



SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

Jody Martin, Director

United States Census 2020: Background Paper

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The census, which is mandated by Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, has been conducted every 10 years since 1790 and seeks to provide an accurate count of the entire U.S. population.¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "The goal of the 2020 census is to count everyone once, only once, and in the right place."²

In addition to mandating that a census take place every 10 years, the U.S. Constitution requires that population data collected from the census be used to apportion seats allocated to states for the House of Representatives.³ Various governmental entities also use decennial census data to redistrict congressional districts, state legislative districts, school districts, and voting precincts; census data are used to enforce voting rights and civil rights legislation and to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in funding for many federal programs.⁴ The Census Bureau estimates that census data are used to distribute approximately \$675 billion in federal funding annually.⁵ According to a George Washington Institute of Public Policy study, more than \$800 billion in federal assistance programs relied upon census-derived data in fiscal year (FY) 2016.⁶

According to the Census Bureau, "decennial census data play an increasingly important role in U.S. commerce and the economy."⁷ For example, local businesses may consider data on population growth and income levels when deciding where to locate stores or restaurants, and real estate investors may rely on data concerning the demand for housing when making decisions about land development.⁸

The questions planned for Census 2020 include questions about age, sex, citizenship, Hispanic origin, race, tenure (whether a home is owned or rented), and the relationship of each person in a household to one central person in the household.⁹ According to the

Census Bureau, people can respond to the census in English and 12 other languages, including Spanish, Russian, and Japanese.¹ The bureau also will provide language glossaries and other materials in English and 59 other languages.²

During most of the 20th century, the majority of American households received short census forms that collected basic demographic and housing information including, but not limited to, age, race, and tenure, while approximately one in six households received a long census form that collected detailed social, housing, and economic data including, but not limited to, educational attainment, income, and employment status.³ In 2005, the Census Bureau began collecting information traditionally reserved for the long-form census through the American Community Survey (ACS) monthly and releasing the data annually to provide the public, communities, and businesses more frequently with detailed information regarding the population.⁴

According to the bureau, "Decoupling the collection of short- and long-form data allowed the Census Bureau to focus decennial census efforts on the constitutional requirements to produce a count of the resident population, while employing technology in both collections to improve efficiencies, improve accuracy, and reduce costs."⁵ The bureau also uses decennial census results as the source material from which to draw population samples to receive the ACS.⁶

What Are the Challenges Facing Census 2020?

The Census Bureau lays out several broad challenges facing Census 2020, including: (1) a constrained fiscal environment for funding research, testing, and design of the census; (2) rapidly changing technology that makes it difficult to prepare for and test new census technologies before they become outdated; (3) distrust in government and concerns over information security and privacy; (4) declining census response rates; (5) an increasingly diverse population, including growing numbers of individuals with limited English proficiency; (6) informal, more complex living arrangements that make it challenging to identify and count a person with a single location; and (7) an increasingly mobile population, which makes it difficult to accurately count individuals.⁷

The bureau operates from census tracts, defined as "small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county." Census tracts usually have between 2,500 and 8,000 people and are "designed to be homogenous with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions."⁸ A census tract is deemed to be hard to count (HTC) based on various housing, demographic, and socioeconomic variables that are correlated with nonresponse and undercounting from the previous

census year.⁹ According to the bureau, HTC tracts tend to include, but are not limited to, immigrants and foreign-born individuals, non-English-speaking individuals, unemployed people, renters, children, American Indians living on tribal lands, densely populated communities with multiunit housing, and specified ethnic and minority populations, including Latinos, African Americans, and Asians.¹⁰ According to a California Complete Count Committee report on the 2010 census, California has 10 of the top 50 HTC counties in the nation.¹¹

According to a 2018–19 state budget change proposal, “California has large populations of residents who have historically been hard to count. In 2015, California had almost 10.7 million foreign born residents, over 17.5 million who live in rental housing, over 24.3 million who are non-white, of mixed race, or Hispanic, over 2.5 million children under age five, with about 500,000 births each year, and an estimated 2 million undocumented residents.”¹² Thus, the high percentage of HTC populations in California poses a unique challenge to ensuring an accurate count.

Additionally, there are concerns that changes to Census 2020 could lead to an undercount. Specifically, the fact that most individuals will be asked to respond to the census via the Internet may decrease the response rate due to worries about information security and privacy.¹³ In addition to security and privacy concerns, broadband access may be challenging for rural communities and low-income communities. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), the state has a digital divide where African American, Latino, and low-income households are less likely to have Internet access at home—a quarter of which cited affordability as a key barrier.¹⁴

There also are strong concerns that the Department of Commerce’s decision to add a citizenship question to the Census 2020 questionnaire will result in lower response rates from immigrant communities. Critics argue that the Trump administration’s aggressive enforcement of immigration law has already made many immigrant communities concerned about their security and mistrustful of government and that the addition of a citizenship question will exacerbate the fears and lower census response rates.¹⁵ California, through a lawsuit filed by Attorney General Xavier Becerra, was the first to challenge the constitutionality of adding a citizenship question to the census, followed by 17 other states.¹⁶ Shortly afterward, several other plaintiffs filed similar lawsuits in New York, Maryland, and the District of Columbia challenging the legality of the commerce secretary’s actions regarding the citizenship question.

U.S. District Judge Jesse Furman from New York blocked the citizenship question from the census on January 15, 2019, stating that the commerce secretary violated the Administrative Procedures Act (APA) by adding the question. The Trump administration appealed directly to the Supreme Court, which in February 2019 agreed to hear the lawsuit with oral arguments scheduled for April 2019. The high court's decision is likely to come at the end of its term in late June 2019. Additionally, on March 6, 2019, U.S. District Judge Richard Seeborg from California also ordered the Department of Commerce to remove the citizenship question from the census questionnaire, siding with California in its lawsuit. Judge Seeborg's decision stated that inclusion of the question violated the APA and the Constitution by hampering the department's constitutional mandate to conduct an accurate count of the U.S. population.¹⁷ Due to the deadline for printing the census questionnaire, it is likely the Department of Justice will ask to consolidate the California lawsuit with the New York suit for the Supreme Court hearing. The Department of Justice will need the Supreme Court to reverse both the APA ruling and the constitutionality ruling to proceed with the citizenship question.

What Is the Federal Plan for Census 2020?

The Census Bureau, which is overseen by the Economics and Statistics Administration within the Commerce Department, is responsible for developing and implementing the nation's decennial census in partnership with states, communities, and the private sector. There are four main components to the bureau's operational plan for Census 2020. First, the bureau must establish where to count. To prepare for the census, the bureau began conducting a complete review and update of the nation's address list in September 2015. Second, the bureau must motivate people to respond to the census. Census 2020 outreach includes a nationwide communications and partnership campaign to encourage people to self-respond. Third, the bureau counts the population by collecting data from all U.S. households and releases Census 2020 results to the president, the states, and the public, according to timelines specified in current law.¹⁸

To keep costs comparable to the 2010 census, the Census Bureau "is in the process of implementing design changes in several key areas," described below.¹⁹

1. Address Canvassing: Rather than requiring individuals to physically canvass every census block, the bureau is updating the national address list using local government data, satellite imagery, and administrative records such as data from the U.S. Postal Service, in a process known as "in-office canvassing."²⁰

2. Internet Response: Historically, individuals responded to the census through a mailed questionnaire. For the first time, respondents may complete the census online. The Census Bureau aims to have more than 50 percent of individuals respond to the census via the Internet. Respondents also will have the option of responding by telephone.²¹
3. Field Operations: The bureau expects to hire half the number of fieldworkers for nonresponse follow-up (NRFU).²² While the bureau has committed to following up in person at least once, Census 2020 field operations will rely primarily on data from external and internal sources—including the 2010 census, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services—to identify vacant housing units and remove them from the NRFU workload and to identify nonresponding occupied housing units and determine the best time of day to contact a household.²³ Additionally, administrative functions associated with field staff, including work assignments, recruiting, training, and payroll, and applications for address canvassing, will be automated.²⁴

What Is the Status of Funding and Implementation for Census 2020?

The projected life cycle cost of Census 2020 is \$15.6 billion, a 27 percent—or \$3.3 billion increase—from the projected cost to the federal government in October 2015.²⁵

In March 2018, Census 2020 received a \$2.5 billion funding boost in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, representing more than a \$1.3 billion increase in funding from FY 2017 levels.²⁶ An accompanying congressional report requires the Census Bureau to staff and conduct its partnership and communications programs at the same level conducted during FY 2008 in preparation for Census 2010. In 2019, the federal government appropriated \$3.8 billion to the Census Bureau, \$1 billion more than it received in FY 2018.^{27,28}

In past years, funding for Census 2020 was below its estimated costs, leading to several cuts in census preparations.²⁹ Specifically, the bureau canceled a 2017 field test for several features of the online response system and reduced Census 2020 “dress rehearsals,” which typically take place in different locations across the county, from three to one (the 2018 End-to-End Test in Providence, Rhode Island).³⁰ The bureau’s partnership and communications program activities also were pushed back due to budget constraints.³¹

April 1, 2018, was “Census Day” for the 2018 End-to-End Census Test in Rhode Island. The primary objective of the test is to “allow for a complete test of the major operations and systems planned for Census 2020, beginning with the development of the address

list and ending with the release of a set of prototype geographic and data products.”³² As of May 2018, the bureau was handling NRFU enumeration and reinterviewing for the 2018 End-to-End Census Test.³³

The bureau also is implementing the Community Partnership Engagement Program (CPEP), which focuses on building and engaging the community on a grassroots level with partnerships throughout the United States, educating people about Census 2020, encouraging people to cooperate with enumerators, and engaging grassroots organizations to reach out to HTC groups and those unmotivated to respond.³⁴ As of April 2018, 44 partnership specialists had prepared CPEP plans, completed program development for the State Complete Count Commission (SCC) and Complete Count Committee (CCC) programs, completed SCC/CCC Train the Trainer Programs, engaged more than 1,526 organizations, and completed more than 1,800 outreach events nationwide.³⁵ As part of the Census Bureau’s outreach strategy, the bureau awarded its Census 2020 integrated communications contract to Young & Rubicam, a global marketing firm, to use innovative technology to provide services across multiple communications areas, including social media, websites, and paid advertising, to promote the importance of responding to the census.³⁶

The Census Bureau also conducted the 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study, which includes a quantitative survey and focus groups and is designed to draw input from a wide variety of audiences to help researchers determine which census messages will resonate with different audiences and where the audiences are located. The bureau held 42 focus groups across the United States on topics such as census familiarity; importance and likelihood of participating in the census; attitudes toward state, local and federal government; and concerns about data confidentiality. The focus groups were composed of members of HTC communities, including groups with rural and economically disadvantaged individuals, low-Internet-proficiency individuals, African American HTC individuals, and non-English-speaking individuals.³⁷ According to researchers, one of the study’s goals is to use focus group data to create predictive models to determine where hard-to-reach homes are located and design campaign and messaging materials specifically to reach various HTC audiences.³⁸

How Is California Preparing for Census 2020?

According to Census Bureau data, California was undercounted in the 1990 census by 2.7 percent (approximately 837,000 people).³⁹ The Legislative Analyst’s Office reported the 1990 undercount cost California approximately \$2 billion in federal funds over 10 years and possibly cost the state a seat in the House of Representatives.⁴⁰ In response to 1990’s poor census results, the state budgeted \$24.7 million to prepare for the

2000 census, hired 50 diverse outreach staff across California, and developed a multilingual advertising and outreach campaign, among other things.⁴¹ However, Census 2000 resulted in an undercount that cost the state approximately \$1.5 billion in federal funding for eight programs, including Medicare.⁴² A 2001 study estimated the 2000 census undercount at approximately a half-million people.⁴³

California spent \$2 million in preparation for the 2010 census due to the Great Recession but received other financial support via the federal stimulus package and public-private partnerships.⁴⁴ California officials said in 2010 that the 2010 census failed to count approximately 1.5 million individuals.⁴⁵ Subsequently, in 2012, the Census Bureau estimated the 2010 census undercounted California by just over a quarter of 1 percent.⁴⁶

For a variety of reasons, there are concerns that California could experience an undercount in Census 2020. Nevertheless, the PPIC's analysis is that California is expected to maintain its 53 seats in the House of Representatives after the census count.⁴⁷ In a report issued in December 2018, the Legislative Analyst's Office also expressed its view that a statewide undercount could occur but is not likely to be equivalent to the 1990 undercount scenario; however, certain regions in the state run a greater risk of being undercounted than others, which could have implications for drawing congressional and state legislative districts. The report also discusses how an undercount could impact the federal funding that California receives for various programs.⁴⁸

To encourage participation in Census 2020 and ensure a complete and accurate count, Governor Brown established the CCC on April 13, 2018, pursuant to Executive Order B-49-18, to develop and implement a census outreach strategy.⁴⁹ The executive order requires the outreach strategy to include the establishment of school-based outreach programs, partnerships with nonprofit community-based organizations, and a multilingual, multimedia campaign designed to ensure an accurate and complete count of the state's population.⁵⁰ The executive order also requires the Governor's Office of Planning and Research to coordinate CCC activities with the support of other executive branch state agencies and departments.⁵¹

The CCC has identified several factors as critical to ensuring the success of Census 2020 outreach in California, including collaborating with Census Bureau staff and ensuring outreach efforts are coordinated and integrated at the state, local, and federal levels.⁵² The CCC is conducting "regional convenings" across California to assess the state's readiness for outreach, create a space for local organizations to lay the groundwork for local Complete Count committees, provide information on federal and state

Census 2020 outreach strategies and timelines, and collect data on HTC populations, ethnic media, and trusted messengers in the region.⁵³ More information on the CCC's efforts is available on its website.⁵⁴

The recent state budgets appropriated funding to prepare for Census 2020. Specifically, the 2018 Budget Act allocated \$10 million to the California census preparation activities, and the 2019 Budget Act provided an additional \$90.3 million for the census.⁵⁵

The governor's budget proposal for FY 2019–20 includes an additional \$54 million for statewide outreach efforts, bringing the total funding to \$154.3 million, which can be spent over multiple years. According to the CCC, the funding will be split among a statewide media campaign; state agency outreach; regional, county, tribal, and local government outreach; and outreach to educational entities and other sector-specific outreach.⁵⁶

Additionally, local governments, community-based organizations, and private foundations also are contributing their resources to census outreach in California.

— *Anisa Jassawalla authored this paper in 2018, and Sara Noceto updated it in 2019.*

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