



NNEDV

## 2020 US Census: Considerations for Survivors

This document provides information about the 2020 United States Census process and outlines important privacy considerations for survivors and domestic violence shelters. NNEDV works directly with the US Census Bureau, a nonpartisan government agency, to help ensure that the process considers the privacy and safety needs of survivors, particularly those who are in shelter and who have relocated. This year, NNEDV became an official partner, joining a diverse group of advocacy organizations across the country working to ensure the communities they help are included in the count. (See [a list of National Partners and Supporters](#) here). Below we outline why participation is required, how the US Census Bureau is required to protect the information that people share with them, and we share important privacy considerations for survivors.

### Participation

The count is mandated by the US Constitution and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The 2020 Census counts the population in the United States and each home will receive an invitation to respond to a short questionnaire. Many people want to know if they have to participate in the US Census, or if they can opt out. Title 13 of the US Code says that everyone living in the United States (including the five US territories) at the time of the US Census is required by law to participate. If someone doesn't participate or intentionally gives false information, they could be subjected to a criminal fine.

### Why Count Everyone?

The US Census happens every 10 years, and is conducted to collect demographic information about the people living in the United States and territories. It is not conducted to collect the specific details about who lives where, but rather, it is used to generate statistics that help the government make important decisions about funding and political representation for those responding. Names and addresses are only collected for the purpose of ensuring that each person is counted only once. The statistics the US Census Bureau creates with the data they collect are used to:

- Determine how much funding communities get for essential public services like healthcare, education, housing and infrastructure programs.

- Determine how many congressional representatives each state gets in the US House of Representatives.
- Draw boundaries for federal and state legislative districts, and for school districts.
- Help local governments and nonprofits determine the need for new roads, schools, hospitals and other public facilities.

### **What Information is Collected?**

The US Census form collects the following information about the residence itself:

- Type of residence
- How many people live in the residence
- Any additional people staying in the residence that weren't in the initial count
- Telephone number of person filling out form (for follow up if needed)

For each person living in the household they ask:

- Name
- Sex
- Date of birth
- Age on Census Day
- Hispanic origin
- Race
- Alternate address
- Relationship to the first person listed on the form

**Privacy Option:** While information for everyone staying in the house must be collected, there is one important privacy option that may be helpful to survivors and others wanting to protect their privacy as much as possible. Rather than providing the name of each person in the residence, people are allowed to write a more anonymous answer in the name sections. For example, a household with three people could write Person 1, Person 2, Person 3, instead of providing names.

You can view a [sample form](#) so that you can prepare in advance.

## The Process

Every household will receive a 2020 US Census form in the mail this month. The first mailings will be invitations to participate online. To complete the form online, the person filling out the form will need to enter the Census ID residence code provided on the paper form received in the mail.

**Tech Safety Note:** Survivors of domestic violence who are concerned that their devices may be monitored by their abusers and want to make sure that their information is kept private, will want to carefully consider their options for submitting the information. If you want to fill out the form online but fear your device is being monitored, consider using a safer device, like a library computer or a friend's phone. For more information about monitoring see our [Technology Safety Quick Tips](#) and our [Technology Safety Plan: A Guide for Survivors](#).

The Census Bureau will send paper forms to all households that haven't completed the online form. They will be mailed a few weeks after the initial invitation to participate online. Those who wish to participate by filling out a paper questionnaire can wait for it to arrive. Once the form is received, it can be completed and returned in the mail, or the answers can be provided over the phone.

## What Happens if I Don't Respond?

If the Census Bureau does not receive a response, that residence will be added to the non-response follow up process. During the non-response process, field agents from the US Census Bureau are sent out to follow up with each residence that did not reply. This process is officially set to start on May 13, 2020.

**Safety Note:** It's important for survivors to know how they can make sure that the person who shows up to their door is an actual Census Bureau employee and not someone trying to impersonate a field agent to gain access to personal information. Field agents must carry a photo ID with their name, photograph, a watermark, and an expiration date. They will provide a letter on official letterhead about the purpose of the visit, and visits should only occur between 9:00 AM and 9:00 PM local time. You can request to speak to the field agent's supervisor to

confirm their employment, or you can call your regional US Census Office to confirm that the person works for the US Census Bureau.

If no one answers when the field agent stops by, a “Notice of Visit” will be left at the door. This notice will encourage people living in the residence to respond, and will provide an online response code. The Census Bureau will then try to determine household information by using external data from utility bills and federal records. After trying to reach the household three times, the field agents are authorized to ask nearby reliable “proxies” like landlords, neighbors, and postal workers for details about the household. If there is no proxy available, field agents will continue to visit the residence up to 6 times, and sometimes extending beyond that, through the end of July.

### **How is Census Information Protected?**

[Title 13 of the US Code](#) contains strict rules that limit how the US Census Bureau can use the information they collect, and what they must do to protect the privacy of the people who respond to the Census. Personal information provided on the US Census is legally protected by Title 13, and in no circumstances can it be used against respondents (except in the prosecution of alleged violations of Title 13 – for example, if they gave false information on the form).

It is against the law for anyone at the US Census Bureau to publish any private information that identifies an individual or business who has responded to the Census. This includes names, addresses, and telephone numbers. They are also prohibited from sharing any private and personally identifiable information with anyone outside of the Census Bureau, including other federal agencies. Census Bureau employees face steep penalties for violating confidentiality: up to 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

### **What Should Domestic Violence Shelters Expect?**

In 2019, domestic violence shelters were offered the opportunity to provide their address in advance to the US Census Bureau so that they could be incorporated into a specialized process that’s been designed to safely and privately count survivors in shelter. Those who opted into that process will be contacted by their specially trained census worker and have a plan for conducting the count.

Those who did not opt into the process will be sent a form just like other households. They have one of two options:

1. They can opt to have survivors complete the form as if it is a general housing unit. If this is the option chosen, staff will need to ensure that survivor information is kept private and confidential from other survivors in shelter. This can be done by offering ways for each survivor to fill in their information privately, and have that information obscured from others who subsequently fill in their information. Although it is the job of the shelter to make sure that every survivor has the opportunity to be counted, it is not their job to require survivors to fill in the form. Ultimately, the decision to participate is up to each individual survivor.
2. If the shelter wants to opt in to the specialized procedures, they can do so by prompting the non-response process listed above by not completing the form mailed to them. They will then be added to the non-response operation. At that point, a field agent will stop by the shelter, and when they do, the person who answers can disclose that they are a shelter or safe house. Once they do that, the field agent should stop their interaction and refer the non-response case number to the designated point of contact at the local US Census Bureau office who has been assigned to shelters and safe houses. Then, the worker with specialized training will reach out to the shelter and assist in the data collection process.

### **Privacy & Confidentiality Reminders for Domestic Violence Shelters**

Ultimately, it's up to each individual survivor to decide how they will participate. Domestic violence shelters should not share any survivor information with the US Census Bureau, unless the survivor has explicitly allowed them to through a release of information. For more information on best practices related to releases of information, read our resource [How to Work with Survivors Regarding the Release of Personal Information](#), and check out our [template Limited Release of Information](#).

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