississippi KIDS COUNT, <https://kidscount.ssrc.msstate.edu/data-research/mississippi-kids-count/mississippi-kids-count-reports/>.) Ultimately, we provided these materials to the Mississippi 2020 Census Complete Count Committee.

Discussion

The decennial census is a data source of critical importance to decision making. With concern for children being undercounted, it is important that efforts be undertaken to address challenges in those places with historically lower participation and contemporary predictions of undercounts. Through the Mississippi YOU COUNT! initiative, we developed and piloted an approach to identify these areas using publicly available statistical tools and facilitation strategies to engage community members in dialogue and planning. Overall, the people who came to the workshops identified challenges to census participation and then suggested creative potential solutions. Despite their differences, the commonalities that emerged among the three locations demonstrated that process matters: Local people and organizations can be engaged to improve the counting young children. The benefits of using a participatory approach may include obtaining local knowledge regarding potential barriers and facilitators of a complete census count, increasing the likelihood of local buy-in to grassroots census “get out the count” efforts and input

on adaptations for national-level census messaging to enable targeted modifications for local and statewide use.

The U.S. Census Bureau provides several data sources and tools that can be used to better understand the factors associated with census (and other survey) participation, and many non-governmental organizations have put major effort into further research, outreach, and education. However, these resources must be actively employed to meet their potential, which requires a roadmap for engagement. We used public data sources to inform our community engagement initiatives. Such an approach can be improved and adapted for other contexts. For instance, not addressed here, further attention could be directed toward the intersections of hard-to-count areas and populations with higher proportions of immigrants and limited English proficiency.

We conclude that facilitating active engagement at the local level will help to improve the accuracy of data to inform decision making. Interestingly, an average of 60% of workshop participants reported they would be likely to join a Complete Count Committee (CCC), and all the communities that participated in the YOU COUNT! initiative had active CCCs at the time of this writing. Of course, actual self-response rates to the 2020 Census will serve as the ultimate outcome for analysts to evaluate; those findings could be used to inform future analysis and interventions. In all, we maintain that Census Bureau partnership specialists, Extension leaders, and others could use these types of strategies as potential pathways of engaging other population subgroups that may be undercounted, such as racial minorities, the elderly, and rural residents in general.

For More Information

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