



## **Census Funding Is Recovery Funding**

### *Underfunding the Census Jeopardizes Effective Response to Natural Disasters*

Recent natural disasters, including hurricanes and wildfires, have caused enormous suffering and left massive physical destruction and population displacement in their wake. Tornadoes, flooding, snow storms, and other extreme weather events, such as the unprecedented polar vortex in 2017,<sup>i</sup> also threaten lives, businesses, and community infrastructure every year. Events in 2017 caused \$306 billion in damage, making it the costliest year on record for natural disasters.<sup>ii</sup> Again we are approaching hurricane season and bracing for the impacts of systems like Florence, which will likely require recovery funding from Congress. Preparing for anticipated extreme weather events also requires Congress to ensure that the U.S. Census Bureau – which has faced persistent underfunding and logistical challenges for 2020 Census planning – has the resources it needs to conduct an accurate count in all communities, especially those impacted by natural disasters.

The link between the decennial census and natural disasters is critical for lawmakers to understand for two reasons:

- Without accurate census data, disaster preparation, recovery, and rebuilding will be far more difficult in the future.
- The disruption from natural disasters adds to the challenge of conducting an accurate enumeration in areas recovering from disasters.

### **Census Data: A Guide for Disaster Planning, Preparation, Response, and Recovery**

Faced with increasingly severe weather and natural events, [federal, state, and local agencies must be equipped with accurate, comprehensive Census Bureau data](#) to inform rigorous advanced planning, effective preparations and evacuation efforts, rapid response once the greatest danger has passed, and long term recovery for affected communities. Evacuation plans, for example, require detailed, accurate census information to identify populations without sufficient resources and wherewithal to leave their homes easily and to inform agency rescue and relief efforts. Key data derived from the decennial census and related American Community Survey that inform these vital activities include:

- Population density and rate of growth
- Households with persons age 65 or older
- Disability status (+ by age)
- Language spoken at home/English language ability
- Income and poverty levels and concentrations
- Access to private vehicles (at home)
- Age of structure (residential)
- Number of units in building
- Mobile homes

## Census Data and Long-Term Recovery

Accurate census information is also crucial for accessing disaster recovery funding through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This funding is census-guided in a way similar to HUD's Community Development Block Grants: data about local populations enables state and local governments to effectively access available funds and implement recovery plans.

- Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, more than \$50 billion in long-term disaster recovery funding (CDBG-DR) has been appropriated through HUD to assist Gulf Coast communities.
- CDBG-DR regulations require that funding benefit the most economically vulnerable populations impacted by a disaster.

## Difficulties of Conducting an Accurate Census in the Wake of Catastrophe

In 2009, and again in 2011, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights examined the challenges of conducting the 2010 Census in areas recovering from and profoundly changed by severe natural disasters<sup>iii</sup> Five years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated large swaths of the nation's Gulf Coast, the Census Bureau still faced unique difficulties conducting the enumeration, including:

- Large numbers of people in temporary housing;<sup>iv</sup>
- High rates of vacant housing units;
- Higher percentages of renter-occupied units relative to owner-occupied units;
- Difficulty in identifying informal housing arrangements; and
- A potential influx of temporary residents working on rebuilding efforts (often individuals with low English proficiency).

## Challenges Facing Our Disaster-Impacted Communities

Many communities affected by hurricanes and wildfires will still be deep in recovery when the 2020 Census enumeration takes place. In fact, the Census Bureau has started pre-census address building in communities across the country and will need to modify those activities in areas hit by these disasters. The geographic extent, type and magnitude of damages in affected communities present additional challenges for the 2020 Census. Examples of infrastructure damage and displacement that could affect census preparations and implementation include:

- As of early August 2018, wildfires have burned over 340,000 acres and damaged or destroyed over 1,800 structures in California. 15,000 homes were threatened by these fires, and nearly 40,000 residents were under evacuation orders.<sup>v</sup>
- More than 1,300 people were still in shelters and more than 60,000 displaced people were still living in hotel rooms paid for by FEMA one month after Hurricane Harvey hit in August 2017.
- An estimated 176,100 homes in Texas were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Harvey; at least 136,000 homes and other structures were damaged in Harris County (the greater Houston area).<sup>vi</sup>

- Monroe County, Florida requested 7,500 mobile home units and 1,700 travel trailers to house displaced residents after Hurricane Irma in August-September 2017.<sup>vii</sup>
- The Puerto Rican government updated statistics on the impacts of Hurricane Maria in a recent report to Congress, detailing a \$139 billion reconstruction plan. They estimate that 1,427 Puerto Rican residents died from September to December 2017 as a result of the disaster.<sup>viii</sup>
- The polar vortex caused the Washington D.C. government to announce a “cold emergency” and fill at least 1,500 city shelters and hypothermia stations in December 2017, while other East Coast cities struggled to shelter those experiencing homelessness as well.<sup>ix</sup>

The same residents who tend to be most undercounted in decennial counts—those living in poverty, people of color, rural populations, and young children—are also the least able to bounce back when impacted by natural disasters. Fully funding the Census Bureau as it prepares for the 2020 Census lays a critical foundation for ongoing disaster recovery efforts.

### A Vital FEMA Partner

Census Bureau data are so essential to emergency preparedness and disaster recovery efforts that the agency now serves on five Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) committees and will chair a new FEMA data analytics committee. The *Census Bureau Builder* on-line tool helps state and local officials leverage data from the census, ACS, and economic surveys to help businesses recover and people return to work as quickly as possible after a natural disaster.

**The bottom line:** *investing in a fair and accurate census is an investment in the well-being of communities that have faced and will face the wrath of nature and our ability to face and recover from disaster through informed, prudent decision-making.*

<sup>i</sup> Hendrix, Steve and Tara Bahrapour. *Washington Post*, December 28, 2018.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/is-the-polar-vortex-back-be-afraid-frigid-friends/2017/12/28/e60eaaaa-ebfe-11e7-9f92-10a2203f6c8d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e093994435f7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/is-the-polar-vortex-back-be-afraid-frigid-friends/2017/12/28/e60eaaaa-ebfe-11e7-9f92-10a2203f6c8d_story.html?utm_term=.e093994435f7)

<sup>ii</sup> Mooney, Chris and Brady Dennis. *Washington Post*, January 8, 2018.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/01/08/hurricanes-wildfires-made-2017-the-most-costly-u-s-disaster-year-on-record/?utm\\_term=.6032dae7bc61](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/01/08/hurricanes-wildfires-made-2017-the-most-costly-u-s-disaster-year-on-record/?utm_term=.6032dae7bc61)

<sup>iii</sup> *Counting in the Wake of a Catastrophe*, LCCR Education Fund, 2009 and *The Hard Count: A Community Perspective on 2010 Census Operations*, LCCR Education Fund, Feb 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> In 2020, the Census Bureau will mail census materials or visit homes in rural and remote areas based on a master list of addresses compiled in advance; location and stability of housing are important factors in whether people are counted accurately and fairly.

<sup>v</sup> California Statewide Fire Summary, October 2017:

[http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/communications\\_StatewideFireSummary](http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/communications_StatewideFireSummary)

<sup>vi</sup> Lozano, Juan A. *Business Insider*, October 1, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/ap-month-after-harvey-debris-piles-show-recovery-takes-time-2017-10>

<sup>vii</sup> Harris, Alex. *Miami Herald*, September 22, 2017. <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/florida-keys/article174907241.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Florido, Adrian. *NPR All Things Considered*, August 9, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/09/637230089/puerto-rico-estimates-it-will-cost-139-billion-to-fully-recover-from-hurricane-m>

<sup>ix</sup> Malone, Scott. *Reuters*, January 5, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-weather-homelessness-feature/cold-comfort-u-s-homeless-shelters-overwhelmed-in-brutal-weather-idUSKBN1EU1ZE>