Looking for the Last Percent: The Controversy over Census Undercounts

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Some undercount of the population occurs in all censuses, and death records for previous years, immigration and emigration data, and previous censuses. The undercount rate dropped from 5.4 percent in 1940, to 4.1 percent in 1950, 3.1 percent in 1960, 2.5 percent in 1970, and 2.0 percent in 1980. The 1990 count showed a slight improvement with a 1.8 percent undercount. The undercount error has become a standard part of the decennial census landscape.

In 1980 and 1990, big city mayors complained that census undercounts were particularly large. Critics of Census Bureau plans want the final population totals to be more accurate. Earlier this month, New York City filed a lawsuit seeking to force the Blacks and Hispanics were undercounted by as much as 6 percent in the 1980 census.