

Counting Rural America

A GUIDE TO 2020 CENSUS OPERATIONS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The 2020 Census self-response operation will begin on March 16 and continue through mid-July of 2020. The Bureau will encourage households to respond online, but people also can provide their responses by phone or paper questionnaire.
- For areas without reliable mail delivery, without traditional mailing addresses, or with high seasonal vacancy rates, census takers will hand-deliver 2020 Census materials during the **Update Leave** operation. They also will verify (update) addresses. This operation will take place from March 16 through mid-April of 2020.
- Census workers will count some remote rural areas in-person during the **Update Enumerate** operation from January through mid-July of 2020.
- All households also will have the option of responding to the census over the phone.

As the 2020 Census approaches, operations are underway to ensure that it meets its overarching goal: “to count everyone once, only once and in the right place.”¹ Households will have the option to respond online, using a paper questionnaire, or over the phone. Most households will be sent a letter in the mail with instructions for responding to the census online or by phone. Some of these households also will receive a paper questionnaire in this initial mailing. All households that do not respond will receive a reminder letter and a paper questionnaire. These contact strategies will be based on what the Census Bureau believes will be the most effective approach for enumerating each community or neighborhood.

Remote areas, and places without traditional mailing addresses, with high seasonal vacancies, or recovering from natural disasters, will be counted using special operations. These operations involve census-takers visiting the households to drop paper questionnaires (along with instructions for responding online) or enumerate the residents in person. The online questionnaires and telephone assistance will be available in 12 languages other than English. However,

paper questionnaires will be available only in English and Spanish.² All households will have the option of responding over the phone.³

Internet Response Contact Strategies

The Census Bureau is promoting online response to the 2020 Census as the preferred method. To encourage online response, the Census Bureau will employ two contact strategies as part of the **Internet Self-Response Operation**:⁴

- **Internet First:** Households that are considered likely to respond online will receive an invitation letter in the mail prompting them to go online and answer the questionnaire with a unique ID code or call a toll-free line for assistance. If needed, households will receive up to four follow-up reminders, including a paper self-response questionnaire.⁵
- **Internet Choice:** Households in areas with limited internet connectivity or use will receive the paper questionnaire in their first mailing. The mailing also will include instructions for how to respond online, and the toll-free number for questionnaire assistance. These households also will receive multiple reminders in the mail, if needed.⁶

The **Internet Self-Response Operation** will begin on **March 16, 2020**.⁷

Special Operations for Remote Rural Areas

Before mailing census materials to households, the Census Bureau must complete an **Address Canvassing** operation to create a comprehensive, accurate list of all housing units. In past censuses, the Address Canvassing operation involved Census Bureau employees verifying and updating the address list in person for every area in the country (**In-Field Address Canvassing**).⁸ For the 2020 Census, the bureau will rely in part on satellite imagery, commercial data, and records from other government agencies to update the address list (**In-Office Address Canvassing**). In-Field Address Canvassing will be used only for areas that cannot be canvassed

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effectively in-office, such as those experiencing significant growth or change.⁹

However, some households in very remote or rural geographies lack traditional mailing addresses or primarily receive mail at post office boxes. In some cases, residences are hidden from the main road.¹⁰ Such homes are at risk of being missed. For example, research suggests that low-visibility housing, such as garages, barns, campers, and trailers, contributed significantly to the undercount of Mexican immigrants in the 2010 Census.¹¹

Two operations focus on such residences: **Update Leave** and **Update Enumerate**. In these operations, census employees conduct the address canvassing to update the address list at the same time that they either drop off paper questionnaires (and instructions for responding online) or enumerate households in person.

- **Update Leave (UL):** During this operation, census staff will drop off self-response materials, including paper questionnaires and directions on how to respond online or on the phone, during the In-Field Address Canvassing operation. UL will happen in

areas where the majority of housing units do not have mail physically delivered or their mail delivery information is not verifiable (about 10 million homes, or 7 percent of the nation’s total).¹²

- **Update Enumerate (UE):** Instead of leaving self-response materials, bureau staff will visit households in some areas and conduct the survey in person while simultaneously updating the address list.¹³ Remote Alaska will be counted first, beginning January of 2020.¹⁴ Other areas that were part of UE in 2010 (like northern parts of Maine) and tribal areas that request to be enumerated in person are likely to be included in UE. Overall, the Census Bureau estimates that UE will reach 500,000 housing units.¹⁵

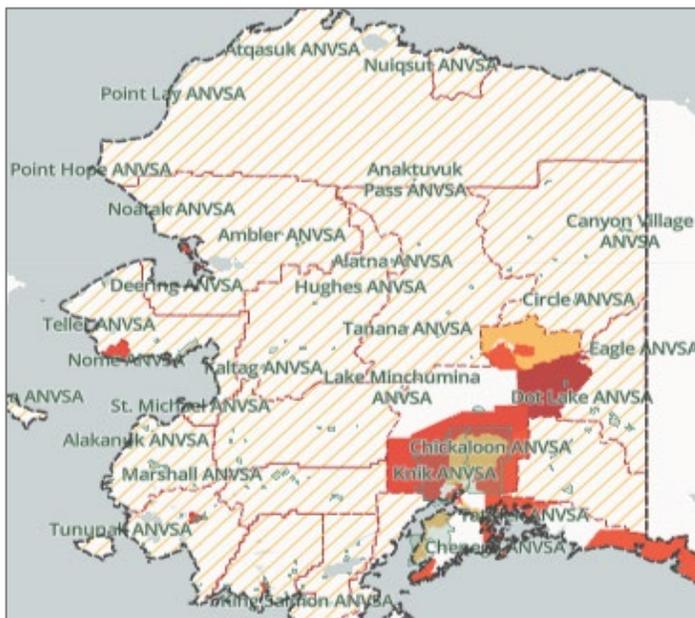
The UL and UE operations will begin on March 16 of 2020.¹⁶

The Digital Divide

The digital divide—or the demographic gaps in access to or use of the internet—will be a challenge for the 2020 Census. Without reliable internet access, some rural residents may encounter problems with the online questionnaire or choose not to participate online.

- **Lack of access to the internet:** Over a quarter of rural residents have no internet subscription at home.¹⁷ Fewer than half of rural residents with less than \$20,000 in household income have a broadband subscription.¹⁸ Internet connections are often slower in rural areas, as well.¹⁹
- **Internet connectivity problems:** During preparation for the 2018 End-to-End (E2E) Test, address canvassers in a mostly rural area in West Virginia faced dead spots where mobile internet service was not available for census field workers.²⁰ Only certain cell service providers worked in certain areas. To access internet or cell service in those areas, workers sometimes needed to drive far from their assignments.²¹
- **Lack of access to phone service:** Telephone questionnaire assistance will be available for those who need help filling out the census online and people can respond by phone if they prefer. However, cellular service is limited or nonexistent

Figure 1. Remote Alaska Has Many Update Enumerate Tracts



Much of Alaska is a part of Update Enumerate (indicated by diagonal orange lines) and has tribal areas. Source: CUNY Mapping Service, 2017.

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in many parts of rural America, especially on tribal lands.²² Landline phone service is not always reliable in rural areas, either.²³

OPERATIONS AIM TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

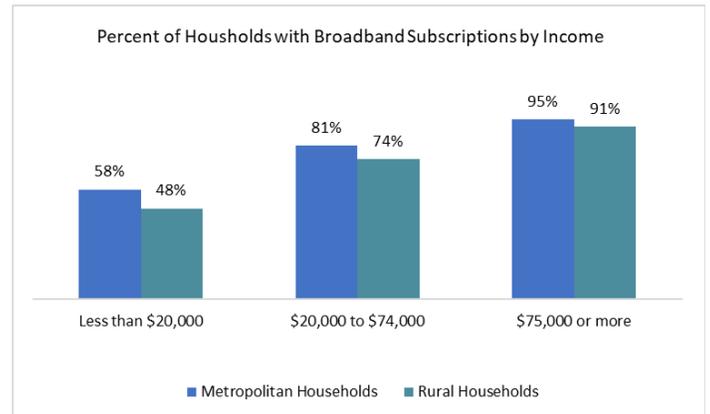
There are a number of other operations designed to improve the count. These operations may be even more important for rural areas.

- **Census Questionnaire Assistance (CQA)** will be available by telephone and in multiple languages to help answer questions and resolve technical questions related to answering the census online.²⁴ For the first time, CQA users can choose to answer the census over the phone. This may be particularly important in areas with limited access to the internet, or who do not use or are not comfortable with the internet. **CQA will be available from January through September of 2020.**²⁵
- **Nonresponse Follow-Up (NRFU)** is an operation during which census-takers follow up in person with households that did not self-respond (including those included in UL areas).²⁶ As part of this process, the bureau will use government administrative records to delete addresses identified as vacant or nonexistent from the NRFU list and attempt to count some unresponsive, occupied households. However, administrative records may not have accurate information for many rural areas, especially those with higher immigrant populations, due to hidden residences.²⁷

Hard-To-Count Populations & Regions

Hard-to-Count (HTC) groups and areas are those more likely to be missed in the census.²⁸ Seventy-nine percent of the HTC counties in the 2010 Census were in rural areas.²⁹ Areas that are a part of the UE operation are also considered HTC.³⁰ Rural America is home to many people who are considered hard to count for other reasons, as well. People of color, those with low incomes, people with disabilities, and undocumented or recent immigrants living in rural areas are among those at increased risk of being undercounted.

Figure 2. Low-Income Rural Residents Have the Lowest Rates of Broadband Internet Subscription



Source: Housing Assistance Council, 2018.

Census data are used to apportion seats and draw district lines for the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and local boards; to target more than \$800 billion 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. Failure to count all populations fairly and accurately can lead to unequal political representation and unequal access to vital public and private resources for these groups and their communities.

Specific populations in rural America that may be hard to count include:

- **African Americans:** There are 34 hard-to-count rural counties that are majority African American and over half of those are in Mississippi.³¹ About 40% of low-income African Americans in the rural South do not have home internet access.³² The 2010 Census missed almost one in ten African Americans.³³
- **Asian Americans:** Between 2000 and 2015, the Asian population grew 72%, making Asian Americans the fastest growing racial or ethnic group.³⁴ Those who have immigrated to the U.S. recently may be less likely to know about or understand the importance of participating in the census. Over a third of the Asian American population has limited English proficiency.³⁵

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Eleven percent of Asian American households have either no broadband connection or no computer.³⁶

- **Latinos:** Texas has 20 Latino-majority, HTC rural counties—more than any other state. About 40% of low-income Latinos in the rural Southwest do not have internet access.³⁷ From 2014 to 2015, the Hispanic population increased by 2 percent and represented almost half of the nation’s total population growth.³⁸ Almost a third of Hispanics (31 percent) speak English less than “very well.”³⁹ Historically, areas with low rates of English proficiency have been at greater risk of being undercounted.⁴⁰ Latino communities also are experiencing growing fear and distrust of the government as a result of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.⁴¹
- **People who live on tribal lands:** High poverty and unemployment rates along with low rates of educational attainment and internet access make American Indians living on reservations or tribal lands hard to count.^{42, 43} Distrust of the federal government, language barriers, and housing issues like overcrowding and homelessness are also factors that make it more difficult to enumerate tribal members.⁴⁴
- **Migrant and seasonal farmworkers:** High rates of poverty and nonstandard living quarters are among the factors that make it more difficult to count this population.⁴⁵ Most farmworkers have limited or no English proficiency and over a third have a 6th grade education or less.⁴⁶
- **People in Appalachia:** In West Virginia, almost one-fourth of the population lives in HTC areas. This is a higher share than any other part of Appalachia and higher than the national average.⁴⁷
- **People with disabilities:** Several rural regions of the United States, including Appalachia, have large populations of people with disabilities.⁴⁸ And of late 2016, only 50% of people with disabilities reported using the internet on a daily basis, compared to 79% of people without disabilities.⁴⁹

- **Older rural Americans:** About one-third of those aged 65 and above do not use the internet. Rural residents in general are more than twice as likely to report never using the internet, compared to suburban and rural residents.⁵⁰ Rural areas have a higher share of adults who are age 65 and older than urban or suburban counties.⁵¹

Ways to Ensure a More Accurate Count of People in Rural Areas

- **Become a Census Bureau partner and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s partnership program gets the resources it needs.** Budget shortfalls are putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates from the Census Bureau as well as promotional materials ([census.gov/partners](https://www.census.gov/partners)).
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights publishes many helpful resources at [civilrights.org/census](https://www.civilrights.org/census). Resources from the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality can be found at [georgetownpoverty.org/issues/democracy/census](https://www.georgetownpoverty.org/issues/democracy/census). The Census Project ([thecensusproject.org](https://www.thecensusproject.org)) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. Census Counts 2020 has a hub for census resources available at [censuscounts.org](https://www.censuscounts.org).
- **Funders can join the Funders Census Initiative (FCI).** FCI ([funderscommittee.org/working-group](https://www.funderscommittee.org/working-group)) supports funders by providing resources and information, as well as tracking relevant legislative issues.
- **Funders can support trusted local voices to do outreach.** These may include radio stations, other local media, and tribal governments, for example. Some rural radio stations, such as those that serve remote areas or broadcast in Spanish or other non-English languages, may be less likely to meet federal contracting standards that would allow them to play paid ads provided by the Census Bureau. However, these

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outlets are important for reaching diverse rural communities with census outreach messages and should be supported.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES, SERVICE PROVIDERS, AND ADVOCATES

- **Form or participate in a Complete Count Committee (CCC).** CCCs (census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/complete_count.html) are voluntary groups dedicated to promoting census participation by leveraging members' knowledge of the local community.⁵² CCCs can be an effective tool for organizing outreach to people in rural areas or by identifying the locations of hidden or hard to find housing units, for example. Successful CCCs include a broad range of civic and community leaders.
- **Reach out to clients, customers, family, friends and community members.** Make sure they know to look out for the census materials in 2020, understand the importance of being counted, and have the support they need to respond. For example, service providers like migrant Head Start programs and migrant legal services can play an important role in supporting the enumeration of migrant farmworkers by conducting outreach and providing assistance.
- **Participate in the American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) Program.** The Census Bureau is using a Tribal Governments Liaison Program to engage tribal leaders for the 2020 Census, provide a trusted voice on the importance of the census, and offer training. The appointment of tribal liaisons by tribal governments is essential to the success of this program.⁵³
- **Conduct hiring sessions in rural communities.** Members of rural communities are well-positioned to more accurately enumerate their neighbors than are outsiders. However, the

application process is entirely online, which presents a challenge for those without reliable or convenient access to the internet. Churches, libraries and other community organizations can host census job fairs and make computers available for community members who want to apply for 2020 Census positions.

- **Provide access to internet-connected computers.** Local organizations can provide access to the internet for people who wish to respond online but do not have internet at home.

Complete Count Committees Leverage Local Knowledge



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

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