



States, cities gear up for Census with billions of dollars at stake

By Reid Wilson - 01/11/19

With billions of dollars in federal money on the line, state and local governments are budgeting hundreds of millions of dollars to convince their residents to respond to next year's Census.

Many states are budgeting far more for community outreach than they have in previous Census cycles, a reflection, some legislators said, of concern that this decade's count is at risk of missing thousands of residents.

"We're mobilizing earlier, getting coordinated earlier and providing more resources than we ever have in the past," said Marc Berman, a California

assemblyman who chairs a special Select Committee on the Census. “The challenge is greater than it’s ever been.”

The stakes are so high because the decennial Census is used to determine how the federal government allocates money from hundreds of programs to state and local governments.

Census-driven statistics are used to dole out more than \$800 billion a year through about 300 federally-run programs, according to Andrew Reamer, a research professor at The George Washington University’s Institute of Public Policy.

“Most of it actually is programs involving low income people. School lunches, food stamps, Medicaid. All of these programs, Congress authorizes a certain amount of money for the programs but the distribution is based on either simple or elaborate formulas for how much each state gets,” said Robert Shapiro, who oversaw the 2000 Census as President Bill Clinton’s under secretary of Commerce for economic affairs.

“The smaller your undercount, the fewer number of people who are not counted, the bigger the slice of that \$800 billion your state will get.”

This year, state and local governments say they are more worried about the potential for an undercount than they have been in previous Census cycles.

More than a dozen states and several cities have sued the Trump administration over a plan to add a question about citizenship on the 2020 Census forms, something experts say threatens to scare away already hard-to-reach communities from participating in the count.

“The Trump administration wants to use fear and intimidation to discourage our immigrant and refugee neighbors from participating in the Census,” said Dow Constantine (D), the executive of King County, Washington.

A single uncounted resident can cost a state as much as \$19,000 in federal funds, Reamer found.

To avoid undercounts, cities like Seattle, Baltimore and Salt Lake have created what they call Complete Count Committees, drawing together stakeholders who represent traditionally hard-to-reach communities.

Earlier this month, Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) appointed a trusted ally who ran several city departments to head New York City's Census outreach efforts.

Six state legislatures have created their own Complete Count commissions. Eleven state governors have created similar versions through executive actions.

The commissions have support from both sides of the aisle. A version passed in Michigan was sponsored by a Republican state legislator. Republican governors in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky and Mississippi all created their own Complete Count boards.

"The idea is if there's a good representation of folks on that committee that represent a broad range of communities, they then know how best to reach out to those communities," said Indiana state Rep. Cherrish Pryor (D), who is sponsoring a measure to create a Complete Count board in her state. "We're kind of behind the ball from where we should be."

In California, the legislature has already appropriated \$100 million to ensure a complete count — four times as much as the state spent before the 2000 Census, and 50 times as much as they spent in 2010, when the recession forced sharp budget cutbacks.

Berman said spending nine figures to promote Census participation is critical for a state that gets \$78 billion from the federal government. He said a full count would ensure that California keeps all 53 seats it holds in the U.S. House of Representatives, too.

"We could lose billions of dollars if there's a significant undercount, and we could also lose political representation in Congress for the first time in our state's history," Berman said. "This is an opportunity for one-time spending that has a massive return on investment."

Shapiro, who oversaw the Clinton-era Census, said states are mounting massive advertising campaigns to fill a void left by the Census Bureau itself, which typically spends millions of dollars urging people to respond and several years building its own network of community groups.

"The states are trying to make up for the failure of the Bureau in this administration to do what the Census Bureau has always done in the past.

The Census Bureau hasn't changed, the administration has changed," he said.

Shapiro estimated that more than 24 million Americans might have some reason to refuse to respond to the Census if they lose trust in the federal government's motives.

That includes not only undocumented immigrants, but also those who might hold delinquent student loan debt and those who owe back child support.

Mounting a completely accurate count of more than 330 million people while accounting for migration, births and deaths is virtually impossible, but the Census Bureau comes pretty close.

After the 2010 count, the Bureau said it had actually overcounted the American population by about 36,000 people — a result not statistically significant from a perfect count.

But certain communities are less likely to participate or be counted than others. The Census Bureau said it undercounted African Americans by about 2.1 percentage points, and Hispanic Americans by 1.5 percentage points.

The count missed 1.1 percent of renters — who are most likely to be low-income people who take advantage of the federal programs that allocate funding through Census numbers — while slightly overcounting home owners, who are likely to be wealthier.

Young men were more likely to be undercounted, while young women were more likely to be overcounted.