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## An unexpected result for some census takers: the wrath of irate Americans

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This is the scary season for the nation's census takers.

Since they began making [follow-up house calls](#) in early May, census takers have encountered vitriol, menace and flashes of violence. They have been shot at with pellet guns and hit by baseball bats. They have been confronted with pickaxes, crossbows and hammers. They've had lawn mowers pushed menacingly toward them and patio tables thrown their way. They have been nibbled by ducks, bitten by pit bulls and chased by packs of snarling dogs.

Some days, being cursed at seems part of the job description.

So far, the Census Bureau has tallied 379 incidents involving assaults or threats on the nation's [635,000 census workers](#), more than double the 181 recorded during the 2000 census. Weapons were used or threatened in a third of the cases.

Now, with just three weeks to go in the door-knocking phase of the count, the number of census takers has dwindled, and the remaining households are the toughest.

While most homeowners have received census takers graciously, some say they have been surprised at the degree of anger exhibited by Americans who consider them the embodiment of intrusive government.

"I came across loads of hostility," said Douglas McDonald, who summoned police in Deltona, Fla., after a tug-of-war with an irate homeowner over a census form. The homeowner threw his ripped half in the toilet.

McDonald, 70, a District native who retired from the Labor Department after 30 years as an investigator, said he wasn't prepared for the level of anti-government fervor he encountered.

"There's so much anger and bitterness, with people losing their homes and their jobs," said McDonald, who eventually quit. "They're not too fond of the government. They don't want to talk to you."

Sherri Chesney, 46, said she was cursed and spat at during follow-up visits in Houston. One day, she encountered a woman working in her garden. Chesney showed her census badge, she said, prompting the woman to launch into a tirade: "I don't need the blankety-blank government snooping in my business." Then she threw a metal patio table at Chesney, who escaped injury by ducking.

"I was stunned, I really was, that America is so mad at the government," said Chesney, who no longer works for the census. "People don't know what it's like out there. It's scary and dangerous, and it's not worth my life."

Census officials say they do not consider anti-government sentiment more widespread than usual this year. But Fernando Armstrong, the Philadelphia regional census director responsible for Maryland and the District, said it seems to be more vociferous.

"It's the degree of passion they have," he said. "When they don't want to participate, they *really* don't want to participate."

In the Washington area, the threats made to census takers have been infrequent, and no one has been harmed.

Some of the attacks elsewhere represent random violence, such as a robbery at knifepoint in Richmond, Va., and a carjacking in Connecticut. In some situations, the job turned unexpectedly dangerous, as for the Baltimore crew leader who was [fatally shot](#) seven times while sitting in his car and the Wisconsin census taker who knocked on the door of a man who tried to drag her into his apartment.

Other workers were beset by mean-tempered animals. Wendy Soto, who was knocking on doors in California, still can't move two fingers after being attacked by a pit bull that pushed open a security door.

Among the more troubling were incidents that arose from residents' seething resentment that anyone from the government would seek their personal information.

Some people pointedly mentioned President Obama.

While conducting follow-ups in an upscale Seattle neighborhood, Grover Ellis said he came across a woman who considered him an agent of Obama, not the U.S. government.

"The idea of the census just enraged her," said Ellis, 64, stressing that the overwhelming majority of people he met were welcoming and responsive. "The way she saw the census, she was required to help Obama. And she wasn't going to do anything to help out Obama."

Police have been dispatched after confrontations between census takers and property owners who posted No Trespassing signs. As federal government employees, the census takers are not breaking the law by disregarding the signs.

But try telling that to a homeowner with a crossbow.

In a rural part of California's Nevada County northeast of Sacramento, two census workers told authorities that a man ordered them off his land. He mentioned his submachine gun, then followed them down the drive with a crossbow in hand. No charges were brought against the resident, the sheriff's department said.

A homeowner in Marion, Ohio, called police, saying he had just used his baseball bat against a stranger on his property. The perceived interloper was a census taker who told police the resident flew off the handle as soon as he mentioned the word census. The census taker was struck in the forearm, warding off blows from the aluminum bat. The resident was charged with felonious assault.

Dallas regional director Gabriel Sanchez said occasional encounters with dogs and protective property owners are par for the course in any census.

"It's not that people are waiting to gun down a government worker or waiting to assault a census worker," he said. "Some people have a strong need for privacy and being left alone. I'm sure they would treat the FedEx man the same way."

Soto, the pit bull victim, says census takers should be permitted to carry weapons, such as pepper spray, to ward off harm.

"If I'd had pepper spray in my pocket, I probably would have had a good chance of not losing my hand," said Soto, 38, who was earning \$15 an hour and saving for a vacation with her children and a used car.

The dog bit Soto in the stomach, leg and hand. The census is paying for her doctor's bills, medication and replacement clothing. She doesn't know when she will be physically able to return to her regular job as a special-education teacher's aide.

Steven Jost, a spokesman for the Census Bureau, said it is unlikely that the policy prohibiting census workers from carrying weapons will be rescinded. After the 2010 census is completed, officials will examine all incidents to determine whether changes are needed to reduce risks, for both workers and the public. The number of verified incidents might go down after analysis.

Chesney, for one, won't be back for another census unless she's offered an office position.

"I want to help my country," she said. "I want us to have funding for schools, and all the things that are involved with the census. But I'm not putting my life at risk."

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