

Disinformation and the 2020 Census



What's at stake in the 2020 Census?

The U.S. Census is a crucial bedrock of representative democracy and provides information that is the cornerstone of knowledge about all people in the United States. But historically marginalized communities, including communities of color, immigrants, low-income rural and urban households, and young children are consistently and disproportionately undercounted in the census at exceedingly high rates, depriving those communities of resources and political power for the next 10 years.

If nefarious actors are successful in suppressing census participation and delegitimizing the results, it will affect everything from fair representation in Congress to equitable distribution of more than \$800 billion in federal funds. In the face of a potential disinformation campaign, stakeholders must work together to protect the integrity of the census.

What is disinformation, and how is it spread and amplified?

The consequences of disinformation became stunningly apparent after the 2016 presidential election. We now understand that state-sponsored Russian operatives used a variety of sophisticated tactics, including fake news campaigns, to exploit social media platforms and sway vulnerable voters with divisive messages and false rhetoric.

In regards to the 2020 Census, media manipulators and disinformation agents may attempt to undermine the integrity of the data and the public's perception of the data. Mainstream news outlets have also played a role in spreading disinformation to key audiences. [Media manipulators](#) are known to plant stories to small, and typically understaffed, news outlets that don't have the resources to properly fact check. If the story performs well, mid-sized outlets and national outlets pick it up in an effort to dismiss or debunk the story as false. Media manipulators always want their narratives amplified until they reach the widest possible audience, and that's usually done via national media coverage.

Calling attention to disinformation – even if the intent is to discredit it – gives it [oxygen](#) and, thus, helps it flourish. This is known as the problem of amplification. Purveyors of disinformation want to reach the professional media to amplify the harmful content to the widest possible audience. Media coverage is further amplified by search engines and social media.

Ways you can fight the spread of disinformation about the census

We all have a role to play in fighting the spread of disinformation and protecting our democracy. To minimize the impact of disinformation on the 2020 Census, please consider strategically engaging the media using the following tips:

■ DON'T GIVE EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION.

Don't point journalists to specific instances of disinformation, even if you're talking off the record. If they can find it online, they can publish it, because you are no longer considered the source.

Do press journalists to tell you what evidence they have. It's their job to find the examples. If they don't have any, remind them that there's a big difference between what is possible and what is known.

■ AVOID REPEATING DISINFORMATION.

Don't repeat or share the falsehood, e.g., "We're concerned about the rumors circulating online that the Census Bureau is leaking data to ICE." Studies have shown that when you verbalize a negative message, it sticks in people's heads – even if you're refuting it.

Do provide accurate facts in the form of inoculation or balance messages, e.g., "We're working to remind folks that it's illegal for the Bureau to share information with other government agencies."

■ AVOID LANGUAGE THAT TRIGGERS A COUNTER-RESPONSE.

Don't use language that could trigger a counter-response among adversarial groups, such as "white decline," "constitutionalist" or "alt-right trolls."

Do describe adversarial groups' actions and their impact on your communities in as accurate and euphemism-free terms as possible, e.g., "Individuals with anti-immigrant views are spreading disinformation to scare people out of participating in the census and securing funding and representation for their communities."

■ PIVOT TO OTHER TOPICS BESIDES DISINFORMATION.

Don't let the conversation solely be about the existence or impact of disinformation.

Do pivot to talking about what's at stake in the 2020 Census and the importance of engaging hard to count communities, such as people of color, immigrants, people who are homeless, young children and older adults.

■ AVOID SPECULATION.

Don't offer up examples of potential disinformation campaigns, e.g., "If there were disinformation about foreign interference in the census, that would be really bad."

Do stick to the evidence. If there is nothing pointing to a disinformation campaign, remind the reporter of that.

■ AVOID FEAR MONGERING.

Don't talk about how scary the threat of disinformation is.

Do talk about the importance of providing people with accurate information.

■ THINK ABOUT THE THREAT LEVEL.

Don't talk to journalists on the record about problematic narratives if they pose a low threat (e.g., they're circulating on only one platform and have low online engagement). Media coverage of disinformation can do more harm than good if only a small number of people have seen the disinformation to begin with.

Do encourage trusted journalists to debunk if the threat of people seeing disinformation rises (e.g., a narrative has spread to two or three platforms or reached more than 1,000 online interactions). For help assessing the threat level a particular piece of content poses, reach out to national civil rights groups or to the Census Counts campaign, at censusdisinfo@spitfirestrategies.org.

■ ENCOURAGE JOURNALISTS TO CONTACT NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS.

Don't feel like you have to talk to every reporter who reaches out or that you have to know all the answers to questions about disinformation. You always have the option of saying, "I'm not the best person to comment on that."

Do urge journalists to contact national civil rights organizations, which can either engage the journalist directly or connect them to experts in the field of disinformation. If your organization doesn't have a national hub, feel free to direct journalists to the Census Counts campaign, at censusdisinfo@spitfirestrategies.org.