

## Conducting a Census on American and Canadian Indian Reservations: Comparing Challenges and Solutions

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### 1. Historical Perspective

#### *United States*

The number of American Indians enumerated in the U.S. censuses in large part has been affected by the historical differences in enumeration and racial classification methodology. American Indians were effectively excluded from the first six censuses (1790 through 1850) due to the constitutional mandate to exclude “Indians not taxed”. Beginning in 1860, only those Indians who were considered assimilated (based on land ownership) were officially counted, and noted as “civilized Indians”. It was not until 1890 that the Census Bureau attempted to conduct a full enumeration of all Indians.

Likewise, determining who should be considered an American Indian has fluctuated throughout the history of the U.S. censuses. In 1950 all persons of mixed blood (Indian and white or Negro) were classified as “all other races”. Additionally, prior to 1960, the census enumerator determined racial classification by observation. Since 1960 the Census Bureau has relied upon self-reporting to classify persons by race. For persons of mixed blood, racial classification was made by race of the father (1960 and 1970) or mother (1980 and 1990). In 2000, for the first time, a person could classify themselves in all racial categories that apply.

The Census Bureau itself produces an estimate of the number of persons missed during the decennial census. In 1990, the Census Bureau estimated that it missed 12.2% of American Indians living on reservation lands. This number was more than twice as large as the next largest undercounted population group (Hispanic at 5% undercount). Additionally, other reports and records conflict with Census data. These include (but are not limited to) the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Labor Force report and tribal enrollment records. In part, the differences are due to differences in terminology and methodology. For instance, the U.S. Census is an actual enumeration taken every 10 years, and numbers reflect persons living in a specific geographic area (in this case, reservation lands). The BIA Labor Force report relies on information submitted by individual tribal governments, and does not require any standard methodology. Tribal enrollment records track all enrolled members of the tribe, and include not only tribal members living on tribal lands, but also tribal members living elsewhere.

#### *Canada*

*(N.B., the sections of this paper which deal with the Canadian Census were written from a “Head Office” perspective, and do not focus on any one region but rather apply to the country as a whole.)*

In Canada, the historical situation has been somewhat different than in the United States. First Nations people living on Indian Reserves have always been included in the target population of the Census, although the degree of success at enumerating these people prior to the mid-twentieth century is difficult to estimate. However the intent, since the first Census of Canada in 1871, has been to include First Nations people, including those living on Indian Reserves, and to collect information on aboriginal ancestry. The ancestry question has collected data for First Nations people, under categories such as “North American Indian”, “Native Indian”, “Status Indian” or “Registered Indian”.

The Canadian government, specifically the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), maintains an Indian Register, which is an annually updated list of members of Canada’s 608 Indian Bands, along with major life events, such as births, deaths, and movement off reserves. The Indian Register counts of Registered Indians on-Reserve are sometimes considerably higher than Census counts, due to the very different nature and purpose of a Census, compared to a Registry. However, because the Register counts are used for allocating Federal payments to First Nations on Reserves, the discrepancies may have contributed to the reluctance of some First Nations authorities to endorse the Census.

In 1986, Census officials approached First Nations leaders in order to make arrangements for enumeration, but they were unsuccessful in 136 Indian Reserves, including many of the more populous Reserves in the country. As a result, Census population counts could not be released for these areas. Following this, officials at Statistics Canada began to develop a different approach to conducting a Census of Population on Indian Reserves. Most significantly, they strengthened their partnerships with

Aboriginal groups, and through consultations, agreed to conduct the first-ever post-censal survey of Aboriginal people, the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). In 1991, the number of reserves on which enumeration could not be completed fell to 78 (although a further 181 communities opted out of participation in the APS). In 1996, a similar number of reserves (77) were incompletely enumerated, but many of these were different than in 1991, and the factors involved were often unique to each Reserve. Heading into the 2001 Census, a commitment was made to a second APS, and efforts at establishing successful partnerships were stepped up.

(It should be noted that, although incomplete enumeration is the major source of under-coverage of reserves, under-coverage also exists on Indian Reserves where enumeration is successfully completed. No reliable estimates have been produced for on-reserve under-coverage, so its exact extent is not known).

## **2. Unique Challenges**

### *United States*

The historical undercount of American Indians on reservations is not entirely attributable to differences in enumeration and racial classification methodologies. Rather, enumerating American Indians on reservation lands presents many unique challenges to obtaining a complete and accurate count.

The remoteness of many tribal lands, coupled with incomplete/poor quality maps and difficult to navigate unpaved roads (especially in wet weather) leads to an issue of undercoverage of housing units. For instance, the Navajo Nation alone is approximately the size of West Virginia, but contains only 8.3% of the population of West Virginia (1990) and has less than 10,000 miles of paved roads, whereas West Virginia contains more than four times that amount. Many American Indians still primarily speak a language other than English, which means that hiring bilingual enumerators is essential (in the U.S. (1990) 6.1% of persons did not speak English well or at all, versus 23.3% of American Indians on reservations; this was even higher at the Navajo Nation, where 42.4% of American Indians did not speak English well or at all). A large percent of American Indians on reservations live in poverty (50.7% versus 13.1% in the U.S. as a whole (1990)) which leads to a host of difficulties, including lack of an available vehicle in good working order which is required to work as a Census enumerator; inability to afford the gas necessary to get to training and to begin an assignment prior to receiving the first paycheck; lack of telephones, which impacts our ability to communicate with potential workers (to offer a job, inform when/where to report to training, to keep in touch with employees on progress of assignment).

There are also cultural issues that present challenges to a complete enumeration. Distrust of the U.S. government is high. American Indians remember well past U.S. governmental policies of assimilation, removal, and termination. Parents, brothers and sisters, have been forced to attend boarding schools, where children were forbidden to speak, act, or look like an "Indian". Even today Indian nations are wary of legislation that threatens their exercise of tribal self-governance.

Census question wording and definitions do not always apply, or are not easily interpreted. For instance, the qualifier on the second question on the U.S. census questionnaire "Start with the person, or one of the people living here who owns, is buying, or rents this house...", is often misleading as to intent. In some tribal cultures, property is owned only by females. Yet, the actual owner may not now or ever live in the home. The occupant may be reluctant to list as the owner of the home (the literal interpretation of the question) someone who does not lay claim to that ownership in a traditional sense. Even classifying units as vacant presents interesting challenges. In some tribal areas, the traditional housing (hogan, pueblo) is still maintained for ceremonial use, although not for daily housing. Certainly it is possible that someone could live in the unit if a need arose, and some families still choose to, but to classify each such unit as vacant would artificially inflate the vacancy rate on tribal lands which are experiencing a significant shortage of available housing. This shortage of available housing also affects a complete enumeration, as many Indians live in government subsidized rental housing (HUD housing), which has limits on the number of persons who can legally live there. However, due to the housing shortage many family units might actually reside in a house, and despite assurances of confidentiality, residents are unwilling to tell another government agency the actual number of persons living in the unit.

Managing the census process on tribal lands creates its own set of challenges. On tribal lands, familial relationships are multilayered. It can be uncomfortable to ask prying questions, such as on the finances of relatives. Yet, almost three-quarters of the American Indian Reservations in the Denver region alone required administering the long form to every other household (versus one in six households nationally). Family or clan relationships affect many aspects of tribal enumeration. A crew leader might supervise his or her aunt or uncle or clan elder, and any perceived criticism of performance might be construed as being disrespectful of one's elder. Additionally, tribal politics might have an influence

on which tribal members would be acceptable to other tribal members as enumerators.

### *Canada*

In Canada, many of the challenges faced by the U.S. are amplified. The remoteness of over one thousand small reserves, coupled with lack of reliable maps, nonexistent roads, and seasonal migration of some Bands pose significant logistical challenges to conducting a census. In some areas, enumerators must charter a small bush plane, hope for good weather, and try to conduct the entire census in one or two days before flying out again. Considering that every household on these reserves is enumerated on a long form and through personal interviewing, this is a major accomplishment, with staff often working very long hours under difficult circumstances.

There are also considerable challenges involved in the recruitment of persons to perform the census on reserves in Canada. Tests designed for use in southern cities are of little value, and far more attention must be paid to factors such as knowledge of the geography of the area and the location of isolated dwellings than to map-reading skills, for instance. In addition, a person's relationship with members of the community can be a critical factor, especially when the divulgence of confidential information is involved.

Cultural issues also play a role in Canada, with language difficulties and differing concepts and definitions at the fore. Interpreters are often required, and concepts such as "usual place of residence" need to be carefully adapted. As well, census-takers need to be sensitive to the distrust of First Nations people in some areas towards any representatives of the Federal Government, in the wake of historical precedents such as relocations and residential schools.

Another factor that must be kept in mind is respondent burden. Over the past three decades, in particular, the need for information on First Nations has increased dramatically. As a result, the number of surveys and studies of person on reserves has become onerous. In a given year, a reserve might be visited by teams of anthropologists, private polling or survey firms, Statistics Canada survey-takers, survey-takers from other Federal or Provincial/Territorial agencies, and finally, on a Census year, the census-takers. Adding to the total burden are the facts that some of the topics covered by some surveys can be sensitive and that sampling ratios are usually very high in small geographical areas like reserves.

Finally, there are some particular challenges associated with the political reality in Canada. Since the 1980s, there has evolved a certain protocol in dealing with First Nations

communities. There are numerous levels of representative organizations to keep informed, at the national, provincial, tribal, and Band levels. Permission to survey a reserve should be obtained from the Band Chief and/or Band Council. All recruitment and hiring should be overseen and approved by the Chief and Council, as well. The Census must also be cognizant of the desire of First Nations to have control and ownership of the data provided by their members, and strive (within the limits imposed by the Statistics Act) to return as much information as possible about the reserve to its representatives, and to ensure that the information is relevant and useful to them.

### **3. Initiatives**

#### *United States*

Since the Denver region of the U.S. Census Bureau contains approximately three-quarters of American Indians on reservation (1990), significant improvement in the accuracy and coverage of this population could not be obtained nationwide unless the Denver region affected it. Therefore, many initiatives undertaken in Census 2000 to improve the count of American Indians on reservation lands by the U.S. Bureau of the Census were unique to the Denver region.

First and foremost, the guiding principle was to honor the 1990 Executive Order issued by then President Clinton to involve tribal governments in a meaningful consultation, and to treat them in a government to government relationship. To do this, beginning in 1997, the regional director, other top managers in the Denver region, along with American Indian staff hired specifically to partner with tribal governments leading up to and during Census 2000 (called Tribal Government Partnership Staff (TGPS)) began to visit each and every one of the 92 tribal governments in the Denver region PRIOR to any work being conducted on their tribal lands. Input from the tribal leadership regarding the feasibility of current Census 2000 plans on tribal lands was solicited, and the tribal leaders were asked what factors they felt attributed to the undercount in the 1990 Census. It was during these visits that much of the knowledge of the unique challenges indicated in the prior section was gained.

One substantive "flaw" in the planning for Census 2000 enumeration was soon uncovered. The Census Bureau had planned to increase the use of mail-in Census questionnaires in the rural parts of the western U.S. In 2000, enumerators hired for the Census would hand deliver a Census questionnaire for

residents to complete and return in the mail. Any housing unit which did not return a completed questionnaire would be contacted during Nonresponse Followup, a process that is used over the entire country to followup on all such households. Tribal leaders ADAMANTLY opposed this type of enumeration. They felt that due to cultural and language issues, the only way to effectively improve the accuracy of the Census would be to conduct personal interviews with all households using tribal members that were recognized by the households visited. So, despite the significant additional costs this type of enumeration would entail, a change was made to the method of enumeration used on tribal lands.

Other improvements in the process were made as well. A significant and focused effort was undertaken to improve upon the efforts to hire tribal members - including specialized recruiting brochures, testing in tribal offices, extensive job advertising in tribal newspapers and radio stations, recruiting assistants hired early to specifically focus on recruiting efforts on tribal lands, obtaining waivers to exempt Census 2000 income from state welfare payments and HUD housing, to name a few. In order to facilitate keeping staff once hired, advances on pay earned (via travelers checks) were provided for gas money, along with phone cards to employees with no phones so they could call their supervisor regularly.

To improve the receptivity of the enumerator at the household, a national American Indian focused paid advertising campaign was launched. All tribal newspapers, TV station, and newspapers that were identified were included in the media buy. In kind funding was provided to tribal governments for locally developed promotional items/events. Each tribal leader was asked to provide either a letter of support for Census 2000 or a MOU between Census and the tribal government for the enumerators to carry along with them. Enumerators were provided cultural sensitivity guidelines that were developed in consultation with each individual tribal government. Tribes were invited to have an interpreter attend enumerator training and that person was given time to go over the correct way to interpret Census questions into the native tongue.

Internal changes were made as well. Staffing estimates for number of staff needed for the operation were doubled and significant management and technical staff for support and oversight was added, a module on cultural sensitivity for local office management training was developed, and an entire team of Partnership Specialists (10 persons in the Denver region) was devoted to maintaining constant communication with the tribal governments.

A very important aspect of the government to government communication was the Tribal Liaison program. Each

tribal government was asked to designate an individual (Tribal Liaison) as a point of contact. This person worked closely between the Census Bureau and the tribal government throughout the Census process, assisting with efforts to promote the value of the Census to tribal residents, helping recruit, and countless other ways. Two persons from each tribal government were invited to attend a regional conference Denver in July, 1999. This conference drew high level participation, with the tribal leader or designee, along with the officially named Tribal Liaison attending. The purpose of this conference was to underscore the importance of the Census to tribal governments, and to update everyone at the same time regarding the plans and timelines for Census 2000. This was a very successful effort.

### *Canada*

In Canada, initiatives and efforts aimed at improving coverage of the on-reserve population have been a continual focus of the Census since 1986. Statistics Canada has made changes in three broad areas in order to secure the full endorsement of the Census by First Nations people and their representative organizations. These three broad areas are partnerships, capacity-building, and specialized collection tools and procedures.

In the area of partnerships, the Census has instituted a process of continuous consultation with the national organization which represents First Nations people, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), as well as with Provincial/Territorial and Tribal organizations. In addition, a process developed by the Prairie Region Census Office proved so successful it has been adopted in every region. The process involves extensive consultation and negotiation with all First Nations organizations prior to the Census, including visits and presentations aimed at highlighting the importance and uses of the Census, and discussion of the needs and concerns of the First Nations communities with respect to the census. The consultations are then formalized in the signing of an M.O.U. with each organization.

Among the chief concerns that have emerged in these consultations has been that of active participation. In 1991, this meant the hiring of more persons from the reserves to perform enumeration for the census, particularly in the Prairie Region, which hired Aboriginal Census Commissioners and Area Managers. In 1996, this was expanded across the country, and included census communications officers. In 2001, it will include hiring Aboriginal persons to work at various levels of census field

collection management. In addition, the 2001 APS will hire, train, and make use of Aboriginal staff.

Another concern that has emerged from the consultation process has been the need for more relevant information. As a result, beginning in the late 1980s (using the results of the 1986 Census), Statistics Canada has produced data profiles for Indian Reserves wherever the numbers permitted it, and provided these to each community. Unfortunately, many reserves are too small to permit publication of detailed data, so for 2001, Statistics Canada is working with First Nations to develop a set of geographical areas for which data can be published, and which are meaningful to First Nations data users. For example, small reserves will be combined into Bands or Tribes, even if they are not contiguous. As well, the content of the 2001 APS was determined through extensive consultation with First Nations data users.

Another key outcome of this consultation process has been the development of initiatives in the second broad area, capacity-building. Capacity-building is based on the premise that, in order for First Nations to become fully-participating partners in the Census process (and the National Statistical program), they require specialized knowledge and skills. To this end, Statistics Canada has instituted Training Programs, an Internship Program, and is working with the AFN and Indian and Northern Affairs towards the establishment of a First Nations Statistical Institute. These initiatives involve the nomination of candidates by First Nations organizations to receive training and hands-on work experience in conducting social and business surveys, in project-management, and in statistical methods and analytical techniques. The people involved in these initiatives will have the capacity to actively participate in the establishment of a national aboriginal statistical program. Already, some of the participants in these programs have been involved in the development work for the 2001 APS (which is being conducted following one of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples). This enhanced partnership and focus on capacity-building will, it is hoped, increase the number reserves which will be successfully enumerated in 2001.

The third broad area in which the Census has focused its efforts is the development of specialized collection tools and procedures. The oldest of these, developed for the 1991 Census, is the Northern and Reserves Questionnaire, a long form specifically designed for use on reserves and in northern communities which are enumerated by interviewers. This form contains examples and instructions that are relevant in the communities where it is administered (e.g. the list of sample work activities includes trapping), and is re-worded for interviewer administering rather than for self-enumeration. Other

specialized collection tools include questionnaires translated into 13 Aboriginal languages, specialized procedures and training manuals for reserves, and regionally-tailored public communications materials, many in Aboriginal languages.

Specialized procedures are also a key part of conducting a Census on Reserves. One of Canada's most unique programs is the Early Enumeration Program, in which communities in the Far North are enumerated in early March of the Census years, rather than in May, because many of them move in the spring, either because of the ice-melt, or because they are following game or conducting a seal-hunt.

A key set of enumeration procedures for reserves is one which ensures that coverage is complete. These procedures require that Census staff review the reserve maps and the listings of dwellings with Band administrators before they leave the reserve, to ensure that the entire territory was covered and that no dwellings were missed.

#### **4. Recent Results and Looking Ahead**

##### *United States*

The undercount for American Indians living on reservation lands showed significant improvement in Census 2000. As measured by the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation Survey, the Census Bureau estimates it missed 4.74% of this group, down from 12.2% in the 1990 Census. More impressive was that this undercount rate was the most significantly improved rate of all population groups. The Hispanic undercount rate was decreased from 4.99% in 1990 to 2.85% in 2000, while the undercount of the total population decreased from 1.61% in 1990 to 1.18% in 2000.

As evidenced by this significant decrease in the undercount in Census 2000, many of the initiatives undertaken worked. However, there is still room for improvement. Most significantly, the U.S. Census needs to review the Tribal Government Liaison Program for 2010. Tribal liaisons felt they did not always know exactly what their role was in each activity (recruiting, hiring, operations). They also had great concerns about the lack of compensation from the Census Bureau for the amount of time they spent in Census related work. At times they weren't prepared for the reality of the actual enumeration (timelines, process). From the Denver region's experience, devoting a significant amount of resources toward recruiting, operations, and management was

key to the improved census count, but more is still needed. Additionally, a more systematic approach to communicating with the tribal liaisons and leadership during the recruiting and enumeration processes needs to be developed, and involving the TGPS in the critical communication link between the Local Census Office and the tribal government during operations is imperative. More immediate is the need to continue to build on the partnerships that were established in 2000. It is imperative that continuous access to training programs on Census data products and use be provided. Efforts to keep tribal governments informed of the direction of Census planning, and involve them in meaningful consultation during the entire Census planning cycle must be made. It is not enough to simply enter into occasional conversations with national organizations. Individual tribal governments must be contacted on a regular basis..

### ***Canada***

The preliminary results of Canada's 2001 Census (as of August 17, 2001) confirm that the initiatives described herein have cemented the partnership between Statistics Canada and Canada's First Nations. At the time of this writing, there were only 22 confirmed cases of Indian Reserves on which enumeration was not carried out during field operations. (Note: this number is expected to increase once the data from all reserves have been subjected to data quality analysis. The number refers strictly to reserves for which no data whatsoever were obtained.)

This substantial decrease (from 77 in 1996) suggests that many of our initiatives are proving effective. Continuous improvement continues and will continue to be made in our Census collection tools and procedures; however it is in the areas of consultation and capacity-building that the greatest strides have been made in recent years.

Conducting any enumeration activity on more than a thousand tiny communities lost in the vastness of Canada's North will certainly always be daunting, but by working together with those communities and their representatives, the Census is rising up to the challenges of distance, remoteness and cultural differences. Working with First Nations, we are building their capacity for statistical activities of every type, from collection to analysis. The vision is of a fruitful partnership between First Nations and Statistics Canada in building a comprehensive, effective and relevant statistical program.