

Tribes and the Census

The 2020 Census Is Finally Underway

At long last the 2020 Census is underway. After more than a decade of planning the first household has been enumerated. The event took place in Toksook Bay, a remote Alaska Native village on the Bering Sea in southwestern Alaska. The first person counted was Yupik elder Lizzie Chimiugak. The Director of the Census Bureau, Stephen Dillingham, personally went from Washington, DC to her home in Alaska to interview her and begin the 2020 nationwide enumeration.

Toksook Bay has a population estimated at 661 in 2017, up from the 590 counted in the last decennial census. Almost 95% of the residents are Alaska Natives. Toksook Bay was first settled in 1964 by people from the nearby Alaska Native village of Nightmute. It was counted in the Census of 1970 and incorporated as a municipality under state law in 1972.

Typical of the way things happen in rural Alaska, the event almost didn't take place. The weather was not good for flying. Director Dillingham was able to get into Toksook Bay in a chartered airplane, but he had to shorten his schedule there in order to leave before the weather set in and prevented his departure.

Members of the press that traveled all the way to Alaska to cover the event weren't so lucky. They got weathered in and were unable to fly out of Bethel, the regional center, because of the stormy weather.

The enumeration in Toksook Bay was the beginning of the special Census procedures in Alaska. The count starts in the remote Native villages in late January. Travel to the villages is easier before spring "break-up" when the ice melts and makes travel difficult. Native people move away from the villages to hunt and fish. Many are unavailable at their homes on April 1st, the official Census Day for the major cities in Alaska as well as the rest of the country.

Although Toksook Bay is an overwhelmingly Native village, it is not tabulated in the Census results as an Alaska Native Village Statistical Area (ANVSA). The Bureau's list of ANVSAs is taken from the list of Alaska Native villages contained in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. That legislation, which settled the Native land claims in the state as a necessary precondition for developing the oil resources on the North Slope, contained a list of villages authorized to select land to which village corporations could claim title and control the surface resources.

The Census Bureau lists 220 communities as ANVSAs. They exist in all parts of the state. Most are off the road network that connects the state's major cities.

The largest is Bethel, the regional hub for the 56 villages in southwestern Alaska. Bethel had an Alaska Native population¹ as counted in the 2010 Census of just under 4,000. Nearly 85% of the 220 ANVSAs had Native populations of less than 500. Alaska Natives are the dominant population in three-quarters of the ANVSAs.

Subsistence hunting, fishing and berry picking are major activities, with few permanent year-round paying jobs. Most of those jobs are in the schools, and many are filled on a contract basis by persons from outside the village. Seasonal cash employment, sometimes in the villages and often in construction and other jobs in distant locations is essential to purchase the supplies needed for a subsistence lifestyle.

Alaska Native Tribes and Organizations Actively Promoting Census 2020

Alaska Native tribes and organizations and the state of Alaska have launched major campaigns to promote participation in the 2020 Census.

A coalition of groups, with leadership provided by Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) and the state demographer's office, has been actively working on Census outreach for many months. The President and CEO of CIHA, Carol Gore, is the former Chair of the Census Bureau's National Advisory Committee.

The state has a broad-based Complete Count Committee that includes Native representation. The state has also created a mini-grant program providing small sums to Native tribes and tribal organizations as well as other types of governmental and nonprofit entities to conduct events promoting the 2020 Census.

In the Alaska case, the decennial Census results will be used in the redistricting of state legislative boundaries and in the allocation of federal funds to tribes for housing and transportation infrastructure projects. Decennial and other Census data is also used to determine funding levels for a wide variety of state-administered programs that provide services to Native people such as Medicaid, food stamps (SNAP) and aid to local school districts.

Alaska has only one Congressional District, so the apportionment of seats in the US House of Representatives is not at stake.

¹ All Native population figures in this newsletter involve people who identified American Indian or Alaska Native as their only race in response to the race question on a Census questionnaire. The Census Bureau counts this population as AI/AN "alone."

Other 2020 Census News

With the 2020 Census now underway in remote rural Alaska, the drive to promote participation in the decennial headcount nationally is in full swing.

The Bureau has begun a long-planned promotional campaign. The effort includes an advertising campaign, public service announcements and a presence on social media. Part of the campaign focuses specifically on getting Native people to answer the 2020 questionnaire, either on-line, on paper or over the phone.

Most states have statewide Complete Count Committees to help promote the Census. Some involve Native leaders.

Perhaps the most extensive state outreach effort has been underway for some time in California. The legislature appropriated \$187 million to insure that all the hard-to-count population in the state is counted. Work in the Native communities, on and off reservation, is being coordinated by CIMC, the California Indian Manpower Consortium. Tribes without state funding, such as the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North and South Dakota, have set aside scarce tribal general fund money for their own Census promotion efforts.

At the national level, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) has expanded the effort it launched for the last decennial with a new Native Country Counts campaign. The campaign features a toolkit, T-shirts and various promotional materials. Grants are also being provided to tribes and Native organizations for Census events. Details are available at <http://www.ncai.org/initiatives/indian-country-counts>.

NCAI also continues to play an important role in advocating for Native interests on Census issues. Its Chief Executive Officer, Kevin Allis, testified recently at a hearing called by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. In a written statement he stressed: "The importance of the 2020 Census to Indian Country cannot be overstated."

He went on to urge the Census Bureau to address delays in hiring American Indian/Alaska Native enumerators, to increase efforts to communicate the importance of the Census to Native communities and to ensure that Census data on the Native population is accurate and not suppressed or distorted by the Bureau's new disclosure avoidance procedures.

Norm DeWeaver

norm_deweaver@rocketmail.com
Redistribution of this information is encouraged

February 7, 2020