



SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

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Los Angeles and Orange Counties: 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. In addition to mandating that a census takes place every 10 years, the Constitution requires population data collected from the census to be used to apportion seats allocated to the states for the House of Representatives.¹ Census data also are used to allocate hundreds of billions in federal funding for hundreds of federal programs.² Specifically, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that census data are used to distribute approximately \$690 billion in federal funding annually.³

An accurate decennial census is greatly important at the local level because it determines local funding levels based on targeted populations. For example, the formula for distributing funds for the Head Start program includes an estimate of the number of children younger than 5 who are living in poverty – and if that population is undercounted, cities and counties could lose funding that would otherwise help their constituents. Further, governmental entities use the census counts for redistricting congressional districts, state legislative districts, school districts, and voting precincts. Undercounted areas could lose representation and services to other areas in the state.

The census also impacts other areas of society. According to the Census Bureau, “decennial census data play an increasingly important role in U.S. commerce and the economy.”⁴ 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.⁵

To conduct the census enumeration, the Census Bureau initially will mail every household a postcard in March 2020 with general information regarding the census. Then, beginning March 12, all households will receive a letter with specific information about how to fill out the census questionnaire. Every household will receive a first reminder, then nonrespondents will get two additional reminders. Between May and July 2020, census enumerators will then conduct follow-up visits to households that have not responded. Enumerators also will conduct counts of group quarters such as nursing homes, homeless shelters, and student dormitories.⁶

Challenges in Obtaining an Accurate Count

Certain populations and communities have been historically difficult to count in past census efforts. Notable hard-to-count populations are summarized in the text box below. The Census Bureau divides up communities by units called 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.⁷ A census tract is designated as hard to count when it is home to a high degree of one or more hard-to-count populations.⁸

According to a California Complete Count Committee report on the 2010 census, California has 10 of the top 50 hard-to-count counties in the nation.⁹

Census 2020 faces additional challenges compared with previous efforts because most households will be asked to respond to the census questionnaire online, which means those without reliable access to the Internet, such as low-income households or those in rural areas, will find it difficult to respond. To address this problem, local governments and community-based organizations are attempting to mobilize computer kiosks and portable tablets to increase the initial response rate. Further, the Census Bureau plans to distribute hard copy census forms to households in areas it determines are unlikely to respond online; however, it is unclear how that determination will be made.¹⁰

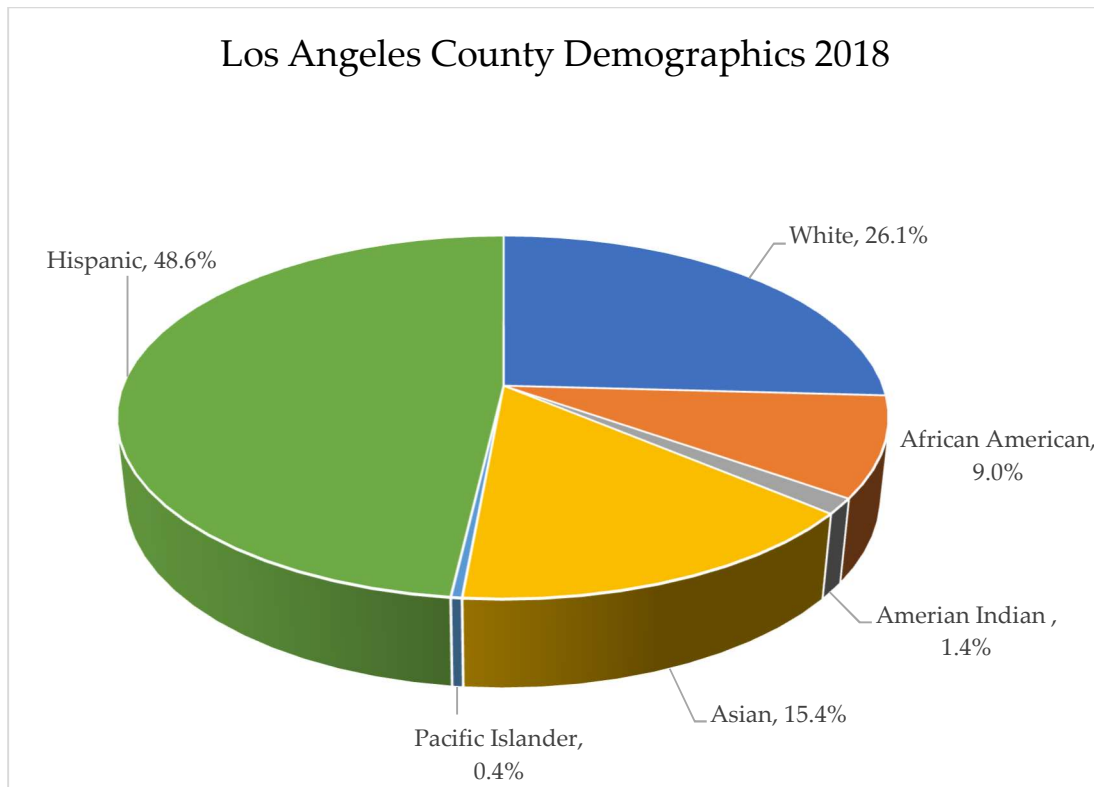
Hard-to-Count Populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Immigrants (both documented and undocumented)▪ Non-English speakers▪ Low-income individuals▪ Children younger than 5▪ Renters▪ American Indians living on tribal lands▪ Racial and ethnic minorities▪ Homeless individuals▪ LGBTQ individuals
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

In addition, there are concerns about Census 2020's security and integrity. A May 2019 Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) survey found 63 percent of respondents are concerned about the confidentiality of Census 2020.¹¹ Further, due to the federal government's well-publicized attempt to add a question about citizenship to the census, immigrant populations may be less inclined to fill out the census questionnaire. A Sierra Health Foundation survey found Latinx immigrants were drastically less willing to participate in a census that asked a question about citizenship.¹² Although the U.S. Supreme Court disallowed inclusion of the question, advocates tend to agree that damage has been done in raising distrust and fear—especially in immigrant and mixed-status households—about the 2020 census.

Los Angeles County

Los Angeles County is home to more than 10 million people—more residents than 42 other states. It covers 4,084 square miles of land ranging from urban areas with some of the highest population density in the United States to remote, rural areas. The county is considered the hardest-to-count county in the nation.¹³

Besides having a high percentage of racial and ethnic minorities, which are considered hard to count (as seen in the chart on the following page), more than half of the county's population are renters and 6 percent are children younger than 5.¹⁴ In 2010, young children in California were undercounted by 7.7 percent—the worst in any age group—and in follow-up research, it was determined that households in Los Angeles County were especially likely to indicate confusion over whether to include young children when completing their questionnaires.¹⁵



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Further complicating the census effort in Los Angeles County, the Census Bureau estimates that about 15 percent of the population lives in poverty and that more than 20 percent of households do not have a broadband Internet subscription.¹⁶ More than 56 percent of Los Angeles County residents speak a language other than English at home.¹⁷ The PPIC estimates that more than 33 percent of census tracts in Los Angeles County will have households that do not respond to the initial census questionnaire, prompting a follow-up effort.¹⁸

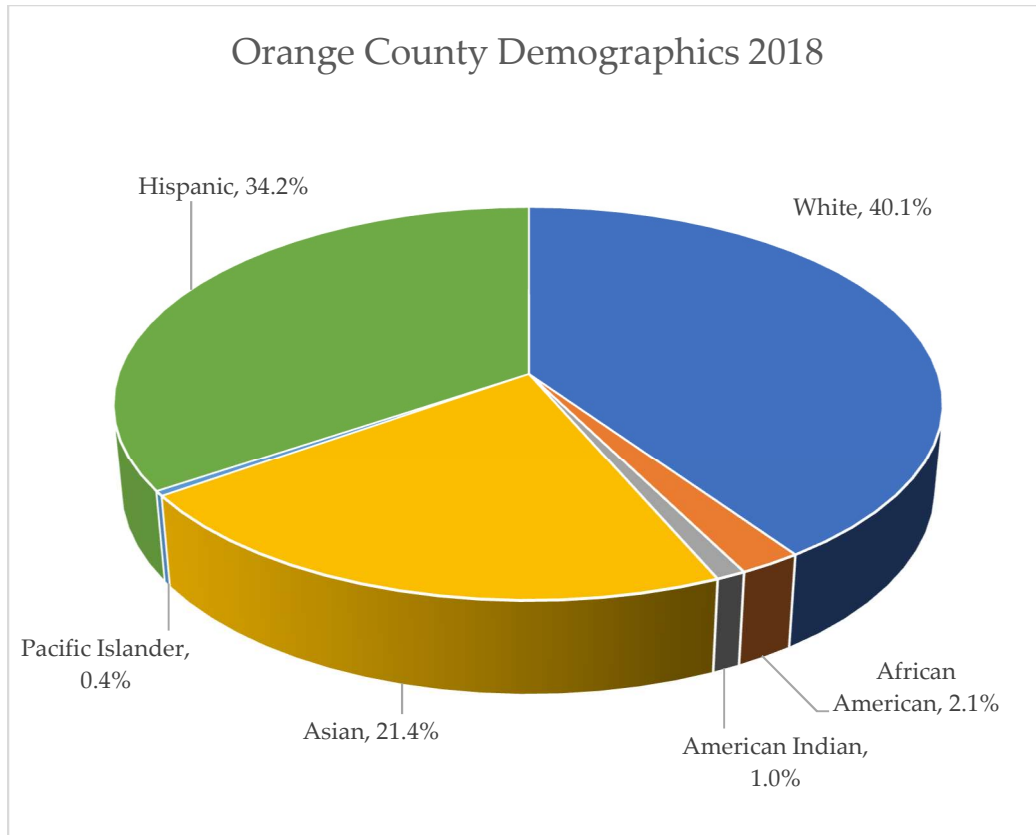
Another potential challenge for Los Angeles County is the number of colleges and universities within the region. The county is home to University of California, Los Angeles; five California State Universities (Dominguez Hills, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Northridge, and Pomona); and 21 community colleges, in addition to a number of private universities. College students are difficult to count because they tend to move frequently and are typically in high-density or nontraditional living circumstances. Further, students living away from home may not realize they need to fill out a census questionnaire, and their families may be confused about whether to include them, risking either an undercount or overcount, respectively. According to the Census Bureau, students who live away from home should count themselves at the on- or off-campus residence where they live and sleep most of the time.¹⁹

The city of Los Angeles has some of the highest concentrations of hard-to-count communities in the state, often for several reasons. More than 58 percent of Los Angeles city residents are African American, Hispanic, or Native American—populations that have been historically undercounted in past censuses. In total, about 72 percent of residents are from racial or ethnic minority groups. Further, approximately 63 percent of residents are renters, 20 percent live in poverty, and 60 percent speak a language other than English at home.²⁰ The city of Los Angeles also has a high number of homeless individuals, about 36,000 as of July 2019, which accounts for more than 60 percent of the homeless population in the county.

The city of Long Beach also has high numbers of hard-to-count populations. About 70 percent of residents are from racial or ethnic minority groups, and 60 percent of residents are renters. Twenty-six percent of residents were born in another country, and about 47 percent of residents speak a language other than English and about 19 percent of Long Beach residents are low income. A further problem for Census 2020 is that more than 20 percent of households in the city are without Internet subscriptions.²¹

Orange County

Orange County is home to more than 3 million residents, and while it is a mostly suburban county, it is the second most densely populated county in the state. Orange County has a number of residents who are within a racial or ethnic minority group, as shown in the chart on the following page. Additionally, about 46 percent of residents older than 5 speak a language other than English at home.²²



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

About 6 percent of Orange County residents are younger than 5. Additionally, about 43 percent of the Orange County population are renters. Due to its suburban nature, the county has less of an issue with rural Internet connectivity than other California counties, although more than 12 percent of households are estimated to be without an Internet subscription.²³ The PPIC estimates that about 11 percent of census tracts in Orange County will have households needing follow-up during the 2020 Census effort.²⁴

While Orange County overall has smaller percentages of hard-to-count communities than Los Angeles County, several of its cities will be challenging to count. The city of Santa Ana is 77 percent Hispanic, a historically undercounted population in the census. Further, 81 percent of Santa Ana residents speak a language other than English at home, and 45 percent of residents are foreign-born. More than 55 percent of residents are renters, and the average household has four people living in it. Nearly 20 percent of residents are low income.²⁵

The city of Anaheim has similar hard-to-count populations as more than 55 percent of the population are renters, 62 percent speak a language other than English at home, and 37 percent were born in another country.²⁶ Undercounting these hard-to-count areas of

Orange County would misrepresent areas that need targeted federal funding and could shift those dollars and services to other places.

Conclusion

Los Angeles and Orange counties are home to hard-to-count populations who are less likely to respond initially to census forms and therefore are at risk of being undercounted. The state considers counties key outreach providers during the Census 2020 effort because they have greater knowledge of local needs and residents' concerns. Nearly \$26 million has been allocated by the state for county outreach contracts to target hard-to-count populations within their boundaries—with Los Angeles County receiving about \$9.3 million and Orange County receiving about \$1.5 million. Counties are expected to use this funding to increase awareness and knowledge about Census 2020, deliver focused, culturally relevant messages about the census process, and work collaboratively with a network of community-based organizations and other local governments. Southern California is home to an ethnically, regionally, and socioeconomically diverse population and so will need to develop targeted plans and careful outreach to achieve an accurate Census 2020 count.

—Sara Noceto, Senate Office of Research

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