

First uncounted, then undercounted
Census track record on Native Americans
By Jourdan Bennett-Begaye
Ethnic Media Services, Indian Country Today

The first enumeration of the 2020 Census starts this week in Toksook Bay, Alaska, a remote Yup'ik village on the coast of the Bering Sea.

The U.S. Census Bureau wanted to get a head mcount of residents in the village while the ground was still frozen. Counters will travel by snowmobile, sled or bush plane.

Every 10 years, the Census Bureau attempts to count every person in the United States, as required by the Constitution.

This is the 24th decennial (once every 10 years) census since the first, in 1790. The census was written into the Constitution because lawmakers wanted America's population to directly affect its representation in Congress.

However, for Indian Country, or American Indians and Alaska Natives, that story is much different:

When did the decennial census first count Native Americans as part of the U.S. population and how did the census identify us?

The first census happened in 1790. But it wasn't until 70 years later, according to the [National Archives](#), that the first Native American was included in the count of the general population.

When the decennial census, in 1860, first counted Natives it only included those who had given up their tribal citizenship and assimilated. Those who had not done so, and/or were living on reservations as tribal members, were deemed “non-tax-paying” and not counted.

In 1860, enumerators counted more than 40,000 Native people and identified them as “Indian” under the “color” column, not by their tribal affiliation. Pueblos, who are located in the Southwest generally, were not included. If Indians were included, they were classified as “non-white.” Census-takers back then counted Taos Pueblos as “copper” or “Indian.”

In some cases, Native persons living with the “white population” in a settlement were counted but not identified as Indian because they were not living on a reservation. The National Archives said those were “half-breeds” and [indicated](#) as such with “HB” or “½ I.”

Back then, census-takers, who were non-Native, were the ones to define us.

Why did it take so long before the census officially included Native Americans in the population count?

Technically, Native people were not supposed to be included in the census count, according to the Constitution, which in its census mandate excluded “Indians not taxed.” This meant Indians living on reservations or in unsettled areas of the country.

The government started separately counting Native people, taxed and not-taxed, for the first time in the special 1857 Shawnee census in the Kansas Territory and in the 1860 (decennial) Census.

In [1870](#), only 8% of American Indians were classified as “taxed” and eligible to be American citizens. The other 92%, or 287,981, were not included in the final tallies that the Census Bureau submits after every decennial count for government uses in myriad ways, particularly resource allocation and electoral representation.

Historians estimate that the total indigenous population in the 1870 census (313,712) was larger than that of five states and 10 territories.

The 1880 census was different.

Natives were more fully counted, the National Archives found, because the Census Bureau said:

“Indians not in tribal relations, whether full-bloods or half-breeds, who are found mingled with the white population, residing in white families, engaged as servants or laborers, or living in

huts or wigwams on the outskirts of towns or settlements are to be regarded as a part of the ordinary population of the country for the constitutional purpose of the apportionment of Representatives among the States, and are to be embraced in the enumeration.”

The 1880 Special Census of Indians counted “not-taxed” people living on the reservations and became the first to include them in its final tallies.

Over time, the counts increased and included more territories.

How accurate was the official census count of Native Americans -- and when did the numbers begin to reflect a more accurate count?

The [National Archives](#) says the 1890 census was the first “enumeration of all Indians.” However, those records were destroyed in a fire at the U.S. Commerce building in Washington, D.C., in 1921, so that’s difficult to determine.

Technically, no census count of Native Americans and Alaska natives has come close to being accurate. In fact, both are still significantly undercounted compared to the rest of the country.

After the 2010 census, the Census Bureau said American Indians and Alaska Natives on reservations or in Native villages were undercounted by 4.9%. That is more than double the 2.1% of

African Americans not counted, the next-most-undercounted group by ethnicity.

The numbers have varied widely: In 1990, the bureau reported an official 12.2% undercount of American Indians living on reservations. That dropped to an undercount of 0.7% in 2000 but then rose to 2010's 4.9% undercount.

Tribal leaders and the Census Bureau hope that focusing on hard-to-count communities and improved technology will help produce a more accurate count this year.

###

Jourdan Bennett-Begaye, Diné, is the Washington Editor for Indian Country Today based in Washington, D.C. She received her masters degree in magazine, newspaper and online journalism from and completed the Newhouse Graduate Newspaper Fellowship for Minorities at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Follow her on Twitter: [@jourdanbb](#). Email: jbennett-begaye@indiancountrytoday.com.