■ **FACT SHEET**
Data Equity for Deaf Communities

Rethinking Accessibility, Outreach, & Data Collection in Federal Statistical Programs

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More than 48 million people in the United States[1]—roughly 15.4 percent of the population—are Deaf or hard of hearing, according to a comprehensive study published in 2011. Accurate and high-quality data about Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are crucial for guiding research on deafness, shaping educational and employment support policies, enforcing civil rights protections, and providing resources for civic engagement. However, the Census Bureau has historically undercounted people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. While the bureau has made efforts to improve accessibility, current measures are still insufficient, and the Deaf community remains largely overlooked.

The bureau and other statistical agencies should strengthen outreach efforts, address existing data gaps, and prioritize the fair and accurate representation of Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities in our nation's data.

The bureau should prioritize recognizing signed languages as separate from spoken languages, updating ableist language in survey questions, and providing additional and equally accessible methods for responding to censuses and surveys. Additionally, the bureau should actively recruit enumerators fluent in sign language to improve data collection.

The Census Bureau Undercounts the Deaf Community

The disability community is diverse, and data undercounts occur for various reasons. For example, undercounts may occur due to a lack of accessible options, such as braille or videophone, in federal surveys. Additionally, nearly 1 in 5 people with disabilities live in geographic areas that the bureau finds "hard to count," and people with disabilities are overrepresented in populations that the bureau has often undercounted and overlooked, highlighting the systemic barriers that many individuals with disabilities face in participating in federal data collections.

Recommendations[2]

To ensure accurate data collection and representation of the Deaf community, increase participation in federal surveys, and strengthen outreach, the Census Bureau should:

1. Collect data on people who use American Sign Language (ASL), and acknowledge ASL and other signed languages used in the U.S.

ASL is the primary language for many people in the Deaf community in the U.S. and is recognized in 45 states as an official language. Despite this, the Census Bureau does not produce high-quality estimates on the prevalence and use of ASL and other signed languages. Although surveys such as the American Community Survey (ACS) include a language question, they only ask about the languages spoken at home—overlooking those who *sign* language. Even if a respondent explicitly stated that they use ASL, for example, the bureau would code—or categorize—ASL as English in processing the data.

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1   This estimate includes people with all and any levels of hearing loss, including unilateral and bilateral hearing loss.
2   The recommendations presented in this factsheet are derived from a comment letter by the National Association of the Deaf, et al, in response to a Census Bureau Federal Register notice: "Soliciting input or Suggestions on 2030 Census Preliminary Research."

To ensure the collection of essential data that enables communities to access vital resources—such as education, transportation, technology, health care, employment, and housing—the bureau should:

- Modify the ACS and inquiries about languages "used" in the home rather than "spoken;"
- Count the number of people who use signed languages, and recognize signed languages as unique and separate from spoken languages; and
- Accurately assess the number of people who use ASL and other widely used signed languages such as British Sign Language, French Sign Language, and Chinese Sign Language.

2. Update the terminology used in surveys with inclusive language.

Federal surveys such as the ACS currently refer to individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing as "people with a hearing difficulty." This and other characterizations, such as "hearing impaired," promote a deficit perspective, suggesting that "hearing" is the standard and that anything different is a deficiency. This negative framing could deter individuals from identifying as Deaf or hard of hearing when responding to surveys.

To improve data collection accuracy, the Census Bureau should:

- Update standards in the ACS to refrain from using ableist language such as "hearing difficulty" and opt for more neutral terms such as "Deaf," "Hard-of-Hearing," "DeafBlind," "DeafDisabled" or other terms that are endorsed or preferred by the Deaf community. Revisions should be tested by the bureau and implemented with input from the Deaf community.

3. Enhance response options for people who use signed languages in federal censuses and surveys.

Limited accessibility features in federal data collection hinder participation. For example, in the 2020 Census, respondents could complete the questionnaire via paper questionnaire, online, or by telephone in 12 languages. However, not all of these options were accessible to Deaf individuals. Although the Census Bureau provides a telephone device for the Deaf (TDD) option for phone responses, these options may not be widely used by the Deaf community—particularly younger individuals.

To increase participation in the decennial census of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, the bureau should:

- Update and promote alternative options to TDD to better align with current technology and communication preferences within the Deaf community, and offer an ASL videophone option;
- Improve the usability of video language guides in ASL, such as using interactive timestamps and searchable content and offering additional video guides in other commonly signed languages;[3] and
- Conduct more robust outreach efforts to promote awareness of available tools and resources to complete censuses and surveys.

4. Increase ASL-fluent enumerators for federal data collections.

For federal data collection, such as the decennial census, the Census Bureau hires temporary enumerators to count the population. Census offices use recruiting events to help hire enumerators. However, the absence of ASL-fluent enumerators in census and survey operations may hinder people whose primary language is ASL from participating and filling out forms.

To boost engagement and accessibility for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, the bureau should:

- Allocate resources to engage Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in the census and conduct additional outreach efforts to recruit people who are Deaf and ASL-fluent.

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3   Language guides help respondents fill out a census or survey and are translated versions of a form's instructions, questions, and answer choices in the respondent's preferred language.