

2020 Census: Accurately counting people who live in group quarters facilities

The U.S. Census Bureau counts every person living in the U.S. either in a household or in a group quarters (GQ) facility. GQs include places such as college residence halls, residential treatment centers, skilled nursing facilities, military barracks, correctional facilities, and workers' dormitories. GQs are usually owned or managed by an organization that provides services to its residents, and people living in GQs are usually not related to each other.

Nearly 4 percent of Alaskans were counted in GQs in 2010 – a larger share than 45 other states. This high ranking is due to our state's mix of industries, including seafood processing, oil extraction, and military. Populations of many Alaska communities are greatly affected by GQ residents, and errors in decennial enumeration of GQs impact local statistics over a decade. To avoid errors, it's critical that the Census Bureau use proven and consistent enumeration strategies at Alaska's GQ facilities in 2020.

In the past, the Census Bureau counted people at GQs mainly by providing them with paper questionnaires to be filled out individually. GQ questionnaires are similar to those delivered to households, except they explicitly ask about respondents' usual place of residence. Like all Census respondents, people living in GQs are counted at their "usual residence," which is the place they live or stay most of the time. Typically, people who live in GQs themselves decide where their usual residence is and indicate it on their Census questionnaire. Census Bureau research has shown the best data comes from people completing the questionnaire for themselves; this is one reason why door-to-door counts by enumerators disappeared for most of the nation in 1960.

However, to save costs, many GQ facilities in 2000 and 2010 were enumerated indirectly by administrative rosters from facility managers or from their personal knowledge. Two-thirds of GQ questionnaires in 2010 were completed by GQ facility managers, rather than by residents themselves, up from half in 2000. Many questionnaires were missing data – 18 percent of questionnaires from GQ facilities in 2010 did not have race data, 25 percent did not include ethnicity data, 7 percent lacked age data, and 3 percent omitted sex data.

For the 2020 Census, the bureau plans to further expand its reliance on information supplied by GQ facility managers rather than residents, but doing so comes at a cost to accuracy that deserves to be avoided. To achieve a complete and accurate count in 2020, the Census Bureau's default strategy for enumerating the population group quarters facilities should be paper questionnaires that residents fill out themselves. Other strategies should only be used only in situations where this proven method is impractical, rather than ones in which it is simply less convenient. Rosters provided by GQ facility managers must also be assessed for accuracy, not just completeness.

Additionally, the Census Bureau must ensure its enumerators consistently apply its residence rules when collecting responses from all types of GQs by providing adequate training and quality control procedures. The Census Bureau should share its specific plan to ensure residence rules are consistently applied with Alaska stakeholders.

Why does it matter?

For funding reasons alone, an accurate count of the population is important to each community.

In fiscal year 2015, Alaska received almost \$3,000 per capita through federal assistance programs that distribute money based on decennial census-derived statistics, compared to the U.S. average of \$1,838, according to a recent analysis by the George Washington Institute of Public Policy.

The programs that distributed the most money to Alaska in fiscal year 2015 were Medicaid (more than \$1 billion), Highway Planning and Construction (more than \$500 million), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (almost \$170 million).

In addition, Alaska's Community Assistance Program distributes millions of dollars in state funding each year to communities based in part on population estimates derived from the decennial census.