BY PATRICK POTYONDY

The U.S. Constitution requires an “actual enumeration,” or counting, every 10 years of every person in the country. In the first count, in 1790, 17 marshals and their assistants were given nine months to complete the job.

The marshals faced several hurdles, not least because it was the first count. Roads were often impassable, if they existed at all. Bridges were scarce, forests impenetrable, people suspicious, and the horse was the only mode of transportation. It took the marshals twice their allotted nine months, but they came back with a final count: 3,929,214 people living in 13 states.

They counted the heads of households, the number of free white males 16 and older (for purposes of war), free white males under 16, free white females (but not their age because it was thought to be “indelicate ... to ask a young lady”), other free persons and slaves. After considerable debate, Congress decided against James Madison’s proposal to collect detailed data on Americans’ occupations, citing the expense and potential unconstitutionality.

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson suspected, but had no way of proving, that the 1790 enumeration greatly undercounted certain groups and families. Indeed, an undercount was intentional back then. Only three of every five slaves were counted, and Native Americans weren’t counted at all. That didn’t change until after the Civil War and the passage of the 14th Amendment, when the country began counting the “whole number of persons” in each state.

It’s Coming Again

Our next counting begins around April 1, 2020, and the stakes could hardly be higher: The census is the basis for congressional apportionment (how many seats each state gets); redistricting at all levels of government (how we draw the lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures and school boards); decision-making by public officials, businesses and nonprofits; and the annual allocation of more than $800 billion in federal funding to the states.

Missing less than 5 percent of the population might seem unimportant given the size of the country, but even a 1 percent undercount could cost a state a U.S. House seat and millions of dollars in federal funding.

Transportation and communication have improved greatly since 1790, but the dedicated public servants of the U.S. Census Bureau still wrestle with the question of how to reach everyone in the country and avoid an undercount. As lawmakers consider ways to ensure that every person in their state is counted in the spring of 2020, here are the key groups they will...
focus on, the people who have historically been undercounted. For every undercounted group, establishing trust and keeping the message simple are key.

Where Are the Children?
Surprisingly, the census often overlooks one of the nation’s most vulnerable groups. The estimated undercount of children less than 5 years old was 4.6 percent in 2010. Why? A lack of awareness among those completing the survey that kids need to be counted.

“If the mom, dad or guardian filling out the form is unaware that they need to include the young children in their household, those children and their needs become invisible,” says Flo Gutierrez of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Moreover, undercounted children are more likely to be in hard-to-count households and neighborhoods, such as those with high poverty rates or multi-unit housing.

CENSUS FAQ

The citizenship question
The controversial question would ask people if they are citizens and, if so, where they were born. If they are naturalized citizens, it would ask in what year they became one. It would not ask if they are here legally, according to Wilbur Ross, secretary of the Commerce Department, which oversees the Census Bureau.

Has a question been asked in the past?
Sort of. A question related to citizenship status was asked on the 1820, 1830 and 1870 census questionnaires and in each decennial census of the total population from 1890 to 1950. But today’s understanding of “citizenship” wasn’t formed until the 1910s and ‘20s. Until nearly the 20th century, the U.S. essentially had open borders for people from certain parts of the world. Since 1960, the citizenship question has been asked of only a sample of households.

Why do some say the question is necessary?
The official explanation has been brief. Ross stated in March that the Justice Department requested that the question be added to help in enforcing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Open records documents dispute his recollection of the request, and decennial census information has never been used or needed in enforcing the VRA.

Why do others object to it?
Critics say the information collected in the American Community Survey is adequate for civil and voting rights enforcement. In addition, they are concerned that the question could deter millions of immigrants from filling out their mandatory surveys, which could seriously skew the national head count.

State and local complete count committees—the premier best-practice to achieving accurate counts—should include organizations involved with children. “This includes community clinics, pediatricians, religious institutions, Head Start, WIC offices and schools, to name a few,” Gutierrez says. “Roughly $160 billion in federal funding goes to states to assist children, based on their numbers. These resources ensure that children have access to health care, food, education and housing. These are resources that are critical for their development and allow children to thrive.”

Convenience Is Key

Latinos make up 18 percent of the U.S. population. “An undercount of Latinos means a failed census,” says Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. “The hostile environment the federal government has created for immigrants, [and] the last-minute addition of an untested citizenship question will increase this fear and distrust” among Latinos, he says.

NALEO’s research found that Latinos prefer paper to electronic survey forms. Researchers tested four census-related messages:

- It’s convenient, safe and required.
- It’s your civic or community duty.
- Federal funding depends on it.
- It’s a way to show resistance and defend your community.

All four produced positive results, but the first one—that filling out the form is “convenient, safe and required”—performed the best. To encourage Latinos to complete their surveys, “state leaders should refer quality people to apply for census jobs,” Vargas says, echoing the sentiments of many others.

Oh Where? Oh Where?

Rural areas can be particularly tough to count, given the geographic obstacles and the digital divide. “One of the biggest hurdles in rural areas is the dearth of good internet access,” says William P. O’Hare, an independent researcher whose work is published by the University of New Hampshire. “There are also many rural areas around the country where it is difficult to find housing units. They may be on unmarked roads and/or difficult to see from a main street or road.”

On top of these difficulties, “Rural communities are often characterized by the dominance of racial, ethnic or cultural groups,” O’Hare says. “American Indian reservations are a prime example of this, but many of the Hispanic communities in the Southwest and rural black enclaves in the Southeast are other examples.” He points out that complete count committees must know about these local areas to make the 2020 count accurate.

“AN UNDERCOUNT OF LATINOS MEANS A FAILED CENSUS.”

Arturo Vargas, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials

Previous efforts have undercounted communities of color. The 2010 census is estimated to have undercounted Hispanics by 1.5 percent, African-Americans by 2.1 percent, Asian Pacific Islanders by about 1 percent and Native Americans by 4.9 percent. Experts agree that, for every community, it is essential to hire trusted voices who understand the culture of the people they will be counting.

Fair Share of Resources

The nonprofit civil rights organization Color of Change found three primary reasons why African-Americans might not participate in the census: They believe that it won’t make a difference to their community; that the government has other ways to obtain the information; and that the questions are intrusive. Regarding the citizenship question, a majority said it would not deter their community from participating but that it would deter undocumented immigrants from doing so.

“Ensuring funding for programs in my community” was the study’s most persuasive message for African-Americans of all generations.

The organization also notes that, while cable TV is popular with older adults, social media is the preferred news source for millennials. Reaching blacks will be more difficult than reaching whites, however. Whereas 81 percent of whites have home internet, only 70 percent of Hispanics and 68 percent of blacks do.

The Census, When?

As with other communities of color, the Asian and Pacific Islander communities were concerned about the addition of the citizenship question, according to Asian Americans Advancing Justice, a nonprofit legal aid and civil rights group. Most, however, were unaware that the 2020 census was approaching.

Among Asians, Vietnamese-Americans were the most positive about completing an online form, while Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islander-Americans, Indian-Americans and Korean-Americans generally preferred paper.

And, as in the Color of Change study, the message that the census is important because it ensures a community’s fair share of resources tested the best, while messages centered on civic duty or legal requirements tested less positively.

Building on these themes, the National Congress of American Indians testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that “native people especially on reservations and in Alaska Native villages have been historically underrepresented in the census.”

The group has denounced cancelled field tests in Indian country and, like NCSL, has advocated for sufficient funding for the 2020 census. It also recommends finding strong, permanent, nonpartisan leadership for the Census Bureau and ditching the citizenship question.
Home Address: Nowhere

The roughly 3.5 million people who are homeless can be difficult for any census operation to count. Families with children make up about 35 percent of the total, while African-Americans are seven times more likely to be homeless than whites. Veterans represented about 9 percent of homeless adults in 2016.

“To effectively count the homeless population we need to first understand [them],” says Tom Murphy of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “That includes knowing the locations of shelters, encampments and other places where people are likely to congregate.” And that will likely require “conducting a census at night.”

Murphy says communities often have success enlisting a combination of homeless service providers, people who have been homeless themselves and peers from specific subpopulations, such as veterans and youth, to help establish trust.

Nonprofits Chipping In

Foundations, their grantees and other philanthropic organizations have a stake in a fair and accurate census count, too. Nationally, more than 100 foundations are contributing to well over 100 organizations as part of a wide-ranging “get out the count” effort. A coalition of advocates, for example, launched the “Stand Up for the Count” campaign to restore trust in the census through public education.

The Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation started the Funders Census Initiative to support nonpartisan, nonprofit state and local efforts to boost participation. One such state-level nonprofit is Colorado’s Together We Count, which helps grassroots organizations, businesses and officials at the state, local and tribal levels reach hard-to-count populations.

Some nonprofits are pressuring legislatures to enact matching-funds programs for census outreach work. The programs direct philanthropic efforts toward a more complete count. Michigan lawmakers, for example, enacted legislation that will fund 2020 census outreach by an allocation of one state dollar for every four private dollars received, up to a maximum of $500,000.

Legislators also can use their influence and networks to help set up state and local complete count committees. They can encourage philanthropic leaders, as well as trusted messengers like child-care providers, clergy, teachers, librarians, health care providers and family members, to participate. Trusted voices are the best source of information about the census, and it’s not too early for legislators to mobilize these key assets. The one-year countdown to the 2020 census begins soon.

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