

# Does Everyone Count?

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*An examination of the history, implications and impact of the national census.*

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Illustration by Tristan Bedell

**“Shape your future!”, “Don’t leave it blank!”, “Everyone Counts!”**

**Y**ou have probably heard these slogans before in connection to the census, statements meant to inspire and motivate individuals to participate in an act of civic engagement that only occurs once every decade.

For some, the census is yet another government-mandated chore. For others, who may have never seen a census form, it’s a mystery. So what is the census? And what happens if you “leave it blank”?

With controversy over a citizenship question, low participation rates and several risk issues, many are saying the 2020 census is “doomed to be inaccurate.”

This is no small concern.

Though one might use census information for a research project or presentation, the census is used for more than just counting the population. It affects every level of government, even your own neighborhood.

It's used for city planning, designing highways, economic insights — even product development — and works in tandem with the [American Community Survey](#) to provide monetary support to programs that totaled more than \$675 billion in 2015.

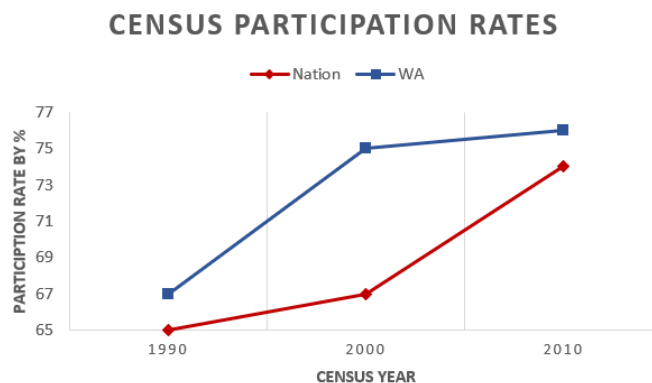
These funds were allocated to [121 state and federal programs](#), including foster care, crime victim assistance, wildlife restoration, school lunches and even the Pell Grant, which provides aid for college students.

In addition to these programs, the census determines how many seats each state holds in the House of Representatives. Results from the last census gave Washington state another representative.

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“A lot of people are surprised by the impact of it,” said [Opportunity Council](#) employee and census advocate Summer Starr. “It seems like, ‘Oh, they’re just doing another bureaucratic process,’ but it’s one that really affects us.”

Yet for something so important, participation is an issue the Census Bureau encounters every decade. The census is meant to provide an accurate count of every individual in the United States, but in 2010 only 74% of mail forms were returned. For every incomplete form, the government spent about [\\$57 to send out an enumerator](#), who collects information for the census in-person.



A comparison of census participation rates made from data obtained by the U.S. [Census Bureau](#).

The Bureau estimates that 21.8% of households will not respond to the 2020 census online and will receive a paper questionnaire in the event that an online form isn't filled. Additionally, those who do not respond by mail, phone or online form will be visited up to six times by enumerators.

Washington state has a history of higher participation than nationwide

rates, but when the only way to have an accurate account is to get everyone involved, there's always room for improvement.

"I personally know as a citizen that every person counts," census worker Pam Galloway said.

She served as an enumerator in the last census and worked to recruit part-time workers for the 2020 census in Thurston and Mason counties.

**"If your town is listed as a population of 30,000 and it's really 40,000, that's 10,000 people that [your] county or city needs to provide services for, but there's nothing to justify it," Galloway said.**

Unfortunately, the U.S. Government Accountability Office labeled this census a "high risk," noting 97 recommendations for the Census Bureau in 2019. Of these recommendations, 67 have been met and only seven of 15 priority recommendations have been implemented.

What remains are key details like management improvements, resolving testing issues and filling vacant positions. Since the census will have an online form option for the first time, cybersecurity weaknesses are also a concern.

By April 1, every home will have received an invitation to participate in the census. With the deadline approaching fast, it's likely the Bureau won't be able to meet every recommendation.

What's more, the 2020 census could see even less participation after the Department of Commerce announced it would be adding a citizenship question on March 26, 2018. By July 16, 2019, Judge Jesse Furman of the Federal District Court officially blocked the question from being asked in any manner on the census. However, the motivations behind the move are questionable.

The DOC claimed the citizenship question would help determine violations of the Voting Rights Act, but United States District Judge George Hazel stated in a memorandum that evidence pointed to discriminatory motivations. He argued it suggested an advantageous move for the Republican Party because it could reduce the political power of Hispanics. It wasn't until 1970 that there was even an attempt to count Hispanics in the census.

The issue struck a nerve not only in undocumented residents but U.S. citizens, too.

"The damage from the fear created has continued on," Starr said. "There's concern over the government's use of the information."

**So why is a tool that benefits communities also a means to exploit them?**

The deluge of problems surrounding this year's census presents an opportunity to recall its troubled past.

One of the Census Bureau's most egregious errors was the use of

One of the Census Bureau's most egregious errors was the use of confidential census information to wrongfully imprison people of Japanese descent in the name of "military urgency" during World War II. Names and addresses, paired with citizenship status and racial information, allowed them to track and place more than 120,000 individuals in internment camps. Former census directors called it "one of the most glaring and heinous examples of the Census Bureau's violation of the public trust" in their 2019 brief on the citizenship question.

The brief draws attention to the Bureau's treatment of Muslim populations following 9/11. At the request of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Bureau released ZIP codes of predominantly Muslim communities and listed their countries of origin.



Former Bureau directors claimed this led to less participation in the 2010 census and stated that, in the wake of these events, immigrants and people of color had good reason to be suspicious of the citizenship question.

"There are no easy answers to those concerns," Starr said.

Despite its promise to maintain confidentiality, the Bureau has broken that promise on several occasions. Alongside these incidents is a history of bias in the way demographic data is gathered.

Before writing "When Women Didn't Count," a book on the continued distortion of women's history in federal statistics, Robert Lopresti was a government information librarian at Western Washington University for 31 years.

"As I was nearing the end of my career, I was looking for some sort of big project I could leave behind," Lopresti said. "I remembered something I had seen in the volume of the 1920 census."

**Peculiar occupations for women.**—In case a woman is returned as following an occupation which is very peculiar or unusual for a woman, examine the schedule carefully to determine whether an error may have been made in the return, either of the sex or of the occupation. It is unusual for a woman to follow any of these occupations:

Auctioneer	Forester	Molder (any metal)
Baggageman	Freight agent	Motorman
Blacksmith	Furnace man	Pilot
Boatman	Garbage man or scavenger	Plasterer
Bollermaker	Gas or steam fitter	Plumber
Boiler washer	Heater	Pressman, printing
Boothblack	Hostler	Puddler
Brakeman	Inspector, mine or quarry	Raftsmen
Brickmason	Inspector, street railroad	Railroad official
Butcher	Ladler or pourer (metal)	Railway mail clerk
Butler	Laborer, coalyard	Roofer
Cabinetmaker	Laborer, lumberyard	Sailor
Captain	Laborer, pipe line	Sawyer
Conductor	Laborer, road or street	Slater
Cooper	Locomotive engineer	Smelter man
Coppersmith	Locomotive fireman	Soldier
Craneman	Loom fixer	Stevedore
Deck hand	Lumberman	Stonecutter
Ditcher	Machinist	Stonemason
Electrician	Manager, mine or quarry	Street cleaner
Engineer (any)	Marine	Structural iron worker
Engine hostler	Marshal	Switchman, railroad
Express messenger	Master	Teamster
Fireman (any)	Mate	Tinsmith
Flagman, railroad	Mechanic	Tool maker
Foreman, lumber camp	Millwright	Woodchopper
Foreman, mine or quarry	Miner	
Foreman (any construction industry)		

The [Alphabetical Index of Occupations and Industries](#) contains a list of "peculiar" occupations for women in the 1940s.

It was a section titled "Peculiar Occupations for Women" in a [population report](#). The report instructed officials to evaluate whether women made errors in listing their occupations — simply because they were "unusual." The list includes carpenters, millers, machinists, telegraph linemen and a handful of other titles.

By 1940, the updated version of this report, known as the "[Alphabetical Index of Occupations and Industries](#)," grew to include engineering, blacksmithing, management

positions and marine work. When a woman listed her occupation as one of these flagged positions, it was thought she might have made an error or that a man had listed his sex incorrectly.

"There was incredible bias in terms of what women could do," Lopresti said.

More recent criticisms of the census include its treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals. In 1990, any couple that identified their partner as same-sex would have their sex changed to fit a hetero-normative perspective.

"It's the cheapest sex-change operation in history," Lopresti said.

Additionally, individuals identifying a same-sex spouse had their forms corrected to "unmarried partner" from 2000 to 2010.

And as cultural norms progress, the census still falls behind. In 2017, over 75 members of Congress requested the inclusion of questions about gender identity and sexual orientation on the American Community Survey.

**3. How is this person related to Person 1? Mark  ONE box.**

<input type="checkbox"/> Opposite-sex husband/wife/spouse	<input type="checkbox"/> Father or mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Opposite-sex unmarried partner	<input type="checkbox"/> Grandchild
<input type="checkbox"/> Same-sex husband/wife/spouse	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent-in-law
<input type="checkbox"/> Same-sex unmarried partner	<input type="checkbox"/> Son-in-law or daughter-in-law
<input type="checkbox"/> Biological son or daughter	<input type="checkbox"/> Other relative
<input type="checkbox"/> Adopted son or daughter	<input type="checkbox"/> Roommate or housemate
<input type="checkbox"/> Stepson or stepdaughter	<input type="checkbox"/> Foster child
<input type="checkbox"/> Brother or sister	<input type="checkbox"/> Other nonrelative

The 2020 census will allow individuals to mark a same-sex spouse for the first time. Obtained from the 2020 census sample questionnaire.

The director at the time, John Thompson, claimed the Bureau worked to determine whether they had a legislative mandate to collect the data and concluded they had "[no federal need to change the planned census and ACS subjects.](#)"

If the census is used to provide funding to those who need it most, how many support programs for LGBTQ+ individuals are automatically

many support programs for LGBTQ+ individuals are automatically dismissed as a result of this decision?

Without a count of who might use those services, it's an easy way to push the needs of an estimated 4.5% of the nation under the rug.

The census is merely a reflection of the times.

While it often falls behind, it is evolving to include new, important changes in the way it collects information. For the first time, individuals will be able to identify a same-sex spouse on the 2020 census — a much bigger step than the unmarried partner box added to the census in 1990, which only allowed same-sex couples to identify themselves unofficially.

Part of Galloway's job has been to recruit individuals to work in their own neighborhoods that speak languages other than English, indicating the Bureau is considering how it could effectively reach every demographic.

Still, one of the Bureau's most challenging aspects of counting the nation is reaching communities labeled "hard to count." This typically includes young children, minorities, people living in rural areas, low-income households and nomadic populations. These groups make up at least 790,000 people in Washington state alone.

Anyone living in a group quarters situation — like college dorms — can expect an enumerator to visit them in person during April. Basic

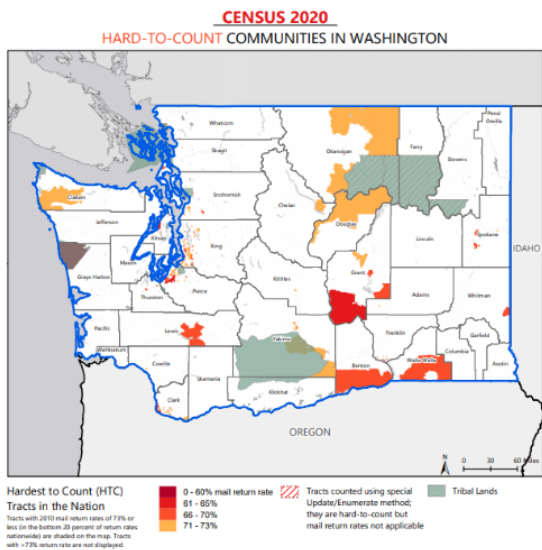
questions such as name, sex, race and birth date will be asked, in addition to whether they have an alternate address.

Students living off-campus should fill out the census either online or by paper with their roommates present to mitigate repetitive information or potential errors.

Old or young, student or not, participating in the census is an easy way to make tangible change. While the census bears the scars of a damaging history, it plays a significant role in supporting the nation.

"This is a way your information can be used to impact your community," Starr said.

"We have to ask ourselves: 'What is the impact of not participating?'"



A map of Hard to Count (HTC) population locations in Washington state, obtained from the [2020 Census Hard to Count](#).



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