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Black Men and Families Undercounting in the United States Census

Focus Groups Reports

Conducted by
W.E.B. Du Bois Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy

On behalf of
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
& The Thomas W. Dortch Jr. Institute at Clark Atlanta University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Census plays a critical role in determining federal funding allocations, political representation, and resource distribution for communities across the country. However, Black men and families have historically been undercounted due to systemic barriers, misinformation, and deep-rooted mistrust of government institutions. This report examines Black men's engagement with the census, identifying key concerns and proposing actionable recommendations to improve participation rates and ensure Black communities receive their fair share of resources and representation.

Focus group participants revealed varying levels of awareness regarding the census, with some first encountering it through family discussions, school, or media advertisements. However, many lacked a clear understanding of its purpose, leading to limited participation. While some completed the census due to workplace initiatives or financial incentives, others admitted to never having filled it out, citing reasons such as lack of outreach, distrust of government motives, and concerns over privacy and data misuse.

One of the most significant barriers to census participation among Black men is mistrust in the government and skepticism about how census data is used. Many participants expressed fears that census information could be misused for tracking individuals, law enforcement surveillance, or reinforcing systemic inequities rather than benefiting Black communities. Additionally, logistical barriers such as lack of census outreach, inaccessible forms, and unstable housing situations further contribute to low response rates. Participants also reported concerns that, despite census participation, Black communities do not see tangible improvements in funding for schools, infrastructure, and healthcare.

Low participation in the census has lasting consequences for Black communities, affecting political representation, funding allocations, and public services. Without accurate census data, Black communities risk continued underrepresentation in legislative bodies and insufficient funding for essential programs. The lack of trust in the census process highlights the need for greater transparency, improved accountability in resource distribution, and culturally relevant outreach efforts.

To address these challenges, the following recommendations should be implemented:

1. Enhance Community Outreach:

Partner with Black-led organizations, faith groups, and community leaders to increase awareness and credibility of the census.

2. Improve Accessibility:

Provide census materials through various channels, including digital platforms, mobile census stations, and bilingual outreach teams.

3. Combat Misinformation:

Launch targeted educational campaigns to clarify the purpose of the census and assure confidentiality of respondents' information.

4. Increase Representation Among Census Workers:

Hire census takers from within Black communities to foster trust and encourage participation.

5. Leverage Influential Voices and Media Platforms:

Engage Black media, social media influencers, and cultural figures to amplify the importance of census participation.

6. Strengthen Accountability in Resource Distribution:

Ensure census data is actively used to improve funding for schools, healthcare, and infrastructure in Black communities.

7. Develop Long-Term Civic Engagement Strategies:

Incorporate census education into broader civic engagement efforts, such as voter registration and employment training programs.

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms in census outreach and engagement efforts to build trust and increase participation among Black men and families. Addressing these issues will require a sustained commitment from policymakers, community organizations, and the Census Bureau to ensure Black communities are accurately counted and equitably served. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, stakeholders can work toward a more inclusive and representative census process that truly reflects the diversity and needs of the nation.

METHODOLOGY

This study delved into the experiences and perspectives of Black men and families regarding the U.S. Census. To gather these insights, we embarked on a journey that began with recruiting participants through various channels. In consultation with National Coalition of Black Civic Participation staff, the researcher derived focus group questions, desired demographic to inform the qualify survey, and timeline to conduct the research. Next the research proposal was submitted to the Clark Atlanta University Internal Review Board for approval in October 2024 and was granted consent to conduct the research at the end of November 2024.

We announced our study on LinkedIn, leveraging the reach of the W.E.B. Du Bois Southern Center of Studies in Public Policy page to solicit participants. Simultaneously, we collaborated with local Atlanta groups, Black Man Lab and Her Story, to spread the word and invite individuals to participate. Over a two-month period, from late November 2024 to mid-January 2025, we received an over-whelming response to our qualifying survey, with 533 people expressing interest. From this diverse pool, we carefully selected 24 individuals to participate in focus group discussions. Our selection process considered a range of factors, including gender, geographic location, family size, age, and income, to ensure a representative sample.

Between December 2024 and January 2025, we held four focus group sessions. Three of these were conducted virtually, transcending geographical barriers, while one allowed for in-person connection. Each session provided a dedicated space for participants to share their thoughts and experiences for about an hour and a half. We prioritized creating a safe and welcoming environment where individuals felt comfortable sharing their perspectives openly and honestly. Participation was entirely voluntary, and we assured participants that their contributions would remain anonymous and confidential. As a token of our appreciation for their time and valuable insights, each participant received a gift card.

Before each focus group commenced, we carefully explained the informed consent procedures and provided participants with written consent forms, ensuring their full understanding and agreement. To capture the richness of the discussions, all sessions were audio-recorded, and with the participants' permission, three were also video-recorded. In this report, we have taken meticulous care to protect the anonymity of all participants.

Dr Joseph L. Jones from Clark Atlanta University facilitated all four focus groups, guiding the conversations with expertise and sensitivity. An external evaluator was also present to observe the sessions and provide an independent analysis, enriching our understanding of the data.

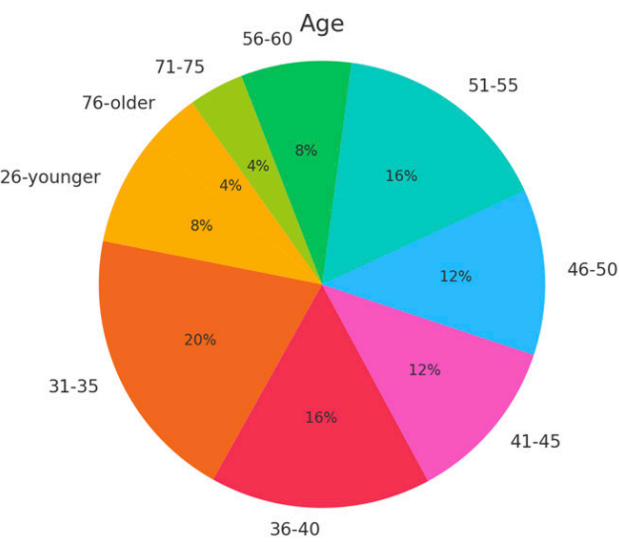
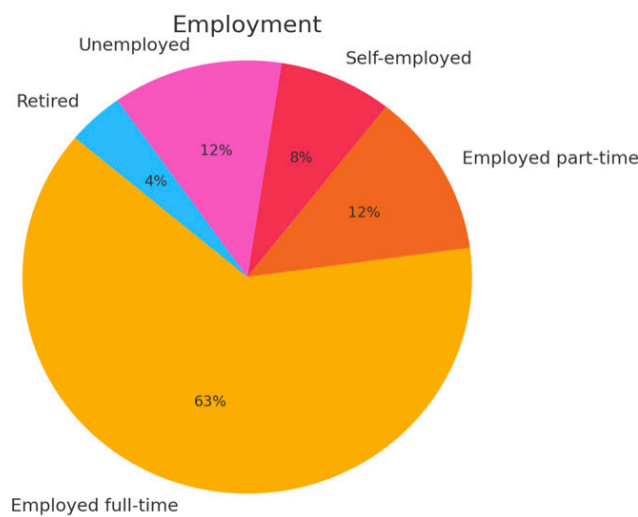
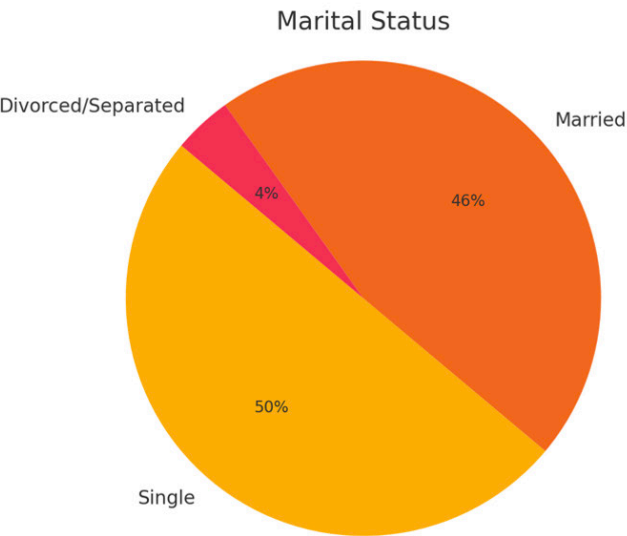
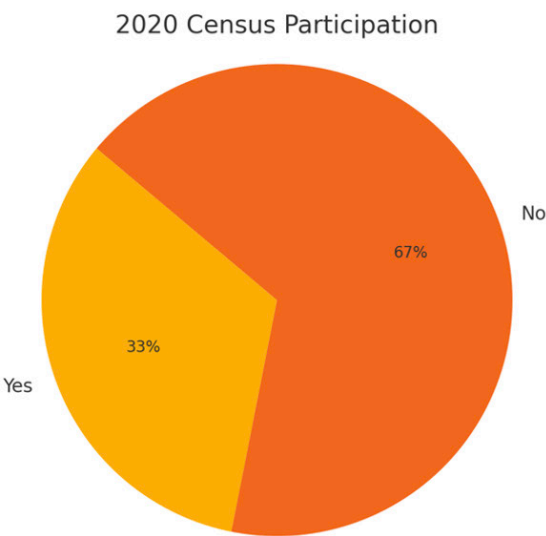
Our data analysis process was a multi-faceted journey. Immediately following each session, the facilitator and evaluator engaged in a thoughtful debriefing session, dissecting the content, key takeaways, and any surprising moments that arose. This allowed for immediate reflection and

identification of emerging themes. The facilitator then meticulously transcribed and conducted a preliminary analysis of each session's transcript, gaining an initial grasp of the data. Individual summary reports were crafted for each focus group, capturing the essence and unique perspectives shared within each group.

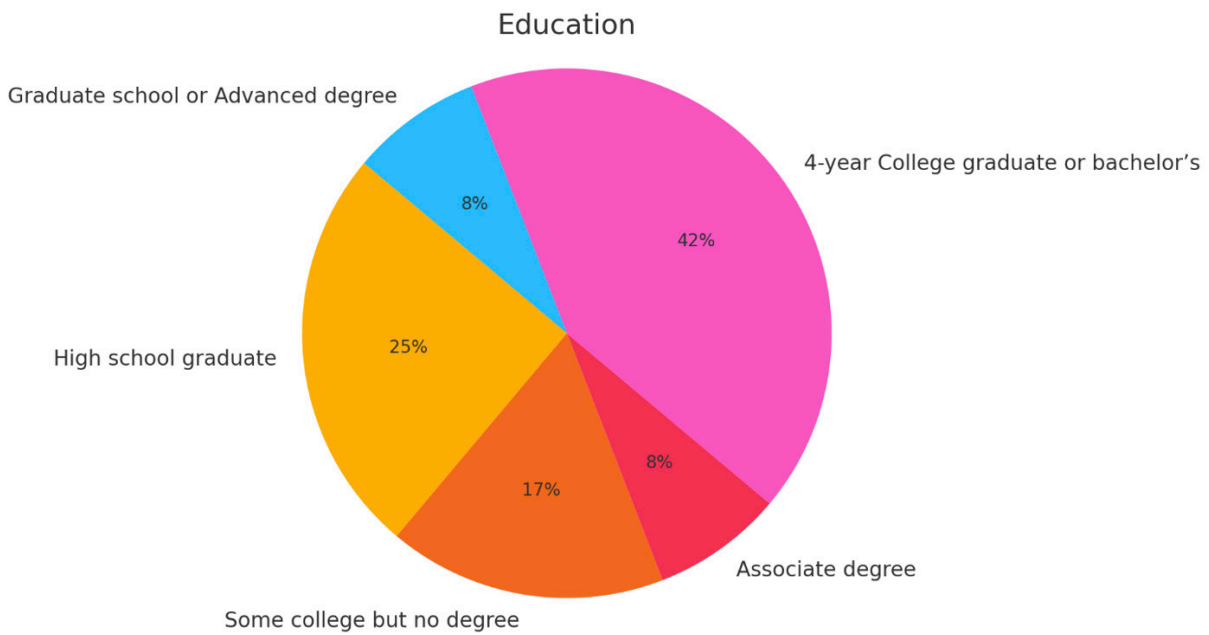
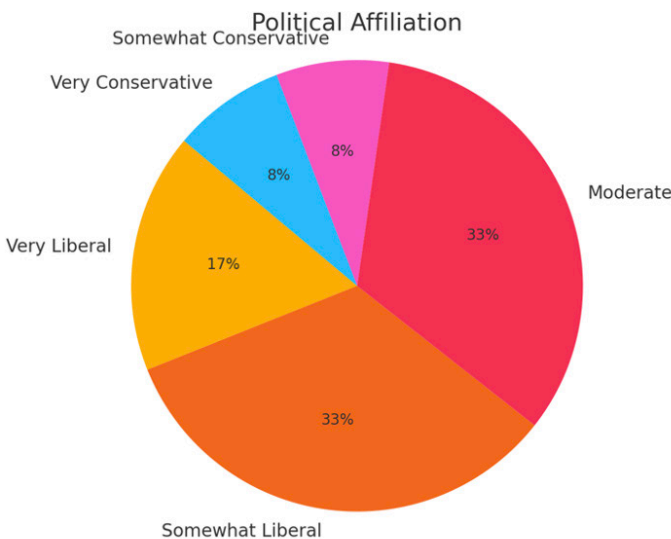
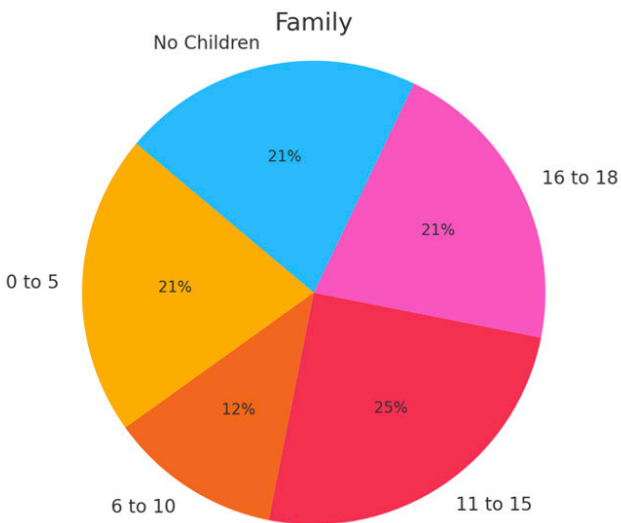
Finally, we begin the data analysis process, facilitator transcribed after each focus group to discuss session content, what was learned, what was surprising, and to process any emotions evoked throughout. Next, the facilitator conducted a preliminary analysis to get a general understanding of the data and reflect on its meaning. An individual summary report was drafted for each focus group that analyzed major themes. Once individual reports for each group were completed, the data was further analyzed across all focus groups and organized into themes. These themes or key findings helped determine the attitudes and perceptions that participants have on U.S. Census. The themes were then turned into recommendations for this report.

DEMOGRAPHICS

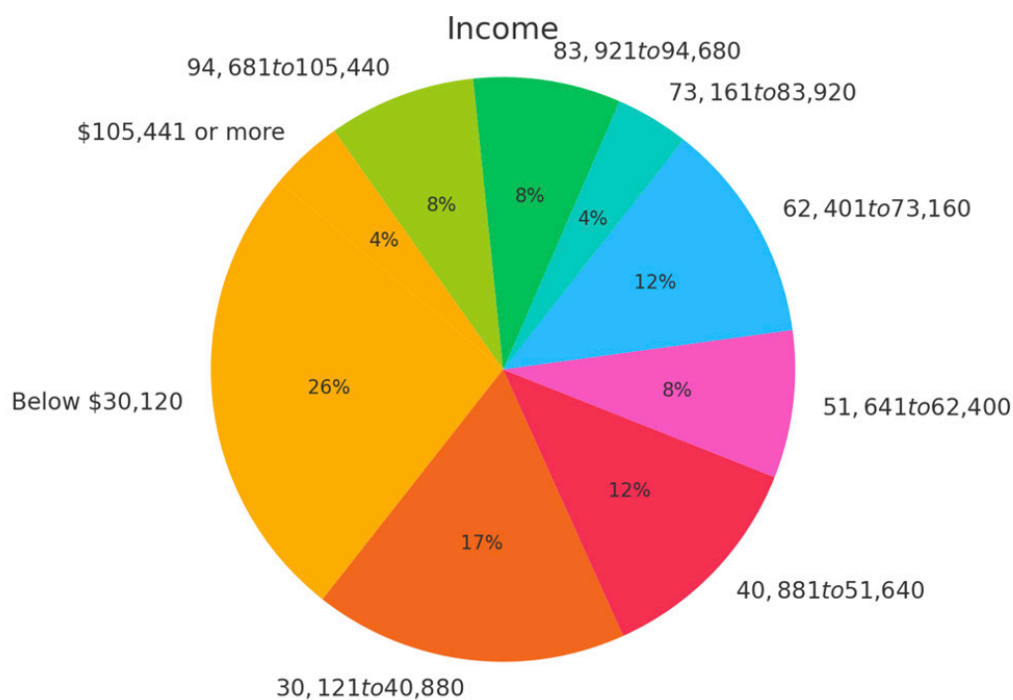
The following demographics reflects the self-reported information by the 24 participants in the 4 focus groups:



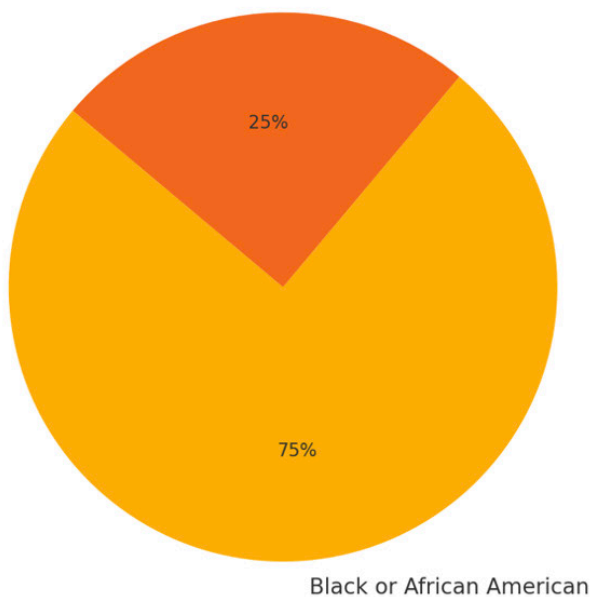
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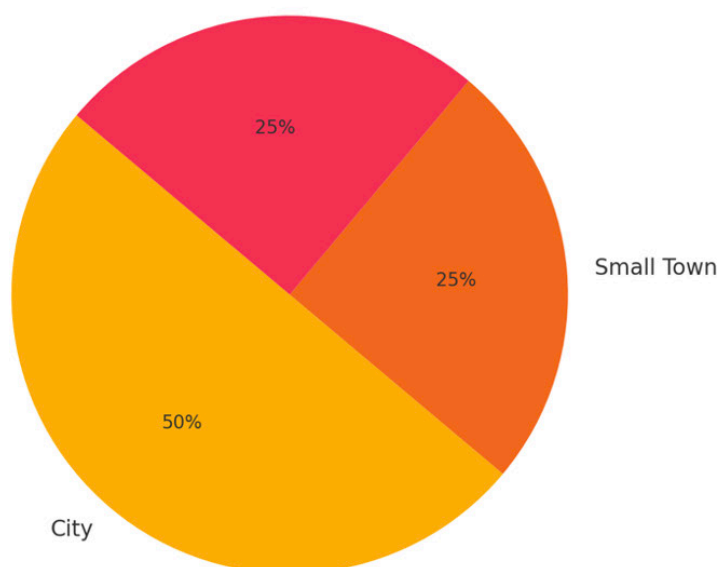
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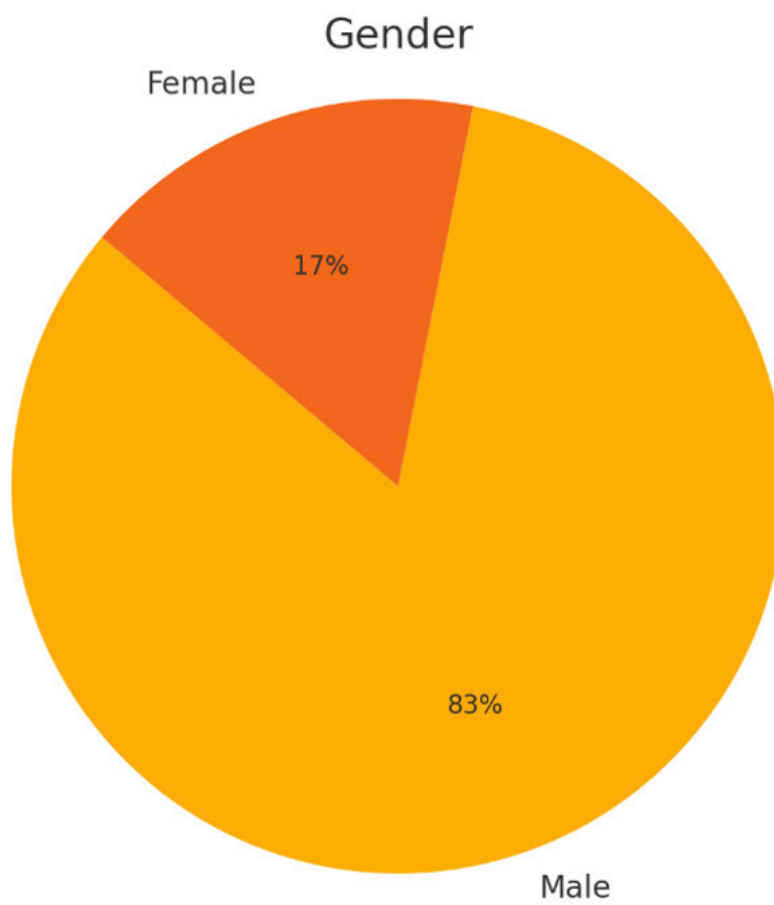
Ethnicity



Geography



DEMOGRAPHICS



KEY FINDINGS

Introduction

This report examines Black men's and families' engagement with the U.S. Census based on insights gathered from a focus group discussion. Participants shared their thoughts on census awareness, barriers to participation, trust in government, and ways to enhance engagement. Their responses illustrate a deep-seated skepticism about the census process, concerns about its impact, and ideas for improving outreach efforts.

The census serves a crucial role in determining the allocation of federal funding, representation in government, and community resources. However, within Black communities, participation remains inconsistent, and many remain skeptical of its benefits. This report delves into the complex relationship between Black men and families and the census, exploring both historical and contemporary concerns that shape their views.

Perceptions and Awareness

Many participants had varying levels of awareness regarding the census. Some first learned about it through their families, particularly their parents.

"I participated in the 2010 census for the first time because I was with my mom when she filled it out."

Others encountered the census in school but noted that it was rarely emphasized beyond brief mentions.

"I learned about it in high school, but after that, I didn't hear much about it."

Some participants first became aware of the census through television advertisements, but these did not always resonate.

"My first introduction was a TV ad, but I don't think it was really targeted toward our community."

In contrast, others were introduced to the census through work or community groups.

"When I was managing a labor union, we hosted meetings to educate workers about the census."

KEY FINDINGS

Despite these experiences, overall participation remained low. Some admitted they had never filled out the census and were unaware of how to do so.

“I haven’t participated. I don’t even know how to.”

Others participated only when incentivized.

“I didn’t really participate until college, and even then, it was because they sent me a gift card.”

Additionally, many felt the census was not emphasized enough in their communities, leaving them uncertain about its purpose.

“My parents talked about it, but I don’t recall ever seeing it really pushed as something urgent for us.”

Some expressed concerns about accuracy, doubting whether the census properly captures the diversity of Black communities, particularly among African American, Caribbean, and African immigrant populations. One man described it as:

“The census doesn’t capture the nuance within Black communities—Haitians, Jamaicans, Ugandans, African Americans. We’re all lumped together, but we’re not all the same.”

These varying levels of awareness illustrate a broader issue; Black communities are often overlooked in census outreach efforts, leading to misinformation and low participation rates. Without proper education on the importance of census data, many continue to perceive it as irrelevant to their daily lives.

Barriers and Concerns

One of the primary barriers to census participation was lack of access and awareness. Some participants described how systemic issues prevented them from receiving census forms.

“A lot of Black men weren’t allowed to live in housing projects unless they were married, so they didn’t have an address to send a census to.”

KEY FINDINGS

Others pointed out inconsistencies in census outreach.

“Some communities never receive census outreach or mailers, so they don’t even get the opportunity to participate.”

Mistrust of government also played a significant role in discouraging participation. Several participants expressed concern about how census data might be used against them.

“There’s a general belief that the government uses census data to track Black people.”

“Some folks think if you have warrants, filling out the census could help law enforcement find you.”

Fear of repercussions also influenced some people’s decisions not to participate.

“If I remember correctly, in 2020, there was a penalty if you didn’t fill out the census completely. Why penalize people for something that’s supposed to help?”

Additionally, concerns about privacy led some to withhold information.

“Some people omit information on purpose, like if they have extra family members living with them. They don’t want the government in their business.”

Another recurring concern was how the collected data would be used.

“I worry that census data is used to determine how little funding we get, rather than how much.”

A significant issue highlighted was the disconnect between census participation and tangible benefits. Many expressed frustration that despite participation, Black communities continued to face economic disparities, underfunded schools, and inadequate healthcare services. This lack of visible impact has reinforced skepticism and disengagement.

KEY FINDINGS

Trust & Representation

Many participants expressed skepticism about whether the census accurately represented and benefited Black communities.

“The census determines funding for schools and community programs, but we don’t actually see those benefits.”

“Our schools are still underfunded, and our neighborhoods still lack investment, even though we fill out the census.”

A recurring sentiment was that census participation did not lead to tangible improvements.

“Even after the census is complete, we still see over-crowded schools and underfunded public services.”

Others pointed out disparities in funding.

“Other communities seem to get more funding and resources than Black neighborhoods, even when we participate in the census.”

Some described why they would not fill out the census because of fear what would be done with their information.

“Some folks purposely omit information because they feel like it’s none of their business. If they have a cousin or aunt staying with them, they don’t want to say that.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the government allowing marketing companies to have access to that data—like how we get targeted ads after searching something online.”

There was also concern that census data was manipulated or misused to maintain systemic inequities.

“I don’t trust that the government uses census data ethically or fairly.”

“If they know how many of us are here, why does it feel like we’re always underrepresented?”

KEY FINDINGS

Historical injustices, such as redlining and voter suppression, have contributed to the widespread belief that government data collection efforts—including the census—are tools of control rather than empowerment. Many expressed the need for census officials to work directly with trusted community leaders to repair this trust.

Outreach and Engagement

When asked how the Census Bureau could improve outreach, participants offered several suggestions. One emphasized the need for direct, face-to-face interaction.

“Go old school—knock on doors, talk to people face-to-face.”

Others pointed to the importance of using cultural touchpoints.

“Advertise at sporting events—Black men watch football and basketball.”

“Put census information in barber shops. That’s where we have real conversations.”

Participants also stressed the importance of using trusted voices and community leaders.

“Political leaders push voting but not the census. They should be doing both.”

“We need faith leaders and grassroots organizations involved.”

Some suggested leveraging influential figures.

“If Kendrick Lamar talked about the census, people would listen.”

Changing the messaging was another recommendation. Many felt that the Census Bureau needed to clearly communicate the direct benefits of participation.

“Show people what actually happens with their census data.”

“Make it clear how much funding Black communities miss out on due to undercounting.”

KEY FINDINGS

Lastly, participants called for greater transparency and accessibility.

“Tell people exactly what happens with their data and who can access it.”

“Most of us don’t even know when the census is happening.”

Expanding representation among census workers was another proposal.

“Have more people from our community working as census takers.”

CONCLUSION

The focus group revealed that Black men and families engage with the census at low rates due to a combination of lack of information, mistrust of government, and skepticism about its benefits. While some participants had participated in the census, many questioned whether their responses led to meaningful improvements in their communities. The overarching concern was that census data is collected but not used equitably to support Black neighborhoods.

Participants proposed a range of solutions to increase census participation. Effective outreach requires culturally relevant marketing, trusted community messengers, and greater transparency about how census data is used. Addressing these concerns will be key to ensuring that Black communities receive the political representation and resources they deserve.

For the Census Bureau to increase participation among Black men and families, it must modernize its outreach strategies, engage trusted voices, and demonstrate a real commitment to equity.



DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reveal a deep-rooted skepticism and disengagement with the census among Black men and families. The themes of mistrust, lack of tangible benefits, and systemic exclusion highlight the need for meaningful policy changes and targeted engagement efforts. While the census is intended to ensure fair political representation and equitable distribution of resources, its perceived inefficacy within Black communities undermines its legitimacy.

A major implication of these findings is the necessity for structural reforms in census outreach. To counteract misinformation and mistrust, greater transparency regarding how census data is used and protected must be a priority. The government must address the historical injustices that contribute to these concerns while demonstrating the real-world benefits of census participation.

Moreover, many participants expressed frustration over a lack of visible impact from the census. Even when Black communities participate, there is still a feeling that funding and resources are not equitably distributed. This calls for not only increased transparency but also stronger accountability measures to ensure census data is used effectively to benefit historically marginalized populations.

Another significant implication is the need for sustained engagement beyond just the decennial census count. The government and community organizations must work continuously to keep census participation relevant and front of mind, rather than treating it as a once-every-ten-year event. A stronger commitment to year-round civic engagement could help address systemic undercounts and mistrust in the process.

Given the ongoing disparities in political representation and economic development in Black communities, ensuring full and accurate participation in the census is critical. Without intentional interventions, the cycle of underrepresentation will persist, leaving Black communities without the resources and legislative influence they need to thrive.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance Community-Centered Outreach:

Establish partnerships with Black-led community organizations, faith groups, and trusted leaders to promote the importance of the census through culturally relevant messaging. More local grassroots initiatives should be developed to reach historically undercounted populations.

2. Improve Accessibility:

Ensure census materials are widely available, particularly in Black communities, through mail, in-person outreach, and digital access points. Mobile census stations, bilingual outreach teams, and neighborhood events should be leveraged to bridge gaps in participation.

3. Address Misinformation and Build Trust:

Develop clear, accessible, and widely disseminated explanations about how census data is protected and how it directly benefits Black communities. Conducting educational campaigns year-round can reinforce the importance of accurate data collection.

4. Increase Representation Among Census Workers:

Recruit and train census workers from within Black communities to increase engagement and credibility. Seeing trusted members of the community leading census efforts can alleviate skepticism and increase participation rates.

5. Utilize Influential Voices and Media Platforms:

Engage Black media outlets, social media influencers, and cultural figures to amplify the importance of census participation. Many younger participants indicated that traditional outreach methods such as mail and TV ads were not effective. A shift toward digital outreach, podcasts, TikTok and community events could better capture attention.

6. Strengthen Accountability in Census Resource Distribution: Advocate for greater oversight to ensure that census data is not just collected but is actively used to improve funding allocations for schools, healthcare, and infrastructure in Black communities. Local governments should be required to report how census data directly influences budgetary decisions.

7. Develop Long-Term Civic Engagement Strategies:

Instead of focusing outreach solely on census years, integrate census education into broader civic engagement efforts. This could include school curriculums, voter registration drives, and employment training programs to highlight how census participation ties into broader socio-economic progress.

By implementing these recommendations, the Census Bureau and policymakers can work toward fostering trust and increasing participation among Black men and families, ensuring their communities receive the resources and representation they deserve. Addressing these deep-seated concerns will require ongoing efforts, sustained commitment, and a willingness to rethink traditional census outreach strategies to meet the needs of Black communities in meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms in census outreach and engagement efforts to build trust and increase participation among Black men and families. Addressing these issues will require a sustained commitment from policymakers, community organizations, and the Census Bureau to ensure Black communities are accurately counted and equitably served. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, stakeholders can work toward a more inclusive and representative census process that truly reflects the diversity and needs of the nation.

Failure to address the persistent undercounting of Black communities will only continue to exacerbate disparities in funding, infrastructure, education, and political representation. The consequences of underrepresentation extend beyond the census itself and influence the broader socio-economic landscape, reinforcing systemic inequities that have existed for generations. The U.S. Census Bureau and policymakers must recognize the unique historical and social barriers that contribute to skepticism and disengagement and actively work toward addressing these concerns.

Additionally, increasing participation in the census requires more than just one-time engagement efforts. Long-term strategies, including year-round civic education programs, community-driven census outreach, and transparent reporting on how census data is utilized, must be established to ensure that Black communities see direct benefits from their participation. When communities understand the impact of the census in tangible ways, such as improved schools, healthcare access, and fair political representation, trust in the process will begin to rebuild.

Ultimately, achieving full representation in the census is a matter of equity and justice. The Census Bureau must make an intentional and sustained effort to work alongside Black community leaders, grassroots organizations, and trusted voices to ensure that every person is counted and that census participation leads to meaningful and lasting change. The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for creating a more transparent, effective, and inclusive census process that serves all communities fairly and equitably.

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms in census outreach and engagement efforts to build trust and increase participation among Black men and families. Addressing these issues will require a sustained commitment from policymakers, community organizations, and the Census Bureau to ensure Black communities are accurately counted and equitably served. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, stakeholders can work toward a more inclusive and representative census process that truly reflects the diversity and needs of the nation.

Black Men and Families Focus Group Census Participation

Overview

The U.S. Census is a vital tool for determining federal funding, political representation, and the allocation of resources. However, Black men and families remain disproportionately undercounted due to systemic barriers, misinformation, and mistrust in government institutions. This report explores the key challenges Black men face in census participation and provides actionable recommendations to increase engagement and ensure equitable representation.

Key Findings

- Awareness of the census varies widely; while some encounter it through family or school, many are unfamiliar with its purpose.
- Mistrust in the government is a primary deterrent, with concerns about data misuse and surveillance.
- Many Black communities see little tangible improvement despite participating in the census, reinforcing skepticism.
- Barriers include lack of census outreach, inaccessible materials, and unstable housing situations.

Implications

Low census participation among Black communities leads to underrepresentation in political decision-making and insufficient funding for essential services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Without an accurate count, Black communities' risk being overlooked in federal and state policy planning. Addressing these issues requires transparency, trust-building, and proactive outreach.

Recommendations

- 1 Expand Community Outreach:** Collaborate with Black-led organizations, churches, and trusted community leaders.
- 2 Improve Accessibility:** Provide census materials in multiple formats, including digital and mobile platforms.
- 3 Address Misinformation:** Launch public education campaigns to ensure understanding of census confidentiality and benefits.
- 4 Increase Representation:** Recruit census workers from Black communities to build trust and credibility.
- 5 Leverage Influencers and Media:** Use social media, Black media outlets, and cultural figures to promote census participation.
- 6 Strengthen Accountability:** Ensure census data leads to visible improvements in Black communities.
- 7 Develop Long-Term Engagement:** Integrate census education into broader civic engagement efforts, such as voter registration drives.

Conclusion: Ensuring an accurate census count in Black communities is a matter of equity and justice.

Addressing the barriers to participation requires sustained efforts from policymakers, community organizations, and the Census Bureau. By implementing these recommendations, we can work toward a more inclusive and representative census process that truly serves the needs of Black men and families.