



COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

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These Are Our Numbers – The Importance of the 2020 Census

The U.S. Constitution mandates a complete count of all persons living in the United States every ten years – a process known as the decennial Census. The Census plays a vital role in the functioning of our democracy and economy: from determining how many seats in the House of Representatives each state receives, to the proper allocation of federal government resources, to research and business decisions made every day. However, the upcoming 2020 Census faces a series of obstacles that could stand in the way of achieving an accurate count.

More than a Counting Exercise

The number of seats each state receives in the U.S. House of Representatives – also known as apportionment – occurs following the completion of the Census. Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution requires apportionment of the House of Representatives “according to their respective numbers”¹ while ensuring at least one representative for each state. Following the initial apportionment set out in the Constitution, Congress determined the number of seats in the House and the apportionment of those seats under the broad guidelines of Article 1, Section 2. In keeping with that requirement, as the country grew, so too did the size of the House of Representatives until it reached 435 seats following the 1910 Census.

After a breakdown in the process following the 1920 Census, in 1929 the House passed the Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929, which fixed the size of the House of Representatives at 435 members. After the conclusion of each Census, the Census Bureau utilizes a process known as “the method of equal proportions” to apportion the 385 seats remaining after each state receives one seat. This process uses a mathematical formula that ranks states by their population until the final seat is allocated. Following the 2010 Census the average population of a congressional district was 710,767. However, it ranged from a low of 527,624 for Rhode Island’s two seats to a high of 994,416 for Montana’s at-large seat.

Apportioning seats affects elections, policy, and representation for a decade, so it is crucial that this process be done fairly and correctly. Therefore, an accurate Census is critical, because even a minor miscount can make a difference. The number of seats each state has in the House goes beyond effective representation for that state’s population. It also affects presidential elections because of how states’ votes in the Electoral College are determined. A state’s Electoral College slate is the combined total of 2 (the number of U.S. Senators per state) plus the number of

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

representatives that state has in the House. For example, following the 2010 Census, Minnesota was allocated the 435th seat while North Carolina missed gaining a 14th seat by only 15,753 people. As a result, North Carolina was given 15 votes in the Electoral College instead of 16 votes for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections.

In addition to providing critical underpinnings for our democracy, ensuring an accurate census count is also necessary to ensure that states receive the federal funding they need to serve their residents. According to the Census Bureau, 132 programs used Census Bureau data to distribute more than \$675 billion in funds during 2015.² Ranging from Medicaid to nutrition assistance to school lunches to formula grants for rural areas – federal funding for many programs is based upon the population size of the receiving jurisdiction. Therefore, without an accurate count, billions of federal dollars could be misallocated, causing states and localities that have been undercounted to miss out on federal money they would have otherwise received.

State and local governments as well as new and existing businesses rely on accurate census data too. For example, census data provide critical information for state emergency preparedness agencies to evaluate how vulnerable people and businesses are to major weather events. New businesses often use census data to determine where to open a new shop, while existing businesses use the data to identify potential customers and determine if their current structure maximizes potential business opportunities.

Top 10 Programs that Rely on Census Data (in billions)	
Medicaid	\$311.8
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	\$71.0
Medicare Part B	\$70.3
Highway Planning and Construction	\$38.5
Federal Pell Grant Program	\$29.9
National School Lunch Program	\$18.9
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families	\$17.2
Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers	\$15.8
Title 1 Grants to Local Education Agencies	\$14.3
Special Education Grants to States	\$11.4

Funding the 2020 Census

Following a review of the high cost of conducting the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau developed a comprehensive plan for the 2020 Census, which if fully implemented would save \$5 billion from the original projected cost of the 2020 Census. This plan called for new technologies and methods of collection, including, for the first time, asking most households to respond to the Census online. Achieving these savings required upfront investments by the agency to develop and test the new technologies. However, Congress failed to fully fund these

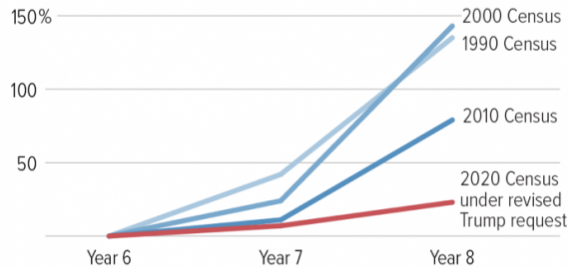
² <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/working-papers/Uses-of-Census-Bureau-Data-in-Federal-Funds-Distribution.pdf>

upfront investments. From 2012 through 2016, the 2020 Census received about \$200 million less than the agency requested.

For 2018, the Trump Administration requested only \$1.7 billion for the Census Bureau, only slightly higher than the 2017 level and an amount woefully inadequate given the increased activities needed just two years before the Census. In fact, in the similar time period for the

Proposed Increase in 2018 Census Bureau Funding Far Less Than in Previous Decennial Census Cycles

Change in Census Bureau budget relative to year 6 of each decade



Note: All years are fiscal years. Figures show discretionary budget authority in each year of the decade relative to that in the sixth year, not adjusted for inflation.
Source: CBPP based on Office of Management and Budget, enacted appropriations, and October 12, 2017 testimony by Commerce Secretary Ross.

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2010 Census, funding increased by 61 percent. For 2018, Congress finally began making up for previous underfunding by providing \$2.8 billion for the Census Bureau, a 92 percent increase compared with 2017.

Because of earlier funding restrictions that limited development of the planned cost-saving approaches, the Census Bureau now estimates the 2020 Census will cost \$15.6 billion, \$3 billion more than original estimates. Funding restrictions also contributed to the cancellation of two of the three end-to-end field tests originally planned.

These field tests are necessary to test many of the new IT systems the Census Bureau plans to implement in 2020, including better efforts to collect addresses and a new initiative to get most respondents to complete the Census online. Having only one end-to-end test greatly increases the risk that these new systems could fail to work properly – threatening the accuracy, and ultimately the overall cost of the Census.

Citizenship

In March of 2018, the Department of Commerce announced that the 2020 Census would, for the first time since 1950, ask households whether their members were U.S. citizens. In response, 18 states have sued the Department to prevent the inclusion of this question, more than 160 mayors from both parties wrote Secretary Ross requesting removal of the question, and several former Census directors warned about the risks and costs associated with including a citizenship question.

In fact, career staff at the Census Bureau wrote a memo warning that including an untested citizenship question could drive down response rates among a population that is already difficult to count. In that memo, the Census Bureau’s chief scientist, John Abowd, wrote that adding a citizenship question “very costly, harms the quality of the census count, and would use substantially less accurate citizenship status data than are available.”³ This makes it clear that

³ <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/391527-census-bureau-official-warned-in-memo-against-adding-citizenship>

adding this question not only harms immigrant families, but could make the Census more expensive, all to get less accurate information about citizenship status in the country.

Without a full response, communities already vulnerable to undercounting face further risk of marginalization. Hispanic and African-American communities are historically undercounted – to the tune of 1.5 percent and 2.1 percent respectively in 2010.⁴ When communities are undercounted, they lose out on representation, federal funding, and data that can help those communities grow and thrive economically.

Conclusion

An accurate Census count is a cornerstone of our democracy. It is the foundation for our representative government, ensuring that everybody receives the representation, resources, and services they have earned and need. This year, as Congress debates the need to increase funding caps for vital discretionary programs, Congress will also need to approve the final funding for the 2020 Census. The large increase in funding that will be required for the 2020 Census must be an important factor in determining the appropriate level of overall discretionary funding. And once the overall funding level has been determined, providing the funding necessary for a successful, complete 2020 Census must be a high priority for appropriations action.

⁴ https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html