State Efforts to Support the Census

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The decennial census is the largest peacetime federal activity in the United States. It is a head count or enumeration of everyone residing in the country.

The federal census provides the basis for apportioning the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among the states, and, by extension, the number of votes each state has in the Electoral College. Also, census data will be used in drawing congressional, state and local electoral district lines and will help determine how federal funds will be distributed to the states for the next decade. In addition, census data will guide both public and private decision-makers as they consider key issues of the day.

The 2020 census, like the previous 23 federal censuses, is a federal operation, conducted with federal funds. It is expected to cost $15.6 billion. The law requires everyone to complete their forms; however, it is not always easy to achieve full compliance.

State Action

While the U.S. Constitution squarely places the responsibility for the decennial census on the federal government, states and lawmakers may act to help ensure accurate population totals for their states in 2020. Options include creating a state-level complete count committee, and providing state funding for census outreach.

State Complete Count Committee (CCC). Currently, 32 states have government state-level complete count committees or commissions to support a successful census count. Committees encourage communities, civic and business organizations, faith-based groups and others to participate in the census.

Three states created their committees through legislation: Illinois, New Jersey and New York. A total of 29 states used executive orders or actions to create their committees. For example:

• In Alaska, the governor established the 2020 Census Alaska Complete Count Commission through an administrative order.

Did You Know?

• The first U.S. census was held in 1790, when 350 marshals counted the 3,929,214 residents in the 13 states and territories.

• The 2020 census will be the first “high tech” census. People may respond to the 10 questions online—by smartphone, tablet or computer—or over the phone or on paper.

• NCSL developed census talking points for legislators and others.
The Constitution gives Congress authority over the census and it has delegated responsibility to the Department of Commerce and its U.S. Census Bureau. Title 13 of the U.S. Code, as amended by Public Law 94-171 (1975), directs the secretary of commerce to take the decennial census.

The bureau must report the population for each state to the president by Dec. 31 of the census year. Within one week of the opening of the next congressional session, the president must report to the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives the apportionment population counts and the number of representatives to which each state is entitled.

To support states in redistricting, the bureau makes special preparations to provide redistricting data needed by the states. By April 1, 2021, the bureau will provide the “PL. 94-171 file” to each state’s governor and to majority and minority legislative leaders. This file includes information about population, race and age at the most granular level—the block level.

Nearly 95% of all households within the United States will receive a census questionnaire, and the other 5% will be reached directly by bureau employees. The bureau is hiring hundreds of thousands of temporary workers—it’s often described as the nation’s largest civilian mobilization—to reach out to people who don’t initially respond. For the 2010 census, the bureau used an estimated 635,000 enumerators to count roughly 310 million people. It’s expected that 300,000 to 500,000 temporary workers will be hired in 2020. Even with its large workforce, the bureau is relying on partnerships with states and others to help get an accurate count.

States have established committees have done so because they want an accurate population count. A number of these states are on the cusp of gaining or losing a congressional seat, a decision that will be based on the count. Others have established committees because they want to reach out to the state’s hard-to-count populations.

In 2010, children under 5 years of age made up the hardest-to-count population group; 4.6% of this group (a net undercount of almost 1 million young children) were missed. As a result, states lost over half a billion dollars a year from five major federal programs aimed at children.

While some states are still working on establishing a committee, others have decided not to do so. Their reasoning stems from the fact that the census is a federal action and there are already many local committees and philanthropic and nonprofit agencies working to support it.

**State Funding.** So far, 20 states have appropriated money to support their state’s committee and outreach. California has put the most money toward the 2020 census—$187 million. While no other state has devoted resources of that magnitude, the other 19 states have made commitments ranging from $100,000 in Montana to $30.5 million in Illinois.

These states are hoping their appropriations will pay dividends, as they work to get their fair share of the $890 billion of federal funds distributed annually based on formulas that use census data. Census data from 2020 will be used to determine each state’s share of federal funding for the next decade, so accuracy could be vital. For more information on state actions and funding, visit NCSL’s 2020 census and legislation resources webpage.

**Federal Action**

The U.S. Constitution established the census and federal law governs it. Article I, Section 2, Clause 3, requires that, “Enumeration shall be made . . . every subsequent Term of ten Years” of all people in the United States.

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