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Here's Why an Accurate Census Count Is So Important

By Jim Tankersley and Emily Baumgaertner March 27, 2018
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WASHINGTON — The United States census is so much more than just a head count. It is a snapshot of America that determines how congressional seats are apportioned, how state and federal dollars are distributed, where businesses choose to ship products and where they build new stores. To do all that properly, the count needs to be accurate.

The Commerce Department's decision to restore a citizenship question to the census beginning in 2020 is prompting concerns about curtailing participation and possibly undercounting people living in the United States, particularly immigrants and minority groups who are expressing discomfort with answering questions from census workers.

Wilbur Ross, the commerce secretary, acknowledged concerns about decreased response rates in a memorandum released on Monday night. But he said asking about citizenship would enhance the results by helping calculate the percentage of the population eligible to vote.

An undercount of the population would have far-reaching implications. It could skew the data that are used to determine how many congressional representatives each state gets and their representation in state legislatures and local government bodies. It would shape how billions of dollars a year are allocated, including for schools and hospitals. It would undermine the integrity of a wide variety of economic data and other statistics that businesses, researchers and policymakers depend on to make decisions, including the numbers that underpin the forecasts for Social Security beneficiaries.

Here are several of the commercial, political and research efforts that depend on accurate census data:

Divvying up seats in Congress, state legislatures and more

The Constitution requires the government to enumerate the number of people living in the United States every 10 years, and to use that data to apportion the seats in Congress among the states. The calculation is based on total resident population — which means citizens and noncitizens alike — and it generally shifts power between the states once a decade, in line with population and migration trends.

States including Texas, Florida, Colorado and Oregon are projected to gain seats after the 2020 numbers are in. Illinois, Ohio, New York and West Virginia are among the states expected to lose seats. An undercount could shift those projections.

Lawmakers also use census data to draw congressional district boundaries within states, an often-controversial process that can help decide partisan control of the House. Census data also underpin state legislative districts and local boundaries like City Councils and school boards.

Handing out federal and state dollars

The federal government bases a large amount of its spending decisions on census data. Researchers concluded last year that in the 2015 fiscal year, 132 government programs used information from the census to determine how to allocate more than $675 billion, much of it for programs that serve lower-income families, including Head Start, Medicare, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Pell grants for college and reduced-price school lunch programs. Highway spending is also apportioned according to census data.

Influencing business decisions

To sell products and services, companies large and small need good information on the location of potential customers and how much money they might have to spend. The census provides the highest-quality and most consistent information on such items, and businesses have come to depend on it to make critical choices.

Census data help companies decide where to locate distribution centers to best serve their customers, where to expand or locate new stores and where they have the best chance of seeing a high return on investment. That is why business groups have been particularly concerned about the integrity of that data.

"The 2020 census is used to help construct many other data products produced by the federal government," said Michael R. Strain, an economist at the American Enterprise Institute who writes frequentlyon the importance of census data for policymakers and the private sector.

"Some of those products are heavily used by businesses when determining where to open new stores and expand operations, or even what items to put on their shelves. This affects retail businesses, for sure, but businesses in many other sectors as well," he added.

Planning for various health and wellness programs

Low response rates from any one demographic group would undermine the validity of various population-wide statistics and program planning.

Scientists use census data to understand the distribution of diseases and health concerns such as cancer and obesity across the United States population, including drilling down to race and ethnicity to identify health patterns across demographics. Public health officials then use the data to target their interventions in at-risk communities. Inaccurate census data could lead public health officials to invest in solving a problem that does not exist — or worse, to overlook one that does.

"It's getting harder to conduct the census, due to a variety of factors, including increasing cultural & linguistic diversity, and distrust of the government," said Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, an economist who directs the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. "The addition of the citizenship question will make the enumerators' jobs even harder by heightening privacy concerns and reducing participation among immigrants, who may fear the information will be used to harm them or their families."

Gaming out Social Security

An undercount in the census could also impact forecasts about Social Security payouts, which are already increasing as a share of the federal government's revenue.

When Congress plans for the costs of the country's Social Security needs, lawmakers rely upon demographic projection about the population's future: the number of children expected to be born, the number of people expected to die, and the number of people expected to immigrate. If baseline data regarding the current population are inaccurate, future projections could be skewed, causing financial challenges down the line.

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