

EXPLAINING THE “99 PERCENT” 2020 CENSUS COUNTING GOAL: Why 99% Doesn’t Equal “Complete and Accurate” (And What Congress Must Do To Fix the Problem)

As the U.S. Census Bureau nears the end of data collection operations, the Census Director and Commerce Secretary have tried to reassure lawmakers and stakeholders that the bureau is on track to produce a “complete and accurate census” that “will meet or exceed the standard for data collection set in previous decennial censuses.” This means, they say, that the 2020 Census will count at least **99 percent** of all households in the country, even though the administration shortened the timeframe for household counting operations (self-response and Nonresponse Follow-up, or NRFU) by a month. The new end-date for all data collection is now September 30, despite the recommendation of all senior expert Bureau staff to continue data collection operations through October 31 followed by followed by a six-month period for vital quality check/assurance and data processing activities.ⁱ

As of September 6, the Census Bureau had “resolved” 87.6% of all housing units — on its way, the Secretary and Director have said, to enumerating at least 99% of all homes.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The remaining one percent would be enumerated using statistical imputation methods.

If the Bureau “counts” almost 100% of all households, does that mean the census is acceptably accurate?

- ➔ **No. The percent of housing units “counted” tells us very little about the quality and accuracy of the count.**
- ➔ Despite the Bureau’s best efforts, even in a less challenging environment, data collected during the door-knocking operation (NRFU) are less reliable than self-responses, which translates to less accurate census results.
- ➔ ***In the wake of broad pandemic-related disruption and delay in all 2020 Census operations, it is more difficult to enumerate households accurately.*** Complicating factors include the passage of time since April 1, 2020 (the reference day for the census); the displacement of people and households from their usual April 1 residence due to the pandemic; concerns about COVID-19 on the part of both census takers (called “enumerators”) and the public; and the height of hurricane season and wildfire threats.
- ➔ The proportion of households that haven’t been counted varies greatly from state to state, and even within most states. Reaching the 99% goal everywhere by September 30, if the courts and Congress do not give the Census Bureau the additional time the professional staff have said they need, will make it harder to collect accurate data during NRFU and force the Bureau to fill-in information for many more households using less reliable sources.

Why is the Nonresponse Follow-up operation so difficult, especially for *this* census?

- Households that don’t respond on their own are more likely to be the *hardest-to-reach* and the most reluctant to participate. If a household member agrees to speak to an enumerator, she might not include everyone living there out of fear that information would be shared with a landlord or housing authority, law enforcement, or immigration officials.
- Enumerators leave a Notice of Visit (NOV) after each unsuccessful visit to a nonresponding home. The Bureau estimates that nearly 10 percent of households in the NRFU operation might self-respond after receiving such a notice. *However, many enumerators are reporting that they can’t leave NOVs in many multi-unit buildings because of COVID-related restrictions on visitors; this skipped step could reduce self-response by households in the NRFU universe.*
- The Commerce Inspector General’s office and GAO reported recently that the Bureau is not meeting its hiring goals in all areas, as drop-out rates are much higher than projected. The Bureau is asking enumerators to work not only outside of the communities they know, but sometimes in other states. This does not help get the job done well or effectively, since these enumerators are unfamiliar with the culture and environment of the communities in which they are going door-to-door, and residents will be more suspicious and reluctant to speak to government employees who clearly are strangers to the area.

Why doesn’t a 99% “completion” rate result in an accurate census?

There are many ways the Census Bureau “resolves” or “enumerates” a housing unit. Not all “completed” cases result from a self-response, which yields the most accurate data, or direct in-person interview with a member of the household.

- **Nonresponse Follow-up is twice as likely to miss people in a household that otherwise is counted than is true for households that self-respond. These “within household omissions” account for a significant portion of the census undercount.**
- Some housing units are vacant or nonexistent (e.g. commercial property or uninhabitable). While these cases require only one visit to confirm the status and mark the home as “completed,” enumerators must verify that a housing unit was vacant *on April 1*, which might require more time and investigation. Or, a structure with a street-level business – such as a store or tax services – could include living quarters in the back, basement, or upper floor. Rushing this work could lead to an incorrect determination about occupancy — *and therefore an undercount*.
- The Census Bureau planned to “enumerate” an estimated 6.2 million (or more) nonresponding households, after one unsuccessful in-person visit, using a compilation of federal administrative records and data collected in other Bureau surveys. Experts believe those records systematically leave out population groups that are most likely to be missed in the census, such as young children and young adult men of color. A rushed census timeline could lead to more “administrative record enumerations” for households that already are at risk of undercounting.
- Enumerators will continue to visit housing units not “resolved” as vacant/nonexistent or enumerated using administrative records up to three times before turning to “proxies,” such as a neighbor or landlord, to collect at least basic information about the household. In 2010, 22 percent of nonresponding homes were counted through proxy interviews. According to Census Bureau evaluations, 7 percent of those interviews produced wrong information, and almost a quarter (23%) didn’t yield enough information to be useful, thereby requiring use of statistical methods to impute the data. The design of the 2020 Census could yield a greater share of proxy interviews because nonresponding households are proxy-eligible after three unsuccessful in-person attempts, compared to after six unsuccessful attempts in 2010.
- **Finally**, the enumeration of housing units does not cover everyone living in the U.S. The non-household counting operations, often difficult under the best of circumstances, have been delayed considerably in 2020 and could be more difficult due to COVID-19 concerns. Due to the pandemic, these operations also are more likely to miss people, count people twice or in the wrong place, or fail to collect accurate information about demographic characteristics (such as race and age). These operations include:
 - The Group Quarters Operation, which counts people who live in group facilities, such as college dorms, prisons, nursing homes, and military barracks.
 - The Service-based Enumeration and enumeration of Targeted Non-Sheltered Outdoor Locations, which count people experiencing homelessness who are not living in a household.
 - The Enumeration of Transitory Locations, which counts people who live in RV parks, hotels/motels, carnivals/circuses, marinas, and similar mobile living quarters.

How can Congress help ensure a more accurate census?

A rushed census won’t be an accurate census. *Every state is facing an undercount unless Congress gives the U.S. Census Bureau more time to finish counting operations and conduct vital, complex data processing and quality assurance activities thoroughly and carefully.*

- The Census Bureau’s expert, professional staff said that counting operations, including the self-response option and door-knocking operation, should continue through October 31, 2020. The Commerce Secretary supported that recommendation, until the Census Director issued the revised, rushed operational schedule on August 3, without explanation.
- In order for counting operations and quality improvement checks to continue through October, **Congress must extend the statutory reporting deadlines (Title 13, U.S.C.) for apportionment and redistricting data by four months each, as the administration requested in April.**

ⁱ On September 5, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California issued a Temporary Restraining Order against implementation of the “rushed” census plan in the case of *National Urban League et al v. Ross et al* (Case No. 20-CV-05799-LHK), pending a hearing on a motion for a Preliminary Injunction on September 17.

ⁱⁱ To track progress towards the 99% goal, the Census Bureau is publishing two sets of indicators showing the progress of the household counting operations.

1. Total response by state, which represents the self-response rate (number of households that have responded on their own, as a *percent of all housing units*) **plus** the percent of all housing units that have been “enumerated” during the Nonresponse Follow-up (NRFU), or door-knocking, operation. Cases completed in the field for the Update Enumerate and Remote Alaska Operations are included in this rate to ensure coverage of the full housing unit universe. The daily table is available here: <https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates/nrfu.html>
2. NRFU Completion Rates by Area Census Office (ACO), which represent the percent of housing units in the NRFU caseload *only* that have been “completed” or resolved. The map showing these completion rates is available here: <https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates/nrfu-completion.html>. To view these completion rates with a more detailed set of ranges, see the CUNY HTC 2020 map: <https://www.censushardtcountmaps2020.us> (turn on NRFU Completion Rate by ACO feature in right-side panel).

ⁱⁱⁱ When the door-knocking operation (NRFU) was fully deployed across the country on August 9, the national self-response rate was 63.2%. As of September 6, this rate had crept up to 65.4%. That means there is a lot of work for enumerators to do in the field. In-person visits actually started in the majority of the 248 Area Census Offices *before* the official national NRFU launch — weeks before in some cases. From July 16, when the bureau kicked off a phased-in, “soft launch” of NRFU, through September 6, enumerators “counted” 25.5% of unresponsive homes, resulting in the “resolved” rate of 87.6%.