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# Counting the city: mayoral views on the 2020 Census

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# Counting the City: Mayoral Views on the 2020 Census

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The *2020 Menino Survey of Mayors* details insights and perspectives shared by a representative sample of over 100 mayors leading U.S. cities with populations of more than 75,000 residents. Now in its seventh year, the Menino Survey is based on live interviews with mayors on their pressing challenges, priorities, and expectations for the future. This year's Survey explores mayoral views on COVID-19 recovery and implications, policing and protests, parks and greenspace, and the 2020 Census.

As the 2020 Census concludes at the end of September, a large majority of the mayors of America's major cities are extremely concerned that their cities' populations will be undercounted. In the *2020 Menino Survey of Mayors*, we asked a representative set of 125 mayors about their efforts to ensure an accurate census count and their concerns about who in the city might not be counted.

In this brief, we a) summarize their level of concern about census response in their cities, b) evaluate how well it corresponds to reality in their cities, and c) highlight some of the tactics they are using and the challenges they are working against to increase response rates. Among other things, this analysis illuminates mayors' level of engagement with the census.

## WHY RESPONSE RATES MATTER TO CITIES

An accurate census count is critical for both fair representation and city funding. The census determines representation at many different geographic levels. Federally, the census is used to determine the apportionment of congressional districts to states; if a city's population is undercounted, its state might receive fewer congressional districts, reducing the state's power and the city's representation in Washington, D.C. The census is also used for state legislative districting; as at the national level, if a city's population declines relative to the rest of the state, it may lose representation in the state legislature. Finally, within the city, the census determines populations for council, school board, and other districts in the cities that elect representatives at the district level. If some neighborhoods are undercounted in the census, the people who live there will be underrepresented in city government as well.

Financially, the census is critically important for determining funding levels for federal programs<sup>1</sup> that are allocated based on population. Census undercounts will reduce federal funding to cities for healthcare,

<sup>1</sup> McCaskill, Nolan D., Alexander Nieves, and Michelle Bocanegra. 2020. "Cities risk losing out on trillions in federal aid as census deadline looms." Politico.

education, low-income assistance programs such as SNAP, highways and transportation, and community development. If cities are significantly undercounted in the census, it will affect their budgets and services for the next decade. One mayor summarized the magnitude of the challenge:

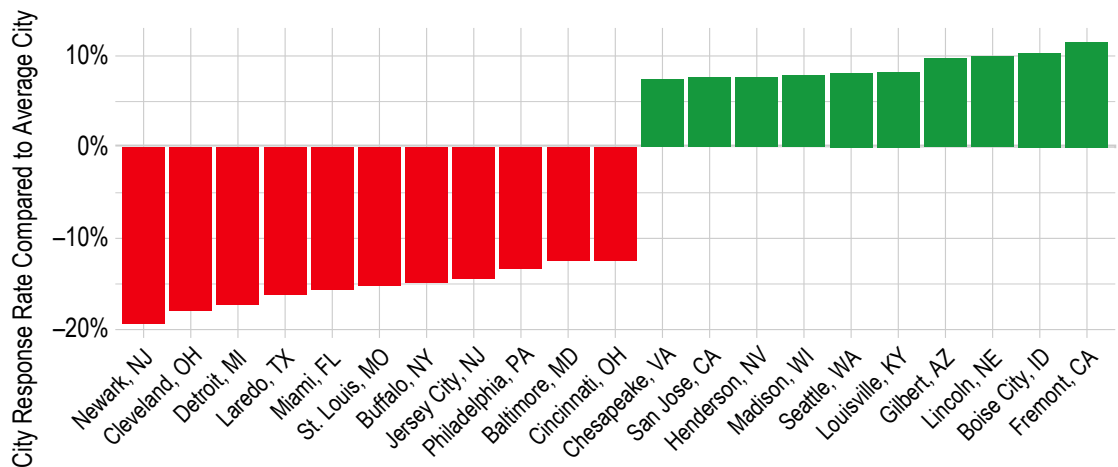
*“We certainly don’t want to lose any representation at the federal level, and it’s estimated that for every person undercounted the city stands to lose approximately [\$3,000] per year, and that’s each year for 10 years. By the time we do the next census, we will have lost about [\$30,000] for each resident undercounted.”*

Being undercounted in the census will have downstream political and fiscal consequences for potentially decades to come.

## SHOULD MAYORS BE CONCERNED ABOUT UNDERCOUNTING RESIDENTS?

The U.S. Census Bureau reports daily household response rates for each city. Response rates are based on the percentage of households that complete the census.<sup>2</sup> There is substantial variation in response rates. Figure 1 shows the cities with the highest and lowest response rates in the 100 largest cities.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the average city has a response rate of 67 percent, slightly higher than the national response rate of 65 percent.

**Figure 1: Highest and Lowest Response Rates in the 100 Largest Cities**



The mayors we surveyed reported that they are extremely worried about undercounting their cities’ populations. Eighty-two percent of mayors reported that they are “very” or “somewhat concerned” about their population being undercounted; only 6 percent of mayors were “not concerned at all.” While there is a small partisan difference in level of concern (19 percent of Republican mayors are “not concerned at all” compared to 4 percent of Democratic mayors), a large majority of Republican mayors (65 percent) are somewhat or very concerned that their populations will be undercounted.

<sup>2</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau, <https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html>. In our analyses, we use response rates from August 31, 2020, the date our survey concluded.

<sup>3</sup> While all of the cities presented here are part of the Menino Survey study population, their presence on these graphs does not indicate whether or not mayors of these cities participated in the survey.



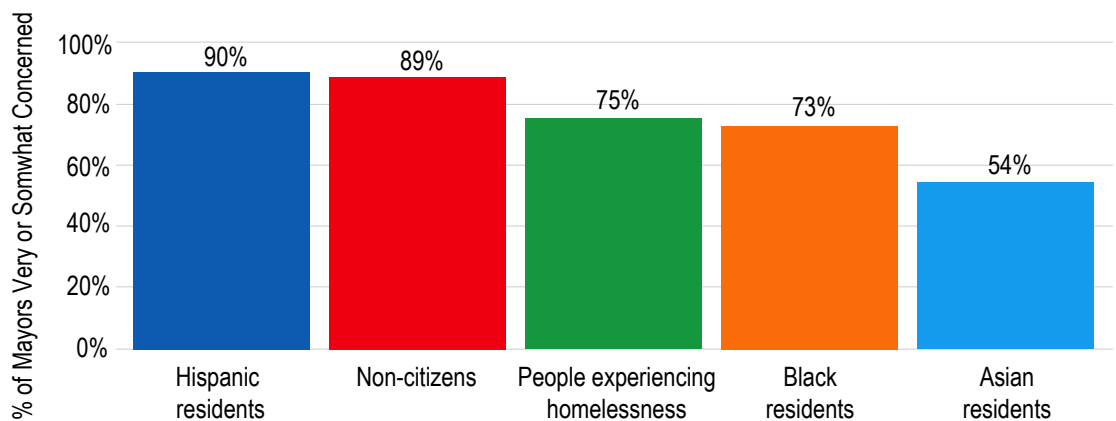
One important question is whether mayors' level of concern corresponds to city response rates. Figure 2 shows that they do. While many mayors in higher-response cities also expressed concern about undercounts, the mayors of cities that are lagging behind were substantially more concerned. Moreover, none of the least concerned mayors lead cities with low response rates. This suggests that mayors are attentive to, and informed about, census completion.

**Figure 2: Undercount Concern is Higher in Cities with Lower Response Rates**



We also asked mayors whether they worried that particular groups may be undercounted. Mayors were most concerned about undercounting Hispanic residents and non-citizens. Roughly, three-quarters of mayors were also worried about undercounting Black residents and people experiencing homelessness, and about half of mayors were concerned about undercounting Asian residents.

**Figure 3: Mayors Are Most Concerned About Undercounting Hispanic and Non-citizen Residents**

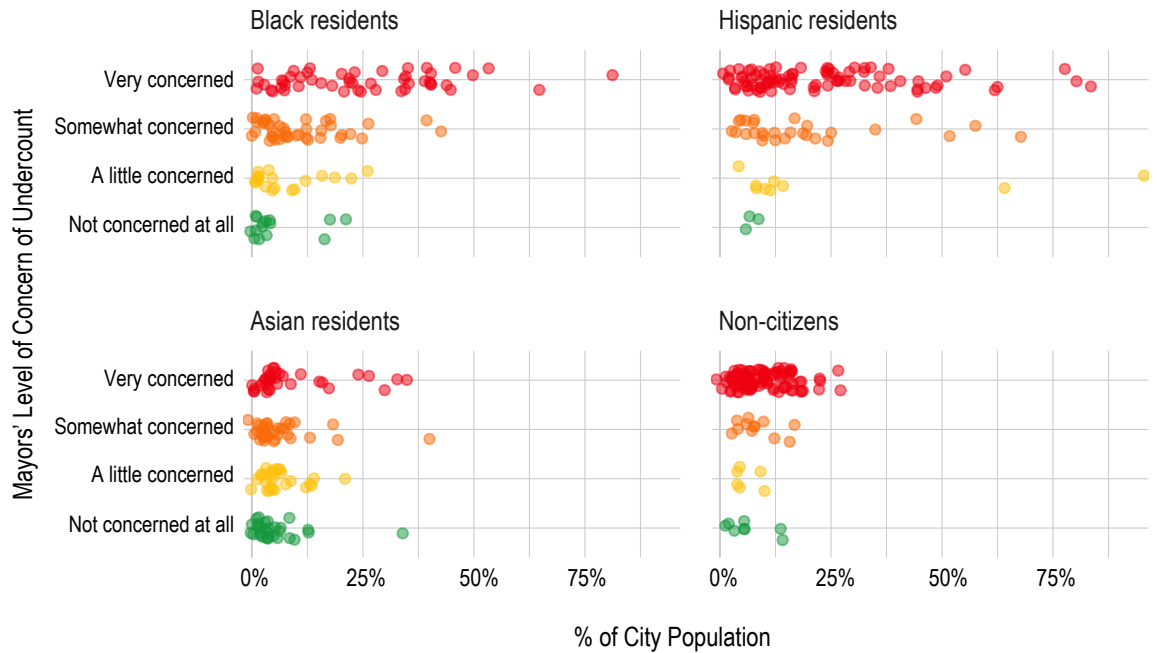


As with their concerns about the overall undercount, mayors' worries about the undercount of specific groups also correspond to realities in their cities. Mayors were more likely to express greater concern about undercounts as the size of the group's population within their city increased. Figure 4 compares mayors' levels of concern for undercounting each group with the proportion of each group in the city's population.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Source: 2018 American Community Survey. Data on the size of the homeless population is not available for all cities.

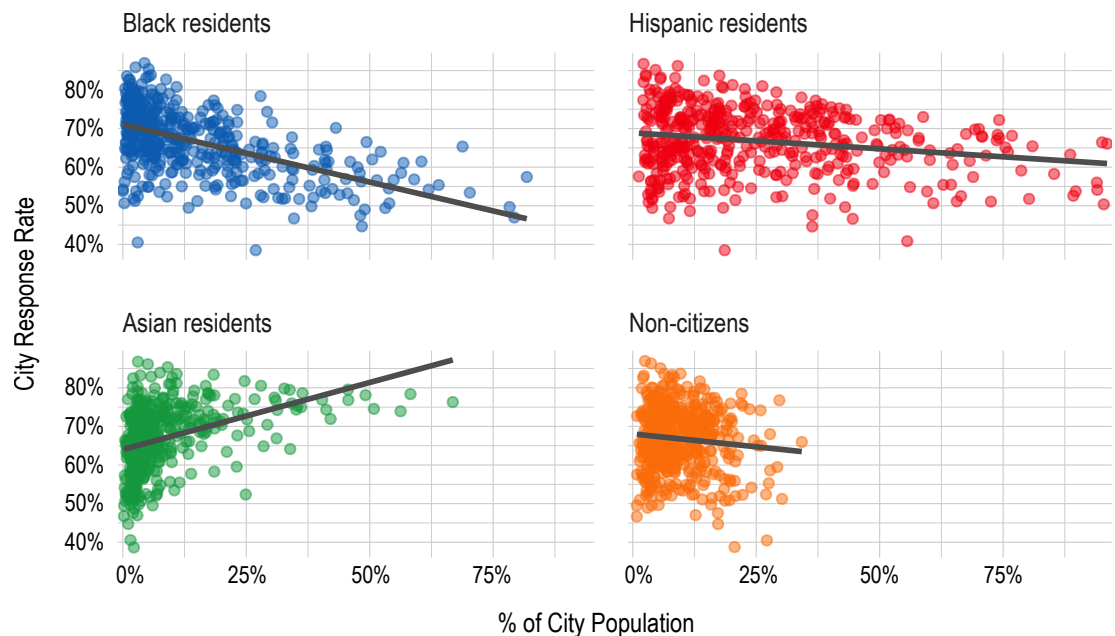


**Figure 4: Undercount Concern Increases with Group Population**



Mayors of cities with large Black, Hispanic, and non-citizen populations in particular are right to be very concerned about undercounting these residents. Looking across all cities in our sample, Figure 5 shows that overall city-level response rates are lower in cities with larger Black, Hispanic, and non-citizen populations. In contrast, response rates are higher in cities with larger Asian populations.

**Figure 5: Relationship Between Group Populations and Overall Response Rates**





## WHAT ARE MAYORS DOING TO ENSURE AN ACCURATE CENSUS?

Mayors have responded to these significant concerns about census undercounts by taking significant actions to increase participation and ensure an accurate count of their populations. In response to an open-ended question, 59 percent of mayors mentioned that their cities were engaging in different types of advertising, including billboards, local media, social media, and distributing fliers and other materials. Thirty-two percent of mayors discussed forming “complete count” committees or task forces, either locally or regionally, to increase response rates, and highlighted the importance of including representatives from every neighborhood and community organization. Twenty-five percent of mayors dedicated city staff to the census, 22 percent allocated funds or applied for grants to fund the effort, and 21 percent mentioned different events their cities had planned (some canceled due to COVID-19). The wide variety of strategies employed reflect that there is no single best way to reach constituents. Given the highly fragmented media landscape, mayors need to use many channels to be heard.


Overall, mayors were very engaged in their cities’ census efforts. Only three mayors were not involved or said that the city was not focusing on the census. Many mayors mentioned their current response rates, their activities to increase it, and the high costs of an undercount. The mayor of a large Southern city described their extensive efforts:

*“We had a major, major program; I wouldn’t do it justice by talking about it. We have done direct mailing, social media, TV, radio, you name the media and we have put something out there. We have some huge billboards in the city. I actually want to brag, we are over 70% response rate. That is more than the average nationally. In fact I am about to write a letter to a couple of the census tract areas that have low response so they get it and hopefully respond too.”*

Many mayors mentioned the creative solutions their cities employed to increase census participation by reaching hard-to-count groups and neighborhoods. One mayor included “a letter to every water bill customer,” a “census week of action,” and a “census cruise — a car parade through neighborhoods.” A few mayors mentioned working with the schools; one discussed a “teacher-led curriculum in our schools focused on children and their families to educate them on the census,” another said they “gave every student extra credit in school if they had their parents fill out the Census.” One mayor talked about spending more than \$200,000 on census outreach, including “creative programming, like ice cream trucks — get a free cone if you complete the census.” Several mayors discussed competitions with other nearby cities to maximize response rates. Mayors of several cities used their COVID response efforts to promote the census, including distributing information at COVID testing sites and food banks.

Despite these efforts, mayors expressed severe concern over achieving a complete census count. About 25 percent of mayors talked about the impact of the pandemic on their cities’ census efforts, and concerns that it would exacerbate undercounting. One mayor put it bluntly: “But I think we’re all [cities] f\*\*\*\*. Not going to get an accurate count because the feds cut \$80 million in funding and staff. And COVID exacerbated the issue.” Another mayor, whose city was lagging behind in responding to the census, told us that “In the best of times, it is difficult to get citizens to give information to the federal government, but the tone from the White House has made things worse. This layered with COVID, economic insecurity, and racial conflict has led to a big problem.” The mayors of several cities with large college student populations worried that the closing of schools in the spring temporarily reduced their populations and would have significant impacts on their census counts.

Mayors with large Hispanic communities faced particular challenges. Mayors mentioned working closely with Latino organizations, distributing mailers and advertising in Spanish, and trying to convince undocumented residents that “the information is confidential and will not be used for any other purpose.” One mayor of a Western city with a large Hispanic population talked about their efforts:



*"We have been working our a\*\*\*\* with this. We formed a mayors' committee very early, for months and months, allocated local resources, our own and county. Before COVID we had a big set up at our major events, that we had to shut down, we have had very active volunteering, agencies, school district,...public service announcements in multiple languages, direct mail campaigns... We have used every technique that we can come up with to educate people about why it is so important and to try to limit the fears of the Latino community and undocumented, so they are not scared about la migra. We are at 68% even when we have worked so hard on this. We knew it was going to be hard, but the pandemic has really made it even worse... We are doing everything we can to try to convince them, shame them, educate them, whatever we can do."*

Mayors face a formidable challenge in ensuring accurate census counts in their communities. These difficulties have grown dramatically in the face of a global pandemic coupled with an anemic federal government response. The nation's mayors have promulgated an impressive array of programs to combat these challenges. But, the groups that have been disproportionately hit hardest by the health and economic consequences of COVID are the same ones that are also most challenging to count in the census. The ongoing global pandemic may distort political representation and funding formulas in many cities in the coming years.

Mayors' engagement with the census also highlights the power of high quality, up-to-date, neighborhood-level data. The Census Bureau provides not only city-level response rates, but daily census tract-level response rates as well. Mayors and their staff were able to use this data to assess response rates in each community and know where to target their efforts. Many mayors mentioned specific areas in their city that were succeeding or lagging behind, and taking action to increase responsiveness in particular neighborhoods. Overall, the 2020 Census is likely to undercount the population in many areas. However, response rates would probably be substantially lower if not for the tract-level data that enabled cities to focus their efforts. When cities are able to use data to track policy successes and failures at the micro-level, they can adapt their strategies, target their resources, and achieve better outcomes for all of their constituents.

To learn more about the Menino Survey of Mayors, visit [www.surveyofmayors.com](http://www.surveyofmayors.com)

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#### **Boston University Initiative on Cities**

The Initiative on Cities at Boston University seeks to research, promote, and advance the adaptive urban leadership strategies and policies necessary to achieve more sustainable, just, and inclusive urban transformation. Founded by a proven urban leader, the late Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and a highly regarded academic, Professor Graham Wilson, the Initiative serves as a bridge between world-class academic research and the real-life practice of city governance.

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