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**Census changes help correct historic undercount of Wisconsin’s Indigenous population**

*By Frank Vaisvilas, Green Bay Press-Gazette*

Coming from mixed ancestries, Brenda John always struggled with how to accurately identify herself when filling out census questions.

“I’m Oneida, I’m also part non-Native,” she said. “I don’t have the option to say both without going into a generic mixed race bucket that can no longer be used for important things like grants for our community. People also don’t understand the difference around the Hispanic questions and, again, the question of what to do if you are both Hispanic and black, or Hispanic and Native, can result in not getting counted correctly.”

John, who lives on the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin, said she understands the importance of the census to her tribe and also to Wise Women Gathering Place, the nonprofit where she works, because those figures are used in determining federal funding.

A push by tribal and federal officials to encourage participation in the 2020 U.S. census resulted in what tribes are hailing as the most accurate picture to date of the size and diversity of people with Indigenous ancestry in Wisconsin.

Combined with improvements to the census itself, that effort helped push the percentage of people reporting they were Indigenous combined with another race, such as white or Black, up [165% in Wisconsin from 2010 to 2020](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/wisconsin-population-change-between-census-decade.html). In Brown County, the number of people reporting they were all or partly Indigenous increased by more than 3,200 people, or 143%.

The percentage of people responding that they were American Indian or Alaska Native alone, with no other race, increased by only about 10% in Wisconsin.

Tribal officials across the U.S. have long argued that Indigenous people have been undercounted by the federal government, which finally led to a change in data collection for the[2020 census](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html). Those changes included more options and clearer instructions for reporting ancestry of multiple races, resulting in large gains not just for Indigenous people, but for other racial groups as well.

Melissa Nuthals, of the Oneida Nation’s self-governance office, said the majority of American Indians have other races in their makeup and that diversity had not been reflected in past census tallies. She said less than 7% of Oneida citizens are full-blooded Oneida with no other race.

“They are improving their methods,” Nuthals said of the census data collection.

The 2020 question about multiple races more clearly directs the respondent to add their full racial ancestry as well as the name of their tribe. Detailed results from those questions have not yet been released by the Census Bureau.

John said she initially put off filling out the census form because she felt anxious about intrusive questions and wondered if she would be correctly identified and counted. Once she started, those fears slipped away.

“The process was so easy compared to other years,” she said. “I finally said to myself ‘I’m just going to check out this (online) link’ and hoped it wouldn’t be too overwhelming, and it was easy.”

On the Oneida Reservation, about 65,000 acres starting on the west side of Green Bay and continuing into Outagamie County, the census has always reported a smaller population than the Oneida government’s own count.

Besides a change in questions and better tabulations by the federal government, Nuthals said tribal outreach also helped improve the population reporting.

She said many Indigenous in the past wouldn’t fill out the census forms because of distrust of the federal government and concerns about privacy.

Nuthals said some had specific concerns, such as if they had too many people living in their household and they were receiving federal funding. In all these situations, she said tribal officials worked to alleviate those concerns for the 2020 census.

As a result, the Oneida Nation had the fourth-best census response rate of the more than 500 Indigenous nations with reservations in the U.S.

The total population for enrolled citizens of the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin is a little more than 17,000. In 1970, that estimate was 6,500 people. Nuthals said more Oneidas enrolled as citizens with the tribe in the early 2000s after a large per capita payout was offered.

Enrollment in the[Oneida Nation](https://oneida-nsn.gov/) typically requires a person to be at least a quarter Oneida, a formula referred to as blood quantum.

In 2000, the Census Bureau count of enrolled citizens was about 7% lower than the tribe’s number. In 2010, improvements to the census left it about 2.7% lower than that tribe’s count, and this time around the census count was only lower by about 1%.

“They got closer to being accurate,” Nuthals said.

Nuthals said federal grants and funding had once been heavily reliant on census statistics, so accuracy was important. That’s less the case now, because many federal agencies now use the tribes’ self-reported population counts. However, some funding may still consider census counts and political districts are drawn based on census numbers.

The population of enrolled citizens on the reservation is currently 4,626, which is up from 3,121 in 2000. Nuthals said the increase is also attributed to more housing being built on the reservation and its proximity to Green Bay for employment opportunities.

In 2010, there were 2,275 housing units in Hobart compared with 4,259 in 2020, Nuthals said.

The overall population on the reservation for all races increased from 22,776 in 2010 to 27,110  and officials say that’s largely due to increased housing availability on the east side in Hobart and on the west side of Green Bay.

While the population reporting became more accurate during the 2020 census despite the challenges from the pandemic, Nuthals said a lot of information wasn’t accurately collected because of the pandemic, such as household incomes, poverty rates and education levels.

“Hopefully, we can get it all in 2030,” she said.

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**Home is here**

Who are we? U.S. Census Bureau data offers a starting point to answer that question in northeastern Wisconsin, the place we call home. Yet the 2020 census provides only a snapshot; the numbers don’t tell the whole story of the growing number of Black, Asian, Native American and Hispanic residents [in the region](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/local/2021/08/12/census-greater-appleton-area-gains-more-than-22-000-people/5518382001/).

The phrase “Home is here” comes from a business leader whose family fled Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War, speaking about the Hmong experience in our region, but it applies equally to other racial and ethnic groups that call northeastern Wisconsin home.

Over the next year, this series will continue to pose that question — Who are we? — in a variety of settings, from traditional news interviews and informal conversations to formal community town hall events. The goal is to spark a dialogue that helps us better understand who we are, and more importantly, decide who we want to be.

We are journalists at [FoxValley365](https://madison365.com/foxvalley/), the [Green Bay Press-Gazette](https://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/) and [The Post-Crescent](https://www.postcrescent.com/). This project falls under the umbrella of the NEW News Lab, a local news collaboration in northeastern Wisconsin made up of six news organizations, which also includes[The Press Times](https://gopresstimes.com/), [Wisconsin Public Radio](https://www.wpr.org/) and [Wisconsin Watch](https://wisconsinwatch.org/). The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay’s Journalism Department is an educational partner. [Microsoft](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/corporate-responsibility/protecting-journalism?activetab=pivot_1:primaryr4)is providing financial support to the [Greater Green Bay Community Foundation](https://www.ggbcf.org/) and [Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region](https://www.cffoxvalley.org/supporting-local-journalism/) to fund the initiative. The [mission of the lab](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/local/2021/06/23/microsoft-community-foundations-boost-news-northeast-wisconsin/5308130001/) is to “collaborate to identify and fill information gaps to help residents explore ways to improve their communities and lives — and strengthen democracy.”