

Coronavirus Outbreak

Census Deadline Forces Creativity in Hunt for the Most Elusive

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Census outreach interrupted by pandemic, tribal closures
Undercounts would threaten state funding, political power

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Reaching some residents of states like Arizona and New Mexico was going to be tough for Census takers under the best circumstances.

People live in vast rural areas without traditional addresses. Many lack reliable phone service and internet connectivity. Some don't read or write English.

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With federal funding for programs like Medicaid, and seats in Congress for the next decade, dependent on accurate counts, officials in areas with routinely low response rates are rushing to boost participation. The Navajo Nation has joined a federal lawsuit seeking a deadline extension to give Census workers enough time to reach every home on the reservation, with a hearing scheduled for Sept. 17.

"We are doing everything in our power right now to get people counted," Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said, adding, "There's not enough time."

The Navajo Nation, where the self-response rate is only 19.5%, is encouraging people to complete the survey at upcoming events to distribute Covid-19 care packages. In states with hard-to-count populations, like Georgia, organizers are trying internet installations and virtual dance parties to reach people of color, rural populations, non-native English speakers, and foreign-born people who are historically left out.

"The quality of the data will determine which communities get resources and which get political representation," said Emily Klancher Merchant, assistant professor of science and technology studies at the University of California, Davis, who has a background in historical demography.

complete and accurate count on time,” it said.

‘Enormous Workload’

In New Mexico, nearly one-fifth of households receive hand-delivered invitations to complete the Census—compared with just 5% nationwide, said state demographer Robert Rhatigan, director of geospatial and population studies at the University of New Mexico.

The Census Bureau delayed dropping invitations on doorsteps nationwide because of the coronavirus. The bureau also delayed sending enumerators to interview every household that didn’t initially complete the questionnaire. That leaves Census workers with more homes to visit and less time to do it than in 2010, Rhatigan said. And New Mexico was one of the last states where in-person counting resumed, he said.

“That is an enormous workload using a temporary workforce and you have the added reluctance of people to open the door in the midst of a pandemic,” Rhatigan said.

At the Jicarilla Apache Nation, located in the mountains of New Mexico near the Colorado border, people will be counted only through in-person interviews after Covid-19 interrupted invitation delivery, according to the Census Bureau.

Census takers in the area covering the Navajo Nation have completed just over half their workload interviewing households. The bureau has had difficulty filling positions on the Navajo Nation because of virus restrictions, said Alec Esteban Thomson, executive director of the Arizona Complete Count Committee.

The isolated Havasupai Reservation, surrounded by the Grand Canyon, has a self-response rate of zero. The Census Bureau is working with tribes to determine how to reach them while protecting public health, Thomson said.

Panic Mode

While the lawsuit aims to force a deadline extension, state and local leaders aren't counting on it, relying more on making a final push for residents to respond themselves and speed up the count.

Counties with low self-response rates in Alabama, last in the country for the total percentage of households counted as of Monday, are competing for most improved in the bracket-style "Census Bowl" for up to \$65,000 for their public schools.

In Georgia, in the bottom five states for total response rate, some residents are wary of giving out their information online or over the phone and instead rely on an in-person visit from a Census worker to be counted, said Rebecca DeHart, CEO of Fair Count, which was started by former gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams to reach hard-to-count populations.

Organizers are telling people in areas where in-person counting is lagging not to wait. Fair Count has installed internet access at places like barbershops, churches, and migrant farm worker health clinics so people can more easily complete the survey, DeHart said.

Some cities and counties are turning to mobile ads that target the lowest-performing Census tracts and connect people to a call center in their preferred language. A one-week test in Atlanta showed the city increased its count for about \$19 a person—a good return on investment for governments that receive several thousand dollars per person in federal spending, said Roger Alan Stone, president of Advocacy Data that provides the service.

"They're in a panic to boost response," Stone said.

In Arizona, the local Census committee has gotten "a lot more direct" with its media push than when the count began, Thomson said. The state is targeting rural, Hispanic, and tribal residents with radio and text campaigns in the final weeks, he said.

New Mexico's \$11.5 million Census outreach effort has turned to reaching people in their homes and wherever they will see reminders during the pandemic, said Pam Coleman, director of the State Personnel Office and chair of the state's Complete Count Commission. That means ads at a drive-in movie theater and text message and social media campaigns.

"We're just trying to get as much juice out of the squeeze as possible," Coleman said.

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