
Factsheet: Will Your Kids Count? Young children and their families in the 2020 Census

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 ten years. Moreover, the census is integral to our democracy. The data collected every 10 years 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 more than \$800 billionⁱ 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. 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.

Young children are undercounted in the census at a higher rate than any other age groupⁱⁱ

Young children – defined as children under age five – have been undercounted for decades, disadvantaging their families, communities, and neighborhoods. In the 2010 Census, the net undercount rate for young children was 4.6 percent, and more than 2.2 million in this age group were not included in the census results.ⁱⁱⁱ This is a higher net undercount rate than for any other age group. Even among other children, those under five years old are more likely to be missing from census data.^{iv}

Some young children are especially at risk of being missed

Some groups of young children, depending on their race, ethnicity, or even where they live, have higher-than-average undercounts. Young Black and Hispanic children have the highest net undercounts. Experts estimate that approximately 6.5 percent of young Black and Hispanic children were overlooked by the 2010 Census, roughly twice the rate for young non-Hispanic White children.^v

Young children living in certain geographic areas are at particular risk of being undercounted. For instance, the 2010 Census undercounted children under age five in Arizona by 10 percent, but overcounted them in North Dakota by 2.1 percent. Therefore, a young child in Arizona may not be afforded the same resources as a similar child in North Dakota when census data are used to distribute federal funds. One study found that in the nation's largest counties (those of a half million people or more), the net undercount for young children was nearly 8 percent—almost twice the national rate.^{vi}

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The young child undercount is getting worse

While the census accuracy for adults has been improving over time, the undercount for children under age five has been getting progressively worse. The net undercount rate for young children is more than three times what it was in 1980, increasing from 1.4 percent to 4.6 percent in 2010, representing hundreds of thousands more families.^{vii} Localities with disproportionately high numbers of young children may be at a higher risk of being undercounted than ever before.

Why are young children missed so often in the census?

Millions of young children live in the types of households, families, and neighborhoods that are most difficult to enumerate. That is why special attention is needed to reach these households and make sure they return a completed 2020 Census questionnaire that includes all young children in the household.

- Almost 4.5 million children under age five live in hard-to-count neighborhoods.
- It is widely believed that poor households are difficult to enumerate,^{viii} and young children have a higher poverty rate than any age group.
- Young children in large families may go uncounted because they live in large and complex households. In 2010, nearly a quarter of young children lived in households of six or more people.
- Some young children have complicated living arrangements, moving among various relatives or caregivers. Foster children, children living with grandparents or other relatives, and children whose parents are cohabiting but not married are also more likely to be missed. A recent study found 40 percent of all children under age five lived in a household with complex living arrangements.^{ix} The figures are higher for Black children (50 percent) and Latino children (55 percent). Young children in complex households may be left off the questionnaires because respondents are uncertain of whether or not to include a young child as a household resident.^x
- Language barriers also contribute to the undercount of young children in households where people speak a language other than English. In 2010, one-quarter of young Latino children lived in a linguistically isolated household where adults had difficulty speaking English.^{xi} It is shown that language limitations cause respondents to report in error on the census questionnaire.^{xii}

What does undercounting young children cost communities?

When young children are undercounted, their communities are denied a full voice in policy decisionmaking. Children are included in the population totals used for congressional reapportionment and the drawing of legislative district boundaries. When children are undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately represent reality, and those young children's needs may not be represented or prioritized according to their real share of the population.

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Not only do representatives and state legislators make decisions about programs that serve young children, but, every year, more than \$600 billion in federal funds is allocated to states and localities based on census data. Here are some of the programs whose funding is based in whole or in part on census counts that impact children's lives. (Unless noted, figures are for fiscal year 2015.^{xiii})

- **State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) – \$11 billion.** SCHIP was created in 1997 to reduce the number of uninsured children by providing subsidized insurance to children of the working poor through federal grants to states. SCHIP covers nearly 9 million children.^{xiv}
- **Special Education Grants (IDEA) – \$11.2 billion.** Through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal government provides grants to states to assist them in ensuring a free public education environment that will allow children with disabilities to thrive. Through IDEA, federal funds assist states in providing early intervention services for infants and toddlers (0 – 2) and their families.^{xv}
- **Head Start – \$8.2 billion.** The Head Start program provides grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies to provide child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families, with a special focus on helping preschoolers develop the early reading and math skills they need to be successful in school.
- **Foster Care – \$4.6 billion.** The Federal Foster Care Program helps to provide safe and stable out-of-home care for children until they are safely returned home, permanently placed with adoptive families, or placed in other planned arrangements for permanency.
- **Child Care and Development Fund – \$3.3 billion.** The Child Care and Development Fund assists low-income families, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care so they can work or receive training and education.

Children in lower-income families can also benefit from resources that provide financial security for their families and economic development for their communities based on census-derived data:

- **Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments Program – \$9.2 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.
- **SNAP – \$69.4 billion.** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (previously known as food stamps) is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among families in the U.S. More than 45 million low-income families rely on federally funded SNAP subsidies that are administered to them through state governments. Nearly 70 percent of SNAP beneficiaries are members of families with children.^{xvi}
- **Medicaid – \$311.9 billion.** Medicaid is a federal-state insurance program that provides health coverage to low-income families and individuals, including children, parents,

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seniors, and people with disabilities. More than two-fifths of Medicaid enrollees are children.^{xvii}

You can help – right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of young children in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or 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 young children.** The Census Bureau needs a major annual 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 young children at risk of being severely undercounted. Without 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.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the undercount of young children in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Complete Count Committees that will be established in many states and localities. It is important that Complete Count Committees include voices for children to remind leaders and local census staff of this critical constituency. These committees work with the Census Bureau and local communities to help ensure a complete census. As a reference, the 2010 Complete Count Committee guide can be found at <https://www.census.gov/2010census/partners/pdf/cccGuide.pdf>.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner.** Partners get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional material.

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Randi Carmen Schmidt, Executive Director of the Children’s Leadership Council, at rschmidt@childrensleadershipcouncil.org.

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Additional Reading

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O'Hare, W.P., Mayol-Garcia, Y., Wildsmith, E., and Torres, A., (2016) The Invisible Ones: How Latino Children Are Left Out of Our Nation's Census Count, Child Trends Hispanic Institute & National Association of Latino Elected Officials, Child Trends, Washington DC. Available online at <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Webinar-FINAL.pdf>.

O'Hare, W.P. (2016). Who Lives in Hard-to-Count Neighborhoods? *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp 43-55. Available online at <http://redfame.com/journal/index.php/ijsss/article/view/1441>.

O'Hare, W.P. (2016). What Do We know About the Presence of Young Children in Administrative Records, Proceedings of the Federal Conference on Statistical Methodology. Available online at https://s3.amazonaws.com/sitesusa/wp-content/uploads/sites/242/2016/03/G1_OHare_2015FCSM.pdf.

O'Hare, W.P. (2016). "Honey, I lost the kids: The undercount of young children in the US Decennial Census," *Significance*, Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, February <https://www.statslife.org.uk/social-sciences/2647-honey-i-lost-the-kids>.

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U.S. Census Bureau (2012b). *2010 Census Coverage Measurement Estimation Report: Summary of Estimates of Coverage for Persons in the United States*, DSSD 2010 Census Coverage Measurement Memorandum Series. Available online at https://www.census.gov/coverage_measurement/pdfs/g01.pdf.

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- ⁱ 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>.
- ⁱⁱ O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, Page 29
- ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau (2016). U.S. Census Bureau (2016b) *Investigating the 2010 Undercount of Young Children—A New Look at 2010 Census Omissions by Age*, July 26, 2016.
- ^{iv} O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, Page 30
- ^v O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, Table 3.2, Page 34.
- ^{vi} O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, Table 5.8, page 67
- ^{vii} O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, figure 4.1, page 42
- ^{viii} Fernandez, Shatuck and Noon (2016) Presentation at the Southern Demographic Association Conference, October 2016
- ^{ix} Jensen, E. (2017) Presentation at the Children’s Leadership Council – Census Bureau meeting, April 13, 2017, Washington DC.
- ^x O’Hare, W.P. (2015) *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Census*, Springer Publishers, Page 95
- ^{xi} U.S. Census Bureau (2017). *Investigating the 2010 Undercount of Young Children – A Comparison of Demographic, Housing, and Household Characteristics of Children by Age*, January 18, 2017.
- ^{xii} U.S. Census Bureau (2017). *Investigating the 2010 Undercount of Young Children – A Comparison of Demographic, Housing, and Household Characteristics of Children by Age*, January 18, 2017.
- ^{xiii} Based on an analysis by Andrew Reamer and Sean Moulton, updating figures from the 2010 Brookings Institute report *Counting for Dollars*
- ^{xiv} <https://www.medicaid.gov/chip/chip-program-information.html>
- ^{xv} <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/osep/index.html?exp=1>
- ^{xvi} <http://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>
- ^{xvii} <http://www.cbpp.org/research/health/policy-basics-introduction-to-medicaid>

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