

Uncertain Counts: The Struggle to Enumerate First Nations in Canada and the United States, 1870–1911

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Abstract. Throughout the nineteenth century, Canada and the United States struggled to gain accurate demographic data on the First Nations and Métis communities they claimed to oversee. Enumerators grappled with linguistic and cultural differences, distrust, the ambiguity of racial categories, and the geographic mobility and isolation of many Native American communities. Understanding how, where, and why national census takers and Indian agents failed to overcome these challenges sheds light on the locality of federal power and the pathways through which Native Americans maintained their autonomy.

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“An Indian not taxed should . . . be reported in the census just as truly as the vagabond or pauper of the white or the colored race. The fact that he sustains a vague political relation is no reason why he should not be recognized as a human being by a census which counts even the cattle and horses of the country.”

—Francis Amasa Walker, Superintendent of the 1870 Census of the United States

In 1887, J. D. C. Atkins, the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, noted in his annual report that the yearly censuses taken by his office left much to be desired. He believed that many of the returns were “unreliable estimates, compiled from such information as can be picked up by the police or other employés [*sic*]” rather than from firsthand information collected by the Indian agents themselves.¹ Atkins blamed the process rather than the personnel for this shortcoming. In order to collect accurate data,

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Indian agents had to secure interpreters, travel great distances across unfamiliar terrain, and accomplish their tasks without adequate funding. In this context, the results, while depressing, were not surprising. Canada and the United States were left knowing little about the First Nations communities they claimed to oversee.

Reconstructing the demographic makeup of Native American populations presented contemporary observers and subsequent historians with tremendous opportunities and significant pitfalls. Creating population estimates of indigenous communities in the Western hemisphere at the time of contact, for example, required using demographic projections, extrapolation, and the estimated carrying capacity of the land. The inexactness of these techniques led to estimates that ranged widely from 8 million to 112.5 million inhabitants.²

Historians studying the nineteenth century have access to more comprehensive demographic information, thanks in part to the expansion of federal bureaucracies and a persistent interest in counting indigenous people. Federal officials used demographic data to measure the decline of a supposedly vanishing race, Indians' progress toward assimilation, and the estimated expenditures within the Department of Indian Affairs in Canada (DIA) and the Office of Indian Affairs in the United States (OIA). Treaties, a necessary component of both countries' expansionary policies, required demographic information on the signatory tribes in order to build accurate pay lists. In recent years, a rising number of digitization efforts have made these nineteenth-century censuses accessible in new ways.³

Unfortunately, the extensive challenges faced by nineteenth-century enumerators tasked with counting Indians led to incomplete, inconsistent, and misleading returns. As Bruce Curtis has argued, censuses are made, not taken, and reflect the social expectations of the enumerating culture. The censuses' structure and the process of enumeration ingrained fundamental limitations in the data itself. In the United States, C. Matthew Snipp, Nancy Shoemaker, J. David Hacker, Michael R. Haines, and Margaret M. Jobe have demonstrated the ways in which racial ambiguity, cultural misunderstandings, distrust, and isolation have led to misleading counts. In Canada, Michelle A. Hamilton, Kris Inwood, Chris Andersen, Gustave J. Goldmann, Senada Delic, and Evelyn Ruppert have suggested similar conclusions, noting that racial categorization, bureaucratic structure, geographic constraints, sociopolitical climate, and the ties between colonialism and enumeration affected the quality of returns. These studies focus primarily on enumeration practices within a single country and on the national censuses. Comparing parallel enumerations, including those taken by Indian Affairs, provides an opportunity to uncover the relative importance that

national policy, local conditions, and the agency conducting enumeration had on the quality of census data.⁴

The inherent limitations of Native American census data require that historians, demographers, and anthropologists take into consideration two important factors when utilizing quantitative information: the variable rates of error in enumeration and the specific factors that skewed the data. The quality of nineteenth-century censuses did not improve over time in a linear fashion, nor did they represent transparent depictions of the populations they purported to count. For all their flaws, the censuses served as a basis for federal policy. As a result, even poorly conducted censuses tell us a great deal about the geographic, bureaucratic, cultural, and financial limitations with which Canada and the United States contended when formulating Indian policy during the nineteenth century.

Estimating Error

The task of counting Indians in the United States and Canada fell upon two sets of government agencies: Indian Affairs and the national census bureaus. The DIA and the OIA handled the federal governments' day-to-day interactions with Indians. The DIA and OIA attempted to take censuses annually, although in practice, years often passed between enumerations. Indian agents had firsthand knowledge of the communities they were intending to count and adhered to strict legal definitions of Indian identity to limit treaty expenditures.⁵

Indian agents' focus on treaty Indians led to the systemic undercounting of nontreaty Indians and Métis. Indian agents handed out annuities and took the censuses at the same time. This cut down on the number of trips an Indian agent had to make and created a strong incentive for First Nations to cooperate and be counted. Since nontreaty Indians and mixed-bloods did not receive annuities for the most part, this system limited the number of opportunities the DIA had to gain information on them.⁶ The problem proved serious enough that Frank Pedley, deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs in Canada, stated in 1907 that, unfortunately, "conditions forbid any pretense at accuracy with regard to vital statistics beyond the limits of treaties."⁷ Any returns that had been gathered should be considered rough estimates and approached with caution.

The national census bureaus in Canada and the United States provided a second source of demographic data on Native Americans. The decennial censuses enumerated the entire population of each respective country once every ten years and utilized a different set of assumptions and policy aims than the censuses conducted by Indian Affairs. In Canada, the national cen-

sus generally enumerated all indigenous peoples, treaty and nontreaty alike, as part of the general population. As a result, the national census often picked up First Nations inhabitants who did not have legal status and who did not appear on the DIA's lists. The inclusion of nontreaty Indians complicated matters. The diverse nature of identity and the limited guidance offered to enumerators meant that the application of the term *Indian* occurred inconsistently in the Canadian census. In the United States, national census takers enumerated Indians as separate from the general population and included them on specially designed schedules.⁸

The demographic data collected by Canada and the United States often fell below expectations. Compensating for past inaccuracies, however, is an uphill battle. There are no recounts—no ability to go back to the nineteenth century and record what was missed. Looking for obvious inconsistencies (a population doubling over a year), comparing censuses against qualitative records (presence of epidemics and concerns raised by enumerators), cross-checking census results against one another, and examining the error rates present in modern censuses all provide imperfect means of assessing the reliability of the information nineteenth-century enumerators left behind.⁹

Comparing the censuses created by the OIA, DIA, and the Census Bureau in both countries provides one method of assessing their quality. This approach has a number of benefits. The two sets of censuses overlapped in years, sometimes separated by only a few months, and both sets attempted to reconstruct the demographic makeups of wide geographic areas. The different methodologies used by the two censuses, however, limits the utility of this kind of comparison.

In the United States, the OIA did not use the Census Bureau's distinction between civilized and uncivilized Indians. This led to a wide divergence between the two sets of counts. Determining who was civilized was subjective, taking into consideration factors such as tribal connection, education, religion, and material wealth. By the turn of the century, the Census Bureau abandoned their focus on "civilized" Indians. This decision allowed for a more comprehensive record but made it harder to compare the censuses they took in the middle of the nineteenth century with the ones they took at the turn of the century. As table 1 suggests, differences in categorization could lead to returns that differed not just in their specifics but also in their orders of magnitude.¹⁰

In British Columbia, the Department of Agriculture (Census Branch) and the DIA returned more consistent information about the number of Indians living in the province than their respective agencies south of the border had been able to muster. Even so, the counts between the two organizations differed by more than four thousand in 1911, well after nonabori-

Table 1. First Nations in Washington and British Columbia, 1860–1911

Year	Washington		British Columbia	
	Decennial	OIA	Decennial	DIA
1860–61	426*	ca. 31,000	—	—
1870–71	1,319*	ca. 16,268	—	ca. 45,000
1880–81	4,405*	14,189	25,661	35,052–40,000
1890–91	3,655*	10,837	23,257	35,202
1900–1901	10,309	9,827	28,949	24,576
1910–11	10,997	9,625	20,134	24,581

*Includes only “Civilized” Indians

Sources: Decennial (United States): United States Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910: Bulletin Population: United States—Color or Race, Nativity, Parentage, and Sex* (Washington, DC, 1913), 82; United States Census Office, *Compendium of the Tenth Census of the United States*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC, 1883), 377; United States Census Office, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890, part 1—Population* (Washington, DC, 1892), 470, 474.

Decennial (Canada): Population estimates for 1881 and 1901 in Canada are from *The Canada Year Book 1911*, 2nd ser. (Ottawa, 1912), 16; data from 1911 are from the *Fifth Census of Canada 1911: Religion, Origins, Birthplace, Citizenship, Literacy, and Infirmities, by Provinces, Districts, and Sub-Districts*, vol. 2 (Ottawa, 1913), 370; estimates for all populations in 1891 are based on George Johnson to Minister of Agriculture and Statistics, “Dispute with Ottawa on Indian Census,” 1894, GR-0429, box 3, file 2, British Columbia, Attorney General, Correspondence Inward, B09318 69/94, British Columbia Archive (BCA); “Re Census of British Columbia,” 1894, GR-0429, box 3, file 2, British Columbia, Attorney General, Correspondence Inward, BCA.

Indian Affairs (United States) OIA ARO (University of Wisconsin Digital Collections), 1860, 21; 1870, 16; 1880, iv; 1890, 544; 1900, 653–54; 1910, 60.

Indian Affairs (Canada): DIA ARO 1871, 37; 1881, 140, 223; 1891, 253; 1901, part 2, 182; 1911, part 2, 58.

ginals had become the dominant population in the region and both organizations had gained experience enumerating First Nations.¹¹ Differences in categorization, unique challenges facing both organizations, and the overall difficulty of enumerating Native Americans contributed to these differences.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this kind of cross-checking, however, are limited by the persistent relationship that Indian Affairs and decennial census personnel maintained with one another. In Canada, the DIA and Department of Agriculture maintained their own independent bureaucratic structures, but they shared information, personnel, and strategies for enumerating Indians. This close contact gave them room to check their returns against one another to weed out the most glaring problems but also created opportunities to simply use the other’s data instead of collecting their own.

In extreme cases, the sharing of information occurred as a result of

antagonism between departments. Indian agents had the ability to obstruct census officials from collecting independent data, forcing them to rely on preexisting counts. In 1891, for example, the state legislature of Washington appropriated \$1,500 to enumerate the Colville Reservation. I. T. Keene and O. D. Gwydir proceeded to the reservation and attempted to conduct the census without prior approval from Hal J. Cole, the Indian agent there. Cole, offended by the federal government's lack of trust in the census he had taken earlier in the year and concerned that the enumerators' presence could invoke a violent response, evicted the two men. The commissioner of Indian Affairs defended Cole's decision, depriving the state of its ability to conduct an independent count. If they wanted to have estimates, they would have to use those provided by the OIA. This kind of interference occurred as an exception rather than as the norm but highlighted the interactions that existed across enumerating agencies.¹²

More often, the two organizations intertwined their enumeration efforts out of mutual interest. The American Census Bureau recruited Indian agents to help them collect information for the Indian Schedule of the 1910 census. When the 1932 Indian Affairs census failed to enumerate 88,853 Indians of an estimated 317,234 living in the United States, they turned to the 1930 national census to help fill in their gaps. The OIA and the Census Office, beset by the difficulty of enumerating Indians, utilized each other's resources, expertise, personnel, and data to help formulate their own results.¹³

In Canada, the DIA and the Department of Agriculture also cooperated to a large degree. The cooperation benefited both parties. Indian agents acted as translators, facilitators, and in some instances enumerators for the decennial census. The national census takers helped in turn to disclose the "existence of different parties of Indians, which were unknown to the Visiting Superintendent or other agents of the [Indian] Department."¹⁴ In light of the new results, Indian agents amended their own returns to bring them in line with the national censuses. This was a particularly important practice in areas where the DIA had little contact with the indigenous population or where it had struggled to get accurate returns on nomadic or nontreaty populations. The level of cooperation, however, fluctuated. The 1891 census inexplicably lacked an ethnic-origin column, and treaty Indians appear to have been intentionally excluded from parts of the census. Census officials in 1891 therefore rarely required the assistance of Indian agents. The 1901, 1906, 1911, and 1916 censuses, however, included instructions that Indian agents were to help enumerate First Nations communities in place of standard enumerators.¹⁵

Cross-checking the national and Indian Affairs censuses against one

another therefore provides a problematic and imperfect means of estimating rates of error in enumeration. In British Columbia and Washington, for example, the number of Indians recorded in the parallel counts grew closer over time, suggesting the possibility of improved enumeration practices in one or both organizations by the end of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the inconsistent ways in which the two organizations cooperated, up to and including simply lifting each other's data, makes it difficult to parse out the relative effects of integration from improved enumeration techniques. This is especially complicated to do at the regional and national levels, where a comprehensive analysis of each enumerator's papers and correspondence becomes prohibitively time consuming.

Modern censuses provide a separate means of estimating the degree to which the challenges facing the late nineteenth-century censuses affected the quality of their results. The United States' national census in 1980, for example, underenumerated the First Nations at Colville by between 13 and 23 percent. These errors occurred because of mobility, clerical mistakes, inconsistent data collection, and resistance to enumeration. The Colville Indians were not alone. The St. Regis Mohawks, Santo Domingo Pueblos, Red Lake Band Chippewa, Salt River Pima-Maricopa, and Navajo all suffered underenumeration by varying amounts. In extreme cases, such as the Salt River Pima-Maricopa of Arizona, this undercounting could be as high as 65 percent. Resistance to enumeration created entrenched problems. A study conducted in 1989 found that 23 percent of Indians living in Saint Louis stated that they would not cooperate with the upcoming census because they distrusted the federal government. Mobility, clerical errors, bureaucratic oversights, and resistance resulted in an estimated undercounting of 8 percent of Native Americans in the United States in the 1980 census.¹⁶

A national estimate for the rates of error during the nineteenth century is difficult to give. Suggesting that enumerators missed 10 to 15 percent of the overall population, for example, would gloss over how divergent the quality of enumeration could be and would give a false sense of security when working with this data. National-level conclusions about First Nations demography must be treated with utmost caution. Standard approaches to measuring the quality of returns, such as comparing census results conducted by multiple agencies against one another, introduce problems of their own and fail to reveal instances where both agencies recorded similar but inaccurate results or simply shared information.

The rates of error among nineteenth-century enumerators were undoubtedly higher than those in the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century enumerators faced increased logistic challenges, more isolated

Native American communities, and more significant cultural and linguistic challenges than did their counterparts a century later. In areas where Native Americans lived sedentary lives, separate from but in close proximity to European settlements, rates of error were probably in keeping with those found among the nearby European communities. In regions where First Nations relocated by season, blended in with the surrounding white population, or resisted enumeration, federal agents likely miscounted the population by significant margins, perhaps as high as 20 to 30 percent. In the most troubling situations, they missed entire groups altogether or returned rough population estimates with no individual-level information.¹⁷

The Challenges of Enumeration

For all the challenges surrounding the demographic data itself, the reasons for how and why it fell short reveal a great deal about the relationship First Nations had to the federal government, the regional limitations of federal power, and the persistence of various forms of Native American autonomy in the face of growing federal oversight. During the late nineteenth century, Indian Affairs and decennial census enumerators ran into dozens of problems and complications in their quest to count Indians. These difficulties varied by region, tribe, temporal period, and even local enumerator, but they often stemmed from five overarching challenges. First Nations' geographic mobility, isolation, linguistic and cultural differences, and distrust toward census projects made it difficult for either federal government to get accurate counts. Racial and tribal ambiguity exacerbated these limitations, blurring the clean lines that Indian agents and census enumerators tried to create.

The geographic mobility of Native American communities, while neither universal nor constant, made census enumeration difficult, because it required enumerators to maintain up-to-date information on the current residences of migratory groups. Groups such as the Sioux, Mi'kmaq, and Lyackson relocated their communities to take advantage of seasonal subsistence and wage-labor opportunities, which confounded federal attempts to count them. Geographic mobility skewed census results toward sedentary groups, who were easier to locate, and toward those who lived in closer proximity to European settlements, where up-to-date information was easier to obtain.

Enumerators encountered two basic forms of mobility: seasonal migrations and semipermanent movements. These two forms affected the reliability of the federal count to different degrees. Seasonal migrations lasted for a few months and could be predicted. These migrations occurred at the

same times each year, which gave Indian agents and national census takers the ability to plan for them. Semipermanent migrations, on the other hand, lasted two or three years and were less predictable and harder to track.¹⁸

The seasonal migrations of groups such as the Abenaki, Lummi, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Cayuse, Navajo, Pima, and Mi'kmaq increased the workloads of enumerators and caused inaccuracies in their counts. L. A. DeBlois, the Indian agent at St. Francis Du Lac, for example, complained in 1879 that “during the months of July and August and the greater part of the month of September, very few of the members of the tribe remain at St. Francis.”¹⁹ Instead, many of these Indians traveled throughout the United States and elsewhere rather than remain on their reserves in Quebec. F. A. Rand ran into a similar problem when he tried to enumerate the Halfway River Band of Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia in 1893. He found that no one currently resided on the reservation, all having left for the winter. Rand had to rely on elders and other knowledgeable Indians in the area to create his returns.²⁰

First Nations in British Columbia traveled to Washington Territory to work in the hops fields, fisheries, and sawmills each year. W. H. Lomas, an Indian agent at the Cowichan agency, estimated in 1885 that “some six thousand British Columbia Indians are now crowding to the hop-fields of Washington Territory.”²¹ The labor-intensive nature of hops cultivation and the limited harvest season created strong incentives for farmers to encourage regional mobility. The recruitment of Indian laborers provided a tremendous boon to local industry but restricted the time of year when enumerators could operate. This problem was further compounded by the refusal of some of these groups to reside where the government had dictated. Only half of the Lyacksun Band, for example, lived in their proper villages between 1885 and 1886. The rest of the band had dispersed among other villages or resided in hunt camps. When asked to enumerate this band, Lomas lamented that it would not be easy. Instead of simply visiting one village and enumerating the people there, he would have to visit all the villages and camping places in the area if his superiors wanted an accurate count. In these instances, the time of year the census was conducted greatly affected the returns that were possible. Indian agents could not enumerate a population that was simply not there.

If seasonal migrations made enumeration difficult, semipermanent migrations made it next to impossible. When confronted with semipermanent migrations, most Indian agents had almost nothing to go on. Agents reported back to their superiors that they had no idea where the Indians under their charge had gone or when they would return. The reasons behind these extended migrations came in many different forms. In some cases they were instigated by a refusal to live on the reservations assigned. At

other times, employment, marriage, family, warfare, disease, or subsistence opportunities prompted these movements.²²

Indians who made semipermanent migrations across the Canadian-US divide proved even more difficult to track. Indian agents communicated with their counterparts on the opposite side of the border, but the process was time consuming and did not always yield results. In 1882, for example, C. E. Denny wrote to his superiors that he would attempt to create a new census for the Blood Indians. He had little confidence, however, that it would be accurate. According to Denny, the Bloods living in Canada intermarried with the South Piegans living in the United States. Both groups asserted their rights to collect annuities in Canada, and their intermarriage made separating the two populations difficult. When Denny confronted the South Piegan chiefs on the issue, they responded that they wished to live on the Canadian side of the border where they felt they would be better treated.²³ In places where aboriginals were “practically residents of both countries,” enumeration proved impractical and a constant source of annoyance.²⁴

Geographic mobility interfered with decennial and Indian Affairs censuses to varying degrees because of their organizational differences. The OIA and DIA, for example, entrusted the collection process to the Indian agents, who concerned themselves with recording the members of a specific band irrespective of their current residence. This required individual agents, such as Denny, to expend a great deal of effort tracking down individuals living off the reservation if they wanted to submit accurate counts. Decennial census takers, by contrast, enumerated according to geographic area instead of by tribal group. Indians who had moved off reservations did not need to be tracked across long distances, because the enumerators in charge of the geographic area in which the migrants resided would pick them up. Short-term migrations still interfered with decennial census enumerators, as did migrations across the border, but migrations on the whole were less devastating to the national censuses than they were to the counts created by Indian Affairs.

Geographic isolation, much like geographic mobility, complicated the enumeration process by making it harder for federal agents to reach First Nations communities. Large districts, scattered populations, imperfect communication, and insufficient funds all compounded this problem. National census takers and Indian Affairs agents turned to Hudson’s Bay officials, local police, and missionaries in lieu of speaking directly with aboriginals in remote areas. During the Robinson Treaty and Treaty Nine, for example, the British and Canadian governments relied on Hudson’s Bay Company post managers to gather demographic information and to distribute treaty annuities. The decision benefited both parties. Britain reduced

the costs of enumeration by utilizing Hudson's Bay Company personnel already stationed in remote areas, such as Lake Abitibi. The Hudson's Bay Company benefited in turn from the treaty money being injected into the areas around its trading posts. The challenges presented by geographic isolation did not simply disappear over time and continued to hamper enumeration efforts well into the twentieth century.²⁵

The United States faced similar problems. Francis Amasa Walker, superintendent of the ninth and tenth censuses (1870 and 1880) as well as the commissioner of Indian Affairs (1871–72), expressed concerns about the accuracy of the census in remote areas. In the "Statistics of the Colored Race in the United States," he noted that even an intelligent man "with an instinct for topography . . . a fair knowledge of woodcraft and accustomed to the saddle" would fail to find large portions of the population when expected to cover hundreds of square miles.²⁶ Diligence could not overcome the fundamental problems associated with trying to find isolated segments of the population. Native Americans did not have to be mobile to be difficult to find, as isolation from European communities was often enough to lead to their omission.

The difficulties created by isolation remain to this day, highlighting how pervasive they must have been in the nineteenth century. Even with paved "roads, rapid transit, and aerial mapping," modern censuses have not been successful at enumerating every segment of the Native American population. These continued logistic difficulties have led sociologist C. Matthew Snipp to conclude that "there is no reason whatsoever to believe that a handful of men on horseback, often working in remote areas, trying to count a fearful or hostile population could have done any better."²⁷ While the geographic mobility and isolation of Native American groups made it difficult for enumerators to find many tribes with any consistency, problems continued to plague the process even after they had been found.

Linguistic and cultural complications, for example, made it difficult for enumerators to gain the kinds of information they sought and revealed the assumptions inherent in the enumeration process. Government officials created the national censuses in both the United States and Canada with the belief that they would be dealing with nuclear families and European naming conventions. When working with Native Americans, they often encountered neither. Enumerators found that something as simple as figuring out an individual's name and recording it on paper could be an ordeal. If the band did not speak English or French, a translator was required. In regions like the Pacific Coast where indigenous communities spoke a wide variety of languages, enumerators either had to find multiple translators or rely on a trade language like Chinook Jargon to communicate. While Chinook Jar-

gon made communication simpler, it could not convey complex ideas, leading to inaccuracies and misunderstandings.²⁸

First Nations names, even when acquired, did not conform to European patterns. Native Americans often used a single name that was long, complicated, and hyphenated rather than the divided first name and last name common in many European communities. Enumerators recorded Native American names phonetically, leading to variations in spelling and presentation. This inconsistency became more problematic for groups such as the Kwawkwalth of British Columbia, who possessed multiple names that could change over a person's lifetime or names that were reserved for specific contexts. Multiple names and inconsistent spellings made it close to impossible to compare census lists against one another without substantial effort and added confusion to the entire process.²⁹

Recording an individual's race or tribal status was even more complicated than determining their name. Individuals who appeared on one census as Indian appeared on other censuses as mixed or European. This inconsistency occurred because Indian identity could be defined by at least five different sets of criteria: legal status, self-identification, community recognition, biologic markers (blood quantum), and cultural definitions. These facets of identity overlapped and contradicted one another.

Differences in how to weigh these criteria created conflicting schemas of identity and recognition. On the Pacific Coast, for example, exogamous marriages linked dozens of tribes together. In this context, Indian agents could assign a single tribal identity to individuals, but this allocation did little to reflect the social and political orderings of the region. These kinds of disconnects between federal perceptions and practical orderings created misleading counts.³⁰

Native American identities also changed over time, further muddling an already challenging situation. Internal and external pressures caused by treaties, reservation allocations, disease, changing subsistence patterns, diplomacy, and intermarriage changed the ways Native American communities defined themselves. This pressure caused some groups to disappear as meaningful social and political categories while causing others such as the Catawbas, Creeks, and Seminoles to coalesce as a result of them. The fluidity of identity confused enumerators and created ambiguous situations that could not be adequately recorded on the census forms.³¹ Under the provisions of the Canadian Indian Act of 1876, an Indian was "any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band . . . any child of said person . . . [or] any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person." Illegitimate children did not fit this definition unless the band consented to

distribute money to them. The act specifically excluded mixed-bloods from its definition except “under very special circumstances.”³²

Identities under these criteria did not remain static even at the individual level. The Indian Act ruled that Indians who left the country for a period of more than five years could be stripped of their status. Native American women who married white men became “white.” White women who married Native American men became “Indian.” This legal change did not always alter how communities viewed the individual who gained or lost legal recognition or impact how they self-identified. Nor was it always permanent.

In 1896, for example, Hannah Eliza Cox pressured the DIA to add her back on to the rolls of the Rice Lake Band in Ontario. She had been stripped of her status by Chief Paudash after she married James Cox, a European lumber foreman, in 1875. James abandoned Hannah in 1891 after many years of marriage, leaving her and her two children destitute. After the dissolution of their marriage, Hannah secured the assistance of A. P. Pousette, a solicitor, and John Thackeray, an Indian agent, to pursue her reinstatement. She succeeded in convincing the deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs to restore her to the annuity rolls on the condition that she would not receive back pay and persuaded the band to compensate her \$90 for her losses as a result of her expulsion. During the case, the DIA considered a wide variety of factors, including her work ethic, marital fidelity, and character, when resolving the matter. Her reinstatement demonstrated the instability with which legal identity could be applied and enforced.³³

Inconsistencies in identity also occurred when individuals voluntarily severed their connections to a band, hid their native ancestry, took land scrip or allotments,³⁴ left the country, or were forced off the lists by Indian agents. With all of the racial qualifications and intricacies, determining Indian identity was no easy task. Enumerators, pressed for time and confined by the physical space allotted by the census schedules, attempted to condense dynamic identities into a handful of words. That they often came up short should be of little surprise.³⁵

The Canadian government did little to address ambiguous racial identities until 1901, when they allowed decennial enumerators to record nuanced racial divisions for the first time. The Census Office instructed their enumerators to record mixed-blood Indians according to the heritage of both parents. This specificity allowed enumerators to list someone as belonging to multiple tribes or as mixed race (e.g., English-Chippewa). In practice, they did not always treat mixed-race individuals consistently, leading to problems in both the initial recordings of information and in the tabula-

tions. In 1911, census officials changed how mixed-race individuals would be treated, instructing their agents to enumerate “all admixtures according to the race of the father.”³⁶ They justified this change by stating that their previous attempts to differentiate the heritages had been met with substantial resistance. Dominion statistician R. H. Coats reported that in a large number of cases persons known to have at least some percentage of Indian blood designated themselves in ways that allowed them to avoid the stigma of being associated with an Indian group. By shifting the racial qualifications, the censuses of 1901 and 1911 highlighted the difficulties in comparing censuses conducted by the same agency over time, let alone comparing results taken by different agencies— or worse, by different governments.³⁷

The decennial censuses in the United States used two sets of racial categories to denote Indianness instead of one. “Indians taxed” represented those Indians who had assimilated into white society regardless of whether they paid taxes. Census officials justified the loose interpretation of the phrase “Indians taxed” on the grounds that “Indian citizens, like white citizens, frequently have nothing to tax.”³⁸ Census officials treated “Indians taxed” like most other populations and included them on the normal schedules. “Indians not taxed” constituted unassimilated Indians. Enumerators included these Indians on separate schedules, if at all, and asked a different set of questions, including whether they wore European clothing, understood English, or were monogamous. Taken together, the shifting boundaries of who qualified as “Indian” in Canada and the United States emphasized the subjective nature of racial classification. Both federal governments struggled to ascribe discrete identifiers to a spectrum of belongings, relationships, and experiences.

First Nations resistance to the gathering of demographic information provided the final complication to a process already beset by inaccuracies, difficulties, and headaches. Collecting information from which Native Americans did not see “a present and direct benefit” required “considerable persuasion and trouble.”³⁹ First Nations’ distrust and hostility toward the census process differed by temporal period, tribe, region, and the agencies conducting the enumeration. While many groups agreed to provide demographic information to Indian agents as part of the annuities process, they expected to be compensated for the information and expressed skepticism, indifference, and resistance to the work. Decennial census officials, who offered nothing in return for the information they collected, met stiffer resistance.⁴⁰

Native American communities believed that providing demographic information could be dangerous for a variety of reasons. The information could be used to assess the military capabilities of Native American groups,

disclose illegal cultural practices such as polygamy, help locate suspected criminals, or highlight children who could be forced to attend residential schools. Other groups feared the act of enumeration itself. The Matchlaht at Friendly Cove, British Columbia, believed that if enumerators recorded their names on paper it could “cause them to die by poison,” while others associated the federal officials with the waves of disease that had decimated their populations.⁴¹

First Nations also expressed skepticism toward enumeration because they believed that it undermined their claims to sovereignty. If the groups being enumerated operated in a government-to-government relationship with Canada or the United States, why should either country be counting them? Enumeration implied jurisdiction, which many indigenous groups refused to accept. As a result, Indians had little to gain from their cooperation with national census takers and believed they had a great deal to lose.⁴²

First Nations’ distrust and hostility toward the census process was not unique. In 1860, for example, Philadelphia’s *Saturday Evening Post* portrayed the census as asking intrusive questions of whites as well.⁴³ The cartoon was not entirely unfair. From 1790 to 1830, the results of the US census were posted publicly to allow the community to verify the information that had been given. Until 1880, there did not exist any legislative provision in either Canada or the United States to protect against the use of personal information that was collected.⁴⁴

To overcome the resistance to enumeration, Indian agents and decennial census takers sometimes resorted to coercion. In 1880, Indian agents faced with Blackfeet opposition refused to provide the Blackfeet with rations. Within the hour, the Blackfeet agreed to be counted. Enumerators operating in British Columbia, such as Ronald Green, threatened that Indians who did not provide census information would make themselves ineligible for government assistance. Other agents recommended that treaty payments be withheld from bands that did not cooperate.⁴⁵

Threats proved effective but could not overcome the stiffest resistance. Indian agent George L. Davenport noted in his annual report in 1880 that the Sac and Fox had refused to give him the ages and names of their population, as it violated their religious beliefs. Davenport made “every explanation and argument” to convince them of the innocence of the collection but to no avail.⁴⁶ Despite being denied annuities for four years, the Sac and Fox continued to refuse to submit to the kinds of counts Davenport desired.

National census takers, lacking Indian agents’ ability to punish recalcitrant groups, had to rely on the federal court systems or empty threats to secure cooperation. Legal action, while rare, showed some signs of promise. Michel D’Aigles (Chief Dokis), of the Nipissing Band in the Robinson-

Huron Treaty area (present-day Ontario), was the son of a fur trader and an Anishinaabeg woman. In 1891, George B. Mills, an enumerator, visited the house of Chief Dokis. Unable to gain the information he required after a number of visits, Mills eventually resorted to legal pressure. Dokis received a \$26.60 fine for his interference. Joseph Michaud, Justice of the Peace at Sturgeon Falls, took up the case with the DIA. Michaud argued that the fine was inappropriate because the interpreter spoke neither French nor Ojibwa well (the languages Dokis knew) and had previously tried to pressure Dokis into selling his timber rights. This pressure had created a lasting animosity between the two men. In the subsequent investigation, the census commissioner uncovered that Mills had previously misled the Department of Agriculture in order to receive compensation twice (once from Dokis and once from the Department of Agriculture). In August 1891, the Department of Agriculture wrote to the DIA stating that the proceedings against Chief Dokis would be dropped. The correspondence provided no indication whether the fine Chief Dokis paid would be returned to him.⁴⁷

Coercion worked both ways. Native American communities understood the value of the information they provided and tried to use the census process for their own purposes. Chief Isadore's band in British Columbia refused, for example, to allow a census to be taken of them until the government considered their request for a reserve that included the "whole valley of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers."⁴⁸ The ploy failed, and the government turned to a resident of Kootenay to acquire the band's vital statistics. Even so, the band's refusal suggests that First Nations groups were willing to withhold their information in the hope of gaining inducements for their cooperation.

Conclusion

Taken together, the US and Canadian governments' difficulty enumerating Indians reveals the localized limitations of federal authority during the nineteenth century. In areas where First Nations maintained high levels of autonomy, Indian agents and census takers often failed in their tasks. In other instances, they found themselves negotiating or even threatening tribes in order to acquire basic information about groups they claimed to oversee. Beset by logistic, cultural, financial, and linguistic challenges, enumerators produced counts of varying quality.

Even as rough estimates, however, the censuses taken of Native Americans and First Nations in the nineteenth century are valuable tools for considering Canadian and American Indian policy. Censuses do far more than count people. They provide governments with a tool to understand, catego-

rize, and control the nations. They help create national identities, solidify and explicate racial categories, and establish a sense of progress. The flaws in the information recorded by enumerators did not stop either federal government from using the imperfect population estimates to allocate funding, fulfill treaty obligations, measure progress toward assimilation, and restrict transnational mobility. Understanding the limitations of the censuses is therefore important not only for creating demographic estimates of the past but also for understanding how and why the federal governments constructed the policies that they created.

Notes

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