
FACT SHEET: WHY THE CENSUS COUNTS

What is the decennial census?

The decennial census is a constitutionally required, once-every-ten-years undertaking to count every person living in the United States. Congress has delegated its authority to conduct the count to the U.S. Department of Commerce and its Census Bureau. The Census Bureau is currently ramping up for the 2020 Census. April 1, 2020 is Census Day.

The ongoing American Community Survey (ACS) is a legal part of the decennial census, providing annually updated information for policymakers on the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of every community in the nation.

Why do we conduct a census?

The census is required by Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution and plays a central role in our representative form of government. Under the Constitution, the population count is used to determine how many seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and how many electoral votes each of the 50 states will have for the following decade. We only have one chance to get the 2020 Census right, and everyone in the United States will live with the consequences for a decade.

Supreme Court rulings affirming the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal representation require that congressional districts must have roughly equal numbers of people, so the census population numbers also are used to draw congressional district lines. Public officials also rely on census counts to draw state and local voting districts.

Why is the census important?

In addition to providing the basis for fair voting representation, census data:

- Play a key role in the implementation and enforcement of the nation's civil rights laws;
- Influence the allocation of more than \$600 billion in federal government resources to states, localities, and families every year;
- Help state and local officials, community leaders, and nonprofit organizations identify current and future needs for health care, education, housing, food and income security, rural access to broadband, and other services; and
- Guide private-sector investment decisions on where to invest in job creation, new facilities, and marketing.

Why is the census a civil rights issue?

Census data are a vital tool for overcoming the nation's legacy of slavery, racism, and discrimination. The collection of accurate, comprehensive race and ethnicity data – as well as data on gender, age, and household composition – in the census is central to implementing, monitoring, and evaluating many civil rights laws and policies, from fair political representation and voting reforms, to equal opportunity and access across all economic and social sectors of society, including housing, education, health care, and the job market. The data provide evidence

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of disparate impact of governmental and private sector policies and practices, and assist civil and business leaders in devising solutions that promote equality of opportunity and address the needs of a diverse population.

- Fair, proportionate voting representation in our democracy depends on valid census data. That's why the census is required by the U.S. Constitution.
- Federal agencies rely on census and ACS data to monitor discrimination and implement civil rights laws that protect voting rights, equal employment opportunity, and more.
- Census and ACS data also determine federal funding for health care, education, housing, food and income security, rural access to broadband, and other services. Communities of color, urban and rural low-income households, immigrants, and young children are all at risk of being missed at disproportionately high rates. Being undercounted deprives already vulnerable communities of fair representation and vital community resources.

Why should everyone participate in the census?

Every person living in the United States and every community benefits from an accurate census in a myriad of ways.

- Government officials at all levels use census data to understand and address family and community needs: access to health care providers and facilities, good schools, and affordable and safe housing; food and income security; Internet access (especially in rural and low-income communities); and other vital services.
- Census data guide efforts to promote equality of representation and economic opportunity by providing objective, inclusive information on America's diverse communities and populations.
- Effective implementation of the Voting Rights Act relies on census race and ethnicity data, as well as ACS data on individuals who are not proficient in English, which determines which jurisdictions must offer electoral assistance in other languages.

What are the challenges to a fair and accurate census?

Counting every person in the United States is a massive and complex undertaking even under the best conditions. Ensuring a fair, inclusive, and accurate count requires careful planning, continual updating of address information, advance testing of procedures and technology, and the hiring, training, and oversight of a large temporary workforce to gather and process the data.

Some groups of people have historically proven to be challenging to count accurately. Among people who are more likely to be missed in the census are people of color, urban and rural low-income households, and young children. The Census Bureau classifies these communities, as well as immigrant, limited English proficient, and single-family households, as "hard-to-count." Accurately enumerating these communities takes a focused effort.

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There are additional challenges facing the 2020 Census. In response to congressional demands for cost savings, the Census Bureau has implemented new procedures and first-time uses of technology, including an online option for people to respond to the questionnaire and electronic data collection by enumerators. These technologies could dramatically reduce paperwork and staff time, potentially saving several billion dollars over the cost of repeating 2010 Census methods. But if these new systems are not fully tested in the field, de-bugged and refined, the 2020 Census could turn into a costly and damaging disaster. Congress and the Trump administration are inviting such a disaster by failing to fund the 2020 Census adequately, forcing the Census Bureau to delay, streamline, or cancel crucial field tests, including the only tests planned in rural areas and on American Indian reservations.

Every decade, the Census Bureau requires a steady ramp-up in funding, as it moves from research and testing, to operational and systems development, to preparations and, finally, to the actual count. But Congress and now the Trump administration have not committed the necessary funds to ensure the success of the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau's budget for Fiscal Year 2017 was roughly 10 percent below its request and finalized seven months late. Even worse, the administration's initial budget request for Fiscal Year 2018 proposed only a two percent increase over the previous year, a woefully inadequate ramp-up to accommodate a full 'dress rehearsal' of census operations (the 2018 End-to-End Census Test). By comparison, the Census Bureau's funding increased by 60 percent between 2007 and 2008 in advance of the 2010 Census.

In addition, the unexpected resignation in June 2017 of the Census Bureau's director left a leadership vacuum that President Trump and senators must move quickly to address by nominating and confirming a highly qualified, well-respected director who is unquestionably committed to a nonpartisan, fair, inclusive, and accurate 2020 Census.

Who would be hurt if the census is not fair and accurate?

All Americans have a stake in fair political representation and in the effective use of tax dollars to meet community and national needs. But those with the most to lose – people who are members of disadvantaged or marginalized communities – are at greatest risk of being uncounted. As a result, their communities will not receive the political influence and resources they deserve and need.

Who is responsible for making sure the census is successful?

The U.S. Constitution vests Congress with responsibility for overseeing the census. Lawmakers, in turn, delegated authority to conduct the census to the Census Bureau, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce (Title 13, U.S. Code). But the Bureau can only do its job well if Congress provides sufficient resources for planning, testing, and deployment of new procedures and technologies, as well as effective outreach to hard-to-count communities to minimize the possibility of disproportionate undercounts. Community organizations can play an important role by becoming official 2020 Census "partners" and educating their constituents about the importance of being counted.

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What changes will we see in the 2020 Census?

For the first time, people will have an option to complete their household's census questionnaire online. The Census Bureau will encourage everyone who can to respond using the internet, but paper questionnaires will continue to be available. Households with indicators of low internet access or use will simultaneously receive the paper questionnaire and information about responding online. People will be able to report their answers by telephone as well. Census field workers also will use mobile electronic devices to collect data when they visit unresponsive households.

The Census Bureau has been testing new approaches to collecting data on race and ethnicity, in order to get a more complete and accurate portrait of the U.S. population. Under consideration are combining separate questions on race and ethnicity (Hispanic origin, previously) into a single question, and including a Middle Eastern and North African ethnic category. Before the bureau can adopt these changes, however, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) must revise the national policy for collecting federal statistics on race and ethnicity. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, joined by 80 organizations, submitted comments on the proposed revisions in April 2017.

What is needed from our national leaders to make the 2020 Census a success?

With so much riding on a fair and accurate count, the nation's leaders must come together, despite the heated political climate, and ensure that this constitutional requirement is done well.

The president must nominate a highly qualified, well-respected, and nonpartisan candidate with a clear vision for an accurate, fully inclusive census to serve as Census Director. If the nominee meets those criteria, the Senate should make quick confirmation a top priority.

And, as Congress finalizes Fiscal Year 2018 appropriations bills, it must give the Census Bureau sufficient funding to ensure comprehensive final testing and development of all 2020 Census systems and operations.

What role can community organizations play in making the 2020 Census a success?

Right now, community leaders can raise their voices in support of needed leadership and adequate resources for the 2020 Census. They also can urge their state and local elected officials to form Complete Count Committees — with representation from a broad cross-section of the community — to supplement the Census Bureau's own outreach and promotion activities.

Looking ahead, organizations can become official census partners. More than 250,000 organizations — from large national organizations and companies to community-based groups, faith institutions, and social clubs — were part of the 2010 Census Partnership Program. Partners educate their own members, constituents, and customers about the importance of completing the census form and serve as “trusted messengers” to help ease concerns about data confidentiality.

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