
Will You Count? Households with Low Incomes in the 2020 Census

Why is the census important?

The decennial census is the most inclusive civic activity in our country, covering every person in every household. The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years. Moreover, the census is integral to our democracy. The data collected affects our nation's ability to ensure equal representation and equal access to important governmental and private sector resources for all Americans, including across racial and ethnic lines. Census results are used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local boards; to target more than \$800 billion¹ annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investment, and much more. These functions depend on a fair and accurate census.

Unfortunately, certain population groups – referred to as “hard-to-count” – are at a higher risk of not being fully counted in the census. Some of these groups have been historically underrepresented in the census for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in methodology, such as relying on the internet as the primary way for households to respond to the 2020 Census; and some may be reluctant to respond due to concerns about data confidentiality.² Being hard-to-count can lead to unequal political representation and unequal access to vital public and private resources for these groups and their communities.

Households with low incomes are at risk of being undercounted.

People with low incomes have been undercounted in past censuses, disadvantaging their families, communities, and neighborhoods. More than 29 million people in or near poverty (below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level) live in hard-to-count census tracts, making up almost 50 percent of the U.S. population that lives in hard-to-count communities.³

What are the hard-to-count characteristics of households with low incomes?

Households with low incomes typically share certain characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:

- **Housing:** Households with low incomes tend to be renters, and are more likely to be missed in the census because they are more likely to be moving during the census-taking process.
- **Race and Ethnicity:** Households with low incomes are more likely to include people of color, who are also historically hard-to-count. In fact, the 2010 Census undercounted African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians and Alaska Natives living on reservations.⁴
- **Internet Access:** The 2020 Census plans to use the internet as the primary mode of data collection from U.S. households.⁵ However, only 78 percent of households with incomes below \$30,000 use the internet, 10 percent less than the next income group (\$30,000-\$50,000) and almost 20 percent lower than households with incomes of \$50,000-70,000.⁶
- **Administrative Data:** The 2020 Census likely will use administrative data, such as information mined from IRS tax returns. This method may create a relative disadvantage for individuals and households with low incomes who do not file taxes or have W-2s.⁷

What are the consequences of undercounting households with low incomes?

When households with low incomes are undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately represent reality. Undercounting results in households with low incomes being denied a full voice in policy decision-making. As a result, their community's different needs may not be represented or prioritized according to their real share of the population.

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Undercounting households with low incomes in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that impact children, households, and communities with low incomes are funded based in whole or in part on census-derived data, including:⁸

Education and Child Care

- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion.** Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers of low-income children to help ensure that all children are meeting state academic standards.⁹ In school year 2014-15, Title I served more than 24 million children in U.S. public schools.¹⁰
- **Special Education Grants – \$11.2 billion.** To help schools comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Special Education Grants are used to provide resources to students with a disability, tailored to their individual needs.¹¹ Fifteen percent of funds are allocated on the basis of the states' relative populations of children who live in poverty. In the 2015-2016 school year, the grants served nearly 7 million children.¹²
- **Head Start Program – \$8.3 billion.** This program provides grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies to provide child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families, with a special focus on helping preschoolers develop the early reading and math skills they need to be successful in school.¹³ The program served almost 1 million families cumulatively throughout the program year.¹⁴
- **Child Care and Development Fund – \$2.9 billion.** This fund assists low-income households, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care so they can work or attend training and education.¹⁵ In 2015, approximately 1.4 million children and 850,000 families per month were served by the fund.¹⁶

Food and Nutrition

- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion.** SNAP is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among households in the United States.¹⁷ More than 40 million individuals with low incomes rely on federally-funded SNAP subsidies that are administered to them through state governments.¹⁸
- **National School Lunch Program – \$11.6 billion.** This program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to low income children in public and nonprofit schools.¹⁹ The program served more than 30 million children each school day in 2015, more than 73 percent of whom are from households at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.²⁰
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – \$6.3 billion.** WIC provides supplemental nutritious foods, education, and referrals to health and social services to new mothers with low incomes and children up to age five determined to be at nutritional risk.²¹ In 2015, the program served more than 8 million mothers and children.²²

Health Care

- **Medicaid – \$312 billion.** Medicaid is a federal-state insurance program that provides health coverage to households and individuals with low incomes, children, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities.²³ About 70 million people were enrolled in Medicaid in 2015.²⁴
- **Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) – \$11.1 billion.** CHIP provides funds to enable states to maintain and expand child health assistance to uninsured, low-income children.²⁵ More than 8 million children were served by CHIP in 2015.²⁶
- **Health Center Programs (Community, Migrant, Homeless, Public Housing) – \$4.2 billion.** These programs aim to assure access to comprehensive, culturally competent, quality primary health care services for underserved and vulnerable populations, such as migratory and seasonal

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agricultural workers, people experiencing homelessness, and public housing residents.²⁷ Nearly 26 million people rely on these health centers.²⁸

Housing and Energy

- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion.** Section 8 vouchers aid households with low incomes in obtaining decent, safe, and sanitary rental housing.²⁹ More than 2 million households with low incomes use the voucher program to afford housing.³⁰
- **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) – \$3.4 billion.** LIHEAP assists households with low incomes to meet the costs of home heating and cooling.³¹ In 2014, an estimated 6.3 million households received help with energy expenses.³²

You can help—right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of low-income households in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or support work on policy development, community organizing, and “Get Out the Count” campaigns for the 2020 Census. Here are some ideas:

- **Help your members of Congress understand why it’s important to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census in a way that will count all low-income households.** The Census Bureau needs a major funding ramp up several years before a decennial census to perform critical tests and build out a massive infrastructure. Already – due to funding constraints – important activities needed for a fair and accurate 2020 Census have been postponed or canceled, putting low-income households at risk of being severely undercounted. Without a sufficient increase in the Census Bureau’s budget, a complete count will be in jeopardy, and census costs could increase by billions of dollars.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org/>) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights also publishes many helpful resources at <https://civilrights.org/census/>.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the challenges low-income households face in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Complete Count Committees that will be established to help ensure a complete census.³³ It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for low-income households to remind leaders and local census staff of this critical constituency.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** Budget shortfalls are also putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional material (<https://www.census.gov/partners/>).

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Joseph Battistelli, Outreach and Field Manager at the Coalition on Human Needs, at jbattistelli@chn.org or Sonum Nerurkar, Get Out the Count Manager, at nerurkar@civilrights.org.

¹ Reamer, Andrew. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” GW Institute of Public Policy, 17 April 2018. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

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² Goldvale, Casey and Indi Dutta-Gupta. “Counting Everyone in the Digital Age.” Leadership Conference Education Fund and Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017. Available at http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LCEF_2020_Census_Poll_Report-Final-002.pdf.

³ Based on calculations from the 2010 Decennial Census mail return rates.

⁴ “Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2010 Census.” United States Census Bureau, 2012. Available at https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html.

⁵ “For 2020, Census Bureau Plans to Trade Paper Responses for Digital Ones.” Pew Research Center, 24 February 2016. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/24/for-2020-census-bureau-plans-to-trade-paper-responses-for-digital-ones/>.

⁶ “Final Report.” National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations Administrative Records, Internet, and Hard to Count Population Working Group, 2016. Available at https://www2.census.gov/cac/nac/reports/2016-07-admin_internet_wg-report.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Funding figures within this section are for FY 2015 unless otherwise noted. Reamer. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” 2017. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

⁹ “Factsheet: The 2010 Census and Latino Families.” The Leadership Conference Education Fund, Retrieved 13 December 2017. Available at <http://www.protectcivilrights.org/pdf/census/latino-families-and-the-2010-census.pdf>.

¹⁰ “Table: Children in Title I Schools by Race and Ethnicity.” Kids Count Data Center, Retrieved 5 January 2018. Available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8418-children-in-title-i-schools-by-race-and-ethnicity#detailed/1/any/false/1381,1246,1124,1021,909/167,168,133,3,185,107/17042>.

¹¹ “OSEP Grant Opportunities and Funding.” U.S. Department of Education, Retrieved 13 December 2017. Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/osep/index.html?exp=1>.

¹² “Programs: Special Education--Technical Assistance on State Data Collection--IDEA General Supervision Enhancement Grant. United States Department of Education, June 2017.” Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/static-tables/index.html>.

¹³ “Factsheet: The 2010 Census and Latino Families.” The Leadership Conference Education Fund, Retrieved 2017.

¹⁴ “Head Start Program Facts Fiscal Year 2015”. Available at <http://www.protectcivilrights.org/pdf/census/latino-families-and-the-2010-census.pdf>. United States Department of Health & Human Services, Retrieved 14 December 2017. Available at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/factsheets/2015-hs-program-factsheet.html>.

¹⁵ Walker, Christina and Stephanie Schmit. “A Closer Look at Latino Access to Childcare Subsidies.” CLASP, December 2016. Available at <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/CloserLookAtLatinoAccess.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Based on Preliminary FY 2015 Data.” United States Department of Health & Human Services, October 2015. Available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/characteristics-of-families-served-by-child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf>.

¹⁷ “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 3 October 2017. Available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

¹⁸ “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 3 October 2017. Available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

¹⁹ “The National School Lunch Program.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 2017. Available at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>.

²⁰ “National School Lunch Program Fact Sheet.” United States Department of Agriculture. Available at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>; “The National School Lunch Program.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017.

²¹ “Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).” Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 15 August 2017. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/women-infants-and-children-wic>.

²² “WIC Program.” Food and Nutrition Service, United States Department of Agriculture, 5 January 2018. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>.

²³ “Medicaid/Medicare.” Benefits.gov, Retrieved 20 December 2017. Available at <https://www.benefits.gov/benefits/browse-by-category/category/21>.

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²⁵ “Factsheet: The 2010 Census and Latino Families.” The Leadership Conference Education Fund, Retrieved 2017. Available at <http://www.protectcivilrights.org/pdf/census/latino-families-and-the-2010-census.pdf>.

²⁶ “Total Number of Children Ever Enrolled in CHIP Annually.” Kaiser Family Foundation, 15 February 2017. Available at <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/annual-chip-enrollment/?currentTimeframe=1&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>.

²⁷ Reamer. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” 2017. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

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²⁹ Reamer. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” 2017. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

³⁰ “National and State Housing Fact Sheets & Data.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/national-and-state-housing-fact-sheets-data>.

³¹ Reamer. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” 2017. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.

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³³ For more information, see “Complete Count Committees.” U.S. Census Bureau, Retrieved 31 May 2018. Available at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/press-kits/2018/ccp.pdf>.

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