



LegisBrief

A QUICK LOOK INTO IMPORTANT ISSUES OF THE DAY

NOV 2017 | VOL. 25, NO. 42

What You Need to Know About The 2020 Census

BY PATRICK R. POTYONDY

Founder James Madison argued vehemently in favor of including the census—known as the enumeration—in the United States Constitution. He meant for the official count of the population to be as accurate and complete as possible. Only with a proper accounting, he argued, would public officials be able to “[rest their arguments on facts, instead of assertions and conjectures.](#)” The facts accumulated by the census are used not only by the government at all levels—they are used by businesses, non-profits and policymakers, too.

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the decennial census every 10 years. This part of the census literally counts every single person once, recording name, age, race, residential status and relationship to others in each household. The [American Community Survey \(ACS\)](#) is also part of the census, but this portion is done continuously on a huge array of topics. It conducts massive surveys, using statistical samplings of more than 3 million households per year. Individuals living in the United States are required to respond to all parts of the census in both these forms (although the Bureau last prosecuted someone for not answering more than 40 years ago). Personal privacy is protected both by the oath that all census staff take and by the “[72-Year Rule](#)”: The government is not allowed to release personal data on individuals for 72 years. That means census data on individuals from the 1940 census only became available in April 2012.

State Action

With the 2020 Census quickly approaching, state lawmakers are beginning to consider how to help make sure their citizens are counted accurately because, while the census is a federal responsibility, states benefit in a variety of ways.

The decennial census determines how states go about [the redistricting process](#)—and which

states gain or lose a congressional seat. States also receive hundreds of billions of federal dollars per year—dollars guided by census data—that help fund the whole range of federal programs that benefit states, including infrastructure, health care and the social safety net.

To ensure that they conduct accurate redistricting each cycle and that they are allocated their fair share of federal dollars, states and local governments have incentive to help get out the count. There are several options for doing so. The first is the [Local Update of Census Addresses, or LUCA](#)—the sole chance for governments at the state, tribal and municipal levels to review and comment on the master address list that will be used to conduct the decennial census. The more accurate the address list, the easier and more accurate the enumeration. Local officials are best placed to update the list, given new boundaries, construction and zoning. States can also sponsor and fund “get out the count” efforts, including [state panels](#) and [multi-organization partnerships](#) to coordinate and encourage an accurate count.

Aiding an accurate count is good policy in other ways, too, because many state programs rely on census data to distribute funds to localities and communities. Census data can help identify demographic trends early, giving legislators time to address future needs and craft solutions. And census data is used by businesses, especially small business owners. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau provides tools such as the [Census Business Builder](#) to help businesses use census data to their advantage.

Federal Action

The federal government conducts the census. It is an ongoing project. In preparation for each decennial census, multiple test runs and polls are conducted. But inadequate funding threatens its success. The U.S. Census Bureau [had planned to conduct three test runs](#) before the big event.

Did You Know?

- The Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) is the sole chance for state, local and tribal governments to review and edit the master address list that will be used to conduct the decennial census. The deadline to [register](#) for LUCA is Dec. 15, 2017.
- In 2015, the states and D.C. received nearly [\\$600 billion in federal funding from census-guided programs](#). An accurate count ensures those dollars are distributed fairly. An inaccurate count would not change that overall dollar amount, just how it is spent.
- Some groups have been undercounted historically. Often known as “[hard-to-count populations](#),” they include rural communities, communities of color, immigrants, young children and low-income people.

Allocation of Federal Funds to States Based on Census Data

Amount from the 16 largest federal programs that allocate funds based primarily on census data. Dollar amount in billions.

State	Allocation	State	Allocation	State	Allocation
Alabama	\$7.6	Louisiana	\$9.4	Ohio	\$21.1
Alaska	\$2.2	Maine	\$2.8	Oklahoma	\$6.6
Arizona	\$13.5	Maryland	\$10.9	Oregon	\$10
Arkansas	\$7.6	Massachusetts	\$16.1	Pennsylvania	\$26.8
California	\$76.7	Michigan	\$14.6	Rhode Island	\$3.1
Colorado	\$8.1	Minnesota	\$8.4	South Carolina	\$7.3
Connecticut	\$8	Mississippi	\$6.1	South Dakota	\$1.4
Delaware	\$2.2	Missouri	\$11.3	Tennessee	\$13.1
Florida	\$29.3	Montana	\$2.1	Texas	\$43.3
Georgia	\$13.7	Nebraska	\$2.5	Utah	\$3.3
Hawaii	\$2.2	Nevada	\$4.7	Vermont	\$1.8
Idaho	\$2.4	New Hampshire	\$2.1	Virginia	\$10.2
Illinois	\$19.7	New Jersey	\$17.6	Washington	\$13.7
Indiana	\$11.1	New Mexico	\$6.2	West Virginia	\$5.1
Iowa	\$5.3	New York	\$53.2	Wisconsin	\$9.1
Kansas	\$4.5	North Carolina	\$16.3	Wyoming	\$0.9
Kentucky	\$10.1	North Dakota	\$1.5		

Source: *Counting for Dollars 2020: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds (16 Largest Census-Guided Programs)*, Dr. Andrew Reamer, George Washington University

But now, it plans to conduct a single end-to-end test before the final, official count in April 2020.

Highly-touted innovations, primarily in the realm of technology, had sought to save over \$5 billion, compared with the 2010 Census. For example, tasks like payroll and training enumerators will be automated. And, for the first time, the enumeration will be conducted primarily via the internet. The hope was that the technological innovations would save a lot of money by, among other things, cutting down on the need for expensive, in-person visits to households.

The Commerce Department, however, recently informed Congress that the 2020 Census will cost \$15.6 billion, or \$3.3 billion more than the previous count. The Government Accountability Office has labeled the census a “high risk pro-

gram,” and reports that the Bureau requires \$4.8 billion more, instead of \$3.3 billion. The lack of a federal funding ramp-up in the last years of this decade threatens to ensure that the technology is properly vetted and that staff are adequately hired and trained.

Other concerns remain to be addressed. Cybersecurity is one worry, given the centrality of networked machines and the internet. A week after informing Congress that IT programming was set to run \$1 billion over budget, the Census Bureau director resigned in May 2017, and as of November 2017 had not been replaced. Inadequate funding has prompted groups across the political spectrum — including NCSL, in a letter to U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi—to call for sufficient amounts.

Additional Resources

[The United States Census Bureau](#)
[The Census Project](#)
[NCSL census webpage](#)

NCSL Contact

Patrick R. Potyondy
 303-856-1447