The High Cost of Undercounting

If the 2020 census includes a citizenship question, educators are worried about the potential loss in education funding.

By Lauren Camera Education Reporter
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The Supreme Court is set to decide this month whether the forthcoming 2020 decennial census will ask respondents if they are U.S. citizens.

The Trump administration wants the so-called citizenship question included in the survey, White House officials have said, in order to better enforce the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the anticipated undercount of people and poverty, driven by the reluctance of immigrant communities and Hispanic households to complete the census if the citizenship question is included, is expected to have a devastating impact on federal K-12 funding for school districts that serve the most vulnerable students.

Ahead of the high court's decision, educators across the country are bracing themselves for billions of dollars in critical resources that could be lost and they're scrambling to develop ways to minimize the undercount.

"Whatever decision is made, I know the impact will be felt really strongly, particularly in L.A.," Vivian Ekchian, deputy superintendent at Los Angeles Unified School District, says. "We are a school district where 80 percent of students are living in poverty, 17,000 are experiencing homelessness and 7,000 are in foster care at any given time. Almost 100,000 of our students are English learners. The undercount would be detrimental to the resources we receive."

At issue is how the population and poverty data collected through the census are used in various formulas to distribute federal funding for a whole host of domestic programs. In fiscal 2015, census data was used to distribute more than $675 billion in federal funds across 132 programs, according to the Census Bureau's own analysis.

While census data is used to determine funding for federal programs like Medicare, Medicaid Part B, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Section 8 housing and more, it has a particularly acute impact on education dollars.

"The misconception that a lot of people have is that for every person that gets counted or missed is that it affects all these programs," says Andrew Reamer, a research professor at George Washington University's Institute of Public Policy, whose current project is called "Counting for
Dollars 2020: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.

"That's not the case," he says. "Some programs are more sensitive to census accuracy and inaccuracy than others."

Education is among the most sensitive.

**The Effects of an Undercount on Education**

Of the top 11 federal programs ranked by dollars distributed using census data in fiscal 2015, five specifically involve students and education. They include, among others, the $19 billion National School Lunch Program, which provides free or reduced price lunches for students; the $16 billion Title I program for schools with high concentrations of poor students; $12 billion in special education grants for students with disabilities; and the $9 billion Head Start program that provides preschool for children from low-income families.

Location also matters a great deal, explains Reamer, who was tapped by the plaintiffs in the three cases heard by judges at the U.S. federal courts in the Southern District of New York, the Northern District in California and in Maryland to offer expert analysis of the effects of the inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 census, specifically regarding the distribution of federal funds for various programs to certain states.

About 7% of people living in the U.S. are noncitizens, but in some states, like California, that number is more than double, he stresses.

"So if the Census Bureau's own research is relatively accurate, then the answer to the question of how the presence of the citizenship question would impact federal funding is that any state with a percent of noncitizens higher than the average will lose money and others will make money," Reamer says.

That means, generally speaking, places in California, Florida, New York and Texas will see federal resources decrease, while places like Ohio and Pennsylvania would see an influx of federal dollars.

While federal funds generally account for 10% or less of school budgets, states and school districts with higher levels of child poverty rely on those federal funds more than states with lower levels of child poverty. And it's those communities where the undercount is expected to be the worst if the citizenship question is included.

"Adding the citizenship question will be very challenging because it adds major complications to how we go about outreach to our immigrant communities," Ekchian says. "Adding the citizenship question will create a whole new layer of complications and complexities that will make it even harder to for us to reach our most vulnerable families."
The Census Bureau itself has studied the phenomenon of undercounting in depth. According to its findings, the last time it administered the decennial census in 2010, approximately 1 million young children were not counted. Census officials currently estimate that the introduction of a citizenship question would lead to an 5.8% decline in responses to the census, which they underscore is a conservative estimate and would be much worse in areas with large immigrant communities and Hispanic households.

Other analyses show, for example, that Hispanic respondents would be 12 times more likely to stop answering the survey when they come to the citizenship question than non-Hispanic whites. That type of undercount among noncitizen households alone would result in $152 million in misallocated Title I funds alone, according to an analysis from the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of 74 of the nation's largest urban school districts. A 5.8% undercount for noncitizen and Hispanic households would be even more acute: Schools in L.A. and New York City, for example, would stand to lose more than $10 million in Title I funds.

For L.A. schools, the council estimates, the loss of Title I funds would result in the loss of up to 200 staff positions, including teachers, counselors, librarians, nurses and social workers.

Places like Chicago, Miami-Dade, Clark County and Dallas would also be hit especially hard. For this reason, the citizenship question is opposed by almost the entire education community, including the national associations that represent school boards, school superintendents and principals, who filed a joint amicus brief in the Supreme Court case, where they outlined "grave concerns" about the citizenship question.

"Because decennial census population counts are so vital to adequate funding for schools and education policy, census undercounts pose a grave risk to our education system," the groups wrote in support of the challenge to the citizenship question in front of the justices. "Given the financial impact on funding with the addition of a citizenship question, particularly on public schools in states with the highest populations of immigrants, communities most in need will receive less."

The Fate of the Census Citizenship Question

The administration has the authority to alter the census as it sees fit, and last year Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross Jr. announced plans to reintroduce the citizenship question on the 2020 decennial census at the request of the Department of Justice, whose officials said they want the data to better enforce the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Until 1950, almost every decennial census asked a citizenship question dating back to 1820. More recently, however, the Census Bureau has only included the question on certain offshoots of the census, like the annual American Community Survey, which is given to a smaller number of households.
It's unclear how the justices will come down in their ruling. When they heard arguments in April, the liberal judges voiced skepticism about Ross's decision to add the question, while conservative judges were less concerned, noting that other countries use a similar citizenship question on their census forms.

But already three federal judges, one in New York City, one in San Francisco and one in Maryland, ruled that the citizenship question violates the Administrative Procedure Act because Ross's decision to add it was arbitrary. The justification for the citizenship question was also recently called into question after documents were found showing that the anticipated undercount would hit Democratic strongholds hardest and potentially allow Republicans to gerrymander congressional maps.

Of course, the debate over whether the census should include a citizenship question feeds into the larger debate over the Trump administration's immigration agenda.

"We knew immediately that this was intended to have repercussions on our communities," says Mireya Reith, founding executive director of Arkansas United, a Springdale-based nonprofit that advocates for immigrants rights. "Our concerns really tie into a moment right now where immigrants in general all across the country have a distrust in government. That's in part because of this administration and how this administration really has lifted up enforcement and deportation as a primary priority."

Reith, a naturalized citizen, was appointed to the Arkansas State Board of Education in 2011 – the first Latina to serve in that position in the state – and later, in 2016, became the youngest person in state history to lead the State Board.

"I do think that after the Supreme Court ruling we will see state boards of education picking up these conversations in a bigger way," she says. "Serious local leadership has to give assurances to these communities that their participation will be protected. There has to be a very serious proactive effort if immigrants are to participate."

Late last fall, she says, an unverified memo circulated among immigrant communities in Arkansas that said the Trump administration intended to share the citizenship question with immigration enforcement agencies.

"Whether it was true or not, it's things like that, that put our communities on high alert," she says. "Census officials have stated to us that that could not happen. At the same time, there is not a trust of this administration, and this administration hasn't given us any reason to trust there wouldn't be a manipulation of the process."

**Building Systems of Trust Among Immigrant Communities**

"When I first came to this incredible country I was undocumented," says Lupita Ley Hightower, the superintendent of the Tolleson Elementary School District, which serves about 4,300 students in preschool through grade eight just west of Phoenix, Arizona, in Maricopa County. "There is a real understanding of the fear here."
For communities like Tolleson, where upward of 80 percent of students are Latino and 90 percent are poor, located in a state that has one of the lowest per pupil expenditures in the entire country at $8,000, the federal funding is crucial.

Hightower has been working with specialists from the census and members of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, she says, to better understand how the information on the decennial census is used so that she can reassure her community that a citizenship question would not put them at risk with immigration officials.

"We've been educating ourselves so we can better educate our community – they should fill out the form, that the information is protected," Hightower says. "That might be one of the biggest fears, what's going to happen with that information. But it's protected information, it's confidential and it's critical to be counted."

The approximately $1 million in Title I funding that Tolleson schools receive, for example, is used for things like reading interventionists, community and family engagement coordinators and instructional STEM coaches.

"The education and support systems for kids would look very differently if families decide not to fill out the questionnaire," Hightower says. "The implications are huge. We're looking at the funding and know that it might result in less opportunity for students. This is a community that needs that supplemental funding."

Earlier this week, educators from across Indiana – school board members, school superintendents, officials from urban and rural school districts, even librarians – huddled in Indianapolis at the state's school board headquarters with educators from across the state to talk about anticipated funding losses from an undercount.

State officials have estimated that up to $929 could be lost per person not counted per year for the next decade, depending on the severity of the undercount.

"We're talking about $10,000 for every person we don't count," says Steve Corona, the vice president of the Fort Wayne Community School Board in Indiana. "That's got everyone's attention."

"What we were talking about was, hey, we know there is going to be an undercount," says Corona, who also who serves on the National School Boards Association as the chairman of the National Hispanic Council of School Board Members and is also the executive director of Latinos Count, a nonprofit organization focused on sending more Latino students to college. "We just don't know how severe it's going to be. Irrespective of people's opinions on whether or not that citizenship question should be included, there's going to be money lost there."

Corona says the State board is putting together a toolkit for school districts for how they can ensure the most accurate possible counts in their communities, especially among the most vulnerable populations who might be less inclined to participate because of the citizenship question. That will mean recruiting teachers, principals, school counselors and nurses, librarians
and any school personnel that are seen as trusting individuals in the community to spend time with families to stress the importance of participating in the census.

"The goal is to identify those trusted sources in our school communities and encourage those people who have any concerns about the importance of counting young people," Corona says. "Some people just don't understand how important it is with respect to money, but we're going to leave it on the table and give to other states if we don't get organized."