

A Methodology for Enumerating U.S. Citizens Living Overseas

Mary Frances E. Zelenak
U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC 20233-7600
mary.frances.zelenak@census.gov

I. Introduction¹

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts a census of the United States population every ten years, as mandated by the U.S. Constitution. In recent years, members of Congress and advocacy groups have encouraged the Census Bureau to research ways to include all U.S. citizens living abroad in the decennial census counts. This paper presents the methodology, selected challenges, preliminary response results, and plans for further assessment of the possible enumeration of U.S. citizens living overseas during the 2004 Census Test.

II. Background

In the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, the Census Bureau included counts of military and civilian federal employees and their dependents living overseas during the time of the decennial enumeration in the Census counts for apportionment purposes only. The Department of Defense and other federal agencies provided the Census Bureau with counts of these people by their home state. In Census 2000, there were 576,367 military and civilian federal employees and their dependents added to the state population numbers. No demographic characteristics were provided with these counts. In other words, characteristics of the people such as age, sex, and race were unknown.

Shortly before Census 2000, several stakeholder organizations encouraged Congress and the Census Bureau to research ways to count all U.S. citizens living abroad, including private U.S. citizens (those people who are not military or federal workers or their dependents). Because of the timing of this request, the Census Bureau was unable to put any procedures into place for counting these people in Census 2000.

However, in response to the stakeholders' inquiries and congressional interest, the Census Bureau held a two-day conference in November 2001 on the Enumeration of Americans Overseas. During the

conference, stakeholders, Congressional representatives, and Census Bureau officials discussed the possibility of conducting a census of U.S. citizens living abroad.

As a result of these discussions, and at the suggestion of Congress, the Census Bureau embarked on a research and evaluation program that would provide information regarding the feasibility of counting U.S. citizens and their dependents living overseas as part of its 2010 Census data collection process. In January 2002, the Census Bureau convened the 2010 Overseas Enumeration Research and Planning Group to address policy issues, and develop and test a prototype system for collecting data from U.S. citizens living overseas.

III. Methodology

The 2010 Overseas Enumeration Research and Planning Group began by planning the 2004 Census Test of Overseas Enumeration to evaluate the feasibility, quality, and cost of enumerating U.S. citizens living overseas. In this test, U.S. citizens living in selected countries would have the opportunity to provide information to the Census Bureau through a self-initiated mail or Internet response.

Outreach and information dissemination began in December 2003 and continued through June 2004. In the selected countries, stakeholders, business establishments, libraries, media outlets, schools, and other third-party organizations, as well as U.S. embassies and consulates, were contacted and asked to assist in informing eligible respondents about the Census Test and provide a distribution point for paper questionnaires. The Internet questionnaire on the Census Bureau's web site and the paper questionnaires were available from February 3 through July 2, 2004.

A. Eligibility

All U.S. citizens living in the selected countries, regardless of how long they had resided abroad, and persons living or staying in the same household as a U.S. citizen on Census Day, April 1, 2004, were eligible to answer the questionnaire. The only exceptions were those who were on vacation or short business trips.

¹This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed on statistical, methodological, technical, or operational issues are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

B. Site selection

For the 2004 Test, the Census Bureau selected three countries, France, Kuwait, and Mexico, based on criteria that included geographic diversity, significant numbers of U.S. citizens, and the availability of estimates from administrative records that could be compared to the test census counts for evaluation purposes.

C. Response modes

There were two modes of response for the 2004 Census Test - paper questionnaire and Internet response. Paper forms were made available at distribution sites, such as embassies, consulates, and through some third-party organizations in the selected countries, including the American Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Americans Resident Abroad. A postage-paid envelope was provided for the respondent to mail the form to the Census Bureau. An Internet version of the questionnaire, containing the same questions and six additional awareness questions shown after completion of the others, was available on a secure Census Bureau web site for those who wished to complete the questionnaire online.

D. Questionnaire

The Census Bureau designed a household-level questionnaire for the overseas enumeration that contained the Census 2000 "short form" questions asked stateside--name, household relationship, age, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin--plus additional questions needed for the purposes of this specific enumeration test including citizenship, stateside address, Social Security Number, passport number, primary activity, and other items needed for validation and evaluation purposes. Paper forms and the Internet version of the questionnaire were available in English. In addition, the Census Bureau provided a Spanish language version of the paper questionnaire for use in Mexico.

IV. Challenges

There are many challenges to conducting a test of an Overseas Enumeration. Some of those with the greatest impact are briefly explained below.

A. Informing U.S. citizens

One of the biggest obstacles facing the Census Bureau was how to inform the U.S. citizens living abroad about the Census Test. Unlike the stateside census, which includes a comprehensive outreach and paid advertising campaign, a thorough address frame, a mailout of questionnaires, and a rigorous personal follow-up visit

operation, participation in the overseas census depends solely on self-response, which is primarily a function of respondent awareness.

For the 2004 Test, the Census Bureau originally developed a communications strategy that relied solely on the cooperation of the media, embassies, consulates, stakeholders and other third-party organizations to inform people about the census, to promote the overseas enumeration, to motivate people to respond, and to distribute census questionnaires. There was no plan to use paid advertising. To help implement its communications plan and coordinate outreach activities with the media and organizations in each country, the Census Bureau contracted with an international public relations firm that had offices in the test countries.

The Census Bureau provided promotional materials including posters, "take one" cards, fact sheets, and informational brochures to organizations. Some of the suggested outreach activities included displaying posters, distributing materials such as brochures and cards, sending information to members or customers by mail or e-mail, placing the Overseas Enumeration Test link on their web site, and inviting speakers to meetings.

Although there were several ways in which an organization could participate in promoting the Census Test, many organizations that were contacted declined to participate in promoting the Census Test or distributing census materials. Some cited security concerns, while others stated that there were very few U.S. citizens among their members or customers. For other organizations, promoting the Census Test was not their core mission and, therefore, not a priority. It should be noted, that even if all organizations had participated, there still would have been no guarantee that all eligible respondents would have heard about the census. It is likely that some of the targeted population lived in remote locations, lacked media access - no radio, newspaper, etc., or had no contact with the participating organizations.

As the data collection period continued into April, response to the Census Test was disappointingly low - only a few thousand returns were received at the Census Bureau. In an attempt to increase response, the Census Bureau revised its original communications plan and began modest paid advertising in a limited number of areas in France and Mexico in May 2004. Advertising in France consisted of ads placed in a few English language newspapers, such as The International Herald Tribune, and on Internet web sites. English and Spanish ads were placed in selected newspapers and on radio stations in two locations in Mexico.

B. Participation in the Census Test

Just as in the stateside decennial census, awareness of the Census Test by the Americans living overseas did not automatically mean they would respond. Even if they were aware of the Census Test, factors affecting their participation may include:

- Views and attitudes about the overseas enumeration operation, the Census Bureau, or the United States, in general;
- Disinterest in participating in the Census Test;
- Lack of a "benefits" message - people want to know "Why should I participate?" and "What's in it for me?"
- Security, confidentiality, and privacy concerns;
- Availability and accessibility of the forms - may not have known where to get the paper forms, may have been unable to go to distribution points because of travel distance or schedules, may have been unwilling to go through a lengthy embassy or consulate security process to obtain forms, or may have lacked access to a computer or Internet connection.
- Ability to complete and submit forms - difficulty in understanding instructions, foreign post office not accepting postage-paid return envelopes, electronic problems due to slow, old, or incompatible computer systems or browsers.

C. Additional issues and concerns

Some of the additional issues and concerns in conducting an Overseas Enumeration include:

- *Verification of universe membership.* Because a complete list of U.S. citizens does not exist, it may be difficult to verify a person's U.S. citizenship status.
- *Item non-response.* Respondents may leave blank certain questions, specific to the Overseas Enumeration Test and the evaluations, such as Social Security Number or last stateside address. Some of these items are important for validation of the forms or to connect the respondent to a state in the U.S.
- *Laws of other countries.* Some countries have privacy laws that may affect the collection of certain information from respondents.
- *Different levels of awareness, motivation, and attitudes.* The awareness, motivation, and attitudes of the people who provided feedback via the Internet awareness questionnaire or during the focus group interviews (See Section

VI. A.) may not reflect those of other respondents and non-respondents. These may differ from one country to another and also among regions within a country.

- *Lower counts of military personnel.* Using this self-initiated response method may result in a lower number of military and federal civilians being counted than if we used an administrative list or counts similar to the 1990 or 2000 censuses.
- *Inability to calculate a response rate.* Because we do not know how many U.S. citizens are living in each country, we do not have a denominator for calculating a response rate.

V. Preliminary results

The 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test has proven to be an enormously useful exercise in its ability to illustrate the extraordinary difficulty of enumerating Americans abroad. The Census Bureau is currently processing the 2004 Overseas Enumeration data. Therefore, only preliminary response results from the test are available.

A. Estimates of U.S. Citizens Living Abroad

Although the exact number of Americans living abroad is unknown, the Census Bureau obtained estimated counts of U.S. citizens residing abroad from several sources. These estimates, none of which can be validated, vary in size and reliability. The ranges of the estimates of U.S. citizens in the three test countries are:

France	29,000 to 112,000
Kuwait	1,000 to 8,000
Mexico	64,000 to 1,036,000

The extremely broad range of these estimates in both size and reliability indicate the large uncertainty of the estimates and hence, a reason to research a methodology to enumerate Americans abroad.

B. Preliminary Response Results

Response in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test was extremely low. As of July 2, 2004, the close of data collection, the total number of responses (the number of forms returned to the Census Bureau) from the three test countries was 5,390. This number does not reflect the number of people, but the number of forms received at the Census Bureau prior to any unduplication and further processing. There were 1,783 paper forms (35 of which were Spanish) and 3,607 forms submitted via the Internet.

The number of responses received from each test country is shown below. These numbers only reflect the number of forms returned, and not the number of persons included on the forms. The final numbers published in the evaluations will differ because of data processing.

France	3,105
Kuwait	286
Mexico	1,999

VI. Research objectives and evaluations

Eight evaluations are planned to assess the feasibility of enumerating and collecting census data from U.S. citizens living overseas. The evaluation topics include outreach and awareness, participation levels, relative response by mode, data quality, geocoding, administrative records, invalid return detection, and lessons learned. The low response cited above may affect the inferences to be drawn from the evaluations since the results of the test may not be representative of all Americans living abroad.

A. Outreach and awareness

This evaluation focuses on the effect that the outreach efforts had on the collection of Census Test data and the participation of U.S. citizens living abroad. Through the use of an awareness questionnaire, debriefings, and focus group interviews, the Census Bureau will attempt to gain an understanding of what strategies were effective in informing, educating, and motivating people to respond.

Respondents who submitted a Census questionnaire via the Internet were asked to complete a short questionnaire indicating how they found out about the Census Test and what motivated them to participate. After the Census Test, focus group interviews of U.S. citizens living in France, Kuwait, and Mexico were conducted. The goal of these focus groups was to obtain feedback and to elicit information from respondents and non-respondents about their awareness of and attitudes toward the Census Test, as well as their reasons and motivation for responding or not responding to the Census Test.

Debriefings with embassies, consulates, stakeholders, and other participating organizations in the three countries were conducted to obtain their views of the outreach activities and discuss any issues that arose during their participation.

B. Participation levels

The Census Bureau has traditionally evaluated decennial censuses with precise measurements and rates of coverage, often using a follow-up survey and demographic analysis for comparison with census counts. It was not feasible to conduct a post-enumeration survey or coverage measurement in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test. Therefore, the Census Bureau will compute participation levels (defined as the absolute number of people counted in the 2004 Test) for each country and for several demographic categories. These will be compared to counts from administrative records for the various groups.

C. Relative response by mode

The Census Bureau employed two enumeration modes, respondent-initiated paper returns and the Internet. Paper questionnaires were made available to U.S. citizens at embassies and consulates, and through third-party organizations. An electronic version of the questionnaire was available on the Internet for respondents who wished to answer using a computer. The Census Bureau will evaluate the effectiveness and participation levels of each enumeration mode by country.

D. Data quality

The Census Bureau will research limited aspects of the quality of the collected data. Because of the introduction of additional items not collected on the stateside questionnaire, such as Social Security Number, passport number, and primary activity, an important item to be researched is item non-response. Specifically, the Census Bureau will determine how often certain data items were left blank.

E. Geocoding

The Census Bureau asked respondents to provide their last stateside address to determine if persons can be assigned to a specific state or block in the United States. The Census Bureau will assess respondents' willingness or ability to provide this information, as well as the Census Bureau's ability to geocode the addresses to the state and block level using its automated system.

F. Administrative records

Administrative records were used to obtain potential counts of U.S. citizens in other countries. For each country in the 2004 Test, the Census Bureau will compare counts from available administrative records to

the test census counts. The Census Bureau will evaluate the results of this comparison, and research other potential uses of administrative records to enumerate U.S. citizens living overseas, including the building of an address frame.

G. Invalid return detection

Part of the Overseas Enumeration Test involves validating whether questionnaires are eligible for processing. Because the distribution of questionnaires was uncontrolled, anyone could obtain, complete, and submit a paper form or access, complete, and submit an electronic form via the Internet site. To address this issue, the Census Bureau implemented an invalid return detection system to determine the eligibility of the forms. The Census Bureau will evaluate its impact.

H. Lessons learned

The Overseas Enumeration Test has many unique characteristics, such as differences among mail systems in countries, different methods available to communicate with U.S. citizens living abroad, and different data security issues. The Census Bureau will document the lessons learned in the 2004 Test and assess how to address the issues in any future enumeration.

VII. Conclusion

Attaining an accurate count of U.S. citizens living abroad is an extremely difficult task. Despite numerous obstacles, the Census Bureau mapped out a plan and conducted the 2004 Census Test of Overseas Enumeration as a first step in testing a methodology and determining the feasibility of such a task. Ultimately, the U.S. Congress will decide the future of efforts to enumerate U.S. citizens living overseas.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank all those who were involved in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test. The author also thanks Jon Clark, Peter Davis, Philip Gbur, Idabelle Hovland, Donna Kostanich, Rajendra Singh, Kathleen Styles, and Frank Vitrano for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

References

Bouffard, Julie A. (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 2: Data Quality for the 2004 Census Test of Overseas Enumeration," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 4.

Chesnut, John (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 3: Geocoding in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 6.

Communications Plan for the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, Draft, July 14, 2003.

Farber, James (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 5: The Effectiveness of Administrative Records in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 9.

Hovland, Idabelle (2003), "2004 Census Test Project Plan: Overseas Enumeration," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 11.

Moul, Darlene (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 8: Lessons Learned in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 3.

Rosser, Dawn, and Farber, James (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 1: The Participation Level in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 8.

Rosser, Dawn and Farber, James (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 7: The Invalid Return Detection System in the 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 10.

Stapleton, Courtney N. (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation 6: Relative Response and Effectiveness of Two Enumeration Modes," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 5.

Zelenak, Mary Frances (2003), "Study Plan for Evaluation #4: Outreach and Awareness in the 2004 Test of Overseas Enumeration," 2010 Census Test Memoranda Series, Chapter: 2004 Overseas Enumeration Test, No. 7.