

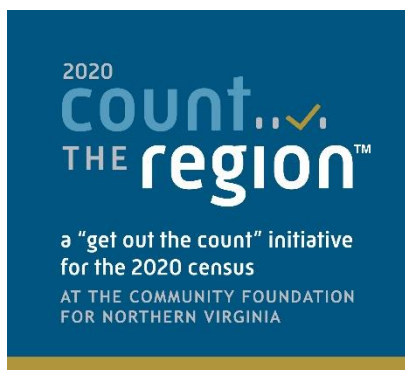
building a community that works for everyone

Every Voice Counts: Count the Region

Building Community, Trust, and Understanding through the 2020 Decennial Census

A “get out the count” initiative at the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia

Every ten years, households across America receive an invitation to complete the decennial census, a constitutionally mandated process to count every resident. Voluntary participation is critical for securing an accurate, “complete” count that decisionmakers use to reshape political boundaries and to dispense \$1.5 trillion in funding each year, yet about one in five Northern Virginians—172,000 households—were considered at risk of not responding to the 2020 census.



To reach this population and increase self-response rates among the general and hard-to-count populations, the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia launched Count the Region, an initiative that promoted broad census participation through the formation of a Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee and a smaller subcommittee of local government staff. These individuals worked together to develop structures that facilitated ongoing communication and information exchange; to create and deliver unified, hyper-local messages about the value of this work; and to secure resources for communities that needed extra support to reach the hard-to-count households.

The region saw a tremendous increase in census responses from its general and hard-to-count populations. An estimated 79 percent of households in Northern Virginia responded to the Census, up from 74 percent in 2010 while the national average remained unchanged at 67 percent. Approximately 70 percent of households in Northern Virginia’s hard-to-count tracts self-responded to the Census, an increase of 2.1 percentage points from 2010, compared to an overall decline in the response rate nationally and in other parts of Virginia.

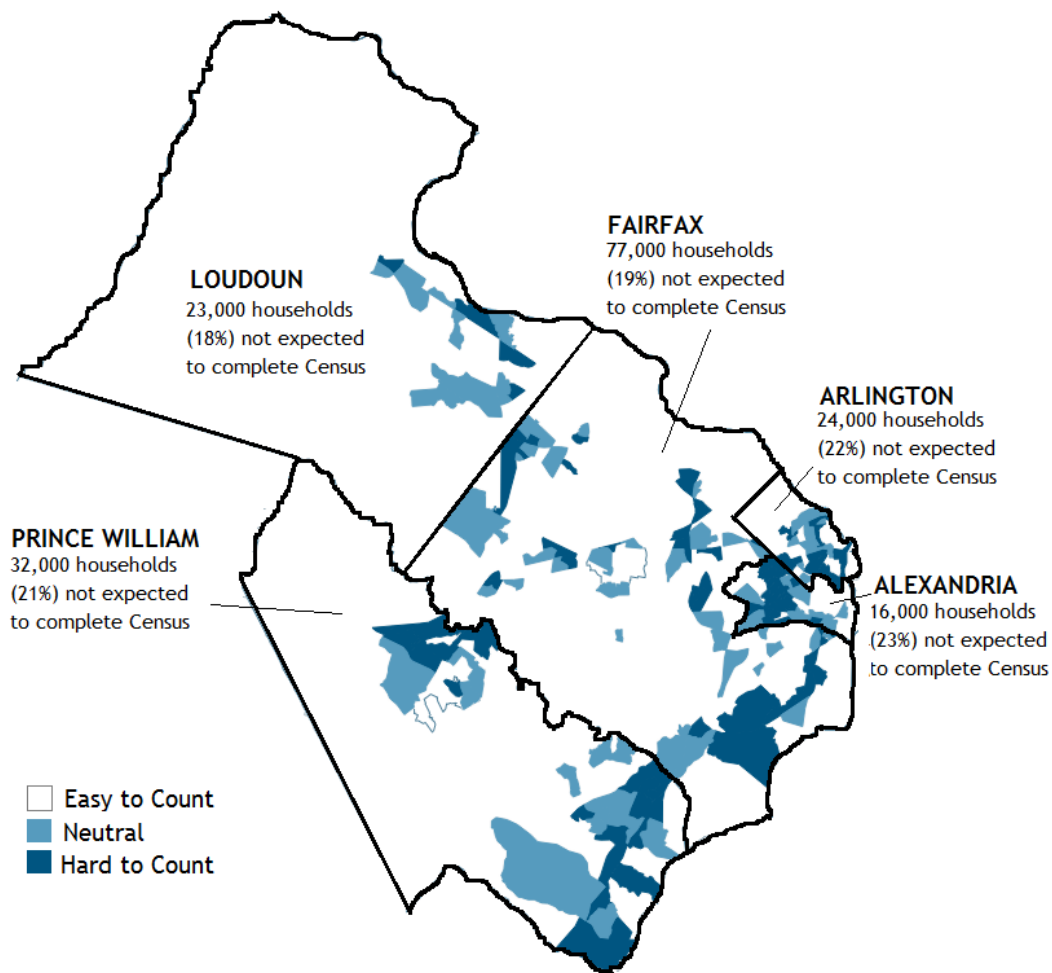
The success of Count the Region and other local efforts to increase census promotion produced a number of lessons learned that have application not just to future census efforts, but to other community organizing activities that rely on building trust, understanding, and community.

A Complete Count Takes Trust, Understanding, & Community

The decennial census is a constitutionally mandated process to count every person residing in America every ten years. Decisionmakers use the resulting data to guide approximately \$1.5 trillion each year to state and local governments, nonprofits, businesses, and households across the nation; in FY2016, for example, results from the 2010 decennial census brought \$17.7 billion to the Commonwealth of Virginia through the 55 largest federal spending programs, including Medicaid/Medicare (\$6.4 billion), student loans and Pell grants (\$3.5 billion), highway planning and construction (\$1 billion), and a range of services for high-need and vulnerable populations.¹ The census also helps determine political boundaries and representation, and provides data critical to government, businesses, and nonprofits. It takes the average household ten minutes to complete.

Despite the tremendous importance of the census and the ease of its completion, one in five Northern Virginians—172,000 households—were considered at risk of not responding to the 2020 census.² These hard-to-count populations are spread throughout the region but are more prevalent in Prince William County, Arlington, and Alexandria. See **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Location of easy to count, neutral, and hard-to-count census tracts in Northern Virginia

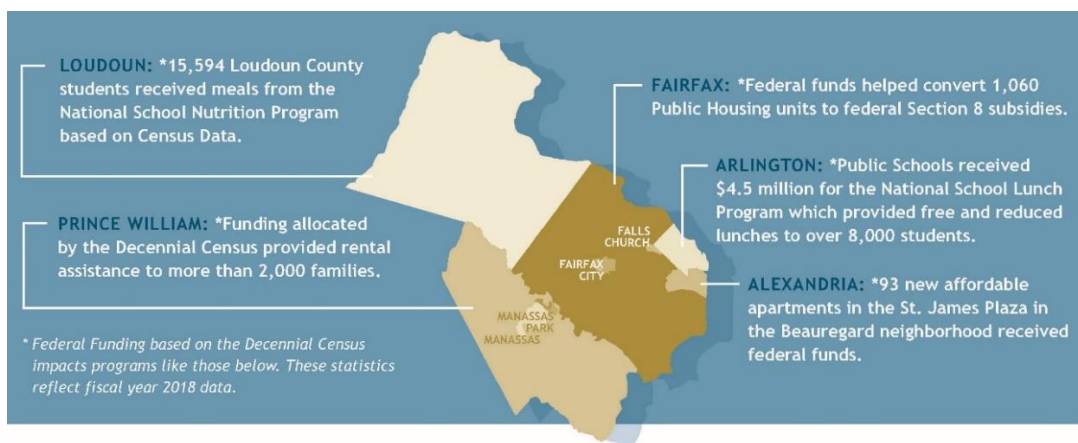


Source: Insight Region™ analysis of low response scores, U.S. Census Bureau

When a household does not complete the census, the Census Bureau estimates its composition through a combination of in-person follow-up, interviews with neighbors, reviews of public records, and data from similar neighborhoods.³ While this process tends to generate an accurate *overall* headcount for the state, it frequently underrepresents Black and Hispanic residents, young children, and renters⁴ and can result in changes to federal funding⁵ and political representation across the region.

For example, nationally, an estimated 4.6 percent of young children were not counted in the 2010 census,⁶ which can impact the amount of funds available for children’s health insurance, childcare, early education (Head Start), and food support (SNAP). See **Figure 2** for additional examples of local census impacts.

Figure 2. Why Northern Virginia Cares about the 2020 Census



Source: Community Foundation for Northern Virginia, 2020

Securing a “complete count” requires an understanding of why certain households do not participate in the census and why certain populations have historically been undercounted. Certainly, some face *logistical* barriers to participating—that is, it is difficult for them to complete the form, perhaps due to limited English proficiency, poor internet access, a disability, frequent moves, and/or complex living arrangements that are difficult to capture. The U.S. Census Bureau has been responsive to many of these logistical barriers, creating, for example, instructions and forms in different languages and offering several response methods (such as via online, phone, or mail in 2020).⁷

A number of *non-logistical* factors also influence census participation, including the interrelated issues of **trust**, **understanding**, and **community**:

- ➔ **Trust.** Public opinion polls reveal a strong, growing distrust of the federal government that administers the census and of state and local governments that promote its completion, particularly among non-Hispanic whites and the native-born population.⁸ This general distrust can create suspicions about the competence and intentions of government officials in collecting census data, which may be difficult to assuage.
- ➔ **Understanding.** Most Americans do not completely understand the purpose or use of the census, which can limit attaining a complete count. For example, a recent national survey found that 54 percent of respondents did not know that the census influences the amount of federal funding a community receives (despite respondents citing this as the top reason to participate) and 47 percent did not know that the census cannot be used to track undocumented residents.
- ➔ **Sense of Community.** Most people do not expect to benefit directly from the census; instead, they believe their *community* will benefit and see participation as a civic duty.⁹ Fostering this sense of community and civic duty requires educating residents about how the census will benefit that household's different communities—their neighborhood, school, racial-ethnic group—and framing participation as a philanthropic act.

Tackling these issues of trust, understanding, and community is an inherently local activity, typically pursued by local governments. Frequently, the bulk of these efforts fall on a single individual in each county or city government, who may not have the necessary time or range of skills to analyze relevant data, engage and convene stakeholders, develop promotional materials, and devise strategies to reach a diverse population of hard-to-count residents. While the work they pursue is similar across jurisdictions, these government employees typically work in isolation from one another, pursuing tasks with limited support from or coordination with other jurisdictions. As one Northern Virginia government staffer described, “In 2010, I may have called someone from another county to ask a question about their census process, but it was usually one-off and did not establish a relationship.” Staff may also find themselves in a challenging position where elected officials or county/city leadership do not want to devote local resources to census outreach.

The net result of these challenges is that communities with high levels of resources and support for the census will be more equipped to produce cohesive, responsive data, strategies, and outreach materials to encourage a complete count; localities with limited resources and/or support—often the same as those with a large hard-to-count population—will struggle to secure a high response rate.

An intermediary can help address these issues, providing a consistent level of staffing support to local governments, connecting jurisdictions to share knowledge, and developing accurate, consistent, and hyper-local messages that help build back trust, understanding, and a sense of community.

Count the Region—A Regional Response to Census Outreach

In 2019, the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia stepped into this role of intermediary by launching Count the Region, an initiative focused on promoting broad census participation through targeted support to and strategic coordination with the region’s five largest jurisdictions: Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William counties. “Nonprofits have fewer restrictions than government and can be creative, less formal, and move faster, more nimbly deploying resources on what is most needed,” noted Jenée Padmore, who directed Count the Region for the Community Foundation. “We saw this initiative as a way to add value and support to our partners in government.”

Count the Region focused on three core tasks:

- (1) Sharing information,
- (2) Developing consistent messaging, and
- (3) Forging new partnerships.

1. Sharing Information

The census is a dynamic process. Before it launches on April 1 of each new decade, officials are making decisions about what questions to include, validating addresses, and working to understand and address reasons for non-response. Once the census goes live, responses grow daily, new communities emerge as hard-to-count, and timelines and expected processes undergo sudden revision.

Staying current on these changes can be challenging. To facilitate information sharing across jurisdictions, Count the Region created the Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee, composed of 40 community leaders across government, business, faith, and education that met periodically throughout the life of the initiative. “Even though we have multiple jurisdictions, we are one region—our goal was to bring stakeholders together around an issue that affects us all,” noted Bernard Mustafa, chair of the Community Foundation’s board and co-chair of the Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee. “The Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee became a forum where everyone could share best practices and communicate across political boundaries.” The committee also provided an opportunity for leaders to hear directly from Census Bureau leadership, to learn about the importance of the census, and to understand the different ways that Count the Region was supporting and reaching into the community with census resources (materials and digital messaging).

Count the Region also convened a smaller sub-committee of staff from each of the five largest jurisdictions in Northern Virginia every 4-6 weeks to share data, news, and strategies. This coordinating role was meant to supplement existing complete count committees and census promotion efforts in the individual jurisdictions, allowing participants to brainstorm with colleagues and bring back ideas to incorporate into their government’s implementation plans. The meetings also included regular attendance by U.S. Census Bureau representatives, who were able to provide status updates on overall and hard-to-count populations, provide strategic support, and answer questions from attendees. Local governments benefited tremendously from this direct contact with Bureau staff—not only did staff have consistent, current data to share with their complete count committee, they also had the latest information on any changes to the process, which happened frequently during the pandemic.

2. Developing Consistent Messaging

Approximately 56 percent of residents of Northern Virginia commute to a job outside of the jurisdiction in which they reside, often passing through multiple counties to get to work, and also frequent other parts of the region in their free time.¹⁰ This high rate of mobility in the region presented a unique opportunity for residents to receive multiple messages encouraging census participation—but also a need for consistency across jurisdictions to continue to foster trust and confidence in the process.

Promotional materials developed by the US Census Bureau contained that consistent messaging, but, given the nature of the Bureau’s service area, did not speak directly to the needs of Northern Virginians. Count the Region participants wanted messages that were accurate, consistent, hyper-local, and part of their strategic direction.

Count the Region staff worked closely with an external designer to produce pithy, visually-appealing messages to educate different communities about the importance of the census and encourage a complete count. Products included, for example, a one-page summary of the census in multiple languages; a dedicated portion of the Community Foundation’s website that included information on jurisdictional census events, downloadable educational materials, and links to local, state, and national resources; a “#NOVACOUNTS” digital campaign to educate local jurisdictions; a video to inform residents about how the census influences federal funding in the region; and weekly suggested social media messages. Individual jurisdictions were able to customize these products (e.g., adding their name and brand to the message, modifying text to relate more directly to their constituents) and push them out through social media, printed materials, and brick and mortar advertising. Count the Region participants also shared ideas around how to distribute physical products in the wake of COVID-19, including at local food distribution centers, testing sites, mobile lunch sites for schools, and library curbside pickup.

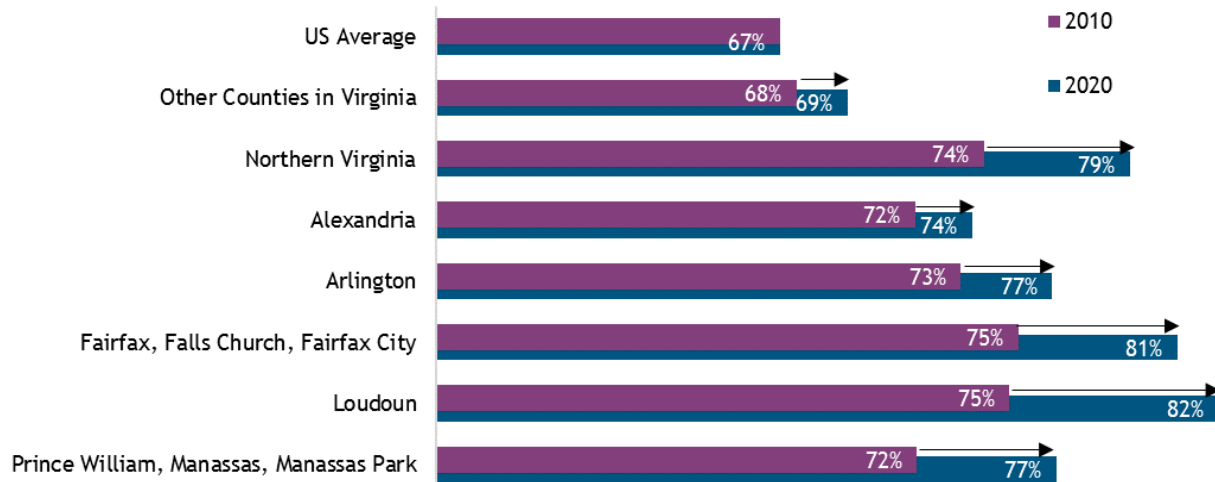
3. Forging New Partnerships

The regional nature of the collaborative also helped attract new partners and funders, who benefited from having a single point of contact to connect them to the right jurisdictional partner. For example, in 2019, the Community Foundation approached the Potomac Health Foundation about opportunities to support census outreach in areas with high resource needs. The Potomac Health Foundation awarded the Community Foundation with a grant to help with targeted outreach within Prince William County, which had approximately 32,000 hard-to-count households (21 percent) and did not have a complete count committee at the time. The investment helped county staff build internal support for census promotion and eventually form a complete count committee. The initiative also received the attention of iheartradio, which launched a digital outreach campaign, and facilitated interviews with a popular Spanish station and Facebook talk show.

The Results are In!

In 2020, the region produced an especially high self-response rate—an estimated 79 percent of households in Northern Virginia responded to the Census, up from 74 percent in 2010. Other counties in the Commonwealth also saw higher self-response rates, though not as much as in Northern Virginia, and the national average remained flat at 67 percent.

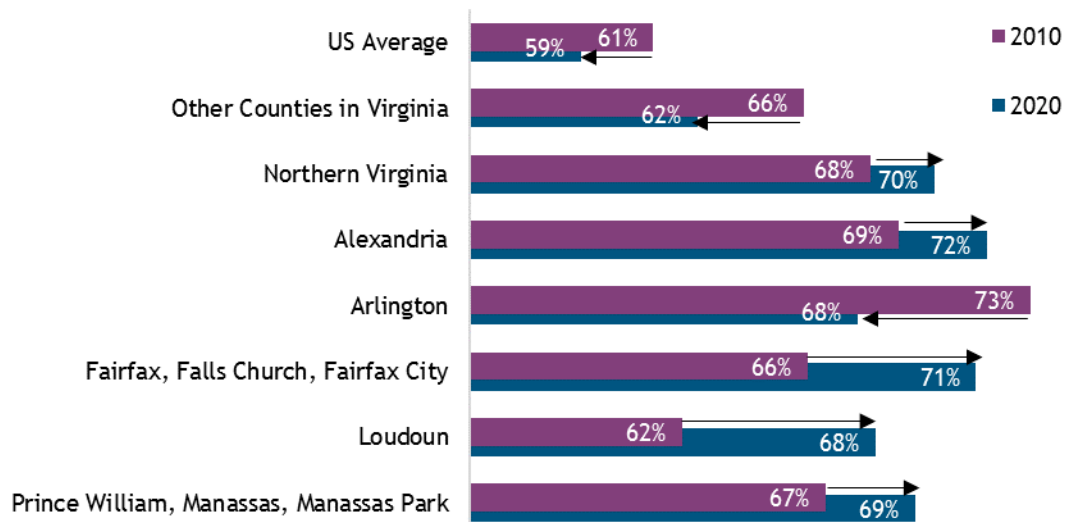
Figure 3a. Change in self-response rates, 2010-2020
All Neighborhoods



Source: Insight Region™ analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau

The region also saw high response rates from its traditionally hard-to-count neighborhoods. Approximately 70 percent of households in Northern Virginia’s hard-to-count tracts responded to the Census, an increase of 2.1 percentage points from 2010, compared to an overall decline in the response rate nationally and in other parts of Virginia.

Figure 3b. Change in self-response rates, 2010-2020
Hard-to-Count Neighborhoods (Tracts with a Low Response Score of 25 or higher)



Source: Insight Region™ analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau

Lessons Learned

Count the Region staff and participants reflected on what worked and what could use improvement from their 2020 census efforts—these lessons have application not just to other census efforts in 2030, but to other community organizing activities that rely on trust, understanding, and community.

- ❖ **Make participation easy and meaningful.** Count the Region staff initially envisioned a complex committee structure, with an executive committee and several sub-committees focused on the business, government, education, media, faith, and nonprofit communities. However, after participation declined sharply after the first few meetings, staff realized they need to rethink meeting frequency and level of effort. Staff moved to virtual meetings and disbanded all but one of the subcommittees (government representatives continued to meet regularly). The new structure made it easier for stakeholders to participate and allowed the Census Bureau to regularly attend, which provided “a huge draw” to meetings. Staff also reflected on strategies that could have further engaged stakeholders, such as recruiting enthusiastic supporters with strong local networks, establishing expectations and rules of engagement, and providing concrete action items for census promotion.
- ❖ **Slow down.** Partnering with government typically requires a slower pace and more restrictions than nonprofits may prefer. In Count the Region, materials were developed quickly by Foundation staff, but often required several weeks for local government partners to approve. This issue was particularly true when it came to branding, as some governments have restrictions around the use of logos and what organizations they can promote, and to coordinating any kind of joint statement, which requires multiple layers of approval within each jurisdiction. Slowing down also necessitates a longer planning period, which participants noted proved helpful with the pandemic. “The regional effort started in early 2019, so when COVID-19 hit, we were prepared with different communication strategies. We were able to adapt.” Nationally, many local governments were less prepared to continue their census efforts during COVID-19.¹¹
- ❖ **Coordinate activities, especially for hard-to-count populations.** Local governments that participated in Count the Region used their regular meetings as a forum to brainstorm strategies and to learn from what has worked in the past. Outreach activities, however, remained highly localized. Participants discussed a number of their efforts—holding a community “census day” in a hard-to-count neighborhood, reaching out to local restaurants to distribute information to residents—that could have not just been shared but also *coordinated*: for example, a region-wide “census day” event in hard-to-count neighborhoods throughout Northern Virginia or coordinated outreach to regional restaurant chains. Participants remarked that the overall effort could have been more robust in helping to reach hard-to-count groups.
- ❖ **Hard-to-count communities may always need extra support.** While Northern Virginia saw an increased self-response rate of its general and hard-to-count census tracts, it still “missed” 21 percent of households overall and 30 percent of hard-to-count ones. Nearly all (99.9 percent) of these households were eventually enumerated by the Census Bureau to generate a complete population count, but historically, the process will likely result in an undercount of very young, Hispanic, and Black residents. These populations will likely need extra support from nonprofits to make up the difference.

Conclusion

Census participation is ultimately an act of **trust, understanding, and community**, a reflection of the personal ties between family, neighbors, and friends and of the institutional ties between government, business, and nonprofits.

In 2020, Northern Virginia mobilized as a region to increase census participation—developing structures that facilitated ongoing communication and information exchange; developing and delivering unified, hyper-local messages about the value of this work; and securing resources for communities that needed extra support to reach the hard-to-count households. “I was beyond proud to co-chair the Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee, because as a longtime northern Virginia resident, I take great pride in my community,” said Richard Pineda, co-chair of the Northern Virginia Complete Count Committee. “We convened key civic, government, social, and private sector leaders from around the region to leverage our local connections, relationships, and collective influence to promote increased engagement throughout the region.”

Northern Virginia saw a tremendous increase in census responses from its general and hard-to-count populations and learned more about the mechanics of region-wide coordination and collaboration.

We came together to make every voice count.

References

¹ See https://gwipp.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2181/f/downloads/IPP-1819-3%20CountingforDollars_VA.pdf and <https://gwipp.gwu.edu/counting-dollars-2020-role-decennial-census-geographic-distribution-federal-funds>

² <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/research-matters/2016/05/identifying-hard-to-survey-populations-using-low-response-scores-by-census-tract.html>

³ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/planning-level/nyc-population/census2020/importance-self-response.pdf>

⁴ The Census Bureau estimated a national undercount of approximately 4.6 percent of children under 5, 2.1 percent of black residents, 1.5 percent of Hispanic residents, and 1.1 percent of renters in the 2010 census. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html

⁵ For a complete list, see <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/working-papers/Uses-of-Census-Bureau-Data-in-Federal-Funds-Distribution.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.censushardtocomountmaps2020.us/?latlng=38.92469%2C-77.18376&z=10&query=coordinates%3A%3A38.78406%2C-76.62827&promotedfeaturetype=states&arp=arpRaceEthnicity&baselayerstate=5&rtrYear=sR2020latest&infotab=info-rtrselfresponse&filterQuery=false>

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/languages.html>

⁸ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2020-report-cbams-study-survey.pdf>

⁹ A recent national survey found that a majority of people (54 percent) said that they believed the census would benefit their community, while only 37 percent said they thought answering the census would benefit them personally. A plurality (44 percent) said they believed answering the 2020 Census would “neither benefit nor harm” them personally. When asked for the most important reason to participate in the census, 30 percent of respondents chose “It helps determine funding for public services in my community” and 25 percent chose, “It is my civic duty”. See <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2020-report-cbams-study-survey.pdf>

¹⁰ Author’s calculation of 2011-2015 ACS commuter flows, see <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2015/demo/metro-micro/commuting-flows-2015.html>

¹¹ <https://www.naco.org/resources/featured/census-2020-achieving-complete-count-during-pandemic>