

Counting Young Kids in the 2020 Census: Don't Overlook the South¹

By William P. O'Hare

O'Hare Data and Demographic Services LLC

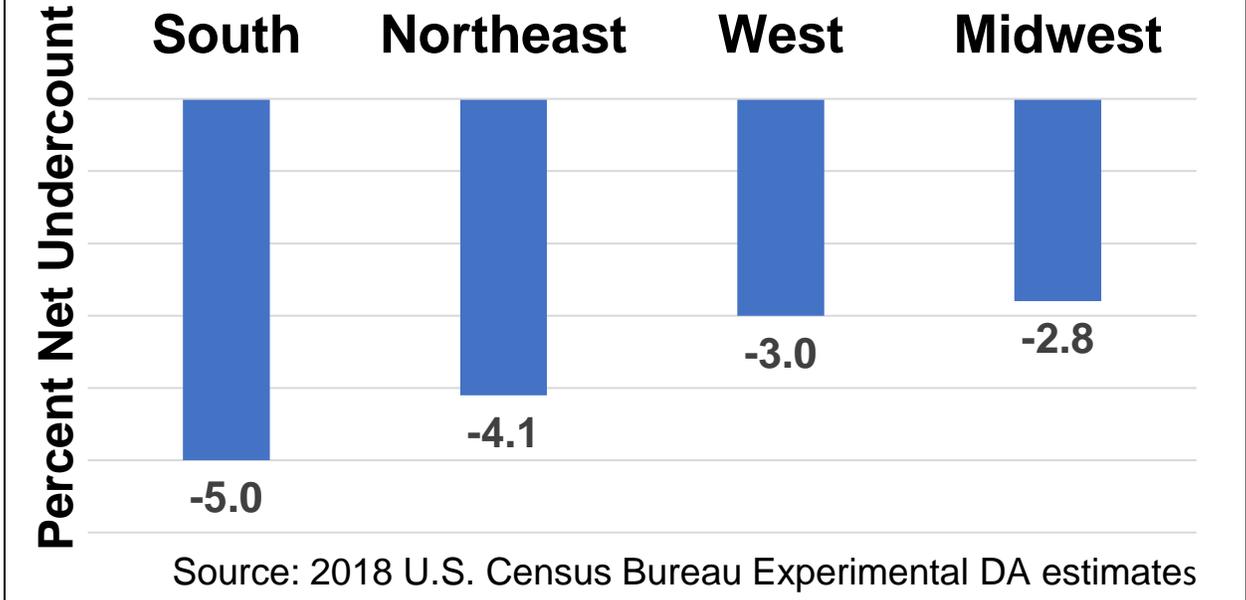
In the 2010 Census, young children had a higher net undercount (4.6 percent) than any other age group. Moreover, the net undercount for young children has tripled since 1980 while the net undercount rates for most other demographic groups have improved (O'Hare 2015). Therefore, counting young children accurately in the 2020 Census should be a high priority.

When people think of places where the 2020 Census will have difficulty getting a complete and accurate count of young children they often think of the large urban centers of the Northeast or Midwest; cities like Detroit, Chicago, New York, or Philadelphia. While those areas have their own set of challenges, evidence suggests that the biggest problem might actually be in the South.

Figure 1 shows the net undercount rate of young children in the South is higher than any other region. Keep in mind that this is the Census-defined South region which includes states like West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, and Oklahoma as well as States of the Deep South.

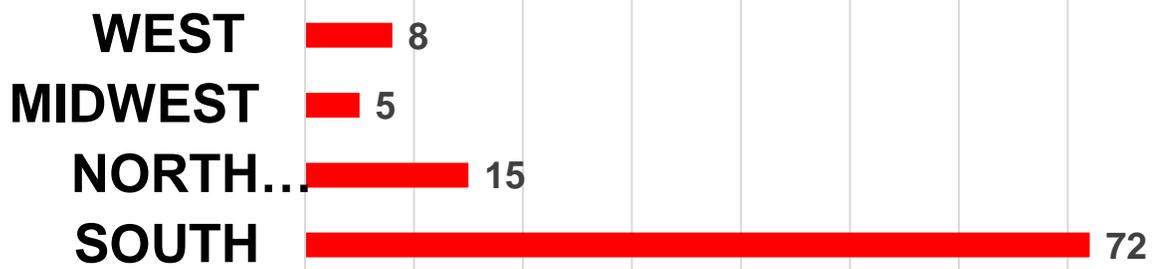
¹ This material comes from a presentation by William P. O'Hare at the annual conference of the Southern Demographic Association in New Orleans, October 24, 2019.

Figure 1 Net Undercount for Age 0 to 4 in 2010 Census



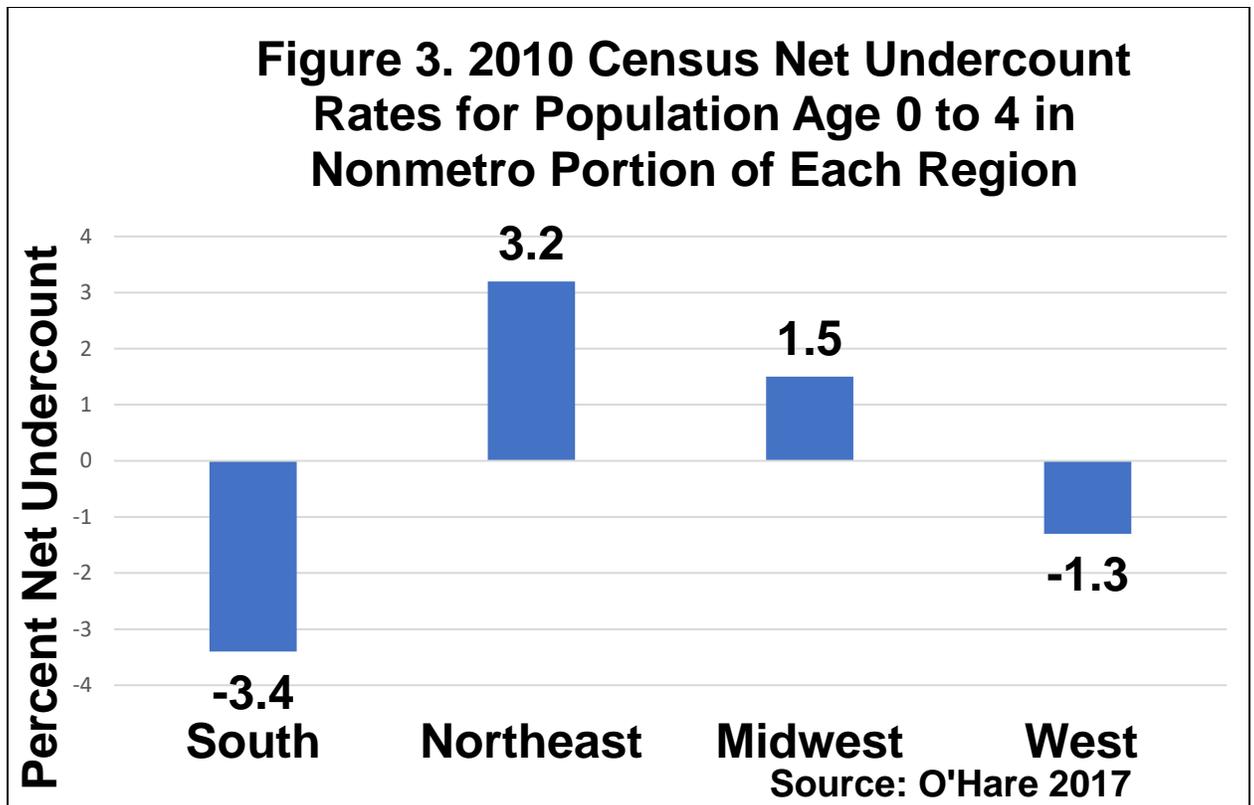
In April 2018, the Census Bureau released updated net undercount estimates for young children in large counties (100,000 or more people) (King et al. 2018). Figure 2 shows that large counties (100,000 or more population) with high net undercount rates for young children are highly concentrated in the South. Of the 100 large counties with the highest net undercount rates for young children, 72 are located in the South.

Figure 2. Number of Counties in Each Region Among the 100 Counties with the Highest Net Undercount Rate for Young Children in 2010 Census



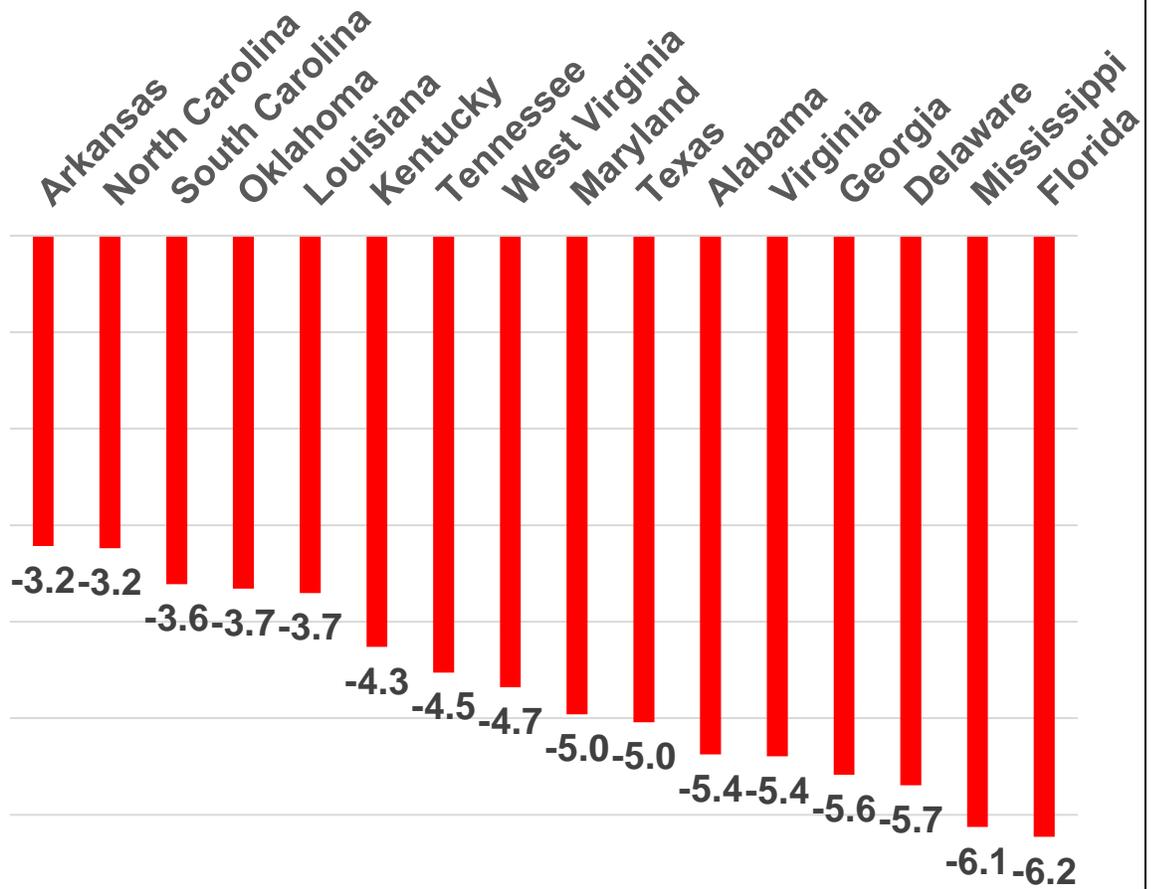
Source: 2018 U.S. Census Bureau Experimental DA Estimates

However, the problem is not confined to the large urban centers of the South. The net undercount of young children in the rural South is much higher than the net undercount of young children in rural areas of other regions. Figure 3 shows net undercount rates for nonmetropolitan or rural portions of every region. The net undercount rate for young children in the rural South (-3.4 percent) is more than twice as high as the net undercount rate for young children in the West (-1.3 percent) and young rural children in the Northeast and Midwest had a net overcount. The high net undercount rate for young children in the rural South is somewhat surprising given the fact the rural areas generally have lower net undercounts than urban areas (O'Hare 2017b).



The net undercount of young children in rural areas of the south is pervasive. In every state there is a high net undercount of young children. But the regional net undercount rate for young rural children the South masks big differences across the rural areas of southern states. Figure 4 shows the net undercount for young children in the rural portions of Southern states ranges from a low of 3.2 percent in Arkansas and North Carolina to a high of 6.2 percent in Florida and 6.1 percent in Mississippi. In other words, the net undercount of young children in rural Mississippi and rural Florida was about twice as high as the comparable population in Arkansas and North Carolina.

Figure 4. Net Undercount Rates for Age 0-4 in Southern States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018 Experimental DA estimates

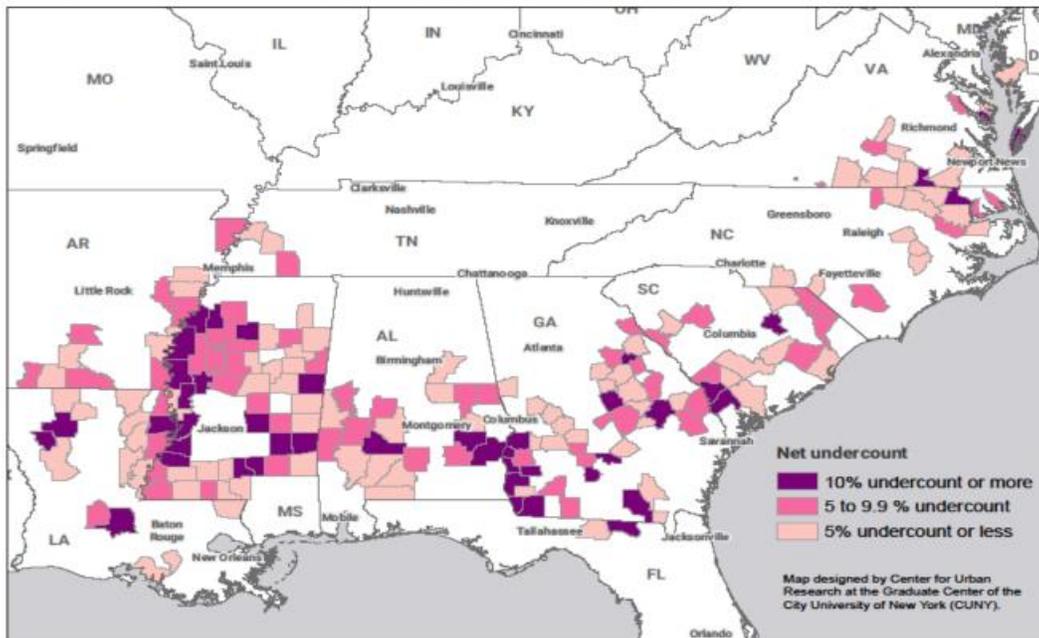
One section of the South where it will be particularly difficult to get an accurate count of young children in the rural “black belt” which stretches from South Carolina to the Mississippi Delta. While the net undercount estimates for small counties probably contain a good deal of random error, examining clusters of counties may be more informative. The map below shows a string of 199 heavily black counties in rural portions of several states in the Deep South. In this study, heavily black means one-third or more of the young children are black. The collective young child net

undercount rate for the 199 rural counties where more than one-third of the young children are black is -5.2 percent, for the 239 counties in the South where 5 to 32.9 percent of the young children are black it is -3.3 percent, and for the 388 counties where less than 5 percent of young child population are black it is -2.4 percent.

Several pockets can be identified where the net undercount of young children in the 2010 Census was higher than 10 percent and many nearby counties had net undercounts of 5 percent or more for young children. Rural counties with high net undercounts of young children appear in a couple of clusters, notably along the Mississippi river and Southeast Alabama. Another pocket is located I Southeast Georgia and South Carolina.

The high rates in rural Mississippi are not too surprising given the fact and Mississippi, has a large number of young black children living in entrenched poverty in the Delta and other rural areas of Mississippi.

Heavily black counties in the Rural South by net undercount rates for young children



One other factor that will hinder a complete and accurately count of young black children in the South is the high rate of households without internet access at home. In the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau will be

promoting the use of internet responses.² According to the Census Bureau (2019, page 2):

“First, ISR develops communication and contact strategies to encourage the use of the internet as the primary response mode through a sequence of invitations and reminder mailings.”

(ISR refers to the internet self-response option.)

Nationally about 8 percent of young children live in a household without internet access, but the figure is 26 percent of young black children living in low-income households in the rural South based on the 2017 American Community Survey results.

The key point here is that the South in general and the rural south in particular is an area where the undercount of young children was higher than most other places in the country in the 2010 census. Getting an accurate count of young children in the 2020 Census, will be a big challenge. In meeting that challenge it is important that we do not overlook the rural South where the net undercount of young children in the 2010 Census was extremely high.

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² To be clear, households will have the option to respond by paper or phone as well as the internet, but it is clear that the internet option is what is being promoted most heavily by the Census Bureau.