
Will You Count? African Americans in the 2020 Census

Why is the census important?

The decennial census is the most inclusive civic activity in our country, covering every person in every household. The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years. Moreover, the census is integral to our democracy. The data collected affect our nation's ability to ensure equal representation and equal access to important governmental and private sector resources for all Americans, including across racial and ethnic lines. Census results are used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local boards; to target at least \$800 billion¹ annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investment, and much more. These functions depend on a fair and accurate census.

Unfortunately, certain population groups – referred to as “hard-to-count” – are at a higher risk of not being fully counted in the census. Some of these groups have been historically underrepresented in the census for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in methodology, such as relying on the internet as the primary way for households to respond to the 2020 Census; and some may be reluctant to respond due to concerns about data confidentiality.² Being hard-to-count can lead to unequal political representation and unequal access to vital public and private resources for these groups and their communities.

African-American households are at risk of being undercounted.

The African-American population has been historically undercounted in the decennial census, disadvantaging their families, communities, and neighborhoods. In fact:

- The 2010 Census undercounted the African-American population by more than 800,000.³
- Approximately 7 percent of young African-American children were overlooked by the 2010 Census, roughly twice the rate for young non-Hispanic White children.⁴
- African-American men have been historically undercounted in greater numbers than men of other racial or ethnic groups.⁵
- Today, more than one in three African Americans live in hard-to-count census tracts.⁶

Why are African Americans missed so often in the census?

African-American households typically share certain characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:⁷

- **Poverty:** Overall, using the official poverty measure, about one in four African Americans lives in poverty (24 percent),⁸ far exceeding the national poverty rate of 13 percent.⁹ It is widely believed that households living in poverty are difficult to enumerate.¹⁰
- **Housing Insecurity:** Individuals and families who rent are undercounted at higher rates than homeowners.¹¹ The majority (58 percent) of African-American households rent their homes.¹² Due to rising rental costs and stagnant wages, many renters experience housing instability,¹³ making them even more likely to be missed in the census.¹⁴ African Americans also are more likely to be “doubled up,” moving in with friends and family due to lack of affordable, available housing options.¹⁵ Furthermore, families are increasingly facing eviction, with women living in African-American neighborhoods at especially high risk.¹⁶

What are the consequences of undercounting the African-American community?

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When African-American communities are undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately represent reality. Undercounting results in African Americans being denied a full voice in policy decision-making. As a result, their community's different needs may not be represented or prioritized according to their real share of the population.

Furthermore, federal agencies rely on census data to monitor discrimination and implement civil rights laws that protect voting rights, equal employment opportunity, and more. This is particularly important for African-American communities, which have faced discrimination and have been historically disenfranchised from the voting process.

Undercounting African Americans in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. African-American children and families are disproportionately affected by poverty and federal programs designed to alleviate the impact of poverty. Many programs that impact African Americans are based in whole or in part on census-derived data, including:¹⁷

Education and Child Care

- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion.** Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers of low-income children to help ensure that all children are meeting state academic standards.¹⁸ In 2014-2015, African-American children made up 22 percent of the overall student body in Title I schools.¹⁹
- **Special Education Grants – \$11.2 billion.** To help schools comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Special Education Grants are used to provide resources to students with a disability, tailored to their individual needs.²⁰ In 2012-2013, 15 percent of African-American students used IDEA services, the second highest rate for a racial or ethnic group.²¹
- **Head Start Program – \$8.3 billion.** This program provides grants to local public and private agencies to provide child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families, with a special focus on helping preschoolers develop the early reading and math skills they need to be successful in school.²² The program serves almost 1 million families throughout the program year.²³ In 2015-2016, African Americans comprised 29 percent of participants.²⁴
- **Child Care and Development Fund – \$2.9 billion.** The Child Care and Development Fund assists low-income parents obtain child care so they can work or attend training and education.²⁵ In 2015, African-American children comprised 41 percent of children served under the program.²⁶

Food and Nutrition

- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion.** SNAP is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among families in the United States.²⁷ In 2015, about 26 percent of African Americans received SNAP benefits.²⁸
- **National School Lunch Program – \$11.6 billion.** This program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to low-income children in public and nonprofit schools.²⁹ During the 2010-2011 school year, about 5 million African-American children participated in the program.³⁰

Healthcare and Housing

- **Medicaid – \$312 billion.** Medicaid is a federal-state insurance program that provides health coverage to low-income families and individuals, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities.³¹ In 2012, there were 16 million African-American participants in Medicaid.³²

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- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion.** Section 8 vouchers are the nation’s leading source of housing assistance for low-income seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, helping them secure affordable rental housing in the private market.³³ More than 2 million low-income households use the voucher program to help pay their housing costs.³⁴ In 2010, African Americans comprised 45 percent of the voucher holders.³⁵

You can help—right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of all African-American households in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or support work on policy development, community organizing, and “Get Out the Count” campaigns for the 2020 Census. Here are some ideas:

- **Help your members of Congress understand why it’s important to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census in a way that will count all in the African-American community.** The Census Bureau needs a major annual funding ramp up several years before a decennial census to perform critical tests and build out a massive infrastructure. Already – due to funding constraints – important activities needed for a fair and accurate 2020 Census have been postponed or canceled, putting the African-American community at risk of being severely undercounted. Without a sufficient increase in the Census Bureau’s budget, a complete count will be in jeopardy, and census costs could increase by billions of dollars.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The NAACP (<https://www.naacp.org>) works to ensure that the census collects the most full and accurate data on the African-American community. The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org/>) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights also publishes many helpful resources at <https://civilrights.org/census/>.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the issues the African-American community faces in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Complete Count Committees that will be established to help ensure a complete census.³⁶ It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for the African-American community to remind leaders and local census staff of this critical constituency.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** Budget shortfalls are also putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional material.³⁷

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Hilary O. Shelton, Director, NAACP Washington Bureau & Senior Vice President for Policy and Advocacy, at hoshelton@naacpnet.org or Sonum Nerurkar, Get Out the Count Coordinator, at nerurkar@civilrights.org.

¹ Reamer, Andrew. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” GW Institute of Public Policy, 17 April 2018. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

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- ⁷ Data within this section are based on 2016 ACS 1-Year Estimates unless otherwise stated.
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