

2020 Census FAQs

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The U.S. Census Bureau has kicked off its media blitz for the 2020 Census, and you'll no doubt be seeing and hearing a lot on the internet, TV, radio and in print about the effort to completely count the nation's population. But those ads and public service announcements may still leave you with questions. We'll try to answer them here.

Q. What is the 2020 Census?

A. The census is a count of everyone living in the United States and its territories on April 1, 2020. A complete national census is done every 10 years; this will be the 24th census since the first one in 1790. Through wars, economic depressions and other turmoil, the count has never been missed or delayed.

Q. Why is the census done?

A. It is required by the U.S. Constitution, to determine how hundreds of billions of dollars in federal taxes are distributed among the states and how many representatives each state should have in Congress. The number of members in the U.S. House of Representatives was increased to 435 in 1911 and then capped at that number in 1929. That means states that are growing quickly, like North Carolina and Texas, get additional seats at the expense of those that are growing more slowly or not at all. North Carolina is expected to gain a 14th congressional seat based on the 2020 Census.

Q. How else is census data used?

A. The census produces the country's most complete tally of the population, and the data is available to anyone to use. It's the basis for countless government and private studies and research, including other government surveys. Businesses use it for marketing and deciding where to locate retail outlets or other facilities. State and local governments use the data for all sorts of purposes, including how to draw districts for elected officials.

Q. Will anyone other than the U.S. Census Bureau have access to my data?

A. No. The Census Bureau releases only statistics, not individual results. Title 13 of the U.S. Code forbids the Census Bureau or any of its employees from disclosing personal information for an individual or a business. And that means the information is not made available to law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, or other government regulators.

Q. Is census information shared with immigration authorities?

A. No. The rules against releasing census data to government agencies extend to ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Q. Who fills out a census form?

A. One person per household completes the form. A household includes everyone who occupies a house, apartment, mobile home or room as their usual place of residence on April 1, whether they're related to each other or not. A friend living in a room over the garage would be included in the household; a daughter away at college would not. People who live in "group quarters," such as military barracks, prisons, homeless shelters, group homes, college dorms or nursing homes, are counted by an administrator for those quarters. Special efforts are made to count people in transitory situations, such as living in hotels or campgrounds or homeless outdoors.

Q. How will I get a census form?

A. This will be the first time everyone will be invited to answer the census via the internet. The forms will be available online starting March 12, and every household will receive a letter in the mail about this time inviting them to fill it out online or by phone.

Q. What if I don't have access to the Internet or don't want to fill it out online?

A. About 20% of households in areas with low internet access will also receive a paper census form with this initial mailing. Other households that don't respond online or by telephone will get reminders in the mail, and those that haven't responded by early April will be mailed a paper questionnaire as well.

Q. Will someone come to my door?

A. Only if you don't fill out the form, either online, by phone or through the mail. Enumerators will make several attempts to find someone at home if a household hasn't responded. That effort will continue through July.

Q. Are there long and short census forms, as in the past?

A. No. There's just one form, and it will be limited to basic demographic information about the people living in each household. Detailed questions on subjects such as housing, commuting or income are now done through annual Census Bureau surveys.

Q. Do you have to be a citizen to be counted?

A. No. The Constitution requires the government to count people living in the U.S. at the time of the census, not citizens. People visiting the country for a short time, on business or vacation, won't be counted, but foreign students or workers who are living here for an extended time are counted. By the same token, American citizens living abroad for an extended time are not counted, with the exception of deployed military and federal employees.

Q. What if no one in the household is proficient in English?

A. The printed form will be available in only two languages, English and Spanish. The online form is will be available in 13 languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Korean, Arabic, Tagalog, Polish, French, Haitian Creole, Portuguese and Japanese. The guides that explain the census will be available in 59 non-English languages.

Q. What if I don't fill out a form at all?

A. If a household still hasn't filled out the form online, by phone or by mail by the end of April, the Census Bureau will send someone — a census employee known as an enumerator — to knock on the door and take the census in person. It is illegal to willfully not be counted by the census, punishable by a fine of up to \$100 (giving false information on a census form can result in a fine of up to \$500). But the Census Bureau hasn't sought to have anyone prosecuted since the 1960s, according to John Thompson, a former census director. Thompson says the bureau believes it's better to persuade people to participate in the census, by showing them how having everyone counted helps their communities get their fair share of federal dollars for transportation, education and health care.

Q. When will the census data be available?

A. The Census Bureau is required to deliver the state population numbers to the president and Congress in December. By March 31, 2021, it will deliver the detailed data, down to individual census blocks, to the states, which will use the information to redraw legislative districts.

Q. Will my data become public someday?

A. Yes, after 72 years, individual census forms are made public. This is a treasure trove of information for historians and for people tracing their genealogy. Until then, it remains confidential. In 2022, the 1950 census forms will go to the National Archives, where they will be made available to the public.

Q. How does the census know where to send the forms?

A. Last year, the Census Bureau put together a master address list, derived from various sources, including where the U.S. Postal Service delivers mail but also local government records. The bureau has traditionally walked every street in the country to verify the list and look for homes that might be missing. This time, 70% of that verification work was done by satellite images, with 30% still done in the field, according to Kaile Bower, who heads the bureau's communications branch. Creating an up-to-date and accurate address list can be a challenge in places where people have been displaced by natural disasters, such as Hurricane Florence, or where new households are being established, such as new subdivisions.

Q. Will there be a citizenship question?

A. No. The current presidential administration sought to include a citizenship question on the decennial census for the first time since 1950. But several state and local governments and the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit, arguing the question would undermine the accuracy of the census by discouraging both legal and unauthorized immigrants from filling out the forms. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that the rationale for the question appeared to have been "contrived," but left open the possibility that the administration could provide adequate justification. A week later, the administration said the forms would not include a question about citizenship.

Q. How are overseas military personnel counted?

A. In the past, the census has counted military members who are serving overseas and credited them to their home states. Under new rules, the census will make a distinction between military personnel stationed overseas for long periods of time and those who are on more temporary deployments. Those who are stationed overseas, who are more likely to have established a household on or near a base in Germany or Korea, for example, are counted in their home states for apportionment purposes but not at a specific address. Those who are deployed, such as sailors on ships at sea or troops in Afghanistan or Iraq, will be credited to their address just before the deployment, which means the populations of counties that include military bases such as Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune could see a higher count than in 2010.

Q. What about civilians living overseas?

A. The census counts civilian federal government employees living overseas the same way it does military personnel stationed overseas. They contribute to the state total in their home state, but not at a particular address. Other Americans living abroad are not counted in the census.