



SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

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Final Countdown to Census 2020: Background Paper

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The census, which is mandated by Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, has been conducted every 10 years since 1790 and seeks to provide an accurate count of the entire U.S. population. In addition to mandating that a census take place every 10 years, the U.S. Constitution requires population data collected from the census to be used to apportion seats allocated to the states for the House of Representatives.¹ Census data also are used to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funding for many federal programs.² At the local level, the census determines local funding levels based on the government program's targeted population. Further, governmental entities use the census counts for redistricting congressional districts, state legislative districts, school districts, and voting precincts. According to the Census Bureau, decennial census data play an increasingly important role in commerce and the economy.³ For example, local businesses may consider data on population growth or income levels when deciding where to open stores or restaurants, and real estate investors may rely on data concerning the demand for housing in making decisions about land development.⁴

Among all government programs, the decennial census is unique because of its constitutionally mandated public service role. The U.S. Constitution requires the Census Bureau not only to attempt to offer information as a service to the population (as is the case with other federal government programs such as voter registration or health care enrollment) but to actually reach and count every person living in the United States and its territories—all ages, residence statuses, and locations—regardless of whether they desire to participate or are difficult to find, reach, and count. The requirement presents an immense challenge for both the federal government and the states that rely on an accurate count.

Census 2020 Timeline

2020 Census Activities:

- **January 21:** The Census Bureau starts counting the population in remote Alaska.
- **March 12–20:** Households begin receiving official Census Bureau mail with detailed information on how to respond to the census questionnaire. Options for online, phone, and mail responses will be included. In areas the Census Bureau has determined are less likely to respond online, households will receive paper questionnaires.
- **March 16–24:** All households will receive reminder letters.
- **March 26–April 3:** Households that have not already responded to the census will receive a reminder postcard.
- **March 30–April 1:** The Census Bureau counts people experiencing homelessness following a special process outlined below:
 - **March 30:** Counting people who are in shelters
 - **March 31:** Counting people at soup kitchens and mobile food vans
 - **April 1:** Counting people in non-sheltered, outdoor locations, such as tent encampments and on the streets
- **April 1:** Census Day. By this date, every home will have received an invitation to participate in the 2020 census; however, people may respond beginning in March once they receive instructions.
- **April 1–30:** The Census Bureau counts people in group living arrangements, such as college students living on campuses, people living in senior centers, military barracks, correctional facilities, and nursing or residential treatment facilities.
- **April 8–27:** Households that have not responded to the census will receive a reminder letter and a paper questionnaire, followed by a final reminder postcard.
- **May–July:** Census enumerators begin following up by visiting homes that have not responded to the census questionnaire.
- **December:** The Census Bureau will deliver apportionment counts for the House of Representatives to the president.

2021 Census Activities:

- **March 31:** Deadline for the Census Bureau to send detailed counts and summary files to states for redistricting purposes as specified by Public Law 94–171.

Census Bureau

The Census Bureau is responsible for taking, compiling, and publishing the decennial census count of the population living in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the five U.S. territories (Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands). Conducting the count is a multiyear operation during which the bureau makes an accurate list of every residence in the United States and its territories, develops an operations and communications plan for getting members of every household to respond to the census questionnaire, and follows up in person with nonresponding households. Only Census Bureau employees are authorized to collect data from the public during the census count. The bureau is hiring thousands of temporary census takers, or enumerators, to complete the effort.

The Census Bureau also is responsible for designing the census questionnaire. The Census 2020 questionnaire has nine questions and is estimated to take about 10 minutes to complete.⁵ The form will be available in 13 languages, and the bureau also is operating a call center to assist respondents in the same languages.

The Census Bureau is bound by law to protect the answers provided and keep them strictly confidential, meaning it cannot release any identifiable information about a person, their home, or business, even to law enforcement agencies. The law ensures that respondents' private information will not be published and that respondents' answers cannot be used against them by any government agency or court. Census Bureau employees—including the temporary enumerators—who access respondents' information swear a lifetime oath to protect the information collected.⁶ Further, the Census Bureau states that the data collected is protected by following industry best practices and federal requirements to protect against cyber threats and hacks.⁷

To raise awareness about Census 2020, the Census Bureau developed a detailed communication program focused on national advertising through print, outdoor, and broadcast media, as well as digital marketing and direct outreach through the mail.⁸ The bureau's communications plan centers on research-based planning to execute a media and outreach campaign that is relevant and culturally sensitive to its target audiences.⁹ The communications plan acknowledges that a successful Census 2020 campaign must overcome misunderstandings about the census, concerns about data security, and distrust in the government. The Census Bureau's outreach campaign contracted with advertising and media agencies that focus on specific target audiences, broken into racial and ethnic groups.¹⁰ However, the bureau is relying on state

Complete Count committees and community partners to form a grass-roots effort to increase participation, especially in hard-to-count communities. Specially, the bureau's goal is to establish 300,000 committed community partnerships by March 2020.¹¹

California's Census Effort

In 2018, the Census Bureau began encouraging every state to form a Complete Count Committee, an advisory panel of a broad spectrum of government and community leaders from education, business, health care, and other community organizations to provide a vehicle for coordinating census efforts between local, state, and federal entities. In April 2018, Governor Brown created California's Complete Count Committee, which has been meeting quarterly since that time.¹²

The state's census operations and funding are run by the California Census Office, which is overseen by the Government Operations Agency. The state provided a total of \$187.2 million to the Census Office with the purpose of increasing statewide participation in the census through outreach and communication, filling gaps in the Census Bureau's outreach, and forming strategic local partnerships.

The Census Office is responsible for contracting with and distributing state funding to outreach partners, including counties, tribal governments, community-based organizations, and education entities. Separately, the state funded a media campaign that uses local, ethnic media to target specific communities that the federal media approach might fail to reach.

The Census Office used a traditional request for proposals to select its media and community-based organizations, and more than 20 media entities and 80 community-based organizations responded. Counties and tribal governments were able to opt in to the allocated census funding based on their hard-to-count populations. Contracted entities are required to develop strategic plans, quarterly reports, and an implementation plan, as well as a final report after the census effort is complete. Local entities and large community-based organizations with administrative capacity are able to use their allocated funding to subcontract with local organizations and stakeholder groups to increase the scale of their outreach.¹³

Annual State Budget Allocations to the Census Office as of December 2019

	Appropriation Amount	Expended Amount*	Available Balance
2017 Budget Act	\$10,000,000	\$9,450,224	\$549,776
2018 Budget Act	\$90,300,000	\$77,995,171	\$12,304,829
2019 Budget Act	\$86,931,000	\$49,545,305	\$37,385,695
Total	\$187,231,000	\$136,990,700	\$50,240,300

* Expended amount includes encumbered or obligated expenditures. Source: 2017–19 state budget acts and Census Office documents.

Of the \$187.2 million in state funding, more than 80 percent has been allocated for the statewide media campaign and outreach partnerships with local entities, with notable funding amounts including \$26 million dedicated to counties, \$37.4 million to community-based organizations, \$7.7 million to education entities, and \$3 million to tribal governments. An additional \$12.2 million has been held to allocate to community-based organizations or counties as needed.

Challenges in Obtaining an Accurate Count

Certain populations and communities are historically difficult to count. The Census Bureau operates using census tracts, defined as “small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county.” Census tracts usually have between 2,500 and 8,000 people and are “designed to be homogenous with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions.”¹⁴ A census tract is deemed “hard to count” based on various housing, demographic, and socioeconomic variables that are correlated with nonresponse and undercounting from previous census years.¹⁵ Notable hard-to-count populations are summarized in the textbox at right.

California has the largest and most diverse population of any other state. That fact, along with its geographical size and variation, makes it the most difficult state to accurately count. According to the Census Office, 20 percent of California census tracts are in the hardest-to-count category,

Hard-to-Count Populations

- Immigrants (both documented and undocumented)
- Non-English speakers
- Low-income individuals
- Children younger than 5
- Renters
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Homeless individuals
- Individuals living in nontraditional housing

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

and 66 percent of census tracts are harder to count than the national average. A high percentage of California residents fall within at least one hard-to-count category.¹⁶

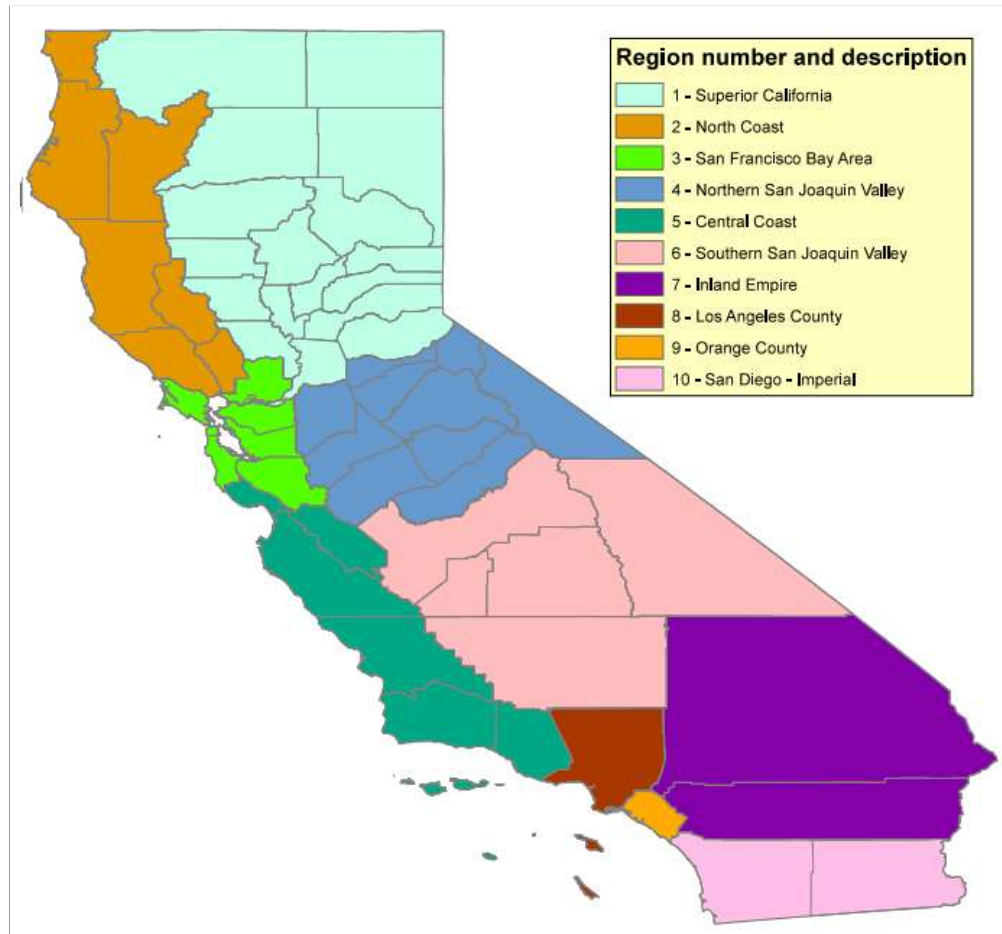
Census 2020 faces additional challenges compared with previous efforts because the census count will be conducted primarily online, which means that households without reliable access to the Internet, such as low-income households or those in rural areas, will find it difficult to respond to the census questionnaire.

In addition, there are concerns about Census 2020's security and integrity. A May 2019 Public Policy Institute of California survey found 63 percent of respondents are concerned about the confidentiality of Census 2020.¹⁷ Further, due to the federal government's well-publicized attempt to add a question about citizenship to the census, immigrant populations may be less inclined to fill out the census questionnaire. A Sierra Health Foundation survey found Latino immigrants were drastically less willing to participate in a census that asked a question about citizenship.¹⁸ Although the U.S. Supreme Court disallowed the question, advocates say the damage has been done by raising distrust and fear—especially in immigrant and mixed-status households—about the 2020 census.

California's Hard-to-Count Characteristics

The California Census Office grouped the state's 58 counties into 10 census regions based on their hard-to-count populations, like-mindedness of the counties, capacity of community-based organizations within the counties, and state census staff workload capabilities. The Census Office also developed a "California hard-to-count index," based on multiple demographic, housing, and socioeconomic variables that correlate with an area being difficult to enumerate. To generally understand the characteristics of each census region that presents potential challenges in obtaining an accurate count, on the following page is a list of the leading hard-to-count characteristics, according to the California Census Office's analysis.¹⁹

California's Census 2020 Regions



Source: California Census Office

- Region 1: Households without a broadband subscription, vacant or seasonal housing, low-income households, nonfamily households.
- Region 2: Individuals that moved recently, households without a broadband subscription, low-income households, nonfamily households, vacant or seasonal housing.
- Region 3: Multiunit structures, nonfamily households, renter-occupied units, foreign-born individuals, individuals that moved recently.
- Region 4: Vacant or seasonal housing, low-income households, households without a broadband subscription, nonfamily households.
- Region 5: Crowded units, nonfamily households, non-high school graduates.
- Region 6: Low-income households, nonfamily households, households without a broadband subscription, non-high school graduates.
- Region 7: Low-income households, vacant or seasonal housing, non-high school graduates.
- Region 8: Crowded units, multiunit structures, non-high school graduates.
- Region 9: Unemployed individuals, vacant or seasonal housing, multiunit structures.
- Region 10: Unemployed individuals, multiunit structures, nonfamily households, renter-occupied units.

In addition to the socioeconomic and housing characteristics that make California’s populations difficult to count accurately, about 17 percent of the state’s population has limited English proficiency, and well over half of the population belongs to a racial or ethnic group other than Caucasian.²⁰ Further, about 27 percent of California residents are foreign-born.²¹

—Sara Noceto, Senate Office of Research

SOURCES

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- ¹ U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIV, § 2.
 - ² U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 Census Operational Plan: A New Design for the 21st Century,” December 2018, p. 5.
 - ³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 - ⁴ *Ibid.*
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 - ⁶ 13 United States Code (U.S.C) § 9, 13 U.S.C § 214.
 - ⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 Census Operational Plan: A New Design for the 21st Century,” December 2018, p. 173-174.
 - ⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 Census Integrated Communications Plan,” June 2017, p. 5–6.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 - ¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 Census Partnership Plan,” March 2019, p. 3.
 - ¹² Executive Order B–49–18.
 - ¹³ California Census Office, Interim Statewide Outreach and Communications Strategy, August 2019, p. 21–28 and p. 52–56.
 - ¹⁴ California Complete Count Committee, “Counting 2010 and Planning for 2020,” June 2012, p. 4.
 - ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 - ¹⁶ California Census Office, “Initial Report to the Governor, Census 2020,” October 2018, p. 3–4.
 - ¹⁷ Joseph Hayes, “Motivating Californians to Fill Out the 2020 Census,” Public Policy Institute of California, July 2019, www.ppic.org/blog/motivating-californians-to-fill-out-the-2020-census.
 - ¹⁸ Edward Kissam et al., “San Joaquin Valley Latino Immigrants: Implications of Survey Findings for Census 2020 – Executive Summary,” Sierra Health Foundation, January 2019, p. 1, www.shfcenter.org/assets/SJVHF/SJVCRP_Survey_Findings_Executive_Summary_011819.pdf.
 - ¹⁹ Analysis of the California Census Office Hard-to-Count Fact Sheets, census.ca.gov/htcfactsheets/.
 - ²⁰ *Ibid.*
 - ²¹ Public Policy Institute of California, “Immigrants in California,” May 2019, www.ppic.org/publication/immigrants-in-california.