



**Center for Neighborhood
Knowledge**



2020 Census Response Rate Falling Behind Over 11 Percentage Points Lower than 2010

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In an April 24, 2020 email blast, the U.S. Census Bureau proudly announced that “The country has reached an important milestone in the 2020 Census. More than half of all the households in the country have responded – that’s 77,500,000 households so far!” The day before, 52.4% of potential households had responded, and the rate had actually crossed the halfway mark about a week earlier.²

This accomplishment is important because having a complete count is crucial for political, economic and social reasons. Constitutionally, the decennial census is required so that Congressional seats can be reapportioned to account for geographic shifts in the population. The official count is also used for redrawing (a.k.a. redistricting) of electoral district boundaries for Congressional representatives, state legislators, and local officials. Equally important, the numbers are used for allocating public funds, enforcing laws (particularly voting rights), and understanding the characteristics of the nation’s population and housing stock.

Yet, as others noted, this accomplishment is less impressive when looking below the surface. On April 18, the *New York Times* reported that the COVID-19 crisis has seriously hampered self-reporting, causing the Census Bureau to adjust their timeline and prolong the collection process

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² 50.2% on April 17, <https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html>

to counter any shortfalls.³ The agency itself had already acknowledged the problem as early as March 21, 2020, when the Bureau announced a rescheduling of operations to be completed later than their original deadline.⁴ The adjustments are framed and justified as necessary to protect the health of census workers and the public, which is valid and prudent. But, nothing was mentioned about the need to extend because of any possible lack of progress.

There is some evidence that COVID-19 could have suppressed responses. Compared to a decade earlier, the 2020 response rate in late March was over ten percentage points lower than at a similar point in the 2010 enumeration. This relative lack of progress could be due to the timing of the COVID-19 crisis. The enumeration coincided with the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis.⁵ While the April 1 “Census Day” was ceremonial start⁶, the self-response phase commenced on March 12, when people could start filling out the census form. By that time, the state of Washington had mandated partial restrictions on gatherings and movements. Governor Jay Inslee issued an order closing all schools in the three most affected counties, which includes King County and the city of Seattle, the novel coronavirus hotspot at the time. As the virus spread, so did the effort to require people to shelter in place, a strategy to slow the rate of infection to prevent overwhelming the health system. This meant staying, working and learning at home, and limiting travel to only essential activities. On March 16, President Trump issued, albeit with some reluctance, “guidelines urging people to avoid social gatherings of more than ten people and to restrict discretionary travel.” By “Census Day,” a large majority of Americans were under some form of shelter-in-place strategy.

The timing of the public-health crisis coincides with a possible slowdown in census responses. The graph below compares response rates in 2020 and 2010. The 2010 mail response rate is the number of returned forms divided by the total number of addresses from the master address file, and the 2010 mail return rate is the number of returned forms divided by only the number of deliverable addresses. Because the 2010 mail return rate has a smaller denominator, it has a higher value than the 2010 mail response rate. According to the Census Bureau, the 2010 mail response rate is more compatible to the 2020 response rate.⁷ The 2020 response rate

³ Michael Wines, “After Virus Delays, Census Must Scramble to Avoid Undercount,” New York Times, April 18, 2020.

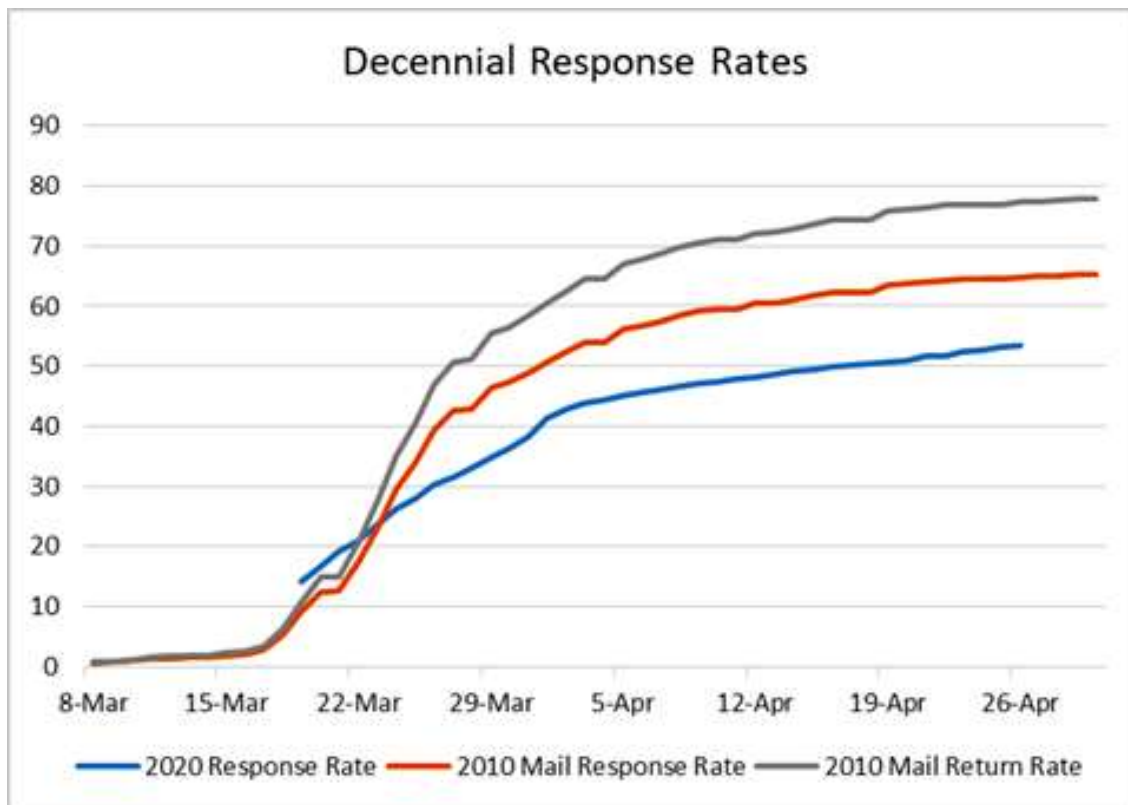
⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 Census Operational Adjustments Due to COVID-19,” March 21, 2020.

⁵ Dates and information compiled from the following web sites: <https://www.seattletimes.com/tag/coronavirus/>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-stay-at-home-order.html>, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2020/mar/16/donald-trump-joe-biden-bernie-sanders-coronavirus-live-news-updates>

⁶ This date is used to determine the location of permanent residence for respondents. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/census-day.html>

⁷ Personal correspondence, April 28, 2020. The authors are appreciative of the Bureau’s staff willingness to engage in a series of email exchanges to clarify and detail the technical details of the 2010 and 2020 response rates.

is only available publicly starting March 19, 2020. What the graph shows is that the 2020 rate was higher prior to March 22 when compared with the 2010 mail return rate, and higher prior to March 24 compared with the 2010 mail response rate. These dates correspond with the deepening of the COVID-19 crisis and the start of mandated shelter-in-place. By April 24, 2020, the date of the email blast from the Census Bureau, the response rate was over eleven percentage points behind the corresponding date a decade earlier, according to the best available information.



Along with COVID-19, there are several major factors that could hamper 2020 responses, including the shift to the internet as the primary mode of data collection, the growth of vacant and seasonal housing, and the growth of the hard-to-reach Hispanic population. For both cost and other reasons, the Bureau had shifted the primarily mode of self-reporting to responding online⁸, although the public has the option to respond by phone or mail. This strategy has had its intended effect, with about 85% of all responses coming in online. However, the unexpected

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Innovative Technologies Ensure a Complete and Accurate 2020 Census," November 9, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2017/comm/technology-2020-census.html>. See form at <https://my2020census.gov/login>

materialized, rendering this approach less effective. In particular, this data collection method places an extra burden on households without a computer or broadband connection, which for others has become the lifeline connecting them to the outside world while staying at home to “flatten the curve.”

There are also other changes that could adversely affect the response rate. For example, there has been a growth in unoccupied housing units. Vacant units increased from 12.3% to 13.1% of the housing stock between 2010 and 2018.⁹ The presence of these units translates into a lower calculated response rate because they have no permanent residents, thus do not add to the numerator in the population enumeration. There has also been a noticeable growth in the number of Hispanics, which is a hard-to-count population.¹⁰ Between 2010 and 2018, their share of the total population increased from 16.3% to 18.3%. This demographic shift makes it more challenging to have a complete count, thus compounding the barriers created by COVID-19.

As additional information becomes available, it will be possible to estimate the magnitude of COVID-19 impacts and other factors on the 2020 response rate. Nevertheless, the available evidence is sufficiently compelling to act now. Regardless of the cause or causes for the response gap, one glaring possibility is a real and present danger of having one of the most incomplete census enumerations in history. It is highly likely that the undercount will disproportionately affect those who were missing in previous decades. This differential undercount hurts low-income people, people of color, and immigrants. The Census Bureau is not to be blamed for today’s dire circumstances that have upended everyone’s life and complicated the 2020 enumeration. What is required, however, is a rapid and massive mobilization of community organizations and groups to work collaboratively with public agencies to minimize the damage. Scarce resources must be focused on actions to ensure that the most marginalized people and neighborhoods are included.

⁹ Statistics on vacant housing units and the Hispanic population downloaded from data.census.gov, accessed April 26, 2020.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2010 Census ,” May 22, 2012, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html