

## US Census

### Defining Who and How People Get Counted, Questions of Social Justice and Equity



The U.S. Constitution mandates a national census every 10 years. The U.S. Census Bureau is charged with counting every person once, in the right place, in each census. "Census numbers are used to allocate political representation (power) and money," I was reminded at the Census. A number of anthropologists and sociologists work in the interdisciplinary Center for Survey Methods Research within the Statistical Research Division (SRD). They are dedicated to working within the Bureau to make recommendations for change, identifying

problem areas for census/survey research, testing and improving questions and enumeration of minority populations, defining the research questions to be asked and suggesting methods to improve enumeration of hard-to-find populations.

I spoke with anthropologists Laurie Schwede (Research Social Scientist) and Eleanor Gerber, (Supervisory Social Scientist, Questionnaire Design and Measurement Research), together with sociologist Manuel de la Puente (Assistant Division Chief, SRD) in their Suitland, Maryland offices on January 8, 2008. I also spoke with the Chief of SRD, mathematical statistician Tommy Wright, about the role and needs for social science at Census. Manuel and Tommy have earned the name of "honorary anthropologists."

#### **Is there a critical mass of anthropologists at Census? How many?**

Currently there are declining numbers of anthropologists at the Bureau, through retirements and attrition. Formative anthropologists Leslie Brownrigg and Matt Salo retired. There are two anthropologists and one sociolinguist in SRD; and "perhaps 3-5 anthropologists with advanced degrees in Field Division or elsewhere in the Bureau," according to de la Puente. All the individuals with whom I spoke were eager to attract more anthropologists and social scientists to the Bureau.

#### **I asked Laurie how she ended up at the Bureau of the Census:**

Laurie has been at Census for 19 years. She received her Masters at University of Colorado/Boulder, and her PhD at Cornell University, both in Anthropology. She did dissertation research in Indonesia on matrilineal Muslims (Minangkabau) as a Fulbright-Hays Fellow. Although her dissertation topic was fairly traditional (she undertook a random sample survey and participant observation, to look at household structure and decisionmaking, out-migration and its effects on communities, and the implications for persistence or decline of matrilineal organization) it clearly presaged her interest in working on household structure and enumeration. When she and her husband returned to the States, she responded to a Census job announcement in the Anthropology Newsletter, to work on research to improve the enumeration of homeless persons, managed by Salo and methodologist Pam Campanelli.

#### **What type of work do anthropologists/social scientists do at the Bureau?**

The bread and butter work is (a) design and (b) pre-testing of censuses and surveys; and the dessert work is (c) independent research in an area of interest to the Bureau (as with any proposal for funded research), involving proposals, research, and publication, combining an academic aspect with more mission-focused work.

As an example of (a), Eleanor, trained in cognitive anthropology, focuses on Acognitive testing and development@ the major method for finding out how people understand and respond to Bureau

questions. It's basically listening to and observing how people respond to questions and asking what they are thinking. Through the influence of survey methodologists in the Bureau, the approach is now institutionalized in Bureau policy: "there's now a 'pre-testing' standard that we are required to test any new question."

The census undercounts and the homeless ethnographic studies that attracted Laurie in the first place were the first large-scale, coordinated ethnographic studies of the census. They set the stage for the Ethnography for the New Millennium Program - a set of six ethnographic and qualitative evaluations undertaken by SRD anthropologists and sociologists during Census 2000, with outside contract ethnographers. They included studies of complex households in six race/ethnic groups (Schwede); privacy and confidentiality (Gerber); colonias (de la Puente and Stemper); mobility (Salo, de la Puente and Childs); social networks (Brownrigg); and Generation X and civic engagement (Crowley).

### **Complex Ethnic Households in America**

As an example of independent research (c), Laurie undertook the problematic issue of identifying and analyzing the structure, function and changing nature of complex ethnic households among six race/ethnic groups (Navajos, Inupiaq Eskimos, immigrant Koreans and Latinos, African Americans, and rural non-Hispanic whites) and implications for the census. This resulted in a book co-edited with Rae Lesser Blumberg and Anna Chan, *Complex Ethnic Households in America* (2006). "The research evaluation done in conjunction with the book and followup research has been the most satisfying project of my career so far. The opportunity to write this book with the other research team members enabled me to dig deeper into linkages among household structure, race/ethnicity, geography, kinship systems, gender, language, economics, and other factors and relate them to census coverage issues and demographic projections." Minority populations have higher growth rates than non-Hispanic whites. "If current trends continue, non-Hispanic whites, now about 70% of the population, are projected to decline to less than 50% of the population sometime in the 2050s." Laurie made the point that minority subpopulations and complex households are more frequently miscounted, so it's likely that census coverage errors will continue to increase in future censuses, making it even more important to continue to develop better enumeration methods. Which brings us back to concerns about social justice and equity and how to address them.

### **Salary and Compensation:**

Entering with an M.A. degree, a median salary (GS-9, Step 5) is about \$54,525. With a new Ph.D., a starting salary would likely be in the range of \$58,206 (GS-11, Step 1) to \$69,764 (GS-12, Step 1). With promotions, it is possible to reach the top of the Senior Executive Service, \$149,000. "The benefits are terrific [e.g. health insurance, pension, 401k annual and sick leave] the same as Members of Congress," I was advised. Telework and a child care center are available; training is encouraged.

### **Legacy and Contributions of Anthropology**

With the caveat that it's difficult to disentangle the contributions of anthropology from other social sciences, the group made the following observations where ethnography and anthropology have made theoretical and methodological differences in the conduct of censuses:

(1) "We have learned that if you use people from the community, you get better results. They [regional offices in the field] hired people from the communities in the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses; but ...didn't know how to operationalize it until they got anthropologists out there. The use of ethnographies contributed to this change."

(2) "Social science in general has made people understand that you have to watch the enactment in the field; and that you need to talk to real people in the field before you start asking those questions in the census."

(3) "Theoretical perspectives have been embedded, raising consciousness about the necessity of knowing natural language to phrase questions correctly." Residence concepts, for example, how do people think about where they live? It turns out that "live" and "stay" do not mean the same thing to many people, but they are synonyms for others. For many, "live" has an official or social dimension; whereas the Census Bureau wants to know where people are *now* - where they are "staying." Eleanor's research on respondents' understanding of residence instructions turned out to be very important in revising question wording to improve the enumeration of mobile individuals such as college students and others.

(4) "Differential counting of ethnic and other minorities. Anthropologists identify and explore the interaction of factors that lead to undercounting or overcounting of people by doing ethnography in the field."

Aware of the critical role of early anthropologists at the Bureau, I asked Laurie about the history of ethnography. "There had been some ethnographic research before that [before Brownrigg], first by the Valentines, under contract, and later by anthropologist Cathy Hines and consultant anthropologist Peter Hainer, under the leadership of our division chief, sociologist Elizabeth Martin, who was instrumental in launching the first large ethnographic studies. Cathy left and Leslie and Matt Salo came in around 1988, along with Pam Campanelli (a survey methodologist). Leslie and Matt then strengthened the role of anthropology here. Leslie took the lead on getting the Behavioral Causes of Undercount Ethnographic Project started, while Matt and Pam were instrumental in getting the Improving the Enumeration of the Homeless project going at the same time. Elizabeth Martin oversaw the development of these projects, provided funds, staffing, and support for them, and co-wrote some of the papers. I joined the team in 1989 on Matt's/Pam's project and Manuel joined Leslie's project a year later. Eleanor came on as a contractor in 1989, I believe, and did her first study of the meaning of residence concepts then, coming on full time in 1992."

The social scientists at the Bureau are enthusiastic about attracting more anthropologists and grad students. Check the website regularly for employment details ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) and job postings; other avenues are the PostDoc Research Program, competed annually, in which there have been anthropologists in the past; the Dissertation Fellowship Program, open to social scientists; and a Graduate Intern Program, all of which are posted on the Statistical Research Division webpage.

### **Outsourcing and Contracting for the 2010 census - call for Anthropologists**

As with other federal agencies, the Bureau anticipates more contract outsourcing, particularly in preparation for the 2010 census. Of timely note, the Bureau is preparing an RFP for 5-year indefinite-quantity contracts. They encourage anthropologist-owned consulting firms "to respond to the RFP competition and become eligible to do research for us, especially during the 2010 Census evaluation phase. Methodology (including ethnography) is one of the five contract areas of most interest to anthropologists." A preliminary RFP will be sent out to interested parties for comments in the February to March, 2008, time frame; the actual RFP will be sent out in May or June, 2008. The url is: <http://www.census.gov/procur/www/rd2013>. Questions? Ann Dimler, an SRD colleague, at [Elizabeth.Ann.Dimler@census.gov](mailto:Elizabeth.Ann.Dimler@census.gov).

### **What can AAA do?**

The best way for anthropologists to have their voice heard or influence the undertaking of the census is to be appointed to one of three advisory committees, either as an expert or as a representative of an association or user group. Anthropologist Kim Hopper was an influential member of the Decennial Advisory Committee between 1998 to 2002: his request for ethnographic studies helped get approval and funding for the Census 2000 ethnographic studies. This committee (renamed the 2010 Census Advisory Committee) advises on the conduct of upcoming censuses and surveys. He was appointed as a representative of the Coalition for the Homeless. The other two

stakeholder committees are the Race and Ethnic Advisory Committee; and the Census Advisory Committee of Professional Associations (heavy data users). A constructive role for the AAA is to actively promote association representation or expert representation on these committees, providing direct input on the conduct of censuses/surveys.