

Libraries can ensure everyone counts in 2020 Census

The upcoming 2020 Census will have repercussions for communities across the country. Academic libraries can play important roles in promoting a fair and accurate count.

Census data is key to the allocation of billions of dollars in federal funding to states and localities, such as education and healthcare programs. The decennial count of all residents is required by the U.S. Constitution to determine representation in Congress and the Electoral College, and is the basis for drawing districts for federal, state, and local offices. In addition, data resulting from the census is widely used by the public and private sectors for research and planning, including many social scientists.

As a consequence, the census is high-stakes for communities. If residents aren't counted in the census, then their communities lose out on those resources and representation.

To help address these disparities, libraries can provide information about the census to their communities. In addition, the 2020 Census will be the first that can be taken online. As providers of technology access, libraries will need to be prepared.

One of the key service populations for academic libraries is also one of the demographic groups at greatest risk of being undercounted in the census: college students. In an analysis of nonresponse to the 2010 Census, the most influential predictors were renter households and people aged 18 to 24.

By providing information about the census, libraries can help the public understand the census, how it affects them, and how they can participate. For instance, do you know these facts about how the census will count college students?

- Students will be counted at the residence where they live and sleep most of the time—which may be their college address, not their parents' home.

- Students living in the same off-campus apartment will be counted as one household on the same census questionnaire.


- Students living in on-campus dormitories will be counted by the housing facility (as a “group quarters”), rather than directly responding to the census.

- Students who are foreign citizens, such as international students, will be counted the same way as all other students.

Providing information about the census can also link to learning objectives about topics such as the U.S. Constitution, electoral processes, government funding programs, and demographic data.

Ryan Womack, data librarian at Rutgers University Libraries, was involved with the 2010 Census. As part of that experience, he wrote: “I made sure that we had posters and information displayed around the libraries, and I did an interview about the importance of the Census for the campus TV channel. It was a fun experience, and the Census [Bureau] had plenty of materials to make it easier. So I would encourage librarians to get involved!”

ALA is providing resources to assist libraries in engaging with the 2020 Census. ALA has released a brief for policymakers and community leaders, “Libraries and the 2020 Census,” and will publish additional informational resources for librarians and provide conference programming and other opportunities in advance of the 2020 Census.

To get involved, watch for opportunities on your campus or your community, such as a Complete Count Committee. You can also contact your regional Census Bureau office for more information. For assistance from ALA staff, you can contact Larra Clark (lclark@ala.org) or Gavin Baker (gbaker@alawash.org). 

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