

Census partners with American Indian group to encourage good count

Coahuiltecas leading effort to encourage participation in 2010 Census to prevent an undercount in Bexar County.

It's admittedly small in comparison to San Antonio's other major ethnic and racial groups. In fact, the number may not reach 20,000 yet, but representatives of Bexar County's American Indian urban population - like many others concerned about the financial and political impact of a South Texas census undercount - are stressing participation in the 2010 Census.

The goal is to ensure every American Indian is counted "so San Antonio gets its fair share," said Ramon Vasquez, executive director of the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, an educational, cultural and service group established in 1994 by the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation. Though not federally recognized, the tribe describes its members as descendants of the indigenous people who built the region's Spanish colonial missions and have lived in South Texas and Northeast Mexico.

Since June, the U.S. Census Bureau has worked with the group, signing on to sponsor its sixth annual Missions Heritage 5K Run/Walk and Mission Pow Wow Sept. 13 and organizing a regional tribal conference in San Antonio Oct. 26-27.

The bureau also has hired a full-time tribal partnership assistant, 41-year-old San Antonian Benito Tremillo, to work with the American Indian group.

San Antonio is among the top 10 cities with major urban Indian populations, as are Dallas and Houston, experts said.



"There have been massive undercounts of urban Indians living in major cities," Vasquez said. "It's been a longtime problem," especially since 65 percent of American Indians no longer live on reservations and generally receive fewer services than those who live on reservations.

Vasquez said an undercount will keep groups such as his from fully drawing federal dollars for programs that better serve the population's needs.

"Unfortunately, we suffer from the same things as Mexican Americans," he said, pointing to high dropout and teen pregnancy rates and issues such as obesity and diabetes.

At the same time, Census Bureau statistics for Bexar County show exponential growth of American Indians.

In the 1990 Census, when the questionnaire allowed people to check only one racial category, there were 4,265 American Indians in the county.

By 2000, when the one-category rule was changed, the number of American Indians had grown to 18,302 - 11,193 of them who identified themselves as both American Indian and another group, such as Hispanic.

"What you're seeing in Texas is a growing number of Latinos making that choice," said Texas state demographer Karl Eschbach. "They've decided the best way to talk about their race is that they're Hispanic or Latino, and they're indigenous American, because they have roots in the Americas."

The growth is not "people moving from reservations," he added. "It's Hispanics thinking that this is a better way to report their race. They don't pick a race out of thin air. People are saying this is meaningful to them."

Eschbach expects the number of American Indians to grow in 2010, which worries Vasquez.

"San Antonio isn't prepared to provide the types of service or meet the needs of its urban Indian population," he said.

Stanley Lewis of the U.S. Census Bureau regional office in Dallas said its tribal partnership assistants are spreading word of the census as well as the need to hire enumerators next year.

"The mission is to ensure everyone is counted," Lewis said.

[American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions](#)

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