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# COMMUNITY OUTREACH TOOLKIT

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A quickstart guide to tailoring  
census outreach efforts for the  
people you serve



# How to use this toolkit:

STEP 1

## READ THE INTRO

PAGE 03

Welcome!  
Find out what this toolkit is, who it's for, and how to use it.

STEP 2

## GET A CENSUS REFRESHER

PAGE 04

Take Census 101—get a refresher on the reasons census matters to your community and the United States at large.

STEP 3

## LEARN THE BASICS OF OUTREACH

Get quick tips & best practices on how to design your outreach based on behavioral science research.

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STEP 4

## IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION



"I don't think the census has any impact on my life."

PAGE 11

"I don't feel comfortable sharing my information."



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"I have trouble completing census forms."

PAGE 13

"I don't have time to fill out the census."



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STEP 5

## TAILOR YOUR OUTREACH

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Answer some questions and fill in the blanks to create a plan for your outreach strategy.

STEP 6

## USE OUR RESOURCES

PAGE 16

See examples and get printable materials to support your census outreach efforts.

# 1

READ THE INTRO

## WHAT THIS TOOLKIT IS AND WHO IT'S FOR

Hello, and thanks for your interest!

You see the value in high-quality census data and want to ensure this continues so that your organization and our communities can benefit. **You want the people you serve to be accurately counted so they get their fair share of funding and representation for the next decade.**

Census partners are critical to helping the U.S. Census Bureau reach people across the nation. This toolkit will outline four barriers that census and external research have identified as particularly common reasons for not completing the census. Because you know your community best, **you are uniquely positioned to break down these barriers and ensure the people you care about are counted.**



This toolkit was developed in collaboration with the Office of Evaluation Sciences, which brings diverse scientific expertise to Federal agencies, translating research insights into concrete recommendations for how to improve Federal programs, policies, and operations. **It provides useful tips and evidence-based guidance on how to make your communications and outreach efforts as effective as possible.**

Let's get started!

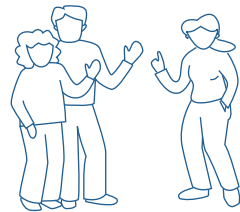
# 2

## GET A CENSUS REFRESHER

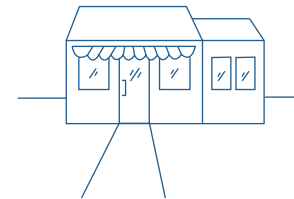
# CENSUS 101: WHAT, WHY, & WHEN

The Census Bureau's mission is to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy. The Census Bureau collects information through the decennial census, the American Community Survey, the economic census, and many other surveys.

Federal funds, grants and support to states, counties and communities are based on population totals and breakdowns by sex, age, race and other factors. People in your community use Census Bureau data in all kinds of ways, such as these:

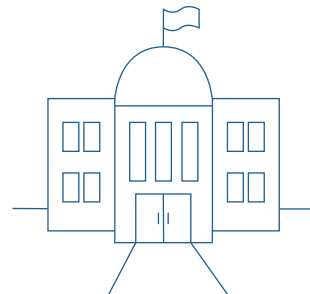


**Residents** use the census to support community initiatives involving legislation, quality-of-life and consumer advocacy.

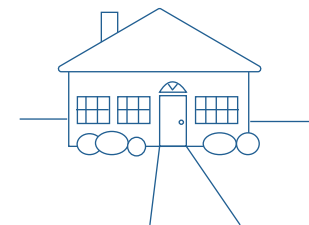


**Businesses** use Census Bureau data to decide where to build factories, offices and stores, and these create jobs.

**Local government officials** use the census to ensure public safety and plan new schools and hospitals.



**Real estate developers** and city planners use the census to plan new homes and improve neighborhoods.



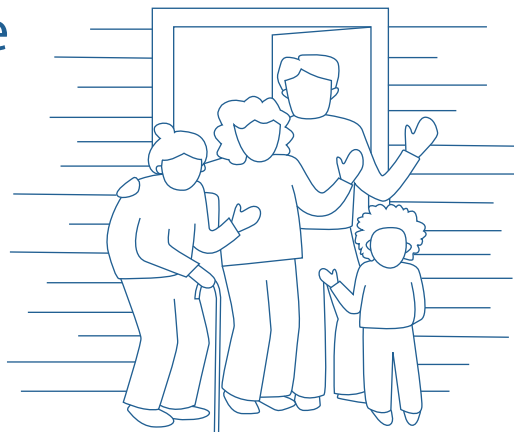
# WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT 2020

Once a decade, America comes together to participate in the decennial census, creating national awareness of the census and statistics. This census provides the basis for reapportioning Congressional seats, redistricting, and distributing billions of dollars in federal funding to support your state, county, and community's vital programs.

We included a printable version of "Census 101" fast facts to share with your community on pages 18-19.

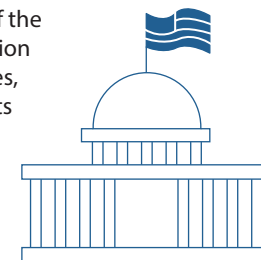
## Everyone counts.

The census counts every person living in the U.S. once, only once, and in the right place.



## It's about fair representation.

Every 10 years, the results of the census are used to reapportion the House of Representatives, determining how many seats each state gets.



## It's in the Constitution.

The U.S. Constitution requires a census every 10 years. The census covers the entire country and everyone living here. The first census was in 1790.



## Your data are confidential.

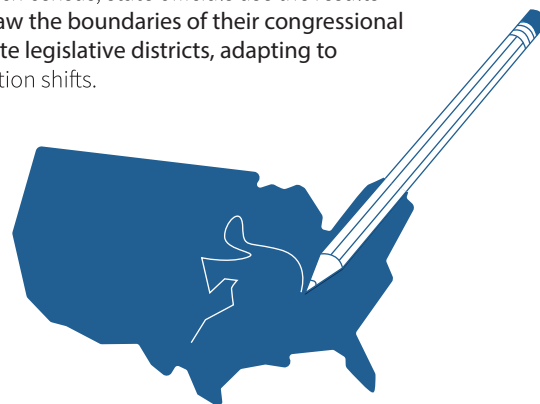
Federal law protects your census responses. Your answers can only be used to produce statistics.

By law we cannot share your information with immigration enforcement agencies, law enforcement agencies, or allow it to be used to determine your eligibility for government benefits.



## It's about redistricting.

After each census, state officials use the results to redraw the boundaries of their congressional and state legislative districts, adapting to population shifts.



## It means \$675 billion.

Census data determine how more than \$675 billion are spent, supporting your state, county and community's vital programs.



# 3

LEARN THE BASICS OF OUTREACH

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT WHAT WORKS

Researchers have long studied the way we access, process, and act on information. We've taken their insights and come up with recommendations and questions to ask yourself when developing your messaging. Grounding your communications in these principles will make them as effective as possible.



### MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

Page 05



### MAKE IT RELEVANT

Page 06



### PLAN THE DELIVERY

Page 07



# MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

Reducing friction in the path towards action is critical—and sometimes the smallest tweaks can have a significant impact.

## 1 Keep it simple.

*Is all the information in my message immediately useful?  
Am I using simple language?*

When communicating to mass audiences, there is no award for impressive use of an extensive vocabulary. Stick to a fifth grade reading level and a conversational style (such as the use of contractions) that's to the point. It's easy to over-share in an attempt to be thorough. Instead, provide only the most essential items for the immediate actions people need to take, and include reference links for those interested in learning more.

## 2 Make it visual.

*What pictures could I use to convey my message?*

We've all heard the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words," but very few informational campaigns begin by drawing a picture. Humans are drawn to attractive imagery and color, and some studies show we read as little as 20% of the text on a page. Make your design default a picture, and then add words, rather than start with extensive written text.

## 3 Create a checklist.

*What are the individual steps my audience should take?*

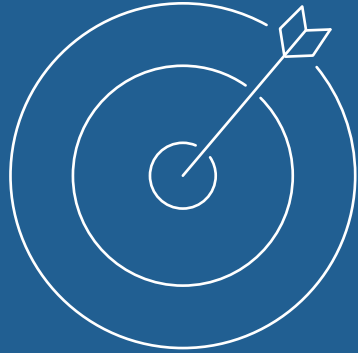
To help people take action, show a clear to-do list, next steps, or break down the specific tasks required to complete that action. Here's how:

- Start each step's sentence using the specific verb of the action they need to complete.
- Help people know what to expect, such as documents they'll need to bring with them to an appointment, etc.
- Break things down into smaller, more manageable chunks—for example, "Open a savings account" is more concrete than "Save money."

## 4 Prompt people to make a plan.

*What kind of planning does my audience need to do?*

There is often a gap between what we intend to do and what we actually do. To close this gap, a proven tactic is to provide a fill-in-the-blank template helping individuals to plan specific details of completing a task. Have them answer logistical questions such as what time they'll do something, what mode of transportation they'll use, the route they plan to travel, and other basic yet critical details.



# MAKE IT RELEVANT

Position your message to work for the audience you hope to engage—accounting for what’s important to them and what motivates them.

## 1 Make it salient.

*Why does my audience care?*

It’s easy to forget that the thing you’re advocating for, which you know a lot about, may not be as clear to someone even one step removed. Frame the “why” of taking an action as a value proposition that’s important to your targeted listener.

## 2 Make it personal.

*Where can I add a personal touch?*

Remember when your mom may have made you write thank you notes to your relatives after your birthday? It turns out she was on to something! Research has shown that personalization can increase response rates. Try these approaches:

- Personally address communications, such as letters or emails
- Tailor content to cite specific examples that matter or include the reader
- Include personal appeals from the sender, like a little handwritten note or signature on a template letter

## 3 Make it social.

*Who does my audience identify with or admire?*

We are strongly influenced by what those around us do, what we perceive to be “normal” or “acceptable,” and what others think of us. If we publicly commit to doing something, we’re more likely to follow through. We will purchase products that people we hope to emulate endorse, and consider how others rate restaurants or items we want to buy.

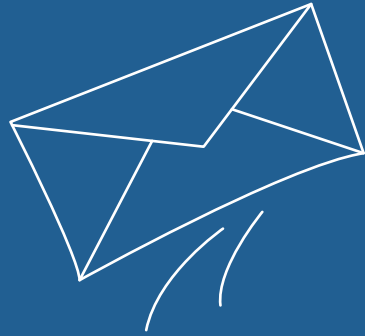
## 4 Consider the right incentives.

*How can I make my incentive seem even better?*

Both financial and non-financial incentives can be powerful motivators. Whenever applying this tactic, carefully consider the timing of the incentive and the context in which it is framed.

For example, a \$1 coupon is much more exciting for a \$5 item than a \$100 item even though in both instances an individual is saving the same amount. Providing a free financial planning consultation may be much more valuable during tax season.





# PLAN THE DELIVERY

Meet people where they're at—the packaging of your message matters.

## 1 Consider the messenger.

*Who will my audience listen to?*

People pay attention to who is asking them to do something. Is it someone they know? Trust? Respect? Consider who will resonate best with your target audience.

Additionally, if you're sending a written communication such as a letter or postcard, including a photo of the person sending the message has been shown to increase responsiveness.

## 2 Consider the timing.

*What is my audience's schedule like?*

*When will your message be most relevant?*

Research has shown that sending emails at lunchtime led to increased click rates, emphasizing the new year and a fresh start increased retirement savings, and asking people to sign a form at the start, rather than the end of a form reduced self-reporting errors.

Whenever possible, make your case for doing something linked to short-term costs or benefits. We have a tendency to discount things in the future, because they seem more abstract. This is why it's so hard for us to save for retirement or keep to a diet.

## 3 Consider the location.

*Where does my audience spend time?*

*Where will my message be most relevant?*

The context of your setting can also affect people's interest in hearing your message. Are you knocking on someone's door when they're home relaxing on a Saturday morning, or talking to them about how the census can impact educational funding while at the school parents' night?

## 4 Get creative with your mechanism.

*What kinds of communication channels does my audience like and already use?*

While sending letters or flyers can still be effective communications mechanisms, research has shown that text messages, pop-up boxes, and in-app messages are also cost-effective ways to connect.

Consider what channels your audience already engages with so you can meet them there, rather than trying to direct them to a new path of having to open their mail or visit a new website.

# 4

## IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

# BREAKING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

This section provides specific examples of how to apply the principles identified earlier in the context of the census to address some common barriers to taking the decennial census.



**“I don’t think the census has any impact on my life.”**

This person isn’t sure what census does, how its data affects them, and why their participation matters.

**PAGE 10**



**“I don’t feel comfortable sharing my information.”**

This person is concerned about data privacy or having their information used by other federal agencies.

**PAGE 11**

**“I have trouble completing census forms.”**

This person may not be a native English speaker and find census forms confusing.

**PAGE 12**



**“I don’t have time to fill out the census.”**

This person is very busy and assumes the census will be time-consuming and cumbersome.

**PAGE 13**





WHAT THEY SAY

**“I don’t think the census has any impact on my life.”**

WHO THIS MIGHT BE

**This person has never been shown a clear connection between the census and its impact on their daily life or community.**



## **MAKE IT ACTIONABLE**

### **Create a visual that will stick**

Because the census doesn’t feel important to this group, design an infographic or other visual aid that can help to connect the dots on how census data is used. Be careful not to make it overly complex—one strong example that someone will remember is better than an information overload they simply scan.



## **MAKE IT RELEVANT**

### **Create a badge**

Leverage local business owner networks to provide owners with a “census supporter” badge building awareness during the census response period and reinforcing the use of census data for economic development.



## **PLAN THE DELIVERY**

### **Get someone local**

Work with public servants such as firemen, police, and school teachers can demonstrate the importance of the census for benefits that people highly value.

### **Leverage existing touchpoints**

Draw on existing interactions such as community newsletters or events that highlight the census’ connection to something the individual is familiar with.



WHAT THEY SAY

“I don’t feel comfortable sharing my information.”

WHO THIS MIGHT BE

This person wonders: How is my data used and stored?  
Are the data really confidential?



## MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

### Preview census questions

Walking people through the questions the census contains before they actually take it can help to clarify the type of information “the government” is asking them, and help build clarity that there is no identifying information such as name or social security number.



## MAKE IT RELEVANT

### Start with a sure win

If you acknowledge something you know is a concern of your audience, they are more likely to relate to the next thing you say. For example, try highlighting data security as a legitimate concern before explaining how information is protected.



## PLAN THE DELIVERY

### Connect early

Because these individuals may require more information and discussion than other groups, begin outreach with them early. Early outreach will enable more time for informational efforts to build their confidence with how census data is used and protected.

### Reputation matters

Finding a familiar person this group trusts is particularly important. Choose someone who has community standing rather than the most “well known” person.



## WHAT THEY SAY

**“I have trouble completing census forms.”**

## WHO THIS MIGHT BE

**This audience contains non-native English speakers or recent immigrants. They may not understand the importance of participating in a census or survey.**



### **MAKE IT ACTIONABLE**

#### **Reduce word count**

Especially for non-native English speakers, complete an exercise where you communicate actions to taking the census with as few words as possible.

#### **Make a worksheet**

Help people prepare to take the census with a worksheet or checklist that clearly specifies what people need to know in order to complete the census (how many people live in their house, their ages, etc.).



### **MAKE IT RELEVANT**

#### **Promote responsibility to a group**

These often tight-knit communities will value the fact that taking the census to represent their voice and enable a more accurate allocation of resources for their entire community requires everyone to participate.



### **PLAN THE DELIVERY**

#### **Meet people where they are**

Identify services individuals use—such as public transportation—and bring census messaging there.



## WHAT THEY SAY

“I don’t have time to fill out the census.”

## WHO THIS MIGHT BE

This person either assumes the census is cumbersome to complete or does not value the census highly compared to other tasks.



### MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

#### Provide context

Anchor the time it takes to complete the census to a simple task they do as part of their normal day. For example, “You can complete the census while you wait for your next metro train.”

#### Make it a default

Embed a notification or link to the online census into a platform they already trust and use. For example, if individuals interact with your organization by logging into an account or visiting your website.



### MAKE IT RELEVANT

#### Offer micro-incentives

Even a small, yet relevant benefit can help “tip the scale” for someone busy, e.g., getting to wear the “I voted” sticker at work or a free cup of coffee for filling out the census on a tablet at a table in a public place.

*Printable stickers are included on page 20.*

#### Public commitment

Because this audience is busy, creating a way for them to publicly commit (for example, signing their name on a public board) can increase the likelihood they’ll follow-through.



### PLAN THE DELIVERY

#### Text and link

Reminding this audience to take the census multiple times can be helpful. Try including the link with the reminder so they can take immediate action and not have to remember to come back later.

# 5

## TAILOR YOUR OUTREACH

# SEND OUT YOUR FIRST MESSAGE

Now that we've covered some best practices for messaging and given you an overview of barriers to participating in Census Bureau surveys, you're ready to tailor your first message to your audience. As you craft your message, use this checklist to make sure you're making it as effective as possible:

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

- Who is my primary audience?*
- Why might they not participate in the census?*

### HAVE AN OBJECTIVE

- What do I want my audience to do after receiving my message?*
- Does my audience have an incentive to take that action?*

### MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

- Is all the information in my message immediately useful? Am I using simple language?*
- What pictures could I use to convey my message?*
- Have I communicated the individual steps my audience should take?*
- What kind of planning does my audience need to do in order to take the action I want?*

### MAKE IT RELEVANT

- Why does my audience care?*
- Where can I add a personal touch?*
- Who does my audience identify with or admire?*
- How can I make my incentive seem even better?*

### PLAN THE DELIVERY

- Who will my audience listen to?*
- What is my audience's schedule like?*
- When will your message be most relevant?*
- Where does my audience spend time?*
- Where will my message be most relevant?*
- What kinds of communication channels does my audience like and already use?*

# 6

USE OUR RESOURCES

## OUTREACH MATERIALS

Use the resources in the following pages in your outreach!  
Check back at [www.census.gov/partners](http://www.census.gov/partners) for updates to the toolkit.

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### OUTREACH PLANNING WORKSHEET

Page 17

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### CENSUS 101

Pages 18-19

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### PRINTABLE STICKERS

Page 20



# CENSUS OUTREACH PLANNING WORKSHEET

## PLAN YOUR MESSAGE BY ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS:

Who do I want to reach?

Why might they not participate in the census?

What is the action I want my audience to take?

These are the concrete steps required:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

Why should my audience care about my message?

What kinds of people does my audience trust and admire?

What channels of communication does my audience prefer?

What times of day is my audience available?

Where will my audience be most receptive to my message?

What incentives will my audience respond to?

## FINAL REVIEW CHECKLIST:

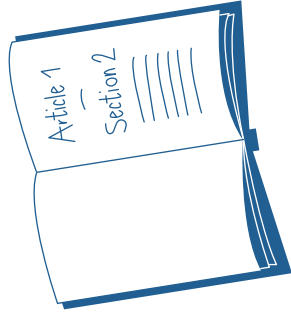
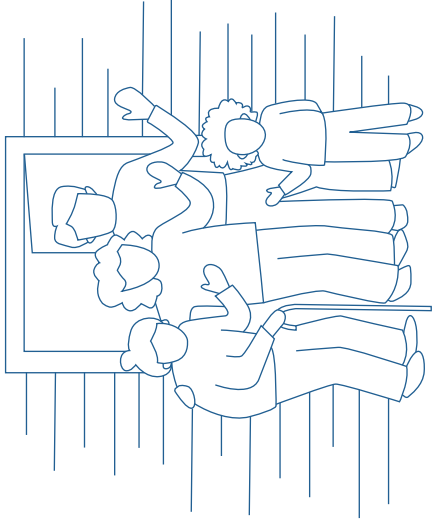
- All the information in my message is immediately relevant*
- I have edited my language to be simple*
- I have used pictures where possible to convey information*
- I have communicated the individual steps I want people to take.*
- I have considered how to add a personal touch.*
- I have considered how to make my incentive seem even better.*

# CENSUS 101: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The 2020 Census is closer than you think!  
Here's a quick refresher of what it is and why it's essential that everyone is counted.

## Everyone counts.

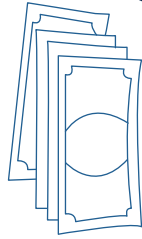
The census counts every person living in the U.S. once, only once, and in the right place.



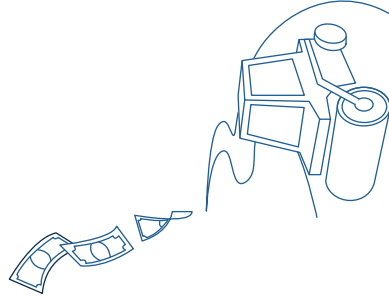
## It's in the Constitution.

The U.S. Constitution requires a census every 10 years. The census covers the entire country and everyone living here. The first census was in 1790.

## It means \$675 billion.

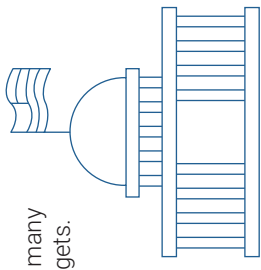


Census data determine how more than \$675 billion are spent, supporting your state, county and community's vital programs.



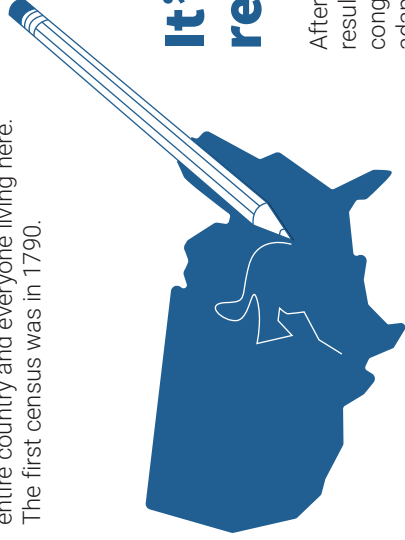
## It's about fair representation.

Every 10 years, the results of the census are used to reapportion the House of Representatives, determining how many seats each state gets.



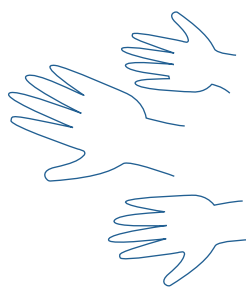
## It's about redistricting.

After each census, state officials use the results to redraw the boundaries of their congressional and state legislative districts, adapting to population shifts.

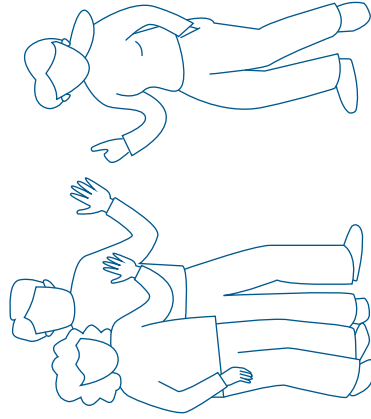


## Taking part is your civic duty.

Completing the census is required: it's a way to participate in our democracy and say "I COUNT!"



# Census data are being used all around you.

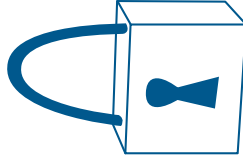


Residents use the census to support community initiatives involving legislation, quality-of-life and consumer advocacy.

## Your data are confidential.

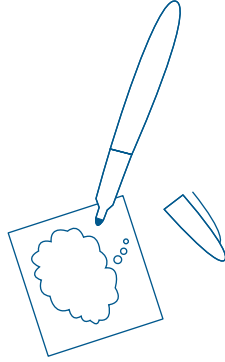
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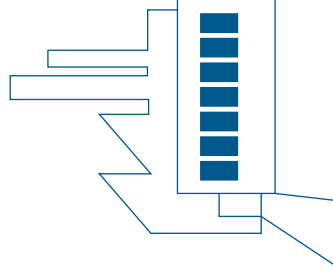


## You can help.

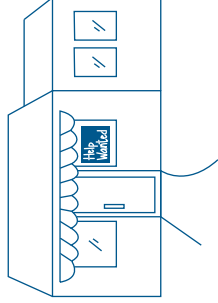
You are the expert—we need your ideas on the best way to make sure everyone in your community gets counted.



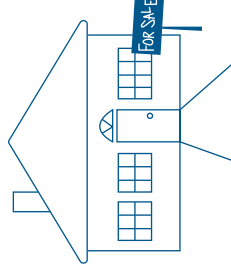
Businesses use census data to decide where to build factories, offices and stores, which create jobs.



Local governments use the census for public safety and emergency preparedness.

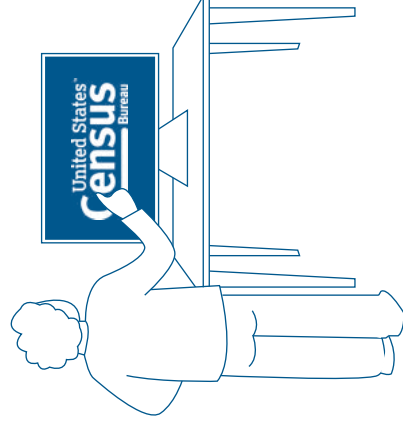


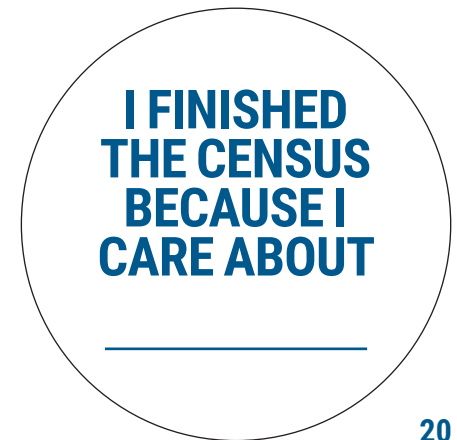
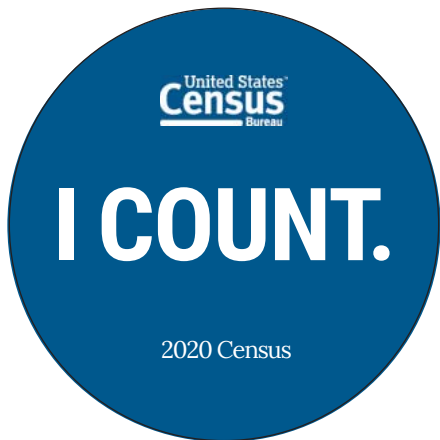
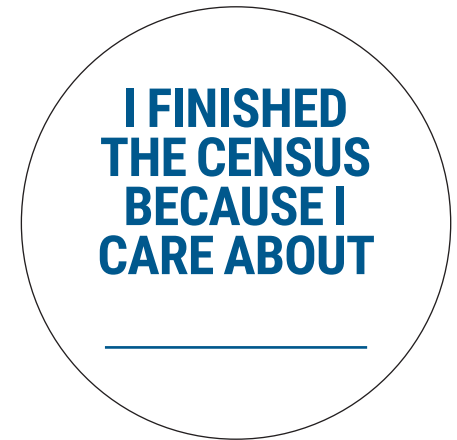
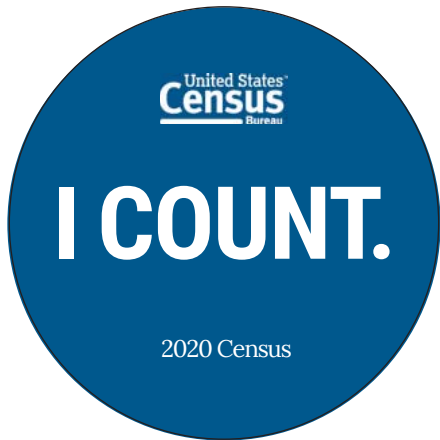
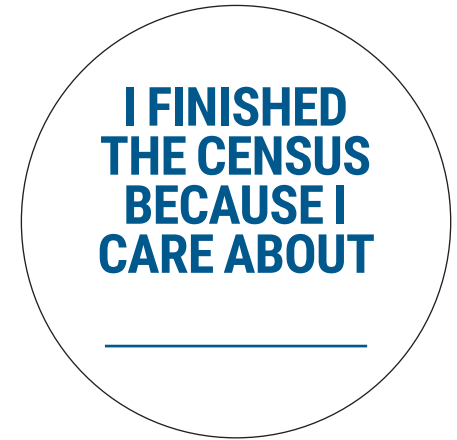
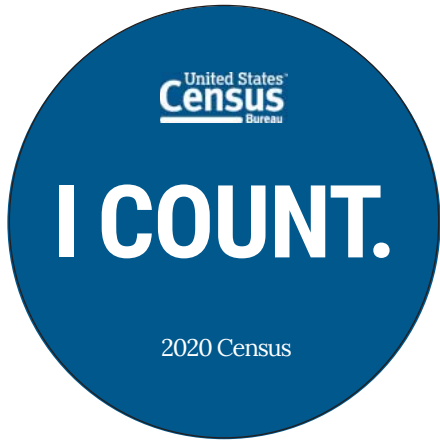
Real estate developers use the census to build new homes and revitalize old neighborhoods.



## 2020 will be easier than ever.

In 2020, you will be able to respond to the census online.





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## CREDITS

The Office of Evaluation Sciences developed the Community Outreach Toolkit for the office of the Chief Innovation Officer and the National Partnerships program at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Additional resources for crafting evidence-based communications and citations for research referenced in this toolkit can be found at [oes.gsa.gov](https://oes.gsa.gov).

## WAS THIS TOOLKIT USEFUL? WAS IT CLEAR?

If you have specific questions or feedback, please let us know. We are always looking to improve our materials to make them as useful as possible.

Email us at [census.partners@census.gov](mailto:census.partners@census.gov) with your feedback and suggestions.