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On the Importance of Counting Nebraska Latinos in the 2020 Census: Blog post

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On the Importance of Counting Nebraska Latinos in the 2020 Census

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The Census is a vital tool for fair economic and political decisions. It is the basis for the allocation of the federal budget, the apportionment of the House of Representatives and the redrawing of electoral districts. Government, businesses, and non–profits rely on census data to allocate funding, to measure impact, and to plan services for community and economic development. Thus, a census count that represents an accurate portrait of the population is critical for equity. Nebraska has a small minority population, roughly at 20 %. But, as any other Midwestern state, it is experiencing a major demographic shift. Latino immigrants and refugees are fast changing local communities across the state. It might be easier to dismiss the implications of undercounting these communities here –at least compared to the media attention to California or New York. Yet, an inaccurate census could have a long-lasting effect as anywhere else.

Understanding the 2020 Census Challenges

The 2020 Census will be required to do more with fewer resources in a challenging political context. Compared to the 2010 Census, the US Census Bureau lacked a predictable budget during the planning phase of the decennial census. For instance, [it cancelled two of the three planned end-to-end tests in 2018 due to inadequate funding](#). Yet, the 2020 Census will be incorporating various innovations. It will be the first census with the option to complete the questionnaire online, and the first to use administrative records to improve coverage and reduce the costs of follow-up efforts. It is unclear how these innovations may affect data quality and accuracy. [Experiments during the implementation of the American Community Survey](#) suggest that the option of an internet-self response benefited advantaged homeowners and only slightly increased coverage. Collecting census data online increases concerns about data privacy as well. Studies on the 2020 Census suggest that [additional measures will be needed to increase internet self-response](#) among people of color and disadvantaged communities, which have less access to internet services. Moreover, the use of administrative records poses additional risks. For instance, children under five are less likely to have an administrative record compared to adults, and will be more likely to be overlooked. [Children have been historically one of the hardest to count demographics in the Census](#).

The political climate adds to these economic and technical challenges. In the recent years, many federal surveys have documented a decline in their response rates. The [2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study](#) revealed that distrust in government was high among all racial and ethnic groups, and that minorities were significantly concerned about data privacy and confidentiality. The request of Department of Commerce to add the citizenship question in the 2020 census questionnaire -allegedly needed to enforce the Voting Rights Act, had heightened this concern. In [an amicus brief](#) introduced to the Supreme Court, many professional organizations argued that this question would jeopardize the constitutional mandate of a complete population count. Expert studies presented in Court estimated that the citizenship question [will deter participation in the 2020 Census by 7.1% to 9.7% nationwide and by 14.1% to 16.6% for Latinos and other immigrant populations](#), compromising the accuracy of imputations and other statistical methods, typically used to correct for non-response. [New evidence](#) that suggests the request was politically motivated heightens the animosity around the forthcoming Supreme Court ruling on this issue.

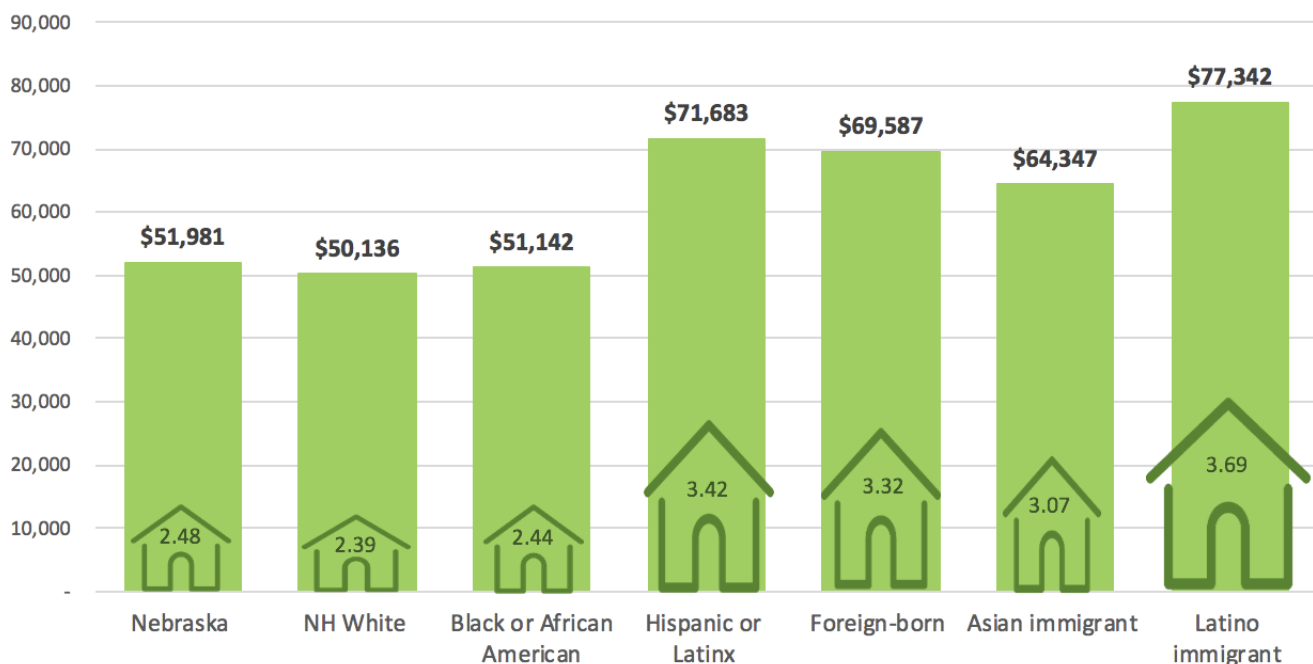
Nebraska is not exempt from these challenges. Due to budget cuts, [Nebraska lost two out of the three local census offices held in 2010](#). With [the veto of Bill 439](#), Nebraska became one of the two states in the nation without a statewide Complete Count Committee, a standard best practice to guarantee a successful execution of the decennial census. At stake, it is the fair allocation of federal funding and political representation of local communities. Based on 2016 federal funding figures, the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) estimated that [an additional 1 percent undercount could result of a \\$ 40 million loss in federal funding each year](#). Although, there is no prospective effect in the number of congressional seats that Nebraska could lose, a forthcoming

redistricting without an accurate population count in electoral districts could also undermine the political gains of Latinos and other minorities across the state.

The Costs of Nebraska Minority Undercounts

If racial and ethnic disparities in Census participation remain in the 2020 Census, it will become costly for Nebraska. In the 2010 Census, our state's mail return rate—that is, the number of completed survey forms over the occupied housing units that received questionnaires, sat nationally at 77 %, higher than the U.S. rate at 74%. Yet, [one in three African-Americans](#), [one in six Hispanics](#), and [one in seven Asians](#) in Nebraska currently live in a Hard-to-Count (HTC) census tract. The US Census Bureau defines a census tract as HTC when the mail return rate in 2010 was lower than the national rate. CPAR estimates that Nebraska can lose \$ 2,096 in federal funding per person each year undercounted. As the household size varies by race and ethnicity, the cost of a minority household to be undercounted in the next ten years is far greater if the householder is foreign-born or Latino. An undercount of an immigrant household could result in an extra loss of 17,000 dollars each year. If the householder is Latino or a Latino immigrant, the extra loss can reach around 20,000 or 25,000.

Undercount cost per household in 10 years by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity of Householder



Source: Average period 2013-2017 estimates for household sizes extracted from Table S0201 and Table S0506, American Community Survey. Average Number of people per household displayed inside house icon

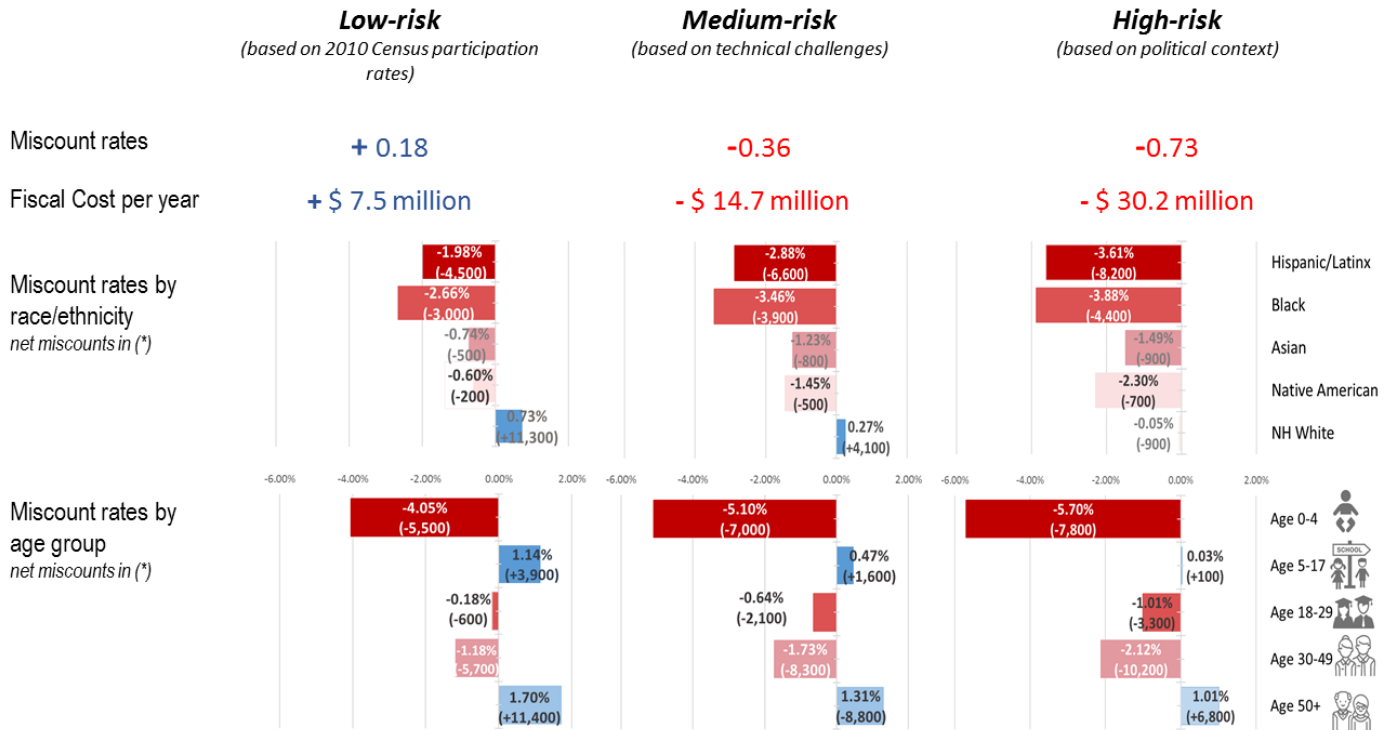
These estimates, however, do not take into account the contextual challenges of the 2020 Census. Just recently, the [Urban Institute](#), a non-partisan think tank, published accuracy estimates based in three risk scenarios using prospective self-resp rates on 2020 projected population estimates.

The low risk scenario entails that the 2020 Census will perform similar as the 2010 Census. The medium risk scenario takes into account the effect of administrative changes according to the 2020 Census Operational plan. The high-risk scenario, considers the effects of adding the citizenship question. The Urban Institute predicts in the low risk scenario a net over count of 0.18 % , a net undercount of 0.36% in the medium-risk and 0.73% net undercount in the high-risk scenario. In terms of federal funding, the low-risk scenario could result in \$7.5 million annual gains, but this scenario is the least likely. The medium and high-risk scenario could result in the loss of \$ 14.6 million and \$30.2 million respectively.

Each of these scenarios imply significant losses in terms of equitable representation. The low-risk scenario favors an over-count of non-Hispanic Whites and older adult population at the detriment of undercounting minorities, specifically African Americans and Latinxs. The medium-risk scenario represents significant loses– above one percent– for the all minority groups. The high-risk scenario, which accounts for the effects of the current political context, could also result in an undercount of Non-Hispanic whites. Moreover, as the Latino population constitute the largest minority group, their undercounts represent more than a half of the losses in each scenario –55% in the low-risk, 56% in the medium-risk, and 58% in the high-risk.

In all these scenarios, Nebraska will still be undercounting children under five, young and middle-age adults. The undercount rate of children under five in each of the scenarios surpasses [the 2010 Census rate of 1.9 % for Nebraska](#). Currently, minority children and children of immigrants account respectively for 30% and 17% of the children of the state. As [Latinos and other minorities become a higher share within the children, the young and middle-aged population in the following years](#), an inaccurate count of these age-groups could jeopardize the resources needed to secure better outcomes and social mobility for future generations.

Nebraska: Miscount Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Age-Groups according to Risk Scenarios



Source: Urban Institute, 2019. [Assessing Miscounts in the 2020 Census.](#)

While race/ethnicity alone cannot account for the reasons of the undercount, the relative concentration of undercounts in these communities suggest the presence of other structural factors – such as limited English proficiency, multigenerational households, mixed-immigrant status households, prevalence of renters over homeowners, etc. – that restrict the availability of these groups to participate in the census. Therefore, not addressing racial and ethnic disparities in census participation more than ever will render costly consequences.

The Community Response

In Nebraska, most counties with HTC census tracts have already formed or are considering forming Complete Count Committees (CCC) [1]. To date, Nebraska has [13 local CCC committees](#), including cities, county and special grassroots committees targeting the African American, Asian and refugee population. Many Latino Leaders are participating in CCCs across the state. Yet, the creation of a Hispanic/Latino Complete Count Committee in South Omaha has been slow due to the current political climate. South Omaha represents the most populous Latino neighborhood in the state, which concentrates more than half of Omaha Hispanic population, and comprises many of HTC census tracts. At OLLAS we documented how [the rise of deportations in the state and in Omaha](#) have deterred further involvement of the Latino and other immigrant families in public life. Nevertheless, the stakes to count the fast-growing Latino population in this city, Nebraska, and the United States have never been higher.

[1] Eleven counties in Nebraska have at one or more HTC census tracts. These include Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Scottsbluff, Buffalo, Dakota, D... on, Madison, Hall, Colfax, and Thurston --a

county that is home to tribal lands and which do not receive mail surveys as the standard census method. Among mail-based counties, Scottsbluff and Kearney in Buffalo County are still considering a CCC.

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