

The 2020 Census is in 'deep trouble' and tribes will lose big



A troubled Census: Norm DeWeaver, James Tucker, and Liz Medicine Crow, talk about the challenges for Native people in the 2020 Census. (Photo by Mark Trahant)

by **Mark Trahant** Sep 12, 2018 - edited ...

Tribes will lose at least \$3,000 in government spending for every citizen who is not counted

ALBUQUERQUE -- American Indians and Alaska Natives are undercounted during the best of circumstances when the U.S. conducts its once-a-decade count. But what about this year?

“The 2020 Census is in trouble. It's been in trouble for a while,” said Norm DeWeaver. DeWeaver is a consultant, has served on Census advisory boards, and was a speaker at the **Native Power Building Summit last week**. DeWeaver said the Census troubles have been brewing for several years because Congress hasn't wanted to spend enough money.

“The main moral which I've been trying to get across to anybody I have any dealings with, is that tribes and Native organizations are going to have to do a lot more work to insure an adequate count of all Native people in 2020, than they ever had to do in 2010,” he said.

The stakes are significant. One estimate says that every tribal citizen who is not counted will cost their tribal government some \$3,000 in lost federal support for services.

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“The thing that's so problematic about this is that our starting point was that from the 2010 Census there was an undercount estimated by Census of people living on tribal lands of 4.9 percent,” he said. “We actually think that it was much higher than that but that's what Census tells us. It was twice the number of the next closest population report, that was under-counted. When you have a 4.9 percent deficit you're starting with, you don't start off by saying, ‘We're going to address that by cutting funding and we're going to cut operations that are going to help us, specifically, key into Indian country to make sure we get a full enumeration.’”



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DeWeaver said the Census Bureau spends ten years planning its next count. And as part of that effort, it conducts field tests to check on the methodology. “For 2020, they planned two tests in reservation areas which was consistent with what they did in 2010, and as I recall, in 2012. Those tests, at the last minute, were canceled,” DeWeaver said. The field tests were scheduled for Standing Rock in North Dakota and Colville in Washington. DeWeaver said the Census Bureau says, “We have no insurance that Congress is going to produce the money that’s necessary to go ahead with those tests and therefore, we’re gonna have to call them off.”

Three U.S. Senators, Heidi Heitkamp, D-North Dakota; Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska; and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minnesota; said the Census was setting aside Native communities for “other priorities.” The three senators asked the bureau to come up with an action plan to be certain that there is an “accurate and cost effective process to count all American Indians and Alaska Natives.”

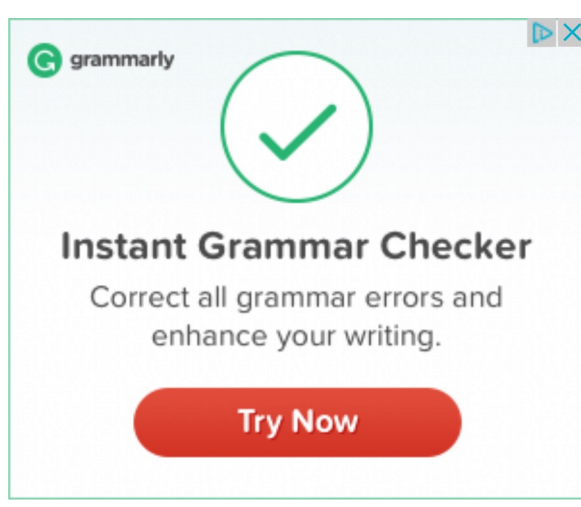


Liz La quen náay Kat Saas Medicine Crow, Haida and Tlingit, is **president of First Alaskans Institute**. She says that it’s critical for Native people to understand the significance of the Census. “I never thought, in my life that I would ever have to be an advocate for the Census. I mean you just say the words and people are like ... It's not exciting, you know how people talk about it like it's not a sexy topic,” she said. “We gotta figure out a way to get our people to understand that when they get counted, that's dollars into the community. When they get counted, that's representatives in our state legislature. It's hard to get that message across because nobody wants to fill out a form that they think might track back to how many people they have in their housing unit.”

The Census matters to tribes because there are federal dollars at stake. “It’s been calculated that on average for every person who is not counted in the tribe or their state is going to lose \$3,000 per person. \$3,000 per person,” said James Tucker. “So you can basically tell someone that if they don't want to be counted, leave aside representation, leave aside reapportionment, leave aside everything else, you're gonna cost our tribe a lot of money and you're gonna cost potentially upwards of \$3,000.” Tucker is an attorney with the law firm of Wilson Elser LLP in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is a member of the National Advisory Committee, which provides input on race, ethnic, and other communities for improved census operations, survey and data collection methods.

He said the top 16 federal programs use Census Data for funding and block grants. “If you are not counted, you do not exist for purposes of those federal grants and you are hurting your tribe. It's as simple as that,” Tucker said.

Medicine Crow said the Census has one population that is over counted: Affluent white people. “So it's not just that they're under-counting us, it's that they are over counting people who already are receiving the benefits of their racial status in this country,” she said.



The Census also determines how people are represented in the Congress and in state legislatures. “In Alaska, we're at about 20 percent of the population,” Medicine Crow said. That vote should be powerful enough to win elections. But “we have a system that's designed for us not to have voice. So, in our redistricting in Alaska, the last round, the chairman of the redistricting board said to us as we were engaging in the redistricting process, ‘You know, if the Alaskan Natives could

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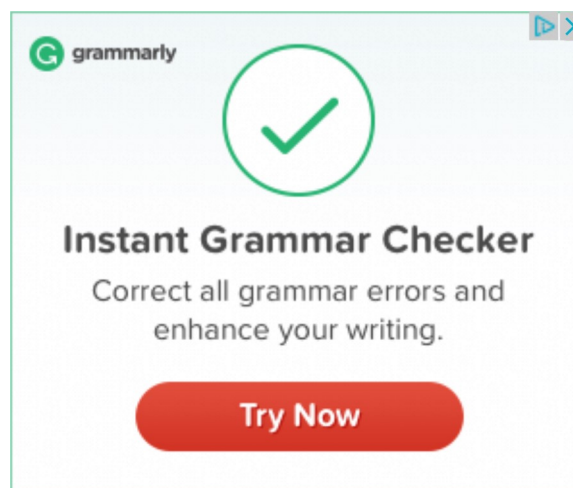
just get behind one plan. If you could just unify on a plan and tell us what you'd like, that would make our job so much easier.' Do you know how many other racial groups or groups of color or minority groups were asked to carry the burden of unification behind one path? Not a single other group. Only we have the onus of unification. "

Think about the mechanics of that process because it means crossing vast swaths of territory, corporate interests and tribal interests.

She said Alaska Natives should have had at least two additional seats in the legislature. One idea, she said, is to come up with the resources for extensive mapping (something that political parties do now) to leverage the Native voice.

DeWeaver said there are success stories that could be models for the future. The Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Arizona has 20,000 members in eight communities spread from Tucson to Phoenix. But only one of those eight communities has trust land and status as a reservation status. The tribe is really prepared, using a "complete count" committee to make sure that all departments in the tribal government -- the health department, workforce, education -- are working toward that goal.

The tribe "developed a poster contest to produce materials which had pictures of Yaquis in Yaqui regalia in the Yaqui language to distribute. That was very important," DeWeaver said. "They also were at all the events that took place during the enumeration period and before to help familiarize people with the fact that they needed to answer the Census."

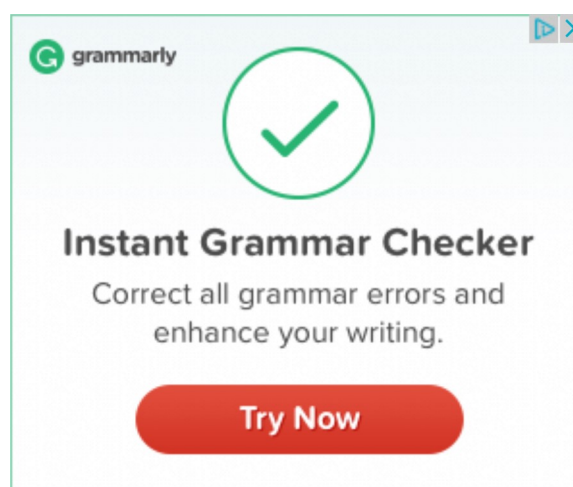


Medicine Crow said villages in Alaska also had door-to-door enumeration. "And then, after they finished their count, they put together a map to be able to show how many people were in each of the different points on the map. And have local leadership validate and verify that that was accurate or that they actually got all the places people were living."

The Census, like voting registration, has an additional burden in Indian Country because of the lack of an addressing system. The Census has a program where matches address withg where people live. Tucker said "good luck with that."

A lot of people in Indian Country might have six families using the same post office box. Or the address might be first home on the right four miles up before the intersection of two rural roads. Tucker said even geocoding is not useful in rural reservation areas.

Mark Trahant is editor of Indian Country Today. He is a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. Follow him on Twitter -@TrahanReports



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