



**NATIVE GOVERNANCE
CENTER**

CASE STUDY: THE 2020 CENSUS AT RED LAKE NATON

NATIVE GOVERNANCE CENTER

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SUMMARY

Mandated in the US Constitution, the census has a dismal record of undercounting certain population groups, in particular Native Americans residing on reservations. It affects federal representation and redistricting by states. It has an impact on the funding available to Native communities for investment in infrastructure, health care, education, and a host of social programs.

On top of this long-standing failure, the 2020 census faced two unprecedented challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic and political interference by the Trump administration. For Native communities across the country, the result was a net undercount of 5.64%. At Red Lake Nation in northwestern Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota), however, through outstanding leadership and a series of actions that embody Native nation rebuilding principles¹, Red Lake Nation achieved a count of 100% of known housing units. This case study looks at the context, how the census unfolded at Red Lake Nation, and key takeaways from their process.

METHODOLOGY

Native Governance Center (NGC) is a Native-led nonprofit organization serving the Native nations that share geography with Mni Sota Makoce, North Dakota, and South Dakota. This research is jointly funded by NGC and the State of Minnesota acting through its Department of Administration, Office of the State Demographer. This case study was designed by NGC staff, and primary research was conducted by Deanna StandingCloud (enrolled citizen of Red Lake Nation).

¹ Principles of Native Nation Building. (2021). Native Governance Center. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://nativegov.org/resources/principles-of-native-nation-rebuilding/>

WHY COUNT?

The 2020 census is estimated to have cost \$14.2 billion, or “roughly \$96 per household, compared to \$92 for 2010, \$80 for 2000, and \$45 for 1990 (adjusted for inflation).”² Some would argue this expense alone demands the question: why do we count?

The decennial (occurring every ten years) is mandated by the US constitution and serves several purposes:

- **Apportionment:** Apportionment is the word used in the US Constitution to describe the dividing up of the seats in the US House of Representatives between the states, based on population counts. For example, because of the results of the 2020 census, “Texas will gain two seats in the House of Representatives, five states will gain one seat each (Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon), seven states will lose one seat each (California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia), and the remaining states’ number of seats will not change...”³
- **Redistricting:** States use the census to redraw electoral district boundaries. In Minnesota, for example, while the statewide growth was 7.6%, 78% of that growth occurred in the seven-county Metro area, while some rural counties saw little or no growth, or decreased in population.⁴
- **Distribution of Resources:** The census facilitates the equitable distribution of billions of dollars in federal support in grants to states, communities, and programs.⁵ For example, public health agencies rely on census data for “just about every aspect of work, from research and surveillance to funding levels and policymaking.”⁶ These data (and sometimes their absence) have had a profound impact on the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 2020 Census: Innovations Helped with Implementation, but Bureau Can Do More to Realize Future Benefits. (2021). U.S. Government Accountability Office. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-478>

3 US Census Bureau. (2021, October 8). 2020 Census Apportionment Results Delivered to the President. Census.Gov. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-census-apportionment-results.html>

4 Brower, S. (2021). Minnesota’s Demographic and Census Overview for 2020 Redistricting [Slides]. Minnesota House of Representatives. <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/comm/docs/C3TfSEuiGkWTnghCkp9IYg.pdf>

5 US Census Bureau. (2021). Why We Conduct the Decennial Census of Population and Housing. Census.Gov. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/why.html>

6 Krisberg, K. (2020, February 1). Census count has implications for public health: Health funding, programs depend on accurate enumeration. The Nation’s Health. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://www.thenationshealth.org/content/50/1/1.1>

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From the very first US census in 1790, Native Americans have been undercounted or omitted from the enumeration. Indeed, the U.S. Constitution explicitly excluded them from the census. Beginning with the 1860 census, some Native American populations were counted and included in special schedules (separate from the general population). It was not until after the passage of the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act that Native Americans would be fully counted as part of the main population.⁷

ENUMERATION

Enumeration is a complete, ordered listing of all the items in a collection. This is important because the Census Bureau is required to count residents one-by-one, rather than by using other means to estimate the population.

2020 was thus the ninth census in which Native Americans were—theoretically—fully counted as part of the entire population of the United States. And yet, the Census Bureau estimates that Native Americans residing on reservations were undercounted in 2020 by a net 5.64% (compared with the estimated overall count accuracy- a net undercount of 0.24%).⁸ By comparison, the 2010 census undercounted Native Americans on reservations by 4.88%.⁹

The census generally tends to undercount members of BIPOC groups and to overcount the white population, further marginalizing groups already discriminated against by mainstream society and its institutions.¹⁰ The undercount of on-reservation Native Americans in 2020 was likely around 100,000, with “more than a \$300 million loss in federal funding for Indian Country annually [emphasis added].”¹¹

7 Gauthier, J. H. S. *Censuses of American Indians - History* - U.S. Census Bureau. US Census Bureau. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/censuses_of_american_indians.html

8 US Census Bureau. (2022, March). 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Estimation Report. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/coverage-measurement/pes/national-census-coverage-estimates-by-demographic-characteristics.pdf>

9 US Census Bureau. (2012, May). 2010 Census Coverage Measurement Estimation Report: Summary of Estimates of Coverage for Persons in the United States. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2010/technical-documentation/methodology/g-series/g01.pdf>

10 Chalabi, M. (2020, February 27). How the US census misses people of color – and why it’s so harmful. *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/datablog/2020/feb/27/2020-us-census-black-people-mistakes-count>

11 Schneider, M. S. J. (2022, March 12). Native Americans missed at higher rates in 2020 US Census. *Great Falls Tribune*. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://eu.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2022/03/12/native-americans-missed-at-higher-rates-in-2020-us-census/65344296007/>

2020 CENSUS

Collective memory of the 2010 census, widely recognized as damaging to Indian Country,¹² loomed large in the years leading up to 2020. National organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) invested in initiatives to educate funders and mobilize public opinion in support of an accurate count of Native Americans. For example, NCAI launched its “Indian Country Counts” project in 2017, and in February 2018, provided written testimony for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs outlining the ways in which an inaccurate census would have a negative impact on Native peoples. This impact would be felt in terms of political under-representation and the inequitable distribution of resources. The testimony points to the dramatic contrast between the proposed funding for the 2020 census in comparison with funding patterns for the 2010, 2000, and 1990 censuses.¹³

Perhaps foreshadowing the Trump administration’s general attitude towards the census, these plans to underfund the 2020 census were followed with other tactics to sabotage the count, including the attempted introduction of a citizenship question. Although the Supreme Court struck this attempt down in June 2019,¹⁴ it would continue to plague the census process.

A Freedom of Information Act request and lawsuit filed by the Brennan Center for Justice revealed systematic efforts by the administration to influence the census process throughout 2020. The administration attempted “to exert partisan influence, and make the process less transparent, while the administration was in communication with anti-immigrant groups.” It further attempted to “illegally... remove undocumented populations from the apportionment count due at the end of December 2020.”¹⁵

12 Mark Hedin, Ethnic Media Services. (2019, May 29). Reversing census undercount in Indian Country. The Bay State Banner. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://www.baystatebanner.com/2019/05/24/reversing-census-undercount-in-indian-country/>

13 Keel, J. (2018, February 12). Making Indian Country Count: Native Americans and the 2020 Census: NCAI Written Testimony for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. National Congress of American Indians. Retrieved March 25, 2022, from <https://www.ncai.org/resources/testimony/making-indian-country-count-native-americans-and-the-2020-census>

14 Department of Commerce v. New York. (n.d.). Oyez. Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2018/18-966>

15 FOIA Documents from Trump Administration on 2020 Census. (2022, March 31). Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/foia-documents-trump-administration-2020-census>

2020 CENSUS

It was in this climate of distrust and partisanship that the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the first U.S. case being confirmed in Washington State on January 20, 2020.¹⁶ While counting was planned through July 31st, the Census Bureau's response (announced April 3, 2020) would have extended the window for field data collection and self-response to October 31, 2020.¹⁷ This extension was broadly welcomed by government entities and citizens' rights groups, and nonprofits such as NCAI and NARF.¹⁸

Although this extension was initially supported by the White House, Congress refused to extend the statutory deadlines¹⁹ in order to ensure an accurate count. The Bureau abruptly reduced the extension on August 3rd by announcing September 30th as the new deadline for data collection.²⁰ This decision was condemned by numerous experts including four former directors of the Bureau, who had served under both Democratic and Republican presidents.²¹ The Bureau itself had admitted that the accelerated "Replan" posed a threat to the accuracy of the count, and on September 24th, a federal district court handed down a temporary ruling that the count would continue until a final ruling decided for or against the new deadline. The count thus continued after September 30th, and the US Ninth Circuit court refused to overrule the district court's decision. The case made it to the Supreme Court, which effectively allowed the count to stop early. The last data was collected at 11:59 PM on September 15th, Hawaii time.

16 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, January 5). COVID-19 Timeline. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>

17 U.S. Department of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham. (2021, October 8). Statement on 2020 Census Operational Adjustments Due to COVID-19. Census.Gov. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/statement-covid-19-2020.html>

18 Native American Rights Fund. (2020, April 21). NARF and NCAI Applaud Proposed Census Extension. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.narf.org/census-2020/>

19 Wang, H. L. (2020, May 27). "We're Running Out Of Time": Census Turns To Congress To Push Deadlines. National Public Radio. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-up-dates/2020/05/27/863290458/we-re-running-out-of-time-census-turns-to-congress-to-push-deadlines>

20 Statement from U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham. (2021, October 8). Delivering a Complete and Accurate 2020 Census Count. Census.Gov. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/delivering-complete-accurate-count.html>

21 Wines, M., & Fausset, R. (2020, August 5). With Census Count Finishing Early, Fears of a Skewed Tally Rise. The New York Times. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/us/2020-census-ending-early.html>

2020 CENSUS (CONTINUED)

The 2020 census was a prime example of a political power-grab.²² The Biden White House released a general “Protecting the Integrity of Government Science” white paper, which used the 2020 census as a case study. It noted that bureau employees saw it as such:

“Since census counts are used for the purpose of redistricting and reallocation of representation in the House of Representatives, these challenges to the 2020 census deadline were viewed as political interference that would undermine the integrity of the census counts.”²³

In addition to the net undercount of Native Americans living on reservations, the 2020 census has proved, overall, to be inaccurate. By the Bureau’s estimate, the “Black or African American” population was undercounted by 3.30%, the “Hispanic or Latino” population by 4.99%, and the overall population was by 782,000.²⁴



22 Narea, N. (2020, October 15). The census deadline is now October 15. Trump wanted to cut it short. Here’s why the census matters. Vox. Retrieved April 7, 2022, from <https://www.vox.com/21502550/trump-census-2020-covid-deadline>

23 National Science and Technology Council. (2022, January). Protecting the Integrity of Government Science. WhiteHouse.gov. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/01-22-Protecting_the_Integrity_of_Government_Science.pdf

24 US Census Bureau. (2022, March). 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Estimation Report. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/de-cennial/coverage-measurement/pes/national-census-coverage-estimates-by-demographic-characteristics.pdf>

MNI SOTA MAKOCE

Mni Sota Makoce reported the highest overall self-response rate in the nation during the 2010 census, but this rate was uneven. Native voices were particularly excluded. Aware of this and wanting to achieve a more accurate count in 2020, the Minnesota Council of Foundations (MCF), supported by Minnesota State Demographer Susan Brower, took the lead in forming the Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership (MCMP) and Tribal Nations/Native Communities Hub (HUB). The stated goals for the MCMP were:

- “Promote participation in the 2020 census in Minnesota, with a focus on reducing gaps in participation in historically undercounted communities,
- Promote strategies to engage historically undercounted communities that also develop sustainable civic engagement capacity,
- Create community-based strategies or organizational structures to lead ongoing, nonpartisan advocacy for the census, American Community Survey (ACS), and other democracy-building causes, and
- Engage Minnesota grantmakers in democracy-building.”²⁵

The HUB was co-chaired by Native Governance Center’s executive director, Wayne Ducheneaux II, and Shelly Diaz, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. While all of the eleven Native nations in Minnesota are sovereign nations, each is historically and culturally unique. Thus, “the strategies and tactics to encourage community members to participate in the census varied greatly.”²⁶ Having met for the first time in mid-2019, by early 2020 the HUB was convening monthly to share best practices and resources.

Native Governance Center (NGC) supported the work of the HUB and Complete Count Committee coordinators by leaning on its relationships with institutional funders and Native leaders. NGC:

- Mobilized funding from the Blandin Foundation and the Northwest Area Foundation directly to support Census work.

²⁵ Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership. (2022, May 1). 2020 Census: A story of unprecedented perseverance, purpose and impact in Minnesota. Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership 2020. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://mcmp2020.org/>

²⁶ Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership. (2022, May 1). 2020 Census: A story of unprecedented perseverance, purpose and impact in Minnesota. Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership 2020. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://mcmp2020.org/>

MNI SOTA MAKOCE (CONTINUED)

- Convened monthly meetings of the HUB to problem solve and share best practices.
- Participated in Minnesota Indian Affairs Council meetings to engage directly with Tribal leaders about the census work and to reinforce the importance of the mission of the HUB.
- Helped coordinate the launch of Minnesota Census Pow Wow Day.
- Provided funding for Complete Count Committees in nine of the eleven Native nations in the state.
- Co-hosted a Facebook Live session with Native Roots Radio on the Census.
- Helped form the Minnesota Tribal Coalition for Civic Engagement, made up of individual Tribal census coordinators, in an effort to promote “get out the vote” initiatives.
- Produced an animated explainer video, “Participation in the Census is an Act of Sovereignty,”²⁷ which was shared via e-mail and on its website, and viewed thousands of times across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.



²⁷ Native Governance Center. (2020, April 8). The 2020 Census: An Act of Sovereignty. YouTube. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkabu8mzniY>

RED LAKE NATION

“That’s what was stopping me from participating...the government wants to know, and I’m like, screw the government, that kind of thing.” (Christin Jordan)

The 2010 census produced a dramatic undercount for Red Lake Nation.²⁸ In 2017, Red Lake challenged the data’s use by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to calculate the Indian Housing Block Grant and won.²⁹

In 2018, with this in mind and with the 2020 census approaching, the Red Lake Nation Tribal Council approved a resolution to form a Complete Count Committee under the leadership of the Red Lake Economic Development & Planning (EDP) department. (Complete Count Committees are volunteer committees established to increase awareness about the census and motivate residents in the community to respond).³⁰

MN TRIBAL NATIONS HUB

The EDP participated in the Minnesota Tribal Nations/Native Communities HUB, which was formed by the the Minnesota Council of Foundations, supported by the Minnesota State Demographer’s Office, and co-chaired by Native Governance Center’s executive director, Wayne Ducheneaux.

28 McInerney, A. (2021, April 28). From zero to 100: Red Lake leaders achieve complete census count ›. Blandin Foundation. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://blandinfoundation.org/blog/2020/12/from-zero-to-100-red-lake-leaders-achieve-complete-census-count/>

29 Bartecchi, D. (2021, August 29). Millions more for reservation housing after Red Lake Band of Chippewa and Village Earth challenge Federal Census data. Village Earth. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://villageearth.org/millions-more-for-reservation-housing-after-red-lake-band-of-chippewa-and-village-earth-challenge-federal-census-data/>

30 Minnesota State Demographic Center. (2018, June). Organizing Complete Count Committees. https://mn.gov/admin/assets/CCC%20workbook_6-7-18a_tcm36-341880.pdf



OBSTACLES TO THE COUNT

From the start, the Red Lake EDP faced several challenges, including general characteristics of what the census bureau calls “Hard-to-Count” populations, difficulties in recruiting census workers from among Red Lake citizens, and the unique characteristics of Red Lake as a closed reservation.

“Hard-to-Count” Populations

Red Lake Nation and its citizens share many characteristics in common with other Native American and “Hard-to-Count” populations, such as high mobility rates, an historical mistrust of the federal government, geographical challenges, and language barriers.^{31 32 33} According to census bureau research, the EDP faced an uphill battle against a “belief profile” unique to Native Americans, who are

“much more likely than other groups to express skepticism about the use and purposes of the census and the security of census data, and they were the only group for which agreement that it is important for everyone to be counted was lower than 90%.”

Difficulty Recruiting Red Lakers as Census Employees

The Census Bureau and community leaders have long been aware that census workers drawn from the communities they are set to count are more effective than outsiders, because of the trust issues discussed above.^{34 35} Recruiting Red Lake Nation citizens proved especially difficult, and the census bureau was not able to hire sufficient census takers for the door-to-door counting. Potential hires needed to have adequate transportation in order, for example, to be fingerprinted as census workers.³⁶

31 Carol Chiago Lujan. (2014). American Indians and Alaska Natives Count: The US Census Bureau’s Efforts to Enumerate the Native Population. *American Indian Quarterly*, 38(3), 319–341.

32 O’Hare, W. (2019, October 21). 2020 Census Faces Challenges in Rural America. Carsey School of Public Policy | UNH. Retrieved April 12, 2022, from <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/2020-census>

33 Loud, J. (2018, July). Oshkiimaajitahdah Program Narrative January 1, 2017–December 31, 2017. Bureau of Indian Affairs. https://www.bia.gov/sites/bia.gov/files/Red%20Lake.AR_.2016%20to%202017.Nar%20and%20Stat%20Comp%20508.pdf

34 US Census Bureau. (2009b, May). Tribal Governments Liaison Program. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2009/dec/D-3232.pdf>

35 Susan Brower (Minnesota State Demographer) interviewed December 10, 2021.

36 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

OBSTACLES

And while the census bureau offered virtual training modules (in response to the pandemic), these were not accessible to individuals with poor (or no) internet connection, computers, or smartphones.³⁷

Red Lake Reservation a Closed Reservation

Finally, the Red Lake Reservation is a closed reservation, meaning all its land is owned in common by its enrolled Tribal citizens, and very few non-members live there. Furthermore, Red Lake Nation is exempt from Public Law 280,³⁸ and state courts and government have no jurisdiction. The Tribal government has full sovereignty over the reservation with the right to limit who can visit the reservation, a privilege not automatically granted to non-members.³⁹ These distinctions, together with a lived experience that engenders mistrust of outsiders generally, and government agents especially, does not ease the census challenges. As Chairman Seki put it about his fellow Red Lake citizens, “...they don’t like to be invaded by non-members [and are] always are concerned when they see strange vehicles.”⁴⁰



³⁷ Wayne Ducheneaux II (Executive Director, Native Governance Center), interviewed March 23, 2022

³⁸ Native Governance Center. (2021, October 21). It's Time to End Public Law 280. Retrieved April 12, 2022, from <https://nativegov.org/news/its-time-to-end-public-law-280/>

³⁹ Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. (n.d.). Miskwaagamiiwi-Zaagaiganing / Red Lake Nation. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://mn.gov/indianaffairs/redlake-iac.html>

⁴⁰ Darrell Seki (Chairman, Red Lake Nation), interviewed September 20, 2021.

THE COUNT AT RED LAKE

Supported by key leadership, staff, and community members who were “passionate” about the census and understood its importance,⁴¹ the RLN Economic Development and Planning department (EDP) was responsible for communicating the importance of the census and encouraging Tribal members on the reservation to complete the census questionnaire. In addition to using social media channels to message Tribal citizens about the census, the EDP spent the early weeks of 2020 planning the statewide Census Pow Wow. During this event, scheduled for March 21st, Native nations across Minnesota planned to recognize and mark the importance of the census. Shelly Diaz, co-chair of the Tribal Census HUB described the Census Pow Wow as follows: “Through drum and dance, we pray and celebrate the census and indigenize it...We will make this OUR census while sharing our culture with all.”⁴²

Alas, it was not to be. When the first COVID-19 case in Minnesota was confirmed on March 6th,⁴³ Red Lake Nation moved to adopt measures that would protect its citizens. Native Americans have proved especially vulnerable to the virus,⁴⁴ and of particular concern was the population of older, Native language speakers.⁴⁵

As the scope of the risk became more apparent, RLN declared medical martial law,⁴⁶ which came into effect on April 3 and was to be in effect for 15 days. It remained in place until May 11, 2021.⁴⁷

The measures of the law were rigorous. Residents of the reservation were quarantined to their homes and yards; limited in their movement to only shop for

41 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

42 McInerney, A. (2020, March 10). Indigenizing the Census: Minnesota tribal communities collaborate for a strong Census 2020 count ». Blandin Foundation. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://blandinfoundation.org/blog/2020/03/indigenizing-the-census-minnesota-tribal-communities-organize-for-a-strong-census-2020-count/>

43 Minnesota Department of Health. (2020, March 6). News release: Health officials confirm first case of novel coronavirus in Minnesota. Retrieved April 13, 2022, from <https://www.health.state.mn.us/news/pressrel/2020/covid19030620.html>

44 Williams, R. L. (2021, December 2). Native American Deaths from COVID-19 Highest Among Racial Groups. Princeton School of Public and International Affairs. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://spia.princeton.edu/news/native-american-deaths-covid-19-highest-among-racial-groups>

45 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

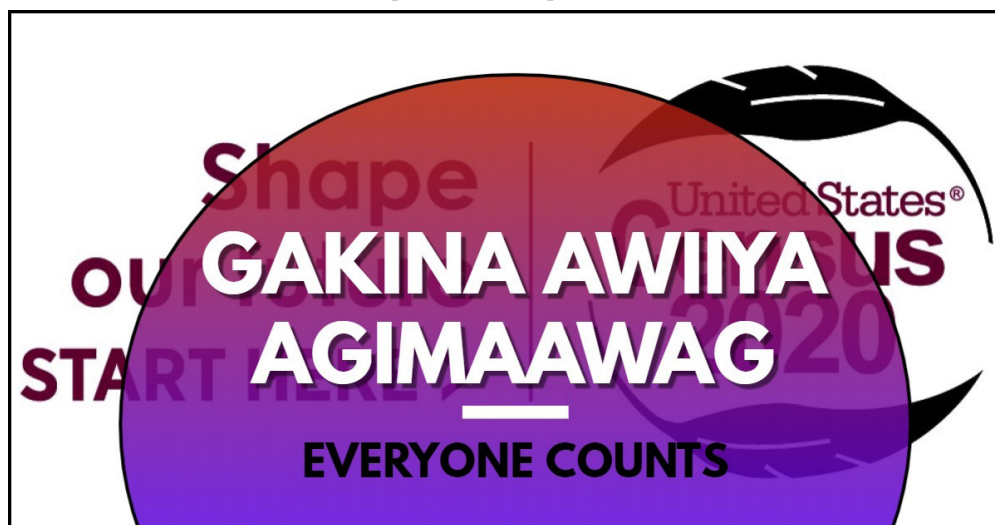
46 Native News Online. (2020, April 7). In Effort to Stop Spread of COVID-19, Red Lake Nation Under Medical Martial Law. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://nativenewsonline.net/health/in-effort-to-stop-spread-of-covid-19-red-lake-nation-under-medical-martial-law>

47 Olson, H. (2021, May 20). Red Lake Nation lifts medical martial law after more than a year - Bemidji Pioneer | News, weather and sports from Bemidji, Minnesota. Bemidji Pioneer. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://www.bemidjipioneer.com/news/red-lake-nation-lifts-medical-martial-law-after-more-than-a-year>

THE COUNT

food and necessities, care for elders and vulnerable persons, and attend medical appointments; permitted to travel to and from employment (if determined to be an essential employee); and subject to a nightly 10:00 PM to 6:00 AM curfew. Furthermore, non-essential meetings and gatherings were canceled. Essential meetings or gatherings were limited to ten persons, and all travel to and from the Reservation was strictly monitored and limited to essential travel only.⁴⁸

The statewide Census Pow Wow was canceled, and though the EDP redoubled their communications efforts across social media platforms and continued the three-month census challenge, the census count at RLN remained in single digits.⁴⁹ The Census Bureau was putting pressure on the EDP to allow outside enumerators onto the reservation,⁵⁰ but the medical martial law remained in place. The Tribal Council was not willing to risk the lives of its most vulnerable citizens to comply with the inflexibility of a federal agency. Susan Brower, Minnesota State Demographer explains: “The census bureau wanted to do it their way and wasn’t really making any reasonable changes based on what the Tribal members and the Council wanted to make it safe for [Red Lake] members.”⁵¹



This isn't an error: Red Lake census staff intentionally placed Ojibwe language on this census ad to reinforce cultural match and ensure the ads resonated with the community..

48 Chairman Darrell G. Seki. (2020, April). Executive Order: Medical Marshall Law. Red Lake Nation. <https://www.redlakenation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Executive-Order-Medical-Martial-Law-04032020.pdf>

49 Wayne Ducheneaux II (Executive Director, Native Governance Center), interviewed March 23, 2022

50 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed April 8, 2022.

51 Susan Brower (Minnesota State Demographer) interviewed December 10, 2021.

THE COUNT (CONTINUED)

Alisha Gehlert (EDP department director) and Elizabeth White (EDP office manager), who were leading the EDP's census drive, worked to imagine effective and practicable new approaches. Their first breakthrough tactic, launched September 15th, was a series of pop-up, drive-through census events, where the atmosphere was celebratory and community-centered. At these events, after completing the census questionnaire, attendees

"received a census bag filled with swag, received a t-shirt, [were] entered into a drawing where they could win artwork from local artists that included beadwork, apparel, and framed art...electronics such as ear buds and cameras, gift cards to Target, Amazon...appliances such as pots/pans sets, popcorn machine with all ingredients (popcorn, oil, variety of toppings/seasonings) and electric frying pan/griddles, etc..."⁵²

The second breakthrough tactic, approved by the Tribal Council on September 16th, was the payment of \$20 gift cards (redeemable at the Tribally-run trading post) to Tribal citizens who completed their questionnaires.⁵³ While these incentives had a positive impact, it was not until the EDP introduced their final breakthrough tactic that the participation accelerated dramatically.

*"We're going to get Red Lakers to go with them, and they're going to knock on the door. Community members engaging with other community members. This is going to be amazing."⁵⁴
(Alisha Gehlert, Red Lake Nation Director of Economic Development and Planning)*

In mid-September, Gehlert and White remained worried about the impending deadline, which had been moved forward from the end of October to September 30th. As they considered, yet again, the tactics already employed, the necessary absence of outside census workers, and what else might be available to them, they hit upon a new and radical idea.

⁵² Elizabeth White (former Office Manager for Department of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), e-mail correspondence May 11, 2022.

⁵³ Elizabeth White (former Office Manager for Department of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), e-mail correspondence April 19, 2022.

⁵⁴ Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

THE COUNT

This idea would require the approval of Red Lake Nation's Chairman, Darrell G. Seki, Sr. It was already after regular office hours but, looking out the window and seeing Chairman Seki's car still in the parking lot, they ran through the government center toward his office. Entering his office, they rapidly explained their new idea. To illustrate the idea, they asked the Chairman to enact a skit with them, in which he played a reluctant resident visited by an outside census worker. Gehlert and White impersonated the census worker and an accompanying Red Lake citizen.

The idea was new but simple, and would address both the public health concern about outsiders roaming freely within RLN's borders, and the long-standing Red Lake distrust of outsiders and the government. If the Chairman would agree, census workers would be allowed on the reservation, but only if each were accompanied by a Red Lake citizen. Chairman Seki was immediately taken by the idea, and gave his blessing—but with the absolute qualification that, "As long as there's a Red Laker with every single one of those drivers, it's okay."⁵⁵ The EDP was thus able to get around the obstacles to regular census employment for Red Lake citizens (inaccessible training, lack of transportation), provide a good wage for a group of accompanying riders, and satisfy the Tribal Council's public safety requirements.



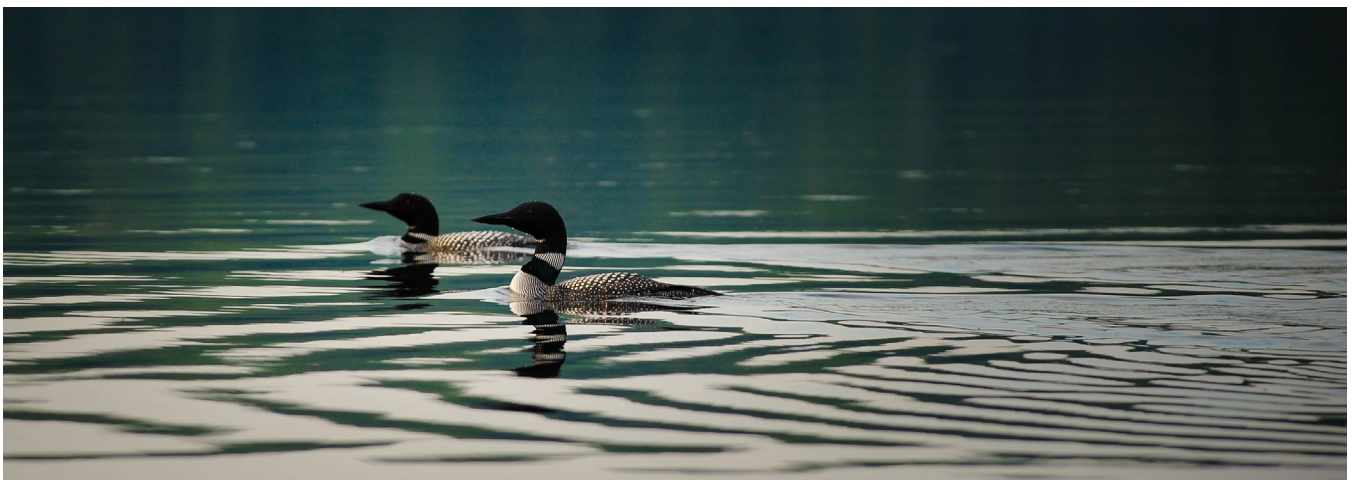
⁵⁵ Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

THE COUNT (CONTINUED)

Deeply concerned about the deadline, Gehlert and White knew there was no time to waste. They worked with the Chairman's staff to create an ad hoc day labor program. Gehlert reached out to State Demographer Susan Brower who, while equally excited about this new approach, had limited funds available, and, for which, the process of granting to RLN would be complicated and too slow. Brower, in turn, reached out to Wayne Ducheneaux at Native Governance Center. NGC was able to quickly secure funding and provide it so that this new tactic could begin immediately.⁵⁶

On the opening day of the new program, Gehlert didn't know if any Red Lakers would show up to ride alongside census workers, or how the census workers themselves would respond to the innovation. That morning, 18 Red Lake citizens presented themselves as riders and were sworn in as census employees, meaning they were committed to the same level of confidentiality as the enumerators. The program ran for 11 days with as many as between 19 and 29 co-riders present (with the exception of the final day, October 15th, when only two were required).

The results were impressive. By October 1st, 70% of known households had been counted. By the end of October 15th, Red Lake Nation could proudly boast a 100% count.⁵⁷



⁵⁶ Wayne Ducheneaux II (Executive Director, Native Governance Center), interviewed March 23, 2022

⁵⁷ McInerney, A. (2021, April 28). From zero to 100: Red Lake leaders achieve complete census count >. Blandin Foundation. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://blandinfoundation.org/blog/2020/12/from-zero-to-100-red-lake-leaders-achieve-complete-census-count/>

NATIVE NATION REBUILDING

“We’re our own nation.” (Alisha Gehlert)

“Red Lakers don’t really like non-Red Lakers showing up.” (Sarah White)

Red Lake Nation’s unparalleled success in the 2020 Census exemplifies the five “Native nation rebuilding” principles, which characterize a successful approach to governing. These principles were identified through several decades’ worth of research by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. The successful Native nation’s assertion of sovereignty (1) is supported by strong governance institutions (2); governs in a way that matches its own Indigenous culture (3); possesses spirited leaders who act as changemakers (4); and has a strategic orientation, in which decision-making focuses on long-term benefits rather than immediate gains.⁵⁸ The research provides numerous examples of where successful Tribal governments—characterized by the nation rebuilding principles—lead to improved outcomes for their citizens across a range of metrics.

Native Governance Center believes that Red Lake Nation’s census campaign was characterized by all five of these principles. The Native nation rebuilding framework is an effective way of understanding how Native nations can achieve great results for their people, and can help to illuminate the strategies that are key takeaways for other nations. The census campaign showed Red Lake Nation:

- **Asserting its sovereignty:** Enforcing its medical martial law in the face of census bureau pressure was an act of sovereignty Red Lake used to protect its citizens. In addition, this act of sovereignty yielded a new census taking model that, even in the absence of a pandemic, would have been more effective at achieving a complete count.⁵⁹ The enforcement included the expulsion from the reservation of one enumerator who refused to count alongside a Red Laker and attempted to enumerate alone in defiance of Red Lake Nation’s law.⁶⁰
- **Utilizing strong governance institutions:** Elected Red Lake leaders supported the innovative measures with legislative approval and funding, and allowed administrative staff to execute the plans.⁶¹

58 Jorgensen, M. (2007). *Rebuilding native nations: Strategies for governance and development*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

59 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed April 8, 2022.

60 Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

61 Sam Strong (Secretary, Red Lake Nation) interviewed December 16, 2021.

REBUILDING (CONTINUED)

- Red Lake Nation's robust administrative infrastructure allowed staff to conceive and implement the breakthrough tactics. Stable working relationships with other governmental authorities (MN State Demographer) and organizations (Native Governance Center) helped Red Lake solve the "puzzle."⁶²
- **Employing Cultural Match:** From the start, Red Lake sought solutions that would work at RLN—rather than looking to outside expertise. For example, rather than relying on standard Bureau collateral, EDP then-Office Manager Elizabeth White designed marketing pieces with Ojibwe language and imagery that would resonate more with Red Lake citizens.⁶³ The use of prizes (and later) gift cards was an extension of the deep-rooted tradition of gift giving in Anishinaabe culture^{64 65} and "a little thing...to honor their time."⁶⁶ These also served to counter the perception of outsiders "taking" from Red Lakers: extracting land, extracting resources, extracting knowledge.⁶⁷

EXTRACTION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Settler colonialists have long stolen land, resources (minerals, food sources, water, air, etc.), and information from Native people.

- **Possessing Spirited Leadership:** Chairman Seki, Secretary Sam Strong (who oversaw the Economic Planning and Development Department), and the Tribal Council understood the importance of the census to Red Lake and supported the EDP in its efforts. EDP staff, in turn, were able to mobilize support from among the community, demonstrating the leadership that recognizes the need for change and is able to effect it.
- **Strategically-Oriented:** The census is resource-consuming in terms of time and funds. But in focusing on the medium- and long-term benefits of an accurate count, Tribal leadership made the strategic decision to invest in the census.

⁶² Susan Brower (Minnesota State Demographer) interviewed December 10, 2021.

⁶³ Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

⁶⁴ Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

⁶⁵ Minnesota Historical Society. (n.d.). Gift-giving Practices. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.mnhs.org/furpost/learn/gift-giving>

⁶⁶ Darrell Seki (Chairman, Red Lake Nation), interviewed September 20, 2021.

⁶⁷ Darrell Seki (Chairman, Red Lake Nation), interviewed September 20, 2021.

IMPACT

As discussed above, an accurate count ensures equitable allocation of resources, which will be used to improve the quality of life of citizens. Using the estimate of \$2,800 in funding per Tribal citizen per year,⁶⁸ the undercount (had it remained at the early September levels) might have deprived RLN upwards of \$200,000,000 over ten years.

In addition, it is a well-publicized fact that Minnesota retained its eight seats in the House of Representatives by an eyebrow-raising 89 individuals counted.⁶⁹ Without in any way discounting the hard work and achievements of census and auxiliary workers across the state, and the millions of Minnesotans who were counted, the thousands of Red Lakers who were counted in the final days of the census were indispensable to the retention of the state's congressional seats.

The utility of our system of democracy, where the interests of the people are, in theory, represented in government, depends at least partially on proportional representation. The more accurate the representation, the more equitable the decision-making processes in the legislative branch.



⁶⁸ Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership. (2022, May 1). 2020 Census: A story of unprecedented perseverance, purpose and impact in Minnesota. Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership 2020. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://mcmp2020.org/>

⁶⁹ Montgomery, D. H., Nelson, T., & Bakst, B. (2021, April 27). Census: Minnesota keeps all 8 U.S. House seats, barely. MPR News. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/04/26/census-to-reveal-whether-minnesota-will-lose-house-seat>

RECOMMENDATIONS

States, Census Bureau, and Institutional Funders

The census in Indian Country involves many stakeholders aside from the citizens to be counted. State and local governments, the Census Bureau, and institutional funders all have an interest in achieving an accurate enumeration. For these groups, we have identified several approaches that were key to success at Red Lake Nation in 2020, and which we believe should inform the strategy of future censuses:

Honor Tribal sovereignty.

External stakeholders need to be prepared to equip Native nations with the resources they need to achieve the count, and to let the Native nations conduct their complete count campaigns in ways that will be effective. Rather than restricting Native nations, funders should “let us decide how we need to use the money to get done what we need to get done.”⁷⁰

Do your research.

Government entities, nonprofits, and funders will realize results if they “understand our [Native] culture and traditions.”⁷¹

Fund community-based leaders who are trusted and deeply involved in the local counting effort to achieve results.

As State Demographer Susan Brower says, “I really think having members of the Tribe and having members of the community who care and who are funded...is critical.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Alisha Gehlert (former Director of Economic Planning and Development, Red Lake Nation), interviewed October 26, 2021.

⁷¹ Darrell Seki (Chairman, Red Lake Nation), interviewed September 20, 2021.

⁷² Susan Brower (Minnesota State Demographer) interviewed December 10, 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Native Nations, Nonprofits, and Community Groups

When asked what the experience at RLN had to offer other Native nations, Chairman Seki replied that his experience was limited to his own nation and that he would not presume to dictate to peer leaders in other nations. NGC understands that no two Native nations are alike, and following our core value of honoring sovereignty, we do not offer these recommendations in any spirit of instruction. Rather, we are simply highlighting those factors and activities that we believe to have been most effective at bringing about Red Lake's complete count in 2020, and which will improve the 2030 enumeration process.

Begin early.

Census experts, as well as those intimately involved with RLN's count, repeatedly stress the importance of beginning the communications campaign early. While the official period of self-reporting and follow-up counting may seem lengthy, in practice it is often insufficient.

Cultivate agility, but be prepared to pivot.

Planning is important but inflexibility will be damaging.

Identify allies wherever they can be found.

Ideas include individuals within the Census Bureau, State and local governments, and nonprofit organizations that can help focus energy and coalesce resources around your goals.

Honor Tribal sovereignty.

Supporting partners to Native nations need to honor Tribal sovereignty by recognizing the nations' right to determine how their people will be counted.

Native Governance Center is a Native-led nonprofit dedicated to assisting Native nations in strengthening their governance systems and capacity to exercise sovereignty. We serve Native nations that share geography with Mni Sota Makoce, North Dakota, and South Dakota.



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