

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a red cap and a white shirt, looking down at a smartphone. He is sitting in a blue vehicle, possibly a van or truck. The background shows a house and some greenery.

Field Recruitment: A High Impact Opportunity to Address Undercount in the 2020 Census

by Jacob Model, PHD

Sourcing and recruiting high-quality enumerators is a strategic way to use precious grant dollars to ensure an accurate 2020 Census. Up to 40 percent of the count in the 2020 Census are projected to be brought in by enumerators.¹ They will be responsible for knocking on 60 million household doors and trying to get people to complete the Census accurately. This workload would be nearly a third more than the 47 million households counted by enumerators in 2010.²

Half a million enumerators — the largest non-military mobilization in the country — will be hired, trained, and deployed to knock on doors, largely in hard-to-count communities.³ Each enumerator, on average, is expected to count approximately 300 people.

But hiring enough high-quality enumerators — those who are familiar with the neighborhoods they are responsible for counting and who have the requisite cultural and language skills to be trusted by the community — is a staggering challenge, as the Census Bureau has repeatedly stated publicly.

“The one thing that keeps me up at night is the one thing I have less control over, and that’s our ability to recruit and hire,” said Al Fontenot, U.S. Census Bureau associate director of decennial programs.⁴

In its 2018 End-to-End test, the bureau did not come close to meeting recruiting goals.⁵ Ultimately, it only fielded 67 percent of their targeted number of enumerators.⁶ Nearly a third of those hired either resigned or were fired.⁷

It is important to remember that the Rhode Island test did not include the addition of a citizenship question on the form they tested. Importantly, the majority of the Rhode Island applicants applied before the decision was made to add this question in late March. We expect that the citizenship question will further hinder enumerator hiring and retention. After all, it will

¹ 2020 Census NRFU Detailed Operational Plan

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/NRFU-detailed-operational-plan.pdf> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

² 2010 Census Nonresponse Followup Operations Assessment

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010_cpex_190.pdf (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

³ 6/14/18 Census National Advisory Committee (NAC) Spring Meeting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfZNEthzMPI&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

⁴ Ibid (1:38 in Video)

⁵ See Census Bureau Monthly Status Update on Rhode Island End-to-End Test from June 2018

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/monthly-status-reports/2018-06-msr.pdf> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

⁶ Aug. 3, 2018 Program Management Review meeting transcript, p.10.

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/pmr-materials/08-03-2018/transcript-2018-08-03-pmr.pdf> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

⁷ Ibid

be difficult to find (and retain) qualified people who are comfortable asking their neighbors their citizenship status.

The Ask from the Census Bureau

The Census Bureau is asking nonprofits, as well as businesses and local government, for help in sourcing candidates. Nonprofits are well suited to sourcing and referring high-quality candidates from local communities to apply to be Census enumerators. And since this “outreach” labor force is paid for by the U.S. Census Bureau, this is a high-leverage opportunity to ensure that hard-to-count communities get counted.

Huge Labor Force to Count People: The Equivalent of the Entire U.S. Seasonal Retail Sector Labor Force Will Knock on Doors

The magnitude of the labor force that will be deployed is staggering — it’s approximately the same number of people that the entire U.S. retail sector hires during the holiday season.⁸

The Census Bureau has asked nonprofits, as well as businesses and local government, to help source local candidates, especially those who are from hard-to-count areas or speak the local language.

Since enumerators follow up with households that do not self-respond, primarily in hard-to-count areas, the Census Bureau gives preference to candidates from the local communities they need to enumerate, as well as to those who speak local languages.

There’s also an inherent benefit to local communities — enumerator jobs are well-paid (\$16–\$30 an hour) positions with few work experience requirements and highly flexible hours. If you are a U.S. citizen, over 18 years old, without a serious criminal history, you are likely to qualify. Even the citizenship requirement may be dropped as it was in past Censuses — Ron Jarmin, the Census Bureau’s acting director, recently suggested that they may be trying to get such a waiver.⁹

The biggest downside of the job is the application process. Though the formal requirements are few, the process is long. Fontenot contrasted the private sector and Census enumerator hiring process as follows: “. . . you can sit down at McDonalds, fill out the application, [and] be working that afternoon at a job [that] you may keep for a year or two. We are putting you

⁸ See <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2017/data-on-display/retail-trade.htm>

⁹ July 11 NPR interview with Ron Jarmin

<https://www.npr.org/2018/07/11/627352984/transcript-census-bureaus-acting-director-ron-jarmin-interview-with-npr> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

through security clearances, forms, processes, and a waiting period and we're hiring for a job that may start in 60 days and may last 60 days."¹⁰

High-Quality Enumerators Essential to the Count

It is critical to ensure that Census Bureau has a robust pipeline of local, multilingual community members to do the enumeration. When the bureau is unable to find highly qualified candidates, it will lower its standards and select less qualified ones to meet their hiring needs.¹¹ In practice, this will translate to enumerators who are not local, do not speak local languages, and scored poorly on their assessments.¹²

Less qualified enumerators will have a harder time getting residents to answer the door and helping them to accurately complete Census forms. Apartments may be marked by low-quality enumerators as vacant when in reality the residents refused to open their door to the enumerator. Enumerators may be unsuccessful at communicating with someone who speaks a different language.

A low response rate to door-to-door enumeration will force the Census to rely more heavily on alternative methods of enumeration, such as enumerator by proxy or methods of count imputation. These methods yield less accurate results¹³ and have been criticized by some, as they have been shown to undercount vulnerable populations such as children.¹⁴

The Data Advantage: Knocking on the Right Doors

Only the Census Bureau actually knows which households have and have not completed the Census. Recruiting high-quality enumerators is a high-leverage way to address the undercount because only these enumerators will have data that precisely tell them which specific households have not yet filled out their Census.

Predictive modeling (e.g., low response scores) and aggregated response rate data from Census is certainly helpful for community groups and local governments planning and coordinating outreach, but it will still be broad-brush compared to the individual-level response data given to enumerators. Consider a situation where a community organization canvasses a

¹⁰ 6/14/18 Census National Advisory Committee (NAC) Spring Meeting
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfZNEthzMPI&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ 2010 Decennial Census: Item Nonresponse and Imputation Assessment Report
https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010_cpex_173.pdf
 (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

¹⁴ See the 2016 NALEO/Child Trends Report *The Invisible Ones: How Latino Children Are Left Out of Our Nation's Census Count*, available at
<ftp://ftp.census.gov/cac/nac/meetings/2016-11/2016-04-latino-children.pdf> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

community with a response rate of 50%. They would still be wasting nearly half of their time if they could not distinguish between responding and non-responding households before knocking.

The bottom line is that even if people are reticent to open the doors, at least the enumerators will be knocking on the right ones.

Where Funders and Nonprofits Can Have Impact

Nonprofits are well positioned to help ensure a robust pipeline of highly qualified enumerators. In particular, we see four areas where we believe nonprofits can have a big impact:

(1) Sourcing High-Quality Candidates:

Nonprofits can educate their networks of clients and volunteers about enumerator opportunities and eligibility. Targeted enumerator recruitment campaigns could have immense impact on the outcome of the count.

The Census Bureau's main competitive advantage in today's labor market is its civic mission and service to one's local community. Nonprofits are well positioned to source people who are motivated by this mission through their networks of civically active people. Volunteers as well as clients they serve would be great enumerators, as they know their local communities and are known and trusted messengers. There are benefits for the volunteers as well — in many respects, an enumerator job is like a paid volunteering job for one's community.

(2) Building Pipeline of Candidates Early:

The Census Bureau not only needs to hire an enormous number of enumerators, but it also has to do so within a very short five-month window. One very important role for nonprofits is to start sourcing people earlier and having a pipeline of people who can then apply when the official applications open.

Nonprofits can start building a pipeline for applicants months before the Census Bureau can, gaining critical time to build momentum. Nonprofits can encourage people to opt-in to get notified and receive more information about the application when it opens.

(3) Supporting Candidates: Provide Access to Computers and Coaching in Application Process:

Unlike previous years, the enumerator application is primarily online. Even interested candidates may need help navigating the long application process. High-quality candidates from hard-to-count communities with language competencies may not have the digital literacy to complete the lengthy application process or have a computer. They may need some training on how to upload the required documents, answer the required questions, and complete online assessments.

Nonprofits can provide computers and coaching to overcome these hurdles for applicants:

- 1) Provide computers and broadband Internet access for people to use to apply
- 2) Help applicants gather the documentation required in the application, digitize it, and upload it
- 3) Prepare candidates for the required online assessment
- 4) Remind candidates to complete their applications

(4) Help Candidates Check and Clear Backgrounds:

An additional barrier that nonprofits can help with is the criminal background checks, which was noted by some to be a significant barrier for enumerator employment for minority communities in prior Censuses.¹⁵ Nonprofits may be able to help potential candidates check and clear their records so that they are not disqualified for these jobs.

Additional Coordination & Partnership Opportunities

To increase the attractiveness of the job for would-be enumerators who see enumeration as a career steppingstone, there are additional partners that could be engaged. We believe that community colleges and private sector employers can help building bridges between this short-term work and longer-term skill development and employment.

To play this role, community colleges and the private sector need to understand the enumerator job skills and screening process. For example, they need to know that enumerators must pass a federal background check, a process that would normally cost a private sector firm time and money to do. They also must pass an online assessment, which tests their situational judgement. Beyond screening, enumerators learn marketable skills on the job. They interact with technology in their day-to-day work to schedule their availability as well as to complete the Census surveys. They learn interpersonal skill as they have to “sell” the Census to people who are often skeptical or reluctant.

Several organizations are interested in mapping the skills and competencies learned as an enumerator to community college credits and even educational credentials. These types of incentives may be really valuable for younger pools of talent and help make the case for taking an enumerator job in lieu of something in the so-called “gig economy” with little opportunity for career progression.

Further Explorations to Develop Off-Ramps to Incentivize High-Quality Candidates

- 1) Work with community colleges to establish course credit or credentials tied to enumerator jobs

¹⁵ See 2016 Census Discrimination Case Settlement
<https://www.censusdiscriminationlawsuit.com/news/2016-09-22/census-bureaus-15m-hiring-bias-settlement-okd> (Accessed on 8/16/2018)

- 2) Partner with prospective employers who have talent that align with enumerator jobs (e.g., sales)
- 3) Partner with workforce development organizations to help enumerators market their skills and transition to future employment opportunities

Benefits for Nonprofits & Potential Enumerators

For nonprofits who want their volunteers to better know their community, there is no better way than being an enumerator. We have witnessed firsthand the impact of getting volunteers to walk neighborhoods from our own work canvassing neighborhoods. Engaging volunteers in this type of work is a great way for them to support their local community through an accurate count, as well as to engage community members with whom they may not routinely interact.

For nonprofits with clients who do not have much formal work experience, an enumerator job is a great way to pick up job readiness skills as well as build one's resume. And the pay is relatively good. In a tight labor market, we believe there is also a great fit between the needs of workforce development clients and the enumerator jobs. These clients will likely need some additional support in order to get their foot in the door; however, we believe the return in terms of training, work experience, and potentially educational credentials will be particularly beneficial for these populations.

Overall, we believe nonprofits and local governments — especially workforce development organizations, community colleges, and libraries — are well positioned to support these candidates. They already support people through other hiring processes and it should be easy for them to repurpose their work for enumerator jobs.

The Final Count

Hiring the right people to be enumerators will be more critical than ever before. The Census Bureau is correctly prioritizing hiring local people with local language skills. The substantial local networks of nonprofits could be utilized to source high-quality candidates who could significantly improve the accuracy and completeness of the 2020 Census count in hard-to-count communities.

About the Author:

Jacob Model, PhD is VP of Data & Research at CommunityConnect Labs. He developed the first Community-Based Address Canvassing tool for the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) phase of the 2020 Census, used by over 6 local governments and 40 community-based organizations. He is a frequent and consultant speaker on strategies to address the potential Census undercount.