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Coronavirus Shows Just How Much the Census Counts

Jeffrey M. Wice

Opinion

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Federal aid to New York City is even more urgent than ever (photo: Michael Appleton/Mayor's Office)

While many of our daily activities remain on hold, the 2020 Census must still be taken and completed this year. Not only is it required by the U.S. Constitution, but there is a tremendous amount at stake for New York, including billions of dollars in federal aid, a fair allocation of seats in Congress, and accurate representation in state and local government. From road repairs to education and social services, over 300 federal programs are driven by census data.

Through my work at New York Law School and the statewide New York Counts 2020 census coalition, I have been collaborating with New Yorkers on best practices and strategies to ensure an accurate census count. What we cannot overlook—especially now—is that the census is critical to protecting us from future pandemics. An accurate census count is crucial to securing enough hospitals, medical facilities, doctors, nurses and medical supplies so that we'll never again see the kinds of shortages we are seeing today. That's because health care providers, insurance companies, and government officials all make important decisions on where to provide resources and assistance based on census data.

Unfortunately, while this year's count is especially important, it's also far more challenging than any in our country's history. And right now, New York is lagging behind other states. As of May 8, only 52.4 percent of New York State's households have responded in the first few weeks of the census counting process, placing New York 42nd among the 50 states.

The census has never been a perfect count. In fact, well before COVID-19 struck, the Urban Institute estimated that New York could be undercounted by 313,700 people this year. That's almost half the population of one of our congressional districts.

But COVID-19 puts us in danger of a far more severe undercount that will impact our state for years to come. Some of lowest response rates are in communities hit hardest by COVID-19, the result of income and racial inequality. These are the same areas that have also been historically undercounted and neglected, and without an accurate count, they will not receive adequate government support.

Everyone has a role to play in the solution: our government leaders, community organizations, experts, and fellow New Yorkers. Since person-to-person outreach cannot take place, outreach groups must rely on text messages, phone banking, emails, Zoom sessions, and poster to reach communities that have been historically undercounted. I'm encouraged to see several areas asking grocery stores and other essential

businesses to place 2020 Census flyers in bags as a reminder. These are the kinds of actions we need now.

While I applaud the U.S. Census Bureau for extending the counting period until October 31, with so much uncertainty due to COVID-19, this still may not be enough time. If census workers are not able to visit homes directly, then we will need to build new strategies to reach people through social distancing, media, and other creative methods never tried before.

With so much at stake depending on an accurate census, everyone who can respond must do so. Census information cannot be shared with any other government agency, and there is no citizenship question. It's easy to fill out and can be done online, over the phone, or by mail.

Now more than ever, answer the census. Take 10 minutes to answer 10 questions, which will help New York for 10 years.

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