



Census 2020: Spotlight on the Undercount of Young Children

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 federal funding for important programs through the next decade without having to raise revenue to contribute significantly more state funding.

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 under age five are the group most likely to be undercounted.

In the 2010 Census, the net undercount of young children nationally (4.6%) was more than twice as high as for any other age group. The undercount of young children was estimated to result in 2.2 million children under age five not being counted nationally.⁶ Researchers believe young children are undercounted for many reasons, including:

- Many people do not understand that babies and young children need to be counted.
- Young children are more likely to live in low-income families and are more diverse as a group than older children and adults.
- Young children are more likely to live in hard-to-count neighborhoods.
- Young children are more likely to live in hard-to-count households that are highly mobile or homeless.
- Young children are more likely to live in complex, multi-family households, including grandparent-led households, foster families, and shared custody arrangements.

Counting Babies and Young Children

Research suggests that people do not always understand that the Census is meant to count all members of the household. They do not think that the Census Bureau needs data on young children, so they do not include them on the survey even if they have included information on other members of the household.⁷

Young Children in Low-Income Families

Among children under age five, children living in low-income families and children of color are the most likely to be missed in the Census count.⁸ In Rhode Island, both of these groups are overrepresented in the young child population. Between 2013 and 2017, 35% of Rhode Island's poor children were age five and under.⁹ Rhode Island children under age five were also the most diverse age group. In 2017, 89% of Rhode Islanders age 65 and over were non-Hispanic White, while only 55% of those under age five were non-Hispanic White.¹⁰

Young Children in Hard-to-Count Census Tracts

Hard-to-count Census tracts are calculated based on lower mail-return rates of the 2010 Census survey form. These neighborhoods typically have high concentrations of poverty and high concentrations of multi-unit rental housing. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that nearly five million young children nationally lived in hard-to-count Census tracts between 2012 and 2016. During the same time period in Rhode Island, 33% (18,000) of children under age five lived in hard-to-count Census tracts.¹¹ The majority of hard-to-count Census tracts are located in Providence County.¹² Multi-unit housing is very common in Rhode Island. Forty-one percent of all housing units in Rhode Island are in structures with two or more units.¹³

Young Children in Highly Mobile or Homeless Households

Families can become homeless due to a lack of affordable housing, parental unemployment or low-paying jobs, extreme poverty, and decreasing government supports.^{14,15,16} In Rhode Island in 2018, children under age five made up 34% of the child population living in emergency shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing facilities.¹⁷ Households with young children are highly mobile. Between 2013 and 2017 in Rhode Island, nearly one in five (18%) of children under age five moved at least once during the previous year, with 76% moving within the state, and 24% moving from another state or abroad.¹⁸

Young Children in Complex, Multi-Family Households

Households that include multiple family units or multiple generations are considered hard to count. When completing the Census, these households often do not list all members, or only list members of one family unit in a multi-family household.¹⁹ Nationally, eight million children are living in households headed by grandparents, and 2.7 million of these grandparents serve as the primary caregiver.²⁰ In Rhode Island in 2010, 6% (13,968) of all children lived with a grandparent caregiver, and 2% (4,398) lived with other relatives in the household.²¹ Three percent (14,100) of all households in Rhode Island between 2013 and 2017 were multigenerational households, households in which three or more generations live.^{22,23}

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 robust, targeted communications that address some of the reasons young children are not counted.
- 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. Fully fund implementation of recommendations made by the committee.
- Include in outreach for state and local complete count efforts an array of organizations that interact directly with households with young children (e.g., child care, Head Start, and family home visiting services, libraries, and WIC offices).
- Recruit and train trusted messengers who work with families with young children and can help them navigate the Census survey and reinforce the need to count all members of the household, especially in multi-generational or multi-family households.
- Fund mobilization of local complete count efforts that build on the reach of the Rhode Island Complete Count Committee.

References

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