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DESPITE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE U.S. CENSUS IS MOVING FORWARD, AND ITS CRUCIAL DATA WILL AFFECT MANY ASPECTS OF AMERICAN LIFE, DETERMINING HOW BILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN RESOURCES ARE ALLOCATED TO COMMUNITIES AND HOW LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS ARE DRAWN THAT WILL GUIDE ELECTIONS. BY DONOVAN HARRELL. ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG MABLY

2020 VISION

When the 2010 census data collection process began, Aweys Mwaliya and his neighbors received census questionnaires and other related paperwork in their mailboxes. But the members of the Somali Bantu community couldn't even read the paperwork, and translation services weren't available. They also didn't know what the census was for or why it was important.

"I don't think any single person in our community did them, even including myself," said Mr. Mwaliya, president of the Somali Bantu Community Association of Pittsburgh. The immigrant group, which has had a small presence in the city since 2004, also has an added disadvantage of not having its two main dialects represented on the census forms, Mr. Mwaliya explained.

However, thanks to increased outreach from the U.S. Census Bureau and nonprofit organizations, community members have become more informed about the 2020 Census and why they should participate in it, he said.

"I didn't think it was really worth it, but this year when they told us this was going to affect the funding—the federal funding of state, our local governments here—that's why people are really awake now," Mr. Mwaliya said.

The stakes are high for states as data from the 2020 Census will ultimately determine how billions of dollars in resources are allocated to communities for the next decade, and efforts are being made to press forward in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

"So much is riding on census data for every single one of us," said Susan Licate, a media specialist for the Philadelphia Regional Census Center, which covers Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee. "In the big picture, it's $675 billion in federal funding that is being allocated to states."

This makes fair and accurate representation in the census data critical to each community, as it helps dictate funding for roads, bridges, infrastructure, hospitals, schools, libraries, public transportation, subsidized housing and many other

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government-backed institutions. There are 55 federal programs that distribute funding based on census data, including Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Nonprofits, foundations and other philanthropic organizations also rely on census data to provide services or help guide funding. For example, nonprofits such as Meals on Wheels and the National School Lunch Program use census data to figure out which communities to serve. Universities depend on census data to determine how much federal funding is allocated for federal student financial aid and Pell grants.

These and other organizations, including The Heinz Endowments, often have to step in to make up for cuts to federal services such as food and affordable housing assistance, and gaps in census data can exacerbate the problem. This isn't sustainable in the long term, said Endowments Sustainability Program Officer Matt Barron.

"Philanthropy just can't be a substitute for the government in that way," Mr. Barron said.

DATA GATHERING IN A PANDEMIC

The decennial census is a nonpartisan, constitutional mandate that has been conducted every 10 years since 1790. Census Day, when the bureau determines where and how to count citizens, falls on April 1.

In March, households received an invitation to respond to the census online, by mail or by phone as part of the early self-response phase. These submission methods were available through July 31, the last day to submit information. After the early self-response phase, two postcard reminders were sent to households that hadn't responded. If a household hadn't participated by early April, a traditional paper form of the census questionnaire should have been mailed to the household for a response.

Under normal circumstances, an enumerator, or census taker, would have visited a household to conduct interviews in a week to 10 days after a household hadn't responded to the other methods. If the census taker was unable to speak to someone in person, the bureau then would have shifted to a nonresponse follow-up phase that lasted into the late spring and early summer and included phone calls.

Census takers are bound by a lifetime oath to not reveal personal information, and the bureau only releases statistics to interested government entities, Ms. Licate said. As a result, census takers declined to comment on their specific experiences, citing the oath.

The 2020 Census marks the first time an online method has been made available for early responses. While the telephone census-taking tool offers language guidance in 12 languages, the online process accommodates 59 languages, TTY and American Sign Language. However, even with this increased accessibility, some immigrant communities, including the Somali Bantu in Pittsburgh, still have to rely on their English-speaking, bilingual children.

The bureau has had to lean on its online and phone tools even more because of the coronavirus pandemic. On March 15, the U.S. Census Bureau announced the first in a series of operational changes. It delayed its Mobile Questionnaire Assistance Program from March 30 to April 13. The early nonresponse follow-up operation was also delayed from April 9 to April 23.

On March 26, the Census Bureau suspended in-person interviews for ongoing surveys and eliminated personal visits. Instead, census field workers were directed to call survey participants and gather the information by phone.

Even without a pandemic, census takers can still run into several issues when collecting data, including digital illiteracy, lack of broadband access, language barriers and general anxiety about what the information is used for and who can access it, said Jo Lin, reflective democracy director for Pennsylvania Voice. This is especially true for immigrant communities fearful of personal information reaching Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Department of Homeland Security or Child Protective Services.

According to Census Bureau data from the 2017 American Community Survey, approximately 5.74 percent of Allegheny County's roughly 1.22 million population, or more than 70,000 people, were recorded as foreign-born. This is why organizations like Pennsylvania Voice, a coalition of more than 30 nonprofit organizations from across the state, work to increase civic participation, Ms. Lin said, especially among historically underrepresented communities, including immigrants, communities of color and children under the age of 18.

Pennsylvania Voice's project Keystone Counts was created to specifically help nonprofits contribute to a fair and accurate count. The project is made up of more than 90 grassroots organizations, which Pennsylvania Voice helps in devising community engagement strategies that include door canvassing, text banking and phone banking. These organizations have already reached out to different communities multiple times through door-knocking, phone calls, text messages and pledge cards to inform the people about the importance of the census and foster more participation, Ms. Lin said.

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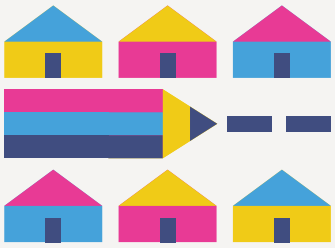
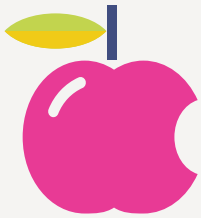
WHY THE CENSUS MATTERS

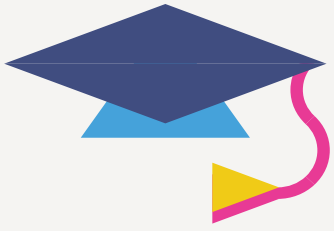
The census determines how $675 billion in federal funding is allocated annually to states.



The census also provides data for the federally mandated process of redrawing election maps.



Nonprofits such as Meals on Wheels use census data to determine where their services are needed.



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"These are civic engagement best practices that some of the organizations in our coalition are actually experts at as part of their mission of community organizing and coordinated civic engagement programming," Ms. Lin said.

Some groups, like Casa San Jose, a Pittsburgh-based Latino community resource center, run voter registration and offer legal resources, immigration outreach and education, and cultural events. These experiences can also help when it comes to census advocacy, Ms. Lin added.

"Many of these communities live in fear and distrust of the government, which is why historically they haven't chosen to self-respond to the census," she said. "We really see nonprofits as being able to bridge the gap of this fear and distrust and have community members actually feel empowered and choose to fill out those applications."

To further combat this suspicion of government, the Census Bureau also has worked to engage trusted community members, including church leaders and community organizations, through its more than 1,600 partnership specialists throughout the country. The bureau and its partners worked to target underrepresented groups, especially immigrant communities, through outreach and awareness sessions, said Ms. Licate of the Philadelphia Regional Census Center.

"There's an old saying that says, 'money doesn't follow the needy, the money follows the count,' " she said. "And that is so true when we're talking about foundations and other supporters of a community."

CENSUS IMPACT ON

Census data also is used at the federal level to allocate congressional seats. Pennsylvania has 18 seats based on its population, and David Thornburgh, president and CEO of the election reform nonprofit Committee of Seventy, believes the commonwealth is on track to lose a seat because of recent population shifts.

For communities that aren't growing, such as struggling small towns, boroughs and post-industrial steel towns, the census raises the stakes, explained Mr. Thornburgh, who also served last year as chair of Gov. Tom Wolf's Pennsylvania Redistricting Reform Commission, which worked to draft a plan for redistricting reform.

"When you're losing population, it's all the more important that you count everybody because that will determine the allocation of resources and political representation," Mr. Thornburgh said.

The census also provides data for the federally mandated process of redrawing election maps. This process is handled at the state level, and its effects trickle down to legislative maps and city district council offices, he said.

This fact is one of the lesser-known aspects of the census, Ms. Lin said. It has the power to help address structural, systemic inequalities in the U.S. that have occurred because of how election maps have been drawn, which is why she and other nonprofits are passionate about making sure the count is fair and accurate.

Legislative maps can and have been manipulated through gerrymandering when politicians design their maps to select specific populations of voters. Historically, this has led to highly partisan maps being drawn to exclude minority groups, leading to a misallocation of resources in favor of predominantly white communities.

"[Gerrymandering] can be used to distort and damage the political process to make essentially some votes count more than others," Mr. Thornburgh said. "It's been used to limit the representation of minority groups, particularly African American groups, over the years. There's lots not to like about gerrymandering."

To combat gerrymandering and other issues related to fair representation, the Committee of Seventy has worked to improve citizen engagement and transparency for the census and map-drawing processes. One of the organization's main missions is to ensure that maps drawn based on the census are done fairly with minimum conflicts of interest.

"I'd suggest that [the census'] impact on representation is at least as important if not more important than the allocation of dollars because it gets to very fundamental issues about how we structure our local democracy," Mr. Thornburgh said. h