

2020

Counting Everyone because Everyone Counts: The Value of Census Data for Local Decision Making

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Recommended Citation

Krishnan, Uma, "Counting Everyone because Everyone Counts: The Value of Census Data for Local Decision Making" (2020). *Metroscape*. 148.

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Counting Everyone

because Everyone Counts

The value of census data for local decision making

by Uma Krishnan

Once every ten years the US Census Bureau conducts the decennial United States census, and 2020 is the year. The census is a national effort to count everyone in the United States. Unfortunately, this year the COVID-19 pandemic has captured the nation's attention even as the 2020 census struggles to claim relevance and broaden its reach. At the same time, census data has emerged as a critical tool for examining stark inequities in the demographics of who is contracting and dying of COVID-19. This year, counting everyone is more important than ever.

The census shapes who benefits in society

From the first census in 1790 to the current one, the census count has helped us understand our past, know our present, and prepare for our future. Framers of the Constitution mandated the census to ensure that each state had proper political representation. Today, the census numbers also shape a wide array of human services and other government spending.

A legacy of undercounting

Individuals in some communities are often missed by census counts—children, people of color, immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, and others. Some people decline to participate, sometimes due to fears about the government. Those who are often undercounted by the census are often the ones historically excluded from public decision-making, equitable economic opportunities, and access to basic resources. Counting everyone is critical to equitable distribution of resources and services, but a full count has historically been hard to achieve. Tragically,

enshrined in the legislative history of the census is the deep-rooted inequity of purposely undercounting segments of the population based on their status in civil society. Article 1, Section 2 of the US Constitution, which mandates the census, includes the following language:

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free Persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.

“Three-fifths of all other persons” is a direct reference to slaves. The practice of intentionally undervaluing persons through the three-fifths compromise ended when slavery was abolished in the United States. However, undercounting continues to remain a significant issue, especially for communities of color.

Local governments rely on census data

The census provides the most reliable and detailed information for describing demographics and housing in local areas. However, in the past, localities impatiently endured the ten-year wait for census data for decision-making, even as they watched population growth and decline and changes to housing stock. But, with vast improvements in information technology, localities, including Portland, have begun collecting more timely data, for example, through the

American Community Survey. However, these efforts cannot match the value of census data for resetting and recalibrating what's known about the demographics and housing characteristics of local areas.

The census count determines political representation at all levels of government. Other significant uses include distribution of federal funds to local communities for affordable housing, economic development, schools, infrastructure projects, transportation, emergency readiness, and other public services. There are other important ways in which localities use the census data alone or in combination with local data sources. For example, in cities across Oregon, census data is central to conducting a mandated Housing Needs Analysis and compliance with Oregon State Goal 10.¹

Impactful use of Census data by Oregon cities

Cities big and small, rural and urban across Oregon use census data in impactful and creative ways. The data forms the basis for analyses, policies, and programs. Examples include the following:

- Tigard is using census data to make strategic investments in clean drinking water and environmental well-being.
- Bend is using census data to plan and manage growth and to ensure housing affordability.
- Prineville is using census data to conduct a housing needs analysis. The city is in the midst of significant growth as a result of companies like Facebook moving into the area, and the housing needs analysis is required for Goal 10 compliance.

How Portland uses census data

The Portland metro area uses census data in several important ways. These are but a few:

► State of Housing in Portland Report

Since 2015, the Portland Housing Bureau has been releasing the State of Housing in Portland Report annually to provide stakeholders and policy makers with a comprehensive look at Portland's hous-

ing market by neighborhood, housing type, and affordability. While the report provides a snapshot of the demographics and housing characteristics of Portland using the census data and estimates from the American Community Survey, it also examines Portland's policies and programs addressing rental and homeownership affordability, tenant protections, and homelessness. The report has evolved into a valuable tool that is much more than a descriptive snapshot of the households and housing stock in Portland. The report offers insights on a variety of issues, such as the changing racial mix of Portland neighborhoods, changes to the composition of housing tenure, and changes to median household income by race and ethnicity. The illustration from the first State of Housing in Portland Report² highlights changes to racial diversity by neighborhoods based on data from the 2000 census and the 2013 American Community Survey estimates (figure 1).

Importantly, the State of Housing in Portland Report provides a better understanding of who is being impacted most by the ongoing affordable housing crisis. The insights are critical for helping decision makers target efforts and resources efficiently and effectively.

► North/Northeast Neighborhood Housing Strategy

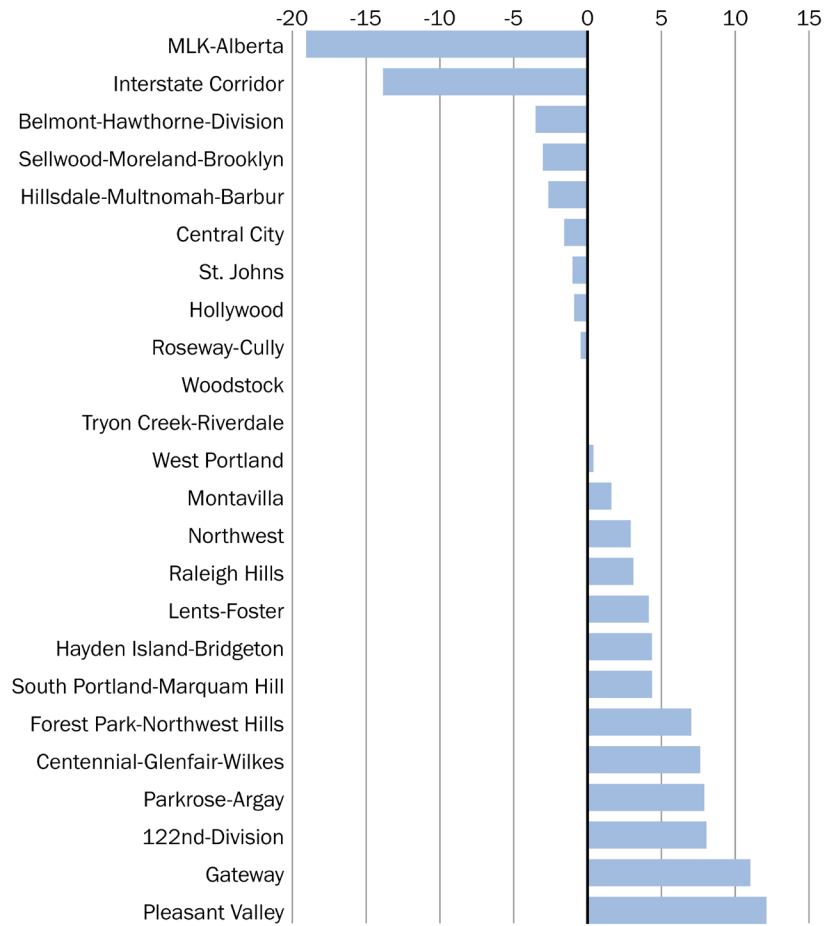
The North/Northeast Neighborhood Housing Strategy was started by the Portland Housing Bureau in 2014. The strategy addresses the legacy of large-scale displacement of the African American community and other communities of color in North and Northeast Portland since the 1970s. The strategy directs investments into new affordable rental housing, opportunities for first-time homebuyers, and home retention programs for longtime residents. The strategy prioritizes people at risk of displacement and descendants of families displaced due to urban renewal. The documentation and analysis for displacement of the African American community and other communities of color relies on decennial census data from several decades.³ Census data from 1970 and 2010 depict the change in racial composition of the African American population in North and Northeast Portland over that time period (maps

1. Oregon's Statewide Planning Goals & Guidelines Goal 10: Housing. OAR 660-015-0000(10), <https://www.oregon.gov/lcd/OP/Documents/goal10.pdf>.

2. Portland Housing Bureau, 2015 State of Housing in Portland (April 2015), <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/record/13332102>.

3. A series of maps that show the change in African American, Latino/Hispanic and additional population can be found in the information sheets at the website of the Portland Housing Bureau <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/phb/79566>

Figure 1 Change in Racial Diversity by Neighborhood, 2000-2013



Source: Portland Housing Bureau, 2015 State of Housing in Portland (April 2015), <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/record/13332102>.

2 and 3).

► Budget Mapping: An Equity Tool

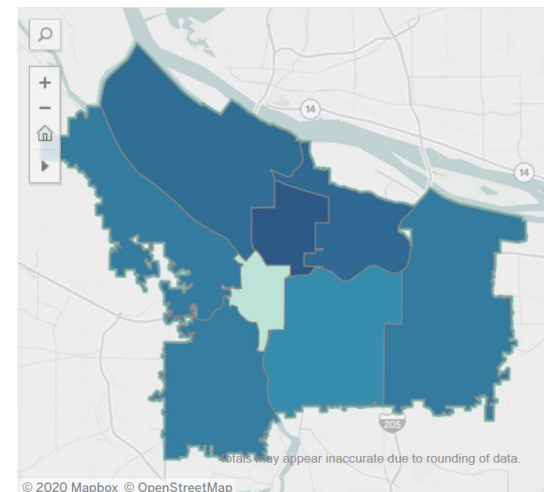
Annually, Portland’s City Budget Office uses census data to conduct budget mapping, which provides a graphic representation of Portland general fund revenues and operating and capital expenditures. This exercise tracks the flow of money for the current fiscal year within eight specific sub-geographies of Portland. By itself, the money does not describe the level of service provided or needed within an area, but it provides the amount of spending per person.

Again, the budget mapping exercise showcases an important use of census data that tracks spending levels in various sub-geographies of Portland. It serves as an equity tool for the city to address broad service issues and

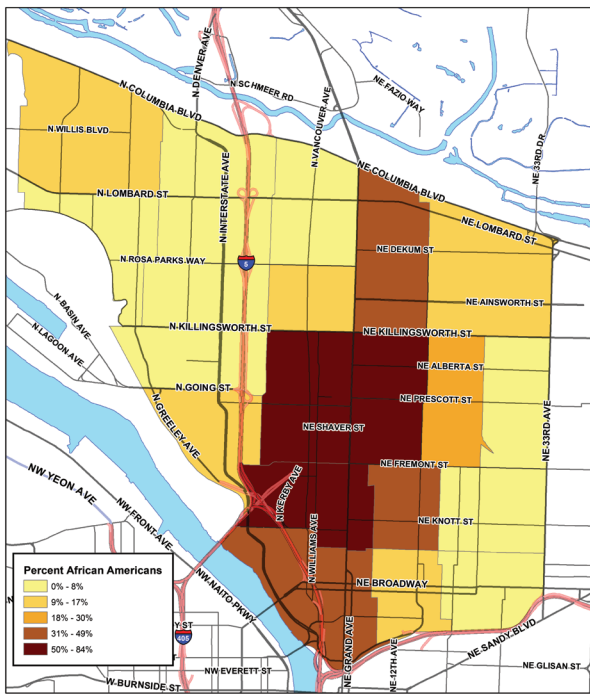
explore how to make services reliable and affordable with equitable access.

Map 1

Total Spending Per User (Move cursor over map geographies and pie graphs to see data)
 \$10.91 ————— \$14.66



Source: Portland City Budget Office. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/cbo/54416>

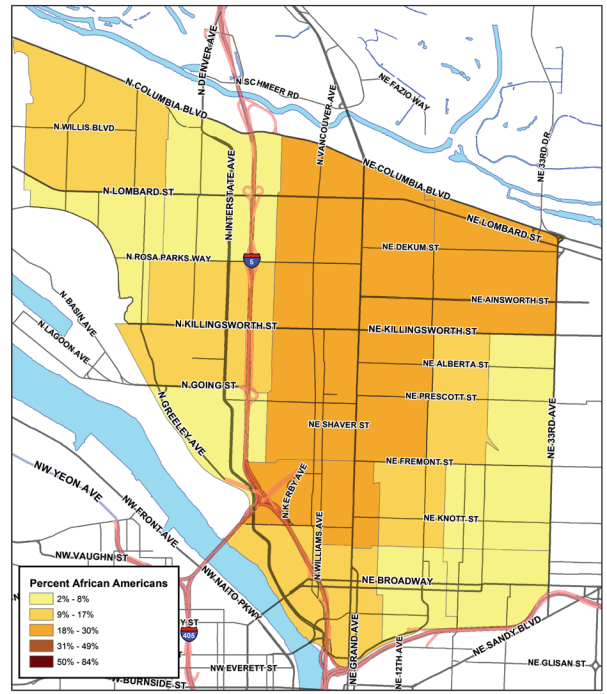


**Black or African American Percent of Total Population 1970
North/Northeast Portland
by Census Tract**

Area	African-American	Total	Percent
Portland	21,572	382,619	6%
North/Northeast	19,463	87,891	22%

Created by Portland Housing Bureau, June 2014
Source: 2010 Decennial Census, National Historic Geographic System

Map 2



**Black or African American Percent of Total Population 2010
North/Northeast Portland
by Census Tract**

Area	African-American	Total	Percent
Portland	36,695	583,776	6%
North/Northeast	12,274	83,237	15%

Created by Portland Housing Bureau, June 2014
Source: 2010 Decennial Census, National Historic Geographic System

Map 3

Preparing for the census – the local road to 2020

Preparations start several years before a census. While the US Census Bureau undertakes nationwide planning, testing, marketing, and communication efforts, there are key projects for which the bureau relies on local partners. There is a local and regional collaborative effort to count hard-to-count populations, and there are other projects that collectively help to increase the response rate and accuracy. Local jurisdictions participate in a local update of census addresses. This process has become particularly critical as Portland sees increased construction of multi-family units. Also, invited participants reviewed and verified selected statistical area boundaries for the 2020 census following US Census Bureau guidelines and criteria. And the Portland Housing Bureau and the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability collaborated on the Participant Statistical Area Program to ensure that the changes to census tracts match the construction and spatial reality. An example from that effort is the revision in spatial representation of Portland’s Pearl District. In 2010, a single census tract (51) represented this area. The construction of hundreds of new housing units is resulting in splitting

of this single tract into three distinct census tracts (Map 4).

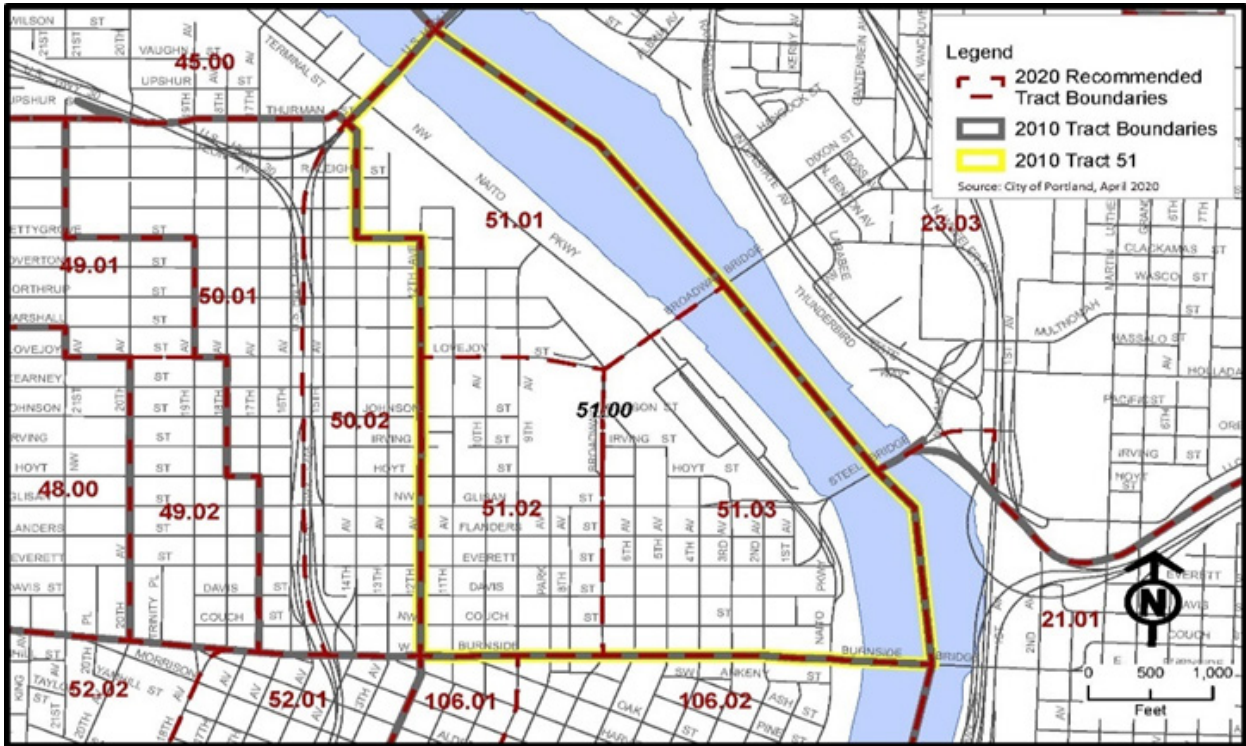
► Efforts to Improve Counting of the Hard-to-Count Population

The overall response rate for Portland in the 2010 census was around 80 percent. That means one-in-five Portlanders were not counted. For the 2020 census, Portland is making efforts to ensure that every Portland resident is counted. Since 2018, Portland has approved \$600,000 towards this effort.

Portland’s Office of Community and Civic Life is the lead agency tasked with efforts to increase the hard-to-count response rate. The agency has been working in concert with community and agency partners to design and implement strategies that can reach out to this population and help them participate in the census.

Everyone counts!

Conducting a decennial United States census is a profound process—an act that advances equity through the notion that *everyone counts*. However, since its inception, the census has been fraught with issues that are clearly not equitable. In fact, efforts for an inclusive



For the 2020 census, Portland's Pearl District is being split into three distinct census tracts: 51.01, 51.02, and 51.03.

Map 4

2020 census have been difficult due to a set of unique factors that have created additional challenges and barriers:

- It is the first-ever digital census, reinforcing a digital divide as many low-income households do not have broadband internet.
- There have been reductions and delays in federal funding.
- There was controversy over a proposed citizenship question.
- Some immigrants are fearful of participating due to the current political and social climate.
- Security of personal online information is causing concern.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is contributing to the risk of undercounting.

Given the high likelihood that Oregon is poised to gain an additional congressional

seat, there has been much interest in state-wide collaboration on increasing the census response rate, especially among the hard-to-count population. Portland has also invested heavily in these efforts. It remains to be seen whether a substantial increase in response rate among the hard-to-count population will be achieved. However, the simple act of trying to *count everyone* has the power to further equity like few other tools—it leads us to the fundamental truth that *everyone counts*.

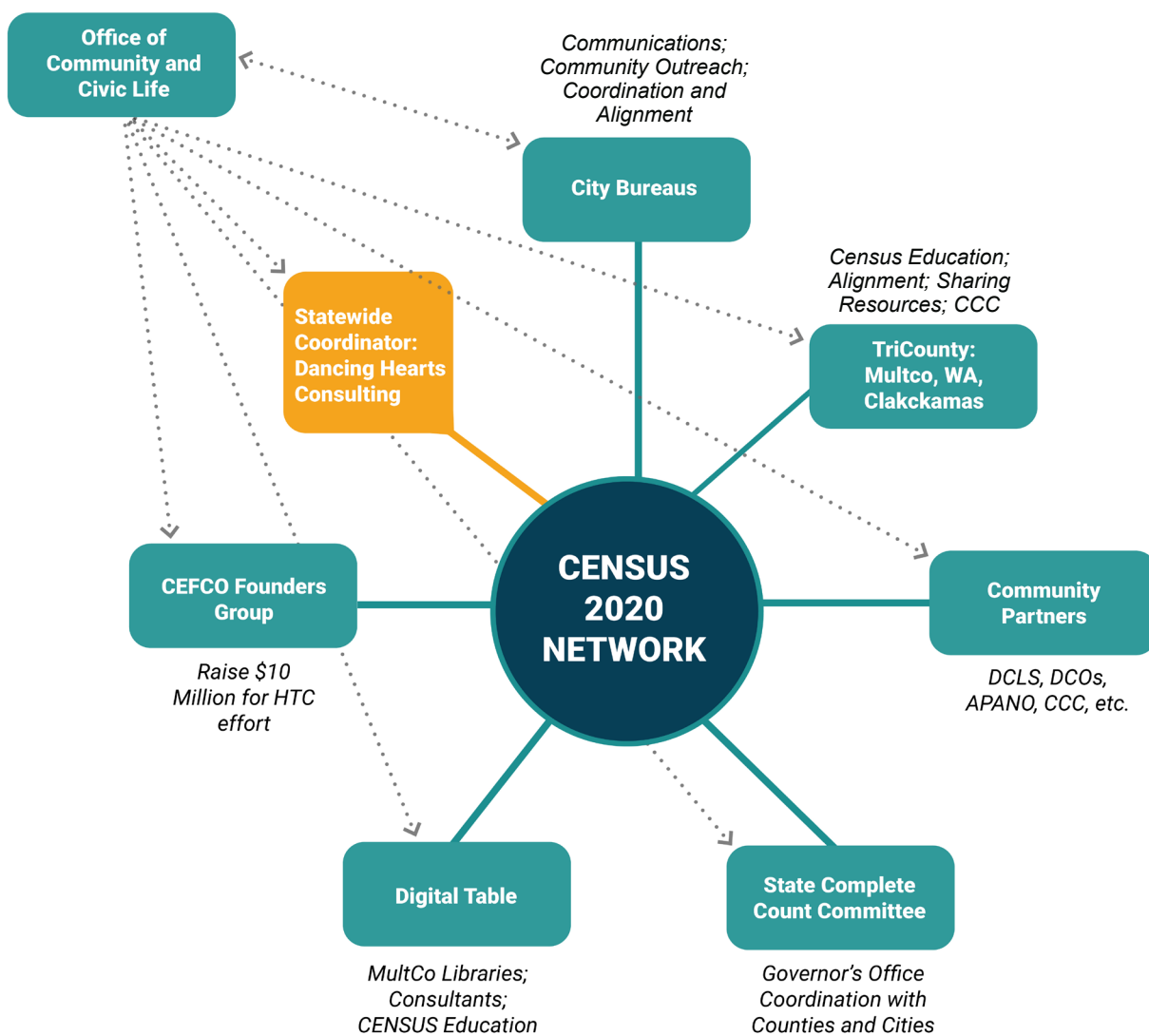
Counting people experiencing homelessness

Every ten years all housing units in the United States with addresses in the US Census Bureau's master address file receive the short form that collects information on the number of people living as a household in the unit and information on whether or not the unit is owned or rented. However, since people experiencing homelessness lack an address, a separate system is in place for counting them.

Census takers working with local groups counted people outdoors and at other identified locations on April 1, 2020. People were also counted at service locations like emergency and transitional shelters, soup kitchens, and mobile food vans. One problem with this separate system of counting is that the census is not capturing persons who neither own nor rent a home but who have to double up with family or friends because they are experiencing homelessness. Equity would require that these people be counted as well.

About the author

Uma Krishnan currently works for the City of Portland Housing Bureau (PHB) as a Housing Program Coordinator, as well as teaching in PSU's Demography Certificate Program. Broadly, her research and teaching interests include applied social demography and affordable housing. She has a PhD in Urban Planning and Policy Development from Rutgers University.



Portland's Office of Community and Civic Life is the lead agency tasked with efforts to increase the hard-to-count response rate.

Source: Office of Community and Civic Life

