



Letter: Undercounting Children Hurts Families Letter to the Editor

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To the Editor:

People are often surprised to learn that children are routinely undercounted in the U.S. census. Many might also be surprised to learn that Census counts and the accuracy of data personally affects them. Most major federal funding decisions — and many state and local ones — rely at least in part on census data, including funding for early childhood education, schools, roads, environmental protection, healthcare and nutrition.

Nationally, census counts are used to distribute more than \$400 billion of federal funds to states and localities for more than 140 child-focused programs such as:

- * State Children's Health Insurance Program
- * Foster Care
- * Head Start
- * Special Education Grants to states

Undercounting children in Virginia could cost the state tens of millions of dollars and set back efforts to support programs that help our most vulnerable children. That is why it is critical that all families fill out their census form and to include all of their children, even newborns, in the count.

According to the Census Bureau, young children are missed at a higher rate than any other age group. In the 2000 census, there was a net undercount of more than 1 million children under age 10. More than three-quarters of a million children under age 5 were missed, which amounts to 4 percent of this population group, by far the largest number missed in any age group.

Children in poor households are the most likely to be missed, so an undercount typically ends up hurting exactly those children that need the most help.

This year, more children may be left uncounted than ever before. The housing crisis has caused more families to double up in one housing unit or live in other temporary and unusual housing situations. In addition, more children live in immigrant families and there are indications that census data undercounts immigrant populations. In Northern Virginia, more than 43 percent of children are either foreign-born or live in a household in which at least one parent is foreign-born. Many of these residents do not speak English well and may have difficulty understanding the importance of the census.

If you are an educator, elected official, a business or community leader, or part of a faith-based organization, you are crucial in spreading the word about the importance of filling out census forms ensuring that Virginia children and

families are accurately represented when decisions are made in Washington.

Without good data, decision-makers are left in a vacuum, forced to either ignore growing problems or make changes based on assumption and anecdote.

Kathy May

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