The Seattle Times

Have you been counted? It's down to the wire on the 2020 census in Washington state as anxiety lingers and lawsuits fly

Sep. 8, 2020 at 6:00 am | Updated Sep. 8, 2020 at 5:19 pm



■ 1 of 3 | Jayce Nugent, a census response representative, gets information from people on a bench at Redondo Beach in Des Moines for the United States 2020 census on Friday. Census staff dynamically deploy to high-tr



With one month left, and billions of dollars and congressional representation at stake, Washington cities, counties, tribes and community groups are launching an all-out effort to try to make sure every person in the state gets counted by the 2020 census, before counting is scheduled to stop at the end of September.

At the same time, there remains broad unease and anxiety — and a flurry of letters and litigation — over the Trump administration's efforts to keep undocumented immigrants out of census counts and to stick to the original timeline for completing the census, despite months of delays in counting brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 93% of Washington households have already been counted, according to the Census Bureau, the third-best rate of any state. The other 7% or so have until the end of the month to either fill out the form online at 2020census.gov, by phone at 844-330-2020 or connect with one of the thousands of door-knockers that the Census Bureau has sent to every corner of the state to track down non-responders.

Washington gets about \$17 billion a year from federal programs that use the once-every-to-years census to determine where funding should go. Everything from Medicaid to Pell Grants to community health centers to housing assistance to highway and transit money depends on the census to help determine how much is allocated.

King County has joined a federal lawsuit seeking to extend census deadlines — to allow counting to continue to the end of October and data processing to continue into 2021 — arguing the compressed timeline will "introduce several inaccuracies in the count, chief among them major undercounts of communities of color."

 $A federal \ judge \ Thursday \ ordered \ the \ Trump \ administration \ to \ stop \ winding \ down \ census \ operations \ until \ a \ court \ hearing \ is \ held \ later \ this \ month \ over \ whether \ the \ count \ should \ keep \ going \ through \ October.$

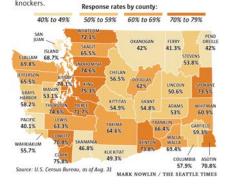
Door-knockers were supposed to begin work in May, but because of COVID-19 didn't start until the end of July or early August. Nonetheless, the Trump administration recently announced that counting would end Sept. 30, rather than Oct. 31, as was previously announced.

Officials at the Census Bureau have said there's not enough time between the end of September and the Dec. 31 deadline to process and analyze all the data.

Census self-response rates

Statewide, nearly 72% of Washington households self-responded to the census, exceeding 2010's self-response rate of 67%. So far, 92% of Washington households have been counted, including those that had to be contacted by doorknockers.

Response rates by county:



Washington Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, both Democrats, are among a bipartisan group of 48 senators who have written to Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, urging him to allow a vote on extending the census deadlines. The Democratic-led House of Representatives has already passed an extension.

And Washington state and the city of Seattle have both joined a federal lawsuit, one of several, seeking to block President Donald Trump's order that undocumented immigrants be excluded from the census counts that are used to divvy up congressional seats. Trump, who last year lost his legal battle to include a question about citizenship on the census, is nonetheless trying to use other government records to, for the first time ever, exclude undocumented residents from the congressional counts.

The lawsuit, signed by Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson and Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes, charges Trump with violating the constitutional requirement that congressional apportionment be based on "the whole number of persons in each State."

"For 150 years — since the United States recognized the whole personhood of those formerly bound in slavery — the unambiguous requirement that all persons be counted for apportionment purposes, regardless of immigration status, has been respected by every executive official, every cabinet officer, and every President," the lawsuit says. "Until now."

King County, in two other federal lawsuits, is also trying to stop Trump's exclusion of undocumented immigrants from the apportionment count.

"It just scares immigrants or people from mixed-status families, so they don't want to complete the census and that makes our job harder," said Micaella Verro, the census program manager for the United Way of King County. "There's just widespread national concern that this is going to be the least accurate census ever because of that and the timeline has been dramatically shortened."

Verro said they're holding out hope that counting could be extended into October but aren't counting on it.

"Time is running out," she said. "Now is the time to go online or call and fill out the Census. Right now."

Marc Baldwin, assistant director for the Washington Office of Financial Management, which is overseeing the state's efforts, said the compressed timeline and Trump's push to exclude undocumented immigrants are "again raising concerns about how safe and accurate the census is going to be."

Nonetheless, Baldwin said, Washington cities and community groups did a "fantastic job of rethinking their strategies

Washington's Legislature authorized \$15 million last year to be spent on census outreach efforts for the "hardest-to-count residents," frequently immigrant and non-English speaking communities and areas with lots of renters.

Most of that money is distributed to local groups to do outreach within their own communities, where they can better explain the process and urge participation.

"All the data suggest you need people from the community to speak to the community," Baldwin said. "It's not about politicians or experts."



ayee Nugent, a census response representative, gets information Friday from people on a bench at Redondo Beach in Des Moines for the United States 2020 Census. (Ellen M. Banner /

'This is just counting people'

One of those hard-to-count areas is King County census tract 91, centered on Seattle's Chinatown International District. Here, 53% of residents are foreign-born, 39% of households have no one who speaks English "very well," nearly a quarter of residents have moved within the last year and 94% of housing units are rentals.

Not surprisingly, census response rates there have lagged. The current self-response rate in the Chinatown ID is just 59%, compared to 71% statewide, 75% in King County and 89% in Seattle's best-responding census tract, Loyal Heights. (Self-response rates represent only people who respond to the census without being contacted by a door-knocker.)

On Wednesday last week, the census set up what it calls a Mobile Questionnaire Assistance event at Hing Hay Park in the Chinatown ID. Stationed at a pop-up tent, stocked with census swag — tote bags, face masks, hand fans, binder clips — were two Census Bureau employees and two community liaisons, hired by the city of Seattle.

In prior years, the Census staffed assistance centers at libraries and community centers, but those have been replaced by the mobile events that pop up in under-responding neighborhoods.

The staffers fielded questions from passersby and, during slower times, flagged down people walking by or in the park to ask them if they'd completed the census. If they had not, staffers were equipped with tablets to help them fill it out on the spot.

"We try to find a way to catch everyone, especially the seniors," said Lillian Young, who was hired by the city to do census

outreach and who speaks Mandarin and Cantonese. "I had one man say, 'I've only been here four years, I'm not a citizen yet,' and I said, 'Oh, this is just counting people and you're a member of society."

Sabreen Abdullah was also hired by the city to staff the tent, to reach out to the community of Cham refugees, from present-day Vietnam and Cambodia. Cham is not one of the 60 languages that the Census Bureau provides information in, so the local community has translated it themselves.

"We emphasize to make sure you write in Cham," on the question that asks about race, Abdullah said. "The census is something, one thing, they can do to get money to their communities."

The Census Bureau said they're doing these mobile events throughout the state over the next month, including about three per day in King County. Each one ends up counting about 50 more households, Toby Nelson, a Census spokesperson said. On Wednesday, the event in Hing Hay Park counted 22 new households in the first two hours.

'Then it doesn't hit home

Groups who, pre-COVID, had big, in-person events planned to promote census participation had to move their resources on

The Na'ah Illahee Fund, an intertribal organization, organized a virtual census "canoe race" to try to spur participation among Washington tribes. Tribes with the highest self-response rate to the census and the biggest improvements got cash prizes from the nonprofit.

The United Way every year sets up 33 free tax prep sites across King County that, this year, were also going to double as census outreach sites. COVID-19 closed all those down in March.

We Count Washington, a campaign supported by the state, King County, United Way and other groups, is organizing one last statewide "day of action" on Sept. 16, featuring hallmarks of voter turnout efforts, to push census participation.

There will be food trucks in low-responding census tracts in SeaTac and Tukwila. There will be a social media campaign and a phone and text-banking operation. There will be mask giveaways and pop-up events around Seattle.

 $Black\ Lives\ Matter-Seattle\ \&\ King\ County\ got\ about\ \$180,000\ in\ grants\ from\ the\ state\ and\ launched\ the\ Demand\ to\ be\ Counted\ campaign,\ emphasizing\ the\ concrete\ stakes\ of\ the\ census.$

In videos, social media and advertising, they've stressed that the census determines funding for health clinics in Seattle's Central District and that it will determine how recovery money gets distributed when the nation digs out of the pandemic-induced economic hole.

"We're really intentional about taking the census out of this theory of data and personalizing it for people," said Sakara Remmu, a manager of the campaign. "If it's not in context for people, then it doesn't hit home."

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