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An inaccurate census may already be costing Arizona billions, and it could get worse

Opinion: Arizona Latinos and Native Americans were significantly undercounted in the 2020 census, and underfunding could ensure it happens again.

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Arizona receives roughly \$30 billion per year in federal funding that is allocated using data from the 2020 census and the yearly American Community Survey (ACS).

It's crucial that the data are accurate for Arizona to receive its fair share of funding.

Unfortunately, efforts to do so are now seriously in danger, thanks to a misguided effort by House Republicans to cut funding for the Census Bureau.

Their proposed \$1.3 billion budget markup represents a 15% cut to the Biden administration's budget request for the bureau and is more than 30% below experts' recommendations for the support needed to maintain and improve census data quality.

This, in an era when public willingness to respond to surveys such as the ACS and the census is decreasing.

Undercounts have big impacts on Arizona

Undercounting vulnerable populations is a particularly serious problem in a state like Arizona with high proportions of Hispanic and American Indian households.

The Census Bureau estimates there was a 4.99% undercount of Hispanics and a 5.64% undercount of American Indians on tribal lands in 2020.

With a population that is 30.7% Hispanic and 6.3% American Indian, the stakes are high for Arizona.

Just as serious is the fact that low-income households — especially those in rural areas, those with lower levels of educational attainment and households without broadband access — are under-represented in census data.

Rural poverty has increased dramatically in recent years and is concentrated in low-income minority communities, making some parts of Arizona even more severely impacted by an undercount.

Average 21 minutes: Feds caution AHCCCS over call wait times

That includes Apache and Navajo counties, which have some of the highest concentrations of American Indians in the nation. At least one expert suggests there may be a substantial undercount of Hopi, in large measure due to lack of internet access.

Yuma County, which has a high concentration of Hispanic residents and a low census response rate, also has been hard hit because ACS data on population characteristics is a key element in allocating funding for federal education, health and community development programs.

Even urban areas such as Maricopa County — with more than half the state's population — are at risk, since 30.6% of households are Hispanic.

Health care relies on accurate census data

The Census Bureau has acknowledged shortcomings in the Census 2020 data and committed itself to a decade-long effort to fix it.

At a point when public distrust of government and survey research continues to plummet, now is not the time to cut funding for these efforts.

Improving the quality of census data is particularly crucial for rural community health centers because their service population includes so many vulnerable undercounted families.

Improved ACS data in coming years and a more accurate census in 2030 will be crucial for rural communities to get a fairer share of health system funding.

Public health officials rely on this data to keep an eye on the spread of disease, assess study populations in clinical trials and discern the magnitude of health disparities faced by vulnerable groups.

Census Bureau data are also used in practical planning for health care workforce recruitment, locating new health care facilities and campaigns to assure equitable access to vaccination.

Disagreements about priorities and funding levels are routine and understandable. But the proposed federal budget cuts would subvert progress toward more equitable and cost-effective health care, and that is amazingly irresponsible.

All Americans will benefit from responsibly allocating adequate funding to assure top-quality Census Bureau data are available to policymakers, funders, planners and health care providers.

Arizonans should call on U.S. Rep. Juan Ciscomani, who is both a member of the House Appropriations Committee and the Problem-Solvers' caucus, to secure an appropriate level of funding for the Census Bureau in fiscal 2024 and future years.

Ed Kissam has researched census data issues for more than three decades. He is a member of a national network of experts and stakeholders, The Census Quality Reinforcement Task Force. On X, formerly Twitter: @edkissam.