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A Critical Moment:

U.S. Public libraries, public trust, and the 2020 Census

Ana Ndumu, Amy Carol Dickinson, and Paul T. Jaeger

Abstract

The current U.S. political climate continues to alter society's engagement with public institutions. The upcoming 2020 census will especially require libraries to reevaluate their services and outreach. This important political event poses a host of implications for information privacy and policy, e-inclusion and e-governance, resource distribution, representation, and social justice. Marginalized communities are acutely at risk of being left out of the democratic process. This article addresses the overarching question, "What is the role of libraries in promoting civic engagement in the 2020 U.S. census?"

Introduction

Libraries are essential information access points. Both community members and government agencies rely on libraries to be trusted messengers and gateways to government information, services, and programs – collectively now known as e-government – the most recent being the 2020 census. For the first time, Census responses will be collected via print, phone, or online – thus, presenting a variety of accessibility, security, and outreach challenges for libraries. In many other ways, the 2020 census is unlike any other prior to it. While the census has in recent decades been viewed as an apolitical national event, this iteration has been fraught with controversy. Some argue that it will be the most difficult in our country's history (O'Hare & Lowenthal, 2015).

This article addresses the structural and ideological challenges involving the role of libraries in the 2020 census. Librarians have a public charge to assist with the census, a complex undertaking and the largest peacetime mobilization effort. Throughout the past several years,

the American Library Association's 2020 Census Outreach and Education Task Force (n.d) has been hard at work to ensure that libraries help to achieve a complete national count (Clark, 2018, April 4).

There is more than enumeration at risk. Given the current political landscape in which data privacy is jeopardized and public trust is fragile, the stakes are all the more exacerbated. In addition to communicating the importance of participation, libraries are now tasked with advocating for fair census practices, dispelling misinformation regarding its use, and providing secure, reliable digital access for respondents. The 2020 U.S. census necessarily raises civil rights concerns, which will be discussed in the remainder of this paper. Achieving a fair and complete count is thus a matter of social justice.

Civic engagement and disenfranchised communities

Libraries have historically influenced civic engagement; not only providing access to government information, services, and programs, but also promoting participation in local elections, acclimating new residents, and much else. Less than a decade ago, the role of libraries in helping people understand their options and sign up for insurance coverage under the Affordable Care Act was a prime example of libraries helping community members interact with governments (for overviews, see Bossaller, 2016; Bertot et al., 2013; and Tanner et al., 2016).

This commitment to community engagement also includes census participation. Increasingly, libraries are looked to as facilitators and community advocates. Who is counted has extraordinary bearing on presenting an accurate portrait of the United States (U.S.) as a society and addressing democratic representation, resources, and interventions to overcome persistent inequities. Census

data underscores contemporary research and analysis on the populace, especially identifications and descriptions of systemic disparities. Hindrances to census participation or failures to ensure equitable participation constitute disenfranchisement.

As the census informs representation, it has been controversial since its creation and enshrinement in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution. The census is important not only in determining representation, but in creating a picture of the people who actually comprise the nation, setting policy objectives, and determining funding distribution. The results of the census heavily influence policy and funding decisions over the subsequent decade. Libraries are entrusted to uphold the interests of those on the margins of society or, for the purposes of the census, frequently undercounted communities.

In the 1990s, the United States Census Bureau (hereafter referred simply as the Census Bureau) developed a Hard to Count (HTC) score and identified data-driven participation deterrents. Those at risk of exclusion, or HTC populations, can be 1) hard to locate, 2) hard to contact, 3) hard to persuade, or 4) hard to interview (Erdman, & Bates, 2017). According to census experts, these groups may not respond because they are not sure what the census does, how the data affects them, or why their participation matters. They might also be concerned about data privacy, such as having their information used by other federal agencies. Household decision-makers may not be literate or fluent English language speakers. They might also be transient or lack the resources to participate. For the 2020 census, a new “hard to survey” metric has been developed: the Low Response Score (LRS), or the predicted level of census non-response at the tract level. Values range from 0-100. So, for example, if a census tract’s LRS=25, the Census Bureau estimates that 25% of households in that area will not self-respond to the census. Regions with LRS scores higher than 30 are categorized as critically hard to count. These communities typically experience inequity. Though in recent decades the census has been approached as a

nonpartisan head count, it has never solely involved enumeration. The Three-Fifths Clause, or the historical tabulation of enslaved African Americans as three-fifths human, is perhaps the most poignant example of how census data can be used for political gain. Vulnerable communities have long been suspicious of the manipulation of large-scale government data to suit the interests of those in the governing class – for instance, through gerrymandering. The “usual residence rule,” which “dictates the counting of incarcerated persons,” (Wagner, 2012, p. 9) constitutes another contentious area. The nation’s prison population, comprised of 59% Black and/or Latinx inmates, is overwhelmingly arrested in inner-city or metropolitan regions and then sent to prisons in rural communities. For example, seventeen of Florida’s state and federal prisons are located in the rural Panhandle region, despite the fact that most inmates descend from the state’s urban Miami-Dade, Broward and West Palm Beach counties. Incarcerated populations are tabulated in the counties in which they are imprisoned, although they leave behind communities and families that would benefit from census-adjacent resources.

Perhaps the most significant census battle entails the highly-contested citizenship question, which would have required respondents to indicate whether they were citizens or non-citizens of the U.S. For years leading up to the census, the citizenship question was debated and litigated. The statistically untested and pretextually unjustified question (Levitt, 2019) was seen by some as a form of intimidation and misinformation that directly benefits dominant groups. On June 27, 2019, the Supreme Court found in *United States Department of Commerce v. New York, No. 18-966* (2019) that the Trump administration’s reasoning for including a citizenship question on the 2020 census was inadequate. Nonetheless, the citizenship debate resulted in a chilling effect in that the very proposal created a threat to immigrant communities and hard-to-count populations writ large. Most population and census experts agreed that a citizenship question would result in lower census

participation from noncitizens and communities of color. The discourse surrounding the inclusion of a citizenship question furthered fear and mistrust among not only foreign-born and diverse groups, but those already apathetic toward government-sponsored data collection or who were inclined to boycott the census altogether. An undercount of these groups could culminate in districts that are disproportionately represented. Evidence presented in a lower court case regarding the citizenship question substantiates that proponents of the citizenship question encouraged the exclusion of Hispanic non-citizens and people under voting age from counts used to develop redistricting maps (Robin Kravitz, et al., v. United States Department of Commerce. Case 8:18-cv-01041-GJH Document 175, 2019). Active attempts to exclude specific communities from political representation and visibility, to say nothing of potential attendant effects on funding for programs that might serve such communities, are unconstitutional.

Against this backdrop of social exclusion, libraries are expected to partner in the Census Bureau's mission of counting "everyone, once, and in the right place" (Jarmin, 2018, November 5). The very communities that are at risk of non-participation are cognizant that power resides not just in numbers but in visibility, in affirmations of existence. With the role of mass media and, some would argue, religious organizations being diminished in the public consciousness, census-related communication geared toward marginalized groups is left to a smaller pool of public institutions. To some, libraries are the most respected census partners. As information professionals, librarians are acutely aware of the dehumanizing aspects of big data and biased information. In light of the rise in xenophobic, nativist, and racist rhetoric, relaying the message that each individual in the U.S. not only needs to be counted but deserves to be counted resultantly becomes a Sisyphean task. Libraries, then, must remind the nation of what it means to say "United States" – of who exactly this means.

Indeed, 2020 was anticipated to be a particularly patriotic year in that it is an Olympic, census, and election year. Some anticipate positive residual effects of these events. In theory, holding a census and election nearly in tandem

is expedient in the sense of dual messaging and motivation. In the face of a divisive, acrimonious political landscape, however, it is more likely that there will be an adverse effect. Those who experience social exclusion may synchronically protest or disdain the election and census as well as the Olympics. Regardless, the census, like the election, will decide the country's direction. Thus, libraries must actively work to legitimize civic engagement to skeptics and articulate precisely how it advances U.S. society. Census participation can in fact disrupt bigotry and intolerance, and this is a potentially fruitful theme to convey, however implausible it will appear to some.

Representation and resource distribution

Accurate census tabulations are necessary for resource distribution and representation throughout the next decade. At stake is the apportionment of seats in state legislatures and federal House of Representatives, the definition of congressional district boundaries, and the distribution of billions of dollars of funds to support critical social services and infrastructure. In this regard, libraries are objects and not simply agents of census participation. Public, school, and academic libraries at public institutions are beneficiaries of census-related resource allocation. Approximately \$883 billion from the 55 largest census-guided spending programs- and an estimated \$900 billion of funding, when all programs are totaled – is guided by census data, according to the GW Institute for Public Policy *Counting for Dollars* project (Reamer, 2019).

School or youth librarians should be involved. Children ages 0-4 were undercounted by almost one million in the last census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Inaccurate counts could have material consequences for children eligible for HeadStart, underaged patients using Medicaid, students receiving special education services or being supported through school lunch programs, and those whose parents receive Section 8 housing vouchers or reside in households receiving low-income home energy assistance (Reamer, 2019). Children who are underprivileged stand to benefit the most from community revitalization made possible through

Homeland Security development and infrastructure grants, which generate employment and community revitalization. In 2016, more than \$40 billion of funding was appropriated via the Department of Transportation with data guided by the census (Reamer, 2019, p. 2). Academic librarians, too, must assist. College students who reside on campus are often dually accounted or not counted at all. In the broader educational purview, the pipeline of students into state universities is impacted by the apportionment of educational financing and leadership. census data informs the definition of state legislative and school board districts and is used in formula calculations for IDEA and Title 1 funds for public schools. In essence, the census plays a key role in our most critical and wide-reaching educational programs and, due to its use in programmatic projections, impacts higher education. This outcome, in turn, trickles down to academic libraries on some campuses.

With great irony, the 2020 census is likely to be an example of the negative consequences of federal underfunding. There are concerns of a historic undercount considering the discrepancy between the gravity of the 2020 decennial census versus the proportionately meager fiscal support invested toward it. The 2010 census cost \$96 per American household, up from \$70 in 2000 and \$39 in 1990. The 2020 census is now expected to cost between \$125-131 per person, or approximately \$15.6 billion (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). However, Census Bureau operations are chronically underfunded and capped at \$12 billion (Mervis, 2014, p. 608). The result has been that the Bureau has cancelled tests since 2017, slimmed down the vital 2018 end-to-end test, and delayed testing its IT systems. Regional census trials were also dramatically curtailed due to budget cuts, with the cancellation of tests in rural West Virginia, Puerto Rico (the only Spanish-speaking test census), Standing Rock tribal lands, and Colville tribal lands - leaving urban Providence, Rhode Island, as the sole end-to-end census test site (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). On-the-ground fieldworkers who verify addresses have been reduced from 150,000 to 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), and census tabulators have been reduced

from 600,000 to 475,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This will directly impact response collection among hard-to-count communities. The burden therefore falls on librarians to function as de facto census workers.

Misinformation and data privacy

Structural constraints are amplified by the fact that the nation is experiencing an era in which people are distrustful of government and data. The 2020 census has been entangled with alienating rhetoric surrounding immigration rights, birthright citizenship, and belonging. News of election interference by foreign governments and recent administrative actions, such as threats of raids on immigrant families, perpetuate anxiety among specific populations. In 2019, survey and focus group research conducted by the Census Bureau revealed that 10% of respondents believed that census data “is used to locate people living in the country without documentation,” (Vines & Walejko, 2019, p. 7) and 37% were unsure. Another 6% believed census data was used “to help the police and FBI keep track of people who break the law,” (Vines & Walejko, 2019, p. 34) and 31% were unsure. According to the Census Bureau, these types of apprehensions make it arguable that the citizenship question may be a major barrier. These perils erode confidence in public entities and jeopardize a complete census count. Even with attempts to make the census more accessible (i.e., translation to five dozen languages), there remains tremendous misinformation and distrust surrounding it.

Legitimacy is what secures libraries as public-facing information organizations. Perhaps more than the embattled mass media and government agencies, libraries can combat confusion about the uses of the census. Libraries themselves in the course of their services represent the type of ethics, confidentiality, and anonymity that communities need to be reassured of. For this reason, they can disseminate the message of information privacy and integrity. About 78% of adults in the U.S. say that libraries help them “find information that is trustworthy and reliable” (Geiger, 2017, para.3), and when examined through the lens of race and ethnicity, higher percentages of Black and Hispanic

adults (83% and 87%, respectively) report such trust. In reality, it is extraordinarily difficult to deanonymize individual households for the more than 330 million people in the United States. Even then, those who do disclose personal information are subject to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine (Jarmin, 2018, May 7). That census data is utilized in aggregate, at the block level at a minimum, is precisely the type of message that libraries will be depended upon to relay. Libraries will need to broadcast the unlikelihood and legal ramifications of census data misuse. In doing so, they will contribute toward a fair and accurate count.

E-inequality and e-governance

Perhaps the most challenging component of the 2020 census entails the introduction of virtual participation which might alienate entire groups. The Census Bureau now prefers online responses, yet research evinces that between 15-25% of U.S. households lack hi-speed or broadband Internet access (see, for example, Anderson & Perrin, 2017). Free and reliable access is important for those that experience a digital divide (Bertot et al., 2013). The new technological component of the census means that libraries will transition from peripheral to frontline support. Digital inequities disproportionately affect those in rural areas, households with lower incomes, individuals with disabilities, and older adults. As the leading source of no-cost public access to the Internet, devices, and technology training, libraries mitigate e-inequality (Pew Research Center, 2019).

The modernization of the census count is not without its hindrances. As mentioned, budget cuts resulted in census experts missing the opportunity to test its first digital push in areas that are acutely impacted by digital inequities on account of fragile digital infrastructure. Interestingly, during the limited test address canvassing in rural West Virginia, census workers encountered numerous issues with Internet connectivity, including Internet and cell service dead spots (Powner & Goldenkoff, 2017). Adding to concerns regarding digital reception and penetration is the fact that technology will now be a factor in other aspects of the 2020 census

undertaking. census tabulators will use mobile phones to conduct work and record data, and address verification will now be left to aerial imagery and geographic information systems (GIS) (Jarmin, 2019).

Moreover, the census is the latest entity in a long line of e-government services for which public libraries function as social guarantors (Jaeger & Bertot, 2011). Increasing demands on libraries as pathways to digital equity, social services, and civic participation are unfortunately not accompanied by increased funding, staffing, training, or communication. The 2014 roll-out of the Affordable Care Act and correlative public partnerships point to some implications for libraries as it concerns the 2020 Census:

- Technology to support the census needs to function properly;
- Librarians should participate in advance training on how to complete the new online census (including how to access versions in various languages, the telephone option, and the paper option);
- Information in libraries should be highly visible to community members;
- Modes of communication between the census and libraries should be established prior to roll-out;
- Libraries should be included in all updates and info should be shared transparently and proactively by the Census Bureau; and
- Librarians should be trained on responses in politically charged contexts (Real et al., 2015).

New e-government programs such as online census participation present unique disparities and exposures (Jaeger et al., 2012). Libraries will need to minimize risks of breaches in their web security, of susceptibility to fraud and identity theft, and of the hacking or weaponization of access points by extremist groups. Library staff must work strategically to ensure safeguards

for families, neighborhoods, and communities who will rely on them to take part in the 2020 census.

Conclusion

The 2020 census is not simply about counting every person on April 1st. It concretely and ideologically represents whether everyone is acknowledged within U.S. society. The census has had difficulty meeting this ideal from the beginning. The first census was conducted in 1790 and asked only the name of the head of the family, the number of free white males over age 16, the number of free white males under age 16, the number of free white females, the number of other free people, and the number of slaves (Dupree, 1957, p. 813). So, it had both racism and misogyny baked into only six questions. The first census acknowledged only 3.9 million “Americans,” all of whom lived along the Eastern seaboard. Even then, it excluded countless others. In all of the early iterations of the census, the three-fifths compromise led to slave states having more nominal representation in Congress and in the Electoral College than they otherwise would have (Amar, 2005). Not surprisingly, for 32 of the first 36 years of the Republic, the President was a slave-owning Virginian, with abolitionist John Adams being the sole exception.

Until the mid-1800s, population growth was fueled more by birth rates than immigration, but nativist fears of German and Irish immigration gave rise to the first major movement to limit immigration, with several leaders of the Census Bureau publicly holding these views (Anderson, 2015). The National Origins Act of 1924 set restrictions to immigration based on quotas allowing a certain number of immigrants from designated countries, with most of the slots going to immigrants from Northern Europe – these quotas prevented many refugees from fascism in 1930s Europe from being able to escape to America (Wyman, 1968). In 1965, the Congress passed a new law that admitted immigrants from around the world on order of application, with special consideration given to those with professional and technical skills. At the same time, Congress also ordered the Census Bureau to focus efforts on reaching undercounted immigrant populations, particularly those of Spanish-speaking

origins (Anderson, 2015). As with the beginnings of the census, efforts to prevent undercounting were highly politicized. And, as the current controversies regarding

the 2020 census remind us, every census ever conducted – and who it counts – has been the source of political controversy because of what can be done with the results in terms of redistributing representation and shifting policy.

From a human rights and social justice standpoint, libraries are critical community partners. Achieving a fair and accurate census will be accomplished only if conducted alongside traditionally hard-to-count groups. While some institutions have to work to establish relationships or broaden their reach, libraries have the privilege of sustaining deep, sometimes historical, connections. There is perhaps no better time for libraries to convey their roles as bipartisan, factual, and judgment-free zones that recognize each individual’s agency and humanity. In truth, libraries are among the few such remaining public spaces. For all of these reasons, libraries will play an enormous role in the 2020 census, a pressing chapter in our country’s story.

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