

2020 Census: Inspiring response by communicating with Alaskans through post office boxes

"Inspiring every household in the country to complete the census is an enormous, increasingly complex, and unparalleled challenge. With an increasingly diverse population and a drop in public participation, an effective communications strategy is critical to the success of the census."

*2020 Census Operational Plan, Version 2.0
Issued September 2016, U.S. Census Bureau, page 92*

In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau will conduct its next decennial census, the results of which will help determine apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives and the direction of billions of dollars in federal funding over each of the subsequent 10 years.

Historically, the Census Bureau has not used post office boxes during decennial operations. However, because many Alaskans are unable to receive mail at home and use post office boxes instead, post office boxes give the Census Bureau a new, cost-effective opportunity to communicate with and encourage timely responses from the Alaskans who are the most difficult and expensive to count.

During the once-a-decade effort to count the U.S. population, the Census Bureau calculates a participation rate for each area, which is the percentage of questionnaires mailed back by households that received them. In 2010, Alaska had the lowest participation rate in the nation at 64 percent, down from 67 percent in 2000.

Low participation rates led to increased expenses, as the Census Bureau had to follow up with each of the nonresponding households in an operation called Non-Response Follow-Up, or NRFU. Lack of voluntary participation can also contribute to inaccurate population counts, as details for households that don't respond after repeated attempts are taken from a proxy — usually a neighbor — or otherwise imputed by the Census Bureau.

Table 1 gives participation rates for Alaska areas. Clearly, the Census Bureau must employ better strategies in Alaska to increase participation rates in many communities and, in return, decrease the cost of NRFU and improve data quality. As part of a cost-effective communications strategy, we recommend mailing promotional materials, such as postcards, to Alaska post office boxes to encourage households to respond. For less than 16 cents apiece, the Census Bureau can get postcards delivered to each post office box in Alaska.

For example, the City of Hoonah, in which there is no mail delivery, has 429 post office boxes. For about \$67, any organization with a bulk mail permit can get a postcard delivered to all of them. The Census Bureau could use this service to send a postcard to every post office box in Hoonah that advises residents to look for 2020 Census materials affixed to the door of their home on a certain date, suggests what to do if they don't find the materials, and encourages their timely response. Considering that each NRFU case cost the Census Bureau an average of \$33.60 in 2010, this strategy would be cost-effective if it resulted in as few as two households in the community responding on their own.

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.

**Table 1: Participation rates for selected areas in Alaska
by Type of Enumeration Area (TEA)**

2010 Update/Leave TEAs ¹			2010 Mail Out/Mail Back TEAs ¹		
Place Name	2000 %	2010 %	Place Name	2000 %	2010 %
Angoon city	48 %	37 %	Anchorage, Municipality ²	73 %	73 %
Barrow city	46 %	36 %	Fairbanks city	64 %	65 %
Bethel city	53 %	49 %	Homer city	62 %	69 %
Coffman Cove city		33 %	Juneau, City and Borough	73 %	75 %
Cold Bay city	17 %	29 %	Kenai city	77 %	73 %
Cordova city	64 %	57 %	Ketchikan city	65 %	70 %
Craig city	56 %	52 %	Kodiak city	67 %	69 %
Dillingham city	62 %	50 %	North Pole city	70 %	69 %
Gustavus city		37 %	Palmer city	79 %	77 %
Haines Borough	62 %	46 %	Sitka, City and Borough ²	71 %	63 %
Hoonah city	55 %	47 %	Soldotna city	76 %	77 %
Houston city	52 %	47 %	Wasilla city	71 %	74 %
Hydaburg city	49 %	46 %			
Kachemak city	54 %	60 %			
Kake city	56 %	43 %			
Kasaan city		27 %			
Klawock city	43 %	49 %			
Kotzebue city	57 %	50 %			
Kupreanof city		35 %			
Nome city	59 %	51 %			
Petersburg city	67 %	67 %			
Sand Point city	42 %	51 %			
Seldovia city	49 %	41 %			
Seward city	59 %	60 %			
Skagway, Municipality	59 %	41 %			
Tenakee Springs city	35 %	34 %			
Thorne Bay city		38 %			
Unalaska city	50 %	48 %			
Valdez city	63 %	57 %			
Wrangell, City and Borough	63 %	54 %			
Yakutat, City and Borough	43 %	42 %			

¹In Mail Out/Mail Back TEAs, census questionnaires are mailed to households through the United States Postal Service. In Update/Leave TEAs, census questionnaires are hand delivered by Census Bureau employees, usually by affixing census materials to each household's door.

²In 2010, Anchorage and Sitka had a mix of Mail Out/Mail Back and Update/Leave areas.