Don’t Rush the Census

Cynthia Dwork and Patricia Williams

In an epoch of actual plague, real locust infestations and Biblical degrees of civic incoherence, it is hard not to retreat to our respective burrows, put our scared-bunny-paws over our eyes, and wish that the world would just leave us alone already. So it is entirely understandable that raising the question of the United States Census in such a moment of overwhelm might seem like something other than a priority. But on July 21, 2020, President Trump issued a memorandum claiming for himself the "final determination regarding 'the whole number of persons in each State.'" Trump's memo further attempts to redefine the very meaning of "persons" by proposing to exclude from that category "illegal aliens." Much here challenges settled Constitutional law—even slaves were counted as (fractional) persons for apportionment purposes—and Trump's claim to be able to pick and choose among who is a person and who is a non-person is breathtaking in its overreach.

Like voting, representation on the Census is located at the very heart of constitutional democracy, and like voting, it affects long-term outcomes and allocation of public benefits via the flow of federal dollars to state programs that underwrite the common welfare of all. An accurate tally enables legislators and other public servants to assess whether specific locations are adequately served or underserved, and, hence, where best to place hospitals, post offices, libraries, bus stops, community colleges, police patrols, and fire stations. It allows decision-makers to know which geographies are dense and in need of on-the-ground ambulances and which are sparsely populated and perhaps more in need of helicopter rescue teams. Accurate planning and efficient investment in infrastructure—like nursing home inspectors or teacher-pupil ratios or stop lights or distribution of dialysis machines to say nothing of ventilators—this is a constitutional goal whose importance ought to be obvious at moments of terrible instability like the present. Indeed, knowledge of population size is the central datum in determining and administering public health priorities and disaster relief, both in the present and in assessing rates of spread and future risk.

This overarching sociological and epidemiological interest in the common fate of all bodies within our borders is why the decennial census, most emphatically, does not ask about citizenship status. From the founding of the republic, the count has included every human-shaped being—even when certain of those bodies were indentured or “feeble-minded” or “alien” or disenfranchised by sex or were otherwise not fully righted as juridical persons. The census is and always has been about the administration of public geographies, common spaces, and the interconnectedness of our shared susceptibility to environmental toxicities and viruses that make no distinctions for race, class, religion or nationality. The virus does not stop at the state border; a resource-constrained, medically-underserved, community poses a slow-spreading risk to all.
While much enumeration is by self-report, a large part is garnered from door-to-door enumeration. This is time-consuming under usual circumstances, and between fears engendered by the threatened citizenship question and upheaval due to COVID-19, the circumstances are far from usual. Citing extraordinary difficulties caused by the pandemic, the Secretary of Commerce requested a 120-day extension of the enumeration period, to October 31, 2020, and the bureau proceeded with operations as if this were the new deadline. Then a paragraph was quietly modified on the census website and lo, shortly thereafter the transmogrified deadline was September 30.

Curtailing the census enumeration period will destroy the quality of the data for a decade. With bad data, statistical analyses are useless, predictions are pointless. Bad data also threatens to cripple the development of data science, as algorithms trained on bad data will necessarily fail, obscuring information about the quality of the algorithms essential for improving the field.

#DontRushtheCensus.

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