

What is the census, and why is it important?



The census, conducted once every 10 years, is the constitutionally-required count of every person living in the United States. It's a huge and complex endeavor, one with an enormous impact on all our communities. The 2020 Census will be the first to urge most households to respond online, but people will also have the option of responding by phone or paper questionnaire.

The decennial census form asks questions about all the people who live and sleep in a household most of the time—including babies and anyone who has no other permanent place to stay and is staying in the household—as of April 1, 2020. The census form should take about 10 minutes to complete, depending on the number of people in the household.

Census data are used to make decisions about how and where to spend more than \$800 billion each year for programs and services that communities rely on.¹ Census data also drive federal funding allocations for libraries, including grants to states under the Library Services and Technology Act. The census population count is used to determine representation in Congress (known as reapportionment) and the Electoral College. Simply put, communities that are undercounted are disadvantaged economically and politically.

Communities also use census data for planning purposes. For example, local school districts may not be able to plan effectively for changing needs if large numbers of young children are not counted, as has been the case in previous censuses. Census data help local leaders make planning decisions about where libraries should be located, whether they should expand, and what kinds of services should be offered based on the characteristics of the community.

We only have one shot every 10 years to get the census right. If we don't, undercounted groups won't get the appropriate level of funding for programs needed in their neighborhoods, and local leaders and officials won't have the reliable information they need to make decisions.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to help ensure that communities across the country are accurately counted. Our institutions are trusted and welcoming hubs of public life, and librarians are respected members of their communities. We can play an important role in outreach to groups often missed by the census—like people experiencing homelessness, young people and children, people of color, people with low incomes, recent immigrants, and those who live in rural or remote areas. Libraries are great places for people to fill out the census form online—especially those who lack internet access at home or on their phones—and get accurate information about the census.

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2020 Census: The basics

The United States Constitution requires a count every 10 years of every person who is residing in the U.S., regardless of immigration status or citizenship. The Census Bureau's goal for the 2020 Census is to "count everyone once, only once, and in the right place." Here are the basic steps in the process:

STEP 1 Update the address list

The Census Bureau maintains a list of every housing unit in the United States. A housing unit is a house, apartment, condominium, trailer, or other place where people might live. The Census Bureau started updating its list for the 2020 Census in 2015, adding new houses and apartment buildings that have been built and removing houses and apartment buildings that were demolished or converted to non-residential uses since the 2010 Census.

STEP 2 Solicit responses

Beginning March 12, 2020, the Census Bureau will mail census materials to 95% of homes. (To understand how the other 5% of households are counted, see the later section about rural and remote areas.) Eighty percent (80%) of those homes will receive a letter inviting them to respond to the census online using a unique code. The other 20% (where internet access may be limited) will receive the same letter plus a paper questionnaire. All households also will receive information about how to answer the census by telephone. April 1 is Census Day, although most households will receive their materials before then and may respond prior to that date.

STEP 3 Collect responses

Respondents will submit one census form listing everyone who lives in their household. Respondents may complete the questionnaire for their household online, by using a paper questionnaire, or by phone (by calling Census Questionnaire Assistance, which will be available from mid-January to early September 2020). Some households without traditional mailing addresses will be counted by Census Bureau employees in person.

STEP 4 Follow up

Households will receive several reminder letters from the Census Bureau if they do not self-respond. The final mailed reminder will include a paper questionnaire. If a household does not complete the questionnaire after receiving mailed reminders, beginning in May 2020 they may receive a phone call or an in-person visit from a Census Bureau employee. Households can continue to self-respond online, using a paper questionnaire, or by phone during the follow up period.

STEP 5 Analyze and disseminate

The Census Bureau will release population totals and other publicly-available data beginning in early 2021.

United States®
**Census
2020**

The 2020 Census logo
will be on all official
communications.

How will the **online response option** work?

Almost all households will receive an invitation letter in the mail with instructions for responding to the census online. The invitation will include a unique identification code called a Census ID or User ID.

Using the Census ID helps the Bureau keep track of responses and prevent duplication.

However, the Census ID is not required in order to respond online or by telephone. If respondents don't have their Census ID handy, they can use their address instead.

The online questionnaire will be available in 13 languages (Arabic, Chinese [Simplified], English, French, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese). If respondents have questions about the online form, they can contact Census Questionnaire Assistance for support in the same 13 languages. Respondents can also complete the questionnaire over the phone when they call.



If respondents don't have their Census ID handy, they can use their address instead.

Will all households receive census materials through the mail? **What about people who don't live in a household?**

Some households will not receive census materials through the mail. And people living in group facilities, or whose home is transitory, are counted through different methods. The additional census methods and operations are described below. Anyone who is not sure how they will be counted will be able to call Census Questionnaire Assistance for more information.

Group Quarters (e.g., College Dorms, Military Bases, Prisons)

The Census Bureau uses a different method to count people in group living situations, called "group quarters," such as college student housing, prisons, military barracks, and nursing homes. In some of those cases, the facility administrator will work with local 2020 Census office staff to collect the information for the people residing there; those individuals will not respond directly to the Census Bureau.

Remote and Rural Areas

Some rural and all remote areas, such as those without reliable mail delivery or traditional mailing addresses, as well as communities recovering from natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding, will not receive a mailed invitation from the Census Bureau. Instead, census workers will hand-deliver materials as they update the address list, or count households in person as they go door-to-door.

- For more information, see: [Counting Rural America: A Guide to 2020 Census Operations.](#)²
- To find out how your community will be counted, see the [2020 Type of Enumeration Area Viewer.](#)³

People Experiencing Homelessness

The Census Bureau will count people experiencing homelessness (and who are not part of a household) at the places where they receive services, such as shelters and soup kitchens. (This operation is called Service-Based Enumeration.) The Census Bureau will also conduct a count of people sleeping outdoors. In addition, the Bureau will count people staying in transitory locations such as motels, campgrounds, and migrant farm-worker camps, through the Enumeration of Transitory Locations operation. However, people who are staying in the home of a friend or family member as of Census Day should be counted on the questionnaire for that household if the person does not have a usual home elsewhere.

→ For more information, see: [Counting People Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide to 2020 Census Operations](#).⁴

Timeline of Key Census Activities

January 2020	Census Questionnaire Assistance will be available to answer general questions about the census from mid-January through early September 2020. However, the self-response period for the telephone option will run from mid-March through the end of July.
February 2020	The Census Bureau will contact administrators of group quarters (military barracks, college dorms, prisons, and skilled nursing homes, among others) in advance of the enumeration of these locations, which will occur in April.
March 12, 2020	The internet self-response period will start as households begin to receive invitations to respond, either through the mail or hand-delivered to households in many rural and remote areas. Households may continue to self-respond through July 31.
March 30, 2020	Service-Based Enumeration (SBE) will begin. This three-day/night enumeration occurs at shelters, locations that provide services for people experiencing homelessness, and targeted outdoor locations where people experiencing homelessness sleep.
April 1, 2020	Census Day! Respondents do not have to wait until April 1 to respond but should include everyone who will be a “usual resident” on April 1. If people aren’t sure, they can wait until April 1 to respond.
April 2020	Group quarters will be counted during April.
May 13, 2020	Nonresponse Follow-up (NRFU) will begin. During NRFU, the Census Bureau will follow up with households that did not self-respond to the census by sending reminders and/or visiting in person. NRFU will continue through July. (In communities with large numbers of off-campus college students, NRFU will begin on April 9, to reach students before the academic term ends.)

→ For more information, see: this [detailed timeline of census milestones](#).⁵

What is new and different about the 2020 Census?

Online Self-Response

For the first time, the Census Bureau will promote online response as the preferred method.⁶ The Census Bureau’s mailing will include an ID code for the householder (that is, the person responding for each household) to enter when they respond online in order to identify their address. However, if respondents don’t have an ID code, they can enter their home address instead.⁷

For many people, the online response option will make it easier and more convenient to respond. However, other people may prefer not to respond online, such as those with limited internet proficiency or who lack reliable internet access. If people have trouble with the online system or don’t want to respond online, they can call Census Questionnaire Assistance for help or to respond by phone, also using the same unique ID number or giving their home address in the absence of one.

Household Relationship Question

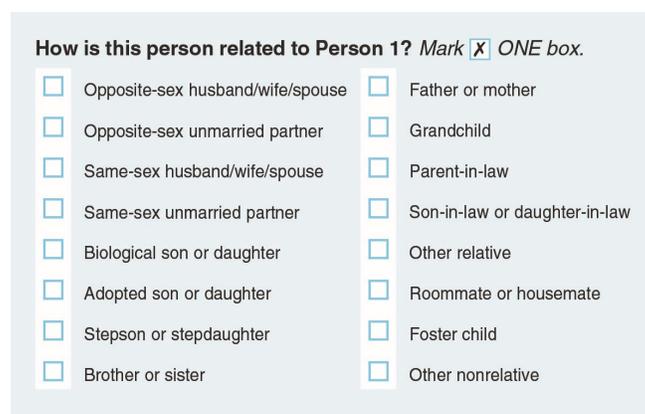
For the first time, the 2020 Census offers a way for the person filling out the form to indicate a same-sex relationship with another household member.⁸ This change (see Figure 1) is expected to improve national statistics on same-sex couples.

Citizenship Question

The Secretary of Commerce directed the Census Bureau in March 2018 to include a citizenship question on the 2020 Census (see Figure 2). However, three federal district courts ruled against the inclusion of the question in early 2019 in court cases challenging the legality and constitutionality of adding it.⁹ The government has appealed those decisions to the U.S. Supreme Court, which is expected to issue a ruling in June 2019.¹⁰ Until the Supreme Court rules, it is uncertain whether or not a citizenship question will be included in the 2020 Census.

Advocates, including ALA, have expressed concern about the addition of the question to the 2020 Census.¹¹ “Adding a citizenship question to the 2020 Census would suppress Census response, distorting the statistics and making them less informative,” said ALA President Loida Garcia-Febo in August 2018. ALA also joined other national organizations in an amicus brief to the Supreme Court opposing the additional question.¹²

Whether or not the question is ultimately included in the 2020 Census, it is important to know that Title 13 of the U.S. Code protects the confidentiality of personally

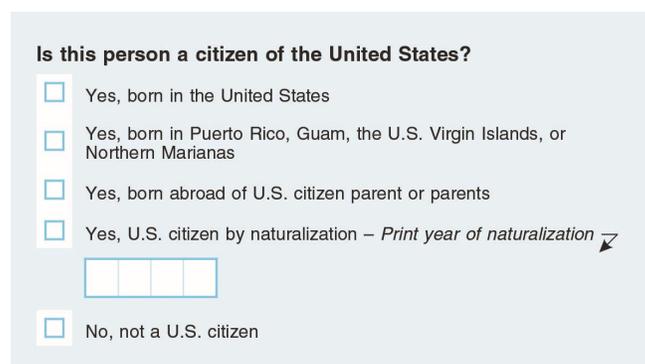


How is this person related to Person 1? Mark ONE box.

<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

Figure 1. The 2020 Census Will Ask About Same-Sex Relationships

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU



Is this person a citizen of the United States?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in the United States
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born abroad of U.S. citizen parent or parents
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization – Print year of naturalization <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> No, not a U.S. citizen

Figure 2. The 2020 Census Might Ask about Citizenship

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

identifiable information collected on the census, including any information about citizenship status.¹³ The law prohibits the Census Bureau from sharing personal census responses with any other government agency (at any level), court of law (including administrative courts), or private entity, for any purpose, including law enforcement.¹⁴ As an added protection, individuals' personal census information may not be used to harm them or their families in any way.

Who is at risk of being undercounted in 2020?

Historically, certain groups of people have been undercounted disproportionately by the decennial census. These groups are considered hard-to-count because the Census Bureau finds them challenging to interview, locate, contact, or persuade.¹⁵ Traditionally undercounted populations include young children, American Indians and Alaska Natives, people experiencing homelessness, and people of color, among others.¹⁶ The undercounting of these groups can undermine their political power and reduce access to crucial public and private resources in the communities where they live.¹⁷

Young Children

Young children (ages 0–5) are considered hard-to-count. In particular, young Black and Hispanic children were overlooked at roughly twice the rate as young, non-Hispanic White children in the 2010 Census.¹⁸ Young children are undercounted, in part, because millions of them live in the types of households, families, and neighborhoods that are the most difficult to enumerate. Additionally, families are often unsure whether to include young children on their census forms.¹⁹ Special attention is needed to reach these households and make sure they report all children, including babies, on their 2020 Census questionnaire.

Children are included in the population totals used for congressional reapportionment and the drawing of legislative district boundaries. When children are undercounted, political boundaries do not accurately reflect the entire population, and young children's needs may not be appropriately represented or prioritized. Every year, more than \$800 billion in federal funds are allocated to states and localities based on census data. Many programs whose funding is based in whole or in part on census counts directly impact young children's lives, including Head Start, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

→ For more information, see this [fact sheet on the young child undercount](#).²⁰

Other Hard-to-Count Groups

The Census Bureau recognizes a variety of groups as hard to count:

- + Complex households, including those with blended families, multi-generations or non-relatives
- + Cultural and linguistic minorities, and people who do not speak English fluently
- + Displaced people affected by a disaster
- + People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning
- + People with low incomes



99% of hard-to-count census tracts have a public library located within five miles.²¹

- + People experiencing homelessness
- + People less likely to use the internet and others without internet access
- + People who have distrust in the government
- + People with disabilities
- + People without a high school diploma
- + Racial and ethnic minorities
- + Renters
- + People who are undocumented immigrants or recent immigrants
- + Young children
- + Young, mobile people²²



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For more information on hard-to-count groups, see the following fact sheets:

- + **Will Your Kids Count? Young Children and Their Families in the 2020 Census**²³
- + **Latinos in the 2020 Census**²⁴
- + **Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPs) in the 2020 Census**²⁵
- + **African Americans in the 2020 Census**²⁶
- + **American Indians and Alaska Natives**²⁷
- + **Middle Eastern and North African Americans (MENA) in the 2020 Census**²⁸
- + **People Experiencing Homelessness in the 2020 Census**²⁹
- + **Households with Low Incomes in the 2020 Census**³⁰
- + **Renters in the 2020 Census**³¹

Census Bureau Efforts to Count Hard-To-Count Communities

The Census Form

- + The online 2020 Census questionnaire will be available in 13 languages (Arabic, Chinese [Simplified], English, French, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese).³²
- + Census Questionnaire Assistance will be available in the same languages, as well as Cantonese and Mandarin. People will also be able to use their Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) when calling.
- + Paper questionnaires will be available in English and bilingual English-Spanish only. (The exception is in Puerto Rico, where there will be Spanish-only forms.)
- + The 2020 Census form will allow people to self-identify their race and ethnicity through a combination of checkboxes with specific nationalities and write-in spaces to report any other national origins or subgroups.³³
- + For the first time, the 2020 Census will enable a head of household to report a same-sex relationship with another household member.³⁴
- + Instructions will encourage respondents to include all children in their household on the census form.³⁵



**The online
2020 Census
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13 languages.**

Support and Outreach Strategies

- + The Census Bureau will provide guides to completing the census in 59 non-English languages, including American Sign Language, in video and/or print. Guides will also be available in Braille and large print.³⁶
- + The Census Bureau plans to recruit employees who are familiar with the neighborhoods they will be assigned to count and who reflect the diversity of those communities.³⁷
- + The bureau will work with community partners (such as libraries) who are “trusted voices,” to increase census awareness and participation.³⁸
- + The bureau will open Area Census Offices across the country, based largely on where hard-to-count communities are located.³⁹



The Census Bureau plans to recruit employees who are familiar with the neighborhoods they will be assigned to count and who reflect the diversity of those communities.

Frequently Asked Questions

When does the 2020 Census start?

The enumeration starts in remote Alaska on January 21, 2020, but most households will receive their census materials by U.S. mail or hand-delivery starting in mid-March. The online and telephone response options will be available starting on March 12, 2020.

How long does it take to fill out the form?

The Census Bureau estimates that it will take about 10 minutes to complete the census questionnaire, depending on the number of people in the household.

Do people have to respond online?

No, households have the option to respond to the census questionnaire in one of three ways: online, by telephone, or using a paper questionnaire.

In what languages will the online form be available?

The online form will be available in English and 12 non-English languages: Arabic, Chinese [Simplified], French, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

In what languages will the paper form be available?

The paper form will be available in English and bilingual English-Spanish. Spanish-only forms will be available in Puerto Rico.

In what languages will telephone assistance be available?

Census Questionnaire Assistance will be available in English and the same 12 non-English languages referenced above, with Mandarin and Cantonese. People will also be able to use their Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) when calling.

What if I need some other language?

The Census Bureau will provide language guides in 59 non-English languages:

Albanian	Burmese	Gujurati	Indonesia	Navajo	Slovak		
American Sign Language	Chinese Creole	Greek	Italian	Nepali	Somali		
Amharic	Croatian	Haitian	Japanese	Polish	Spanish		Turkish
Arabic	Czech	Hebrew	Khmer	Portuguese	Swahili		Twi
Armenian	Dutch	Hindi	Korean	Punjabi	Tagalog		Ukrainian
Bengali	Farsi	Hmong	Lao	Romanian	Tamil		Urdu
Bosnian	French	Hungarian	Lithuanian	Russian	Telugu		Vietnamese
Bulgarian	German	Igbo	Malayalam	Serbian	Thai	Yiddish	
		Ilocano	Marathi	Sinhala	Tigrinya	Yoruba	

The language guides cannot be used to respond to the census, but can help respondents fill out the actual form in English.

In what ways will responding to the census be accessible?

Language guides will be available in American Sign Language, Braille, and large print. Census Questionnaire Assistance will also be available to callers using a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD).

Can people respond on a smartphone or tablet?

Yes, the online form will be optimized to allow people to respond on a smartphone or tablet.

Can people respond if they have misplaced or never received the unique ID mailed or hand-delivered to their address?

Yes, people can respond online or by telephone using an option called Non-ID Response, which allows them to complete their census forms without the unique ID, as long as they provide a valid home address.

Is the online system secure?

Yes, the Census Bureau has taken significant steps to protect online responses. All information entered online is encrypted as soon as the respondent hits “submit.”

Will there be a problem if multiple people respond online from the same location or IP address?

The Census Bureau will only restrict IP addresses as a security precaution. For example, they may block an IP address if its activity appears to pose a security threat. They are anticipating and planning for multiple responses from computers in places like libraries, or generated through other outreach activities, such as block parties.

Can census responses be shared with law enforcement or other government agencies?

No, Title 13 of the U.S. Code protects the confidentiality of personally identifiable information provided in census responses, including citizenship status. Federal law prohibits the Census Bureau from sharing personally identifiable information with other government agencies. Census staff take a lifetime oath to protect census responses, with severe penalties for violations. The law prohibits personally identifiable information collected by the Census Bureau from being used against respondents by any government agency or court.



What should people do if they have a question or problem?

People can call Census Questionnaire Assistance toll-free for answers to questions or to provide their household responses by phone. The phone number will be available in early 2020.

What happens if a person misses a question?

The Census Bureau strongly encourages respondents to answer every question for every person in the household, but will allow submission of incomplete questionnaires. Bureau staff may follow up on incomplete submissions.

How do I identify an official census worker in person or over the phone?

Census workers must present an ID badge that includes their photo, the U.S. Department of Commerce watermark, and an expiration date. For more information, see these additional [tips from the Census Bureau for identifying census workers](#).⁴⁸ To verify, people can also contact Census Questionnaire Assistance, enter the name into the [Census Bureau Staff Search](#),⁴⁹ or contact the [Regional Office](#)⁵⁰ for their state.