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2020 Census count lags in Georgia amid coronavirus

By Beau Evans Capitol Beat News Service

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Georgia is lagging in its count of the 2020 U.S. Census as outreach workers struggle reaching communities in isolated areas for counting amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The decennial count affects the state's share of a huge pot of federal dollars given annually for a wide range of programs like Medicaid and Medicare, food stamps, housing vouchers, highway construction, child-care services, special education and more.

Roughly \$1.5 trillion will be available for states to tap into depending on the size of their census-determined populations, according to research from Georgia Washington University. The larger the population, the larger the share.

But so far, only 56% of households in Georgia have filled out the census this year, far fewer than the 72% completion rate the state saw in 2010, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The low response rate ranks Georgia 35th among all states and trails the national average by about 4%.

That has prompted worry among local workers and volunteers tasked with boosting Georgia's census count this year.

"From a statewide standpoint, we're just not doing well," said Michele NeSmith, research and policy development director for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia. "Unfortunately, the counties with the worst response rates are the ones that need to have as accurate a count as possible."

The bulk of the undercounting is in rural parts of the state that were already at risk of flying under the radar due to poor access to the internet, which is how most people complete the census.

As of Friday, 32 counties – mostly in rural South Georgia – of the state's 159 counties had a census completion rate of less than 40%, according to Census Bureau data. Combined, just 15% of those counties' households had filled out the census via the internet.

Those counties are already experiencing population declines that could be worsened if less federal funding is available due to census undercounting, said Rusty Haygood, a deputy commissioner for the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, who is co-leading the statewide census outreach effort.

"This is the area that I'm most concerned with, us getting on the ground and getting some good responses in the near future," Haygood said.



Metro areas have not been spared from the low census rates, though the trend is being seen most dramatically in rural South Georgia. To date, completion rates are down roughly 5% or more in Fulton, DeKalb and Cherokee counties in metro Atlanta, as well as counties covering other metro areas including Augusta, Savannah, Brunswick, Athens, Macon, Valdosta and Columbus.

The counting shortfall has coincided with social-distancing practices prompted by coronavirus, which quickly handcuffed outreach volunteers who had been planning for months to help people in hard-to-reach areas take the census in local libraries, churches and big events that have been shuttered.

Door-to-door Census Bureau workers were set to start canvassing houses where people had not completed the census earlier this month. But with concerns still high over the virus' spread, that kind of close-contact outreach has not happened yet.

"We are getting farther and farther away from the national average," said Anna Miller, planning and research director for the state Office of Planning and Budget, who is co-leading statewide outreach with Haygood. "So it's not great. We have some work to do."

Food banks and other meal programs have picked up some of the slack as many people have been encouraged to take the census while picking up lunches for themselves or out-of-school children. But outreach workers had planned to lean more on churches and other common social spots to drum up interest in the census before those establishments started closing in March.

One group, the nonprofit Fair Count, had installed wireless internet and laptops in 140 churches, daycares, community centers, barber shops and other establishments in hard-to-count areas for people to take the census before the virus hit. One a third of those establishments have since reopened. The group also embarked a 50-stop bus tour to promote the census but had to pause the tour after only six stops.



Now, Fair Count is planning a largely virtual push to boost census participation via phone banks, text messaging, online events, tele-town halls and local media interviews, said the group's program director, Ed Reed. But outreach workers across the state are also having to balance urging people to take the census and being mindful of the tough economic and health issues that the virus has brought them.

"We are finding that the census is not necessarily a priority on people's minds," Reed said. "They are worried about the job they lost or the health of a family member."

Miller, Haygood, Reed and dozens more state and local leaders working on census outreach are now eyeing moves by the federal government to extend the timeline for wrapping up the census. Lately, they have seen promising signs of the outreach campaign's revival.

Importantly, Census Bureau workers reopened offices May 11 in Georgia after being shuttered for weeks due to coronavirus. They began mailing out census questionnaires in mid-May and are poised to start door-to-door outreach in August for people who have not returned their census.

Congress is also expected to approve deadline extensions that will allow the Census Bureau to formally submit census data to the president by the end of April 2021, instead of the original deadline at the end of December 2020.

That could also push back the timeline for state lawmakers to begin negotiations next summer over redrawing General Assembly and congressional district boundaries, which are also dependent on census-driven population counts.



Meanwhile, members of a state committee tasked with overseeing census outreach met Wednesday to start rekindling marketing campaigns. With \$1.5 million on hand, the committee initially planned to launch television and online advertisements last month but now aims to do so in July and August.

The committee is also reaching back out to hundreds of county, city and neighborhood census-outreach groups that were set to play a key role in raising awareness of the count before coronavirus hit.

Like Fair Count, those groups will need to rely more on virtual outreach for the foreseeable future as social distancing remains a widespread practice, said Holger Loewendorf, a research analyst with the Georgia Municipal Association.

“While we can’t do big personal outreach events and hand physical objects to people to promote the census, we’ll have to find other ways,” Loewendorf said. “We’re working on that.”

Particularly challenging for outreach workers will be locating and counting thousands of college students who left campus as state universities and schools started shutting down in March. That movement is already affecting census counts in college towns like Athens, where roughly 10% fewer census forms have been returned compared to 2010.

Still, census workers and volunteers like Haygood view the upcoming outreach push this summer as critical. He stressed Georgians should not accept having a low census count and less federal funding just because coronavirus has made tallying up people more difficult.

“Coronavirus did impact us,” Haygood said. “But coronavirus is not our excuse. We can’t lay everything at the foot of coronavirus.”

**Spring Sports registrations
open January 2**



Search for your neighborhood to learn what to expect from the 2020 Census.

The U.S. Census Bureau is charged with counting every person living in the United States. In previous decades, most households received a paper questionnaire by mail and were asked to return the completed form by mail. 2020 will be different. Just how you will respond depends on where you live. Everyone has the option of just going online. However, large swaths of rural America can expect to see a Census Bureau counter knock on their door. Other areas can expect the old school questionnaire in the mail. The map below, courtesy of the Center for Urban Research, will show you what to expect. Click on the map, type in your area or county and the map will zoom in. The menu on the left explains the colors. For more information go to [More information](#)

