

Brief History

The U.S. Census



IT'S THAT TIME OF DECADE AGAIN. ON JAN. 25, U.S. CENSUS workers began knocking on doors in Noorvik, Alaska, the first stop in an epic attempt to count everyone in America. Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution calls for an "actual Enumeration" of the population every 10 years in order to determine how many Representatives each state gets in the House. The survey has also collected data on occupations, education and housing, among other subjects. The first Census, in 1790, was mainly a head count of free, white, draft-eligible men. Later queries were sometimes absurdly specific: in 1850, data collectors were instructed to "ascertain if there be any person in the family deaf, dumb, idiotic, blind, insane, or pauper." The 1870 Census distinguished between farmers and "farm laborers" and between housekeepers and those just "keeping house." (Enumerators were also instructed to "use the word *huckster* in all cases where it applies.") Until the Civil War, surveys differentiated free people from slaves, who had historically counted as three-fifths of a person.

Race has long been a muddled matter: 1890 classifications included *mulatto*, *quadroon* and *octoroon*, *Chinese* and *Japanese*. In 1930, *Mexican* was listed. The 2010 survey has caused a stir with the inclusion of *Negro* in addition to *black* and *African American*.

Despite the evolution of data gathering, miscounts have occurred, particularly among the urban poor. Democrats tend to say sampling—the extrapolation of data from smaller groups—is more accurate, but Republicans, suspicious of overcounting in left-leaning areas, argue that the Constitution's use of the word *actual* mandates a nose count. Getting it right is important: in addition to its role in doling out congressional seats, the Census influences the allocation of more than \$400 billion in federal funds that affect the lives of some 300 million Americans. How many, exactly? It'll tell us that too. —BY ALEXANDRA SILVER

Card catalog *Census files in Suitland, Md., circa 1949. Computers were first used to help process the data in 1951*

STAND UP AND BE COUNTED

1790 The first Census counts free white males 16 and older, those under

16, free white females, all other free people, and slaves. Total population: 3,929,214

1830 A uniform questionnaire is printed for the first time. Previously, states or interviewers had provided their own paper

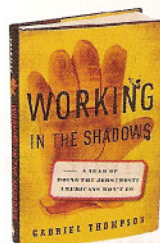
1950 The Census asks whether or not the household has a television set

1960 Questionnaires are mailed out for the first time, reducing the need for door-to-door interviewing



2000 Census respondents are allowed to check more than one box for their race

THE SKIMMER



Working in the Shadows: A Year Doing the Jobs (Most) Americans Won't Do

By Gabriel Thompson
Nation Books; 298 pages

WHETHER OR NOT THEY choose to acknowledge it, most people know that immigrant and migrant workers are paid poorly in the U.S. What they may not know is how hard these laborers toil for their earnings. That's why Gabriel Thompson, a journalist based in Brooklyn, N.Y., spent months undercover working alongside mostly Guatemalans and Mexicans in the lettuce fields of Yuma, Ariz., at a chicken plant in rural Alabama and as a delivery guy for a restaurant in New York City. His goal was not to survive on his income, which he quickly realized was nearly impossible even at the lowest standard of living, but to remain at each job for two full months, no matter how bad the back pain, how sickening the smell of raw meat or how crippling the fatigue. Thompson succeeds—mostly. He gets found out and fired from the chicken plant a week before his self-imposed deadline and hangs up his delivery bike after seven weeks of risking his life in New York City traffic. Therein lies perhaps the only blemish on the book's premise: Thompson has the luxury to quit.

—BY FRANCES ROMERO

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