Count Me Out

By Tom Barron

I became a cog in a human data collection machine and got a front-door glimpse of America in the process.

When I first signed up to be a census "enumerator," one of thousands tasked with gathering population data from households that hadn't responded to earlier queries, I was excited by the chance to do something other than wring my hands at the polarized state of American Democracy. This was in early 2020, when the call went out for census workers nationwide as part of the once-a-decade push to count everyone living on American soil. I responded to one such ad, and after a quick phone call to confirm my interest, and a subsequent trip to Elmira to prove my citizenship and have my photo taken for the all-important census badge, I was ready to do my part. I was told to anticipate a week of training in late March, with census work beginning shortly after.

We all know what happened next. The entire effort was put on pause as the nation, and the world, grappled with the ferocious spread of the Covid-19 virus through the spring. The Census receded into the background and seemed undoable given the pandemic.

So I was surprised by a voicemail in July asking whether I was still interested. Though I had seen some news articles about how the Census count was in peril, I wasn't keen on the idea of knocking on strangers' doors under the new circumstances, so I ignored the call. But the calls kept coming, once a week or so, over the next month. My conscience began to tug at me as it became increasingly clear that the Census Bureau was having trouble finding enough workers for the job. I reconsidered, and in late August, along with a handful of socially distant trainees, I swore an oath to the Constitution of the United States to help collect the count.

Like everything else in the Covid era, the training was not what was originally envisioned. Rather than a week in a classroom, my fellow trainees and I received a half day of in-person training, much of it devoted to paperwork, followed by 12 or so hours of online training. This featured teeth-gritting powerpoints on how to sound pleasant, dress appropriately, and coax information from reluctant households, and a series of videos featuring an attractive young actor who looked suspiciously like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez going about the various tasks of an enumerator. Training also involved getting acquainted with the iPhone we were to use to navigate to target households and collect Census information. A crudely designed app provided a script for enumerators to read to those who answer the door, and depending on how respondents answered, successive screens with additional questions. The training culminated in a conference call in which I and other enumerators were put through our paces by my new supervisor, a

friendly gentleman named Bob. He was a former trucking company manager who soon found himself managing more than two dozen enumerators remotely.

It was during this conference call, where Bob was posing as a reluctant respondent while I tapped away on the phone app, where I first began to realize both the limitations of the scripted approach and the surprising volume of information the Census seeks. This was a lot more than a simple count of the population: Names, birthdates, genders, race and ethnicity are all sought by the Bureau, for reasons never made quite clear in materials. We were trained repeatedly to assure respondents that their personally identifiable information, "PII" in Census jargon, would be kept confidential, and even state that the Census Bureau would never share the information with other federal agencies. For those concerned about confidentiality – frankly, who isn't in these days of server hacks and data dumps – this didn't seem very comforting.

And the script was embarrassingly clunky, to be generous: stiff, formal, and a touch pedantic, undoubtedly written by bureaucrats. For instance, it required the enumerator to ask a total of three times about the number of people living in the household on Census Day, this past April Fool's Day. In case the respondent wasn't sure what it means to not be living in the household, the script provided a laundry list of examples: staying with a relative, visiting friends out of state, on vacation, etc. Certainly the verbiage was meant as merely a guide, I hoped. Nope. When I tried to paraphrase a particularly wordy question to my pretend-respondent supervisor during my capstone, his response was swift and unequivocal: stick to the script.

Fair enough. I set out from my home turf in Newfield on my first day, confident that despite the ugly national mood and a deadly contagion, I could at least try to help make the Census count as accurate as possible. That morning, I had awoken to a list of "cases" -- households that had not completed the Census -- along with addresses that had been deemed "dangerous" and therefore to be avoided. True, there weren't many, but that there were any provided a sheen of nobility to my task as I made my way to the first case, a rural address no more than a half mile from my house. I marched confidently down the driveway, sporting a business casual getup strongly hinted at in training, the badge held around my neck by a "Census"-emblazoned lanyard, and a cheap nylon satchel slung over my shoulder with a larger "Census" emblem, in case anyone missed the memo. There I stopped, flummoxed. We had been told to seek the front door of residences, sticking to marked pathways, and shun any other entrances. But in this case, the pathway to the front door was an overgrown bramble and the front door itself looked like it hadn't been used since the late 1970's. It turns out that, if not the norm, this is an all-too-often reality of Tompkins County households: The front door is for strangers, and the real entrance is somewhere else. By the same token, I discovered that ringing a doorbell is in most cases about as effective as pounding sand. It is either nonfunctional or a signal to occupants that someone not

in-the-know is at the door. And since I wasn't offering girl scout cookies, the signal was not infrequently met with silence.

When someone did appear at a door, I launched into my script with my trained smile. But as awkward and long-winded as it was, it wasn't long before I was skipping some of the more pedantic blather and repeated questions while trying to hurry things along. Many looked on in amusement as I fussed my way through radio buttons and scrollwheels in the app to plug in the data, though others were less charmed by my struggle. What might have taken five minutes with a clipboard and pen took twice as long with the app, which appeared to have been designed by a pure novice. Was that by design, I couldn't help but wonder? After all, the 2020 Census has been a political football since you-know-who took office.

Nevertheless, I persisted. But just as I started to hit my stride, a new headache emerged: The Bureau's demand for "proxies." Imagine receiving a knock on your door from a census worker who explains -- through the plodding script of the app -- that he is seeking information on a neighboring household that has not been reachable. If you agree to provide it, that makes you a proxy for your neighbor. Now imagine being asked for the full names -- including middle names -- birthdates, genders, race and ethnic heritage of your neighbors. You don't know your neighbors' birthdates? The Bureau thinks you might. How about your neighbors'ethnic heritage? Does your neighbor own or rent? Does he own it free and clear? At this point in an interview, people who volunteered for this nosy expedition into their neighbors' business are often shocked, and some shut down completely -- even retracting what they've shared. In any case, after a proxy is done providing the goods on his/her neighbor (and might feel the need for a shower), the enumerator is prompted to ask them for their name and number, in case the Bureau wants to follow up. "Why didn't you ask me my name up front?" one irritated proxy asked me. Touche. Just following a script, I sheepishly replied.

Through September, as I found my way to ramshackle country cabins, splendiferous McMansions, Fall Creek houses, Collegetown apartments, even a treehouse someone had once called home, another issue gradually emerged. Call it "enumerator fatigue," though the exhaustion was only partly mine. Respondents who had already spoken with one, two, as many as a half-dozen previous enumerators, began appearing on my case lists. Instead of, "Can I help you?" I was increasingly greeted with, "Not again! Why do you people keep coming back?" I had no ready answer; usually, I had never been there before myself. The app had served up the address, and I was trying to stick to the script.

It gradually became clear that the rigid software, littered with radio buttons but unable to match reality as it unfolded on the doorstep, and the fact that enumerators are often assigned an entirely new slate of addresses each day, undermining any day-to-day continuity in the effort to close a

case, conspired to keep cases alive despite many on-site visits by enumerators like me. Our one refuge was a screen called “Case Notes,” where we wrote details we hoped would help the next person assigned to an unfruitful address. There I would sometimes find a phone number left by a previous enumerator and make a call to a landlord that he or she had failed to connect with. Often, I too came up short with that approach. Or I reached a landlord at wits end from being called by a rotating cast of enumerators. You could say the appeal of the job was beginning to wane at that point.

Were there dangers? In one instance, I stood accused of being a midday prowler, my badge dismissed as fake, and ordered to leave with such disdain that I kept an eye over my shoulder as I left. Once or twice, I was warned off properties with a string of profanities, and I occasionally recused myself from more treacherous-looking habitats -- the kind that no one should be living in. Still, most respondents were polite, and there were enjoyable encounters to be had: The widow living in a tidy trailer who shared memories of central Florida from the early 70s, where I was growing up; the mixed race family that thanked me repeatedly for doing my job; the masked six-year-old who cautioned me to step further back before summoning her parents; the landlord who, despite being pestered by numerous enumerators, maintained a cheerful attitude; the proxies who were willing to help close a case; finding the treehouse that had eluded others.

But as the number of cases began to dwindle, the negative aspects of the job grew larger. Instead of a list of cases each morning, there would be a text message from Bob to “keep syncing your phones” in hopes that some cases would come down the pipe from Syracuse, our regional headquarters. Instead of the five-hour work shift I had planned, I might only get enough cases for three hours. Then two. “Is it me?” I asked Bob? “Nah, it’s all screwed up,” he replied. “Hang in there.”

By the end of September, the caseload in Upstate New York had slowed to a trickle, unlike other parts of the country where there were many still to be counted, and the residences that were still uncounted had defied as many as 10 previous efforts. The futility --not to mention fear -- of knocking on doors knowing they had been knocked on many times before became overpowering. I was one of seven still remaining in Bob’s crew when I decided I’d had enough. I met him in person for the first time while handing back the phone in a mall parking lot. Bob said I could keep the satchel. “Nice job,” he added.

The next day, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Trump Administration could end the count a month earlier than planned. I couldn’t help but wonder if any of the justices were the target of my kind.

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