

2020 Census Reporting Mistakes I've (Almost) Made So You Don't Have To

A Tip Sheet Prepared for IRE and NICAR's 2019 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference

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To tell the story of the 2020 census, a journalist has to digest a lot of census history and policy. Here are corrections to common mistakes you can avoid in your reporting:

A question about citizenship has not been included among the census questions for every household since 1950.

For [the 1950 head count](#), census workers asked where members of all households were born. If people were born outside the U.S., census workers asked whether they were naturalized citizens of the U.S. Since 1970, a sample of households have been asked about U.S. citizenship status on a smaller Census Bureau survey. It was known as the long form of the census, which was replaced by the American Community Survey after the 2000 census.

The census does not consider "Hispanic or Latino" a race.

[Federal standards](#) set by the White House's Office of Management and Budget require the census and other federal surveys to categorize "Hispanic or Latino" as an ethnicity to allow Latinx people to identify with any race. There was [a proposal to change](#) how the census collects data on Latinx identity, but [OMB has not made public](#) whether it has approved that proposal.

The 2020 census is not the first online U.S. census.

There was an online option for [the 2000 census](#), although it was only available for the short form and only in English. The 2020 census is set to be the first one to allow all U.S. households to reply online. The bureau is also collecting responses by paper, over the phone and in person.

The census does not start on Census Day (April 1).

The 2020 census officially kicks off earlier, on Jan. 21, 2020, in [the remote parts of Alaska](#). Most households in the country can start responding [by mid-March](#). April 1 is used as a reference date.

The census does not count every person in the U.S.

It counts every person *living* in the country on Census Day, including unauthorized immigrants and green card holders. International visitors on vacation or work trips to the U.S., however, are not counted. The Census Bureau has a more [detailed breakdown of who is and isn't counted](#).

The census does not count every resident where they are on Census Day.

It counts people where they usually live and sleep. For the 2020 head count, the Census Bureau is continuing to count prisoners where they are incarcerated. [Military service members temporarily deployed overseas](#) will be counted at their home bases and ports in the U.S.

The census does not collect information from each person living in the U.S.

Information about each person living in the U.S. is collected *by household*. One person can answer questions on behalf of other members of a household. When the Census Bureau releases updates on 2020 census participation rates, those are percentages of households, not people.

Data about individuals can be publicly released 72 years after they're collected.

[Federal law](#) restricts access to data identifying individuals. The Census Bureau can release information about specific demographic groups at a level as detailed as a neighborhood.

The census is not the American Community Survey.

Both are conducted by the Census Bureau. The census goes out to every household once a decade. [The American Community Survey](#) goes out to about one in 38 households every year.