

## People Experiencing Homelessness Count in 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.

### People experiencing homelessness are at risk of being undercounted

About 3.5 million people experience homelessness annually in the U.S. The term “homeless” is very narrowly defined, and does not include individuals temporarily living with family or friends. People experiencing homelessness have been undercounted in the decennial census for decades.

### Hard-to-count characteristics of people experiencing homelessness

- **Transitory Status:** The Census Bureau will reach out to many households by mail. Since people experiencing homelessness move more frequently, it is likely the Census Bureau will not have correct addresses for them.
- **Hard-to-Reach Locales:** People experiencing homelessness can be hard to locate through census methods given where they live: emergency shelters; transitional housing programs or safe havens; unsheltered locations; on the street; in a car; or in an abandoned building. Also, local ordinances that prohibit begging or sleeping in public force people experiencing homelessness into less conspicuous locations.
- **Internet Access:** People experiencing homelessness are far less likely to have Internet access than the general population. The Census Bureau plans to promote an Internet response form as the primary way for households to respond to Census 2020.
- **Age:** About 22 percent of people experiencing homelessness are children, and young children are typically very hard to count.

### Consequences of undercounting people experiencing homelessness

An undercount of people experiencing homelessness will result in their 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 people experiencing homelessness in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Many programs that impact people experiencing homelessness are funded based, primarily, on census-driven data, including:

- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies - \$13.9 billion**
- **Head Start Program - \$8.3 billion**

- Child Care and Development Fund - \$2.9 billion
- Runaway and Homeless Youth Program - \$114 million
- McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program - \$65 million
- SNAP - \$69.5 billion
- Health Care for the Homeless Program - \$366 million
- Medicaid - \$312 billion
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) - \$6.3 billion
- Child Nutrition Program - \$19.2 billion
- McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Funds for Permanent Supportive Housing, Transitional Housing, and Safe Havens - \$2.1 billion
- Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program - \$19.1 billion

#### You can help - right now

Stakeholders (advocates, funders, and civic leaders} can improve the count of people experiencing homelessness 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 people experiencing homelessness.** 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 people who experience homelessness 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 people experiencing homelessness face in the census.** Advocates can join Complete Count Committees to help ensure a complete census and include voices from people experiencing homelessness.
- **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@nlihc.org](mailto:AAurand@nlihc.org) or Chris Harley, Census Counts Campaign Director, at [harley@censucounts.org](mailto:harley@censucounts.org).*