
Will You Count? American Indians and Alaska Natives in the 2020 Census

Why is the census important?

The decennial census is the most inclusive civic activity in our country, covering every person in every household. The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years. Moreover, the census is integral to our democracy. The data collected affects our nation's ability to ensure equal representation and equal access to important governmental and private sector resources for all Americans, including across racial and ethnic lines. Census results are used to allocate seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local boards; to target more than \$800 billion¹ annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families; and to guide community decision-making affecting schools, housing, health care services, business investment, and much more. These functions depend on a fair and accurate census.

Unfortunately, certain population groups – referred to as “hard-to-count” – are at a higher risk of not being fully counted in the census. Some of these groups have been historically underrepresented in the census for decades; some may experience new or increased vulnerability due to major changes in methodology, such as relying on the internet as the primary way for households to respond to the 2020 Census; and some may be reluctant to respond due to concerns about data confidentiality.² Being hard-to-count can lead to unequal political representation and unequal access to vital public and private resources for these groups and their communities.

Native households are at risk of being undercounted.

As of 2016, there were approximately 5.6 million Native people (alone or in combination) in the United States, which is about 2 percent of the total population.³ By 2060, it is projected that there will be 10.2 million Native peoples in the United States.⁴ Currently, the state with the largest Native population share is Alaska, with Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Montana rounding out the top five.⁵ American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIAN or Native peoples) have been undercounted for decades⁶ and roughly one quarter (26 percent) of Natives currently live in hard-to-count Census tracts.⁷

What are the hard-to-count characteristics of the Native community?

Native peoples typically share certain characteristics that compound their risk of being undercounted, including:

- **Poverty:** Households in poverty are traditionally very hard to count.⁸ While the national poverty rate in the United States is 13 percent⁹, almost one-fourth (23 percent) of the Native community faces poverty.¹⁰ On federal Indian reservations, 36 percent of Native individuals were in poverty.¹¹
- **Educational Attainment:** Areas with lower educational attainment are also hard to count,¹² and Native peoples tend to have lower educational attainment compared to the U.S. average. About 83 percent of Native peoples have a high school degree or higher and 19 percent have a BA or higher, compared to national averages of 88 percent and 31 percent, respectively.¹³
- **Housing Insecurity:** Close to half of American Indians and Alaska Natives are renters (48 percent).¹⁴ In addition, around 42,000 to 85,000 natives were doubling up with others in 2013-2015.¹⁵ Living in transitory housing increases the likelihood that the Census Bureau won't have the correct addresses for Native peoples.¹⁶
- **Age:** Young children are traditionally very hard to count,¹⁷ and the Native median age is lower than that of the average U.S. population by more than five years.¹⁸ For Native people on

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reservations, the median age is nine years lower than the U.S. average.¹⁹ Young people of color are especially hard to count.²⁰

What are the consequences of undercounting the Native community?

When the tribal community is undercounted, political boundaries may not accurately represent reality. Undercounting results in Native peoples being denied a full voice in policy decision-making. As a result, their community's different needs may not be represented or prioritized according to their real share of the population. In particular, Native reservations are considered "communities of interest" in many states' redistricting policies, meaning it may be especially important to keep intact when redistricting.²¹

Undercounting Native peoples in the 2020 Census could also impact how federal funding is allocated to states and localities. Today, there are 326 reservations and 567 tribes recognized by the federal government, each with distinctive health, housing, education, and financial needs.²² Many programs that impact the Native community are funded based in whole or in part on census-derived data, including:²³

Care, Education, and Employment

- **Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies – \$13.9 billion.** Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or percentages of low-income children.²⁴ In school year 2014-15, Title I served more than 24 million children.²⁵ About 90 percent of Native students attend Title I public schools.²⁶
- **Head Start Program – \$8.3 billion.** This program provides grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies to provide child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families, with a special focus on helping preschoolers develop the early reading and math skills they need to be successful in school.²⁷ Approximately 10 percent of Native children and pregnant women²⁸ participated in Head Start or Early Head Start during the 2015-16 school year.²⁹
- **Native American Employment and Training – \$58.4 million.**³⁰ This program provides Native peoples with employment training and skills, as well as support for daycare and transportation services to enable Native peoples to thrive in the workplace.³¹ The program also provides funding for mentoring, community service, leadership development, and other activities that help young people achieve academic and employment success. There were 313 grant recipients through this program in Native communities in 2015.³²

Healthcare and Nutrition

- **Indian Health Service (IHS) – \$4.8 billion.**³³ The IHS provides access to comprehensive and culturally acceptable healthcare to Natives, a critical program that fulfills the federal treaty and trust obligations to tribal people.³⁴ The IHS provides services to 2.2 million Natives nationwide³⁵ and uses census data for planning and implementation of programs.³⁶
- **Medicaid – \$312 billion.** Medicaid is a federal-state insurance program that provides health coverage to low-income families and individuals, children, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities.³⁷ In 2016, 43 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives were enrolled in Medicaid or some other public insurance program.³⁸ Medicaid also provides critical supplemental revenue for the chronically under-funded IHS.³⁹
- **Urban Indian Health Program (UIHP) – \$40.7 million.**⁴⁰ This program reaches Native peoples who are not able to access the hospitals, health care centers, or contract health services managed by the IHS and tribal health programs.⁴¹ UIHP programs provide medical care, dental care,

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alcohol and drug abuse counseling, AIDS treatment and prevention, and nutritional counseling. Approximately 25 percent of Native peoples live in urban areas located in counties served by these programs.⁴²

- **SNAP – \$69.5 billion.** SNAP is the most important tool to prevent hunger and malnutrition among families in the United States. More than 40 million low-income families rely on federally-funded SNAP subsidies that are administered to them through state governments.⁴³ More than one-fourth (26 percent) of Native households nationally and 32 percent on reservations received SNAP benefits in 2015.⁴⁴
- **Special Programs for the Aging Title VI, Part A – \$26 million.**⁴⁵ This program provides grants to tribal organizations who deliver home and community-based supportive services to Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian elders.⁴⁶ In 2015, about 8 percent of the Native population was 65 or older.⁴⁷

Housing

- **The Indian Housing Block Grant – \$650 million.**⁴⁸ The Native American Housing Assistance and Self Determination Act of 1996 created two programs, the Indian Housing Block Grant and the Title VI Loan Guarantee Program, which allow tribes to use future grants as leverage for obtaining loans.⁴⁹ The block grant program, which is based almost entirely on census data, served, helped build, or rehabilitated 4,687 units in 2014.⁵⁰
- **Indian Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) – \$70 million.**⁵¹ The Indian CDBG assists low-to-moderate income tribal communities in improving housing, community resources, and economic development on reservations.⁵²
- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program – \$19.1 billion.** Section 8 vouchers are the nation’s leading source of housing assistance for low-income seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, helping approximately 2 million households to secure affordable rental housing in the private market.⁵³

You can help – right now.

There are many ways in which stakeholders, including advocates, funders, and civic leaders, can improve the count of Native households in the 2020 Census. There are opportunities to join or support work on policy development, community organizing, and “Get Out the Count” campaigns for the 2020 Census. Here are some ideas:

- **Help your members of Congress understand why it’s important to support adequate resources for the Census Bureau to conduct the 2020 Census in a way that will count all in Native communities.** The Census Bureau needs a major annual funding ramp up several years before a decennial census to perform critical tests and build out a massive infrastructure. Already – due to funding constraints – important activities needed for a fair and accurate 2020 Census have been postponed or canceled, putting the Native community at risk of being severely undercounted. Most recently, the Census Bureau cancelled planned field tests on two Indian reservations due to uncertainty about funding levels,⁵⁴ thereby eliminating critical testing of methods intended to counteract the undercount of Native peoples in the 2020 Census. Without a sufficient increase in the Census Bureau’s budget, a complete count will be in jeopardy, and census costs could increase by billions of dollars.
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org/>) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress

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and the administration. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights also publishes many helpful resources at <https://civilrights.org/census/>. In addition, the Census Bureau released a report in September 2017⁵⁵ describing its extensive consultations with tribal communities in the years prior. Tribal officials, planners, and community leaders can review the recommendations within the report and push for implementation of needed strategies and approaches for the 2020 Census.

- **Educate state, tribal, and local leaders about the challenges the Native community faces in the census.** As the 2020 Census approaches, advocates can join Tribal Complete Count Committees that will be established among many tribes to help ensure a complete census.⁵⁶ Native peoples living off-reservation or tribal lands may also join Complete Count Committees in states and localities. Complete Count Committees should include Native community voices to remind leaders and local census staff of this critical constituency.
- **Become a Census Bureau partner and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** Budget shortfalls are also putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional material.⁵⁷ Tribal government departments and agencies, such as enrollment offices, IHS clinics and hospitals, senior centers, housing authorities, casinos and others can play a role as partners in the 2020 Census.
- **Learn about and participate in the Census Bureau’s AIAN Program.**⁵⁸ The Census Bureau will use a Tribal Governments Liaison Program in 2020 to educate tribal members, provide a trusted voice on the importance of the census, and offer training related to the 2020 Census. The appointment of tribal liaisons by tribal governments is essential to the success of this program.

If you would like to learn more about these or other ways you and your organization can be involved, contact Amber Ebarb, Budget/Policy Analyst and PRC Program Manager of the National Congress of American Indians, at amber_ebarb@NCAI.org or Chris Harley, Census Counts Campaign Director, at harley@censuscounts.org.

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² Goldvale, Casey and Indi Dutta-Gupta. “Counting Everyone in the Digital Age.” Leadership Conference Education Fund and Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017. Available at http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LCEF_2020_Census_Poll_Report-Final-002.pdf.

³ “QuickFacts: United States.” U.S. Census Bureau, 1 July 2016. Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>; “Table B02010: American Indian and Alaska Native Alone or in Combination with One or More Other Races: 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.” U.S. Census Bureau, Retrieved 4 January 2018. Available at https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_1YR_B02010&prodType=table.

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⁶ Brownrigg, Leslie and Manuel de la Puente. “Sociocultural Behaviors Correlated with Census Undercount.” Paper prepared for presentation in Special Session 2 15 to the American Sociological Association, 22 August 2003. Available at <https://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/lab92-03.pdf>.

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¹² “HTC 2020.” CUNY Mapping Service at the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center, 2017. Available at

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¹⁴ “Table S0201.” U.S. Census Bureau, Retrieved 2017.

¹⁵ Pindus, Nancy et al. “Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas: A Report From the Assessment of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Housing Needs,” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, January 2017. Available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/HNAIHousingNeeds.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Factsheet: Will You Count? Renters in the 2020 Census.” The Leadership Conference Education Fund and Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2018.

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