The answer to who the decennial census counts is relatively simple—it counts everyone. It’s not so simple, though, to answer: How does the census count everyone? The “who” includes every person who resides in the country. The “how” deals with what questions are asked and by which methods.

The U.S. Constitution requires that every “person” be counted. Just how the government goes about that changes from one census to the next. The upcoming 2020 census will be no exception to the rule because it will include both minor and some major changes.

Federal Action

The census is a federal responsibility, executed by the federal government through the U.S. Census Bureau, nested within the Department of Commerce. Even so, states can offer support to make it as complete and successful as possible.

The U.S. Census Bureau has changed several aspects of its operations, including the methods of the survey and some of the questions.

Operational Changes. The 2020 census will be the first census to use the Internet as the primary response method, and to provide a call-in option. Ultimately, in part because of the persistent digital divide, individuals can choose whichever method they prefer—internet, phone, or the classic option, paper. Some may choose to use phone or paper because internet connectivity is not easily available, or because they have concerns about cybersecurity and providing their information over the web.

Given the nature of the internet, cybersecurity concerns are at the forefront of planning. The bureau continues testing and fine-tuning its hardware and software even as April 1, 2020—the specific day everyone is counted—approaches.

Changes to Questions. In addition to the new data collection methods, the Census Bureau and the Commerce Department have changed what will be asked on the decennial census form. The census

Did You Know?

- A citizenship question will likely appear as the last question on the 2020 census, the first time it will be asked of all households since 1950.
- The 2020 census will be the first to ask about same-sex couples.
- States can primarily support the 2020 census in three ways: by contacting Congress, funding census work and creating “complete count committees.”
form begins with an initial set of questions. These include asking how many people live in the household as of April 1, 2020, whether additional people are in the household who were not included in the first question, if the house is rented or owned, and a phone number for follow-up. The form then asks about each individual in the home, including name, age and race.

Although still under challenge in the courts, the census will likely ask about the citizenship status of respondents. The question was last asked of all households in 1950, when the number of immigrants was at historic lows. It has been asked throughout the subsequent decades, however, on the "long form." The long form was replaced after the 2000 census by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, an ongoing survey sent to a sample of households every year. The effects of adding the question have not been fully tested. Additionally, there is currently no plan to add the category of "U.S. National" to the possible answers.

Proponents argue that better citizenship status data will aid in enforcing the Voting Rights Act and that the country should know who is and who is not a citizen, perhaps for redistricting purposes or other goals. Opponents contend that those rationalizations are a smoke screen and that the question will depress response rates, given the contentious national rhetoric surrounding immigrants and refugees.

While much research was done around altering the questions regarding racial and ethnic origins, these will remain largely the same as they appeared in the 2010 Census. The question, “Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?” will remain a stand-alone question, identical to the 2010 version. A respondent may check "no;" or one of the pre-set boxes for "Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, or Cuban;" or write in another Latin American nationality.

One change is to the question, "What is Person 1’s race?" Individuals who select "White" or "Black or African American" can further describe their heritage, similar to the Hispanic origin question. They will be given 16 characters, the same as the Hispanic origins question, to write in, for example, Italian, Nigerian, or even American. Longer combinations will not fit the space. Moreover, the proposal to add the new category of Middle Eastern or North African, or MENA, was not added.

For the first time, same-sex couples will be included in the decennial census. Under “How is this person related to Person 1?,” respondents may check the boxes “Same-sex husband/wife/spouse,” or “Same-sex unmarried partner” after options for “Opposite-sex” spouses and partners. Two sexes are provided as options in a separate category. Respondents can select male or female as their sex in a separate question.

Just where some groups will be counted remains a topic of discussion as well, since the allocation of billions of federal dollars relies on census data. Military members are one of these populations. Deployed troops will now be counted at their home bases or ports, rather than following the 2010 protocol, which counted them at the address they provided at enlistment.

Where to count the incarcerated remains a topic of ongoing debate. Reformers want prisoners to be counted at their home addresses rather than as residents of the facility where they are held. This policy, they argue, artificially inflates the populations of areas that run prisons while draining resources away from other areas when prisoners are likely to stay at individual prisons for only a short time. Conversely, changing the policy would drain resources away from areas that maintain prisons, which are most often rural.

For “group quarters,” the guiding rule for the Census Bureau is that of "usual residence," or "the place where [people] live and sleep most of the time." That means college students should be counted in dormitories if that is where they reside most of the time as of April 1, 2020.

State Action
States benefit from accurate census data in four primary ways: It guides the disbursement of more than $800 billion federal dollars to the states; the decennial census lies at the core of congressional apportionment; states use census data for redistricting at all levels of government; and lawmakers, businesses and nonprofits use census figures to make decisions.

States can choose to support the census in three ways. First, state legislators can speak with their congressional representatives about the census.

Second, they can form state-level “complete count committees” (sometimes called commissions, or CCCs). By May 2018, California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, New York and Mississippi had created CCCs. Legislation was pending in Louisiana and Rhode Island. These are usually created by a governor’s executive order or through the legislature. Other states have launched alternative initiatives to promote the 2020 Census.

And third, states may appropriate funds toward census outreach, education and promotion. California, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia and Washington have appropriated funds of various amounts to census work. Michigan passed legislation that would allocate $1 of matching state funds (up to $50,000) for every $4 in private funds received. Arizona introduced but did not pass a funding bill, and additional dollars from California are pending.