

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

How Many People Live on Nantucket? Depends Whom You Ask

Census Bureau says island has 11,229 permanent residents, but a local entrepreneur says it's 17,200



Nantucket's population typically balloons with an influx of visitors and temporary residents in the summer, but it is also home to thousands of permanent residents.

PHOTO: JOCELYN FILLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Jo Craven McGinty

Oct. 5, 2018 7:00 a.m. ET

Now you see 'em, now you don't.

The population of Nantucket balloons to 46,000 or more each summer, but when part-time residents, seasonal workers and vacationers depart, the number drops to...what?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 11,229 permanent residents live on the island—a crescent off Massachusetts that’s home to some of the country’s wealthiest people—but a group of entrepreneurs believes the true number is 50% larger.

“We’re telling them they have 17,200 people living here,” said Alan Worden, a resident who founded [Nantucket Data Platform](#) to count and categorize the island’s people.

Like all areas of the country, Nantucket has a vested interest in a complete head count because \$675 billion in federal funds is allocated based on population, and at the local level, plans for services are predicated on the number of people who will use them.

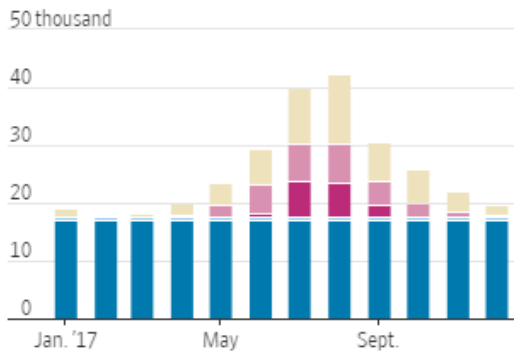
Mr. Worden suspects other areas of the country could benefit from NDP’s methodology, and in the coming months, he plans to promote it in Charleston, S.C., Sarasota, Fla., Jackson Hole, Wyo., and other places.

But state demographers aren’t convinced the Census Bureau’s estimates for Nantucket are as far off as NDP believes.

Ebb and Flow

Average daily weekday population on Nantucket in 2017

■ Permanent residents ■ Commuters
■ Seasonal residents ■ Seasonal workers
■ Visitors



Source: Nantucket Data Platform

“It’s unlikely that there is a population undercount in technical census terms,” said Susan Strate, a demographer at the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute who is also the state’s liaison to the Census Bureau. “I think it’s more a question of definition than accuracy.”

In its report, NDP defines permanent residents as people who regard Nantucket as their usual place of residence, where the adults pay taxes and register to vote.

The decennial census, conducted once every 10 years, asks people to list their usual residence, which it defines as where they live and sleep most of the time.

“This residence is not necessarily the same as the person’s voting residence or legal residence, nor is it required to be the same in a Census response,” Ms. Strate said.

Each year after the decennial head count, the Census Bureau adds and subtracts births and deaths and estimates migration using Medicare enrollment and IRS year-to-year matched tax returns.

Mr. Worden doesn’t doubt the decennial results, but on Nantucket, he thinks the annual estimates veer from reality.

“We have big immigration. Existing housing is getting occupied more densely. The census wouldn’t know that,” he said.

To arrive at its tally, NDP began with Nantucket’s own town census, which last year recorded [around 11,000 adults](#). It used data from Civis Analytics, a private consulting firm, to identify another 3,000 adults it believes are permanent residents of the island. And it analyzed the demographics of the combined group to approximate the number of children.

“We took 14,000 adults and added 3,200 children,” Mr. Worden said. “That’s how we got our estimate.”

The team also used, among other data, the number of ferry and airplane passengers; U.S. Postal Service change-of-address records; and estimates from StreetLight, a private company that uses anonymous “pings” from smartphones to assign home locations based on where the devices usually are.

“Because we had daily trip-level ferry counts, we could compare mobility data to actual counts,” Mr. Worden said.

The question of where to count residents—particularly those with multiple addresses—isn’t new.

In 1920, the decennial census, which previously had been conducted on June 1, was done on Jan. 1. The change caused migrant workers to be counted in the cities where they wintered rather than in the rural areas where they worked in the summer.

The result was so controversial, according to Reynolds Farley, a research scientist at the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, it was never used to apportion seats for the U.S. House of Representatives, the Constitutional reason for conducting the decennial census.

Since then, the census has been taken on April 1.

In 2000, after the census caused Utah to lose a House seat, the state argued that Mormon missionaries traveling abroad should have been counted, and it disputed the legality of statistical imputations used to fill in missing data. The courts were not convinced—but the state did [regain a seat a decade later](#) after the next census. NPD, which was hired to validate Nantucket’s local address list in anticipation of the 2020 census, hopes its work will lead to a better reckoning for the island. It also hopes Nantucket’s agencies, businesses and nonprofits will employ it to answer what it calls pressing questions.

It’s already had some takers. Nantucket Memorial Airport, for one, engaged the company to identify underserved routes.

“The answer was Philadelphia,” Mr. Worden said. “Nine thousand people from Philadelphia came in peak season, and there were zero direct flights. Now, the airport can take data and say, I actually know how many people you can serve.”

Write to Jo Craven McGinty at Jo.McGinty@wsj.com