

CENSUS 2010

by Bret Bender



An ice storm hits any Missouri county. Tips of tree branches that haven't damaged homes or demolished power lines reach for the ground, burdened by their crystalline shell. The scene is peaceful, but frigid. The cold is expected to linger for days and no one can heat their homes. A rescue agency will come with beds and supplies; but, how much does it need? How many persons will need care? Where will the agency get information it needs to prepare for the disaster area into which it's heading?

THE U.S. CENSUS

The U.S. Census data affects our lives every day in ways most of us never imagine. For example, few of us spend our days planning recovery efforts for catastrophic natural disasters such as the one described above.

Then there are those living among us for whom every day is a reminder of the importance of an accurate count. They are people who touch our lives so gently we don't even know they're there, but just enough that we would miss their presence in an instant if they went away.

The above situation is a hypothetical one, but in just seven months of working as a partnership specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau, I have heard the real stories. What follows are just a few of those stories from the people who know best why you should fill out your ten-question Census questionnaire in March 2010.

THE MAYOR

It was me and two other men in the audience of the town council meet-

ing. The mayor was seated in the center of the half-moon table, flanked by the other city councilmembers and the city clerk. Off to the side was the local reporter set to take notes.

The room was small in comparison to some of the other city council rooms I had visited while working with the Census, but certainly large enough for this crowd. I have given the same speech multiple times per day to mayors, county commissions, community organizations, and folks on the street for two months by now.

More often than I had imagined when starting this job, my speech had fallen on deaf ears. The leaders to whom I had talked would say, "Thanks for coming," and send me out the door with no intentions of helping their community get counted. I wondered if this encounter would end the same.

My answer came more quickly than expected.

Not five minutes into my speech, I was cut off by the Mayor. He waved his hand slowly, palm down, as if he were sticking with his hand at the blackjack table.

"Thank you for coming down here. We appreciate you taking the trip," he said. "But you won't find another town who better understands how important the census is."

He proceeded to tell the story of how the town had been demolished by a tornado earlier in the decade. He said the town had a good count in the 2000 Census, so when the town applied for funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), it got all the money it needed. No one died in the tornado, and the town rebuilt itself in

under a year.

The mayor went on to quote population and income-level thresholds that enabled the town to apply for federal grants. With "x" number of residents in a county and "x" average household income, the town was eligible for "x" number of federal grants.

He asked the reporter in the room who said he covered six other towns of similar size, "Do you know any other town that uses Census data like we do?" Without pause, the reporter responded, "No."

I stayed for the end of the meeting and the city council went on to discuss a federal housing grant worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, citing the Census figures that made the grant possible and nodding in my direction.

"Don't worry about this town," he said.

THE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION GRANT WRITER

On a quiet street in north St. Louis City is the central office of an agency that provides job training, language courses, GED classes, and a myriad of other services to its community.

Our meeting took place in a cramped conference room just off the main hallway of the close-quartered building. The walls were plain shade of pale yellow and had the feel of a sterile hospital room.

The two men across the table were happy to have us there. I and one other Census employee were new to the Census, and a third Census employee was handling the bulk of the meeting from our side of the table.

It was one of the first Census meetings I had attended. Only in rare cases after this meeting would I find partners of this ilk. This was the kind of partner that teaches you about the importance of the Census. It's the type of partner that creates its own opportunities to promote the Census and is hungry for whatever resources the Census can provide.

Not long into the meeting the two men brought in a third gentleman who was responsible for writing the grants on which the organization relied. All three understood one fundamental fact about non-profit grant writing: the more people you prove that you can serve, the more government funding you receive.

The better-funded, non-profit organizations know this. The ones that don't, suffer because of it.

THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) can be found in areas underserved by traditional hospitals to fill gaps in healthcare coverage all over the country.

Many Missouri counties don't have any hospitals at all, and an FQHC is the only place to go for certain types of medical care. Some counties don't even have an FQHC.

That is the case in one county I visited. The health department there was a one-story, brick building. The white cement between the bricks still gleamed like new. An all-glass front door opened into a lobby area lined with plastic chairs. The lobby was barely ten feet wide and would not comfortably fit more than 20 adults.

The director of the department was a friendly woman. Before long our conversation reached beyond the Census to stories about our families. But when we returned to the Census topic, she walked to the back wall of her long, sun-filled office. She returned with

a colorfully-tabbed, three-ring binder. Prefaced by a table of contents was information on every health initiative for which she had received grant money and for which she had used Census data to obtain it.

She had a different initiative for each year. Her most recent health initiative was a women's health program. With grant funds, her office was able to provide mammograms and cervical screenings to dozens of women in the sparsely populated county.

But health departments are wellness centers, not hospitals nor emergency care facilities. A trip to the hospital was at least 30 miles. The next big initiative she planned was to bring an FQHC to her county.

The administrator knew she would have to show how an FQHC would serve a population large enough to justify its expense. The Census was her opportunity.

THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

In an office enclosed by walls cluttered with photos of family and past classes, I met a superintendent well-versed in the benefits of an accurate Census count.

The superintendent, always with a smile on his face, already knew the pertinent Census information he needed to provide more students free or reduced-price lunches. He knew the poverty levels needed for eligibility and knew exactly how much money his school received because of that data. In his time at the school district, he said, he more than doubled the number of students he could feed with reduced-price lunch grants because he knew how to utilize the Census data for his area.

He was looking forward to the 2010 Census because his district was on the cusp of eligibility for a government program that provided technology grants to underserved districts. An accurate count would bring him closer to eligibility.

It was an easy meeting. So many times I find myself pleading with people to just put up flyers about the Census, but this superintendent was offering the whole store. He volunteered to use his robo-dialer, usually reserved to announce school closures, to remind parents to fill out their forms. He said he already had plans to e-mail teachers and remind parents at school events. I didn't ask for it, but I may have gotten him to paint a Census logo on his forehead and wear it for a month.

It was a privilege to meet a school superintendent who cared this much. A guy like this in every town, and my job wouldn't exist.

YOU

I don't know your story, but I know you have one. You have somehow benefited from a government agency - in a general sense - knowing people live in your community. Whether it's a newly paved road or a tornado siren within earshot, you have, at some point, benefited from Census data.

The part of your story that remains unwritten is what you will do to carry this message forward. Will you e-mail co-workers and friends? Will you write a guest column for your local newspaper sharing your Census story? Will you remind the grocer, your barber, and others you see on the streets to complete their questionnaires?

The Census questionnaire will arrive on your doorstep mid-March. Some of you may have recently received a long questionnaire as part to the American Community Survey, which is also important to complete, but different from the Decennial Census. The short form being used in 2010 will make that an easy process.

Fill out your Census questionnaire. Someone you know depends on your service. □

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