

Framing the 2020 Census

As we work to get all people counted in the 2020 Census, our communications should aim to make the census feel real and personal for people across the country. Effective messaging moves beyond data and uses education, emotional appeals, and reassurance to motivate people — especially those in communities that the census has historically missed — to participate in the 2020 Census.

Our topline message is simple:

You should participate in the 2020 Census because it's easy, safe, and important.

Easy

People want reassurance that participating in the census won't be a burden, and are more likely to fill out the questionnaire when they're told that they can do so on their own schedule and hear that it will probably only take 10-20 minutes.

It's also important for people to know there are several ways to participate, and that they can choose the one they're most comfortable with.

- Some people are enthused about participating online, whether that's on a desktop computer or a personal mobile device. Others are less responsive to that option because they have limited internet access or are unfamiliar with computers.
- Some people like the idea of answering by phone so they can ask questions in real time.
- Some want to use the paper form because they've used it in the past or speak a language not currently supported by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Given these varying preferences, we suggest emphasizing the number of options available and the power of choice.

The importance of having easy options is critical for us to remember when crafting our field strategy, since part of what will make participating in the census “easy” is our joint ability to ensure that people have access to translations, internet access, large print guides, and other elements that will make the 2020 Census more accessible.

Sample Messages

“Life gets busy — that's why the 2020 Census is all about options. You can choose between a paper form, a phone call to the Census Bureau, or a quick online survey. Just 10 minutes can change the next 10 years for you and your family.”

“When you get your invitation to participate in the 2020 Census, you can choose to respond by phone in 13 languages, or by TDD by dialing 844-467-2020.”

Safe

Many people in communities that have been traditionally missed by the census are distrustful of the government, largely due to historical and current discrimination and persecution at the hands of government institutions. This can create a barrier to participation, so it's important that people know about, and trust in, the strong protections in place to protect themselves and their data.

Note: *In a recent survey, respondents ranked their trust in the U.S. Census Bureau as higher than their trust in the general government. As such, while we're dedicated to holding the bureau accountable, our messaging should build on that trust.*

There's no citizenship question on the 2020 Census

Last year, immigration and civil rights advocates defeated the Trump administration's effort to force a citizenship question onto the 2020 Census. If it had not failed, this question could have deterred many people from participating in the census and deprived their communities of resources and political power.

Messaging research shows that, unfortunately, many communities may still believe that the question is on the census form, which could deter them from participating. It's critical for our organizations to make sure people know that they will not have to identify the citizenship status of themselves or anyone in their household.

The U.S. Census Bureau and federal law keep your individual responses private

The Census Bureau has very strong privacy protections. It's illegal, under federal law, for the Census Bureau to share individual census data for 72 years.

This is important for the public to know because the failed attempt to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census raised concerns in many immigrant communities about whether or not their data could be shared with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), potentially leading to their detainment or deportation.

Other concerns people may have that are **prohibited by law** are that:

- The bureau could tell their landlord they have more people living in their home than what is listed on their lease
- A public benefits provider might decrease their access to health care, food, or other benefits based on their responses
- Their location could be shared with police or other law enforcement

Addressing fear and resistance

One way to reassure people who are nervous about the immigration status of people in their household, or about their privacy in general, is to make sure everyone is aware that they have the right to respond to the 2020 Census by phone, on a paper form, or online. If a household self-responds completely and accurately, it's highly unlikely the Census Bureau will send an enumerator to count it.

The U.S. Census Bureau maintains its cybersecurity systems

This year's internet self-response option has raised concerns for some about digital data security. When crafting your messaging, you should take this into consideration, and remember that different people may need different levels of reassurance, depending on their knowledge of computer systems.

For many, it will be enough to know that Congress has oversight over the Census Bureau and that the bureau is routinely testing and bolstering its systems. For others, it will be key to know broader assurances, like that the bureau maintains a full-scale structure to ensure its systems are functioning, implements continuous testing, and has a thorough framework for identifying and fixing system bugs — even working alongside skilled hackers to find vulnerabilities and patch them before the system is deployed.

Sample Messages

“Census data is safe and secure, and it’s illegal for the Census Bureau to share personal information for 72 years after it’s collected. That means your personal information won’t go to ICE or law enforcement, can’t be accessed by your landlord, and won’t affect any public benefits you receive.”

“The Census Bureau takes seriously its responsibility to protect your data, and is committed to monitoring, testing, and defending its IT systems to keep your information safe.”

Important

Census data help build the foundation of our everyday lives, and an accurate count will help to feed, shelter, protect, heal, and build our communities.

Federal funding for critical community resources

More than [\\$1.5 trillion](#) in federal funding is allocated based on census data — you have to know where people live in order to know where resources are needed. These federal programs fund necessities in local communities, like schools, health care, treatment for clean drinking water, and road repairs that benefit everybody. In addition, when a region has an accurate census count and gets its fair share of federal resources, it frees up state and local funds and helps create more flexibility to invest in new community programs.

Political power

A fair and accurate count builds political power for your community and state because census data are also used for apportionment and redistricting. Census data alter the electoral college and therefore affect the presidential election, as well as who appoints federal judges. The data impact Congress, state legislatures, school boards, city councils — all the institutions that have the power to protect or harm us.

Civil rights enforcement

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX, and the Americans with Disabilities Act — these have all strengthened our nation, changed people's lives, and improved our life experiences because they're more than just words on a page. They are laws that are *enforced* for our protection and safety. The census ensures that advocates, lawyers, and government officials have the demographic data they need to enforce civil rights laws.

Government and business decision-making

State and local governments need to know where people live and work in order to build a community that works for everyone. In conjunction with data from other sources like the American Community Survey, governments can make decisions like where a new bus route is needed, if it makes sense to build a new school in a certain neighborhood, and the best location to distribute supplies in an emergency.

Businesses use census data to help make key decisions. For example, they can decide where to build a new location by identifying communities that have the labor force to support a new manufacturing plant, or they can decide which stores need bilingual staff based on where their target customers live.

Note: *To connect with people on an emotional level, avoid relying on vague, broad, or wonky statements about the importance of the census to our democracy or to funding formulas. Tell a story to which people can relate. Talk about specific local issues that make a difference to them: help paying for child care or school lunch, or funding for schools, hospitals, roads, and jobs that their community needs. Make the harm caused by a potential undercount feel unacceptable.*

Sample Messages

“Participating in the census helps determine how many books and computers our kids’ school can afford, whether our elders can afford heating in the winter, and if there are bus routes where we need them.”

“The census is a way to get back what you put in. You put a lot into this country, build your community and your family. You pay taxes. America couldn’t be what it is without you. The census determines what you get out for all that you put in. It’s about time you get what’s right, what you and your family and community deserve. But you have to be counted. And that means filling out your census form.”

“When our people are missing from the census, resources and political power for our communities get assigned to somewhere else — somewhere that already has more money, more privilege, and more power.”

“Election Day is not the only day in 2020 that will decide our future. Census Day, April 1, is our first chance to make a difference. And on Census Day, everybody counts. When we fill out the census form, and we make sure that all of us are counted, we can help our communities get the schools, hospitals, and roads we need. If we don’t get counted, we don’t count. And we’ll miss out for the next 10 years.”

“I’m participating in the 2020 Census to protect my community. When we win the fight for the Equality Act, it needs to be more than just words on a page. It needs to change people’s lives and better their experiences. The census ensures advocates, lawyers, and government officials have the data they need to enforce civil rights laws.”



**1620 L Street NW, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20036**



(202) 466-3434



censuscounts.org



[@civilrightsorg](https://twitter.com/civilrightsorg)



[@civilandhumanrights](https://www.facebook.com/civilandhumanrights)

Copyright © 2019
The Leadership Conference
Education Fund
All Rights Reserved