

2020 census: What it means for your community

By William Gloster

While the primary purpose of the United States census concerns the apportionment of seats allocated to the states for the House of Representatives, results also determine how an estimated \$675 billion in federal funds are appropriated to local communities annually. These types of funds include grants, loans, insurance programs and direct payments to households.

How might the 2020 census affect Arkansas and its municipalities? The Arkansas State Data Center estimates that the state receives between \$6-7 billion each year based on census parameters. This money supports state programs such as community development, education, housing, highways, Medicaid and SNAP. Inaccurate results and low participation in the census could influence decreases in funding for several of these programs—a \$750 million total decline for a mere one-percent undercount of population. With vast rural areas having little to no internet coverage and high poverty rates, Arkansas is susceptible to undercounting.

Perhaps the most evident effect that the 2020 census will have on The Natural State is the redistricting of voting and school zones. Arkansas has experienced an outflux of population from its rural areas, while it has seen a major influx of residents living in the central, northwest and northeast regions of the state. Congressional voting districts will be redrawn to accommodate these migration patterns, essentially allocating more legislative power to citizens that reside in urban areas such as Little Rock, Fayetteville and Jonesboro.

As a local community leader preparing for the 2020 census, there are a few significant points to keep in mind:

Census Day is Wednesday, April 1, 2020

Households in Arkansas will be invited to respond to the census questionnaire by April 1, 2020. Citizens are mandated to provide information about their age, living arrangements, name, race, relationship to head of household, and sex. Individuals may respond at their own convenience—online, over the phone or via postal services. People who do not submit responses by census day may receive household visits from Census Bureau employees in the following summer months. Finalized reports of population headcounts will reach the president in December 2020, and results will become available for state and public use in early 2021.

Census responses are entirely confidential

The American population grows increasingly wary of how the government utilizes census data. Distrust of the federal government to handle such information has led to diminishing response rates in government surveys; however, it is important to note that census submissions are *entirely* confidential. No law enforcement agency, not even the president of the United States, can access an individual's specific responses. A "72-Year Rule" requires that personally identifiable information be kept private for 72 years; after this period, it may be released to the public. Additionally, Census Bureau employees swear an oath to protect the confidentiality of citizens' answers. Noncompliance could result in a five-year prison term with fines amounting to a quarter of a million dollars.

Accuracy and participation are crucial

Accuracy and complete participation in the U.S. census are paramount for the efficient allocation of votes and federal funds across the state. An imprecise population headcount may lead to decreases in financial aid for many communities in Arkansas. The higher the population headcount, the more funding our communities will receive.

The U.S. census remains a pivotal tool in American politics. The survey is conducted once every 10 years. Therefore, it is undoubtedly important for Arkansans to participate in April. By providing an accurate display of the country's demographic makeup, citizens can ensure their communities receive an appropriate share of legislative power and federal assistance.

In your community, it is imperative to share the facts and significance of the census. As a trusted leader, you are uniquely positioned to help improve the census count. To learn more about the census and how you can ensure your community is represented, visit www.census.gov.



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