

ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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THE CENSUS PROCESS AT ST. REGIS RESERVATION

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This paper presents a report and analysis of the potential problems leading to census undercounts at the St. Regis (Akwesasne) Mohawk reservation in Franklin County, New York. It is a continuation and elaboration of research discussed in a previous paper entitled "Residence Patterns at the St. Regis Reservation" which should be consulted for the historical and cultural background of residence and mobility at St. Regis. The present report is based on fieldwork and consultations with residents of the community and with tribal, governmental and educational officials on- and off- the reservation. Some of the issues raised are of general applicability to many Native American communities while others will be shown to be highly specific to the current social and political situation at St. Regis.

This report begins with a discussion of the major difficulties leading to census undercounts. It then proceeds with a review of the steps being taken by tribal and census staff at St. Regis in preparation for the 1990 census and ends with several recommendations for consultation and action.

Four different kinds of problems may be encountered in the census process which have the potential of affecting its success. They are: 1. The problem of compliance or non-compliance; 2. The question of the fit (or lack of fit) between the census bureau's definitions of household and usual residence and the definitions of residence and household-membership held by people

at St. Regis; 3. Procedures used in collecting census data; and 4. The volatility of the current situation at St. Regis which may well have a strong impact on general compliance and receptivity to governmental initiatives.

The issue of compliance or non-compliance can be raised in the historical and current context of Native American experience. In all communities, some people, regardless of race, class, gender or ethnic-group characteristics will not comply with census-taking and other government programs simply because of their lack of motivation, concern or interest. These may be idiosyncratic responses. However, in Native American communities, additional factors, although not necessarily unique, have a greater combined impact and lead to higher rates of noncompliance. One factor is a lack of understanding of the goals of census-counting. In this regard, a distinction must be made between tribal officials or professionals involved in tribal government and education and the general reservation population. Among officials, tribal council employees, teachers and other professionals, there is agreement with a census goal of accurate statistics about their population. Such people expressed a desire to demonstrate the "strength-in-numbers" of the community, noting the extreme inadequacy of the 1980 census figure of 1,802 for St. Regis.¹ These individuals offered several additional reasons for their willingness to participate

¹U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1984. American Indian Areas and Alaska Native Villages: 1980, supplementary report, issued 1984, p. 18.

in census processes. They are aware of the "minority" status of Native Americans, even in relation to other so-called minority racial or ethnic groups and believe that documenting a larger number of Native people will help correct the situation of invisibility which contributes to the ignoring of Native concerns by federal and local agencies and by the American citizenry at large. Secondly, these officials are also aware of the fact that government funds are usually allocated on the basis of the size of the population being served. Therefore it is in the community's interest to have an accurate recording of their population in order to receive funding in accordance with their actual size and needs.

These arguments can well be presented to the people at St. Regis and although they do agree with the hypothetical or real benefits which follow from an accurate census, they do not necessarily feel individually committed to participate. Reasons include a lack of time and pressure from job or home situations. Another problem affecting certain residents is their inability to read written questionnaires. Although a very small group, some elderly people at St. Regis are functionally monolingual speakers of Mohawk. In addition, many people are not able to read English adequately even though they may speak it with enough proficiency when the need arises. For all of these people, the time and energy required to have questionnaires completed for them create obstacles which are not overcome unless the person feels strong motivation to comply (a condition which is probably rarely met).

Deeper reasons for noncompliance are embedded in negative attitudes toward the government, often based on suspicions about government intentions. Many people expressed such feelings, indicating that they hoped that by not complying with the census process (e.g., by throwing out the questionnaires), they will be adversely affecting government operations. Respondents also wondered why the government takes an interest in knowing the size of the community and in knowing the number of residents of specific households. Furthermore, a common recurrent theme was often phrased as "What good does it do us?" or "What are we going to get out of it?" In the Native American context, real material benefits stemming from governmental processes are rarely forthcoming. The relationship of power and control is seen as decidedly one-sided and people therefore resist "voluntary" collaboration. Although specific harms which might follow from participation were not expressed, a general sense of distrust was frequently communicated.

The second significant factor in undercounting is the problem of the lack of fit between census definitions of household and usual residence and those of the people at St. Regis. For census purposes, "usual residence" is understood as the place where a person lives and sleeps most of the time; "household" includes "all persons who occupy a housing unit"; (and a "housing unit" is defined as the "usual place of residence of the person or group of persons living in it.")² These

²Ibid, pp. 7-8.

definitions seem straightforward enough for a mainstream model of domestic life but they are somewhat problematic for Native American communities. A brief summary of the main conclusions presented in the previous paper on St. Regis residence patterns will help clarify the issues of concern here. Inter-household mobility and fluidity of membership is a norm at St. Regis, characteristic of a large percentage of the population. This norm stems from a variety of sources, especially the continuity of cultural practices and values based on traditional patterns of extended-family households centered on an elderly couple, their children and grandchildren. Multi-generational households most often follow indigenous principles of matrilineal descent, including daughters, their spouses (if married) and their children in or near parental homes. Unmarried mothers rarely set up independent residences, usually remaining with their own parents. They may shift back and forth occasionally between their parents' home and that of their boyfriend's parents. For most men at St. Regis, economic conditions and employment away from the reservation typically result in temporary week-day residence in a distant city with week-end returns to the reservation.

According to St. Regis categories, "usual residence" is interpreted as the place where a person belongs or is thought to belong regardless of the actual amount of time spent there. For example, employed men may be present on the reservation for very few days in a given period and yet their orientation is clearly

to their St. Regis home. Other people may live simultaneously in more than one household on temporary, fluid bases. They can claim rights to residence in multiple houses because of established kinship relations. In these cases, difficulty arises for people when asked to assign themselves to one particular household rather than the other. Stable members of these households may similarly have contradicting notions as to whether such persons are "usual" residents of their housing unit.

The complexities of life at St. Regis are additionally caused by the existence of the Canadian-U.S. international border which cuts through the reservation. Given the situation of inter-household mobility and temporary residence, some people are technically shifting back and forth between households in Canada and the United States. Their individual citizenship as Canadian or American may affect responses to U.S. Census questionnaires or it may be irrelevant to them.

A further complication may arise in situations where whole families (i.e., parents and children) leave the reservation for visits to relatives and friends living in other locales or where a wife and children join a man working in a distant city. These people do not orient their lives to their temporary place of residence even when the "temporary" nature of the shift becomes relatively long-term. They maintain an ideological and emotional attachment to St. Regis and consider it to be their primary home.

The fact of exposure to mainstream American models of residence and family composition may have an impact on a person's

responses to an official census questionnaire. That is, despite the reality of his/her own living situation, people at St. Regis are certainly aware, through their educational experience and through mass media portrayals, of stereotyped American family life. They are also aware of the class and racial orientation consistent with the stereotype. Therefore, in responding to questions about residence and household-membership, they may attempt to fit their own domestic situation into an inappropriate model and thereby distort or negate their own experience.

A third area of potential difficulty in arriving at an accurate census concerns the procedures used in collecting data. Mention has been made above to the problems of monolingual Mohawk speakers and of people who are not fully functionally literate in English. The technique of distributing questionnaires by mail is itself problematic given the dispersed nature of housing units on the reservation. Although there are post offices in Hogansburg, New York and Rooseveltown, New York, most St. Regis residents do not have postal boxes. The majority depend on deliveries to rural boxes and houses. Such a delivery system is unpredictable even with the best of intentions. House-to-house surveys can similarly result in the omission of certain residences unless they are conducted by people who are familiar with the reservation. Some housing units are located in remote spots; others, such as abandoned and converted school buses, are not easily recognized as housing units. Knowledge of the community is therefore essential to full representation.

The fourth cause of difficulty having a potential impact on the 1990 census is the current social and political situation at St. Regis. This factor is the most volatile and unpredictable, both in terms of future significant events and of its contribution to noncompliance. The issues here are quite controversial but some of the actual occurrences are readily apparent and have been widely reported in the local, national and even international press. For many years, a situation of conflict has been brewing over cigarette sales and gambling establishments on the reservation. Certain people have been selling cigarettes at greatly reduced prices relative to off-reservation stores, a practice made possible because of the lack of taxes on the reservation. This differential in price is well-known throughout the surrounding non-Indian communities and has attracted customers from places in New York State and Vermont in the United States, and from Ontario and Quebec in Canada. The burgeoning of gambling at St. Regis, particularly in the form of slot-machines and other games, has similarly brought in a clientele from near and far. When these business operations initially surfaced, some people at St. Regis were immediately concerned but most seem not to have taken much of a direct interest in them. However, the climate changed, especially as the gambling clientele has grown in numbers and become more rowdy. Many people voiced alarm both about the potential influence these establishments might have on children and youth at St. Regis and about the undesirability of the outsiders and

their behavior. The local tribal leadership began to take a more active stance against the gambling businesses and some attempts were made to close them down. The proprietors resisted, in some cases displaying or using firearms in their defense. These actions came to a head during the spring and summer of 1989. Finally, the government of the State of New York entered the controversy, sending in state police in July to disarm the residents. The police also erected roadblocks along state highway route 37 which cuts across part of the reservation and is the only paved access route from either south or north. The police, in effect, occupied St. Regis for several weeks. At the roadblocks, only identified residents of St. Regis were allowed to proceed. As a common result, people who were originally from the reservation, but who currently reside elsewhere, were not permitted to enter to visit their relatives because they could not produce identity papers listing a St. Regis residence.

The St. Regis Tribal Council decided to hold a referendum so that people could manifest their position regarding the continuation of the gambling businesses. The referendum was originally scheduled for July 29, 1989 but was postponed until August 7 and 8th because of the controversy which it aroused. In the end, with only a small minority of people participating, the vote was 480 in favor of allowing gambling businesses to remain open and 57 opposed.

Such overwhelming non-participation in a vote which concerns an issue of great moment to the people of St. Regis indicates

the general conflicting attitudes people hold about government processes. On the one hand, elected tribal leaders have a stake in legal legitimating procedures such as voting. They and their associates and relatives are likely to vote or otherwise comply. On the other hand, many people take a strongly negative position toward what they regard as government interference in traditional lifeways. Mohawk (and other Iroquoian) societies were integrated in accordance with principles of consensus in achieving political co-existence and solving disputes. Therefore, the traditional hereditary clan chiefs and matrons at St. Regis as well as the Iroquois League chiefs centered on the Onondaga Reservation near Syracuse, New York have been vocal in their opposition to involvement in an election or referendum. Most people at St. Regis are not strongly supportive of either position but their lack of participation in the referendum is consistent with extremely low turn-out rates in any reservation election. And of equal importance in this case is the generally volatile atmosphere and fear created both by the kinds of threats being voiced and by the hostile actions and presence of the state police.

Since the removal of the state police, the situation has become calmer at St. Regis. Most of the gambling establishments have re-opened and the controversy has now shifted to the courts. A major issue of current central attention is that of Native sovereignty and jurisdiction. New York State Governor Mario Cuomo contends that unlicensed gambling businesses are illegal

and must be closed. The residents of St. Regis are not attuned to the issue of "legality" but rather to that of rights to determine and control life on the reservation.

The reception which will be given to the 1990 census may well find analogies to the current situation and for this reason the above analysis has been offered. It is impossible to predict future events in the gambling controversy. The present relatively calm situation may last for some time. However, since the basic issues are unresolved, new problems may emerge at any moment. The potential effect on compliance with the upcoming census is obvious. Many people have voiced such concerns, stating that the census may be seen as another instance of government intervention. Decisions which adversely affect people's lives seem to be made in distant places in a dispassionate manner. And, most importantly, people perceive the government to be unresponsive to their issues and needs. They then question why they should respond to government requests. At the present time, St. Regis residents are especially sensitive to questions about residence, relationships, etc., wondering whether such details might be used in attempts to identify and control individuals.

Despite all of these difficulties, steps are currently being taken by tribal officials and Tribal Council employees to proceed with preparation for the 1990 census. Programs at St. Regis are coordinated locally by Diane Hearne, the Tribal Liaison Officer and Director of Education. She is working with Ronald Patterson,

the Census Awareness Officer and Tribal Liaison who is based in the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Boston Regional Office. His responsibility includes programs for Native reservations in New York State and New England.

Two complementary kinds of activities are in progress. These are informational and consultative. Prepared materials have been distributed through schools and community groups to inform people about the upcoming census, detailing the procedures which will be used and explaining the purposes and goals of accurate counting. In July, Mr. Patterson appeared on the local St. Regis radio-station, CKON, to discuss the census and its implications for the community and, in effect, to urge compliance. Informational packets were also distributed through a Census Booth at the annual St. Regis Unity Day fair on September 10th. Subsequently, a workshop on the goals and procedures of the Census Bureau was held on September 18th and 19th. All community members were invited to attend but most of those present were employees of various tribal agencies. Ms. Hearne has established a "Full Count Committee" which is working with community residents to increase awareness of and participation in the 1990 census. Finally, she has appointed a tribal employee, Gus McDonald (the Director of the Job Partnership Training Program) to recruit local residents who will be involved in census-counting and other procedures.

Future activities include the planned appearance of Mr. Patterson at a regular monthly meeting of the St. Regis Tribal

Council. Since these meetings are open to the public, it is hoped that increased exposure to information regarding the census and a higher visibility of personnel will contribute to greater acceptance and compliance in order to produce accurate statistics.

Both Ms. Hearne and Mr. Patterson are well aware of the fact that their roles must be not only to inform St. Regis residents about the census but also to consult with them about their reactions to the stated goals and procedures. As might be expected, there have been mixed responses to the census and to the information which has been distributed. People are certainly much more aware of the up-coming census and its programs than they have been of previous counts. Residents have generally reacted positively to the fact that they have been advised many months in advance of a government operation. Active involvement of local leaders and tribal employees in the process has also had a laudable effect in demonstrating indigenous participation rather than complete outside imposition by the federal government. Direct contacts with people through appearances on the radio, in workshops and tribal meetings are similarly constructive in implementing the census.

However, underlying distrust of the intentions of the government remain strong in the community, especially in the current context of unwanted and unpredictable state and police intervention in the gambling controversy. Questions are continually expressed concerning the motives of the census,

beneath the surface theoretical value of accurate statistics. Tribal employees voiced concern that suspicions about and resentment toward the state government's recent behavior will carry over and affect noncompliance with the 1990 census. The degree of this reaction is impossible to predict but it is significant that such caution is widespread.

It is clear that active and continued consultation with St. Regis residents is a necessary recommendation toward fuller compliance with the 1990 census. These consultations and involvements should be made at all levels of the community. Three kinds of local leadership are important at St. Regis: elected representatives in the Tribal Council and Tribal Chiefs, hereditary clan chiefs and matrons, and active spokespersons of the traditional Longhouse religion. All three groups of leaders should be advised directly and their advice should be equally solicited. Furthermore, the community-at-large should be consulted and listened to in as frequent and varied contexts as possible. The most difficult task will be to explain to people the reasons underlying the government's desire to conduct an accurate census. This explanation has to be made in concrete terms so that people will perceive an actual benefit which will be produced for them locally. Vague or hypothetical results will carry little weight. People want to see that they are treated in a truthful and egalitarian manner and that their concerns and needs are respected.