



2020 CENSUS OUTREACH

Understanding Communities at Risk of an Undercount

North Carolina

Every 10 years, Americans are asked to fill out and return their Census questionnaires. It is an important decennial event, given that the population count guides billions in federal spending, determine congressional apportionment and plays a key role in shaping future policies. The Census Bureau's goal is to "count everyone once and only once," yet demographic analysis and post-census surveys show that the census consistently misses racial and ethnic minorities, low-income households, limited English proficient residents, renters, people experiencing homelessness, people with lower educational levels, and children, especially those aged 0-4, at disproportionately high rates. The opposite is true for homeowners and non-Hispanic Whites who, according to the census Bureau's own analysis, were *over-counted* in 2000 and 2010. The gap between the over-count and under-count represent the extent to which populations are underrepresented. Thus people who are historically undercount by the census reflect those likely to lose the most as a result of the undercount.

What is at stake for North Carolina?

At the national level, under-counts and mistakes made on census forms resulting in over-counting effectively cancel each out to some degree, but they are much more problematic at the local level where populations tend to be more homogenous and may be subject to widespread underreporting. These discrepancies lead to disparities in the allocation of political representation as driven by redistricting and over \$800 billion in government funding for about 300 services and programs. For North Carolina, the census will effect policy measures touching on North Carolinians' everyday lives, such as redistricting, Medicaid, and Section 8 Housing.

Redistricting

In North Carolina, redistricting is conducted by the legislature. Members of the public can attend public hearing that are held by the redistricting committees of the State Senate and State House. In 2011, a number of public hearings were held in various locations, including museums, universities, and community colleges, in order to procure greater public input. A maximum of three hour visit can be scheduled at the public redistricting workroom, where one can create their own redistricting designs. The workroom provides access to a computer, redistricting software, reference data, and printers for maps and reports. Any redistricting designs created are archived since they qualify as public information. Public Redistricting Workroom Access hours: 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM Monday through Friday. Contact the Information Systems Division at (919) 733-6834 to schedule a visit.

Section 8 Housing

A prevalent issues in North Carolina is the lack of adequate housing for low-income individuals. As of the most recent count, 14,819 Section 8 Housing Vouchers were dispersed in Greensboro alone, which comprises five percent of the county's population. Greensboro, NC persists as one of the most undercounted populations in the United States as the estimate undercount is 1.79 percent of the population. The Census Bureau considers "income and housing costs to understand whether housing is affordable in local communities." Factors such as income, poverty levels, and population directly influence the disbursement



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of federal funds to districts within the U.S. and an undercount would result in a lack of federal funding for housing programs.

Medicaid

At stake for North Carolina is \$7.6 million in Federal Medicaid money. Medicaid provides financial assistance to States for payments of medical assistance on behalf of cash assistance recipients, children, pregnant women, and the aged who meet income and resource requirements, and other categorically-eligible groups. With an accurate census count in 2020, North Carolina would be eligible for up to 710 dollars in federal reimbursement assistance for every 1,000 dollars spent on Medicaid. However, even a 2% undercount could mean a loss in millions of Medicaid funding. This loss of funding will have devastating effects to the overall health care system that serves all North Carolina residents. Medicaid pays for half of all births and 60 percent of all nursing home care. Health care providers in rural North Carolina, including hospitals, are particularly reliant on Medicaid funding and could be forced to stop providing key services if a Census undercount led to significant Medicaid cuts. Such cuts would trigger job loss, as federal health care dollars disappear from the state and local economies.

Measuring Hard to Count Communities

It is well understood that communities that have low mail response rates are most likely to be miss-counted. Accordingly, the Census Bureau defines “hard to count” as census tracts where the mail-in response rate is less than 73%. To determine the mail response rate, census statisticians compare the number of completed Census survey forms to the number of occupied housing units that received them. The national return rate in 2010 was 79.3 percent, but it varied significantly by state and region. Less than three-quarters of households responded in Alaska, Louisiana and New Mexico, while nearly 86 percent did so in Minnesota. North Carolina ranks 19th with just over 80% of households responding. In certain counties, more than a third of households failed to return their forms, and some parts of cities responded at even lower rates.

Census participation is largely tied to a jurisdiction’s demographics. The last Census is estimated to have undercounted the nation’s black population by 2 percent, and Hispanics by only slightly less. Whites, particularly older white women, were over-counted. One of the toughest groups to count is children under the age of five, many of whom live in low-responding neighborhoods.

<i>National Net Undercount</i>			
Demographic Group	1990	2000	2010
White (non-Hispanic)	0.68% *	-1.13% *	-0.84% *
Black (non-Hispanic)	4.57% *	1.84% *	2.07% *
Asian (non-Hispanic)	2.36% *	-0.75%	0.08%
American Indian on Reservation	12.22% *	-0.88%	4.88% *
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2.36% *	2.12%	1.34%

In order to respond, people have to receive the forms in the first place. Renters are typically undercounted because the forms do not reach many of them, while homeowners are over-counted. Apartments with mail delivered to a single central location also pose problems. Enumerators follow up with nonresponding



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households, but aren't always successful. Visiting homes in-person comes at a much higher cost for taxpayers and is one reason why the Government Accountability Office reported the 2010 Census cost approximately \$98 per housing unit. Where enumerators are unable to contact the residents, the Census Bureau makes its best guess about the residents based on the statistical information of the surrounding neighbors. Thus demographic data about communities with low response areas are less likely to be accurate.

One major change that could help the agency curb costs is that, for the first time, responses will be submitted online. Respondents will be able to enter their information using a unique ID code mailed to their homes or by providing identifying information that matches administrative records. The agency expects the majority of Americans to file electronically rather than mail in their forms. But this added option could still fail to reach many low-income households because research suggests that nearly half of the poorest households across the U.S. -- those with annual incomes below \$20,000 -- still lack internet access. According to the latest American Community Survey Estimates, nearly one out of five households in North Carolina still have either no internet subscription or dial up only access. An analysis by the Center for Urban Research found congressional districts with lower mail return rates were correlated with higher percentages of households lacking internet subscriptions or having poor connections. Low-income households are more likely to use mobile phones to get online, which presents another potential hurdle for the 2020 Census. Mobile devices have longer load times, and respondents are more likely to not complete surveys than those using desktop computers.

North Carolina had the 10th highest rate of growth in 2010 and continues to grow. It is poised to gain an additional congressional seat in 2021. Only with an accurate census count will North Carolina gain its fair share of representational power. Unfortunately, North Carolina's majority-minority counties and census tracts are among the state's most undercounted areas. 36 out of the state's 100 counties had hard to count areas in 2010. An accurate count could completely change the political landscape of the state, placing more participatory power in the hands of communities of color.

Census Outreach

One point that no one disputes: for communities that are determined to get an accurate count, the time to begin work is now. Reaching the hard-to-count requires trusted messengers in communities relaying information that resonates with communities' values. These can include pastors and faith groups who emphasize completing the Census, because it will benefit neighborhood schools. The attached spreadsheet is meant to help advocates identify neighborhoods in their state at most risk of an undercount and to learn details about those communities to help tailor outreach accordingly.

The spreadsheet contains demographic information about all of North Carolina's hard to count communities down to the census tract. These are organized by county in alphabetical order. Census tracts marked in bold have majority minority populations. In addition to population figures for 2010 and 2016 by race and ethnicity, readers will find information about the portion

Census tracts are merely small subdivisions of a county that provide a stable set of geographic units for the presentation of statistical data, as opposed to say towns, which often have boundaries that shift over time. They generally have a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people. A census tract usually covers a continuous area, however the spatial size of census tracts varies widely depending on the density of settlement.



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of people living below the poverty level, people who rely on public assistance, the number of Spanish language households, and more. Almost all of the data is pulled directly from the official 2010 Census and the 2016 American Community Survey.

Example: Robeson County

For an advocate conducting census outreach in Robeson County, there are some steps they might follow. At a first glance, Robeson County as a whole seems to be in good shape for census participation. The census bureau would not categorize the county as “hard to count”, because the overall mail return rate is 74.2%. But a closer look presents a different story. Looking at the data spreadsheet, advocates will see that Robeson has 12 hard to count census tracts, all of which are majority-minority. Moreover, 45.9% households in the county do not have an internet subscription or dial-up only access. This means it will likely be a substantial hurdle for those households to fill out the census survey online.

Looking at the hard to count census tracts in Robeson County, a census advocate will next identify populations within those tracts that are at risk of an undercount in the 2020 census. For example, census tract 960502 has the lowest mail return rate in the county and therefore is at great risk of an undercount in 2020. Looking at 960502, I see that 25% of the population lives in non-institutional group quarters. Non institutional group quarters include college/university student housing, military quarters, and other non-institutional facilities. Roughly half of the tract residents identify as American Indian. This indicates that an affective census advocate in this community would be someone who identifies as American Indian and has an understanding about the needs of the community. Moreover, over half of the population lives below the poverty line. These factors not only indicate why this census tract is so hard to count, but indicate why an accurate count so important for this community.

For assistance on making sense of the data, contact Laura Wright at laurawright@scsj.org.