



THE CHALLENGE OF AN ACCURATE COUNT

County Governments and the 2020 Census

—Jack Votava, University of Chicago

Although accurately counting Wisconsin's population will be no easy task, the stakes are high. The 2020 census will be a massive operation, employing hundreds of thousands of workers in order to locate and count every U.S. resident – some of whom do not want to be counted, do not care about being counted, or have trouble participating in the usual counting processes.

Nevertheless, it is critical to get the count right. A recent study from George Washington University

showed that Wisconsin received over \$12.6 billion federal dollars in 2016 alone through programs that assigned funding based on 2010 census data. Indeed, every Wisconsin resident missed in the 2010 census is estimated to have cost the state \$1,338 in federal funding per fiscal year. In other words, a 1% undercount cost the state over \$76 million annually.

Luckily, Wisconsin historically has had strong participation in the census compared to the nation as a whole. In 2010, 85.1% of Wisconsinites successfully

“self-responded” to the census questionnaire by mailing it in themselves, compared to 63.5% nationally. However, counting “nearly everyone” is not good enough. Census response rates are on the decline and many individuals, including 7% of Wisconsinites, live in areas that were considered “hard to count” in 2010 because of their low response rates. These hard-to-count areas are unevenly distributed between Wisconsin counties and will be a main obstacle to an accurate 2020 census in Wisconsin.

Areas may be hard to count for a variety of reasons. Some households or individuals may be hard to locate because their addresses are not included in



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FIGURE 1: AREAS DESIGNATED HARD-TO-COUNT IN 2010

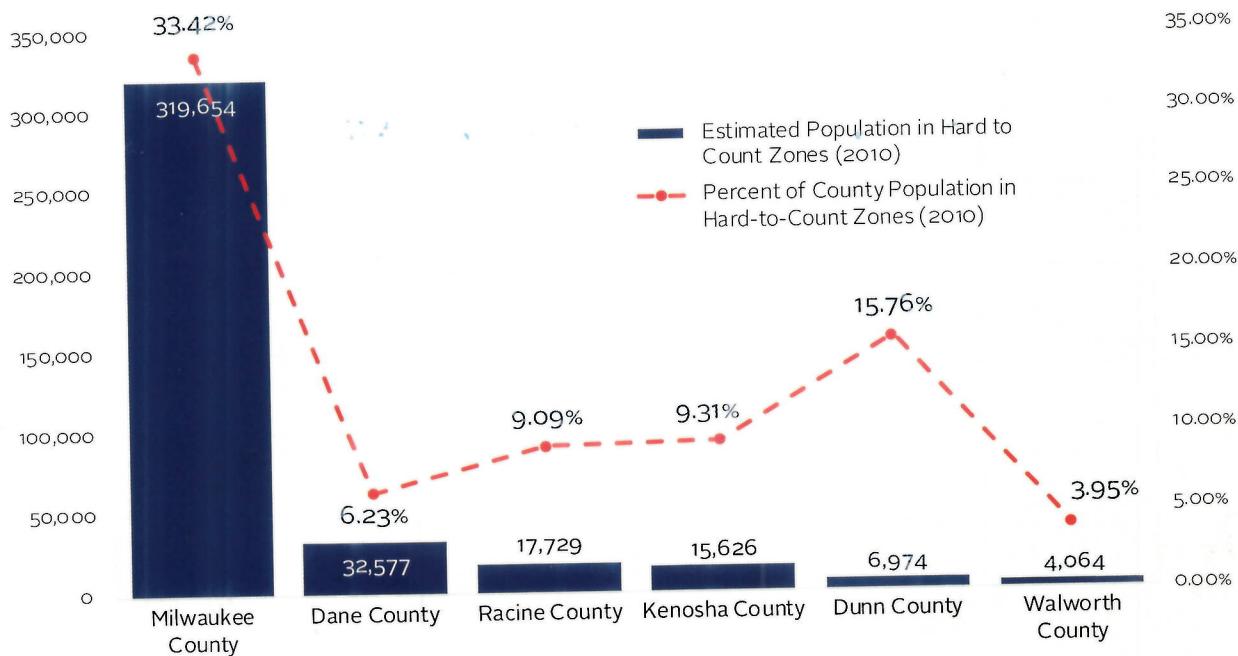


Figure 1: In 2010, six Wisconsin counties contained areas with census response rates so low they were designated "hard to count areas." Nearly 400,000 Wisconsinites currently live in these historically hard to count zones. The Bureau has observed that the low response rates which trigger this designation are often caused by high numbers of people who fall into categories including: young children, highly mobile persons, racial and ethnic minorities, non-English speakers, low income, the homeless, undocumented immigrants, persons with disabilities, and people who distrust the government.

existing census listings or they wish to remain hidden. Others may be hard to contact because they are highly mobile, homeless, lack internet, or have physical barriers that prevent access to their households. Finally, some people, even when located, may be hard to interview due to language barriers, low literacy rates, or hostility towards the government.

To maximize participation and cut costs, the Census Bureau plans to turn to new technologies. Field workers physically verified nearly every occupied address before the 2010 census. In 2020, the bureau is using mainly satellite

data and commercial statistics to authenticate their master file of 143 million addresses. More radically, the Census Bureau plans for the first time to rely primarily on the internet to receive the majority of responses – sending physical mailers to only 20% of households in areas with poor internet access. Residents who do not receive a mailer but struggle with internet can use a new, public toll-free number to complete the census via phone.

Some areas in Wisconsin were too remote to participate in the traditional mail-questionnaire in 2010. These areas participated

in the Update and Enumerate (UE) program, where counts were taken by field workers during on-location interviews. In 2020, most of these locations will be subject to a new Update and Leave (UL) program. Field workers will travel throughout the state updating addresses and leaving instructions on residents' doors on how to participate in the Census via mail, online, or by telephone.

It is important for all counties, especially those with many hard-to-count areas or areas enrolled in UL programs, to help ensure an accurate count. This year, nearly 20 Wisconsin counties elected not

continues

**FIGURE 2: COUNTIES WITH UE AREAS
POPULATION IN UE ZONES**

County	# of People	% of County	County	# of People	% of County
Ashland County	15,779	100%	Lincoln County	8,417	30.1%
Bayfield County	15,004	100%	Marinette County	9,770	24%
Brown County	8,110	3.1%	Menominee County	4,506	100%
Burnett County	15,239	100%	Oconto County	2,881	7.7%
Door County	7,584	27.6%	Oneida County	35,352	100%
Douglas County	6,123	14.1%	Outagamie County	4,699	2.6%
Florence County	4,354	100%	Price County	13,566	100%
Forest County	9,035	100%	Sawyer County	16,384	100%
Iron County	5,748	100%	Vilas County	21,465	100%
Langlade County	2,560	13.3%	Washburn County	10,547	67.4%

Figure 2: In 2010, most residents in 20 Wisconsin counties received no census mailers; instead, field staff traveled these areas cataloging all occupied addresses and personally interviewing their residents. This program, called Update-Enumerate (UE), was designed as an option for surveying very rural areas. Census tracts in Wisconsin were assigned to the UE program primarily due to their fluctuations in inhabited addresses, high numbers of seasonal vacancies, domination by Indian reservations, or very sparse population distributions.

Census officials originally planned to continue UE for 12 million households in the 2020 census. However, to cut costs and ease logistics, most areas formerly participating in UE – including nearly all Wisconsin areas – will now participate in a new “Update-Leave” program. Now, workers will still physically verify addresses in these remote areas but will not interview residents in-person, instead leaving a page of instructions on household doors about completing the census online, by mail, or via phone. Interactive maps showcasing the few small areas that will still require enumeration by interview are available from the Census Bureau online.

to participate in the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) program, putting some households at risk for being missed. One strategy to address this issue is to form Local Complete Count Committees (LCCC) made up of community residents and stakeholders, particularly from groups at risk of being missed, to help advertise and push for participation. Motivating people to participate in the census will

be more important than ever next year for the state and the nation. ♦

ENDNOTES

- 1 Andrew Reamer, “Counting for Dollars 2020.” (George Washington University: 2019.)
- 2 Andrew Reamer, “Counting for Dollars 2020: Report #2.” (George Washington University: 2019.)
- 3 2010 Mail Return Response Data (Census Bureau, accessed 2019.)
- 4 Jeffrey Mervis, “Money, politics, and abandoned homes: Why the 2020 Census might be in jeopardy” (American Association for the

- Advancement of Science, 2017.)
- 5 Interactive Census Hard-to-Count Maps (Census Bureau, live interactive website 2019.)
- 6 Mervis 2017.
- 7 John Thompson, Census Bureau Director (Congressional Testimony, 2015.)
- 8 2020 Census Complete Operational Plan (Census Bureau, 2018.)
- 9 2020 Census UE Operational Plan (Census Bureau, 2018.)
- 10 Registered 2020 LUCA Participants (Census Bureau, 2019.)