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Photo: courtesy of We Count Oregon

The Census is Political: Hard-to-Count Communities Must Be Reached



By We Count Oregon and Julia Michel



Historically, people of color and minority groups have been intentionally excluded from the United States census counts to ensure that political power is concentrated among white Americans. The legacy and impact of the census' racist construction has reinforced systemic oppression of communities of color, native communities, and rural populations. This means the interests of white, wealthy, landowning people have historically been, and currently are, better represented in many facets of Oregon life. Undercounting minority populations propagates a false narrative about population demographics that is mirrored in unjust political representation, policies, and federal budget resource allocation. The census headcount impacts who has political power and who does not. When Black, brown, and minority communities are undercounted, the result is an American culture and democracy that is inequitable. Today, there are exclusionary policies being forwarded by the federal administration. The White House's July 21, 2020, memo attempting to remove from the count undocumented people, in spite of the constitutional mandate to count all people in the United States, in addition to the decision to end the census a month early continue the legacy of inequality. Without intentionally reshaping the form and function of the census—with a commitment to equity—the census is a barrier to liberty.

We Count Oregon is the first woman-of-color-led statewide census campaign in Oregon purposefully designed to undermine exclusionary census norms. The We Count Oregon 2020 campaign reflects the values, cultures, and needs of hard-to-count communities. In Oregon, these are primarily communities of color (including Black, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Latinx, Indigenous and native communities), LGBTQI communities, children under the age of five, disabled people, rural communities, and people experiencing homelessness. Hard-to-count communities in Oregon had less than a 73 percent self-response return rate in the 2010 census. Due to the history of the census and a variety of contemporary political factors, these communities require additional engagement from trusted messengers. The We Count Oregon campaign is based on community insights centered in relationships and trust. This approach ensures understanding of the dynamics, concerns, information consumption patterns, fears, and myths that keep hard-to-count communities from voluntarily participating in the census.



Photo: Esperanza Tervalon-Garrett, We Count Oregon State Campaign Manager.

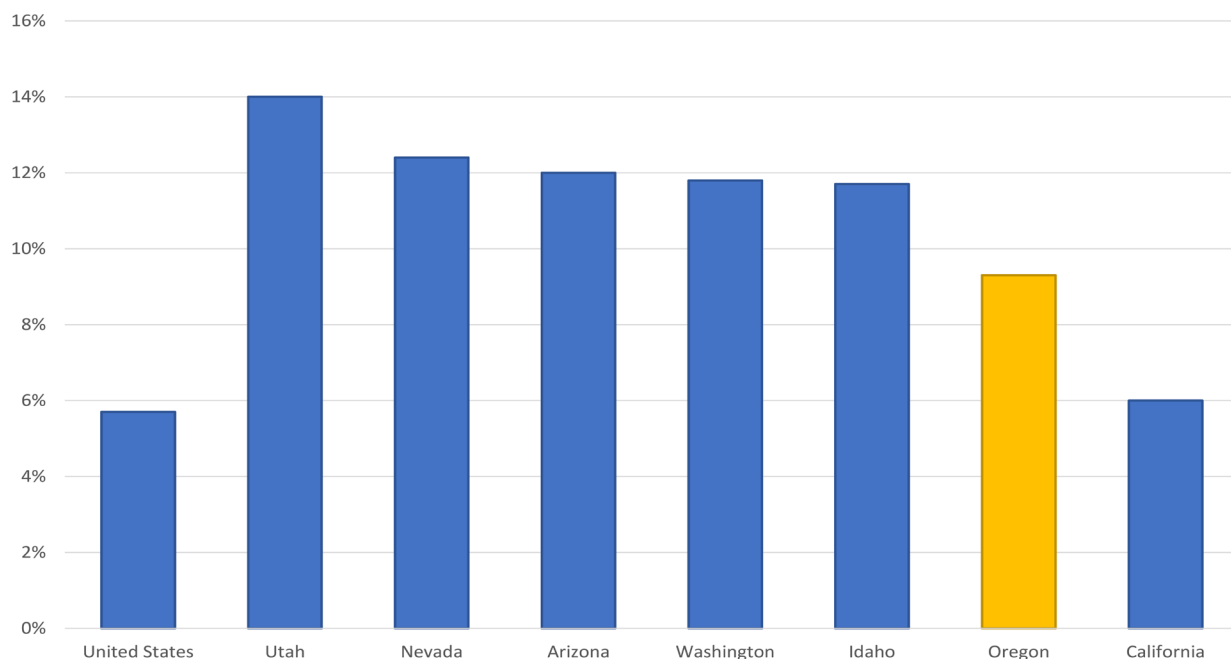
To achieve its goals, We Count Oregon integrates eleven culturally-specific, community-based organizations and has developed a strategy that is centered on race, culture, and language. The primary goal is to help hard-to-count communities remember that they count, that their voices have power, and that being counted enables them to change the narrative about who Oregonians are. We Count Oregon demonstrates that the cultural vibrancy and diverse perspectives of hard-to-count communities are an important part of the heart and soul of Oregon. These communities are Oregon's future.

As of 2018, Oregon's population growth rate ranked eleventh in the nation, an estimated increase of 364,226 persons or 9.5 percent

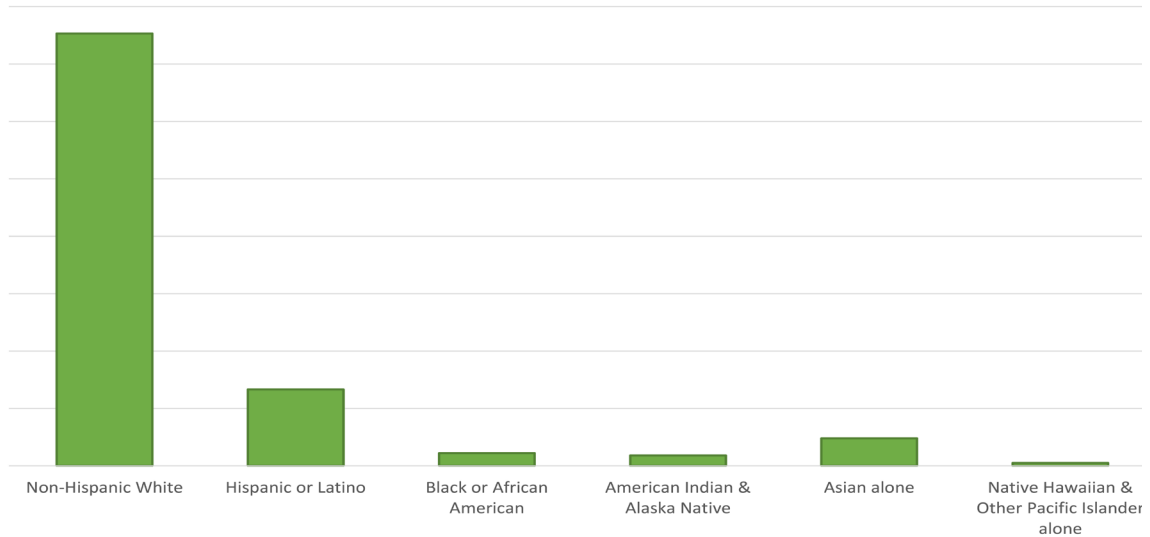
since the 2010 census count.¹ With a growing population, it's imperative that Oregon have an accurate headcount in order to allocate funds and representation accurately. Since 2010, 77 percent of Oregon's population growth was due to migration, including immigrants and refugees, who play an essential role in Oregon's economy. One in ten residents is an immigrant.² The Latinx population is the largest minority group in Oregon accounting for 13.3 percent of Oregon's population in 2018. Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders make up 5.3 percent, and Black people make up 2.2 percent of the population.³ If these communities and other hard-to-count groups are overlooked, an opportunity will be missed for more socially-equitable distribution of funds for another ten years.⁴

1. Office of Economic Analysis, Department of Administrative Services, State of Oregon, Oregon's Demographic Trends, July 2019, https://www.oregon.gov/das/OEA/Documents/OR_pop_trend2019.pdf
2. American Immigration Council, Immigrants in Oregon, May 8, 2018, www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-oregon.
3. "United States Census Bureau QuickFacts: Oregon," United States Census Bureau (website), www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/OR/PST045218.
4. Letter to US Senators. The Census Project. <https://censusproject.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/finalcensus-project-sign-on-letter-re-census-extension-in-senate-relief-8-6-20-1.pdf>. Accessed September 1, 2020.

POPULATION CHANGE IN THE US AND THE WESTERN STATES, 2010 - 2018, US BUREAU OF CENSUS



**OREGON RACE & HISPANIC ORIGIN
2018, US BUREAU OF CENSUS**



The Impact of COVID-19

In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which began to make a lethal impact across the United States in mid-March, the approach to the 2020 census had to change. The US Census Bureau is obligated to protect the health and safety of everyone while fulfilling the statutory requirement to deliver the 2020 census counts to the president on schedule.⁵ We Count Oregon’s efforts to compel Oregon residents to self-respond online, by phone, or by mail continue. US Census Bureau administrators pushed the end of the counting period from July 31 to August 14. As of April 2020, states have committed to deliver the final population numbers to the president and Congress by the original deadline of December 31, 2020.⁶ The US Census Bureau’s efforts are not yet sufficiently scaled to ensure a complete census count in these unsure times.

We Count Oregon has shaped its response to COVID-19 based on three main goals:

- Ensure hard-to-count communities are up to date on the latest recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the State of Oregon.
- Empower hard-to-count communities to feel connected, supported, and empowered during a time of uncertainty and physical distancing.
- Help communities see that taking the census enables political power, representation, and money that hard-to-count communities desperately need.

We Count Oregon followed the Centers for Disease Control recommendations to social distance in solidarity with the most vulnerable community members in hopes of flattening the COVID-19 curve.⁷ The organization suspended

5. United States Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Statement on Modifying 2020 Census Operations to Make Sure College Students are Counted,” news release no. CB20-RTQ.06, March 15, 2020, www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/modifying-2020-operations-for-counting-college-students.html.

6. Tom Banse, “COVID-19 Makes 2020 Census More Complicated Than It Already Was,” Oregon Public Broadcasting (website), March 23, 2020, www.opb.org/news/article/coronavirus-covid-19-census-2020-north-west-online-form/.

7. “These Simulations Show How to Flatten the Coronavirus Growth Curve,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/corona-simulator/.



Photo: Precious Edmonds and Renate Ray

door-to-door operations in favor of phone, text, and digital outreach strategies; canceled all in-person planned events in favor of online; and partnered with local service organizations to disseminate information to hard-to-count communities.

All of these changes came two weeks before April 1, 2020, National Census Day. We Count Oregon pivoted strategies grounded in behavior change theory to a digital event supported by over fifty partner organizations with the hopes of reaching hard-to-count populations. In an effort to drive statewide unity, the campaign invited the Governor's Office, the Oregon Complete Count Committee, and the Census Equity Fund of Oregon to partner in an online Census Day livestream. The digital event attracted nearly 500 people on Zoom and 5,800 on Facebook. On April 1, 2020, there was a 2.3

percent increase in census response from the day before—the highest one-day response rate of the year. According to experts, the only difference between the two days was outreach activities. In other words, the efforts of We Count Oregon and coalition partners had an impact.

Maintaining engagement within hard-to-count communities in this new and uncharted environment is critical to ensure that the next ten years have a more equitable distribution of public funds. In fact, the impact of disinvestment in hard-to-count communities due to COVID-19 is already apparent. People of color, farm workers, and members of rural communities are identified as essential workers without the proper equipment or work provisions to keep them safe. To understand these communities, a closer look at the historical and present context is needed.

The Black Community

It is clear that representation matters on every level and that racism is the biggest barrier to overcome. The Black community in Oregon is vibrant, their voices matter, and their needs matter. The system was not designed for Black people or other hard-to-count communities; therefore, there is a lot of distrust in government procedures. The goal of We Count Oregon is to help Black communities see that being counted is a political act. It's an act of agency and empowerment.

When Oregon was granted statehood in 1859, it was the only state in the union with a constitution that forbade Black people from living, working, or owning property in the state. It was illegal for Black people to move to the state until 1926. Framing Oregon as a historically racist, white state (it had the highest per capita Ku Klux Klan membership in the country)⁸ is essential for understanding the obstacles hard-to-count communities, specifically the Black community, face.

Black communities have been underserved and purposefully left out by entrenched white-nationalist groups whose existence depends on

8. Alana Semuels, "The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America." *The Atlantic*, August 19, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/racist-history-portland/492035/.

"Being left out is a part of the institutionalized dehumanization, othering, and oppression of Black people that are hallmarks of Oregon's legacy."

using race as a wedge to drive statewide politics.⁹ That means Black community members rightly don't trust the systems that are in place to govern their lives. Some Black community members have concerns about data privacy, and given the history of racism and oppression, have developed apathy for local, state, and national politics, which have continually demanded Black support, but have failed to find solutions for the Black community's needs. Being left out is a part of the institutionalized dehumanization, othering, and oppression of Black people that are hallmarks of Oregon's legacy.

For instance, Oregon has the seventh-highest incarceration rate of Black people. That means for every 1,000 Black residents, about twenty-one are in prison. Pushing Oregon to count state prisoners as residents of their home communities, rather than residents of the places where they are incarcerated, would increase Black representation and better serve the Black community. According to research of the Population Reference Bureau, Black children are most at risk to be undercounted by 48 percent compared to white children's undercount, which is estimated to be nine percent.¹⁰ This level of data inequity



Photo: Marchel Hirshfield, Census Equity Coordinator, APANO

paints an inaccurate portrait of Black communities translating into a lack of services and support for Black children.

Immigrant and Latinx Communities

Other disenfranchised groups include immigrant and Latinx communities whose labor is critical to, among other things, the farming economy of Oregon. The recent failed effort to introduce a citizenship question on the 2020 census brought up legitimate and terrifying concerns about deportation and privacy for immigrant and Latinx communities. As a result, the one-in-nine

9. Nina Mehlhaf, "Tracking the White Supremacy Movement in Oregon." KGW8 (website), August 15, 2017, www.kgw.com/article/news/local/tracking-the-white-supremacy-movement-in-oregon/464415792.

10. "Research Identifies New Strategies to Reduce Undercount of Young Children in US 2020 Census," Population Reference Bureau (website), June 12, 2019, www.prb.org/new-strategies-to-reduce-undercount-of-young-children-in-2020-census/.



Photo: Carlos Windham, Comedian, and Founder El Porvenir



Photo courtesy of We Count Oregon.

Oregonians who live with a non-citizen, which amounts to almost a half million people, are more likely to avoid the census and be undercounted. The assault on this community continued after COVID-19 disproportionately impacted Latinx communities. On July 21, 2020, the White House issued Memorandum on Excluding Illegal Aliens from the Apportionment Base Following the 2020 Census to prevent undocumented communities from counting when voting districts are redrawn through apportionment in 2021.

Disseminating facts about the census' security is paramount to undoing fears about participating. More than 10,000 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients live in Oregon. These young people and their families need to be represented in the census in order to have educational and recreational resources allocated to them.

Given the changes to US asylum and refugee policy, coupled with anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx narrative at the national level, these communities,

rightfully, are afraid for their lives and terrified they will be ripped away from their families and deported. It's important to note that 64 percent of Oregon's Latinx population is US born,¹¹ but the impact of the proposed citizenship question raised realistic concern for their safety and the safety of their families. While this population is distinct from first generation immigrants—approximately 96,000 Latinx Oregonians were born elsewhere—and both groups face similar social disparities.¹² These intersectional households have a variety of barriers to participation that We Count Oregon is addressing, particularly through multilingual communications and partnerships with long-time organizations working in these communities.

Localized efforts such as a census field organizer job fair, hosted by East County Rising and the Latino Network, helped boost participation within the Latinx community. That community grew by 72 percent since 2000 and currently makes up 12 percent of Oregon's population.¹³ As COVID-19 has halted We Count Oregon's field-based out-

11. The Oregon Community Foundation, *Latinos in Oregon: Trends and Opportunities in a Changing State*, August 2016, https://oregoncf.org/Templates/media/files/reports/latinos_in_oregon_report_2016.pdf.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

reach, the group is turning to digital and phone outreach in partnership with critical Latinx-focused partners, such as PCUN, Causa Oregon, and Raíces, to reach this critical community.

Tribal and Urban Indigenous Peoples

Long before settlers took over Oregon, before the adoption of the US Constitution, and before the first US census of 1790, there were native peoples living in the territory now known as Oregon. Specific challenges face these communities, including broken treaty agreements, disenrollment, and unrecognized tribes. Native peoples may resist participating in the census given how they have been erased from contemporary culture and face consistent stereotyping and outdated and inaccurate portrayals in pop culture and education.

Part C, Title VI, of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 details the national expectations to provide a quality education for American Indian, Alaskan, and Hawaiian Native students. Money allocated based on the census helps to fund federal grant programs to support the efforts of local educational agencies to meet culturally-related educational needs of native students; to ensure that students gain knowledge and understanding of native communities, languages, tribal histories, traditions and cultures; and to ensure that school staff who serve native students have

the ability to provide culturally-appropriate and effective instruction. With a long history of facing miseducation, misrepresentation, and inaccurate depictions of native peoples' histories, Indigenous and native people are rightfully distrustful of the state. After generations of institutionalized colonialism, it takes sustained efforts of reparation to build trust. Se-ah-dom Edmo is We Count Oregon's tribal community coordinator, enabling the organization to support and integrate the needs of Oregon's nine recognized tribes and urban native peoples.

Over the course of the campaign, We Count Oregon found that native peoples are concerned about information from the census being shared with other agencies including welfare, the IRS, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, tribal officials, tribal courts, tribal police, and the military. The year 1860 was the first time American Indians were counted in the census as a separate population category. Since then, the US Census Bureau has made changes in the way it counts populations, but the process for tribal communities continues to be culturally unresponsive and unjust. To address this, the Oregon census process kicked off in the Warm Springs reservation to ensure that the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs had ownership in census participation. Counting tribal and urban native peoples will happen because of their commitment to their people.

"Native peoples may resist participating in the census given how they have been erased from contemporary culture..."



Photo: courtesy of We Count Oregon

Other Considerations

While hard-to-count communities have the effects of social marginalization in common, there are specific considerations to take into account for why each community's participation has been low.

The US Census Bureau has increased efforts in collecting an accurate headcount of groups that are important to the work of We Count Oregon. Identifying information and outreach gaps is the first step in increasing the participation of hard-to-count communities. Next there's a need to identify underlying causes for the missing data, such as rural communities not having broadband internet for this year's first-ever electronic census, or Spanish-

speaking communities receiving English-only census mailings. Efforts have been made: braille and large print guides are available for disabled community members, and census language guides are available in fifty-nine non-English languages. But more work is needed.

Participating in the census is one act among many in achieving just political representation for all Oregonians. We Count Oregon will continue to do its part to achieve that goal. Learn more about the We Count Oregon campaign at www.wecountoregon.com

"Participating in the census is one act, among many, in achieving just political representation for all Oregonians."



Photo: Make Oregon Count 2020 Symposium