
Will You Count? People Experiencing Homelessness 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 decennial census. Some of these groups have been historically underrepresented in the decennial 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.

People experiencing homelessness are at risk of being undercounted.

An estimated 3.5 million people experience homelessness annually in the United States.³ In 2016, families with children experiencing homelessness accounted for 35 percent of the homeless population.⁴ In 2010, African-American family members were 7 times as likely to stay in a homeless shelter as White family members.⁵ Veterans were also disproportionately represented amongst those experiencing homelessness, making up about 9 percent of homeless adults in 2016.⁶ People experiencing homelessness have been undercounted in the decennial census for decades.⁷

It is vitally important to educate people who are homeless about the census and those who give them shelter to ensure they are included on the census form completed for each household.

What are the hard-to-count characteristics of people experiencing homelessness?

People experiencing homelessness typically share certain characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:

- **Transitory Status:** The Census Bureau attempts to count households by sending materials to every known residential address.⁸ The person filling out the form is prompted to include all people who live in that household, whether or not they are family members and regardless of how long they have been staying or will stay there, as long as they do not have a usual home elsewhere or another household that would include them.⁹ People experiencing homelessness often are temporary members of a household.¹⁰ It is vitally important to educate this population and the people who give them shelter to include them on the census form completed for that household.
- **Hard-to-Reach Locales:** People experiencing homelessness can be hard to locate through census methods,¹¹ in part because of where they live. In 2016, 68 percent of the homeless population was in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or safe havens, and 32 percent were in unsheltered locations.¹² In 2015, 31 percent lived on the street, in a car, or in an abandoned

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building.¹³ Furthermore, local ordinances that prohibit begging or sleeping in public force people experiencing homelessness into less conspicuous locations.¹⁴

- **Internet Access:** People experiencing homelessness are far less likely to have internet access than the general population.¹⁵ The Census Bureau plans to promote an internet response form as the primary way for households to respond to the 2020 Census.¹⁶
- **Age:** Young children are traditionally very hard to count¹⁷ and about 22 percent of people experiencing homelessness are children.¹⁸

The Census Bureau has designed methods, like its Service Based Enumeration (SBE) operation, to count people who are experiencing homelessness based on the services they use, rather than at their place of residence.¹⁹ However, Census Bureau officials will rely on input from local authorities and community-based organizations to make sure that everyone is counted using this method.²⁰ Furthermore, the results from the SBE operation do not provide a complete or geographically disaggregated count of those experiencing homelessness,²¹ since people who are experiencing homelessness will likely be included in the areas' population counts and under a catch-all "other non-institutional group quarters" category.²² Nevertheless, the SBE operation may be the best opportunity to count people experiencing homelessness.

What are the consequences of undercounting people experiencing homelessness?

When people experiencing homelessness are undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately represent reality. Undercounting results in people experiencing homelessness 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.

Undercounting people experiencing homelessness in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that impact people experiencing homelessness are funded based in whole or in part on census-derived data:²³

Child Care, Education, and Employment

- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion.** Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or percentages of low-income children.²⁴ In school year 2014-15, Title I served more than 24 million children in U.S. public schools.²⁵ In 2015, the Department of Education said Title I funds should be used to employ local homeless liaisons and to take homeless youth to and from school.²⁶
- **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.²⁷ In the 2012-2013 school year, Head Start helped 46,800 total families experiencing homelessness and assisted 15,696 of those families find housing.²⁸
- **Child Care and Development Fund – \$2.9 billion.**²⁹ This fund assists low-income families, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care so they can work or attend training and education.³⁰ The program specifically targets children experiencing homelessness by conducting outreach and by granting them a grace period on their documentation for enrolling in the program.³¹
- **Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs – \$114 million.**³² These programs support emergency shelter, transitional housing, and street outreach programs for the over 31,000 young people who experience homelessness each year.³³

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- **McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program – \$65 million.**³⁴ This program is based on each state’s share of Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies, Part A funds, and helps schools to improve the enrollment, attendance, and academic success of children and youth who are homeless in their district.³⁵

Health Care and Nutrition

- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion.** SNAP is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among families in the United States. More than 40 million low-income families rely on federally-funded SNAP subsidies that are administered to them through state governments.³⁶ Not only are homeless families eligible for SNAP, but those who live in shelters are eligible for a homeless shelter deduction in about half of the states.³⁷
- **Health Care for the Homeless Program – \$366 million.**³⁸ This program provides primary health care, substance use treatment, emergency care, and outreach services to people experiencing homelessness, and also assists in establishing eligibility for the homeless population for entitlement programs and housing. In 2015, 890,000 in the homeless population were served by this program.³⁹
- **Medicaid – \$312 billion.** Medicaid is a federal-state insurance program that provides health coverage to low-income families and individuals, children, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities.⁴⁰ With the Affordable Care Act’s expansion of Medicaid, the rate of uninsured people experiencing homelessness has gone down.⁴¹
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – \$6.3 billion.** The WIC program gives nutrition assistance through vouchers that are used to buy nutrient-rich food for pregnant women and children under the age of five.⁴² Program adjustments are made for those who are experiencing homelessness and may not have access to water, cooking, or refrigeration.⁴³
- **Child Nutrition Programs – \$19.2 billion.**⁴⁴ These programs assist state and local governments and private non-profit organizations in ensuring that children in schools and child care – and adults in adult day care programs – receive meals that meet their nutritional needs.⁴⁵ At least 21 million kids receive free or reduced priced meals while school is in session, and less than 3 million do when school is closed.⁴⁶

Housing

- **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance funds for Permanent Supportive Housing, Transitional Housing, and Safe Havens – \$2.1 billion.**⁴⁷ HUD’s McKinney-Vento programs cover outreach, shelter, transitional housing, supportive services, short- and medium-term rent subsidies, and permanent housing programs for those experiencing homelessness, and for some people at risk of homelessness. In 2015, these programs served 773,000 people.
- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion.** Section 8 vouchers are the nation’s leading source of housing assistance for low-income seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, helping approximately 2 million households to secure affordable rental housing in the private market.⁴⁸ Vouchers have been shown to reduce homelessness⁴⁹ and almost one-fourth of the vouchers are used by those with disabilities, including those who have experienced homelessness.⁵⁰

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You can help – right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of people experiencing homelessness 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 people experiencing homelessness.** 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 people who are experiencing homelessness 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 issues people experiencing homelessness face in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Complete Count Committees that will be established in many states and localities to help ensure a complete census.⁵¹ It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for people experiencing homelessness 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 Debbie Weinstein, Coalition on Human Needs Executive Director, at DWeinstein@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>.

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 “Racial Discrimination in Housing and Homelessness in the United States.” National Law Center on Homeless & Poverty, 3 July 2014. Available at https://www.nlchp.org/CERD_Housing_Report_2014.pdf/.

⁴ “The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report.” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, November 2016. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

⁵ Nunez da Costa, Ralph. “Homeless a Racial Matter: Why are Black Families Over-represented in Homeless Shelters?” *Huffington Post*, 14 May 2012. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ralph-da-costa-nunez/black-homelessness_b_1341912.html.

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⁷ Kearns, Brendan. “Down for the Count: Overcoming the Census Bureau’s Neglect of the Homeless.” National Coalition for the Homeless, January 2013. Available at http://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/DownfortheCount_CensusReport.pdf.

⁸ Goldvale, Casey et al. “Counting Everyone in the Digital Age.” 2017. Available at http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LCEF_2020_Census_Poll_Report-Final-002.pdf.

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¹⁰ Ibid; Hoback, Alan and Scott Anderson. “Proposed Method for Estimating Local Population of Precariously Housed.” National Coalition for the Homeless, Retrieved 1 June 2018. Available at <http://nationalhomeless.org/publications/precariouslyhoused/Hobackreport.pdf>.

¹¹ “The State of Homelessness in America.” National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016. Available at <http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-soh.pdf>.

¹² “The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report.” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

¹³ “The State of Homelessness in America.” National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016. Available at <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/>.

¹⁴ Kearns, Brendan. “Down for the Count: Overcoming the Census Bureau’s Neglect of the Homeless.” 2013. Available at http://nationalhomeless.org/publications/DownfortheCount_CensusReport.pdf.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Goldvale, Casey et al. “Counting Everyone in the Digital Age.” 2017. Available at http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LCEF_2020_Census_Poll_Report-Final-002.pdf.

¹⁷ In fact, in the 2010 Census, the net undercount rate for young children was 5 percent. “Investigating the 2010 Undercount of Young Children—A New Look at 2010 Census Omissions by Age.” U.S. Census Bureau, 26 July 2016. Available at <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/memo-series/2020-report-2010-undercount-children-omissions.pdf>.

¹⁸ “The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report.” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

¹⁹ 2010 Census Frequently Asked Questions.” U.S. Census Bureau, 10 May 2010. Available at https://www.census.gov/2010census/partners/pdf/2010_TOA_Agent_FAQs_english.pdf.

²⁰ “The 2010 Census and People Living in Non-traditional Housing: Group Homes, Shelters, Transitory Housing, and the Homeless.” Leadership Conference Education Fund, Retrieved 5 January 2018. Available at <http://www.protectcivilrights.org/pdf/census/census-and-non-traditional-housing.pdf>.

²¹ “2010 Census Frequently Asked Questions.” U.S. Census Bureau, 2010. Available at https://www.census.gov/2010census/partners/pdf/2010_TOA_Agent_FAQs_english.pdf.

²² Ibid.

²³ 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>.

²⁴ “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>.

²⁵ “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>.

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²⁹ Number indicates mandatory portion of the FY 2015 funding for the program. 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 Ibid.

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⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “FY 2015: Budget Summary and Annual Performance Plan.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Retrieved 14 December 2017. Available at <https://www.obpa.usda.gov/budsum/FY15budsum.pdf>.

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⁴⁹ “Policy Basics: The Housing Choice Voucher Program.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 3 May 2017. Available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/policy-basics-the-housing-choice-voucher-program>.

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