



The Citizenship Question: Today's Three-Fifths Compromise?

July 9, 2018

By Ashon McKenzie, Esq.

About 230 years after the signing of the Constitution, our nation's leaders are still stuck on a question that has plagued the country from the beginning: Whom should we count in the decennial U.S. Census?

The question 230 years ago was *how* our federal government would count non-citizens — black slaves whom it deprived of citizenship and humanity. The nation's founders opted for the Three-Fifths Compromise, counting each enslaved human being as three-fifths of a person. The question before us today is *if* the nation wants to capture data about today's non-citizens — documented and undocumented immigrants.

The citizenship question compromises the U.S. Census Bureau's constitutional responsibility to conduct a fair and accurate count of **every person** living in the United States, placing all American communities at risk of being underrepresented and under resourced — particularly those most likely to be undercounted.

Experts throughout the country believe that the inclusion of the citizenship question in the 2020 Census survey will discourage immigrants and mixed-status families from responding to the questionnaire, leaving large numbers of children and families uncounted. In 2017, in the Census Bureau's own focus group testing of the census questionnaire, immigrant and mixed-status respondents intentionally provided incorrect information about household members, falsified names and left family members off the roster out of fear. It's not difficult to imagine an undocumented immigrant mother with two children born in Ohio being nervous about filling out the census survey after hearing stories of family separations at our southern border. She would likely react very similarly to any one of us; she would do what is best to protect her family.

Unfortunately, more than 100,000 of Ohio's children are already at risk of being undercounted because they live in an area that the Census Bureau considers "hard-to-count"— and that's just children ages 0-4. The 2010 census undercounted more than one million children with Black and Latino children being missed twice as often as White children. Many of Ohio's "hard-to-count" communities house large immigrant and young child populations who will be at an even higher risk of being underrepresented because of the citizenship question.

The citizenship question places all of Ohio's communities in danger of losing funding, accurate data for decision-making and political representation.

In 2016, Ohio received \$5.4 billion in federal funding for the top 10 services benefiting our children including funding for Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP), foster care programs, and school breakfast and lunch programs. Funding for all these programs depend on census data. An inaccurate census could mean losses to critical programs like Head Start, which provides high-quality child care allowing parents in urban and rural communities to go to work knowing that their children are in a safe and caring environment. For example, last month, the closure of a migrant Head Start made local headlines as fears spread throughout the community that parents, who did migrant farm work in the area, would miss work because they had no place to take their children for childcare.

An inaccurate count means inaccurate data and decision-making in Ohio's communities. State and community leaders use census data to allocate resources for community needs like education, assistance for veterans, hospitals, and transportation. Businesses and entrepreneurs use census data to make critical decisions about where to locate plants and stores, hiring and customer needs. Without an accurate count, our communities' businesses and services are compromised.

Finally, accurate census data is the lifeblood of our democracy. An incomplete count could mean a loss of representation at the federal level. Based on population projections, Ohio is at risk of losing a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. A full and accurate count may be our only hope for maintaining all 16 of our seats.

As we return to the question of how we count and value every person in our state, and more broadly, in our nation, let's leave a better legacy than the founders' Three-Fifths Compromise. All **people** — citizen and noncitizen — are valuable and represent the future of our state and our nation. A society is measured by how we treat our most vulnerable and it's not too late to make sure that every child, every family, and every **person** counts.