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Census: US sees unprecedented multiracial growth, decline in the white population for first time in history

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The United States experienced unprecedented multiracial population growth and a decline in the white population for the first time in the nation's history, according to U.S. Census officials, who released data Thursday revealing the most sweeping picture of America's racial and ethnic makeup in a decade.

"These changes reveal that the US population is much more multiracial, and more racially and ethnically diverse, than what we measured in the past," said Nicholas Jones, the director of race, ethnicity, research and outreach for the Census Bureau's population division.

The white, non-Hispanic population, without another race, decreased by 8.6% since 2010, according to the new data from the 2020 census. The U.S. is now 57.8% white, 18.7% Hispanic, 12.4% Black and 6% Asian.

Some of those changes, Jones said, can be attributed to improvements to the survey. The white, non-Hispanic population is still the largest racial group in the U.S.

Nevertheless, the release bolstered expert predictions that the United States is becoming a more diverse nation, with continued expansion of the Hispanic, Black and Asian American populations and growing numbers of multiracial residents – only a fraction in past surveys.

"The diversity that we're seeing in this country is going to be much more pronounced," said William Frey, senior fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program.

Race and ethnicity in America

In 2020, 33.8 million people reported being more than one race, more than a threefold increase from 2010, when 9 million people, or 2.9% of the population, identified that way. A

fraction of residents reported being multiracial in 2000 (6.8 million, 2.4%), the first year respondents had the option.

At the national level, there was a 61.1% chance that two people chosen at random in a given area would be of different racial or ethnic groups. That same probability – called a diversity index by census officials – was 54.9 % in 2010.

The states with the highest diversity index scores in 2020 were in the west, with Hawaii at 76%, California with 69.7% and Nevada at 68.8%.

The results released Thursday present more comprehensive data on race and ancestry than in earlier surveys.

The 2020 Census used two separate questions to calculate race and ethnicity. One question focused on Hispanic or Latino origin. The other question focused specifically on race.

The questionnaire included write-in boxes for Black or African American respondents for the first time, allowing them to list whether they are Haitian or Jamaican or Somali, for example. The surveys included similar boxes for white residents, allowing them to write in Lebanese or Egyptian or Italian.

“The improvements and changes enable a more thorough and accurate depiction of how people self-identify, yielding a more accurate portrait of how people report their Hispanic origin and race within the context of a two-question format,” said Jones.

While the white population remained the most prevalent race or ethnic group in most counties, the most prevalent groups in certain areas were non-white, continuing growth trends of past years.

Black or African American populations were dominant in parts of the South, while Hispanic or Latino residents were most prevalent in the Southwest and West. Native Americans were predominant in places where there are tribal lands in parts of Alaska, the Southwest, and Midwest.

“The presence of the Hispanic or Latino population as the second-most prevalent group spanned the entire continental United States, with large numbers of counties in every region,” census officials said in a release.

Yvette Roubideaux, vice president for research at the National Congress of American Indians, welcomed the results.

“Today's news is great news,” she said. “America is more diverse than ever, and that diversity is a strength, not a weakness. We are excited to see that the data confirms that what we already see in our communities or schools, workplaces and with friends and families.”

She and other advocates said they are now turning their focus to ensuring political representation fairly reflect the population shifts in the data.

More: New Census numbers paint picture of race and ethnicity in U.S. But how are those defined?

Population growth continues to slow

The country’s overall population grew by only 7.4% between 2010 and 2020, among the most sluggish on record. The 1930s was the only other decade that had slower growth.

“Population decline was widespread this decade,” said Marc Perry, senior demographer at the Census Bureau, who noted the slowdown was “even more pronounced at the county level.”

“Fifty-two percent of all counties had smaller counties in 2020 than in 2010,” he said.

Perry said smaller counties generally lost population while large ones gained. Growth was “almost entirely” in metro areas, he said, adding that all 10 of the country’s most populous cities grew.

More: Big counties get bigger as large metro areas lead population growth in 2020 census

What is the census?

The census is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution. Every ten years, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a count of the American population, including key demographic details such as race and gender. These data, in turn, are used to draw up congressional districts, as well as in a host of other ways.

Compared with the results from 2010 and earlier surveys, the data show Americans how the population has grown and changed and moved, as well as who our neighbors and communities are – in some sense what it means to be American today.

The results from the 2020 census, taken amid the pandemic and partisan sniping about the politicization of the process, are meant to be a snapshot of the population as of April 1, 2020.

States use the census data to determine legislative and congressional districts – and the Electoral College votes that come with them.

The statistics gleaned from the decennial census reverberate through American life, and are used directly and indirectly to hand out hundreds of billions annually in federal funding and for everything from drawing school district boundaries to measuring the diversity of police forces and corporate boards.

“It's sort of like the denominator for a whole lot of stuff,” said John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University and population studies researcher. He likened it to a definitive “yard stick” Americans will use for years to come.

Undercount of marginalized communities

The coronavirus pandemic could mean thousands of Black and Latino communities were undercounted in the census. Advocates point out President Donald Trump’s attempt to include a citizenship question on the census – a departure from census questioning over several decades – as another factor increasing the undercount of people of color.

In general, undercounting is not new to the census. Data collections have generally undercounted hard-to-reach communities.

“We know there is an undercount,” said Clarissa Martínez-de-Castro, deputy vice president of UnidosUS, a Latino civil rights group. But there’s no way to know by how much until statisticians dig deeper into the data.

After the 2010 census, the bureau released a survey that showed it undercounted 2.1% of the Black population that year and undercounted 1.8% of the Black population in 2000. In 2010, the bureau undercounted 1.5% of the Hispanic population, and in 2000, the estimated undercount of the Hispanic population was 0.7% – not statistically different from zero.

Ron Jarmin, acting director of the U.S. Census Bureau, said Thursday that COVID “significantly delayed” the release of the data, which had been expected in March.

According to research at George Washington University, more than 300 federal programs in 2017 relied on data derived from the census to help guide the distribution of $1.5 trillion to state and local governments, nonprofit groups, businesses and households, including certain USDA programs that are available only in rural areas.

“And the census data will let communities know if they're eligible or not,” said Andrew Reamer, the professor who led the research. “Conversely, for certain HUD (Housing and Urban Development) programs, you (a community) have to be big enough to be eligible."

Terry Ao Minnis, senior director of census and voting for Asian Americans Advancing Justice, said it’s critical for communities of color to be accurately counted during the census because of the funding opportunities via congressional representation.

“If our communities do not have a voice with their elected official, then their needs will not be addressed,” Ao Minnis said. “And this harm is amplified by the fact that these lines will be in place for the entire decade.”

Democracy Docket, a site founded by Democratic lawyer Marc Elias, is tracking redistricting lawsuits in Alabama, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon and Pennsylvania.

Cases in Pennsylvania, Minnesota and Louisiana claim the census data released in April shows population shifts that render districts instantly unconstitutional.

Democracy Docket alleges Republican lawmakers often pass “unfair and unconstitutional maps,” and “some of the best protection voters have against disenfranchisement is through the courts.”

The National Republican Redistricting Trust, which coordinates GOP efforts on a national redistricting strategy, says on its site that Democrats plan to use redistricting “to gerrymander their way into permanent majorities, so they can enact their radical left-wing agenda unchecked.”

Supreme Court says federal judges can’t block gerrymandering

In 2019, the Supreme Court’s Rucho vs. Common Cause ruling blocked federal judges from intervening in partisan election maps, essentially allowing gerrymandering.

The high court’s ruling “really set the stage for a very ominous redistricting cycle, especially for communities of color in the South, where redistricting once again will be controlled largely by one party,” said Michael Li, senior counsel for the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice's Democracy Program.

More: Supreme Court says federal courts cannot strike down partisan gerrymandering

Redistricting is the once-in-a-decade process of redrawing congressional districts to better reflect shifts in the populations. Redistricting is controlled by individual states.

“Because of residential segregation, it’s easier to break apart or pack together communities of color into districts in order to make the map more Republican,” Li said.

The National Black Justice Coalition partnered with the Census Bureau to increase participation of Black LGBTQIA+ individuals in filling out the census forms.

“As we think about state legislatures who will aggressively use this data to redraw congressional districts and boundaries and contribute to voter suppression, I worry greatly about what this will mean for democracy and attempts to weaponize data to chip away at democracy,” said David Johns, the executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition.

Politics 101: What is gerrymandering? Redistricting means new winners and losers

Voto Latino CEO and President Maria Teresa Kumar is concerned that census data could be used to disenfranchise Latino voters.

Kumar pointed out that three years after the 2010 census, the Supreme Court ruled in Shelby County v. Eric Holder to free states with a history of racial discrimination from having to clear voting procedure changes with the federal government.

“It turned out that Shelby County had had the second-largest population growth of Latinos in the country. They had experienced a 297% increase in the Latino population,” Kumar said.

Republican strategist Karl Rove declared in 2010 that “he who controls redistricting, can control Congress.” The Republican Party went on to win state legislative and gubernatorial races across the country.

According to the nonpartisan Cook Political Report, Republicans control the redistricting process in 17 states, Democrats in seven. The power is split between the parties in a half dozen states. Fourteen have independent commissions, mostly appointed by legislative leaders. Six states do not need to divvy up districts because they have only one seat in the House.

Cook Political Report analyst Dave Wasserman noted this year that Republicans have to pick up only five seats to win back control of the House of Representatives. He estimated Republicans are positioned to pick up the equivalent of 3½ seats from Democrats through the redistricting process alone.