What’s the Census and Why Does it Matter?

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

Topic Summary

A census is an official count or survey of a population of people. The United States Census is required by the U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 2) and is collected every ten years. The goal of the Census is to count people living in the U.S. and to use that number to determine representation in Congress. Since 1790, there has been a Census conducted every ten years. The Census is intended to count everyone who lives in the U.S., whether or not they are citizens. It is based on actual counts of people including citizens, non-citizen legal residents, non-citizen long-term visitors and undocumented immigrants.
The data collected by the Census determines the number of representatives each state sends to the U.S. House of Representatives, based on its share of the population. It is also used to establish the number of votes each state gets in the Electoral College and to distribute federal funds to local communities for healthcare, schools, roads and other public services in local communities (e.g., Medicaid, Head Start, National School Lunch Program). This is why it is so critical to get accurate population numbers for the Census.

**How is the Census Collected?**

Census information is collected in a variety of ways: paper mail-in forms, online, phone calls and census workers going door-to-door. 2020 was the first time that the Census went digital allowing people to complete it online. It was also the first Census year in which people could call a toll-free phone number and provide their responses over the phone. Because of the 2020 pandemic, it has been challenging to follow up with households that have not responded to the Census. Census workers who usually follow-up by going directly to people's homes are concerned about knocking on doors and the people who live there are just as concerned about answering the door. While census workers can leave a paper questionnaire (in a bag) at the doorsteps of those who don't answer their door, the emphasis in 2020 has been on other means of gathering census information.

Paper Census forms are only available in English and Spanish. However, the Census can be answered online or by phone in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Tagalog and Vietnamese. The Census Bureau also provides video and printed guides in 59 languages other than English and a video in American Sign Language.

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 74% of households in the U.S. completed and mailed back their 2010 Census questionnaire, which matched the final mail participation rate achieved in the 2000 Census.
The Census questions can vary from decade to decade. The 2020 Census asked questions about:

- The number of people living or staying in a home.
- Whether the home is owned with or without a mortgage or loan, rented or occupied without rent.
- A phone number for a person in the home.
- The name, sex, age, date of birth and race of each person in the home.
- Whether each person is of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin.
- The relationship of each person to a central person in the home.

If you want to look at the Census questions over the years, see U.S. Census Bureau History.

**Census Issues and Controversies**

Over the years, there has been controversy about how data is collected and what kind of information the Census asks people to provide. A few examples of Census controversies include (1) whether or not to count enslaved people, (2) how information about the whereabouts of Japanese American people was given to the U.S. Secret Service during World War II, (3) how women were not allowed to be designated “heads of household,” and (4) disagreement about undercounting.

In 2018, the Trump administration attempted to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census: “Is this person a citizen of the United States?” Critics of the citizenship question argued that there are other ways to get the information and making this change would discourage non-citizens and even legal immigrants from participating in the Census. Opponents expressed concerns that asking about citizenship would result in undercounting, leading to inadequate representation in Congress and reduced funding for those who need it most. Across the country, state attorneys general, civil rights groups and others
challenged the citizenship question in court. In June 2019, the Supreme Court blocked the citizenship question from being added to the 2020 Census.

There has also been controversy about racial identity categorizations and distinctions in the Census. While there has been a decades-long effort to collect more detailed data on people with roots in the Middle East or North Africa (known as MENA), the Census announced that it would not add MENA as a category in 2020. As a result, most people who are from the Middle East or identity as Arab-American are categorized as white by the Census. Along the same lines, because the Census asks if you are “of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin” as a separate question distinct from racial identity, those who identify racially as Hispanic/Latino must choose a different race on the form.

Age

10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- Have you ever heard of the U.S. Census? What surprises you about what you learned?
- Why do you think they collect the information they do (race, sex, age, etc.)? How is this information useful?
- What other information do you think should be collected?
- Why do you think some people don’t complete their Census? What obstacles do people face?
- What more do you want to know about the Census?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)
Have you ever had to fill out a survey about aspects of your identity? What was that like?

Are you surprised or not that 74% of U.S. households completed the Census in 2000 and 2010? Do you think this is a good response rate?

How do you think the Census Bureau could get more people and households to complete the Census?

Why is the Census important?

**Take Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Find out what kind of information your school collects for its own census of the student population, how they collect the information and what barriers they face in getting people to respond to information collection efforts.

- Complete the Census as a family activity. Discuss how to answer the questions, especially those around identity, and talk about what these categories mean and your family’s connection to them. You can also discuss the reason the Census is important. If it’s a non-Census year, download a Census form and discuss how you will complete it when the time comes.

- Use social media to inform and educate people about the Census, the goal and use of the Census and how people can get access so they can complete it.

**Additional Resources**

- [Census Question Controversy](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)

- [Representing the People: Diversity and Elections](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)

- [Let’s Talk about Voting!](#) (ADL Table Talk)

- [U.S Census 2020: Questions Asked on the Form](#)

- [Teaching about Elections](#) (Collection of Resources)