The 2020 Census and Political Representation in California

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Supported with funding from the California Community Foundation, the California Endowment, the California Health Care Foundation, and Silicon Valley Community Foundation
The census plays a key role in political representation

- Every ten years, the census determines:
  - Congressional reapportionment
  - Political redistricting

- An inaccurate census count could undermine both
  - Concerns about funding, method, and response rates

- Consequences could be particularly bad for California
  - Three in four residents are considered “hard to count,” including children, young men, Latinos, African Americans, and renters
Outline

- Population growth and reapportionment
- Impact of an undercount on reapportionment
- Impact of an undercount on redistricting
- Conclusions and recommendations
The census is used to reallocate US House seats

- **Reapportionment**: assigning the 435 seats in the House of Representatives to states
  - State populations are fed into a fixed formula

- Key factor: population growth relative to other states
  - Growth alone is not enough
  - Threshold effects make results less predictable
California is projected to keep 53 House seats in 2020

- California population: 40.6 million people in 2020
  - Up 8.9% from 2010
  - Slowest growth rate in state history
  - Growth rate slightly higher than the rest of the nation

- California is on track to keep its 53 House seats
  - Margin for 53rd seat is 600,000
  - Unlikely to lose a seat with an accurate count
An accurate census would affect seats in other states—but not California.
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There are two likely sources of an undercount

- **Low accuracy**
  - Limited funding may prevent strong outreach
  - Switch to online form without appropriate follow-up
  - Result: historically undercounted groups are undercounted again

- **Immigration-related**
  - Aggressive federal enforcement of immigration laws
  - Citizenship question
  - Result: low response among immigrant communities
Modeling undercount effects: low accuracy

- Low accuracy
  - Use undercounts from 1990 Census (a “bad” census)
  - Assume same groups will be undercounted at the same rates

Group A in 1990 → Undercounted by 5%

Group A’s projected 2020 population × 0.95
Modeling undercount effects: immigration-related

- Immigration-related
  - Research suggests undercounts between 10% and 50%
  - 10% provides conservative lower bound
  - Undercount anyone in a household with at least one undocumented resident

\[ \text{Undocumented households in projected 2020 population} \times 0.9 \]

- Our primary undercount scenario combines low-accuracy and immigration-related simulations
A poorly conducted census with low immigrant response could cost California a House seat.
By itself, a poorly conducted census probably would not cost California a House seat.
But a poorly conducted census might cost California a seat under certain conditions

- California might lose a seat if historically undercounted groups are:
  - Undercounted 5% worse than in 1990
  - Undercounted 3% worse for every undercounted group and 3% better for every overcounted group
  - Undercounted by 1% in California, but not in other states
By itself, low response rates among immigrants probably would not cost California a seat.
But an immigration-related undercount might cost California a seat under certain conditions

- California might lose a seat if:
  - Undocumented households are undercounted by 19%
  - Undocumented households are undercounted by 13% in California but not other states
  - Noncitizen households are undercounted by 8%
  - Latinos and Asians/Pacific Islanders are undercounted by 4%
A better count in California could make a big difference

- The state budget includes $90.3 million for census outreach
- If California…
  - improves combined undercount by 1%: no seat loss
  - improves combined undercount by 5%: one-seat gain
  - improves low-accuracy undercount by 3%: one-seat gain
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The census affects political boundaries within the state

- **Redistricting**: drawing district lines within the state
  - Congressional districts → almost exactly equal population
  - State legislative and other districts → close to equal population

- District lines cannot be predicted exactly—too many options
  - Areas of state that have grown more will get more representation
  - An inaccurate census could distort that representation
Combined undercount would divert representation away from low-income communities of color
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Conclusions

- The 2020 Census faces many political and practical challenges
- If the census fails to reach historically undercounted groups and immigrant communities:
  - California could lose a House seat
  - Political representation would shift away from poorer areas with larger communities of color
- California could lose a seat in many alternative scenarios too
  - All would have to be relatively serious
Recommendations

- Watch for problems using Department of Finance estimates
- California might be able to use other data for redistricting
  - A separate census
  - Adjusted US Census numbers using undercount estimates
  - Legal status is ambiguous
- Leading up to the census, strong outreach efforts could make a big difference
  - Some scenarios even have California gaining a seat
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These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.