



Counting in the Wake of A Catastrophe

Challenges and Recommendations for the 2010 Census in the Gulf Coast Region

Executive Summary

Four years after the catastrophic combination of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and multiple failures of government preparation and response, this report reviews factors that contribute to the unique difficulties in obtaining an accurate count in the Gulf Coast region for the 2010 Census. We recommend a set of policy and operational changes that would increase the likelihood of a successful count, which is vitally important to continued progress in communities still recovering from the impact of the 2005 storms.

The always daunting task of accurately counting the U.S. population every 10 years is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. The count, carried out by the U.S. Census Bureau based on a nationwide survey of households, is used to allocate representation in the U.S. House of Representatives among the states, to draw congressional and state legislative district lines; to direct the distribution of trillions of dollars in federal, state, and private spending and investment decisions; and to assist in the evaluation and enforcement of civil rights protections.

The uneven accuracy of previous census counts – particularly the higher likelihood that racial and ethnic minorities, people with low income, people with limited English proficiency, and others are more likely to be undercounted – raises serious civil rights concerns about equality of political representation and economic opportunity.

For the 2010 Census, the task will be exceptionally challenging in the Gulf Coast region.

Demographic Data Point to Major Challenges Ahead

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the Gulf Coast region made it vulnerable to an undercount even before the Katrina catastrophe and its aftermath.¹

For the 2010 Census, the region's already high rate of people living in officially designated "hard to count" areas has been exacerbated by a set of circumstances facing communities affected by Katrina: massive housing destruction and depopulation; uneven and incomplete recovery; difficult-to-classify addresses in areas of lingering blight; rapidly changing conditions generated by ongoing rebuilding; and distrust of government enhanced by the failures of preparedness, response and recovery.

A review of the most recent available research on demographic and housing data in the Gulf Coast region confirms the particular nature of the challenges to an accurate count in the areas still recovering from Katrina:

- Continued large numbers of people in temporary housing;
- High rates of vacant housing units;
- Higher percentages of renter-occupied units relative to owner-occupied units;
- Significantly higher rates of households that were without phone service two full years after the storm;
- Difficulty in identifying informal housing arrangements and households in blighted areas; and
- An influx of people with low English proficiency, many of them undocumented migrant workers who are hard to reach (even family members with legal residence status may seek to avoid participation out of concern for undocumented relatives or friends who may be sharing living quarters).

Even some information that is evidence of good news for the region's ongoing recovery exacerbates the challenges to the census:

- Some of the hardest-hit communities have for the past couple of years shown the highest population growth rates in the country.
- Ongoing redevelopment, including rehabilitation of damaged properties and new large-scale projects, are creating significant growth in new housing units and population shifts within the region.

These encouraging demographic trends – rapid population and housing unit growth – make it harder for the Census Bureau to approach Census Day on April 1, 2010 with an up-to-date address list, which is necessary to determine who receives a census form.

The Census Bureau has taken some steps to meet the challenges of a Gulf Coast count.

The Census Bureau has recognized the unique circumstances in the Gulf Coast region and has taken some steps to help ensure an accurate count. More specifically, the Bureau has:

- Designated hardest-hit areas for questionnaire delivery by hand rather than by the mail in early 2010, permitting census workers to update the master list created during address canvassing operations in 2009;
- Held a high-visibility kick-off in the region with local and national leaders;
- Put in place a partnership program and hired partnership staff; and
- Planned an extensive advertising campaign targeting both the general public and hard-to-count population groups.

In addition, Congress and the Obama administration included additional funding in this year's economic recovery legislation for the Census Bureau to invest in outreach to hard-to-count populations.

Next Steps: Policy Recommendations for the President

- Use the "bully pulpit" to boost census participation.

Next Steps: Policy Recommendations for the U.S. Congress

- Hold a field hearing in the Gulf Coast region as soon as possible to examine the barriers to achieving an accurate and fair census in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and to evaluate the steps being taken to overcome those obstacles.
- Authorize a federally funded special census in 2012 or 2013 in designated Gulf Coast communities still recovering from Hurricane Katrina at the time of the 2010 Census.

Next Steps: Operational Recommendations for Census Officials

- Immediately appoint a senior-level Gulf Coast Census Coordinator to oversee final preparations and census operations in Gulf Coast communities still recovering from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.
- Increase cooperation with the U.S. Postal Service to ensure an inclusive address list at the time of the census.
- Seek assistance from the Mexican Mobile Consulate – and similar consulates from the home countries of Gulf Coast immigrants and migrant workers – in promoting census participation among these hard-to-count populations.
- Consider special advertising materials and strategies for the 2010 Census in targeted Gulf Coast areas designed to address the unique set of circumstances and concerns associated with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.
- Allocate additional personnel and fiscal resources, if necessary, to address greater-than-expected difficulties in conducting the census in the Gulf Coast region.