

## Ramsey County and the 2020 Census

Ramsey County is committed to helping the 2020 Census achieve its goal of counting “everyone once, only once, and in the right place.” This document explains why a complete count is critical to Ramsey County, the challenges in achieving a complete count, and how Ramsey County can meet these challenges. The proposed addition of a question on citizenship status is of particular concern and will require an unusually vigorous effort to make the 2020 count a success.

### Why a complete, accurate census count is important

**Representation:** Fair representation of Ramsey County residents at both federal and state levels depends on a complete, accurate census count. At the federal level, census data determines the number of seats each state has in the US House of Representatives. According to law, the House is limited to 435 seats, which are allocated proportionally to states according to their population. Every ten years, states that gain population relative to others gain more seats in Congress, while states that lose population relative to others lose seats. In 2020, Minnesota is at risk of losing one of its eight seats, as its population growth is far outpaced by the growth of states like Texas and Florida.<sup>1</sup> Losing a seat in Congress also means losing a vote in the Electoral College. Political representation at the state level is also based on census counts; the State Legislature redraws state senate and house districts as well as Minnesota’s US congressional districts based on population shifts reflected in the census. An undercount of Ramsey County residents could mean a loss of local political influence.

**Funding:** Federal and state governments distribute money to states and localities according to census counts. Federal funds distributed to states include money for highway planning and construction, Medicare Part B, Medicaid, SNAP, and Section 8. In FY 2015 alone, at least 132 federal programs used census data to distribute more than \$675 billion. Most of this money was allocated to state and local governments, though a few federal programs make direct payments to individuals. In FY 2015, Minnesota received over \$8.4 billion from the largest federal assistance programs that distribute funds on the basis of census data, or about \$1,532 per capita in one year.<sup>2</sup> An undercount in the 2020 census could mean a substantial loss in federal funding.

Several State of Minnesota programs also use census data to allocate funding to local governments. These include Local Government Aid (LGA), Community Education Funding, Small Cities Development Grants, and the Trunk Highway Fund. For example, cities in Ramsey County have received nearly \$71 million in LGA in 2018; St. Paul alone has received over \$65 million.<sup>3</sup>

**Data:** The Census provides valuable data for real estate development, business marketing research, maps for planning emergency services, and policy and program development. Census data is also used to plan roads, schools, hospitals, senior centers, and emergency services to serve changing populations. Policy analysts and planners rely on census data to analyze demographic trends and determine emerging priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Roper, “Minnesota at risk of losing a congressional seat after 2020 census,” *Star Tribune*, April 16, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Reamer, “Counting for Dollars 2020: 16 Large Federal Assistance Programs that Distribute Funds on Basis of Decennial Census-derived Statistics (FY 2015): Minnesota,” George Washington Institute of Public Policy, August 18, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota Department of Revenue, “City LGA Amounts for 2018”:  
[http://www.revenue.state.mn.us/local\\_gov/prop\\_tax\\_admin/aclb/lga\\_18\\_amounts.pdf](http://www.revenue.state.mn.us/local_gov/prop_tax_admin/aclb/lga_18_amounts.pdf)

## **Why a complete, accurate census count is usually difficult to achieve**

Since the Census Bureau began estimating accuracy with the 1940 count, it has found that the census consistently undercounts some sectors of the population at disproportionately high rates.<sup>4</sup> There are a variety of reasons for this, including:

- A reluctance to respond among members of African American, American Indian, Latino, and other racial and ethnic minority communities who may distrust the government due to persistent, systemic discrimination
- Housing instability among low-income households, homeless persons, and youth
- Language barriers experienced by immigrant populations, making it difficult to understand the questionnaire and its purpose
- Fear and mistrust among people who are undocumented
- Difficulties in reaching individuals living in multi-unit housing and “group quarters” such as nursing homes and correctional facilities

## **Why the 2020 Census will be especially challenging: the citizenship question**

In March 2018, the US Secretary of Commerce directed the Census Bureau to add a question on citizenship status to the 2020 Census questionnaire. While census questions are normally subject to extensive field testing, this question was added too late to be tested. Without field testing, the question's potential impact on response rates is unknown and therefore poses an unnecessary risk. The Commerce Department asserts that the citizenship question is needed to enforce the Voting Rights Act. However, data on citizenship is already collected in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), which is not used for the apportionment of congressional seats. Therefore, adding a citizenship question to the decennial census is unnecessary and may cause an undue burden on the residents of Ramsey County.

There is serious concern that including a question on citizenship status will discourage participation among Ramsey County residents who are foreign-born or who have foreign-born members of their household, whether documented or undocumented. The current political climate nationwide has generated fear that census data could be used to deport or otherwise target respondents and/or their family members.

The Census Bureau is aware of the risk of undercounting foreign-born residents and their families. In small pretest studies conducted for the ACS in 2017, Census Bureau researchers noted a higher likelihood of non-response, false response, and uncompleted interviews when respondents were questioned about their immigration/citizenship status and birthplace. In interviews, respondents voiced fears that data could be shared with the Department of Homeland Security or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and that they could be deported due to their legal status or even religious identity. In some cases, respondents refused to answer the door; in one case, a respondent walked out mid-

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<sup>4</sup> Funders Census Initiative 2020, “Census Accuracy and the Undercount: Why It Matters; How It’s Measured”

interview, leaving the interviewer alone, and never came back. Interviewers reported that it was far more difficult to get responses than in previous years' field studies.<sup>5</sup>

With a foreign-born population of over 15%, Ramsey County faces the risk of its immigrant and refugee communities being significantly undercounted. As reported in the *Star Tribune*, local advocates for immigrant and refugee communities have indicated that many members are reluctant to share personal information with the government.<sup>6</sup> Families with "mixed status" may forgo participating altogether, resulting in an undercount of citizens and documented immigrants, as well. The American Civil Liberties Union warns, "Lower response rates will be catastrophic for communities and states with large immigrant populations."<sup>7</sup>

### **What can Ramsey County do?**

**Submit a comment on the citizenship question:** The Department of Commerce has opened a 60-day public comment period on census questions, ending August 7. Ramsey County will submit a comment expressing concern that inclusion of the citizenship question—at a time when many in our immigrant and refugee communities are already in a state of alarm—will discourage participation in the census, resulting in a disproportionately large undercount of foreign-born residents and their families.

**Launch a community engagement/outreach effort:** Ramsey County will promote participation in the census through a variety of community engagement/outreach strategies. It will be critical to raise awareness of how census data can and cannot be used. Visits to community organizations, neighborhood associations, local high schools and colleges, adult education centers, local media, faith-based organizations, and other sites will be important. Another option is the formation of a Complete Count Committee, which would bring together committee members from community organizations, faith-based groups, education, media, local business, and other sectors who would help raise awareness and promote census participation.

**Facilitate the recruitment and hiring of enumerators:** Ramsey County can assist in sourcing enumerators and other census workers from historically under-counted communities and census tracts. From encouraging residents to apply for positions with the Census Bureau to providing coaching for the skills test, Ramsey County can promote employment with the census and bolster the Census Bureau's ability to reach all residents.

**Provide opportunities to respond online:** The 2020 Census will be the first to offer an online response option. When the count begins in March 2020, Ramsey County can encourage participation by creating awareness about the census and providing access to the online questionnaire at county libraries, workforce centers, and public events.

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<sup>5</sup> Mikelyn Meyers, "Respondent Confidentiality Concerns and Possible Effects on Response Rates and Data Quality for the 2020 Census," US Census Bureau, November 2, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Roper, "Minnesota groups prep for challenging 2020 census," *Star Tribune*, July 7, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ceridwen Cherry, "Census Citizenship Question Illegally Discriminates Against Immigrants," American Civil Liberties Union, June 6, 2018: <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/census-citizenship-question-illegally-discriminates-against-immigrants>.