

Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 9

2020 Census: Why Every Minnesotan Should Make Sure They're Counted

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at <https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/2020-census>

Transcript

[soft piano music]

Paul Mattessich: Welcome. Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal, to provide insight on significant issues, combining sound information with expert knowledge to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. In this episode our topic is the 2020 census, with special focus on the people and populations that are historically undercounted and why. Three experts have come to the studio for this conversation. Wayne Ducheneaux is executive director of the Native Governance Center, a Native American led nonprofit organization in Saint Paul, Minnesota that assists tribal nations in strengthening their governance systems and capacity to exercise sovereignty. He's a Cohort III Native Nation Rebuilder and an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. His previous work includes serving as Tribal Administrative Officer, District 4 Council Representative and Vice-Chairman of the tribe from 2012 to 2014. Welcome, Wayne.

Wayne Ducheneaux: Thanks Paul. Hau, mitakuyepi. Cante waste nape cayuzapi yelo. Wayne Ducheneaux emakiciyapi ye. And I said there, hello my relatives. I greet you all with a good heart and a handshake. My name is Wayne Ducheneaux, and it's truly an honor to be with you all today.

Paul: Susan Brower is the Minnesota state demographer and directs the Minnesota State Demographic Center. Her work applies an understanding of demographic trends to changes in a range of areas including the state's economy and workforce, education, health, immigration, and rural population changes. She previously worked on Minnesota

Compass as a researcher, and at the Population Study Center at the University of Michigan. Susan, welcome.

Susan Brower: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

Paul: Jacob Wascalus is a research scientist at Wilder Research and works on Minnesota Compass, a social indicators project led by Wilder Research that measures progress and tracks trends in topic areas such as education, economy, workforce, health, housing and others. He previously worked at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Welcome Jacob.

Jacob Wascalus: Thanks for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Paul: Well, thanks again to the three of you and thanks for bringing your expertise to discuss the census. The census, what exactly is the census and how does it work? Can you explain that Susan?

Susan: Sure. So the census is a count of every single living, breathing human being in the U.S. It happens every 10 years and it is an enormous operation. The way that most people-

Paul: How many, when you say enormous, how many people are counted in the U.S., roughly speaking?

Susan: There'll be about 330 million, little over 330 million in the U.S. And that's a lot of people, but if you also think about all the different ways that people live, all their different kinds of circumstances, whether they're in an institution or a group home or an apartment or in a mobile home, there's just all kinds of different special operations to reach people where they are. The first way that people will kind of hear about the census if you're just a regular person, not a kind of a census nerd like maybe some of us here today are, is that you'll get a letter in the mail in mid-March that will invite, most people get a letter that will invite them to go online to fill out the census.

Paul: So, somebody doesn't come to your house, a census taker?

Susan: Not right away.

Paul: Oh okay.

Susan: For most people.

Paul: Okay.

Susan: There are a few areas in Minnesota where a census taker will come to your home, and that is mostly in tribal areas where that's kind of the preferred method that the tribes have chosen, but for the vast majority of Minnesotans, the way that they will first hear

about the census is a letter in the mailbox inviting them to go online and to fill out the census online.

Paul: And so is the hope that most people would take it via the internet online?

Susan: That's the hope. They're pushing as many people, they being the Census Bureau, is pushing as many people to go online as possible because it reduces costs. So that's one of the measures they're really pushing.

Paul: And it actually starts in Alaska in January, and how long do they keep following up after April to make sure that people around the country have participated?

Susan: It'll go into the summer. We don't have an exact date where they will call it off, but they're saying well into the summer they'll have census takers out knocking on doors, following up with people who haven't responded.

Paul: And when are the data reported?

Susan: The first data that we get coming out of the census will be in December of 2020, December of this year. And we'll just get the high level number, the state level totals, which will tell us whether or not we keep all eight of our congressional districts.

Paul: So that that starts to get into another question I know that people would have, why is the census important? What does it do for us?

Susan: It's used for so many things. I mean one of the very first purposes it had and the reason why it's in the constitution, is because it's used distribute political power. That's how we determine how many seats in the U.S. House of Representatives we get, and right now Minnesota has eight. We'll see how many we have after the next census. It's also used kind of all the way down from the federal level to the local levels in terms of redistricting.

Wayne: Leading up to this year, Susan, is there a thought as to where Minnesota is going to land there and are we looking at keeping the same amount of seats? Gaining a seat, losing a seat?

Susan: Yeah, it is so close. It is so close. So in 2010 we kept, we got the very last seat that there was to hand out. There are 435 seats, Minnesota got that very last one, and we kept it only by about 8,000 people, which is just a very, very thin margin for a state our size. And looking at projections, we're right back in that same position again, that we're just on the edge, and it's really from my perspective too close to call at this point.

Paul: Wayne, why should tribal nations care about the census? How do they use it? What-

Wayne: I think the most intimate way that tribal nations use the census work really has to do a lot with funding that's obligated to them from the federal government, from the federal government's trust responsibility. And so oftentimes, depending on what type of source the funding is coming from, whether it's HHS funding, that leads down to the IHS for

healthcare funding, Department of Transportation money that comes into roads for maintenance and infrastructure needs. Oftentimes census data is used as a part of the formulas for formulated funding that really helps redistribute and to distribute the money down the line so that tribal nations... they understand more and more that if we have this accurate data that's the first and the closest that most people know. The other thing I think is it's really about tribal nations returning to their Indigenous roots about having that strategic orientation and thinking wholly about their tribal nations and what's best for them.

Wayne: And so it's a big part of this new data sovereignty movement that's pushing in Indian Country and it's about how do-

Paul: Data sovereignty.

Wayne: Data sovereignty and that's about, how do we gather information through research? How do we house that information so that we are the owner and purveyor of it? And then how do we use it in evaluation or other methodologies to make sure that we are using it to leverage it for the best for our tribal nation.

Paul: That sounds like a topic for another podcast, Wayne. That in and of itself would be fascinating.

Wayne: Please have me back anytime.

Paul: Okay. Other reasons why the census is important or who else uses this information? What difference does it make for them?

Jacob: Well, I'll get a little bit more specific with funding. There are about 300 federal programs that use data derived from the census to distribute and allocate money from the federal government to states, about \$600 billion every year I believe, and Minnesota gets around 15 billion. It might sound kind of crude, but we all sort of have a dollar figure attached to us. \$28,000 per person over a decade roughly, so we want to make sure that in Minnesota, all 5.6, 5.5 million of us are counted so the adequate amount of funds come from the federal government to the state.

Paul: Who can access the census data? Anybody?

Susan: Well, it depends if you're talking about at the individual level, at the level of, where you can see an individual person's name and age, that stuff, that level of data is protected for 72 years after the census. So right now the only individual level data that we have out of a census is from the 1940 census, that's the most recent. But the census data become public at the aggregate level, at the level of a neighborhood, at the level of cities and townships and counties, so that people can use it for their own purposes. So governments can use them, nonprofits-

Jacob: Businesses.

Wayne: I think it's really important to highlight, especially when we're talking about Indian Country, that to hammer home that point that the census data is private, that no one's going to be able to attribute exactly the number to the specific house. The census protects that information very much, and so that's one of the, and I can, I'll get a little bit more into this later, but when it comes to some of the general misunderstandings that caused the mistrust in Indian Country around the census, very much it has to do with, can people know exactly how many people are living in my home?

Susan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul: Sure. Okay. Obviously it's important, we hear about undercounts of certain groups or certain communities. Can you say something about why this happens, how it happens, how can we prevent it from happening?

Wayne: All right. I would, yeah, to pick up right where I left off here.

Paul: Any or all of us chime in now.

Wayne: So, specifically in Indian Country, I have a really good anecdotal story about witnessing the undercount first hand. So back in 2010 I was running our tribal motel, our tribal enterprise for Cheyenne River in South Dakota and had census enumerators there and got to learn a lot about the process, visiting with the folks from a census that stayed with us. And so the next job I got, I was the Administrative Officer for our tribe. So I ran our tribal administration and really got to be way more familiar with how it impacts all of the things for our tribe and what not. But a big reason for the undercount in Indian Country, it's mistrust and misinformation, so that's why proper education and mobilization is going to be such a big trend in Indian Country this year.

Wayne: You have a lot of tribes in the region that the Native Governance Center serves as Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, indigenizing these things, making sure that their tribal members are the ones going out and doing the counting when it comes to the enumerator part. And so, it's this mistrust that causes the undercounting. And so, because for instance, some of our housing on the reservation is federally funded and if you have a house that's only two bedroom, sometimes the laws mandate you can only have X number of people, and so traditionally our families are multi-generational. We weren't one solid family, mom, dad and kids. We used to live traditionally, grandpa and grandma were in, multiple families in one home, and so as we've brought that with us into the future, it really has a conflict then with the certain housing codes that exist out there facing Indian Country.

Wayne: The most shocking thing for me was in the 2010 census, if you looked at the two counties in South Dakota, Ziebach and Dewey County, the total census population was roughly 8,212 people. And by our tribes own account, for our state tax agreement, we said we had 80% of the population on the reservation. That meant there was only 6,000 Indian people according to that statistical derivative, 6,000 tribal members on our reservation. At the time we had an enrollment of roughly 18,000, and we knew it was way closer to 60% of our tribal members on reservation.

Wayne: And so how did we figure that out? Well, we actually had a per capita payment distributed from a trust fund settlement, and we were able to in that per capita application, build in census-type questions because everyone who was a tribal member wanted their per capita payment. So in that one flash point in time we were able to know exactly where all our people were, and it really showed that we were closer, I think we were 58% of our total population on the reservation as that information was pulled out of the... and so it just shows that's a huge swing in the total amount of the population.

Paul: Check on the reliability of the data. Susan...

Susan: Yeah.

Paul: Other reasons for the undercount besides-

Susan: Yeah, so-

Paul: what Wayne mentioned?

Susan: Absolutely. So I think what Wayne mentioned absolutely is a concern for the Native community, but also for many immigrant communities have those same fears. Even communities who have been here for generations of course, like Indigenous people, fear is one kind of barrier, there are other kinds of barriers too. So if we think about groups that are likely to be missed, one group is renters. Many times renters will have some of those same fears because they have some of the same characteristics that Wayne was just talking about or the same kind of perceptions and experiences. But also they live behind two sets of locked doors, so when an enumerator comes around it's harder to do that follow up. So in some cases it's just an issue of physical access.

Susan: Another group that tends to get missed or that was the biggest undercount in the last census, was young children under the age of 5. The Census Bureau did some research to find out why that was happening, and they found that for the children who were missed and the babies who were missed, most of them lived in households where a form was filled out and they just weren't on that form. So the question is, what is causing people to be left off the form?

Wayne: I have-

Paul: And what is?

Wayne: Oh-

Paul: Do you know?

Susan: Go ahead Wayne, and I have some ideas.

Wayne: Well, I literally have a personal question. So I actually have a son due April 21st.

Susan: Congratulations.

Wayne: Thank you. So, do I wait so that we can get the most accurate count to the census to add my son, or do I go ahead and answer it on April 1st and...?

Susan: It's for April 1st, it'll be as of April 1st, so I hope that your son is carried full term to his due date, but April 1st is the date that it's scaled to. Yeah.

Wayne: Thank you.

Jacob: I'll just say in Minnesota we want that, we want to retain the congressional seat. So you should just wait for the enumerator to come around and ask you the question.

Wayne: Fair enough.

Susan: So another reason with the young children that people tend to miss them is in households that are complex or extended, Wayne was describing this. Sometimes people don't know that they should put everyone on the form, even if they're there just for a month or two, that it's not a permanent living situation for the foreseeable future. That's how people get left off, is when they're in kind of transition maybe between households and they're in living with grandma or they're living with their aunt or something, those young children tend to get left off.

Paul: Sure, and I guess the idea is there's always a certain number of people in transition, so you catch people where they are and even if they move, somebody else's moving in and out. So it's a way to really get the best count, the best, most accurate count. Wayne, you said a lot about Native Americans and some of the reasons why they are undercounted, and you've mentioned a bit about how Native American communities use census data. Are there other ways that census data are used or that you've used them in program planning, policy applications, funding?

Wayne: Well, all those things and more, right? So again, like I said, there's been a tremendous growth throughout Indian Country in tribe sophistication in around data and how to use it, and so you're seeing tribes more and more really attune themselves to the fact that we have to be able to gather this information. We have to be able to make it work for grants, applications we send off, also for some of our own strategic planning, more and more of our tribes are developing 25, 50, 157 generation strategic plans on where their nations are going.

Wayne: A great example of that is the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota is developing they call it their seven generation strategic plan. 150 years they're planning out, so and they've gone as far as to find a statistician to help them look at, okay, there are currently, I think it's 28,000 enrolled members of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, based on current population trends, what does that mean in a 150 years? And they've come up to a number, in a 150 year, there's going to be 500,000 people are enrolled members of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. How do we start planning now for that? For that exponential growth, so that we can make, they can make sure as a tribal nation that they have

everything they need to provide for their basic need for their people, to make sure they're ensuring a good life for their people. So again, tribes are learning more and more that these numbers matter and we have to find a good way to be able to use them.

Paul: Do you have any examples, Susan or Wayne or Jacob, of other uses of the census, how it's influenced discussion about a policy or helped anything, any group from a neighborhood organization up to a large national organization, to make a better decision or develop a better plan?

Susan: I want to talk about the Minnesota Compass project.

Paul: Oh yeah, okay sure. Go ahead.

Susan: If I must.

Paul: Yeah.

Susan: I mean if you look at those indicators across the board, so many of them rely on census data, sometimes for the indicator itself, sometimes just to be able to create a percentage. So we know how prevalent that that indicator is or the measure is in the community. I think just looking at all the community organizations that have used it, you can probably speak to this more recently than I Jacob, but how different neighborhood groups and different nonprofits use the data to understand their communities and to understand how people are faring.

Jacob: Yeah, exactly. I mean even with local government, we expect our sort of city administrators to, and our town administrators, to serve us well. We pay property taxes, which helps run the government, local government. But if they had no information about who lives in the communities that they are working for, we would have a pretty dysfunctional city government. And so, census data and census derived products are super important. You're totally right about Minnesota Compass, researchers love this data to really help understand a problem that they're trying to get to the bottom of. At Minnesota Compass, one of the examples of the things we track is housing cost burden. How many people are paying too much for housing? We get that information from the census. What are the poverty rates broken down by demographics? We get that information from the census. There's just a wealth of information contained with the census and it is just vitally important that everyone fill out that form when they get it.

Susan: Can I just... it just occurred to me Jacob when you were talking that a lot of the indicators that we collect data, that we use comes from a survey called the American Community Survey, which used to be the long form of the census. I just wanted to point out that even those additional long surveys that the Census Bureau does, relies on the Decennial Census, which is what we're talking about more today, right? Just the decennial count-

Paul: Right.

Susan: because they have to be calibrated every 10 years to make sure that they are accurate. So there's a very close tie between those data sources, so I just wanted to point that out.

Paul: So, as you're mentioning that, let me just bring up something that's been in the news as an issue, a controversial issue, some people say, "Hasn't the Census Bureau overextended itself in what it asks in the census, and the American Community Survey. Constitution just says, 'Count everybody every 10 years,' census does more than that. And the American Community Survey certainly does far more than that." What is the justification for spending all that money on those data collection activities?

Susan: Yeah, so the Census Bureau just in the last two years or so went through question by question, and outlined how each of the questions were used in a piece of federal legislation. So there is a reason to collect every piece of information. That program that it's tied to it or in many cases programs, could not function the way it does if not for the decennial census or the other surveys, the American Community Survey and others, that are collecting that data. So while it has expanded since its original purpose of distributing political power, today it has many other functions that are tied to federal law, and federal programs.

Paul: So pretty much anybody who's touched by a federal policy or a federal program has a vested interest in a good count and information gathering from the census, and everybody touched by a program or policy is pretty much everybody, so okay.

Susan: That's right.

Paul: Yeah, that sounds important.

Jacob: And I would say that this inaccurate census is also very important to just the economy in general. Businesses love using this source of information to just better understand their markets and their workforce. And they use this data to figure out where they want to cite, say a new retail location or a headquarters, or a manufacturing facility, so a lot of business intelligence also derives from census products and you could imagine that that pretty much drives our economy too.

Paul: Sure. Yeah. Say, we were talking earlier about the way that the census is conducted and the emphasis is online. Are there concerns about internet access, online administration, computer literacy, hacking into information? Any of those things? Should we be watching out for those?

Susan: So, in terms of whether people will be able to answer online, the Census Bureau knows that there are people who don't use the internet and there are places that the internet doesn't reach well. And so, everyone will eventually, after subsequent mailings, receive a paper form. So while they might get that first invitation that we were talking about earlier to go online, eventually if they don't respond and go online, they'll get a paper form. So that's one thing that the whole U.S. can fill it out on paper if they want to. There's also a phone line this time around, and so you can call in and give your answers by phone. So I think, while that's something that I think a lot of people are thinking about,

"What happens if I don't have internet access?" Just rest assured that there are other options, they just might need to wait another week or two until that paper form shows up in the mailbox.

Paul: Any of us have other concerns about online administration?

Susan: I think they're out there. Absolutely, I hear that. I mean that's a concern of many community members that I hear, they're concerned about whether the system itself will be able to manage the load of all 331 million of us. Not that many will go online, but so many people going online in such a short period of time, what could go wrong, right? So there are those concerns out there. People are concerned about, and I share the concerns, about misinformation and disinformation, because we're kind of living in a time where we expect that, that information is weaponized and that we may hear things that are not true. And it may be intentional, it may be unintentional, but I think that misinformation is really something that stands to hurt the accuracy of the count and the quality of the data.

Paul: So, consider a typical person in the United States, if they want to help make sure that the census count is as accurate as possible, what can they do?

Jacob: I would say talk to your neighbors, talk to their extended families, their friends, about the upcoming decennial census. It doesn't have to be a long conversation, it just has to remind them that it's coming and that it's in the mail, that they can go online and fill out the survey really quickly. Or if they are not necessarily computer literate, like my extended family, we can help them fill it out if they need that.

Wayne: For me, I think it's really about, how do we help people understand that taking part of the census is a civic responsibility, right? So if we want, excuse me, all the rights and all the freedoms that comes with being an American, we do have some bare minimum civic responsibilities that we have to give back. One of them is answering the census, so that we can help our government really provide us the best service possible. Another thing for Indian Country that I wanted to make sure to mention is, really I see that as how can tribes grow their capacity to use this census to really beef up their systems, to track their population. It's one of those things that quite honestly, if the United States Census Bureau, wanted the most accurate data that exists for tribal citizens, how many people we have, they would go to the Tribal Enrollment Office and ask.

Wayne: Indian Country is unique in that with so much of our systems and what we do and how we exist tied up through the federal government, we generally have really stringent and strict enrollment criteria. For instance, in our tribe I have to bring in a birth certificate when I want to enroll my child. I recently lost both of my parents, so death certificates, all that stuff goes to our tribal enrollment departments. And so-

Paul: So you have a variety of ways for measuring the members of the tribe.

Wayne: Yep. And I think on just about any given day, if the tribe is willing to share that information, you can call them up and ask how many citizens are in your nation? And I have no doubt in my mind that I could call home to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and

call our Tribal Enrollment Office and ask, "How many citizens do we have?" Some of the other tribes like ours track age, so I could literally call home right now and ask, "How many eighteen-year-olds do we have in our tribe?" And we have that data in house, right?

Wayne: And so, it's one of those interesting dichotomies, and it comes to Indian Country because you do have the United States Census Bureau very much saying that when it comes to citizenship and enrollment, that is a tribal function. It's a sovereign nation, you get to say who's a member of your nation. But when they're trying to count in the census, who's native and who is not, it's a self-reported function, right? And so, literally I go through the form, I can check American Indian, Alaskan Native, I can't remember the proper terms that may have changed now, and then for this year they've also added where I can actually check mark which tribe I belong to, right? And so, but that's all self-reported, and so it can be inflated, it could be lowered, based on how people report what they are on the census.

Paul: Sure. Yeah. Susan, thoughts if a person wants to help make sure that the census count is as accurate as possible, what can they do?

Susan: Well, I'd say think about who you are connected to and who you already have trusting relationships with. Particularly for groups that we know are going to be undercounted, those are the groups that I would encourage folks to reach out to. And if they want to host a table that allows people to fill out the census and if they're part of an organization, that's a great idea too.

Paul: Are there groups out there, advocacy groups, working in communities that we could identify, that people could look up on the web maybe and get in touch with?

Susan: There are. On our website, for the state of Minnesota, it's mn.gov/2020census. We've got a map that shows all of the complete count committees that have formed in Minnesota. There are over 250 right now and they're spread across the state. Many of them are governments, but many of them are tribes, many of them are nonprofit organizations, and so that's something we encourage people to do too, is get involved with those volunteer complete count committees.

Paul: Those committees, groups, Wayne or Jacob, any-

Wayne: Yeah.

Paul: groups you would mention, yeah.

Wayne: I think the state of Minnesota has done a tremendous job. They've formed some really unique partnerships with the Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership, and so in that group, the Native Governance Center, the organization I work for, we are part of the Tribal Nations Native Communities Hub. And what the state of Minnesota has done is they've been very intentional about historically undercounted communities, and how can we make sure we're getting resources out to those communities so that we can have the

most accurate count? And I'm really proud to say that our organization is a participant in that, and that we are trying to help coalesce resource and get it distributed out to tribes, so that we can get this most accurate count as possible. I know the Minnesota Council for Nonprofits is one of those hub partners, and so I believe that information is on the website too. So it's really a great feat I think, that the state of Minnesota is taking the time, the resource to invest in this, because they know the importance of it.

Susan: Yeah, we appreciate that help from the legislature, but also just the community groups and advocacy groups and individuals and organizations really have stepped up this time to kind of help us out-

Paul: That's great.

Susan: and be a part.

Paul: Yeah, that's really great hear.

Wayne: Really unique, especially with the 11 tribes in Minnesota and how they've all come together now, have designated their own tribal staff. So you have tribal liaison partnerships and people that are hired through the U.S. Census Bureau that come out and work with tribal nations, but every tribe in Minnesota now has their own tribal census coordinator that is leading the efforts on reservation and off reservation to ensure that we're getting these accurate counts. So a lot of mobilization.

Paul: Well, it is great to hear about all the energy out there and the opportunities for people to assist. And I suppose that even after the April 2020 census, motivating people to participate in American Community Surveys and other important data gathering efforts is vital as well, and all these efforts will help that to support those other data collection efforts. We have reached the end of our time. So thanks again to our guests, Wayne Ducheneaux, Susan Brower-

Susan: Thank you.

Paul: .and Jacob Wascalus.

Jacob: Thank you.

Paul: Please visit our website www.wilderresearch.org for more information on today's topic. State Demographer, Susan Brower, also mentioned another website useful for the census, mn.gov/2020census for more information. If you have suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research, and I look forward to Talking Through the Numbers with you on other topics.

[soft piano music]