



Counting Rural America in the 2020 Census

Capturing the hard-to-count populations is the toughest (and most expensive) part of the decennial Census, and rural areas are surprisingly hard to count.

A report from the University of New Hampshire finds that most people living in hard-to-count counties (71 percent) are in urban areas, but most of the hard-to-count counties (79 percent) are in rural areas.¹

Meanwhile, Census data determine delivery of about \$30 billion in federal rural assistance programs to these generally hard-to-count rural areas, according to a new study from George Washington University.²

Rural testing for 2020 Census eliminated

Due to funding shortfalls, the Census Bureau had to cancel 2017 tests of special counting procedures for tribal lands and rural and remote areas in the Dakotas, Washington state and Puerto Rico. The same effectively happened for the 2018 end-to-end readiness test, which was supposed to be of 700,000 varied and targeted households in Wisconsin, Washington and West Virginia. Instead, the end-to-end test only happened in Providence, RI.

Rural areas are in danger of being undercounted

Appalachia, approximately 420 counties from New York to Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, has 34 percent of its population living in "nonmetro counties, twice the national level." It is also one of the historically poorer regions of the U.S. According to the report, "the most remote rural areas of Appalachia... have a higher percentage of their population living in HTC areas than any other type of area in Appalachia. In West Virginia, which is entirely in the Appalachian region, nearly one-quarter of the population lives in HTC census tracts, a higher share than any other part of Appalachia and higher than the national average."

Overall, the report concludes, "rural residents are less likely than urban residents to live in areas that will be the most difficult to enumerate in the 2020 Census, but some groups and some places in rural America will nevertheless be very difficult to enumerate accurately. Special attention is needed for specific populations and places, like: Blacks in the rural South; Hispanics in the rural Southwest; American Indians on reservations; Alaska Natives; Residents of deep Appalachia; Migrant and seasonal farmworkers."

Funding increases needed for an accurate rural 2020 Census

Significantly increased appropriations will be needed for the 2020 Census in FY 2019-20 to fund aggressive communications and partnership programs. Helping trusted state and local messengers promote participation in hard-to-count communities is key to increasing self-response and reducing the scale of more expensive door-to-door follow-up visits,³ and ensuring an accurate rural headcount.

¹ "2020 Census Faces Challenges in Rural America." by William O'Hare. Carsey Research National Issue Brief #131. Winter 2017 <https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1329&context=carsey>

² "Census-Guided Financial Assistance To Rural America." George Washington University Institute of Public Policy. September 2018. <https://censusproject.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/gwururalamericasept2018.pdf>

³ The 2010 Census' cost rose \$90 million for every 1% of households that didn't self-respond and required door-to-door visits.