



Giving Every Child A Chance

To: Secretary of State Tahesha Way, Chair
Members, New Jersey Complete Count Commission

From: Alana Vega, KIDS COUNT Coordinator
Peter Chen, Policy Counsel
Advocates for Children of New Jersey

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RE: Counting New Jersey's Young Children in the 2020 Census

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) applauds the appointment of New Jersey's Complete Count Commission and thanks you for the opportunity to provide public comment. ACNJ urges the Commission to ensure that the interests of young children, the most undercounted age group in the country, are represented in the Commission's work. This particularly vulnerable group has been subject to substantial undercounting in the past and may be undercounted again in 2020 unless specific efforts are made to address their needs.

Roughly 5.2 percent of children under age 5 were undercounted in New Jersey in the 2010 Census. That equates to 27,000 children, enough to fill 1,350 kindergarten classes or 540 school buses. Traditional Census outreach efforts have not focused on these children, and undercount rates for young children have worsened at the same time that overall undercount rates for adults have improved.

This undercount has a direct impact on programs that support New Jersey's youngest children. Billions of federal dollars for programs that support young children, such as Medicaid, Head Start, and child care subsidies, are allocated based on Census data every year. If children are undercounted, that means less funding to support young children's needs. Undercounted children are often those who need the most help; they are more likely to live in poverty, live in single-parent households or live in a household where no parent speaks English.

ACNJ has organized a Right from the Start NJ/Think Babies campaign dedicated to improving infant and toddler well-being. However, improving the well-being of New Jersey's young children will be difficult if we do not know who these children are, and the Census provides this critical data.

Some reasons for the young child undercount overlap with reasons for adult undercounts. Young children are more likely to live in a racial minority or Hispanic household, live in poverty or live in a household that recently moved.

But young children face unique obstacles to counting that were not the focus of prior Census outreach.

Notably, 80 to 85 percent of young children omitted in the 2010 Census lived in households that returned a Census questionnaire. That is, someone returned a Census form but left off the young child. A Census campaign focused on young children would require not only that the form be filled out and returned, but also that *all* people living in the household be counted.

Additional outreach may be needed for special groups of young children, particularly those who live in complex households or live with a grandparent householder.

State and local governments have already demonstrated that they can reach families of young children, through campaigns to enroll children in NJ FamilyCare, preschool and child care programs, and other government programs supporting young children such as WIC and Head Start. ACNJ encourages the Commission to coordinate comprehensive state efforts to ensure that all young children are counted in the 2020 Census.

ACNJ urges the Commission to determine the cost of a robust Census outreach effort. Performing outreach to hard-to-reach populations has real costs, but these costs pale in comparison to an inaccurate count. California has allocated more than \$90 million to Census 2020 outreach (roughly \$2.25 per resident), in recognition of the roughly \$1.5 billion lost in federal funding after the undercount in the 2010 Census. The Fiscal Policy Institute performed an analysis for New York State, estimating that \$40 million (roughly \$2 per resident) in state funding would be needed to maximize participation.

Given additional risks and changes for the upcoming Census, including the potential addition of a citizenship question and the addition of an online questionnaire, a well-funded outreach effort is more critical than ever. Meanwhile, the federal investment in outreach has declined, with fewer local offices than in 2010.

An accurate count of young children is critical for funding, representation, data collection and program planning. ACNJ has long understood that New Jersey cannot meet the needs of its children unless we understand who those children are. Another undercount would leave an entire generation of New Jersey children shortchanged for a decade. ACNJ urges the Commission to ensure that *all* New Jersey's young children are counted in the 2020 Census.