

Renters Count in the 2020 Decennial Census

Why the Decennial Census is Important

The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years, and the decennial census seeks to count every person in every household. An integral part of our nation's democracy, census data affects the ability of our government to ensure equal representation and equal access to important federal and private sector resources for all Americans. Census data is used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local governing boards; to target at least \$800 billion annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investments, and much more.

“Hard-to-count” population groups are at higher risk of not being fully counted in the decennial census. While some groups have been underrepresented for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in census methodology: Using the Internet as the primary point of contact for the 2020 Census, or a reluctance to respond given concerns about data confidentiality. An undercount of the hard-to-count populations can lead to unequal political representation as well as unequal access to vital public and private resources for the people in greatest need.

Renters and transitory occupants are at risk of being undercounted

More than one third of U.S. households are renters, a number that has ballooned since the start of the Great Recession in 2008, and is greater than at any point in the past 50 years.

Hard-to-count characteristics of renters and transitory occupants

- **Transitory Status:** Since renters move more frequently than homeowners, it more likely that the Census Bureau will not have a current address for important mailings.
- **Poverty:** Nearly 30 percent of renters today live below the poverty line and are at higher risk of eviction, which could result in undercounting due to invalid addresses.
- **Race and Ethnicity:** People of color, especially Black and Hispanic households, are about twice as likely to be renters as White households. Renters of color have significantly lower median incomes, which increases the chance of eviction and undercounting.
- **Education:** Populations with lower levels of educational attainment are harder to count, and more renters tend to fall into this category compared to the U.S. average.
- **Type of Housing:** Multiunit buildings are a factor in making an area hard-to-count, and renters tend to live in multiunit buildings.

Transitory occupants - people whose “usual home” at the time of the census is transitory or mobile - are also at heightened risk of being undercounted. They tend to live in hard-to-reach locales (e.g., hotels, motels, marinas, racetracks, circuses, carnivals, camp grounds, and RV parks). Since the Census Bureau will not visit every locale, it will conduct a special “transitory enumeration” that relies on assistance from local officials and community advocates to identify temporary transitory locations, such as motels, that now house families displaced by economic distress.

Consequences of undercounting renters and transitory populations

An undercount of renters and transitory occupants will result in renters and their communities being denied a full voice in policy decision-making because political boundaries and congressional reapportionments most likely will not be based on real numbers. As a result, this hard-to-count community stands to lose important representation guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Undercounting renters in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that provide financial security for low-income families and economic development for their communities are funded based, primarily, on census-driven data, including:

- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program - \$19.1 billion**
- **Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) - \$7 billion**
- **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance (LIEHAP) - \$3.4 billion**

You can help - right now

Stakeholders (advocates, funders, and civic leaders} can improve the count of renters and transitory occupants in the 2020 Census by joining or supporting work on policy development, community organizing, and the “Get Out the Count” campaign for the 2020 Census:

- **Show members of Congress why they need to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census and accurately count all renters and transitory occupants.** Several years prior to a decennial census, the Census Bureau needs a major annual funding ramp up to perform critical tests and build out a massive program infrastructure. Due to financial constraints, important activities crucial to ensure a fair and accurate census have been postponed or canceled, putting renters and transitory occupants at risk of a severe undercount.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** [The Census Project](#) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. [The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#) also publishes many helpful resources.
- **Educate state and local leaders about the challenges renters and transitory occupants face in the census.** Advocates can join Complete Count Committees to help ensure a complete census and include voices from the renter and transitory occupant community.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner to help ensure the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** This important program is at risk due to budget shortfalls. Partners (organizations, associations, institution, etc.) get timely updates and promotional material from the Census Bureau.

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Andrew Aurand, Vice President for Research of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, at AAurand@nlhc.org or Chris Harley, Census Counts Campaign Director, at harley@censucounts.org.