****

**Business community needs accurate Census Bureau data, must push for maximum participation**

By [Chris Tomlinson](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/author/chris-tomlinson/)

Feb. 15, 2019

Every strategic business person knows that information is power, and the best place to start gathering intelligence is the U.S. Census Bureau.

Want to know how many people live within a 3-mile radius of a high-traffic intersection? [Census Bureau data can tell](https://www.census.gov/topics/population/age-and-sex/data/tables.html) you, along with their average income, ethnic make-up and average age.

“If you’re a business owner, and you’re looking at where to locate, or to relocate if you're considering expansion, you want to know where your customers are located,” said Aaron Cox, senior vice president for membership at the Texas Association of Business. “You want to be sure you are making the right decisions, that you are going to the right places.”

Decisions, though, are only as good as the intelligence informing them. Over the next 18 months, the business community needs to do everything possible to make sure the 2020 Census is as complete as possible.

Retailers know their neighbors will become the mainstays of their business. Real estate agents use local demographics to set lease rates, and companies use them to negotiate them down.

“There is a place for everyone in our community and society, and there is a company that is willing and ready to serve them, but they need to know where they are,” Cox added.

No one wields Census data better than a chamber of commerce looking to attract investment.

“We will look at those very important indicators, like educational attainment, school districts and where the students are,” Cox told me. We need that information to make sound decisions about where we put our resources in terms of education and building our workforce.”

With so much at stake, the federal and state governments’ preparation for this constitutionally-mandated headcount is downright disappointing.

The Census Bureau reports to the Department of Commerce, where Secretary Wilbur Ross has muddied the process with political partisanship and endangered it with poor quality control.

A federal judge may have blocked Ross’ bid to add a question about citizenship to the survey, but the Trump administration’s immigration policies have already discouraged many non-citizens from telling the government where they live.

The 2020 Census will also be the first where Americans can respond online, which presents new challenges for America’s [230-year-old tradition](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/census-constitution.html). The Census Bureau has installed an entirely new computer system for every aspect of the count, including an app to help 350,000 workers track down people who have not responded.

Critics point to Healthcare.gov’s rollout as an indicator of what can go wrong. Then add [a healthy dose of paranoia](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-cybersecurity-202/2018/08/06/the-cybersecurity-202-the-2020-census-could-be-a-prime-target-for-hackers/5b670ced1b326b0207955f1a/?utm_term=.1d39ae3bbb36) about foreign hackers trying to either shred the system or steal every American’s personal data. Throughout it all, Ross has tried to do the whole exercise on the cheap, asking for a fraction of the dollars that past Census bosses say is necessary.

The business community should be demanding better, and so should every citizen. The Census determines the allocation of congressional districts and federal funding for Medicaid, Medicare, education and transportation.

The Census has a history of undercounting Texans, which means we do not get our fair share of federal spending. Every 1 percent of the Texas population not counted will [cost the state $300 million in federal funds](https://forabettertexas.org/images/2018_Census_Factsheet_CCC.pdf), explained Ann Beeson, CEO of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, a progressive think tank in Austin. Those are funds not spent on health care, education or road and bridge building.

In other words, funds not spent creating Texas jobs.

Many states, counties and cities have formed Complete Count Committees with local business leaders to promote the census. California has set aside $90 million, but Gov. Greg Abbott has yet to form a committee. The Texas Legislature has yet to appropriate any funds.

“We’re not talking just about poor people losing services. We’re talking about everyone in Texas losing out,” Beeson said. As the state searches for more public school funding, getting a good population count is critical, she added.

The law is clear that the Census is obligated to count every person living in America. Every business leader and politician needs to make sure everyone in Texas is counted to give us a complete picture of the state. They should encourage their employees and customers to participate and call their lawmakers to demand greater effort.

A complete count will not only reap Texas as many as three additional congressional districts but will supply business owners with critical data to make smart decisions. And guarantee Texas’ future economic success.

*Chris Tomlinson writes commentary about business, economics and policy.*

*chris.tomlinson@chron.com*