

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In prior years, the Census staffed assistance centers at libraries and community centers, but those have been replaced by the mobile events that pop up in under-responding neighborhoods.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

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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