New Census Bureau Data Show Young Children Have a High Net Undercount in the 2020 Census

By

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Key data from 2020 Census on undercount of young children

- The net undercount of young children (ages birth to 4) in the 2020 Census was 5.4 percent, (based on the middle-series DA estimates) which is the highest rate recorded since tracking begin in the1950 census.

- The net undercount of young children in 2020 was about one million kids the same as 2010.[i]

- The net undercount for young children was much higher than any other age group in 2020 and 2010.

- The gap in census coverage between young children and adults that begin in 1980 continued to grow between 2010 and 2020.

- One of the main reasons young children are missed in the Census is because some parents have the mistaken belief that young children are not supposed to be included in the count.

- One of the most important elements of census accuracy was not addressed in the data released today and that is differences by race and Hispanic Origin. In the 2010 Census, Black young children and Hispanic young children had much higher net undercounts that non-Hispanic young white children. Preliminary data from 2020 suggests the gap between non-Hispanic white children and minority children (black and Hispanic) is bigger in 2020 than it was in 2010.

- Interest and attention to this issue inside and outside the Census Bureau increased dramatically since the 2010 Census. The lack of success in reducing the high net undercount of young children underscores the difficulty of fixing this problem and the need for more attention and more resources.

- Undercounts in the Census mean communities do not get their fair share of federal dollars for things like schools, childcare centers, and playgrounds.

- Despite increased effort on this issue in the 2020 Census, the results indicate more work is needed to improve the count of young children in the 2030 Census.

Background

On March 10, 2022, the U.S. Census Bureau released some of the primary metrics needed to evaluate the quality of the 2020 Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). Specifically, the Census Bureau released data from Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) and limited data from the 2020 Census that could be compared to the Demographic Analysis (DA) estimates released by the Census Bureau in December 2020 to assess census accuracy. This paper focuses on the accuracy of 2020 Census data for young children because they had the highest net undercount of any age group in the 2010 and 2020 Censuses.

This paper focuses on data from Demographic Analysis because past research shows the estimated net undercount of young children based on PES data greatly underestimates the extent to which young children were missed in the Census due to problems with correlation bias in the PES (O'Hare et al. 2016).

The Census Bureau (2020) released the DA estimates in December 2020. In preparing the DA estimate for 2020, the Census Bureau produced a low series, a middle series, and a high series based on various assumption. My analysis of DA data for 2020 is based on comparison of Census counts to the middle series of the DA estimates. The middle series in 2020 corresponds to the updated DA estimates available from the 2010 Census which were released in May of 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

<u>Data Analysis</u>

Figure 1 shows the net undercount rates for young children (ages 0 to 4) and adults (ages 18 and over) from 1950 to 2020 based on Demographic Analysis. There are several key points from Figure 1

- o The net undercount rate for young children increased between 2010 and 2020: from 4.6 percent in 2010 to 5.4 percent in 2020.
- o The net undercount rate for young children in the 2020 Census is the highest since 1950 when tracking started
- o The gap between young children and adults increased slightly between 2010 and 2020; from 5.3 percentage points in 2010 to 5.6 percentage points in 2020
- o Data for 2020 continue a pattern since 1980 of very different trajectories for census coverage of young children and adults.

Figure 1 Net Undercount Rates for Young Children (ages 0 to 4) and Adults (ages 18 and over): 1950 to 2020

Net Undercount Rate

Legend:
- Ages 0 to 4 (dashed line)
- Ages 18 and over (solid line)

Data labels:
- 1950: -3.8, -4.7
- 1960: -2.4, -2.6
- 1970: -2.3, -3.6
- 1980: -0.9, -1.4
- 1990: -1.6, -3.7
- 2000: 0.1, -3.8
- 2010: 0.7, -4.6
- 2020: 0.2, -5.4

net undercounts are expressed as neative figures
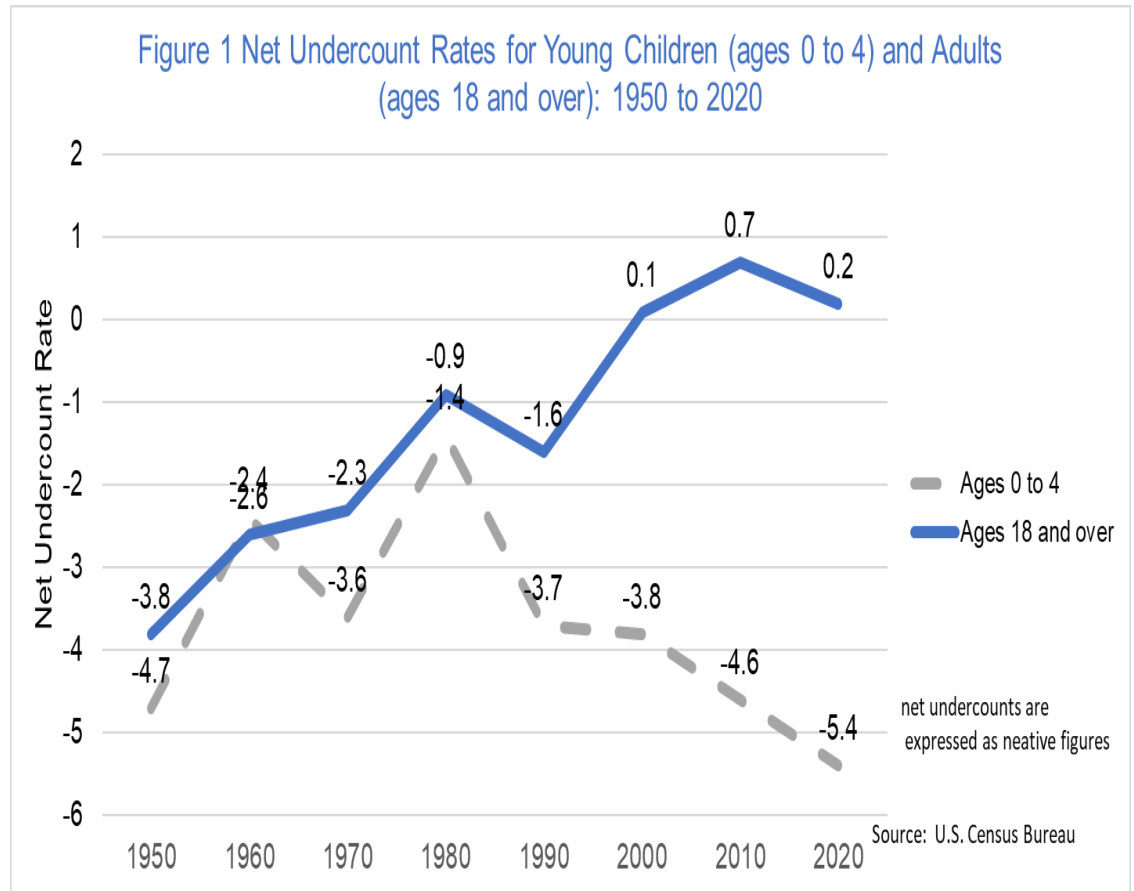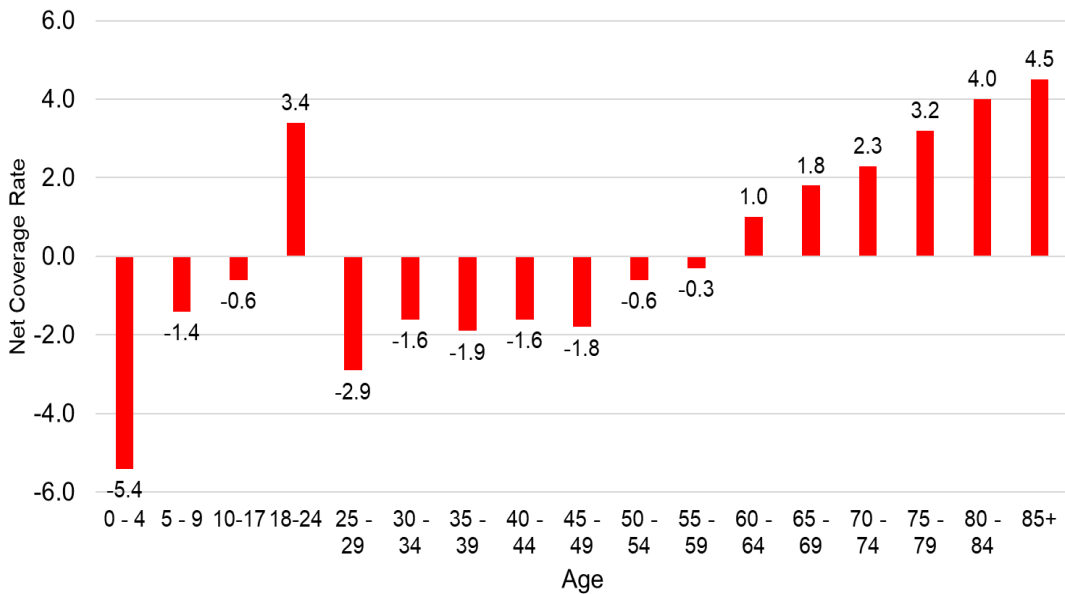
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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Figure 2 shows net undercounts by five-year age groups in 2020 based on the middle series DA estimates. In 2020 young children had the highest net undercount rate, by far, compared to other age groups.
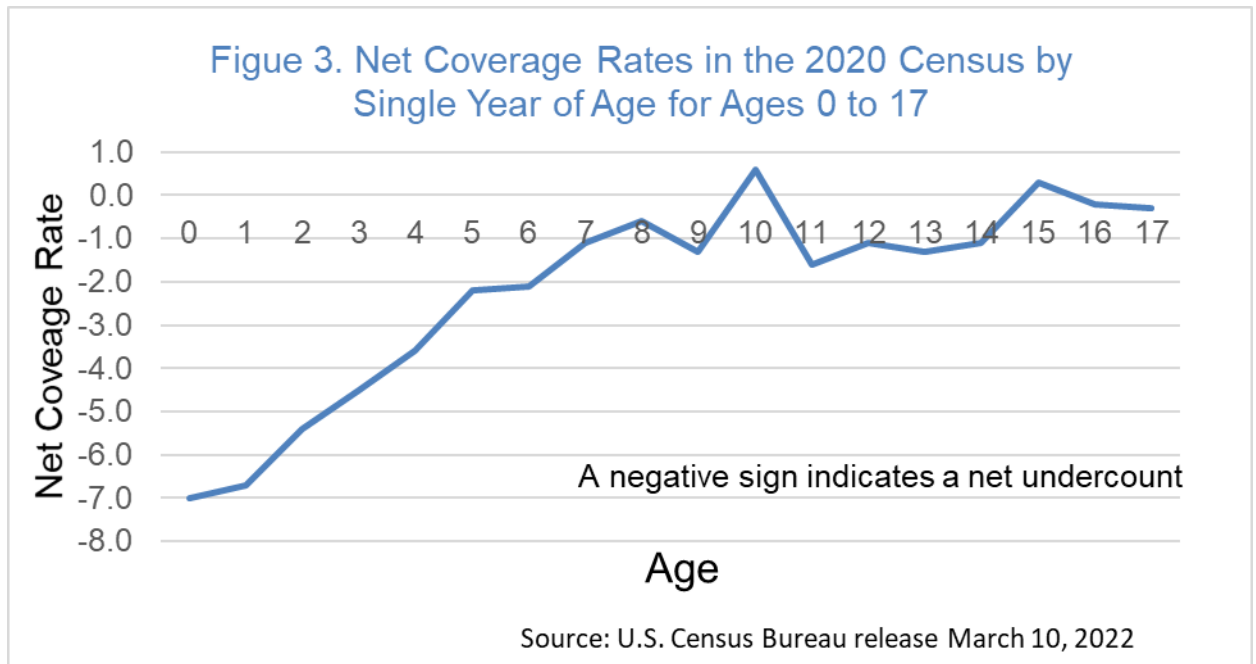
Figure 2. Young Children Had a Higher Net Undercount Rate Than Any Other Age Group in the 2020 Census

Source: U.S. Census Bureau based on middle series DA

It is important to understand that young children are undercounted at a much higher rates than older children.   The overall net undercount rate for children (ages birth to 17) in 2020 masks big differences among age groups.

Figure 3 shows net undercount rates of children by single year of age for 2020. This figure shows children under age 5 have higher net undercount rates than older children

Figue 3. Net Coverage Rates in the 2020 Census by Single Year of Age for Ages 0 to 17

A negative sign indicates a net undercount

Source: U.S. Census Bureau release March 10, 2022

The data released today does not address one of the most important issues regarding the net undercount of young children namely, differences by race and Hispanic Origin. In the 2010 Census, young black children and young Hispanic children had net undercount rates about twice those of non-Hispanic white young children (O'Hare 2015, Table 3.2). Preliminary assessment of data from the 2020 Census indicates the net undercount rate for black and Hispanic population ages 0 to 17 is substantially higher than the corresponding rates in 2010 (O'Hare, 2021).

Why does the census undercount matter?

Census errors are not only a statistical problem they are a social equity problem as well. Probably the most important impact of census undercounts is on funding programs. Reamer (2020) has identified 315 federal programs that distribute money to states and localities based on census-derived data. These programs distribute more

than $1.5 trillion each year to states and localities based on census-derived data . In addition, many states use the Census data to distribute state money (O'Hare 2020).

Table 1 shows 19 large child-focused programs that use census-derived data to distribute money. These programs focus on all children not just young children, but it is important to recognize the young children grow up over the decade between censuses. By 2025, all the children ages 0 to 4 in 2020 will be school-age children. Communities that are under counted do not get their fair share of these resources for things like schools, health clinics, playgrounds, and childcare centers.

Table 1 Federal Expenditures for 19 Large Census-Guided Programs Focused on Children , FY2016		
(Ranked by size in dollars)		
	Department	FY2016 Expenditures
Medical Assistance (Medicaid) Dollars for children*	HHS	$65,019,325,680
Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers	HUD	$19,387,184,000
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families	HHS	$17,096,198,545
Title I Grants to LEAs	ED	$14,364,454,918
State Children's Health Insurance Program	HHS	$13,761,924,000
National School Lunch Program	USDA	$12,042,774,000
Special Education Grants	ED	$11,779,555,245
Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments Program	HUD	$10,156,542,138
Head Start	HHS	$8,648,933,810
Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children	USDA	$6,383,830,000
Title IV-E Foster Care	HHS	$4,727,773,596
Health Care Centers	HHS	$4,319,604,643
School Breakfast Program	USDA	$4,148,731,000
Child and Adult Care Food Program	USDA	$3,324,184,000
Child Care	HHS	$2,840,075,000
Child Care and Development Block Grant	HHS	$2,612,564,000
Adoption Assistance	HHS	$2,591,755,519
Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants	ED	$2,218,528,106
Social Services Block Grant	HHS	$1,575,547,556
Total		$206,999,485,756
* To derive this figure for children, total Medicaid dollars expended in FY2016 were reduced by the fraction of total national dollars going for children based on First Focus 2018 Children's Budget 2018 page 59 (FY2016 $65,252/$362,512 = .18)		
Prepared by Andrew Reamer, GW Institute of Public Policy, George Washington University		
Program spending data research by Sean Moulton, Project on Government Oversight		
Data available on the Counting for Dollars website at https://gwipp.gwu.edu/counting-dollars-2020-role-decennial-census-geographic-distribution-federal-funds#Reports		

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Why are young children missed so often in the Census?

There are many different ideas about why young children have such a high net undercount. A couple of the more common reasons are presented here. Many parents have the mistaken belief that young children are not supposed to be included in the Census. One survey involving parents in low-income families conducted in 2019 found that 10 percent of parents were not planning to include their young child (ages 0 to 5) in

the 2020 Census and another 8 percent were not sure if they would a include their child in the census (Griffin and O'Hare 2020).   Since 10 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in households with incomes under $50,000 is about 760,000 children and 18% is 1,360,000, this factor helps explain the high net undercount of young in the 2020 Census.

The overall figure of 18 percent of parents who were unlikely to include their young child in the census masks important differences among demographic groups. Figure 4 shows the percent of parents unlikely to include their young child ranges from 10 percent for homeowners to 23 percent of Non-Hispanic Black parents.   The continuum shown in Figure 4 conforms to widely held beliefs about which groups are most likely to be missed in the Census.
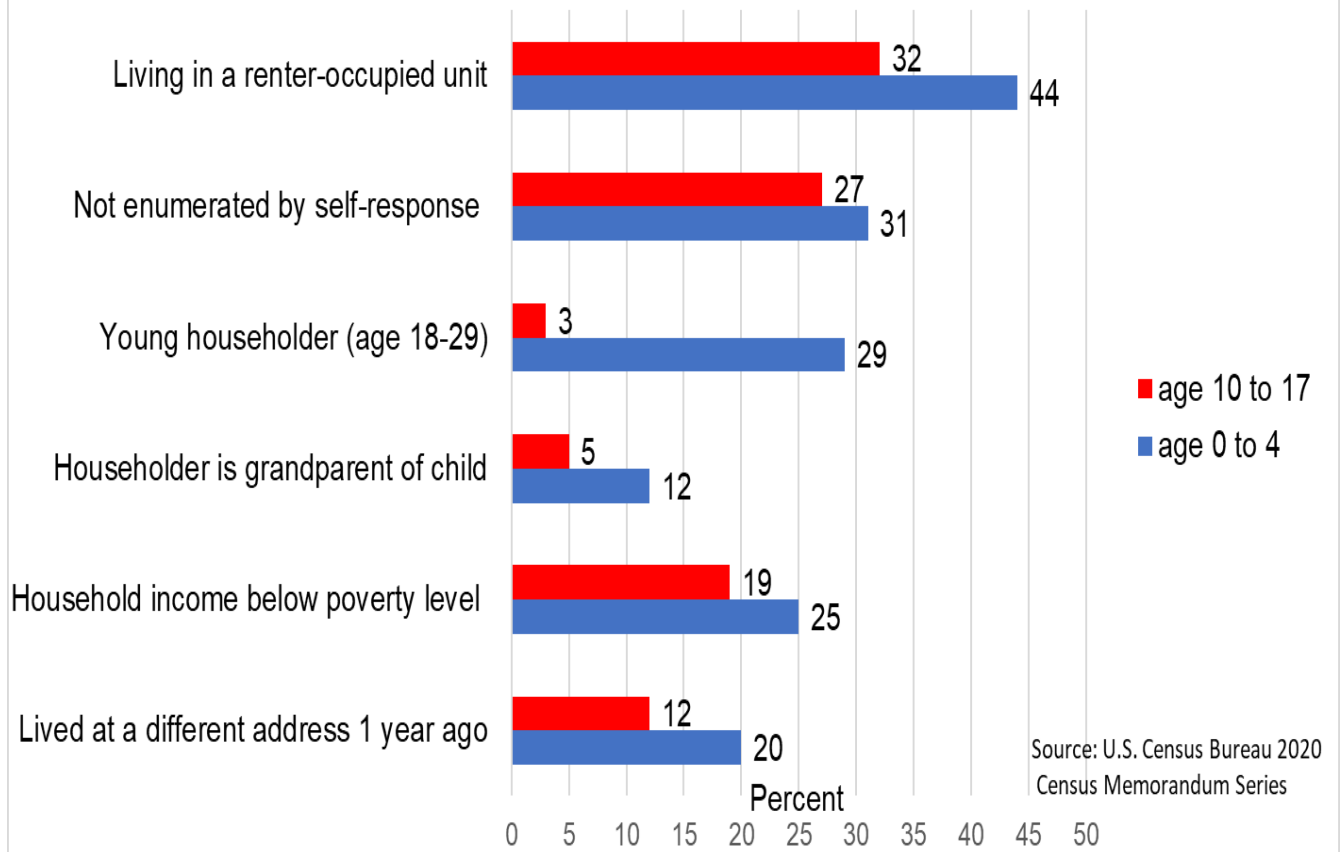
The most common reason given for not including their young child in the census was the idea that there was no need for the government to know about a young child since there were not yet in school.

Figure 4 Percent of Parents Who Would Not or Were Unsure If They Would Include Their Young Child in the Census

Source: Griffin and O'Hare 2020
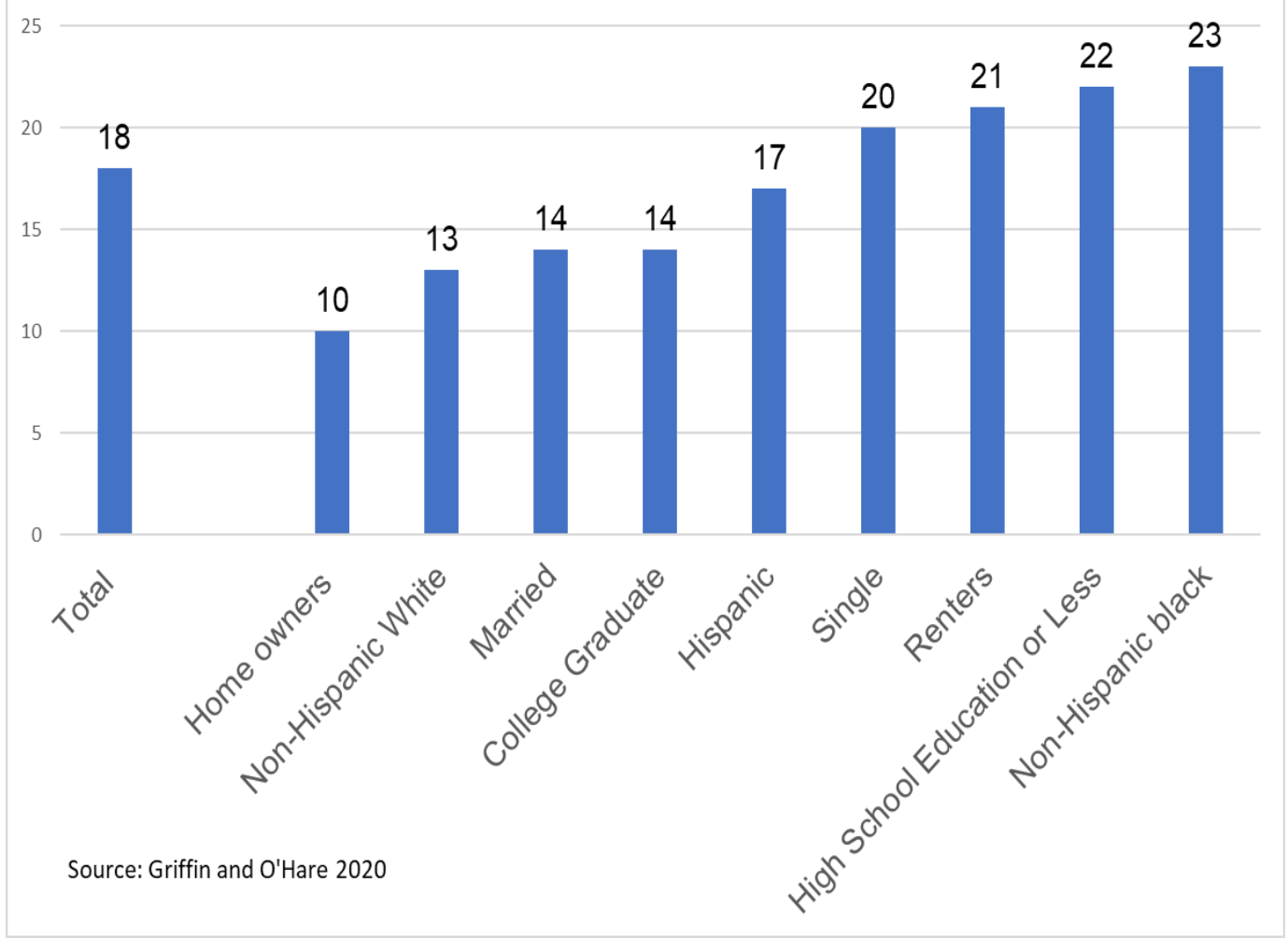
Another reason young children are missed so often in the Census is because young children are more concentrated than older children or adults in the kinds of households that are difficult to enumerate. Figure 5 shows the percentage of young children and older children living in six conditions thought to be associated with being hard to count.

Figure 5 Young Children Are More Concentrated in Hard-to-Count Families and Households

Category	age 10 to 17	age 0 to 4
Living in a renter-occupied unit	32	44
Not enumerated by self-response	27	31
Young householder (age 18-29)	3	29
Householder is grandparent of child	5	12
Household income below poverty level	19	25
Lived at a different address 1 year ago	12	20

Percent

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2020 Census Memorandum Series

Response to High Undercount of Young Children.

Between 2010 and 2020 there was a substantial increase in the attention the high undercount of young children has received inside and outside the Census Bureau. Velkoff (2022) outlines many of the new efforts by the Census Bureau in the 2020 Census designed to address this problem. In addition, stakeholders outside the Census Bureau mobilized in unprecedented ways to try and get a more accurate count of young children (Count All Kids 2022).

Despite the disappointing data from the 2020 Census, many stakeholders were pleased to see the Census Bureau elevate this issue in 2020 compared to 2010. There were a number of campaigns and initiatives within the Census Burau in connection with the 2020 Census focused on young children that were new.   Once these efforts are evaluated, we can decide which are worth continuing in the 2030 Census.

Moreover, there appears to be efforts use the momentum achieved in the build up to the 2020 Census to bring more focus to this issue. The Census Bureau recently established a cross-directorate team or work group within the Census Bureau to focus on this issue (Herbst 2021). In addition, the recently formed Office of Strategic Alliances within the Census Bureau will establish links with child focused groups outside the Census Bureau to gain input into planning for the 2030 Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

The results of the 2020 Census show young children continue to be missed at a high rate, but the responses to this issue inside and outside the Census Bureau hold promise for reducing this problem in the 2030 Census.

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[i] The net undercount number is derived by multiplying the net undercount rates (-0.54) time the number of children ages 0 to 4 (19, 458,000) from the middle series DA estimate