

Exposing the Costs of Uncounting, a review essay

What does it mean to be 'uncounted'? It means that the uncounted – an event, an individual, a group – is invisible, absent from a world built on data. In this review essay, **Mariel McKone Leonard** examines two recent books, **Invisible Women** by **Caroline Criado Perez** and **The Uncounted** by **Alex Cobham**, that take up the task of documenting the true extent of uncounting and make a compelling moral argument for addressing the consequences of the data gap.

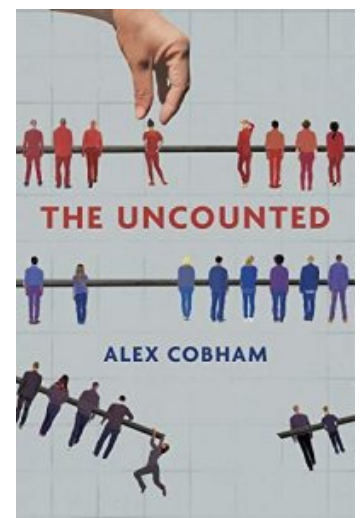
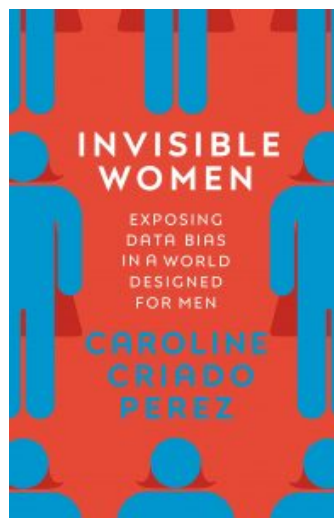
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Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men. Caroline Criado Perez. Penguin. 2019.

The Uncounted. Alex Cobham. Polity. 2020.

What does it mean to be 'uncounted'? It means that the uncounted – an event, an individual, a group – is invisible, absent from a world built on data. The maxim 'absence of evidence is not equal to evidence of absence' is not applicable in official statistics. Rather, absence of evidence – or at least documented, recorded evidence – means that officially, and thus legally and politically, the uncounted something or someone does not exist.

Nearly every day of 2020 laid bare the habits and systems that perpetuate patterns of uncounting, from the [erasure of a female US presidential candidate from news coverage](#), to the 'exceptions for me but not for thee' [treatment of Dominic Cummings by the UK government](#). Likely no example is as explicit as the [Trump administration's attempt to – literally – not count undocumented immigrants in the 2020 census, in violation of the US Constitution](#). The consequences of a failure to count are tragic, both in the sense that they are extremely upsetting as well as their roots in an intrinsic moral flaw. We – society – do not have to [limit production of personal protective equipment to 'standard' men's sizes](#), thus leaving countless medical professionals hampered and exposed. We do not have to [disproportionately police people of colour for 'violating' COVID-19 lockdowns](#) or push to reopen schools and businesses too soon since 'only' [ethnic minorities](#) and [the elderly](#) are at elevated risk. These are choices, and we can choose differently. But first we must acknowledge that choice.

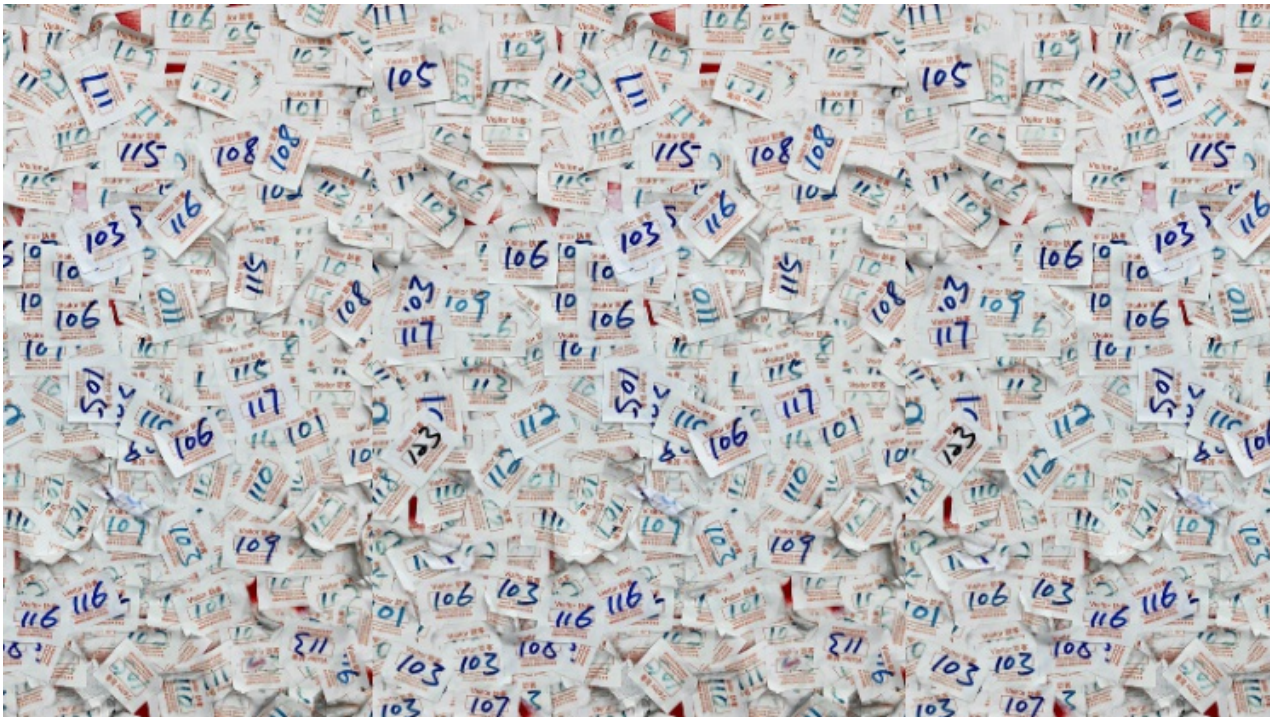


Two recent books, *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez and *The Uncounted* by Alex Cobham, take up the arduous task of documenting the true extent of uncounting as well as proposing solutions. In this, the two studies complement each other well: *Invisible Women* is written for the general public with accessible writing and facts, while *The Uncounted* is more academic and policy-oriented, but both are extensively researched.

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Both books make compelling and forceful arguments for fully counting everyone. *Invisible Women*, as its title suggests, focuses on the half of humanity ignored by policy, science and society. *The Uncounted* is both more general than *Invisible Women* – Cobham considers all members of the global uncounted, not only women – but also more focused; rather than enumerating the many, many ways in which women are excluded, he examines the discounting of billions from a political and economic perspective. Both seem prescient in their consideration of those overlooked by data.

Criado Perez begins *Invisible Women* with a discussion of how so-called ‘women’s issues’, such as basic healthcare, safety and accessibility, are dismissed as narrow ‘identity politics’ (23). Far too often, we are told that the male perspective is ‘the absolute truth’, as [Simone de Beauvoir noted in 1949](#). When women’s experiences do not match this ‘reality’, we are told the flaw is in us. How cathartic it is then to read *Invisible Women* and to realise that so many problems – of too large tools, protective gear, iPhones and seatbelts, of medical care that ignores our symptoms and pain, of voice recognition software and automated assistants that don’t recognise women’s voices, [don’t understand the meaning of the sentence ‘I was raped’](#) and cannot locate abortion providers (162, 176) – are not ours, but those of a world that is quite literally not designed for us. For a time, my Twitter feed appeared full of nothing but highlighted passages from the book, evidence perhaps that many other women also experienced *Invisible Women* as a revelatory moment.



Criado Perez moves methodically from private life (Chapters One and Two) to public life (Chapters Twelve to Fourteen), with stops in ‘the workplace’ (Chapters Three to Six), design (meaning here ergonomics) in Chapters Seven and Eight, before ‘going to the doctors’ (Chapters Ten and Eleven). Page after page, Criado Perez presents overwhelming evidence that addressing the concerns of women saves money (not to mention lives; see pages 31, 51, 122-26, 155 and 186, for a few examples), expands the economy (women’s labour is often excluded from GDP and other indicators, 75-78) and [improves governance](#) (266). Through the course of the book, Criado Perez provides bountiful evidence of her thesis that there are three primary data gaps endangering the health and wellbeing of women: the physiology of female bodies, the care burden placed almost entirely on women and experiences of violence.

Furthermore, these three data gaps interact to exacerbate the daily risks to women. In Chapter Two, Criado Perez discusses how lack of access to toilets increases the likelihood that women will be sexually assaulted, which in turn leads women to instead risk infections and other health complications by holding their urine, defecating outside or changing menstrual products too infrequently. In Chapter Six, she notes that the [UN estimates that between 40 and 50 per cent of women in EU countries have experienced sexual harassment at work](#). Nurses – [most of whom are women](#) – are particularly vulnerable, with some studies finding they are subjected to more violence than police officers or prison officers (138).

At over 300 pages, I wish I could say *Invisible Women* is exhaustive in its coverage and facts, but how could it be? That it is not, is, at some point, simply exhausting. Example after example – at times with little apparent connection between them – is presented in a seemingly endless array of information. In this, *The Uncounted* is in some ways the more pleasurable book to read of the two, despite, or perhaps because of, its academic focus; here, the examples provided are at least broken up by policy analysis. *The Uncounted* is more readable in one other respect as well: its endnotes, which follow proper citation guidelines. In contrast, the endnotes provided in *Invisible Women* consist almost exclusively of URLs with no proper citation. While the author or title of the source may be noted in the main text, the lack of adherence to basic reference standards renders the endnotes effectively useless.

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These differences are no doubt due to the books' intended focus and purpose; if *Invisible Women* is the call to arms to address uncounting, full of the human stories necessary to inject pathos into what could otherwise be characterised as a statistical problem, *The Uncounted* is the battle plan. *The Uncounted* attempts to answer the question posed by *Invisible Women*: why does a data gap exist? Cobham argues that the idea of a 'data gap' is in fact overly simplistic: the problem is not always that data doesn't exist, but that even when it does, it cannot be trusted to be of any reasonable accuracy or reliability. This second gap, of data quality, is the more insidious, because exposing poor data quality is often more difficult than exposing a lack of data. Poor quality data instead provides a false sense that we can draw conclusions from data.

The Uncounted addresses the consequences of both the missing data gap and the poor data quality gap over the course of three sections: the uncounted in the bottom income/wealth brackets (Chapters One to Three); the uncounted in the top income/wealth brackets (Chapters Four to Six); and a final short manifesto to rectify uncounting.

Part One is where *Invisible Women* and *The Uncounted* overlap as, unsurprisingly, women and ethnic minorities comprise the bulk of the economically, socially and politically disenfranchised. However, as the chief executive of the Tax Justice Network and a member of Scotland's Poverty and Inequality Commission, Cobham's primary focus throughout the first part is understanding how uncounting those in poverty interferes with the achievement of global economic development goals. Here, Cobham reasserts Criado Perez's statement that women's work, particularly in subsistence agriculture and familial care, is notoriously uncounted, such that women's participation in the global labour force is 26 percentage points lower than men's. However, time-use studies prove that women habitually work longer hours due to unpaid care and domestic work (20). In yet another example of 2020 tearing away the veil of social equality, [women still perform the bulk of childcare and housework](#) despite the fact that there has been a general increase in time spent at home due to COVID-19 restrictions.



In the second part of the book, Cobham's expertise in tax policy is put to full effect, as he explains how the global elite use power and money to remain uncounted: that is, untaxed. His writing is nuanced and informative, without pedantry. I found myself enjoying this section most of all. In Chapter Four, Cobham thoughtfully and carefully explains the misincentives of global tax policy, touching on profit shifting, financial secrecy and tax transparency. In Chapters Five and Six, he links the uncounting of the global elite – including multinational corporations – to the underdevelopment of the Global South.

Tremendous pressure has been exerted by Western countries and international donor institutions to root out corruption in countries in the Global South, without consideration of how companies evade taxes (Figure 4 on page 135 summarises this point nicely). Without adequate payment of taxes, governments have limited options for funding public goods such as health, education and infrastructure, yet deficit spending is routinely argued against by these same donors in favour of austerity, despite [evidence of its destructive effects](#). Unfortunately for the uncounted at the bottom, in addressing the inequality caused by the uncounting at the top, 'the question of inequality measures is a purely technical one, to be left to others to deal with. Which is, of course, just how things end up uncounted' (154).

In the final section, Cobham outlines his 'manifesto' for how to count everyone: establish a baseline of the available data and most critical gaps; identify appropriate stakeholders for participation in future counting; develop a costed plan to address the gaps and ensure full data collection; and establish global tax transparency guidelines and unitary taxation to end profit sharing.

Cobham acknowledges that taking these steps to truly count the world will be difficult, expensive and time-consuming. It will require societies to fundamentally redesign data collection and storage regimes (it is worth noting that neither author discusses questions of data privacy or surveillance) as well as policymaking processes. It is not enough to collect data; the data must also be made to count. Will it be worth it?

Inequality is what happens when we are not looking. This is why going uncounted matters: if we don't have the numbers we can't look [...] if we're not looking, the most likely outcome is a drift towards [...] greater exclusion of people and groups that are already marginalized (157).

Women and minorities deserve better, and both books make a compelling moral argument for counting everyone and everything. But in an era where we find ourselves debating the human versus economic costs of reopening economies, just as convincing is the economic evidence. As Criado Perez notes, uncounting is ‘scientifically idiotic and a waste of money’ (207). Cobham calls it ‘a debt that keeps growing’ by hundreds of billions of dollars every year (169, 102). But without political demand for action, the likelihood of change is small. Will 2020 be the year that we ‘open our eyes’, as Cobham demands (173)? The growing number of protests worldwide – for democracy, for an end to violence against women, for an end to racism and police brutality, for climate change action – indicates that it might. Only time will tell.

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