



Census 2020: Spotlight on the Undercount of Children in Immigrant Families

What is the Census and Why is it Important for Rhode Island?

Article 1, Section 2 of the *United States Constitution* empowers Congress to carry out a Census of all people living in the United States once every ten years. The Census is carried out at the turn of each decade, and the Census count is used to apportion the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and to allocate federal program funding to each state for the following decade.^{1,2}

Based on the 2010 Census, Rhode Island currently has two seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. However, Rhode Island is at risk of losing one of its two seats and some of its weight in the electoral college because our population growth has not kept pace with states in the South and West where more dramatic population growth has occurred.³ This slower growth rate makes it critical that every person get counted in 2020 to give Rhode Island a fighting chance of maintaining its representation.

Dozens of federal programs will use Census 2020 to allocate funding to states to support children's health care, child care, education, nutrition, child welfare, housing needs, etc.⁴ Ensuring a complete count of Rhode Islanders in Census 2020 will allow the state to maintain and increase federal funding for important programs through the next decade.

Certain populations have historically been undercounted in the decennial Census, including young children under age five, people of color, immigrants, low-income populations, people experiencing homelessness, people living in non-traditional households, people with disabilities, and people who distrust the government. With targeted, specific outreach and engagement, it is possible to get a complete and accurate count of these populations in Census 2020.⁵

Children in immigrant families are defined as children under age 18 who are foreign-born themselves or who have at least one foreign-born parent, regardless of citizenship status or year of arrival in the United States. In 2017, 28% (57,000) of Rhode Island children lived in immigrant families. This rate was slightly higher than the national rate of 25%.⁶ Of Rhode Island's children in immigrant families in 2017, 93% had parents who had lived in the United States for more than five years, and their parents were born in Latin America (57%), Asia (18%), Europe (14%), and Africa (12%).^{7,8} Children in immigrant families are likely to be undercounted in the 2020 Census because they are more likely to:

- Live in families that distrust and fear the federal government because of the Trump Administration's efforts to institute anti-immigrant policies.
- Live in low-income families.
- Live in multi-generational households.
- Live in linguistically-isolated households.

Anti-Immigrant Climate

Since early 2017, the Trump Administration has sought to enact federal policies that would limit immigration to the U.S. from certain regions and countries, block refugees and asylum seekers from entering the U.S., and discourage immigrants from accessing public benefits for themselves and their families by tying program participation to determinations of "public charge."^{9,10,11,12} The Administration also attempted to add a citizenship question to the decennial Census questionnaire for the first time in over fifty years.¹³ These moves have created a culture of fear and increased distrust among immigrant families that may make them more concerned about their privacy and therefore wary of completing the 2020 Census questionnaire.¹⁴ In this climate, researchers believe that noncitizens and Hispanics, regardless of citizenship status, will be undercounted more than the general population nationwide either because they do not fill out the Census questionnaire entirely or because they selectively complete it to leave off undocumented or noncitizen family members.¹⁵

Children in Low-Income Immigrant Families

Nationally in 2017, nearly half (49%) of children in immigrant families lived in low-income households (households with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level) compared to 36% of children in non-immigrant families even though immigrants work a significant number of hours annually and slightly more hours than non-immigrants.¹⁶ Additionally, immigrants made up 17% of the U.S. civilian labor force.¹⁷ In Rhode Island in 2016, 20% of Rhode Island children in immigrant families were living in poverty, compared to 16% of children in non-immigrant families.¹⁸

Children in Immigrant Families in Multi-Generational Households

The number of families living in multi-generational households has been on the rise since 1980 with a marked uptick since the Great Recession, resulting in 20% of the U.S. population living in multi-generational households in 2016. Asian (29%) and Hispanic (27%) families, including immigrant and non-immigrant lead households, live in multi-generational households at even higher rates.¹⁹ According to the Census Bureau, one reason young children were undercounted in the 2010 Decennial Census is that children in immigrant families are more likely to live in multi-generational households than non-immigrant families, making them harder to count.²⁰

Children in Linguistically-Isolated Immigrant Families

Among the Census Bureau's hard-to-count populations are those considered hard to interview, which includes people who may have language barriers, low literacy, or lack of Internet access needed to complete the survey online.²¹ In the U.S. in 2017, 38% of children in immigrant families had parents with limited English proficiency and 14% of the children themselves had limited English proficiency.²² In 2016, 16% of Rhode Island children in immigrant families lived in linguistically-isolated households, meaning no one 14 years or older speaks English exclusively or "very well."²³

Recommendations

- Advocate for full funding of the U.S. Census Bureau at the federal level to ensure adequate staffing, increased outreach and engagement with hard-to-count Census tracts and populations, and robust, inclusive, multi-language, targeted communications.
- Utilize the Rhode Island Complete Count Committee as a public/private partnership, including government, philanthropic, nonprofit, and business stakeholders, to mobilize across sectors for a complete and accurate count in Census 2020. Support implementation of recommendations made by the committee.
- Include in outreach for state and local complete count efforts an array of trusted messengers from organizations that interact directly with immigrant communities.
- Recruit and train trusted messengers who can work with immigrant families to help them navigate the Census survey, respond to privacy concerns, and reinforce the need to count all members of their household regardless of immigration or citizenship status and especially in multi-generational households.
- Fund mobilization of local, ethnically-focused complete count efforts that ensure a complete and accurate count in Rhode Island's immigrant communities.

References

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