

The U.S. census has its flaws—but so has every attempt to count people

April 1 2020, by Teresa A. Sullivan



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A few days ago, I completed my 2020 U.S. census form.

[My latest book](#) details the fundamentals and significance of the 2020 census. By April 1, every residence in the United States will be contacted, usually by mail, to answer only seven questions. This year you may respond online, although there are options for paper, telephone and even talking to a census worker.

Special efforts will be launched to reach the homeless, people in transit and those living in unconventional housing, such as a houseboat. The census will [cost billions of dollars](#).

All this effort and expense raises the issue of whether there is an alternative. The short answer is no, not unless the U.S. Constitution is amended.

Other countries, however, have different ways of counting and tracking their populations. The U.S. system is moving in their direction.

Is there a better way?

The census is required by the [U.S. Constitution to apportion the House of Representatives](#) according to the population of the states. [Census data are used to allocate federal funding](#), some US\$1.5 trillion of it, to states and localities.

Undercounting just one child in poverty may cost a school district nearly \$1,700 a year in Title I funds. According to one study, [the people most likely to be undercounted](#) are often the very people who would benefit the most from Medicaid and other programs.

The census is a snapshot of the country's population. The nature of a snapshot is that it is fixed at a point in time. According to the U.S. Constitution, that snapshot is taken once every 10 years.

The census will not change or go away unless the U.S. Constitution is amended, a lengthy process requiring the agreement of a supermajority of both Houses of Congress and three-fourths of the state legislatures. However, a continuous population register would be one alternative, perhaps enhanced with an occasional "light-touch" census supplementing the register information with just a few questions asked at long intervals.

In reality, however, the population is more like a video, with people moving in and out as they are born and die and change residences in between those two events. A continuous population register is more like a video than a snapshot, with every birth, death and move tracked for every resident.

How population registers work

[Population registers](#) – which require citizens to keep a current address with the government and to register births and deaths—have existed for centuries in parts of Asia and Europe, especially in Scandinavia.

[Population registration in China](#) dates back at least to the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). Later, birth and death registration laws were part of the T'ang codes, one of China's earliest recorded legal codes.

The Japanese system of registration, which was adapted from China, featured distinctive household registries that were intended to be the basis of periodic land reallocation in the seventh century A.D. – though it isn't clear that Japan ever used the data in this way. National registration was restored and strengthened during the Tokugawa shogunate in the 1600s.

The European origins of registries were parish records of baptisms, marriages and burials. Later, the nation-state coordinated the registry, including the movement of citizens from one place to another.

Today, the registries are digitized. As I note in [my latest book](#), the Swedish tax authority, for example, maintains the registry for Sweden, and Swedes have unique PINs and the right to see anything in their file.

Just the census—for now

According to [a working paper developed for the U.S. Census Bureau](#), the United States knows how many people are born and die every year with high accuracy.

For most of the U.S. population—at least those who are reached by the IRS, Social Security or Medicare—it is highly likely that the federal government has their address. There are some potential barriers to using a population register, because tracking births and deaths is a responsibility of individual states, but the states cooperate with the federal government in compiling vital statistics.

The biggest flaw with the population register is keeping accurate track of international migration.

Entry into the United States might go undetected, or a visa may expire. Emigrants are not required to notify the United States that they have relocated to another country, and the U.S. does not employ exit visas.

Even if "net migration"—immigrants minus emigrants—is estimated for the country as a whole, the state or locality where people have entered or left may be unknown. This would be important information for local governments that must provide roads, police and fire service, and other services for all.

This year, the U.S. Census Bureau will use an unprecedented amount of administrative data, such as Social Security records, to check the accuracy of [census data](#), to edit missing information and to estimate the citizenship status of respondents. This latter use of administrative data [has been mandated by a presidential executive order](#) to ascertain citizenship, after the Supreme Court prevented a citizenship question being put on the 2020 census.

So, while there is not yet a [population](#) register, it might be at America's

doorstep. In the meantime, however, please complete your [census](#) form—it is your democratic duty.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The U.S. census has its flaws—but so has every attempt to count people (2020, April 1) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-census-flawsbut-people.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.