

Unique Challenges for the 2020 Census

The 2020 Census will be one that no one will forget. There were a series of unique challenges that caused additional concerns for local jurisdictions and their residents: (1) Administration Hurdles and Barriers; (2) Census in the Year of a Presidential Election; and (3) COVID-19, a global pandemic. Arlington County Government officials and CCC members stayed connected with local, regional, and national partners at each twist and turn along a long road of uncertainties throughout the entire 2020 Census season.

Administration Hurdles and Barriers

Despite the vital importance of the Census, the Trump Administration took actions to prevent a full and accurate count across the country. These actions included attempting to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census, insufficient funding for the Census Bureau's basic operations, delayed and inadequate preparation for 2020, change in dates and timelines, and potential politicization of the count. Arlington County joined forces with several national coalitions to sign on to several lawsuits during the 2020 Census season. The narrative around this and other Administration hurdles created a significant amount of fear and concern from immigrant households, requiring additional CCC efforts to build confidence in a safe and confidential 2020 Census.

Administration Effort to Add a Citizenship Question

Early in the development of the 2020 Census, the Trump Administration attempted to add a citizenship question to the 2020 questionnaire. After numerous lawsuits across the country, the Administration was denied the request.

Change in Timelines

The 2020 Census coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented multiple hurdles to ensuring a complete and accurate count. In the original timeline, online, phone and mail-in responses, and non-response follow up were scheduled to finish at the end of summer 2020. However, due to COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, the Census Bureau revised its plan and non-response follow up was delayed. There were multiple concerns from advocates that the Census Bureau would not have enough time to complete the follow up, deduplication process, and other internal processes to meet the December 31 deadline for reporting the population totals to the president. After multiple lawsuits filed to extend all deadlines, with multiple appeals, Administration changes in end dates and other confusion, the Census Bureau ended all data collection on October 15, earlier than outlined in the COVID-19 plan. Despite concerns about the inability to conduct adequate analysis, the courts determined that the Census Bureau would be required to deliver the final report on December 31, 2020.

Presidential Executive Order

In July 2020, the Trump Administration issued a "Memorandum on Excluding Illegal Aliens from the Apportionment Base." As a result, the American Civil Liberties Union, New York Civil Liberties

Union, ACLU of Texas, ACLU of Southern California, and Arnold & Porter filed a federal lawsuit (New York Immigration Coalition v. Trump) on behalf of immigrants’ rights groups challenging President Trump’s order seeking to block people who are undocumented from being included in the U.S. Census. The three lower courts to consider this issue all concluded that federal law and the Constitution require the Census to count every single person. On November 30, 2020, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case against President Trump’s attempt to exclude undocumented immigrants from the “persons” who must be counted in the Census for purposes of apportioning congressional seats and Electoral College votes to states. At the time of this report (December 11, 2020), the Supreme Court had not yet filed a ruling on this case.

Presidential Election Year

The 2020 Census came in the same year as the 2020 presidential election. The CCC was intentional about helping the entire community recognize that while you have to be a U.S. citizen and 18 years of age to VOTE; EVERYONE counts – regardless of age, where you are from, what you look like, and where you live. An additional nuanced confusion came as one VOTES based on their permanent residence; and they COUNT based on where they were living on April 1, 2020. As the Census timeline was extended during COVID-19, and college students were moving back home, this became even more confusing.

COVID-19

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam declared a public health emergency due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in mid-March, followed by a series of temporary stay at home orders. This coincided with the start of the self-response period for the 2020 Census. And, the U.S. Census Bureau issued a revised set of guidelines and timelines.

Table 2: Revised Census Schedule due to COVID-19

Phase	Planned Schedule	Revised COVID-19 Schedule
Self-Response Online, phone and mailed self-responses continued throughout the data collection process.	March 12 – July 31	March 12 - October 15, 2020 (note: the original COVID-19 plan called for October 31)
Non-Response Follow up (NRFU) Census takers interviewed households in person.	May 13 – July 31	The Census Bureau began soft-launching NRFU on July 16, 2020. All area Census offices completed their work by October 15, 2020. (note: the original COVID-19 plan called for October 31)
Group Quarters Count Persons living in facilities such as dormitories, jails, nursing homes, etc.	April 2 – June 5	April 2 – September 3, 2020

As a result, the Arlington CCC also made significant changes in plans due to COVID-19. Initially, the CCC had planned numerous in-person events, pop up sessions with iPads and mobile phones, as well as partner-hosted activities with older adults, young families, students, and millennials. All of these were halted in mid-March, creating new challenges to reach the hardest to count segments of our community.

For a significant period of the self-response time, the CCC moved to an online environment to reach partners and residents across the County through a broad range of activities. During this time, it became apparent that the people hardest hit by the pandemic – people whose jobs either disappeared as businesses closed or were most exposed as essential workers – also made up some of the main hard-to-count population, who were relying on County services for assistance with rent, money, food and other needed services. Census promotional items, educational materials, and coloring books were repurposed and delivered to families in school lunch and food distribution bags. The Census core team also posted signs and flyers featuring the Census website and phone numbers in additional languages in medians and key locations across the County.

Once the Census Bureau started non-response follow up and mobile questionnaire assistance, members of the CCC, volunteers, and core staff partnered with the Census Bureau staff to offer safe social distancing COUNT pop ups with translation services, and COVID-19/Census giveaways to encourage full participation in the 2020 Census.

Additional strategies are highlighted in the Communications and Engagement section of this report.