

THE 2020 CENSUS IS IMPORTANT TO NEW YORK

Introduction

The 2020 Census is approximately one year away and the results of this census will affect New York in many serious ways. First, it will determine the number of Congressional Representatives New Yorkers have in Washington and the voice we have in federal policies. Second, it will influence the amount of federal funds New York receives *over the next 10 years*, for programs such as Head Start, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and many more. Third, the data gathered will be used to make community-level decisions that affect the location of new businesses, jobs, as well as education and human services that support children and their families (e.g. health clinics, child care, transportation, housing). The need for accurate, complete 2020 Census data is vital and undeniable.

Approach

The US Census Bureau goal is to count everyone once and in the right place; yet, this goal has not consistently been met in the past. Specifically, children five years of age and younger often have been missed in the counts as have people living in low-income communities, people of color and non-citizens. Due to these previous shortcomings, a series of focus groups were conducted to learn what would promote a complete census count. We spoke with parents who have children enrolled in Head Start and Migrant Head Start programs and individuals involved with Community Action Programs. Young parents in low-income communities were our target audience since many are unfamiliar with the census, less likely to complete the survey and tend to omit information about their young children. Focus group discussions were centered around identifying: (1) messages that will persuade individuals to complete the census; (2) persons and organizations who are considered credible, trusted sources within their communities; and (3) how messages should be delivered so they will be visible to our intended audiences.

Each session began with a brief explanation about the census and how enumeration data from past censuses are used (e.g., representation, federal funding). A set of questions were used to guide the discussion and participants were given a \$25 gift certificate for their assistance.

Lessons Learned

Information that persuades: All participants were unaware that census enumerations were associated with levels of funding and overwhelmingly identified that as the most convincing reason to complete the census. A subtle difference was observed among Head Start programs in that Head Start parents who were citizens were willing to complete the census knowing funds were used to help their *community* while Migrant Head Start families wished to make a better life for their families and would support the census knowing it provided important *services to their children*. This distinction could be influential in the types of messages shared with each group.

Information about how census data supported local planning decisions were viewed as somewhat persuasive; however, participants noted their underserved communities were less likely to see new businesses open or receive services (e.g., road repairs). Representation at the federal level was least likely to move people to complete the census.

Multiple participants noted another reason to complete the census was its usefulness in exploring their ancestry since it “would allow family members to find us 50 years from now.”

“Start by not talking about it. First tell people what it does for them; then ask them to complete it.”

“Lots of people need these benefits so that will be good to know.”

“Give them the facts because they don’t see the change. Tell them about things that the census funded in their community (e.g., bridge repairs).”

Credible, trusted messengers: Commonly cited messengers who participants felt could be trusted included physicians, pastors, local elected officials and early education teachers. When asked about elementary school teachers or principals, participants recognized they were groups that would share the information as an obligation but did not necessarily live in the community so their commitment to that community was somewhat questioned. As one person stated, “it’s not personal for them.” While participants questioned the credibility of professional school staff, they suggested school lunch staff often lived in the community and would be preferred messengers.

It was suggested that each community identify those individuals who were committed to helping disenfranchised members. An example of this was a formerly homeless woman who had made it her personal mission to help others who were experiencing challenges. Such individuals were convincing spokespersons because they knew about hardships and were finding ways to make improvements.

“Everyone listens to the weatherman—he’s the one they like too.”

“Zuckerberg pops up to tell you about changes to Facebook; let him talk about the census.”

“Do a video of this group right now and it will go viral—we’ll all send it out.”

Participants identified mayors as likely spokespersons to share information about the importance and benefit of completing the census. Mayors, unlike federal or state level representatives, were viewed as being closer to the community and more invested in what happened there, increasing their credibility.

Overall, messengers need to be people who have relationships with members in the community.

Communication strategies: Focus group participants were surprised and pleased to know how census enumeration directly affects them. However, they also recognized they and others in their communities were often negotiating hectic, stressful circumstances in their lives, frequently holding down more than one job. Therefore, they felt it would require an extended period of messaging before people noticed the information; were adequately informed; and willing to complete the census. Many respondents suggested a two-step approach where the initial phase would focus on educating New Yorkers about the connection between census numbers and federal funding then the second phase would encourage people to complete and return the census.

Our participants, primarily in their 20s and 30s, commented several times that the sources they used to receive information differed from older family members. Young parents repeatedly identified Facebook (e.g., banner ads) and Instagram as mechanisms for getting their attention and local news broadcasts were primary sources used by older family members. “I don’t watch the news but my mother never misses it.” Multiple participants suggested “the weatherman” was the most likeable and best person for sharing messages about the census.

All agreed that robo-calls were “annoying” and should be avoided; however, they had mixed opinions about mass text messages. The point was made that “anything personal, like something sent to my e-mail” would discourage participation in the census. Similarly, informational flyers placed in bills (e.g., electric, water, cable) would not promote responses. Paper forms available at the library were preferable to completing the census on one’s phone.

Libraries, clinics, government offices (e.g., departments of social services, motor vehicles), food pantries, newspapers, news broadcasts, social media sources, schools, churches, billboards and community action programs were considered prime locations for distributing census materials.

*“If it comes every ten years we need to be reminded of it **over and over**; you need to start telling us about it now! It takes time for people to pay attention.”*

Inevitable barriers: An overarching theme present in each group was that “people are afraid to trust the government.” Experiences with child protective services, law enforcement, and national news events were cited as reasons for their wariness. This mistrust was

everywhere—it was mentioned by citizens and non-citizens; members of all races; and in urban and rural communities. Participants were candid that they have issues in their homes that influence their decision to complete the census – family members who aren’t citizens; siblings who are temporarily residing with relatives without the landlord’s knowledge; and family members who are getting out of jail were examples given for why people would not want to share information. Assurances that census information was confidential and disclosure of information led to prison and high fines did not assuage participants’ concerns.

“Sometimes it’s not about filling out the census. People are skeptical, they don’t want to give out any information or open the door.

Look at the times we’re in—nobody trusts anybody.”

“No one is getting by around here—even with more than one job. It will take a lot to convince them to take time to do this.”

“I’ll tell people I’ll complete it but, honestly, I doubt I’d do it.”

The Key Take-away

New York will undergo substantial losses if New Yorkers can’t be persuaded to complete the 2020 Census. First, it is estimated that New York will lose two Congressional seats due to population losses that occurred since the last decennial census and that number could increase if current residents don’t complete the census. Possibly more important, New York annually receives about \$53 billion in funds (potentially \$530 billion over the course of a census) and this funding could be lost if New York does not have a complete count. These repercussions would be in effect for the 10 years that follow the census.