



On Eve of 2020 Census, Many People in Hard-to-Count Groups Remain Concerned about Participating

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The 2020 Census count began on January 21 in remote parts of Alaska, and the US Census Bureau will contact most households between March 12 and March 20 to provide instructions for completing the questionnaire online, by mail, or by phone. By counting all people residing in the US and collecting household demographic information, the 2020 Census will provide critical data for apportioning congressional seats; redistricting federal, state, and local jurisdictions; enforcing civil rights and voting rights laws; implementing other federal data collection efforts; making business and community planning decisions; and appropriating an estimated \$1.5 trillion in federal funds for programs across states and communities (Reamer 2020; US Census Bureau 2018).

People in certain groups and communities have often been at risk of being undercounted, but several factors could increase that risk in the current count (Elliott et al. 2019; Kissam 2019).¹ In particular, efforts by the US Department of Commerce in 2018 and 2019 to add a question about citizenship status to the 2020 Census questionnaire and heightened immigration enforcement efforts have likely raised fears within immigrant communities about how responses to the census will be used. Although a June 27, 2019, Supreme Court ruling blocked the inclusion of the citizenship question,² the White House issued an executive order two weeks later directing federal agencies to provide the Department of Commerce with citizenship data from administrative records.³ The prolonged controversy over the proposed change and the subsequent executive order may have generated confusion about whether the 2020 Census will be used to collect information on citizenship status, and this could contribute to reduced responsiveness among immigrant families.⁴

Studies conducted in 2017 and early 2018 (before those events) found concerns among immigrants and other hard-to-count groups that their responses to the census would not be kept confidential or would be used against them, even though federal law prohibits sharing any identifiable data with other government agencies (Evans et al. 2019; McGeeney et al. 2019).⁵ More timely data on people's

knowledge about the census, their intent to participate, and their concerns about participation can provide further insight on the extent to which hard-to-count groups remain wary of responding and why. These insights can help the US Census Bureau and its national, state, and local partners refine outreach and advertising campaigns to promote census participation, and they can inform plans for nonresponse follow-up with households that do not self-respond. This brief draws on December 2019 data from a nationally representative sample of adults ages 18 to 64 to assess attitudes toward and concerns about the 2020 Census just before counting began. We find the following:

- Though more than three-quarters (77.2 percent) of nonelderly adults report that their households definitely or probably will mail back the 2020 Census questionnaire or submit it online, self-reported intent to participate is relatively low among adults who are ages 18 to 34, live with young children, are nonwhite or Hispanic, live in families with noncitizens, and live in high-poverty communities.
- Nearly one-third of adults (32.3 percent) are extremely or very concerned about how their answers to the 2020 Census questionnaire will be used and with whom they will be shared. Among nonwhite and Hispanic adults and among adults in immigrant families, 40 percent or more are extremely or very concerned.
- There is significant confusion about whether the 2020 Census will be used to collect information on citizenship status. Nearly 70 percent of adults think the 2020 Census questionnaire will ask which people in their households are citizens even though the Supreme Court ruled that the citizenship question could not be included.
- Nearly one-third of adults (31.6 percent) think it is extremely or very likely that answers to the census will be used to find people living in the US without documentation, and another third think it is somewhat likely, despite federal laws preventing this from occurring. This belief is most common among adults in families with noncitizens (40.6 percent) and adults in immigrant families who are worried about deportation (46.4 percent).

These findings highlight the risks to a fair and complete count in the 2020 Census and underscore the importance of efforts to provide accurate information about the data the 2020 Census will collect, how those data will be used, and how participation benefits local communities.

Data and Methods

We use data from a nationally representative sample of 7,694 adults ages 18 to 64 who participated in the December 2019 round of the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS). The WBNS is an internet-based survey designed to monitor changes in individual and family well-being as policymakers consider significant changes to federal safety net programs. For each round of the WBNS, we draw a stratified random sample (including a large oversample of adults in low-income households) from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel maintained by Ipsos that includes households with and without internet access at home. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of nonelderly adults based on benchmarks

from the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey. Participants can complete the survey in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).

Given how important the 2020 Census is for allocating federal funds for major safety-net programs, the 2019 WBNS included validated questions on intent to participate in the 2020 Census, concerns about participation, and beliefs about whether the census would include a question about citizenship or be used to find undocumented people. These questions were drawn from the Census Bureau's 2020 Census Attitudes Survey, a tracking survey that will be fielded daily by phone in the months leading up to the census count,⁶ as well as from the Census Bureau's 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study, or CBAMS (McGeeney et al. 2019).

The December 2019 WBNS data can be used to supplement these data collection efforts in several ways. Fielding for the CBAMS survey occurred between February 20 and April 17, 2018, with most data collected before the Secretary of Commerce announced on March 26, 2018, that the department would seek to add a citizenship question. In contrast, the most recent round of the WBNS was fielded between December 5, 2019, and January 1, 2020. The WBNS data therefore reflect the more recent policy context in which households are making decisions about participation in the 2020 Census. And unlike the CBAMS and tracking survey, the WBNS collects data on both the nativity and citizenship status of respondents and family members who are living with them, which is important for understanding potential issues affecting participation among households in immigrant communities.

Our analysis focuses on the following measures:

- How likely it is that the respondent reports that they or a household member will mail back the 2020 Census questionnaire or submit it online.
- How concerned respondents are about how their answers to the 2020 Census will be used. This includes concerns that the Census Bureau will not keep answers to the 2020 Census confidential; the Census Bureau will share answers with other government agencies; the answers people provide will be used against them; or an unauthorized person from outside the Census Bureau will access answers to the census.
- Whether the respondent thinks the 2020 Census questionnaire will or will not ask which people in their household are US citizens.
- How likely the respondent thinks it is that answers to the census will be used to find people living in the US without documentation.

We compare respondents' intent to participate and concerns about participation by age, presence of young children (under age 6) in the household, race and ethnicity, and family nativity and citizenship status to provide insight on sociodemographic groups that previous research suggests are at greater risk of being undercounted (Erdman and Bates 2017; Goldenkoff 2018; McGeeney et al. 2019). For instance, relative to nonimmigrant households, households with immigrants may be harder to locate, to persuade to participate, or to interview because of language barriers (US Census Bureau 2019a). For

this brief, our definition of family nativity and citizenship status is based on the nativity and citizenship of both respondents and any family members living with them. We group respondents into three categories: families in which all members (including the respondent) are born in the US; in which one or more members are born outside the US and all are citizens; and in which one or more members are noncitizens. We refer to respondents in the latter two groups as adults in immigrant families.

We also compare respondents' intent to participate based on community poverty rates. For this comparison, we use American Community Survey 5-year estimates of the average share of people with annual family incomes below the federal poverty threshold in respondents' communities between 2014 and 2018. We define communities based on zip code tabulation areas (ZCTAs), which are nonoverlapping geographic areas composed of groups of census blocks that approximate the zip codes used by the US Postal Service for mail delivery.⁷ Average ZCTA poverty rates for 2014 to 2018 are merged to the WBNS data using a crosswalk file that matches ZCTAs to respondents' zip codes.⁸ We then divide respondents into quartiles based on average poverty rates for their ZCTAs and compare intent to participate among adults across the four quartiles.

Finally, we examine beliefs about whether the 2020 Census will ask about citizenship status or be used to find undocumented people by family nativity and citizenship status and by how much adults in immigrant families report being worried that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported.

This analysis has several limitations. The sampling design for the WBNS excludes certain people who are unable or unlikely to complete an internet-based household survey that is only administered in English or Spanish, including adults who have low levels of literacy, speak only languages other than English or Spanish, are homeless, or live in group quarters. Our sample does not include adults age 65 and older or those living in Puerto Rico or other US territories. Further, the WBNS has a low cumulative response rate that is comparable to other private surveys but lower than federal surveys such as the CBAMS. However, previous studies assessing recruitment for the KnowledgePanel have found little evidence of nonresponse bias for core demographic and socioeconomic measures (Garrett, Dennis, and DiSogra 2010; Heeren et al. 2008), and WBNS estimates are generally consistent with benchmarks from federal surveys (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez 2018).

The findings in this brief are also not directly comparable with findings from the CBAMS because of differences in the target population, sampling approach, survey mode, and questionnaire design. Unlike the CBAMS, the WBNS provides nationally representative individual-level estimates for nonelderly adults rather than household-level estimates. Although WBNS respondents are asked to report intent to participate on behalf of their households, they are not necessarily the household members who are most likely to return the census questionnaire, particularly if they are not the head of household or the spouse or partner of that person. However, we find that WBNS estimates for household heads are similar to estimates for the full nonelderly adult population.

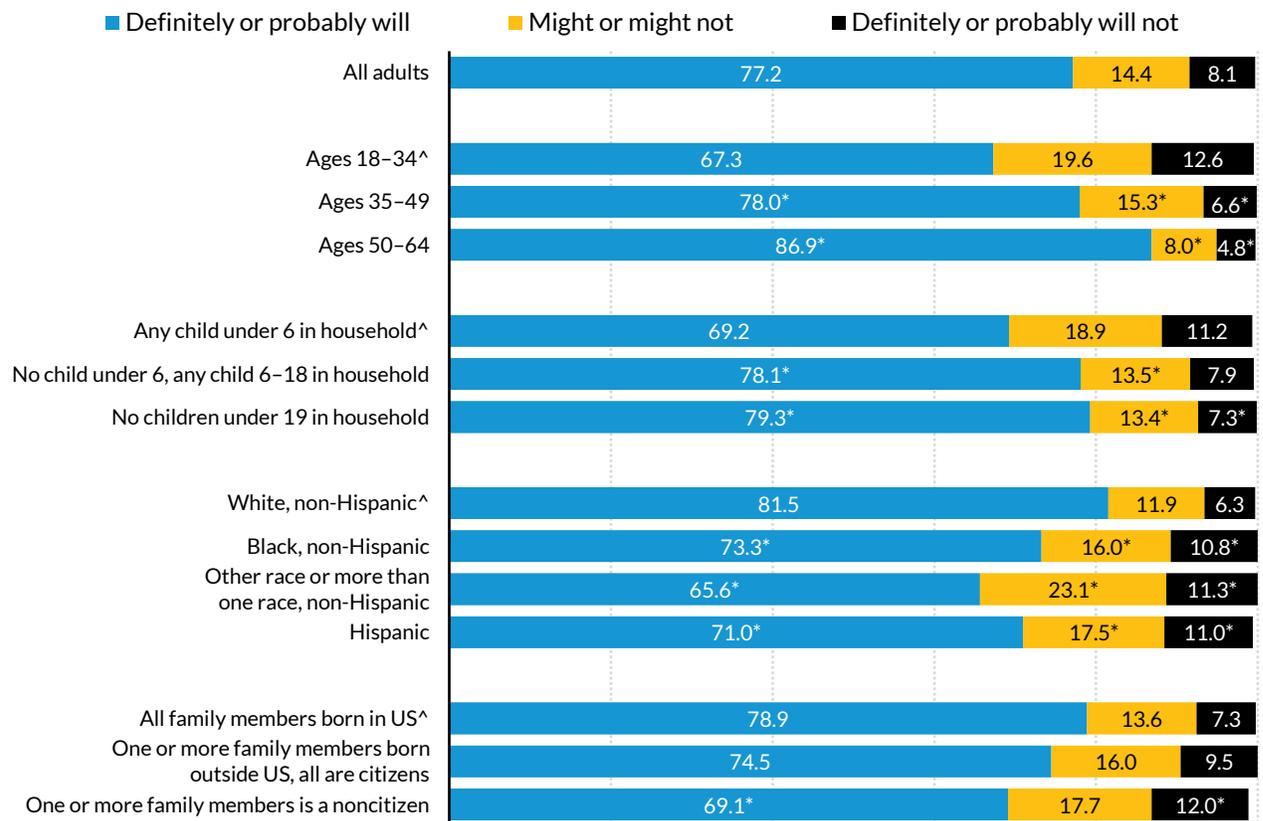
Results

Intent to Participate

Though more than three-quarters of nonelderly adults report that they definitely or probably will mail back the 2020 Census questionnaire or submit it online, self-reported intent to participate is relatively low among adults who are ages 18 to 34, living with young children, nonwhite or Hispanic, in families with noncitizens, or in high-poverty communities.

Overall, 77.2 percent of nonelderly adults report that their households definitely or probably will mail back the 2020 Census questionnaire or submit it online (figure 1). However, 8.1 percent report that their household definitely or probably will not, and 14.4 percent report that they might or might not.

FIGURE 1
Intent to Participate in the 2020 Census among Adults Ages 18 to 64, Overall and by Selected Characteristics, December 2019
 Percent



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019.

Note: Estimates across the three response categories do not always sum to 100 because estimates are not shown for adults who did not report intent to participate.

* Estimate differs significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

Respondents least likely to report that they will complete the questionnaire include adults who are ages 18 to 34, live with young children, are nonwhite or Hispanic, or live in families with noncitizens. Just over two-thirds of young adults ages 18 to 34 (67.3 percent) definitely or probably will complete the questionnaire, compared with 86.9 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds. Adults in households with children under age 6 are about 9 to 10 percentage points less likely to respond to the census than those in households with only children ages 6 to 18 and those who are not living with children.

Non-Hispanic white adults are more likely to report that they will complete the questionnaire (81.5 percent) than those who are Hispanic (65.6 percent), non-Hispanic black (73.3 percent), or non-Hispanic and another race or more than one race (71.0 percent). Adults in families with noncitizens are also less likely to say they intend to participate than adults in nonimmigrant families. Over three-quarters (78.9 percent) of adults in families with only US-born members are likely to complete the questionnaire, compared with 69.1 percent of adults in families with noncitizens.

BOX 1

Adults in Communities in Greatest Need of Federal Funds Are Least Likely to Say They Will Participate in the 2020 Census

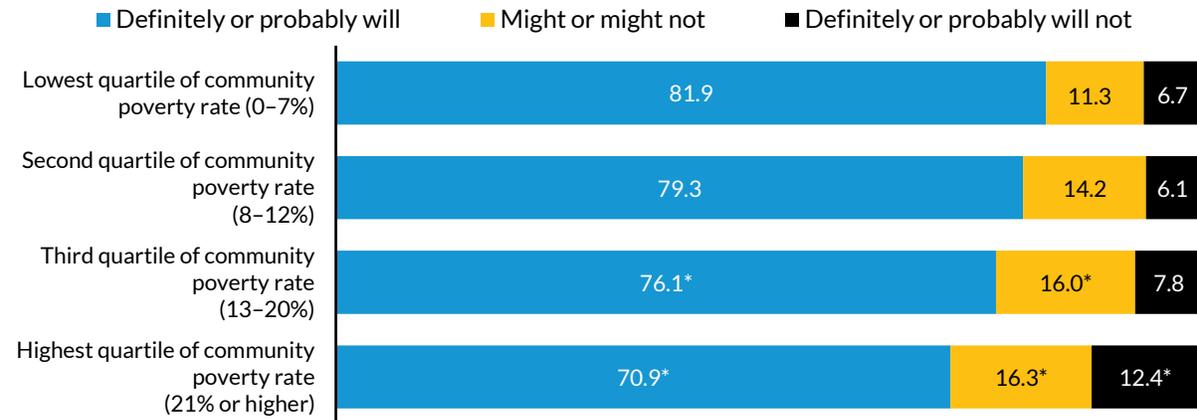
The census and census-derived data guide appropriation of federal funding to states and communities for health care, nutrition, housing, education, transportation, infrastructure, community development, and other programs (Reamer 2020). Figure 2 shows that intent to participate in the 2020 Census is lowest among households living in the highest-poverty communities, which are likely to have the greatest needs for federal funding. We divided WBNS respondents into quartiles based on the shares of people living below the federal poverty threshold in their ZCTAs. Poverty rates are based on pooled 2014–18 American Community Survey data that provide average estimates of poverty in each ZCTA over this five-year period.

In the lowest-poverty communities (those with poverty rates at or below 7 percent), 81.9 percent report that their households definitely or probably will mail back the 2020 Census questionnaire or submit it online, 11.3 percent might or might not, and 6.7 percent definitely or probably will not. In contrast, only 70.9 percent of adults in the highest-poverty communities (those with poverty rates at or above 21 percent) say they definitely or probably will complete the questionnaire, 16.3 percent might or might not, and 12.4 percent definitely or probably will not. These results highlight the potential for undercounts in high-poverty communities and the importance of outreach efforts to increase self-response rates among households in these disadvantaged communities.

FIGURE 2

Intent to Participate in the 2020 Census Among Adults Ages 18 to 64, by 2014–18 Community Poverty Rate, December 2019

Percent



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019. American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014–2018.

Notes: Communities are based on zip code tabulation areas (ZCTAs), which are nonoverlapping geographic areas composed of groups of census blocks that are used to approximate the zip codes used by the US Postal Service for mail delivery. Average poverty rates for ZCTAs are based on 2014–18 American Community Survey 5-year estimates of the share of people in each ZCTA with annual family incomes below the federal poverty threshold. We use a crosswalk file to match ZCTAs to WBNS respondents’ zip codes of residence. Estimates exclude 0.2 percent of adults for whom the Census Bureau does not calculate poverty rates for their ZCTAs or for whom we lack information on their zip code of residence. Estimates across the three response categories do not sum to 100 because estimates are not shown for adults who did not report intent to participate.

* Estimate differs significantly from adults in communities in the lowest quartile based on poverty rates at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

Concerns about Participation

Nearly one-third of adults are extremely or very concerned about how their answers to the 2020 Census questionnaire will be used and with whom they will be shared. Among nonwhite and Hispanic adults and among adults in immigrant families, 40 percent or more are extremely or very concerned.

The census data are only collected to produce statistics, and strong legal protections forbid the Census Bureau from releasing identifiable information or sharing it with other government agencies, including law enforcement. Despite these protections, 32.3 percent of adults reported being extremely or very concerned about one or more of four scenarios in which answers to the 2020 Census questionnaire would be misused (table 1). This includes more than 1 in 6 adults (17.7 percent) who reported being extremely or very concerned that the Census Bureau will not keep answers to the 2020 Census confidential. It also includes between approximately one-fifth and one-quarter of adults who are concerned that their answers will be shared with other government agencies (21.9 percent), used against them (18.4 percent), or accessed by an unauthorized person from outside the Census Bureau (24.6 percent). Though not directly comparable with the CBAMS, these estimates are consistent with concerns expressed by householders participating in that survey in early 2018, in which 28 percent were extremely or very concerned answers would not be kept confidential, 24 percent were extremely or very concerned answers would be shared with other government agencies, and 22 percent were extremely or very concerned their answers would be used against them (McGeeney et al. 2019).

TABLE 1

Concerns about the 2020 Census among Adults Ages 18 to 64, Overall and by Race and Ethnicity and Family Nativity and Citizenship Status, December 2019

Percent

	Share of adults who are extremely or very concerned about how answers to the 2020 Census will be used	Share of Adults Who Are Extremely or Very Concerned...			
		the Census Bureau will not keep answers to the 2020 Census confidential	the Census Bureau will share individuals' answers to the 2020 Census with other government agencies	the answers you provide to the 2020 Census will be used against you	an unauthorized person from outside the Census Bureau will access your answers to the census
All adults	32.3	17.7	21.9	18.4	24.6
By race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic [^]	25.7	13.3	18.6	13.1	18.7
Black, non-Hispanic	39.9*	23.0*	28.1*	24.1*	30.6*
Other race or more than one race, non-Hispanic	40.5*	23.3*	24.5	23.8*	29.7*
Hispanic	44.6*	25.7*	27.4*	29.4*	37.2*
By family nativity and citizenship status					
All family members born in US [^]	29.7	16.1	20.6	16.1	22.4
One or more family members born outside US, all are citizens	39.9*	23.3*	25.0*	22.2*	29.9*
One or more family members is a noncitizen	43.0*	22.6*	27.2*	30.7*	34.4*

Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019.

Note: Adults who are extremely or very concerned about how answers to the 2020 Census will be used include those reporting being extremely or very concerned about one or more of the following: the Census Bureau will not keep answers confidential; the Census Bureau will share answers with other government agencies; the answers you provide to the census will be used against you; or an unauthorized person from outside the Census Bureau will access your answers to the census.

* Estimate differs significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

WBNS respondents differed significantly by race and ethnicity and by family nativity and citizenship status in their concerns about how census data will be used or shared. Nearly one-quarter of non-Hispanic black adults (23.0 percent) and other nonwhite, non-Hispanic adults (23.3 percent) and more than one-quarter of Hispanic adults (25.7 percent) were extremely or very concerned about their answers being kept confidential, compared with 13.3 percent of non-Hispanic white adults. Non-Hispanic black and Hispanic adults were 9 to 10 percentage points more likely to be concerned than non-Hispanic white adults that their answers would be shared with other government agencies. Hispanic adults were about twice as likely as non-Hispanic white adults to be concerned their answers would be used against them (29.4 percent versus 13.1 percent) or accessed by an unauthorized person outside the Census Bureau (37.2 percent versus 18.7 percent).

Compared with nonimmigrant families, adults in immigrant families were more likely to be extremely or very concerned that the Census Bureau would not keep answers confidential or that answers would be shared with other government agencies, with little difference between immigrant families with or without noncitizens. However, roughly one-third of adults living with noncitizens were extremely or very concerned about answers being used against them (30.7 percent) or accessed by an unauthorized person outside the Census Bureau (34.4 percent), levels of concern that were higher than those for adults in nonimmigrant families or in immigrant families without noncitizens.

Concerns about participation did not differ significantly by age, and there were few significant differences by presence of young children in the household (data not shown).

Beliefs about Whether the Census Will Ask about Citizenship or Be Used to Find Undocumented People

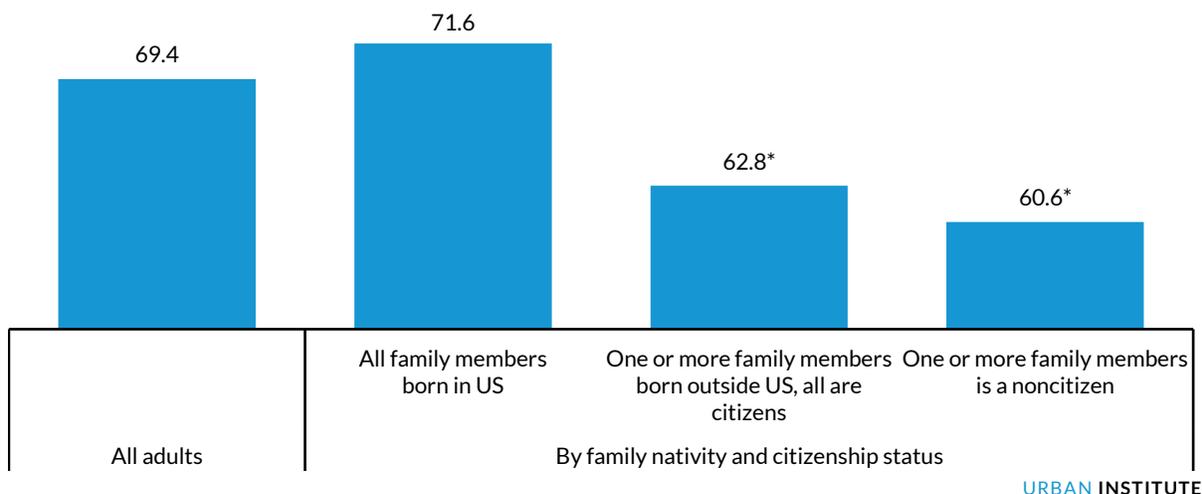
Nearly 7 in 10 adults think the 2020 Census questionnaire will ask which people in their households are citizens.

Survey responses suggested there is significant confusion about whether the 2020 Census will be used to collect information on citizenship and immigration status. Although many factors affect knowledge about the census, efforts to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census (ultimately blocked by the Supreme Court) and the subsequent White House executive order may have played a large role in adults incorrectly believing it will include such a question. Overall, 69.4 percent think the questionnaire will ask which people in their households are citizens (figure 3). Adults in immigrant families are more informed on this matter than those in nonimmigrant families. About 6 in 10 adults in families with noncitizens (60.6 percent) or in immigrant families with only naturalized citizens (62.8 percent) thought the 2020 Census will ask that question, compared with about 7 in 10 in families with all US-born members (71.6 percent). Nevertheless, a majority of adults in immigrant families believe they will be asked which household members are citizens, which could suppress participation if linked to concerns that doing so could adversely affect their families' immigration status.

FIGURE 3

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Who Think the 2020 Census Questionnaire Will Ask Which People Living in their Household Are US Citizens, Overall and by Family Nativity and Citizenship Status, December 2019

Percent



Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019.

* Estimate differs significantly from adults with all family members born in the US at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

Nearly one-third of adults think it is extremely or very likely that answers to the census will be used to find people living in the US without documentation and another third think it is somewhat likely. This belief is most common among adults in families with noncitizens and adults in immigrant families who are worried about deportation.

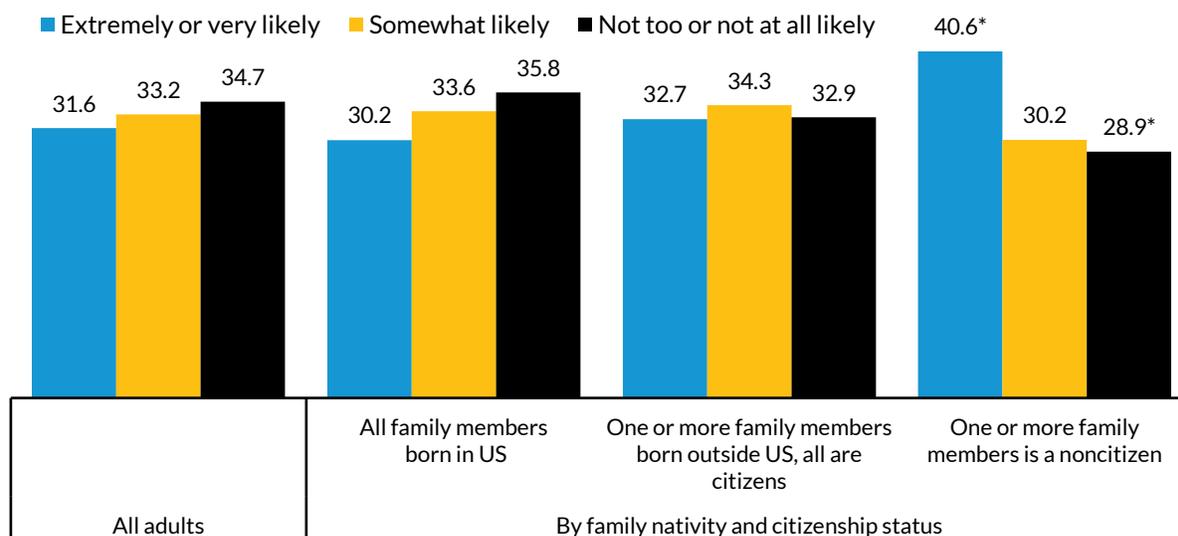
When asked how likely it is that answers to the census will be used to find people living in the US without documentation, 31.6 percent report it is extremely or very likely and 33.2 percent report it is somewhat likely (figure 4).⁹

The belief that it is extremely or very likely answers to the census will be used to find undocumented people was most common among adults in families with noncitizens: 40.6 percent of these adults believe this compared with 32.7 percent of adults in immigrant families without noncitizens and 30.2 percent in nonimmigrant families. Despite federal law protecting the confidentiality of census data,¹⁰ these results suggest significant levels of mistrust in the government, particularly among adults in families with noncitizens, with many believing the government will use responses to the census to enforce immigration policies.

FIGURE 4

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting that it is Likely that Answers to the Census Will Be Used to Find People Living in the US Without Documentation, Overall and by Family Nativity and Citizenship Status, December 2019

Percent



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019.

Note: The estimates across the three response categories do not sum to 100 percent because estimates are not shown for adults who did not report whether they think it is likely answers to the census will be used to find people without documentation.

* Estimate differs significantly from adults with all family members born in the US at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

BOX 2

Nearly Half of Adults in Immigrant Families Who Are Worried About Deportation Think It Is Likely the 2020 Census Will Be Used to Find Undocumented People

Figure 5 shows that, among adults in immigrant families, mistrust about the 2020 Census is highest among those who feel that they or their families or friends are vulnerable to deportation. We asked all respondents who are immigrants or who live with an immigrant family member how much they worry that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported.

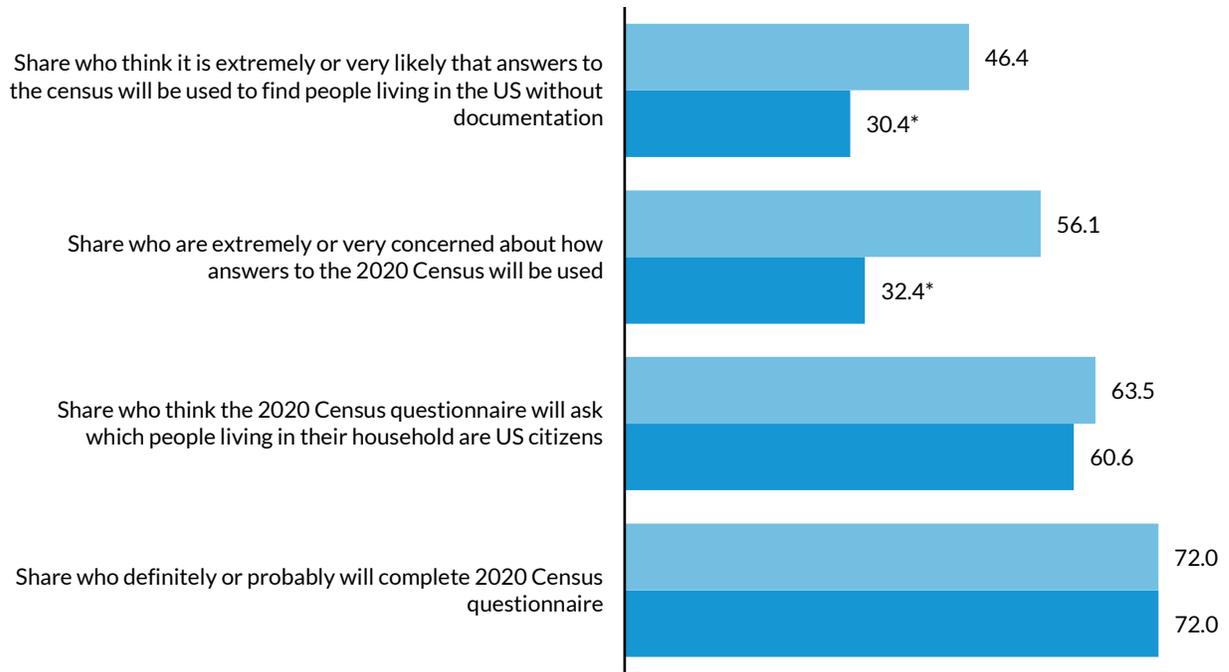
Almost half (46.4 percent) of adults in immigrant families who worry some or a lot that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported believe it is extremely or very likely that the 2020 Census will be used to find undocumented individuals. In contrast, 30.4 percent of adults in immigrant families who worry not much or not at all about deportation thought it was extremely or very likely that the census would be used for this purpose—still a substantial number. Further, 56.1 percent of adults in immigrant families who worry about deportation are extremely or very concerned about how answers to the 2020 Census will be used, compared with 32.4 percent who are not worried. More than 60 percent of adults in both groups think the 2020 Census questionnaire will ask about citizenship status. Nevertheless, 72.0 percent in each group say they definitely or probably will complete the questionnaire. This is about 7 percentage points lower than the share of adults in nonimmigrant families who definitely or probably will participate (figure 1).

FIGURE 5

Concerns About and Intent to Participate in the 2020 Census among Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Immigrant Families, by Worry about Deportation, December 2019

Percent

- Adults in immigrant families who worry some or a lot that self, family, or close friend could be deported
- Adults in immigrant families who worry not much or not at all that self, family, or close friend could be deported



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019.

* Estimate differs significantly from adults who worry some or a lot at the 0.05 level, using a two-tailed test.

Discussion

In the period just prior to the 2020 Census count, nearly one-third of nonelderly adults in the US expressed significant concerns about who will have access to their answers to the questionnaire and how the information will be used, suggesting they are not informed or are not confident in the legal protections preventing misuse of data. Further, the mistaken belief that the 2020 Census will ask about citizenship status or be used to find undocumented people appears to be widespread among adults in immigrant families. More than 60 percent of adults in immigrant families believe the census will include a citizenship question, and over 40 percent of adults in families with noncitizens believe it is extremely or very likely the census will be used to find people without documentation. These people are most likely to be deterred from responding if they fear it will jeopardize their ability to live and work in the US. Moreover, adults in immigrant families, as well as nonwhite and Hispanic adults, are more likely than their peers to be concerned about how their answers will be used. Self-reported intent to participate is

also relatively low among these and other historically hard-to-count groups, including young adults and households with young children.

Intent to participate is also lowest among adults living in the highest-poverty communities. Despite their greater needs, these communities are at the greatest risk of diminished political representation and federal funding if their residents are undercounted relative to residents of communities with lower poverty rates. Differences in the likelihood of participation across population groups and communities increase the challenge of ensuring the 2020 Census produces a count that is not only accurate in terms of measuring the total national population but also fair in ensuring equal representation.¹¹

Although not directly comparable with other data sources (such as the 2018 CBAMS and a Pew survey of adults conducted in October 2019),¹² the findings in this brief suggest that concerns about the 2020 Census and reluctance to participate among people in hard-to-count groups have persisted over time. The CBAMS found that 68 percent of household heads age 18 and older reported being extremely or very likely to respond to the census and that 25 percent were somewhat likely to respond; intentions to participate by age, presence of young children in the household, race and ethnicity, and nativity status were also similar to the patterns found in the WBNS. A key new finding of this brief is the greater level of concern, mistrust, and reluctance to participate among adults in families with noncitizens as of December 2019, following efforts to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census questionnaire, the White House executive order on using administrative data, and policies imposing additional restrictions on immigration.

It is also important to note that reported intent to participate likely overstates the share of households that will ultimately self-respond. The actual mail return rate prior to nonresponse follow-up for the 2010 Census was 10 percentage points lower than the rate of reported intent to participate in the 2008 CBAMS (McGeeney et al. 2019). A low self-response rate increases the resources needed for conducting nonresponse follow-up, in which households that do not self-respond are interviewed at home by enumerators or have information collected through proxy interviews (e.g., with neighbors or landlords), imputed through high-quality matches with administrative records, or imputed through other statistical procedures (US Census Bureau 2019b). Challenges reduce data quality at each stage of this process (Kissam 2019), and groups with low self-response rates have historically been more likely to face larger omission rates and net undercounts (Mule 2012; O'Hare 2019, 149–59).

The Census Bureau, in collaboration with thousands of national, state, and local partners across the country, has launched an \$850 million outreach and communications campaign to promote participation and reach historically underrepresented populations (Goldenkoff 2018). Several states, such as California, have also invested significant funding to achieve these objectives, and hundreds of communities have formed Complete Count Committees.¹³ In addition to the uncertainty posed by the immigration policy environment and efforts to add a citizenship question, these outreach efforts for the 2020 Census will confront unique challenges relative to 2010, including greater mistrust in government, declining survey response rates, a more fragmented media landscape, and concerns about data security for the first decennial census that will include an internet self-response option (McGeeney et al. 2019; US Census Bureau 2017).

The Census Bureau and local campaigns are guided by previous research showing that emphasizing how completing the census questionnaire benefits communities is one of the strongest approaches for motivating households to respond (Evans et al. 2019; McGeeney et al. 2019). From their experience in the field, advocacy and stakeholder groups are already emphasizing the need to target efforts to reach hard-to-count groups with trusted messengers to counter misinformation.¹⁴ The findings in this brief underscore the importance of pairing the message about potential benefits with assurances that the information households provide is protected and of making concerted efforts to reach groups most concerned that the data will be used against them.

Notes

- ¹ Center for Survey Measurement, “Respondent Confidentiality Concerns,” memorandum for the associate directorate of research and methodology, September 20, 2017, <https://www2.census.gov/cac/nac/meetings/2017-11/Memo-Regarding-Respondent-Confidentiality-Concerns.pdf>.
- ² *Department of Commerce et al. vs. New York et. al.* no. 18-966, 588 U.S. ____ (2019). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/18-966_bq7c.pdf.
- ³ “Executive Order on Collecting Information about Citizenship Status in Connection with the Decennial Census,” the White House, July 11, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-collecting-information-citizenship-status-connection-decennial-census/>.
- ⁴ Though a 2019 Census Test found that asking about citizenship status in the census questionnaire had little effect on overall self-response rates, including the citizenship question led to small but statistically significant declines in self-response in areas with high shares of noncitizen and Hispanic residents and in areas in which Asian residents were between 5 and 20 percent of the population (Poehler et al. 2019).
- ⁵ Center for Survey Measurement, “Respondent Confidentiality Concerns”; “The 2020 Census and Confidentiality,” US Census Bureau, accessed February 4, 2020.
- ⁶ We thank US Census Bureau staff for sharing the questionnaire for the 2020 Census Attitudes Survey.
- ⁷ For more details on how ZCTAs are constructed, see “Zip Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs),” US Census Bureau, accessed January 30, 2020.
- ⁸ We use a zip code-to-ZCTA crosswalk file from the UDS Mapper available at <https://www.udsmapper.org/zcta-crosswalk.cfm>. ZCTA codes are the same as zip codes of residence for more than 99 percent of respondents.
- ⁹ It is notable how these results differ from those of the 2018 CBAMS study. In that survey, 10 percent of all adults age 18 and older indicated that they thought the census is used to locate people living in the country without documentation, and 37 percent did not know if it was used for that purpose. However, it is unclear whether the higher share of nonelderly adults reporting in the WBNS that it is likely the census will be used to find people living without documentation is because of differences in question wording, differences in the survey samples, or changes in the political climate around immigration since 2018.
- ¹⁰ “The 2020 Census and Confidentiality,” US Census Bureau, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/factsheets/2019/comm/2020-confidentiality-factsheet.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Robert Santos. “Fairness, Not Just Accuracy, Is Vital to the 2020 Census,” *Urban Wire* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/fairness-not-just-accuracy-vital-2020-census>.
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¹³ This brief cannot be used to assess the effects of these outreach and advertising campaigns, which were not fully implemented when the December 2019 WBNS was fielded. See “The California Census Office Funding Explained,” California Complete Count Committee, <https://census.ca.gov/funding/>, accessed January 27, 2020; “2020 Census Complete Count Committees,” US Census Bureau, last updated January 30, 2020.

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