Wednesday, June 2, 2010

The big count: Tales of a US Census worker

Maybe you remember getting the envelope from the US Census Bureau in the mail this year. Hopefully, you mailed it back, carefully filling out the forms and checking the right boxes.

Good for you. But maybe you didn't return your form. Maybe you dropped it in a pile of mail and then stuffed that pile into a drawer. Or maybe you filled it out but forgot to pop it in the mail and now the envelope lies buried beneath the cheeseburger wrappers in your back seat. Or maybe, just maybe, your failure to return your form was deliberate, a passive-aggressive display of civil disobedience, a way to show the government that in your opinion it is really nobody's business who lives in your house.

This is where I come in. I am a census enumerator. And yes, I carry a badge.

About three-quarters of American households return their census forms. The rest need to be tracked down, then coaxed and nagged into telling a census worker some basic facts about their household. That happy task falls to enumerators, the army of part-time workers who for the past two months have prowled your streets and knocked on doors in a quixotic effort to count every person in these United States.

It's an archaic, almost quaint process that seems to run smack into the technological marvels of the world. The FedEx guy has a computer tablet that tracks every movement of your shipment. Your dad sends you photos from his cell phone. Your grandmother has a Twitter account. But the front end of the census is all done by hand. To mangle the tag line of the good folks at Apple, there is no app for that.

At the heart of this monklike process is the elaborate choreography between a highly trained census worker, i.e. me, a tri-fold sheet of paper known as an Enumerator Questionnaire, or EQ, and a No. 2 pencil.

Between the paperwork, the neat Xs in their prescribed boxes, the spreadsheets and the shuffling from house to house, the enumerator catches tiny snapshots and glimpses of the lives in our community. We see a neighborhood's wear and tear, and we see its pride and joy. In some ways, being a census enumerator is like watching a baseball game through a telescope. You can only see a little bit with each look, but over time, if you know how to piece the frames together, a detailed portrait emerges.

The basic drill is this: We knock on doors. We talk to people.

We write down their information. We turn in the forms. The forms get scanned and the data ends up in a computer. We get more forms. We sharpen more pencils.

So, first, let's talk about the pencil. It is not just any pencil. It is officially a Z1614B, otherwise known as Pencil, Black, No. 2 Med. I know this because the pencil and three of its brethren were part of the Kit G-6 that I received when I reported for census training in late April.

Also in the kit were the following items, according to the packing list:

Z0319: Clip, Paper, No 1 1/8, 1 pkg Z0503: Eraser, Pencil, Tip, Wedge Shape, 4 each Z1610: Pen, Ballpoint, Blue, 2 each Z1904: Sharpener, Pencil, Pocket, Plastic, 1 each These items, plus about five pounds of manuals, forms and workbooks are at the heart of our training to learn how to do Nonresponse Followup. But nobody ever calls it that. Instead, we use an acronym: NRFU, which is pronounced NAR-fu. And yes, it sounds a lot like snafu.

That would be ironic, except for the fact that there is no place in any of the census manuals or forms to place an X in the irony box. It doesn't exist. Kafka and Dilbert want to meet. But they can't.

I need to make a disclosure here. The government frowns on census employees telling wider audiences about their jobs and what they do all day. It says that I cannot be paid for writing about my time as a census worker, so this article is a labor of love. I wrote it not to stick my thumb in the eye of the Census Bureau, but because I believe that people ought to know how their government works.

First some history. The US Government has been in the census business since 1790. The founding fathers recognized that seats in the US House needed to be apportioned by population, and the only way to do that was to get counting. And while Congressional representation is still at the heart of the census, lots of other folks — from local governments to corporations — are interested in the big count. And they have good reason. Population and growth patterns help determine where federal dollars get spent and where the next Lowe's or Bonefish Grill ends up.

For many cities, the goal is to top 50,000 residents. That's the level when a whole slew of federal benefits — from block grants to better hospital reimbursements — start kicking in and when the places start showing up on the site-selection lists for national real estate companies. The communities that are hovering in the high 40s and low 50s have been rallying the troops for months, hoping to squeeze into or remain in the big leagues. They have their own nickname: Bubble Towns.

Now, you can imagine the problems if the US government lets cities and states do their own counts. Nobody would trust the results. Detroit would still have more than 1 million people.

Enter the enumerator. Our job is to count without fear or favor. Why? Because we've taken an oath to do so, and that's what the manual says.

The manual is officially called the 2010 Census Nonresponse Followup (NRFU) Enumerator Manual, but we call it the D-547. It is our bible, and its 150 pages are filled with everything we need to know to do our job.

My training class contained about 18 people, and we met in a cramped cinderblock classroom at the Central YMCA in Winston-Salem. Our instructor, known as a crew leader, was a pleasant man with thinning hair and a calming voice. In a previous life, he did consumer-products marketing at an important company. Now he refers us to page 5-4 in our D-547 to make sure we know how to properly mark our Administrative Area, or AA, Binders after filling out an EQ on a NRFU interview using our black No. 2 pencil. And yes, it is as mentally debilitating as it sounds.

Our group is what you would expect. There's a law-school student who's passed the bar but doesn't have a job. Selfemployed folks looking for a few extra bucks. Retirees anxious to get out of the house. And people like me, who are — to put it politely — between jobs.

But we're no dummies. To get this far, to get paid $13.50 an hour to learn how to do an EQ on a NRFU, is no mean task. We had to take a test, and we had to score high enough to be considered for field-work training. The lousy economy hasn't helped folks who thought they could just show up and be hired. What's happened is that able-brained people are doing census work while they look for something more permanent. At my exam, a Princeton grad who looks to be a few years into the salt mines of the job market got a perfect score, much to the dismay of his fellow test-takers who appeared to need a job more than he did (My score, 27 out of 28.).

During four days of training, we sat in our classroom and learn how to fill out forms and how to conduct interviews in the field. It is precise and tedious. Precise, because the government demands precision. Ones have to look like lower case Ls. I's have to look like Roman Numeral Ones. Fours must be open at the top.

Tedious, because the government has broken down the training into the tiniest steps, leaving nothing to chance or the remote possibility of common sense. We travel over the same material again and again. At times, I felt like I was part of some elaborate psychological experiment designed to determine at what point humans will quit following orders and begin a rebellion.

It’s no surprise that the interviewing process, the heart of our NRFU training, is highly scripted, and the followup questions can border on the ridiculous.

We are required to ask the gender of every household member — even if, as during one actual interview, the person you are questioning is spilling out of her tank top. We are required to ask if all household members, including the kiddies at your feet, have spent some time in the past year in prison or a nursing home. It is what the government demands, and what we have sworn to do.

The census form asks five basic questions of each person at a house. Name, relationship to the person who owns or rents the housing unit, age, Hispanic origin and race. The final two are the most controversial, as they require people to identify themselves, using the US government’s definition of race and ethnicity, and to put people in categories.

For example, here is how the census defines “White”: “The category refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa. It includes people who identify as ‘White’ or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab or Polish.”

I thought about that definition a lot during my training. Not necessarily because it offended me, but because I wondered about how the government arrived at that definition. But I never raised my hand to ask. One of the things you quickly learn in census training is that questions that begin with the word “why” are a waste of time. Things just are. There’s an org chart on page 1-10 of my D-547, and it shows that I am four rungs below the Local Census Office Manager, or El-Com. Maybe he or she knows the answer to my question. But probably not. It is all chain of command.

Census enumerators have to follow a dress code. No jeans.

No sneakers. No open-toed shoes for women. Shirt with a collar. And always wear your badge. Always.

Our badge is a funny thing, and — like the enumeration process itself — it’s a curious mixture of 19 th and 21 st century technology. We have no photo ID, just a slab of plastic where we write our names. The second part of the badge contains phone numbers and our personal NRFU ID, all hand lettered. It doesn’t look very official, and yet it is. When I slip the badge and the nylon lanyard over my head, I am empowered. I am an authorized government worker. I am Census Man.

The badge cuts both ways. It is nearly an all-access pass that gives me entre into people’s lives. I’m in the living room, looking at the photos on the mantle and trying to make sense of a gnarled family tree. In 25 years of journalism, I never had a tool that opened doors as well. The catch is this: The details I see can’t be shared.

Census information is confidential, and we swore in our enumerator’s oath not to reveal personal census information. Violators can face fines and prison for disclosure, and maybe, just maybe, one of the reasons that people don’t mind talking with me is that the information doesn’t really go anywhere, at least not in a way that leads back to the person who gave it.

On a white-hot weekend afternoon, I am off to work a few blocks in Winston-Salem. I have my badge, and my AA binder that contains my addresses and caseload. Slung over my shoulder is my census briefcase,

item no. Z-1079, filled with forms and an ample supply of No. 2 pencils and my official census pencil sharpener.

I've parked my truck, placing my census placard, form BC-1199, in the window per regulations, and for the next few hours I make a loop through this neighborhood of homes and apartments. The sun beats down like a hammer, and the air is humid and sticky. I can feel the sweat beading on my forehead, and I hope that people will take pity on me.

The heat aside, there is something pleasant about the journey and the process. You walk slowly down the street, sauntering and swaggering with your federal authority. There's no quota, so you take your time.

Our AA binder has a list of addresses in our district that are still lacking forms. We find the address. We knock on the door. If no one is home, we leave a D-26 form, a Notice of Visit, or NV. And then it's on to the next place.

The census worker's eye view is different than the view from the car or the sidewalk. It's more intimate, and it's filled with the details that give life to the addresses in the book. There's a sweep and a subtlety. Neighborhoods are often seen as static and permanent, but as a census worker, the changes, however glacial, are on display, pushing and grinding away against each other like rock and ice.

On one street, I walked past a large house that used to be where some friends lived 15 years ago. I noticed that it was no longer a single-family residence. There were two sets of jerry-rigged steps and railing leading to apartments in the back. And across my district, I am witness to small symbols of struggle, decay and rebirth. There are the rotting floorboards and the peeling handrails. Tiny vegetable gardens and new siding. A halfeaten bag of chips.

Expensive baby carriages jostling with mildewed Big Wheels. And on and on.

On this afternoon, there are plenty of houses and apartments where nobody is home, so I am peeling NV notices off my pad one after another. Leaving them can be problematic. It is against the law to use the mailbox, and we're not allowed to open any door. You get creative. I place them under the mat, wedged under a porch rocker or beneath a lighter used as a paperweight. My supervisor likes to use tape.

Sadly, when I return a day later, most of my notices are still there. My list isn't getting any shorter.

When I told my friends what I was going to be doing with the Census Bureau, we joked about stumbling upon a bored housewife in Buena Vista or some other lame start to a bad porno video. The truth is a far sadder harvest. While it's dangerous to make generalizations, the consensus among my fellow enumerators is that there is a rough connection between income, permanency and the rate of return. With some variation, people who are wealthier and own their own home are more likely to mail the form back than their neighbors who are poorer and who rent. This doesn't mean the people in Group A are better or more virtuous or patriotic than Group B. They're just more likely to complete this task. So, the big count isn't just about getting the right number. It's also about getting the number right and creating the most accurate snapshot of our community.

And that said, it is encouraging to me how many people are cooperative if you can catch them when they are home. Even people who are being stretched and pulled by the hard times that have settled upon the land are happy to diagram their lives and help me check my boxes.

There are other little census dramas that speak to the heart of our tangled world. Relationships are tricky business even without the government trying to offer up definitions of race or make respondents parse the difference between a roommate and an unmarried partner. Ultimately, respondents have to decide on their own terms what to call the people who share their lives and share their beds.

When things are going well, it's a low-stress job. We count according to the rules, and we try to get every housing unit put into the right pile, i.e. occupied, vacant or delete. That's it. Our toolkit for getting people to comply is fairly limited. The D-1(F) Information Sheet says: "You are required by law to provide the information requested," but nowhere in our training manuals does it say what the penalty is for noncompliance.

The answer, according to US Code, Title 13, Section 221, is that failure to answer is punishable by a fine not to exceed $100, but failure to answer truthfully carries a potentially higher penalty of $500. That said, prosecutions for refusing to answer are almost non-existent.

Most mornings after I've worked, I meet with my crew-leader assistant, or CLA, to go over my cases and my D-308, the Daily Pay and Work Record. The census must be the only job that requires you to turn in a time card for each day you work. We discuss how I am coming with my binder and any problems that I am encountering.

There really aren't any. I've heard stories of other enumerators encountering far more hostile audiences, but nobody has yelled at me or slammed a door in my face.

On one morning, several of us were meeting with our CLA at the McDonalds at Thruway. We're in our census wear, including our badges, and the language and jargon we use is pretty distinct, so it's clear we are not discussing Egg McMuffins.

An elderly woman with a vague resemblance to Betty White sauntered over to have a look. "Are you all with the census?" she asked. We nodded.

"I think this is just the biggest waste of money," she said. "I don't see why people can't just turn in their forms. I did mine."

We continued to nod and our CLA began the endless cycles of "Yes ma'am"s so the woman would go away and we could finish our review session.

"I know it's a job for you," she added, her voice quivering with a razor of contempt for someone who would take such work. "But it doesn't make any sense."

She is of course right and wrong. She's right in that I was paid several hundred dollars to complete a remedial task on behalf of about two dozen households, a task that each family could have done in about 10 minutes without breaking a sweat. It adds up. The government saves about $85 million for each percentage increase in the rate of mailed-in returns.

But she's wrong when you consider the alternatives.

Statistical sampling would reduce the big count to the big guess. And to say that if you didn't return your form means that you didn't want to be counted and therefore shouldn't be counted is disastrous public policy for our nation's most vulnerable citizens and municipalities. Not counting the poor and the transient doesn't make them go away.

In the end, the census is like a lot of government. It trades efficiency for fairness. My fellow enumerators and I have a job to do, and we are left with what we started with. A badge. A questionnaire. And a No. 2 pencil.