DATA AND TECHNOLOGY GROUPS CAN IMPROVE THE 2020 CENSUS COUNT

KATHRYN L.S. PETTIT

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With 2020 decennial census fast approaching, communities around the country need to mobilize to reach the goal of counting every person, only once, and in the right place. There's a great deal at stake for political representation and resources for cities and counties. Everyone has a responsibility to get involved, especially to reach out to groups that have historically been missed in the count.

Organizations with analytic and coding skills can contribute their expertise to help their local planning and outreach efforts succeed. Local data intermediaries, like the members of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), are natural players to join local collaborations. But there are many more that should get involved: civic data and technology volunteer groups like DataKind and Code for America brigades; researchers from colleges and universities; and private-sector data and tech firms. Learn why the decennial census matters to your community, who has been traditionally undercounted, and steps you can take to improve local 2020 census efforts.

WHAT DOES THE 2020 CENSUS MEAN FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

The primary purpose of the decennial census is to get a complete count of the people living in the United States to apportion the number of representatives in Congress for each state; the counts are then used to draw the congressional district boundaries. States and local governments also use the counts to draw legislative districts. If people are not counted, then communities lose out on political representation.

The federal government also uses the decennial census and data derived from it to distribute more than $800 billion through federal programs and grants to states and local communities (Reamer 2018). These programs pay for many services benefiting your neighbors through Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing vouchers, Head Start, and funding for schools with high shares of students from families with low-incomes. This funding for public services could be a top motivator for responding to the Census, but less than half of the respondents in a recent survey knew that the federal government uses the counts to determine community funding (McGeeney et al. 2019).

Decennial census-derived data also determine whether a neighborhood can be included in new programs. For example, states could select only census tracts with a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the area median income for the Opportunity Zone program.

The impact of census counts goes beyond the federal government alone. Cities and counties also need to know how many people there are, and where they live. They use census data to plan for infrastructure, such as whether and where to build a new senior center or a school. Nonprofit organizations also use census counts or other related data to conduct community assessments to ascertain what services are needed. For the private sector, census data and their derivatives are used to market products and make decisions about locations for a grocery store or other retail.

Show what is at stake locally

Local education efforts can help raise awareness of the importance of the census. The Boston Foundation created a report and website explaining how the 2020 Census works and what's at stake for Massachusetts, including $16 billion in funding. They described how local groups are organizing for 2020, including a funders' learning community and grant program to support outreach.

Community Information Now (CI:Now) created a "Financial Impact of the Census" online tool to visualize the amount of federal funding for each Texas county that is driven by the decennial count—and the dollars at risk if the count is incomplete. Users can filter the data by agency and assistance type.

A complete count is also critical to the research community. As the decennial census is the foundation of many other datasets, including the American Community Survey, the quality of many federal statistics on demographic, economic, housing, and social characteristics rests on the accuracy of the 2020 Census.

WHO GETS COUNTED?

The US Census Bureau attempts to count all people either through self-reporting or follow-up telephone or home visits. However, some people are missed, with some groups affected more than others. Historically, the very young, communities of color, renters, and people with low incomes are disproportionately missing from the count.

Young children are the age group most likely to be undercounted. In 2010, 4.6 percent or 2.2 million children under 5 were not counted (O'Hare 2015). This may be because a parent filling out the form doesn't understand that infants need to be included or because the parent has part-time custody and believes the child was included in another household.

People of color have been undercounted since 1940, when the issue around counting every person was discovered. In 2010, the Census Bureau undercounted 2.1 percent of people identifying as black or African American and 1.5 percent of those identifying as Hispanic or Latino. This means 1.5 million blacks and Latinos in communities across the country were not counted. The impact is even greater since the 2010 Census overcounted non-Hispanic whites by 0.8 percent (Davis and Mulligan 2012).

Other groups that are also often missed are renters, people who move frequently or who live

in multifamily housing that is hard to access. College students may also be overlooked, because they live in dorms or group houses or believe that their parents living elsewhere will include them in their census counts.

Finally, people with low incomes are at risk of being missed. More than 29 million people in or near poverty (below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level) live in hard-to-count census tracts, those with lower-than-average self-reporting rates in 2010. This accounts for 50 percent of the U.S. population that lives in hard-to-count areas (Leadership Conference Education Fund et al. 2018).

WHAT ARE THE NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE 2020 CENSUS?

For the first time, the Bureau is accepting—and encouraging—responses through the internet. A very small share of people will receive a paper questionnaire in the first mailing, but most households will receive a letter directing them to a website to fill out the form. Online reporting has many benefits, but also raises new concerns around the digital divide worsening the undercount. Groups that are already more likely to be missed may lack internet access or feel uncomfortable providing their information online. Less than 20 percent of all households lack access to the internet, but the figure is around 40 percent of households with incomes less than $25,000 and those with limited English (Ryan 2018). Older adults in particular may be less comfortable with technology (Anderson and

Perrin 2017). Community efforts will need to pay attention to people with limited access to computers or comfort with online interactions.

The potential addition of a question on citizenship exacerbates the difficulties of outreach for the census. Undocumented immigrants and members of their households may be reluctant to respond. The Census Bureau is legally forbidden from sharing the responses with other government agencies, but some people do not understand or trust how governments will use the information (McGeeney 2019). The addition of the question is still being challenged in the courts, but however it is settled, immigrants will need to be persuaded about the confidentiality of the data and the value to their community of an accurate count.

Census Data Are Confidential

Data collected from the census can only be used to produce statistics. Federal law ensures that the Census Bureau cannot share the individual-level information with law enforcement or immigration agencies or any other government agency.

Finally, the fractured and politicized media environment makes it hard to reach people, and the census count will be happening in the heat of the 2020 presidential election season. The importance of filling out the census could get lost amid the noise.

The historical and new challenges are daunting but demonstrate the critical need for a coordinated community-wide effort that emphasizes the groups most often missed by the census. Local groups are best positioned to select and implement the specific strategies to overcome the barriers and achieve a successful count for their hometown.

HOW CAN TECH AND DATA GROUPS GET CONNECTED?

Any interested data and technology group should first look at the Census Bureau's 2020 website and sign up to be a partner organization to receive updates on new resources and upcoming milestones. Signing up doesn't commit you to a specific level of effort but signals your commitment to be supportive.

As data and tech organizations, you will likely not lead the organizing efforts for the 2020 Census. You should scan for existing local efforts to plug into and start a conversation about how data and technology support could augment their planning and outreach. Many of these local efforts are organized as Complete Count Committees, volunteer committees to increase awareness and motivate residents to respond to the 2020 Census. They act as state and local "census ambassadors" and may be coordinated by local city or county government or by a nongovernmental organization. You can contact your regional census office to ask if there's one for your area. Foundations have also formed state and local funders' collaboratives

that may have websites linking to resources about the census or locally tailored materials. Finally, other actors, such as civic rights groups or the public library system, may be mobilizing efforts consistent with their broader missions.

What should you do if you do not find a locus of activity around the 2020 Census? Contact your mayor's office or local council representative to advocate for them to launch a Complete Count Committee. For academics, ask your Provost's office if the university has begun planning for outreach and publicity for the 2020 Census for itself and the community beyond the campus.

Support Complete Count Committees

In a presentation to the Allegheny County Complete Count Committee, staff from the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center (WPRDC) shared facts about undercounted groups, along with key findings from the Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study that should inform local messaging. WPRDC also developed a local website that combined the US Census Bureau mapping tool, the CUNY Mapping Hard to Count Communities tool, the broadband map, and the CBAMS presentation.

HOW CAN DATA AND TECH ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT THE 2020 CENSUS?

Anyone with data, analytic, and technology skills can lend their know-how to help improve local outreach for the 2020 Census. Different types of organizations bring different assets to the table. Having an effective and coordinated strategy

around outreach is critical since every place has limited resources to reach all the groups at risk of being undercounted.

As one idea, you can help your community analyze what neighborhoods and population groups to prioritize. National online interactive tools are a great start for answering this question, but most governments and organizations planning their outreach could use assistance navigating the tool and teasing out the implications for strategy. The engagement ideally would incorporate guidance and training to improve data literacy more generally, building capacity for communities to access and interpret data for uses beyond the Census outreach planning.

Analysts could also do original research using data on groups that have been traditionally hard to count or on risk factors that may reduce participation, like lack of a computer or the internet at home. National data sources, like the American Community Survey, provide valuable information, but have some limitations given that the American Community Survey census tract data are five-year averages and many national sources have a long lag time in publishing. Incorporating local data will be especially important for neighborhoods with recent social or demographic changes. For example, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance plans to map recent birth records by census tract to identify areas with a growing number of young families. In San Antonio, they are encouraging building awareness in areas with

potentially less civic participation, as indicated by low voter turnout.

Data and tech groups deeply embedded in their communities can be a trusted messenger to key players in public and nonprofit sectors to raise the profile of the 2020 Census and help them see ways to get involved. You know the characteristics of the neighborhoods and the priority issues that will persuade different groups to get involved. Groups can do targeted education, such as presentations to Complete Count Committees or other audiences, about the undercount and why and how everyone should engage in publicity and outreach.

Educate early childhood coalitons

Early childhood advocates and service providers can communicate the importance of the Census to their families and ensure that their young children are counted. CI:Now recently presented these issues to two child-serving networks in the San Antonio area: the cross-sector Ready Children Impact Council, which is convened by the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, and the ReadyKidSA Coalition, which works to create a comprehensive early childhood system that promotes child development and provides parents and caregivers with the resources to better support their families. The CI:Now staff were already trusted collaborators, having previously provided data support to the two groups in the past.

Your contributions can range from small to large. As a light lift, you can publicize the importance of the 2020 Census to your audiences through

newsletters, social media, and blogs and highlight the implications of a complete count for your community. If you have more time to invest, the [Census Solutions Workshop Toolkit](#) provides step-by-step guidance on how to host an event to generate ideas around a specific Census challenge, such as the undercount of young children or Latinx groups.

Those with technology skills can contribute to your community's outreach efforts in many ways. Groups that work on digital literacy, including public libraries, could combine efforts to promote the census with training on using the internet and computer security. If you have experience in user-centered design, you could develop training or guides on how to complete the Census form. Looking at neighborhood-level data, such as shown on the National Digital Inclusion Alliance's [Home Internet Map](#), can point to which areas have people less likely to have access to or familiarity with the internet. Developers can also explore with local organizers if there's a need for online tools or apps. For example, an interactive map to

support census outreach could allow people to enter their location and display the nearest locations of public libraries or other places with community internet access.

The 2020 Census also offers up new opportunities for collaboration between technology groups and other community organizations. The [Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance](#) created a local interactive map on Digital Access Indicators and is completing an ecosystem map of digital inclusion groups in its area to identify potential allies.

THE TIME IS NOW

With just over a year until Census Day on April 1, 2020, there's no time to waste in mobilizing people so everyone is counted in your community. We will live with the results of the census for the next decade, so the cost of getting it wrong is high. By getting involved now, you can play an important role in ensuring that your community gets its fair share of political representation and resources.

RESOURCES

US Census Bureau Partnership (https://www.census.gov/partners/2020.html) Includes Census 101, mapping tools, toolkits on community outreach and workshops, and a way to sign up for updates.

Census Counts (http://www.censuscounts.org): A coalition of eight national organizational hubs for Census 2020 mobilization maintain this website, which assembles materials on why the census is important, the citizenship question, different groups in the hard-to-count population, and other analytic reports.

NNIP: Mobilizing Data-Driven Local Outreach for the 2020 Census (http://www.neighborhoodindicators/2020census) A list of data tools and research reports that can help in targeting outreach and links to 2020 Census materials and activities from the NNIP Partners.

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Kathryn L.S. Pettit is a principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Center at the Urban Institute and the co-director of NNIP.