

**ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION OF THE  
1990 DECENNIAL CENSUS REPORT SERIES**

**REPORT #13**

**AN ALTERNATIVE ENUMERATION OF A HETEROGENEOUS POPULATION  
IN A SAN FRANCISCO HOUSING PROJECT**

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## SITE PROFILE - THE PROJECTS

Our ethnographic site was located in San Francisco public housing. Throughout the report, we will refer to our ethnographic site as the "Projects."

In this ethnographic profile we discuss some sociocultural factors that we regard as relevant to the outcome of censusing at our site. First, it is of interest to note that the housing authority uses the term "lower income families" as opposed to "low income families" in stating who is eligible for public housing units:

Applicants of the San Francisco Housing Authority Public Housing Program are eligible for admission to low-income housing as families with low-incomes who cannot afford to pay enough to cause private enterprise in this city and county to build an adequate supply of decent, safe, and sanitary dwelling for their use (San Francisco Housing Authority, Policies Governing Tenant Admission and Continued Occupancy, p. 2).

\*It is the policy of this authority (a) to avoid concentration of the most economically and socially deprived families and (b) to house families with a broad range of incomes, representative of lower-income families in the area of operation, and with rent paying ability sufficient to achieve financial stability of the HUD-aided housing units (Ibid. p. 7).

As a result of these policies, the Projects does not house the poorest of the poor in the city by the Bay. A range among poorer families is reflected in differences in furnishings and possessions we observed when we visited different units in the Projects. There are of course differences in housekeeping styles and tastes - units range from "junk shops" to places where you could "eat off of the floor." More directly related to differences in income is the range in quality and quantity of household goods that various families and individuals possess. Some units contain old, worn, inexpensive furnishings while other units boast of cable TV's, furnishings in excellent shape, and kitchens with washers and dryers. Some differences in material furnishings result from funds coming into the family that are not reported to the housing authority. However, according to the Projects' residents and the management, many tenants do report increases in income, even though reporting results in increases in rent.

While the Projects do contain pleasantly appointed units - some tenants even have flowering plant boxes outside their windows - once you enter the stairwell of a building on the grounds of the Projects you know that this is not "middle income housing." In

the stairwells, if the janitors have just cleaned, the smell of strong disinfectant hits you in the face. If it's sometime between janitorial visits, then it's the smell of urine that hits you. Look up... all the light bulbs in the stairwell are out. The bulbs have not burned out; they are regularly knocked out by people who "hang out" and are interested in insuring the protection of darkness to hide illegal activities.

The Projects contains no internal hallways. Access to all apartments is gained via external walkways. There are no elevators and all of the units on one floor of the same side of the building share the same walkway. The complex contains two "garden courts" where children play and adults congregate, three parking areas, one laundry room, and a management office (containing the manager's office, the clerk's office, and the recreation room).

A lower income family is defined as "a family whose annual income does not exceed eighty percent of the median income for the area, as determined by HUD" (Ibid. p. 27). Individual units are occupied by a family, a couple, an elderly person (at least sixty-two years of age), or someone who is disabled or handicapped. In comparison to other public housing authorities, the housing authority broadly defines "family" as:

- a. Two or more persons sharing residency whose income and resources are available to meet the family's needs and who are either related by blood, marriage, or operation of law, or who have evidence of a stable family relationship or intent to form a stable family relationship,
- b. Two or more unrelated elderly, disabled, or handicapped persons known to have lived together regularly or are intending to do so and whose mutual resources are available in meeting the living expenses of the group,
- c. A single person age sixty-two (62) or over, or if under sixty-two (62), disabled or handicapped.

In addition to the usual relatives by blood and marriage, the following may be included in a family:

- a. An unrelated individual necessary for the care and personal support of another who is elderly or handicapped. Income from such person is not counted toward the family's annual income nor is such person included as a party on the lease.
- b. Foster children (Ibid. p. 2).

In regard to the amount of rent that a leaseholder must pay to qualify for admission into San Francisco public housing, the housing authority outlines this:

The family's annual income at the time of final determination may not exceed the income limits for lower-income families, as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and approved by the housing authority Board of Commissioners. The income limits for varying family sizes shall be prominently posted in the authority office. No family other than a lower-income family shall be eligible for admission to the public housing program (Ibid.).

The Projects consists of one, two, three, and four bedroom units.

"The following standards will govern the number of bedrooms required to accommodate a family of a given size and composition":

No. of Persons -----	Number of Bedrooms						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Minimum	1	1	2	4	6	8	10
Maximum	1	2	4	6	8	10	12

(Ibid.:15)

These exact ratios are not consistently maintained. This is because babies are born and older children leave home faster than management can or is willing to move families around. That some individuals remain all alone in two bedroom units while families of five and six crowd together in two bedroom apartments is a constant source of tension between tenants and management.

The Projects is managed on a day-to-day basis by a non-resident manager who is assisted by a clerk. The other two staff members are a laborer who takes care of the grounds (cares for the lawn areas and sweeps the driveways) and a custodian who sweeps and disinfects the stairways and walkways. Any other work and/or repairs that are needed by the complex are arranged by the manager through the housing authority.

On weekends and during non-business hours on Mondays through Fridays, a tenant manager, known as a monitor, handles any problem or emergencies that arise. If the problem or emergency

can not wait until the next working day, the monitor calls the housing authority duty officer who tries to solve the problem. The monitor also takes care of any blown fuses. In exchange for this, the monitor does not have to pay rent. The monitor is a Greek woman who has resided in the complex for almost twenty years.

The Projects is similar to public housing projects in San Francisco and across the nation in that there are problems of drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and violence. While these problems do exist, they have not reached the magnitude that they have elsewhere. The Projects is viewed throughout the city as one of the better public housing projects in which to live. It is not uncommon to meet long-term residents; individuals and families move in and they stay. There are some tenants who manage to shift their "lower income" status but nonetheless elect to remain in the Projects. For some, a lease with the city is a guarantee of housing should their family once again become "lower income". Once a tenant signs a lease with the city, he/she can remain in city housing even if his/her family income rises. The lease holder's rent increases and decreases in proportion to the family income:

At admission and at the annual reexamination, all families shall be charged the greater of the following, rounded to the nearest dollar: (a) thirty percent (30%) of the monthly adjusted income or (b) ten percent (10%) of the monthly income. Increases in rents for families in continued occupancy may not exceed ten percent (10%) per twelve (12) month period as a result of a change in federal status or definition. These families may have other adjustments, as may be mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Ibid. p. 11-12).

One factor that makes the Projects unique is that the complex is truly multi-ethnic. Statistics from housing authority indicate the following approximate race figures: 39 percent Asian, 38 percent Black, 16 percent White, and 4 percent Hispanic origin. This is truly a heterogenous urban population. The Asian population is itself mixed, and includes residents from China (Hong Kong and the PRC), Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

The marital status of the Projects' lease holders is interesting to note. Among Whites and African-Americans, with regard to marital status, the largest category is "single." This is not the case for Asian and Hispanic lease holders. For both these groups, the majority of lease holders are married and living with their respective spouses.

Concerning seniority in the Projects, two White and six African-American household heads have held leases for thirty years or more. The two White lease holders are the most senior of any residents in the Projects. They took up residence in 1952 when the Projects first opened and was inhabited by Whites. Asians with the greatest seniority moved into the complex in the early 1960's. Most of the Asians, however, and the African-Americans moved into the Projects between 1974 and 1984.

With regard to "type of tenant" (that is a family group, the disabled, or the elderly) occupying a unit, for every racial/ethnic group the largest category is "family group." Among both African-Americans and Asians, for example, over half of the units occupied by each respective group is a "family group."

The three-story buildings that make up the complex occupy two city blocks. Representatives of the various racial and ethnic groups resident in the Projects live scattered throughout the complex, with no apparent pattern.

The racially dispersed pattern of residents in housing projects is not reflected in the persons observed on the grounds of the complex. When walking around the Projects, the presence of African-Americans, males in particular, far out number representatives from other racial or ethnic groups.

The African-American males seen hanging around the grounds are residents, loiterers, vagrants, or friends/relatives of Projects residents. Vagrants sleep in various hidden and unused parts of the complex and both vagrants and some residents use the rooftops for "hanging out" and card playing. The fact that African-American males are so publicly visible reflects the "low profile" kept generally by the other ethnic groups. The few women seen on the grounds of the Projects are either watching young children or briefly chatting.

African-American children and young men play throughout the grounds and are occasionally joined by a White, Asian, or Latino. In one small play area, White and Asian children play together. African-American women and men are seen everywhere; sitting outside watching children, standing around talking to one another, or entering and leaving units. Asians, Whites, and Latinos are seen walking to and from their units or entering the laundry room or the manager's office. One is immediately struck by the overwhelming African-American presence in an otherwise White/Chinese section of San Francisco.

## METHODS

Tom Shaw and Patricia Guthrie functioned as co-principal investigators (Co-PIs) for the research project. Both were anthropologists for the project. Tom Shaw speaks Chinese. Patricia Guthrie is an African American woman. We were assisted by Nhor Chhay and Kun Tang, two Chinese translators one of whom also spoke Khmer. Conversations with Spanish speaking residents were interpreted by bilingual relatives. Working between June 4 and July 16, 1990, Shaw and Guthrie divided the ethnographic site equally between themselves and regularly discussed their research findings and concerns. The co-principals worked at the same time at different points at the site, met together with the Projects' staff, witnessed one another's interviewing, and sat together observing the comings and goings of the Projects.

Besides observations, the researchers went door to door visiting, interviewing, and observing the population. For the most part, our research methodology was based on the various "Guidelines" that are a part of the "Joint Statistical Agreement." Each Co-PI was formally responsible for investigating and recording the data for fifty households. If either researcher entered the grounds of the Projects when the manager (a housing authority employee) was on duty, she was informed of our presence. This was done simply as a courtesy.

Guthrie and Shaw selected the Projects as a sample area for several reasons. Both researchers were familiar with the Projects and the adjoining neighborhood. The researchers participated in a two year Ford Foundation study in that part of the city. Also, the site is ethnically diverse and matches the overall research interests of Shaw and Guthrie. Shaw's research interest includes urban Chinese in the United States and Asia. Guthrie focuses on the study of African-American, both urban and rural.

Based on our original proposal, the hypotheses of our study were:

- (1) "The most obvious reason for undercount is that reporting additional residents results in having one's rent adjusted to a higher level. Or one may be disqualified completely from being able to live in the Projects."
- (2) "When dependent children grow up, they frequently stay on in the Projects as unreported residents. There are also cases where the children of the children of legally recorded residents live unreported with their parents and grandparents in households of three generations."

Several overall generalizations about conducting research in the Projects should be noted. These generalizations are not only interesting from an anthropological perspective but they also help to articulate the patterns that we found.

As stated above, the Projects are considered by many housing authority tenants to be one of the most desirable complexes in which to live. Nonetheless, in the Projects there are problems of drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, teen-age pregnancy, and violence. We often saw African-Americans quarreling among themselves. Many of these 'quarrels' develop into full blown fist fights and the sound of gun fire is not unknown to residents.

We listened to Chinese residents who complain that African-Americans regularly steal their wallets and their purses. Because they fear retaliation, they rarely report these thefts and other abuses to the police or the housing authority. Adding to the fear of violence felt by many residents, which we believe is the greatest overall factor affecting the quality of life in the Projects regardless of race or ethnic identity, is the presence of crack cocaine. According to informants and the local papers, the Project's crack trade is controlled by an African-American street gang called the Bay Street Mob. At the start of the research project, Guthrie was offered protection by a gang member who said he would escort her around the complex.

Based on our general knowledge of the Projects, we knew that some of the tenants residing in the complex were not legally registered with the housing authority and that a census "undercount" was therefore quite predictable. What we didn't foresee was the intensity of the fear factor in the Projects, and how it would affect our ability to communicate openly with residents. Although we assumed that hidden residents would not be reported to the census enumerators, we thought that we would be sufficiently trusted that they would be reported to us. We were surprised to learn that residents in many instances had been more honest with the census enumerator than they had been with us. That is to say, census files reported individuals that residents had hidden from the Alternative Enumeration (AE). Later, only with much indirect probing were we able to confirm the presence of these people.

We now believe that our operating "locally" made us appear to be more of a risk than the census enumerator who represented the interests of a far-away government office whose function appeared to have nothing to do with the management of public housing, or the policing of local affairs.

In the Projects it makes more sense and is more practical to suspect the motivations of your neighbor than it does to suspect an official representing the distant authority of the federal government. Guthrie and Shaw did have close acquaintances with key Projects residents, but our relationships with residents and association with the Projects' staff made us appear to be even more of a risk to those with whom we were in not such close communication. From many residents' perspective, a friend of their neighbors was no more trustworthy than the neighbor himself or herself, and in many (but not all) cases neighbors were not to be trusted. This was especially true, it seemed, when neighbors were from different ethnic categories and language and cultural barriers inhibited interaction. We were aware that the Chinese in particular really feared and suspected the African-Americans, and the Hispanic residents who spoke only Spanish often feared both. A final factor underpinning our findings is the population that we selected contains many individuals classified as disabled. As noted above, the disabled and handicapped were formally eligible for leases and some of the Projects' disabled tenants included persons who are formally diagnosed as mentally unstable. Some are heavily medicated; others are not. While medication stabilizes some of the mentally disabled living in the Projects, others do not take their medication on a regular basis and one resident, it was learned, mixes his medicine with alcohol.

When Shaw and Guthrie held conversations with some individuals, we were never really sure if the person's responses were based on reality. We were expecting reason and logic from persons who may have been strung out on drugs or alcohol, who were living in fear of their neighbors, or any combination of these factors. During the course of the research Shaw was threatened with physical harm in a stairwell and Guthrie was locked in a room and verbally abused by a White male resident of the Projects who took his complaints about her all over the city, and then to the Census Bureau itself.

#### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

After analyzing the matching report, comparing the census with the AE, several patterns arise. With this background we now outline five patterns which account for cases of mismatches between the census and AE, for erroneous inclusions and for omissions.

The five patterns concern:

##### 1) The equation of money and space

Individuals who reside in a unit were omitted from the census for fear that their income would be discovered. Individuals who did not reside in a unit were added for fear that the occupants might lose the privilege of renting a large unit. Following are three

of the influences of this equation on concealment. In these examples we refer to apartments by the research codes assigned to each housing unit. The letter preface A is used for Alternative Enumeration records. The letter preface B is used to refer to census records.

In housing unit A07-012, the lease holder, a White female senior citizen, failed to report to the census her live-in male companion. According to this resident, if "word got out" regarding her companion, who earns income in the community, she might have to pay more rent or move to another unit. Her companion was resident in the unit on Census Day. Also, she told us that her adult son is still listed on her lease as living with her, even though he moved to another city several years ago. By listing her adult son on the lease, she is allowed to keep her two bedroom unit. She did not, however, include him on the census form. By hiding her companion, she keeps her rent low.

A "housemate" in a Filipino household lodged in B07-298 was accurately censused by the Bureau, but failed to show up in the AE most likely because counting his presence meant also counting his income, which would have caused the rent to be raised for the entire household. Again respondents appear to have trusted the Census Bureau representative more than the Alternative Enumerators whose links to local housing authorities tenants were not sure of.

In the Chinese household occupying A07-083, a 40 year old son was not enumerated by the census, but neighbors insisted that he lived here. Although interests work at cross purposes at times, and Chinese household heads (as discussed in more detail below) are apt to claim household members that in fact do not reside under the same roof, this case is an example of economic interests outweighing cultural ones. The desire to maintain the fiction that only one person lived in the household, and only one income was available to cover rent, superseded any cultural interest in "representing" the whole family in an enumeration of household members.

## (2) Cultural concepts of household membership

Our data suggest that some Asian lease holders in the Projects included their adult non-resident children in the census even though they live someplace else in the city of San Francisco. This we believe to be the result of cultural meanings associated with the Chinese notion of "family." In Chinese culture, family members can be dispersed geographically but still be thought of as constituting a household as long as they contribute all or part of their income to be managed by the family head. If heads of such families in the Projects were to admit that their grown children lived elsewhere, but that they received income from

them, the result would be a disaster: both higher rent, and a smaller unit. However, we believe that including adult non-resident children in accounting for one's household is a cultural practice rather than one designed to "trick" the local housing authorities. If the latter were true, we would expect residents to want us to believe the same fiction that they wanted housing authorities to believe, based on experience. Instead, among Asians, the Alternative Enumeration was in each case provided with a more accurate count.

In a three bedroom apartment, A07-040, a Chinese husband and wife included their adult daughter and adult son on their census mail return form. The AE revealed that neither of their children reside in the household.

In another three bedroom unit, A07-043, the head of a Chinese household living there reported to the census by mail return that, in addition to himself and his wife, a twenty year old son resides in the household. During the AE it was revealed that the son resides elsewhere in the city.

The head of a Chinese household living in a two bedroom unit, A07-056, told a census enumerator that his 16 year-old son lives with him, but our resolution of this unmatched record revealed he does not.

In another three bedroom apartment (A07-007), a Korean household reported to the census by mail return two additional adult family members who do not reside there.

As is predicted from our hypothesis, in each of these examples according to housing authority regulation (quoted above), the household group should be housed in a smaller unit. Three examples are three bedroom units; A07-056 is a two-bedroom unit. We believe that persons in these Asian households included "absent" members not for the purpose of holding on to larger units, as is the case with White householders in A07-012, but rather because they think of absent members as part of the household. We base this conclusion on the fact that "word is out" about who really resides in apartments A07-040, A07-043, and A07-007 because the Asian residents themselves reported to the Projects' manager and clerk when their adult children moved away. These changes are reflected in their individual leases. Also, at the time of the AE the resident members in many cases talked about their children who had moved away. Yet, on the official census report, some Asian households included non-resident adult children as resident household members.

The housing authority has not moved these households to smaller units and this does not appear to concern the persons living in households A07-040, A07-043, and A07-007. At the same time, if they are receiving remittances from offspring, they are not

saying so. This knowledge would no doubt push the housing authority to act.

### (3) Fluid structure of households

Motivational barriers to enumeration are compounded by the complex and fluid structure of many households, which may not fit the Census Bureau's concept of a "usual residence." Anthropologists (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Hainer, 1987) working in Black inner city communities describe large, loosely structured domestic units with flexible living arrangements, spread over several addresses. Complete enumeration of such households is difficult to achieve (Martin, Brownrigg, and Fay, 1990).

Our data suggests that the concept of the fluid structure of households may well apply to other ethnic groups and to children and women as well as men. Stack's All Our Kin (1971) also supports this notion as it applies to children. It appears that certain individuals, based on their connection to the lease holder/holders, hold resident rights in more than one household at a time. Because of those rights, individuals can move in and out of a household and not lose their membership in any of the two or more households where they hold membership. The connection to the lease holder(s) is either social and/or genealogical. Several examples from our research give evidence.

In this Chinese household in A07-006 an adult daughter lives with her mother on a "sometimes" basis. The mother has cancer and the daughter moves in when the mother needs help. The AE found that the daughter was not present on Census Day even though the mother listed the daughter as resident in the household on the census mail return form.

In an African-American household (A07-016), composed of an adult male and his parents, two additional adult children of the lease holder were present in the household on Census Day. By the time our research had started, the two had left the unit. The remaining household members believe that these two individuals will return again. Like those in the household in A07-006, residence for two of the members of this household is "sometimes."

In another African-American household (A07-014), where a son had been removed by a child protection agency, the AE found that this child was not present on Census Day. His mother had reported him as resident in the household to the census enumerator. Where does this child really live?

One Hispanic household (A07-42) was extremely difficult to unravel. We had language problems communicating and difficulty pinpointing who was present on Census Day and who was not. There was no question that the family considered those who were

reported to the census enumerator as members of this household. However, at the time of the AE, 5 of the household "members" were "temporarily" residing elsewhere. It was fully expected that the "members" would return.

Another Hispanic household (A07-048) is similar to the household in A07-042 with regard to language problems and the fluid nature of household members. Individuals come and go without forfeiting membership.

A 28 year old African-American male in housing unit A07-072 is "sometimes" a resident and possibly the father of a child living there or the boyfriend of the child's mother but his residence in the household is irregular. His name was included on the census mail return form.

A 25 year old Puerto Rican male enumerated by the census in (B07-795) is a fairly regular resident, or at least is around more than simply "on weekends." He was one of six persons in this household reported by a mail return form. His relation to the family head is that he is a boyfriend of one of her daughters.

Two 40 year old men, who are apparently the sons of the leaseholder, claimed membership in housing unit A07-097 but were hostile and very perfunctory in their responses. Whether or not they are around more than on weekends is not entirely clear, and it is possible that they have a residence nearby in the surrounding North Beach community which has long been an Italian-American neighborhood of San Francisco. Neither were included in the household by the census enumerator.

#### (4) Mail drop

We have evidence that lease holders may in fact use mail boxes at the Projects simply as a mail drop; that is, they do not reside in the complex but have managed to secure mail-box keys. The mail-boxes are separate from the units. In one case it seems that an individual filled out a census form for a unit (A07-054) reporting one individual that was empty at census time and in fact remains empty. People keep separate mail boxes for a wide variety of legitimate and illegitimate reasons. Why someone would also want to pay rent for an empty unit is not altogether clear to us.

#### (5) Alienation and ideological resistance

Anderson (1990) suggested fear and a sense of powerlessness as motives for concealment, noting his informants' intimidation by "paper" and fear of being "written up," especially by someone in an official capacity (Martin, Brownrigg, and Fay, 1990). We believe that alienation plays a part in explaining census discrepancies in the Projects. But the part that we think it

plays is particularly interesting because it is counter-intuitive. As has already been mentioned, residents of the Projects were more likely to tell the truth to someone in a far off place like Washington, D.C. than they were to someone who, in the residents' minds, may have had links to the housing authority.

Ethnographers were hired for the JSA because it was assumed that their "closer" relationships to residents would yield more accurate information. In many cases the reverse was true. Residents' fears were focused locally, on the housing authority, the management of the Projects, and other residents. Residents never really trusted or understood us and these attitudes are related, of course. After we finished our AE, and after we returned again to clear up the discrepancies in the Matching Report (luckily), the tenants' association, which formally sponsored this research, voted to have all such "outsiders" like ourselves prohibited from questioning tenants in the Projects without the expressed consent of association members.

Concerning ideological resistance to mainstream society, we were asked by two different community consultants, a White man and a Black woman, "Were we conducting the same kind of research in the rich part of town?" Residents of public housing projects (and poor people in general) are sometimes so besieged by surveys, assessments, and observations "from above" that one result is simply exhaustion, and a general reluctance to cooperate.

#### CONCLUSION

The factors seeming to have produced census errors have to do with household fluidity, economically motivated misrepresentation, cultural meanings associated with notions of "family" and "household," alienation, conscious resistance, and opportunistic exploitation of resources (i.e., continued use of mailboxes for reasons that are not altogether clear). Clearly there may also be language problems, especially for Asians and Hispanics, and other assorted and sundry factors associated with the character of individual tenants in an urban housing projects for "lower income" families: mental disability, intermittent institutionalization for prolonged periods (in prisons or hospitals), and fear of, if not outright rage towards outsiders borne of chronic powerlessness in society at large.

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Disclaimer: This is the final report for one of the 29 independent Joint Statistical Agreement projects which conducted an ethnographic evaluation of the behavioral causes of undercount. All 29 studies followed common methodological guidelines. This report is based on an analysis of the results of a match between the author(s)' Alternative Enumeration to data from the 1990 Decennial Census forms for the same site. Each ethnographic site contained about 100 housing units. Information was compiled from census forms that were recovered through October 10, 1990. The data on which this report is based should be considered preliminary for several reasons: Between October 10, 1990 and December 31, 1990, additional census forms MAY have been added to or deleted from the official enumeration of the site as a result of coverage improvement operations, local review, or other late census operations. Differences between October 10, 1990 and final census results as reported on the Unedited Detail File were incorporated in later analyses of data from this site. The consistency of the authors' coding of data has not been fully verified. Hypothesis tests and other analyses are original to the author. Therefore, the quantitative results contained in this final JSA report may differ from later reports issued by Census Bureau Staff referring to the same site.

The exact location of the study area and the names of persons and addresses enumerated by the independent researchers and in the 1990 Decennial Census are Census confidential and cannot be revealed until the year 2062. The researchers who participated in this study were Special Sworn Employees (SSE) or staff of the Census Bureau.

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