
Will You Count? Renters 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 at least \$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.

Renters and transitory occupants are at risk of being undercounted.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the net undercount rate for people living in rental housing units in the 2010 Census was 1.1 percent compared to a net overcount of 0.6 percent for people living in owner-occupied housing units.³ Some groups of renters had particularly high net undercount rates. There was a 12.2 percent net undercount rate for black male renters age 30 to 49, and 6.1 percent net undercount rate for male American Indians and Alaskan Natives renters age 30 to 49, and a net undercount of 8.6 percent for Hispanic Male renters age 18-29.⁴

More U.S. households are renting today than at any point in the last 50 years.⁵ In total, more than one third of U.S. households are renters (37 percent),⁶ a number that has ballooned since the start of the Great Recession.⁷ Geographically, more than one-third of renters live in the South (about 36 percent), though a significant number of renters live in every region.⁸ In the four biggest cities by population (New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston),⁹ the majority of households were rented.¹⁰

What are the hard-to-count characteristics of renters and transitory occupants?

Renters share certain characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:

- **Transitory Status:** Renters are more likely to be missed in the census because they are more likely to be moving during the census-taking process.
- **Poverty:** Households in poverty are traditionally very hard to count,¹¹ and nearly 30 percent of renters today live below the poverty line.¹² Renters who are forced to devote a greater share of their income towards rent are at higher risk of eviction and could be undercounted if their address is not updated when evicted.¹³ In 2015 alone, 2.7 million renters were faced with eviction.¹⁴
- **Race and Ethnicity:** Historically, Black and Hispanic people have been undercounted in the decennial census,¹⁵ and renters are disproportionately people of color. In fact, Black and Hispanic households are about twice as likely to be renters as White households.¹⁶ In total, 58 percent of Black households and 54 percent of Hispanic households rent their homes, which is much higher

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than the national average.¹⁷ Renters of color also have significantly lower median incomes,¹⁸ making them even more likely to be living in poverty and undercounted.

- **Education:** Areas with lower educational attainment are also hard to count,¹⁹ and renters tend to have lower educational attainment compared to the U.S. average. The majority (52 percent) of people who are the head of their household and do not have a high school degree are renters,²⁰ compared to 29 percent of college-educated household heads.²¹
- **Type of Housing:** Multiunit buildings are considered a factor that makes an area hard-to-count,²² and renters tend to live in multiunit buildings. In fact, 61 percent of renters live in multiunit buildings, compared to 5 percent of those who own their homes.²³

Transitory occupants – people whose “usual home” at the time of the census is transitory or mobile – are also at heightened risk of being undercounted in the 2020 Census. In addition to sharing some of the characteristics listed above, transitory occupants tend to live in hard-to-reach locales (e.g., hotels, motels, marinas, racetracks, circuses, carnivals, campgrounds, and RV parks).²⁴ Furthermore, the Census Bureau will not automatically visit every motel and hotel and instead will conduct a special “transitory enumeration” that relies upon assistance from local officials and community advocates in identifying temporary transitory locations, such as motels that now house families displaced by economic distress.

What are the consequences of undercounting renters and transitory occupants?

When renters and transitory occupants are undercounted, political boundaries and congressional reapportionment may not accurately represent reality. Undercounting results in renters and their communities 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 renters in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that provide financial security for low-income families and economic development for their communities are funded based in whole or in part on census-derived data, including:²⁵

- **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.²⁶
- **Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) – \$7 billion.**²⁷ The LIHTC is provided to those who develop low-income housing. Affordable housing developers used \$7 billion in LIHTC in 2014.²⁸ Through 2013, the program helped fund the construction of 2.2 million new units.²⁹
- **Low Income Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP) – \$3.4 billion.** LIHEAP provides assistance to low-income people to pay their energy bills. Around 9 million households received funding from LIHEAP in 2011 to pay their energy bills, including renters, who may receive different amounts of assistance based on which state they live in.³⁰ In 2017, almost 20 percent of low-income renters will get a disconnection notice after missing a payment.³¹

You can help – right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of renters and transitory occupants in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or

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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 renters and transitory occupants.** 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 renters and transitory occupants 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 challenges renters 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.³² It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for the renter community 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 Andrew Aurand, Vice President for Research of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, at AAurand@nlihc.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 Mule, Thomas. “Census Coverage Measurement Estimation Report: Summary of Estimates of Coverage for Persons in the United States.” U.S. Census Bureau, 22 May 2012. Available at https://www.census.gov/coverage_measurement/pdfs/g01.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cilluffo, Anthony, Abigail Geiger, and Richard Fry. “More U.S. Households are Renting Than at Any Point in 50 Years.” Pew Research Center, 19 July 2017. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/19/more-u-s-households-are-renting-than-at-any-point-in-50-years/>.

⁶ “Quick Facts: Resident Demographics.” National Multifamily Housing Council, Retrieved 14 December 2017. Available at <http://www.nmhc.org/Content.aspx?id=4708>.

⁷ Badger, Emily. “How Renting Became the New Ownership.” *Washington Post*, 24 June 2015. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/06/24/how-renting-became-the-new-homeownership/?utm_term=.8e30a1500924.

⁸ Including about 20 percent of renters in the Midwest, 19 percent in the Northeast, and 26 percent in the West. “Table C11RO: General Characteristics by Census Geography-Renter-Occupied Units (National): 2013 American Housing Survey.” U.S. Census Bureau, Retrieved 14 December 2017. Available at <https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/AHS/2013/C11RO>.

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⁹ “The 30 Most Populous Cities.” National League of Cities, Retrieved 4 January 2018. Available at <http://www.nlc.org/the-30-most-populous-cities>.

¹⁰ “Renting in America’s Largest Metropolitan Areas.” NYU Furman Center/Capital One National Affordable Rental Housing Landscape, 8 March 2016. Available at http://furmancenter.org/files/NYU_Furman_Center_Capital_One_National_Affordable_Rental_Housing_Landscape_2016_9JU_NE2016.pdf.

¹¹ Fernandez, Shatuck and Noon. Presentation at the Southern Demographic Association Conference, October 2016.

¹² Terrazas, Aaron. “The Structures of Poverty: Renter Poverty Rates are Highest in Low-Density Multifamily Units.” Zillow, 29 March 2017. Available at <https://www.zillow.com/research/renter-poverty-multifamily-units-14664/>.

¹³ Kinney, Jen. “The U.S. Metros Hit Hardest by Rising Eviction Rates.” Next City, 13 December 2016. Available at <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/report-eviction-rates-housing-affordability>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Census Bureau Release Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2010 Census.” U.S. Census Bureau, 22 May 2012. Available at https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html.

¹⁶ Ciluffo et al. “More U.S. households are Renting Than at Any Point in 50 years.” 2017. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/19/more-u-s-households-are-renting-than-at-any-point-in-50-years/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hispanic renters have median incomes 15 percent lower than white renters, and African American renters’ income is 30 percent lower. “America’s Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs.” Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2011. Available at <http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/ahr2011-3-demographics.pdf>.

¹⁹ “HTC 2020.” CUNY Mapping Service at the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center, 2017. Available at <http://www.censushardtocomaps2020.us/>.

²⁰ Ciluffo et al. “More U.S. Households Are Renting Than at Any Point in 50 Years.” 2017. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/19/more-u-s-households-are-renting-than-at-any-point-in-50-years/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Independent Statewide Mobilization Tackles Hard to Count Populations in 2010 Census.” Right to the City, Retrieved 14 December 2017. Available at <http://righttothecity.org/independent-statewide-mobilization-tackles-hard-to-count-populations-in-2010-census/>.

²³ “America’s Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs.” Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2013. Available at http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs_americas_rental_housing_2013_1_0.pdf.

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²⁵ 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>.

²⁶ “Factsheet: Will Your Kids Count? Young Children and Their Families in the 2020 Census.” The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 10 July 2017. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/Fact-Sheet-Undercount-of-Young-Children.pdf>.

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²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “America’s Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs.” Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2013. Available at http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs_americas_rental_housing_2013_1_0.pdf.

³⁰ “The Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Helps the Most Vulnerable Americans.” Edison Electric Institute, March 2015. Available at <http://www.eei.org/issuesandpolicy/liheap/Documents/2015%20March%20LIHEAP.PDF>; Laird, Jennifer, Jessica Pac, Christopher Wimer. “Dimming the Lights: Eliminating Energy Assistance Would Move 200,000 Into Poverty, Hurting the Rural Poor the Most.” Columbia Population Research Center, 4 May 2017. Available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/5911c8a19de4bbb96b920341/1494337700539/Poverty+and+Social+Policy+Brief_1_1.pdf.

³¹ Ibid.

³² For more information, see “Complete Count Committees.” U.S. Census Bureau, Retrieved 31 May 2018. Available at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/press-kits/2018/ccp.pdf>.

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