

Native Americans and the Census

Carly Lacombe

BEFORE YOU READ: Historically, who do you think the census has counted? How do you think it might have changed over time?

Most Indians Not Counted for Most of U.S. History

Ever since the first census in 1790, Native Americans have either been severely undercounted or excluded all together. No counts of any Native person were taken by the Census Bureau until 1860 (70 years later)! Even then, the only Indigenous People that were counted were those who renounced their tribal membership and left the reservation. Those who stayed on the reservations were referred to as “Indians not taxed” and were not accounted for because they were not taxed.

It wasn’t until 1970 that the Census Bureau began collecting data for individual American Indian reservations. In 1980, the Census Bureau for the first time decided to actively seek American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) input into



National Census Day is April 1, 2020, but the counting will start early in Alaska so that enumerators can reach Alaskans in their villages before hunting season begins.

the census process. The Census Bureau conducted meetings with tribal leaders to go over the process of the census and to get help identifying and presenting a more complete inventory of American Indian Reservations with help from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

An Accurate Count Could Help Tribes

It has been a long and arduous journey for Native Americans to be counted. At the beginning of U.S. history, many Native Americans were killed by colonizers or they died from disease. Those who were left were forcefully displaced and made to live on reservations far away from their true homes. Today, they still face discrimination. No wonder some of them do not trust the government. (I can’t say I blame them!) “As indigenous people, we are a little afraid of the government,” explained Sidra Starkovich of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, “because we’ve been hurt by the government.”

With the 2020 census, Native Americans have the opportunity to bring more federal resources to their communities. An accurate count plays an important role in the fair distribution of billions of dollars to tribes and to AI/AN people everywhere.



Enumerators will visit households in the striped areas on the map. Other areas received a paper questionnaire in the mail in 2010. The darker areas had lower response rates.



Native American community groups are encouraging Native people to participate in the 2020 Census.

Native American people can use federal funding for education, housing, health care, and economic development. If they are not enumerated fully and correctly they run the risk losing out on these resources.

I am impressed by Native American people's ability to survive despite a long history of genocide, displacement, and not being "counted" as people in this country. They have had to fight for themselves over and over again. I hope with this census, they can be fully counted and get the resources they deserve.

Sources: Tribal Consultation Handbook, Background Materials for Tribal Consultations for the 2020 Census. Fall 2015. U.S. Department of Commerce, <census.gov>. <www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/native-americans-census-most-undercounted-racial-group-fight-accurate-2020-n1105096>

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To learn more about Native Americans and Indigenous peoples around the world, use your online subscription to The Change Agent to access a PDF of the "Indigenous Peoples" issue, published in March 2019.

DISTRICTS	Free white Males of 16 years and upwards, including heads of families.	Free white Males under sixteen years.	Free white Females, including heads of families.	All other free persons.	Slaves.	Total.
Vermont	22435	22328	40505	255	16	85539
N. Hampshire	36086	34851	70160	630	158	141885
Maine	24384	24748	46870	538	NONE	96540
Massachusetts	95453	87289	190582	5463	NONE	378787
Rhode Island	16019	15799	32652	3407	948	68825
Connecticut	60523	54403	117448	2808	2764	237946
New York	83700	78122	152320	4654	21324	340120
New Jersey	45251	41416	83287	2762	11423	184139
Pennsylvania	110788	106948	206363	6537	3737	434373
Delaware	11783	12143	22384	3899	8887	59094
Maryland	55915	51339	101395	8043	103036	319728
Virginia	110936	116135	215046	12866	292627	747610
Kentucky	15154	17057	28922	114	12430	73677
N. Carolina	69988	77566	140710	4975	100572	393751
S. Carolina	35576	37722	66880	1801	107094	249073
Georgia	13103	14044	25739	398	29264	82548
	807094	791850	1541263	59150	694280	3893635

1790 Census

1. Look at the count from the 1790 census above. What do you notice? Categories from left to right are:

Free white Males of 16 years and upwards, including heads of families.

Free white Males under sixteen years.

Free white Females, including heads of families.

All other free persons.

Slaves.

Total.

2. Make several true statements about the data in the chart. Go to <nelrc.org/stand-up-and-be-counted/census2020> for more lessons based on census data.

3. According to the "Three-Fifths Compromise" in 1787, enslaved people were counted as "three-fifths of a person." What do you think this "compromise" was about? Research it to learn more.