

# Accurate 2010 Census data leads to better decisions on how to serve Texas

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Texas Lone Star Forum

New Census Bureau data show that for the 10th year in a row Texas has the highest rate of uninsured children in the country, with 1 in 6 kids uninsured. Nearly 1 in 4 Texas kids lived in poverty in 2008 (e.g., \$17,600 for a family of three).

As troubling as these numbers are, these data likely under-represents the extent of the problem for two important reasons.

First, the latest census data do not cover 2009, and unemployment has been rising sharply in Texas this year, from 6.4 percent in January to 7 percent in July (the most recent month available). Economists tell us that poverty rises with joblessness, and that increase is sharper for vulnerable groups like children.

Second, even once the data catch up to the recession, child poverty is likely deeper than shown in these figures. The federal poverty guidelines are badly outdated and exclude many families struggling to cover basic expenses, effectively disqualifying them from receiving food or housing assistance.

The Measuring American Poverty Act would update the poverty guidelines to include more realistic expenses (including healthcare and child care) and help us to measure accurately the effectiveness of our poverty reduction programs, such as food stamps (known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Shouldn't we know how many people really need help and whether our help does any good?

Decision-makers need reliable, relevant information to get the best results from public programs, but our policymakers and administrators use antiquated measurements and data to make decisions and assess performance. To ensure that services reach the people who need them most, we need an accurate measure of poverty in America, and we need Americans to fill out their 2010 Census forms in the spring.

That is why we must plan early for the 2010 Census. Most people do not realize that the accuracy of data personally affects them. Most major federal funding decisions (and many state and local ones) rely at least in part on census data, including funding for early childhood education, schools, roads, environmental protection, healthcare and nutrition. And the number of representatives we have in Congress is directly related to an accurate count of our fast-growing population.

If you belong to a business or community service organization, you can partner with the 2010 Census to help increase participation, which will give your organization better data on customers or clients in your area.

If you are an educator, elected official, part of a faith-based organization or are simply a proud member of your community, you will be crucial in spreading the word about the importance of filling out census forms next spring, ensuring that Texas kids and families are accurately represented when decisions are made in Washington.

Most people understand the need for reliable, relevant data. Everyone from hospitals to businesses to sports teams rely on data collection and analysis to measure and improve their performance. None of these groups would be satisfied with outdated or incomplete measures of performance.

Improving the quality of data — counting what counts — helps ensure our public programs work and gives us the ability to evaluate them, continue to support them if they are effective, adjust them if needed, or eliminate them if they are ineffective. In short, good data lead to better decisions. Without them, decision makers are left in a vacuum, forced to either ignore growing problems or make changes based on assumption and anecdote.

Only by counting yourself in can you make sure that kids count, too.

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