This is a partial reprint of the National League of Cities’ Municipal Action Guide: Preparing for the 2020 Census. Reprinted with permission.

Even before the U.S. Constitution fully outlines the powers of the three branches of the government, it mandates a decennial count of all persons in the country. In 1970, U.S. Marshalls counted fewer than 4 million people through simple paper tallies during the first census. Today, a diversifying culture, new technologies, and demand for greater efficiencies have pushed the U.S. Census Bureau to innovate and adapt as it prepares to count more than 330 million people in 2020. As a local leader, understanding how your city, town or village will be counted and what you can do now to improve results in 2020 is paramount to the completion of a successful census in your community.

Why the Census Matters to Cities, Towns and Villages

An accurate census helps ensure fair representation at all levels of government. The primary constitutional purpose for the decennial census is to determine how many congressional representatives each state will have for the next decade and to ensure equal representation in the redistricting process. For instance, congressional districts and the boundaries of your city ward are determined by census numbers.

The census directly impacts the funding your city will receive over the next decade. Population counts and statistics derived from both the decennial census and other surveys determine the annual allocation of more than $800 billion in federal investment across states, counties and cities. While many financial assistance programs and block grants, like the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), are distributed to cities based on American Community Survey (ACS) statistics, the benchmark for all ACS data is the decennial census.

The census provides the most reliable and complete data for research, decision making, and planning for both the public and private sectors. Academic institutions, medical facilities, businesses of all sizes, and all levels of government rely on census data to inform their research, decision making and planning. While the decennial census only asks a few basic questions, the population counts and demographic data that it produces serve as a benchmark for most other current statistics that help us gain deeper insights into our communities. Following are just a few of the ways our communities rely on census data:

Governments (Local, State and Federal)

- Demographic composition of a community and constituency
- Education planning
- Procurement and provision of services
- Infrastructure & transportation planning
Allocation of resources and a way to provide financial assistance where needed
Emergency preparedness, disaster relief, and resiliency planning
Characterization of built structures for zoning and permitting processes
Measurement of the success and outcomes of local programs or initiatives

Major Community Stakeholders (Universities, Medical Facilities, Nonprofits, Utilities)
Medical research and planning (public health tracking, vaccinations, disease control, etc.)
Socioeconomic research on communities
Design of educational curricula
Statistics and metrics used in journalism and news reporting

Business Community
Supply chain and logistics management
Determining new markets and where to expand
Forecasting sales and growth projections
Location of retail outlets and logistics facilities
Workforce development

What’s New for the 2020 Census?
The 2020 Census will be the first to offer options for internet and phone responses. In previous modern-day censuses, people could submit their responses by mail using a paper questionnaire or, if they failed to self-report, they could respond in-person to an enumerator. In 2020, the Census Bureau will encourage households to respond through an online portal. This new response method may raise citizen concerns around data privacy and confidentiality. The Census Bureau houses some of the most secure servers within the federal government and is working with the Department of Homeland Security and other federal cybersecurity experts to ensure that its systems are up-to-date with current threats. The 2020 Census will also allow people to provide their responses over the phone for the first time. Learn more about the internet and telephone response options under the “How Can People Respond” section.

There will be a greater reliance on technology to prepare for and execute the count. The census continues to reinvent itself to take advantage of new technologies with each passing decade, but the 2020 Census will feature significant technological advancements that local leaders should be aware of:

• Lead-Up Activities: The Census Bureau has increasingly relied on its partnerships with state and local governments to update its Master Address File (MAF) and ensure that every living quarter in the U.S. is included in the census universe. The Census Bureau has also turned to aerial imaging software from the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency and other agencies to supplant a large portion of costlier “in-field” activities, such as in-person canvassing of every street and road, to finalize the address file. These advancements will limit the presence of census employees in cities prior to the enumeration (or counting) process in 2020.
• Enumeration: In addition to a new online response portal, the Census Bureau is also introducing greater automation into the enumeration process. Census takers will be equipped with smart devices, and all door-to-door visits (called Nonresponse Follow-up, or NRFU) will be conducted digitally instead of with pen and paper as in previous decennial censuses. The electronic devices will allow enumerators to transmit the data they collect in real time, directly to the Census Bureau’s IT systems. Census takers will also receive their daily assignments and report their hours worked electronically, reducing the need for a larger number of local census area offices.

The country is experiencing a period of heightened fear and deliberate misinformation. Most of the changes that will make the 2020 Census different from previous censuses are positive advancements. However, there are unmistakable challenges related to the current heightened climate of fear in many communities, ongoing misinformation campaigns, and database hacking attempts—both domestic and foreign. Trust in government remains at a historic low, which compounds these challenges. Census advocates will spend the next two years preparing to counter misinformation campaigns that are designed to suppress response rates, exacerbate undercounts of certain populations, weaken American democracy and generally disrupt institutional processes. As the level of government most trusted by the public, local leaders can serve as invaluable trusted voices and champions by using both the bully pulpit and city social media channels to instill confidence in the census process and counter false information.


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