

Immigration

Some in Texas fear Trump ban on undocumented immigrants in census is scare tactic to suppress count

By: Arelis R. Hernández-July 22, 2020

SAN ANTONIO — Whenever Father Carmelo Hernandez makes a live appearance on his church's YouTube channel, he asks the same question each week: "Have you filled out your census form?"

The parishioners of St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in Houston are largely Hispanic, undocumented or of mixed status, living in one of the most diverse cities in the nation. Hernandez has spent months using his pulpit to demystify the census, disentangle the misinformation and quiet the fears that congregants have about being counted.

But news that President Trump signed a memorandum Tuesday that would exclude many of his parishioners from congressional apportionment is enough to scare them back into invisibility, he said. To them it is proof — against Hernandez's many efforts to the contrary — that the census is a trap and should be avoided.

"This is an obvious attempt to weaponize the census to make sure people already in power stay in power," said Nabila Mansoor, executive director of the Texas chapter of Emgage USA, which works closely with Texas's Muslim American community. "The demographics are changing such that our districts are going to be more diverse and include many more people that were not there before. If you take out the undocumented community, you are allowing these gerrymandered districts to be further diluted."

Trump said Tuesday [that he has directed](#) the commerce secretary "to exclude illegal aliens from the apportionment base following the 2020 census," adding that the move "reflects a better understanding of the Constitution and is consistent with the principles of our representative democracy."

Excluding undocumented migrants from the decennial counting of people who live within U.S. borders could have significant consequences in Texas, home to an estimated 1.6 million undocumented immigrants and massive demographic shifts since 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Migration Policy Institute. Some experts estimate the true number is closer to 2 million, and more than 107,000 DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients reside in the state.



Demonstrators rally at the Supreme Court in April 2019 to protest a proposal to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census. (Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty)

The Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and Austin urban areas — the fastest-growing in the nation — have some of the highest numbers of undocumented residents in the country, according to the Pew Research Center. They represent huge chunks of the labor force and contribute billions of dollars to the economy, studies show.

Houston alone is home to an estimated half-million undocumented immigrants. Advocates say more concerning than not counting those people is that many of them are in households with children and extended family members who are U.S. citizens — and who might also be left out of the official count.

Experts say the Trump administration’s attempt to change the 230-year-old census process will face [constitutional challenges](#), and Trump opponents say it represents the latest of several actions aimed at suppressing the count and skewing the nation’s population data. The Supreme Court struck down an administration effort to include a [citizenship question](#) on the census, and groups sued after Trump ordered federal agencies to share data on citizenship with the Commerce Department.

“The conversation alone is devastating,” said Graci Garces, director of partnerships at BakerRipley, a community development organization in Texas. “It would also exacerbate the existing feeling among immigrant communities that they don’t count and don’t exist.”

Garces and her team have spent years working with neighbors in the Gulfton-Sharpstown community of Houston to win their trust and to explain how the census can help them. Dubbed the “Ellis Island of Houston,” it is one of the most dense and diverse neighborhoods of Harris County. It has its own census tract.

Street after street is lined with apartment complexes full of immigrant and refugee families from around the globe. BakerRipley has invested in Gulfton-Sharpstown, where it has a community center and programming designed to assist families. Trump’s memo also threatens the organization’s funding, which is based on census data.

“The greater Houston area is projected to lose \$15,700 in federal funding for each living human being that does not get counted,” said Deborah Chen, the director of civic engagement programs for the Houston chapter of OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates.

Texas is at an inflection point with this census as a result of the state’s explosive growth during the past decade. The state could gain as many as three or four members of Congress, but determining the



Immigrant families walk to a respite center after they were processed and released by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in June 2018 in McAllen, Tex. (David J. Phillip/AP)



boundaries of those districts will depend on accurate census data. Shifting demographics present an existential threat to the state's Republican hegemony.

The [coronavirus](#) pandemic has prompted the postponement of public redistricting hearings slated to take place this summer before lawmakers begin to redraw maps next year. But delays in the delivery of census data could lead the Republican-controlled state legislature to hold a special session. Advocates have urged elected state officials to facilitate public input through remote public hearings before what could be a gladiatorial 2021 legislative session.

Texas has a long history of [discriminating](#) against voters of color. Federal district court lawsuits have forced elected state leaders to throw out the maps decade after decade while under the supervision of the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). But after the Supreme Court [invalidated](#) a key provision of the civil-rights-era law in 2013, Texas was freed from oversight and quickly [implemented](#) voter-identification requirements.

The 2021 session will mark the first time in 50 years that Texas will undertake redistricting out of sight of federal scrutiny.

Organizers say the Trump administration's actions are having a [chilling effect](#) on census participation rates, even if the moves are not backed by the courts.

Charlie Bonner, spokesman for the nonpartisan civic organization Move Texas, said the group's outreach workers in the Austin area continue to find people who ask about the citizenship question — a year after it was [ruled unconstitutional](#).

The state government has not devoted any funding to the effort to educate and count more people, leaving the work to the U.S. Census Bureau and volunteer groups that, because of the pandemic, have had to pivot field operations and cancel events designed to urge immigrant communities to fill out the forms.

“Texas is not doing anything to make sure people get counted, because the people in power know the demographics are not growing in their favor,” Bonner said. “When we take more Latinx young people out of the count, we diminish their political power. . . . Those communities are losing money and power in Texas.”

Immigrant and Hispanic communities have historically [underwhelmed](#) at the ballot box, but recent elections suggest years of voter disengagement is no longer a part of the narrative. Filling out census forms is one way grass-roots organizers introduce families to civic life and empower communities to advocate on their behalf.

“We need to be more aggressive in making sure we are seen,” said Hernandez, the priest. “It's our moral obligation to be counted.”

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