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The Pervasive Nature of Under-Reporting Young Children in Official Data

By

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As we start to prepare for the dissemination of the 2020 Census data, it is a good time remind ourselves of the extent to which young children are missed or overlooked in many official data collection activities. In the 2010 Census, young children (ages 0 to 4) had a higher net undercount (4.6 percent) than any other age group. But in some ways that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Not only are young children undercounted in the U.S. Census at a higher rate than any other age group, but they are also under-reported in U.S. Census Bureau surveys (such as the American Community Survey, Current Population Survey of Survey of Income and Program Participation) at a higher rate than other age groups. In addition, the most recent data available indicate young children are under-represented at a higher rate than other age groups in the administrative records used by the Census Bureau. Finally, the under-reporting of young children is not just a problem in the U.S. Census. The undercount of young children in Censuses is seen in many different countries.

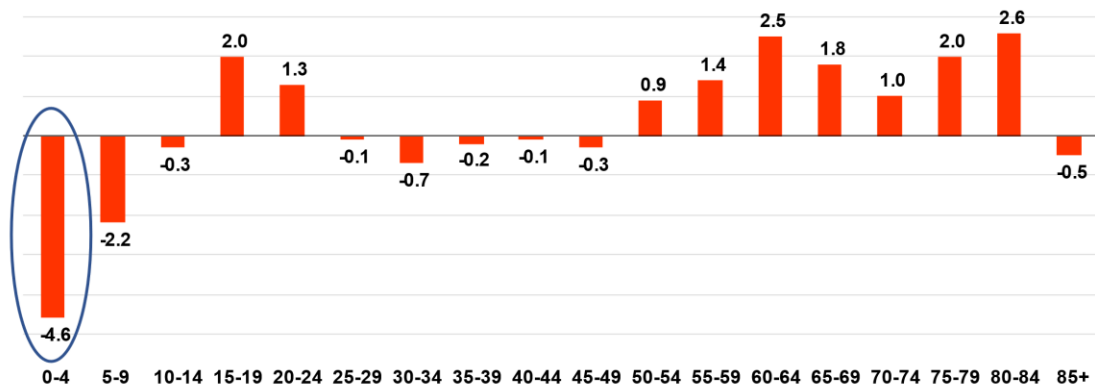
This short paper provides evidence for the points made above and provides citations for more detailed data on each point.

The figure below shows that young children had a net undercount of 4.6 percent in the 2010 U.S. Census, which is much higher than any other age group. A net undercount rate of 4.6 percent means the census count was 4.6 percent less than the

true number. The age group with the next highest net undercount rate was youngish children (ages 5 to 9). No other age group had a net undercount rate higher than 0.7 percent.

Young Children Had a Higher Net Undercount (By Far) Than Any Other Age Group in the 2010 Census

Net Undercount Rates (in Percentages) in 2010 Census, by Age Group



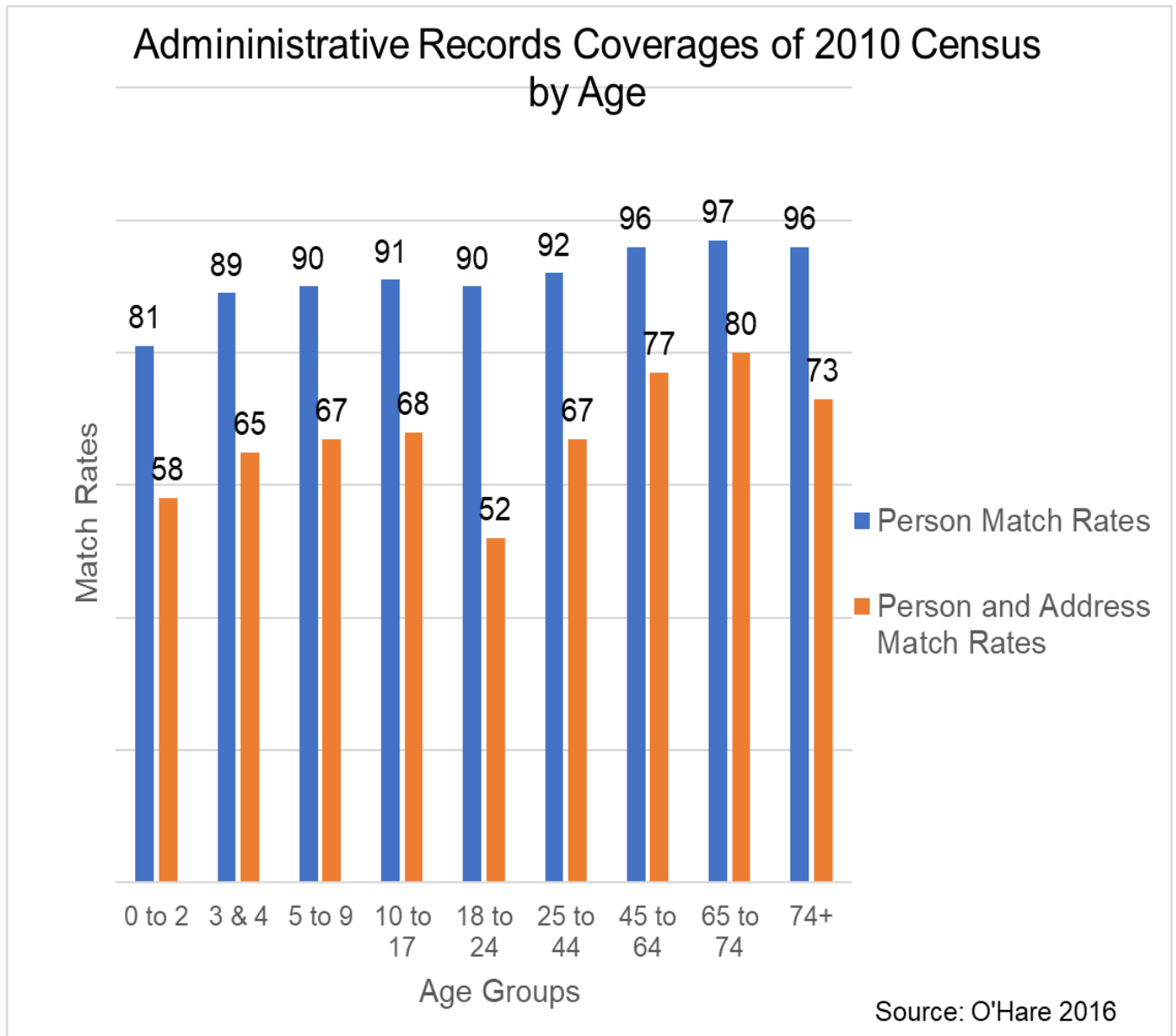
Undercount = 2010 Census Count minus 2012 Demographic Analysis (DA) Estimate

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, May 2012 Demographic Analysis (DA) release.

The table below shows that young children (ages 0 to 4) are under-represented in three major U.S. Census Bureau surveys. The coverage rate for young children is lower than other age groups including older children. The coverage rate is the percent of the population included in the survey compared to the true number. It is not shown here, but the Hogan and Jensen study also indicates Black and Hispanic young children have lower coverage rates than Non-Hispanic White young children in these surveys.

Under-Representation of Young Children in Selected U.S. Census Bureau Surveys						
	Coverage Rates					
	American Community Survey			Current Population Survey		Survey of Income and Program Participation
Age Group	2009	2015		2009	2015	2009
0 to 4	0.89	0.87		0.82	0.82	0.81
5 to 9	0.94	0.94		0.90	0.89	0.88
10 to 17	0.99	0.94		0.92	0.89	0.88
18+	0.95	0.92		0.88	0.87	0.87
Source: Hogan and Jensen 2017						

The figure below shows match rates between the Census Bureau’s administrative records file and the people included in the 2010 Census. The match rate is the percent of people in the administrative records file that can also be identified in the census records. Children ages 0 to 2 had lower match rates than any other age group, indicating they are under-represented in the administrative records file more than other age groups. This analysis is based on the administrative records available soon after the 2010 Census and it is possible that the Census Bureau has changed the selection of administrative records they use in ways that improved the coverage of young children in current administrative records. But until that information is released, the data in the Figure below is the most recent available.



The Table below shows net undercount rates for young children from many different countries and indicates a high net undercount of young children in Censuses is widespread. It is important to recognize the high rate of undercounting young children

was experienced in many different cultures using many different census-taking approaches.

Census Coverage Rates for Ages 0 to 4 for Selected Countries		
	Year	Net Undercount Rate
New Zealand		
South Africa	2011	15.1
Canada	2011	3.4
Australia	2011	1.2
England and Wales	2011	9.6
France	2006	1.9
Mongolia	2000	15.9
Indonesia	2000	13.4
Cambodia	1998	11.4
Vietnam	1999	10.1
Philippines	1995	7.9
Sri Lanka	2001	7.6
Macao	2001	3.9
South Korea	2000	3.6
Japan	2000	2.0

Summary

The evidence provided here indicates young children are especially prone to being missed at a high rate in government data collection activities including the Census. The vulnerability of young children to being missed in official data collection activities means officials in charge of those data collection activities need to pay special attention to this important demographic group.

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