

The Net Undercount of Young Children in the Census: 1950 to 2010

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Despite evidence that young children (under age 5) have had relatively high net undercount rates in the U.S. Census at least since 1950, and many other countries have experienced high net undercount rates for young children, this issue has received very little attention among demographers. This study starts to address that gap by providing data on the undercount of young children in the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census and comparing the results of the 2010 Census to the results of earlier U.S. Decennial Censuses. The study focuses on the results of Demographic Analysis, which compares the Census count to independent population estimates based on births, deaths and net international migration and is widely believed to be the best method for assessing census coverage for young children.

The 2010 Demographic Analysis results show that young children (under age 5) have a net undercount rate of 4.6 percent which is higher than any other age group. As a point of comparison, the net undercount of young children in 2010 (about 970,000) is significantly larger than that of black adult men (age 20-54) which is often the focus of attention for those examining census undercounts. Moreover the net undercount rate for young black (alone or in combination) and young Hispanic children is significantly higher than the total undercount rate for this age group. The high net undercount for young children contrasts with an overcount of children age 14-17.

The net undercount rate for young children fell from 1950 to 1980, but since 1980 the net undercount rate for young children has increased consistently and substantially while that for adults has continued to decline.

The results of this study indicate that all children under age 18 should not be seen as a homogenous group with regard to net undercounts and overcounts. The study also suggests that households with young black or young Hispanic children should be a key focus in planning the 2020 Census.