

New Mexico could lose billions in federal funds if Census population undercounted

Dianne L. Stallings, Ruidoso News Published 7:00 a.m. MT Oct. 22, 2019

Officials estimate more than 5,000 Lincoln County residents were not counted in the last census in 2010.

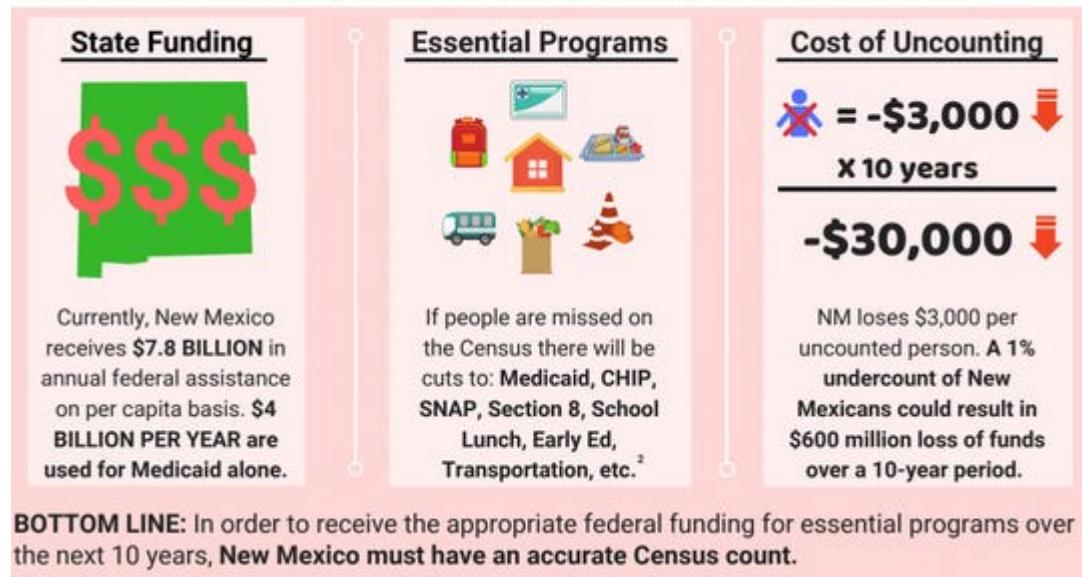
Craig Westbrook, a former census team leader in Lincoln County, said New Mexico officials estimate non-respondents resulted in \$780 million of lost revenue to New Mexico in the last [U.S. Census](#).

"To the state, each resident not counted is worth \$3,745 a year," Westbrook told Lincoln County's Board of Commissioners this week.

By executive order, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham created the statewide Complete Count Commission, and in concert with that, the Legislature appropriated \$3.5 million to the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration to support local governments' efforts for a complete count in the 2020 census.

Of that total, \$2.4 million is available to participating counties to conduct 2020 census outreach, promotion and education to increase the self-response rate and accuracy of the census.

AT STAKE - Billions of Federal Dollars Based on Census:



An accurate census count is critical for federal funding in New Mexico (Photo: Courtesy/Center for Civic Policy)

New Mexico population difficult to count

But some New Mexico counties — most recently Lincoln County, which had only a 70 percent response rate in the last census — declined the funds, which require the formation of a local Complete Count committee.

According to census officials, 43 percent of the state's residents live in hard-to-count areas.

New Mexico is considered the hardest to count in the nation — a vital challenge for the state, as population count from the census also determines the number of seats each state is given in the House of Representatives, and the data is used to apportion and redistrict legislative and school districts.

"In talking to people about the census, it is eye-opening, the lack of understanding about what it is," Westbrook said. "There are a lot reluctant to answer, number one because they think their taxes will go up, and others just flat don't trust the government and won't answer questions."

"They take their private property very seriously and (enumerators) may encounter someone with a gun if they show up on their property. I told them if they don't feel comfortable, make a note and turn around. There are a lot of no trespassing signs on gates."

The state budgeted some money for the outreach program, but officials also were hoping that people would volunteer, Westbrook said, adding that volunteers may lack the commitment it takes to be effective.

Lincoln County undercounted

Westbrook said state officials estimate Lincoln County was undercounted in 2010 by 5,850 residents.

"In 2010, the Ruidoso-Ruidoso Downs urban area registered a 30 to 35 percent response," Westbrook said. "Outside of that area, participation was below 5 percent. The (Mescalero Apache) reservation (adjoining Ruidoso) was done by a different team."

"That is the challenge the county faces — how to reach outliers."

Westbrook said prevailing attitudes may again impact accurate counts.

Lincoln County Commissioners said those attitudes — residents don't trust the government, don't want to share information with it and don't like census enumerators entering their private property — and reluctance to be obligated to perform a list of mandatory functions resulted in the commission declining a state grant of \$25,000 to participate in outreach related to the 2020 census, including creating a local Complete Count Committee.

Lincoln County Manager Nita Taylor said she was having difficulty finding people willing to serve on the committee. Accepting the grant also would require one or two county employees to work on census issues and coordination, she said.

Oct. 21 was the deadline date to commit to the grant, but Commissioner Tom Stewart said he was disturbed by the obligations tied to accepting the money.

"I read terms and conditions," said the commissioner, who formerly served as county manager. "There are a lot of 'shalls' and rules. I am not sure the return on investment is worth it. I'm not as skeptical as 2010, but when you have federal employees saying we can go on private property, I told them (during the last census) they better be cautious."

"Out in the county, specifically in my area of Alto, I see a lot of the (census packet) bags hanging on the doors, because they are not permanent residents. But with the bulk being online this census and there being a penalty for not responding to the census, I think the government has enough to push it. I don't see us gaining much."



Commissioner Tom Stewart said he didn't like the strings attached to census grant and commissioners took no action to accept \$25,000. (Photo: Dianne L. Stallings/Ruidoso News)

District 2 Commissioner Lynn Willard questioned whether the potential funding for the county was worth pressuring an accurate count in the county given the difficulty of reaching the mostly rural residents.

"How do you reach out to people in rural areas?" Westbrook asked. The county has no radio, television or newspaper that covers the entire territory. Flyers can be sent home with students, but the issue is to raise awareness on a timely basis, explaining what it means to them and to the county, he said.

Some ranches barely have cell phone service and do not have Internet access, he said.

The census will continue whether or not the county participates in the grant and forms the committee, Commissioner Dallas Draper emphasized.

Draper said he's not sure forming the committee and taking other steps would bear fruit in Lincoln County.

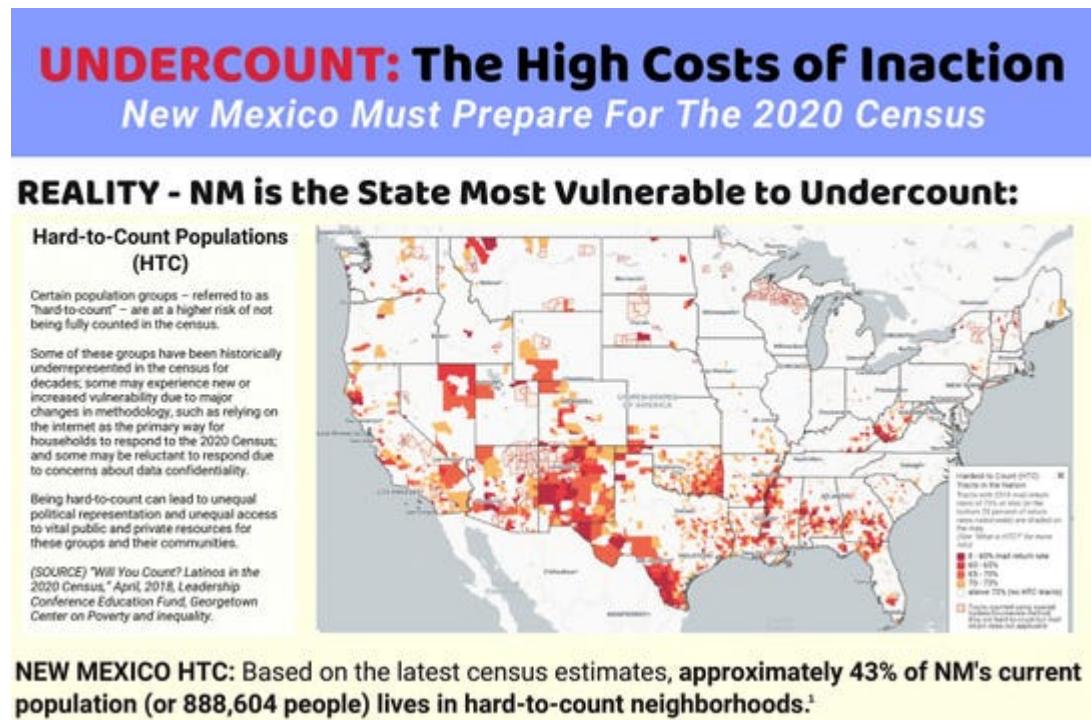
A new way to take the Census

This year, the census begins March 12 and will be conducted online and with the help of enumerators, another term for census takers, knocking on doors. The census document contains 10 questions and is not as broad as in 2010.

For this census, each residence will receive a postcard with an identification number asking for a response online or by phone, Westbrook said.

Three phases are planned: Notification occurs January through March, the second phase is self-response and the third phase will be follow-up by enumerators with those who do not respond, including knocking on doors.

On Oct. 23, [the Census Bureau will take job applications to fill more than 23,000 open positions in New Mexico](#). Applicants can visit Eastern New Mexico University in Ruidoso from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Jobs will include census takers, recruiting assistants, office clerks and supervisory staff.



Stats and demographics show the need for an accurate, 2020 census count. (Photo: Center for Civic Policy)