

Why the U.S. census tries to count everyone

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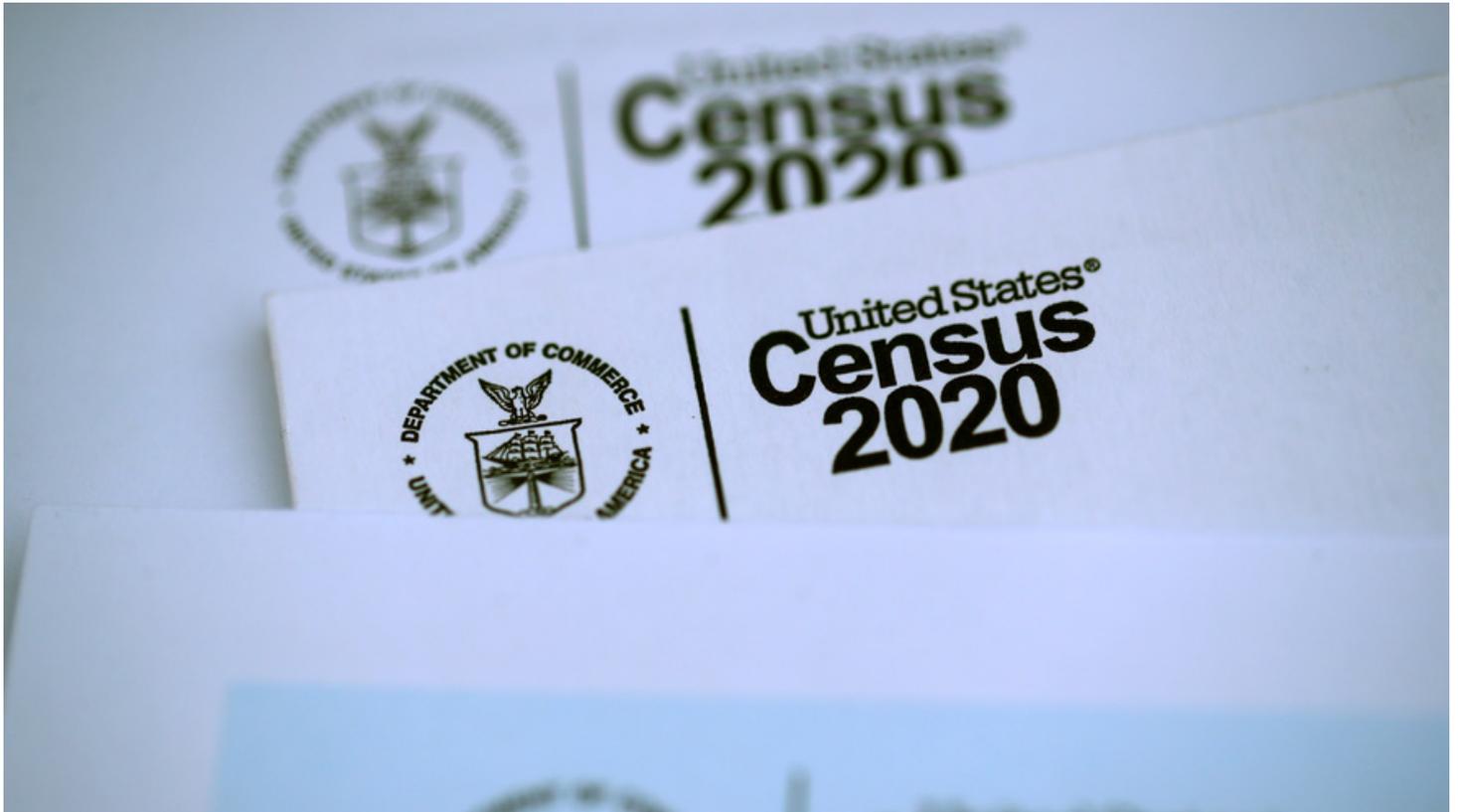


Image 1. The U.S. Census logo on paper gotten in the mail with an invitation to fill out census information online on March 19, 2020, in San Anselmo, California. Photo Illustration: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

It's time to stand up and be counted, America.

Around March 23, a letter should have arrived where you live. The letter asks the adult in charge to complete a form called the 2020 Census. The census (pronounced SEN-suss) is a once-every-10-years tally of everyone living in the United States. It asks who lives in a household, how they are related, their age, race and other information.

Many Federal Programs Rely On Census Data

This is a huge task. It's important that everyone be counted because the federal government uses that information to determine how many seats in Congress each state should have. If a state loses population, it might lose a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. If its population is growing, it might gain a seat. The House and the Senate are the country's two law-making bodies. Each state only gets two senators regardless of how big or small it is. However, the state is given seats in the House of Representatives based on how many people live in each state.

Equally important, census numbers help decide how to divide up money from the government. More than \$675 billion in government money is shared each year. Those funds help states and communities build roads, schools, hospitals and fire departments. More than 100 government programs also rely on the census. The programs use the census to direct money to where the need is greatest.

Among the programs are Head Start and food assistance for low-income people. Head Start is a program for children from birth to 5 years old. It focuses on getting kids ready for school through early learning and other support.

The First Census

The 2020 census marks the 24th national people count, which the U.S. Constitution requires to be held every 10 years. The first census, in 1790, was early in the presidency of George Washington. About 650 men set out on foot or horseback to count everyone living in their assigned areas.

Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson both thought the final number was low. That first census counted nearly 3.9 million people. Quarrels and questions have come with just about every census since then.

After all, it isn't easy getting a snapshot of the entire country for a single day. Census Day has been April 1 since 1930. The U.S. population grows by one person every 23 seconds. The growth is because of births in the nation and arrivals from other countries.

Taking The Census Has Been Simplified

Some people are more difficult to count. People living in rural areas, the homeless and children who split their time between two homes present challenges to getting an accurate count. The U.S. Census Bureau says that about 1 million kids younger than age 5 were not counted in 2010. That was the highest number for any age group.

Officials have tried to simplify the 2020 count. For the first time, responses can be made online, as well as by phone and mail. To help people who speak little or no English, officials have prepared guides in 60 languages. Braille is offered for people who are blind.

Each head of household, even someone living alone, must fill out a census form. Otherwise, they can face a fine. There are no questions about whether someone is an American citizen. This has eased the concerns of some who said asking about citizenship would reduce the response rate of immigrants. They feared it would result in less funding for their communities.

The Census Bureau is required by law to protect people's private information. No one will be identified by name when officials study the numbers collected by the census.

However, for anyone tempted not to respond, keep this in mind. The people who are census takers are like a dog looking for that tasty bone he buried. They don't give up easily. Ignore their letter, and more will follow because they really want everyone to be counted.



Quiz

- 1 What effect does the census have on Congress?
- (A) It decides whether states gain or lose seats in the House of Representatives, but has no effect on the Senate.
 - (B) It decides whether states gain or lose seats in the Senate, but has no effect on the House of Representatives.
 - (C) It decides if Congress gets more money to pay the people who work as senators and representatives.
 - (D) It decides if Congress will let senators or representatives ask people whether they are American citizens.
- 2 According to the section "Taking The Census Has Been Simplified," how do census officials make sure everyone completes the census?
- (A) They travel on foot to visit the homes of everyone living in 650 different assigned areas.
 - (B) They study the names and private information of people who skipped the census in the past.
 - (C) They let people fill out the census online and by mail or phone, and they write letters until they do.
 - (D) They visit people who live in rural areas, the homeless and children who split time between two homes.

- 3 Read the following selection from the section "Many Federal Programs Rely On Census Data."

Head Start is a program for children from birth to 5 years old. It focuses on getting kids ready for school through early learning and other support.

How does this support the author's argument that census data is important for directing money to where it is needed?

- (A) It describes the way government uses census data to divide up money for programs.
 - (B) It explains one place where census takers can go to collect the data they need.
 - (C) It describes a program that can only benefit from an accurate census count.
 - (D) It explains how one program for children was created as a result of the census count.
- 4 Read the following selections from sections "The First Census" and "Taking The Census Has Been Simplified."
1. *The U.S. population grows by one person every 23 seconds. The growth is because of births in the nation and arrivals from other countries.*
 2. *The people who are census takers are like a dog looking for that tasty bone he buried. They don't give up easily.*

Which ideas do these selections support?

- (A) Selection 1 supports the idea that it can be hard to get an exact count for the census, and selection 2 supports the idea that census takers work hard to get the best count.
- (B) Selection 1 supports the idea that people are sometimes worried about completing the census, and selection 2 supports the idea that people's privacy is protected.
- (C) Selection 1 supports the idea that the population is growing very quickly, and selection 2 supports the idea that counting all the country's children is most important.
- (D) Selection 1 supports the idea that people living in some areas of the country are more difficult to count, and selection 2 supports the idea that officials have made it easier.