

## **Adding us up: next year's census important effort**

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Next year, the United States will undertake a national count of its population. This operation commonly known as the decennial population census takes place every 10 years and it provides very useful information to our nation.

The census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. It takes only few minutes for individuals to complete. More important, it comes only once every 10 years and only a small proportion of the population is selected to participate. Like voting, participating in the census is a civil and patriotic obligation, as well as a privilege.

The census is safe. Federal law protects the census information you provide. This information will not be shared with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or any other local or federal law enforcement agencies.

The United States government takes the census operation very seriously partly because census data are used to distribute congressional seats to states. Alabama currently has seven congressional districts. This means we have seven voices for our state in the U.S. House of Representatives. Any documented change in Alabama's population size may affect how many representatives we can send to Washington, D.C.

If you are selected to participate in the 2010 census, you will receive a census questionnaire. In some cases, a census worker will contact you by phone or in person. Either way, please participate. While participants are selected through a random sampling methodology, the information you provide is important for policy and planning purposes.

The federal government also uses census information to make decisions about what services to provide across the nation, and how to allocate some \$300 billion to local, state and tribal governments each year. This is even more critical at this time in history where we face multiple economic challenges, including job loss, home foreclosures, recovery efforts for natural disasters, etc.

Census data are also used at the state, county and local levels by governments, businesses, religious congregations, community organizations, builders, and citizens. Governments base their budgets largely on tax revenue paid by their constituencies; businesses provide services and products that residents need; religious groups can better identify areas of need within various communities; developers and builders use census data to identify areas of investment; and citizens use census information to learn more about their residential areas, neighborhoods, and various services available in their communities.

In 2008, Alabama's population was estimated to be 4,661,900. Yet, the projected figure for the same year (based on the 2000 census) is 4,568,983. The difference between these two figures will be resolved when the 2010 census data are tabulated.

Population is more than just the total count. Age and sex distributions are equally important, especially for fiscal, business and other developmental and investment purposes. In fact, one of the major challenges in the next 10 years will be the changing demographic structure of our state population.

What other useful information can be derived from the decennial census? We know that Alabamians live longer today, but they are also having fewer children. As a result, the proportion of persons below age 18 is declining while the number of older residents is increasing.

According to Census Bureau projections, 13 percent of Alabamians were 65 years and older in 2000, which is higher than the national figure of 12.4 percent. Next year when the 2010 Census will be taken, we expect 14.1 percent of our state population to be 65 and older, which is, once again, higher than the projected national figure of 13 percent for the same year.

This increase in proportion of older persons in the state will require coordination in policy and planning activities in order to meet the needs of this population. One key measure is the old age dependency ratio, which is the percentage of individuals age 65 and over per population of 20-64 year olds. Of course many seniors have savings and retirement money to take care of themselves in times of need, but an increasing number will rely on Social Security paid by current workers, a group whose number is declining.

All these estimates are based on the 2000 census, estimates from various surveys, or the demographic projections from the 2000 census. Many things have changed since the 2000 census. Therefore, it is time to take a new enumeration of U.S. population. We know better when we measure. Take the operation of the 2010 census seriously. Our quality of life tomorrow depends on how we count and measure people today.

If you receive the census questionnaire, or receive a call or a visit from a census worker, please take your civic duty seriously. Understand that participating in the 2010 census will benefit not only you, but also your fellow residents, your community, your county, and your state. Your participation will only take few minutes, but its effects will remain significant for the next 10 years.

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