Census data indicates how prepared our communities are to recover from emergencies, such as COVID-19. Using Census data to calculate community resilience scores reveals which municipalities are equipped to rebuild after COVID-19 and which lack the resources needed to recover. Communities that have a higher percentage of residents facing individual and household risk factors—including poverty, crowded housing, language barriers, heart conditions, diabetes, and respiratory ailments—are at a greater risk of being devastated by COVID-19 and its economic impact.

In Massachusetts, about 24% of residents experience three or more of these risk factors, with Suffolk County residents having the highest percentage of residents experiencing three or more factors of all counties in the state. Communities of color and low-income populations that are more likely to experience these risk factors have been disproportionately ravaged by COVID-19 and face the daunting challenge of recovering from the pandemic.

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The allocation of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives is determined by Census data, meaning that states can gain or lose Electoral College votes based on their population counts. Census data also dictates the distribution of about $700 billion in federal funding to programs such as the Medical Assistance Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Head Start, Medicare Part B, the Federal Pell Grant Program, and Community Development Block Grants.⁴

Massachusetts received about $16 billion in federal funding as a result of the 2010 Census. Since Census data also affects apportionment, an inaccurate count could cause Massachusetts to lose another Congressional seat, as it did as a result of the 2010 Census.

HOW CAN CENSUS DATA HELP OUR COMMUNITIES?

The 2020 Census is crucial for ensuring that communities receive the funding they need for critical programs. The accuracy of the Census can affect the allocation of funds for schools, hospitals, and other essential services. Communities that are undercounted may risk losing federal funding if the city’s population is not accurately counted.

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE 2020 CENSUS IN MASSACHUSETTS?

As of July 24, 64.4% of Massachusetts residents have been counted in the 2020 Census, not yet reaching the 2010 final self-response rate of 68.8%. Disparities exist among Census response rates across the state, with many cities, like Brockton, having response rates below 40% as compared with some tracts in suburbs, such as Wellesley, already exceeding their 2010 response rates of 85%. Residents of diverse urban areas are at a high risk of being undercounted, yet many of the programs that are funded using Census data directly support schools, hospitals, and services in those cities. Communities, like Chelsea, that have been severely ravaged by COVID-19 depend on programs that risk losing federal funding if the city’s population is not accurately counted.

MassVOTE and its partners—including the Massachusetts Voter Table, MassCounts, and MIRA Coalition—lead phone banks each week to help residents respond to the Census. These outreach efforts focus on reaching residents in hard-to-count tracts to work to achieve an accurate count.

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⁵ https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/census-2020
⁶ https://www.censushardtoucmaps2020.us/
⁷ https://www.censushardtoucmaps2020.us/