

Census Data Release FAQ

What will we learn with today's data release?

Today's data release takes us to the next step of the redistricting process. For most states, this means legislators or commissions will start the process of actually drawing new voting district maps. We will be able to see the demographic characteristics of our communities, including the race and ethnicity of people who live there. By understanding how our communities have changed over the last ten years, we can ensure that our mapmakers draw fair maps. The kind of maps that give everyone equal opportunity to be represented by someone who shares their lived experience and values and equal access to the resources that our communities need to thrive.

What is legacy data? Why is it used?

Legacy data refers to the format of the 2020 Census redistricting data that the Census Bureau will be releasing on August 12. It's a raw format, meaning that while less user-friendly, it provides all the same redistricting information that will be released later in September. This data includes population totals down to the census block, race and ethnicity data, and information about who lives where and which residences are unoccupied. The legacy data will be in the same format that was used in the 2010 and 2000 Census, so both states and experts are familiar with how to use it. It is being released ahead of the original schedule in response to state requests so they can get to work on the redistricting process. States will still receive the more user-friendly version before September 30. Most states are planning to use the legacy data rather than waiting for the September data release. Advocates will be able to access a useable version of the data through the Redistricting Data Hub.

Why was the Census data delayed?

In a typical census, data is released by March 31 of the year ending in one. However, this year, Covid-19 delayed the Census Bureau because in-person Census workers who normally go door-to-door could not do so. By extending the timeline for delivering the data, the Census Bureau allowed its scientists to take the time needed to ensure we are receiving quality data that accurately reflects our community.

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What is differential privacy?

Differential privacy is the layer of protection added by the U.S. Census Bureau to provide local-level data about our communities but keep individual information private. The process of differential privacy adds statistical “noise” to census data, which makes it harder to reverse engineer any individual information. This may lead to some differences in how the census data looks at the census block (the smallest unit of geography that the Census Bureau provides data for) level. One change that the Census Bureau has recommended to accommodate the changes in how data will look because of differential privacy, is that mapmakers draw maps using census block group (more than one census block) rather than individual census blocks. While the data for a small demographic area may look different than in years past, it won’t change how we use the data for redistricting.

How do we know we know the data is accurate?

We don’t know yet how accurate the data is that is being released. Once the data drops, experts will analyze it using several different tools provided by the Census Bureau, as well as other methods, to determine whether there was an undercount or other issues with the data. For states and tribal nations, there is also an appeal process where representatives can challenge the census numbers. The Census Bureau can review this appeal and make corrections if warranted. While there is no doubt that the 2020 Census faced significant challenges, including a global pandemic, the Bureau took several steps to ensure that we have the most accurate data possible, including extending the timeline so all of our friends, family, and neighbors had time to be counted.

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Will the Latinx population and other communities of color be undercounted?

It is too early to tell whether there was an undercount or who was missed. We fully recognize that our BIPOC communities faced several hurdles to participating in the 2020 Census and understand that no census has ever been perfect. Regardless, redistricting works best when all voices, particularly those who have historically been left out of the redistricting process, have a say. This is why it is essential that mapmakers provide meaningful opportunities for robust public participation in the process, including community testimony and public input on the final maps.

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