

## Without Critical Funding, Trouble Likely Ahead for 2020 U.S. Census

By Claire Zippel and Jodi Kwarciany

A lack of needed funding may jeopardize the 2020 U.S. Census, making it more difficult to properly allocate federal funding to the District and the states. It also would deprive DC government and analysts like us of accurate data needed to think about the kinds of city services and investments that are most important for DC residents.

The census collects demographic information on the U.S. population every 10 years. The findings are used to distribute more than \$600 billion annually in federal funds, and also help determine how many seats in Congress each state will be allotted.

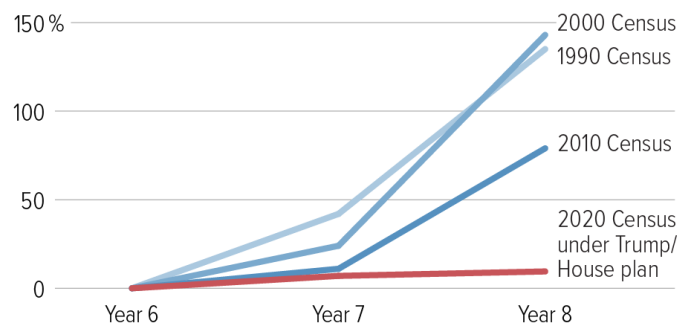
A given census is planned years in advance, and over time more funding is typically added to its budget to reflect cost updates and to conduct pre-survey testing, planning, and outreach. However, the proposed federal budget increase for the 2020 Census remains far below those of previous census cycles. A growing number of stakeholders, including both right- and left-leaning [research organizations](#), [advocacy groups](#), [city and state governments](#), and [business groups](#), are sounding the alarm about an underfunded census. And the U.S. Government Accountability Office [added the 2020 Decennial Census](#) to the list of high-risk government projects.

This lack of adjustment to the budget is already impacting the census in major ways. The Census Bureau has delayed an advertising campaign due to the funding shortfall, and cancelled field tests of [new procedures and technologies](#) intended to [increase the share](#) of people who complete the survey. Robust outreach is critical to making sure harder-to-reach populations, like immigrants, lower-income people, and communities of color, are counted.

Adequate outreach efforts are particularly important for the District. About [21 percent](#) of DC residents live in “hard-to-count” neighborhoods, which are areas where a quarter or more households required in-person follow up to complete the census questionnaire in 2010. Inadequate funding for new procedures designed to boost how many of these households return the census questionnaire by mail, or for fieldworkers to follow up in-person with those who do not, means that these households could be missed in 2020.

### Proposed Increase in 2018 Census Bureau Funding Far Less Than in Previous Decennial Census Cycles

Change in Census Bureau budget relative to year 6 of each decade



Note: All years are fiscal years. Figures show discretionary budget authority in each year of the decade relative to that in the sixth year, not adjusted for inflation.

Source: CBPP based on Office of Management and Budget, enacted appropriations, and draft legislation from the House Appropriations Committee

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An inaccurate census wouldn't just be bad for data nerds like DCFPI staff. A flawed 2020 Census has real stakes for the District.

- **Inequitable undercounting.** [People of color](#), lower-income people, people who do not speak English fluently, and undocumented people are most likely to be [undercounted](#) in a underfunded decennial census. In fact, the NAACP is [suing](#) the Trump administration for this very reason, warning that “if we aren't counted, then we don't count.”
- **Possible loss of federal funding.** DC is entitled to \$3.1 billion (or \$4,900 per person) each year in federal funds that are awarded based on decennial census-derived numbers, [according](#) to George Washington University. A flawed census that undercounts DC residents, especially people of color and low-income people, could unfairly reduce federal funds to the District for critical programs like Medicaid and SNAP.
- **Harder to plan city services.** Many of the District's plans for city services and investments—including [school modernization](#), [sustainability](#), and [affordable housing](#)—use numbers from the decennial census and other surveys that flow from the census. And, DC uses the decennial census to draw Ward boundaries, meaning that an inaccurate census could impact political representation within the District.

Good policy starts with good data that accurately reflect all residents in a community. Policymakers at the federal level should ensure that the 2020 Census has the resources it needs.