As 2020 Census Looms, Citizenship Question Isn't the Only Concern

BY: Graham Vyse | May 31, 2019

The Trump administration's plan to include a citizenship question on the 2020 Census continues to draw controversy.

Bipartisan experts warn that the question would dissuade immigrant communities from participating, resulting in gross undercounts and denying states and localities significant resources.

On Thursday, *The New York Times* reported on court filings showing a Republican political strategist and an architect of the citizenship question suggested it would "be advantageous to Republicans and non-Hispanic whites." The *Times* called it "the most explicit evidence to date that the Trump administration added the question [...] to advance Republican Party interests."

But the citizenship question isn't the only aspect of next year's Census that has experts worried.

At a congressional hearing on Tuesday, Census officials and immigration advocates voiced their concerns about the failure to engage citizens without internet access and underfunding of Census workers and offices. Those potential shortcomings compound worries about how the process could disadvantage states and localities.

This will be the first Census in which most households are encouraged to participate online. But many of the IT systems that will be used are untested, noted Greta Byrum, co-director of the Digital Equity Laboratory at the New School in New York City.

"The overwhelming public focus on the high-stakes citizenship question has taken priority in our national conversation," Byrum said, "and as a result we are behind in addressing safety and security and functionality concerns surrounding the digital transition."

"You just assume people can get online, and that's not a safe assumption to make," she told *Governing* after the hearing.

Byrum worries about a botched rollout akin to what happened initially with HealthCare.gov for the Affordable Care Act, noting that the Government Accountability Office recently flagged more than 500 Census cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

Another concern is a reduction in federal resources.

The Census Bureau plans to halve the number of its local offices across the country and reduce the number of enumerators -- workers who follow up with people who don't respond to Census requests. Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League and chair of the 2010 Census Advisory Committee, has worked on the Census three times. He said he has never been more concerned about getting an accurate count.

Tuesday's hearing was held at LaGuardia Community College in New York, a city that's especially hard to count. Julie Menin, the city's Census director, called it "an arduous and complex task at best," given its 8.6 million residents, "high concentration of apartment buildings, the prevalence of new or transient populations, as well as the rich diversity of our population, with close to 40 percent of our residents being foreign-born and more than 200 languages spoken."

In any jurisdiction, an undercount of residents would impact the amount of federal aid that place receives for years.

"The consequences for New York City and New York state of a lesser Census count would be simply catastrophic," said Steven Choi, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition. "New York, as a state, would be sicker, hungrier, less well-educated and less successful as a result."

It's not just Democratic states that stand to be harmed by an undercount. As *Governing* previously reported, this outcome could hurt red states like Arizona and Texas, where cities have growing minority populations.

"Everyone is supposed to be counted," New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said at Tuesday's hearing, "but not everyone does get counted, and that leads to certain communities having their schools underfunded, having their infrastructure underfunded, and ensuring that some communities don't get the health care they need."

"Despite the critical importance of an accurate Census count, we have an administration in Washington that seemingly wants to manipulate the count," said Democratic New York Rep. Carolyn Maloney. "Simply put, if you're not counted, you're not represented."

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