Counting the Countless: Census 2020 and the Impact of Food Insecurity

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Census 2020 could be the most important and inclusive civic activity our country has ever experienced, covering every person in the United States of America. Our constitution requires an accurate recording of the nation’s population every ten years. It is a centerpiece of our democracy that must honor its diversity and inclusivity in the process.

Did you know census results are used to allocate seats and draw district lines among congress, state representatives, and local boards that distribute more than $800B in federal assistance to states, cities, families? The census guides decision making as it relates to schools, housing, health care, and business investment.

However, often due to various reasons, such as census form errors, low participation, and large population "hard to count" territories, many citizens are not included in the census. When households with low incomes are undercounted, political boundaries become inaccurate — undercounting results in families with low incomes being denied critical services.

Communities facing unfair and inaccurate census counts are proportionately disadvantaged. Did you know that children under the age of 5 are at the greatest risk of being uncounted? That means for ten years those uncounted children will not be considered for any programs and are virtually invisible. There are almost 30 million people in or near the poverty line in these hard-to-count census tracts. This leaves communities without representation for another decade or more and creates new vulnerabilities that increase the likelihood of generational poverty.

A lot has happened since our last census, including electing our first African American President. However, more recent history includes a significant immigration crisis; the #MeToo social justice movement taking flight; national nightmares of a multitude of mass shootings; homelessness at an all-time high; rising housing cost; high underemployment; racial discrimination rearing its ugly head; California wildfires taking lives and damaging property; and the war on poverty still without a solution.

From slavery to civil rights to the women’s movement to immigration, the census plays a significant role in dealing with issues that affect all of us. The data collected affects our ability to ensure equity and equal representation and access to necessary government, private sector, and other pertinent resources for the people who need it most, including across racial and ethnic lines.

During the holidays, we often think about giving back and helping others. I would like to challenge you to think about how we can count those in our communities, not just for the Census, but really count individuals as human beings who need support, hope, and our investment. We need to look no further than our community to find families in need of help.
Persons who historically require assistance from organizations like the Community Action Partnership of Orange County (CAP OC) include homeless persons, women with children, persons with a disability, the unemployed, people experiencing an illness, those experiencing the separation of a relationship, seniors on fixed incomes, and the working poor.

In our current environment, we know that employment is up, and that unemployment is at a near-record low. What is not as evident in these counts is that many of these jobs are part-time and unbeneftited, which means underemployment is high. Even many full-time jobs are in our fast-growing service industry that often employs people in positions that do not pay a living wage.

I saw a bumper sticker that read "Fight Poverty. Get a Job." That simple message fails to recognize that many jobs in our job market pay wages that guarantee that an employee will live in poverty.

Another timely issue is the assault on some of our public assistance programs. The current federal administration has, for example, introduced four proposals that, if enacted, could result in approximately 100,000 Orange County residents being removed from the CalFresh (aka Food Stamp) Program, and more than double that number in areas like Los Angeles. This could represent the loss of over $250 million of food for vulnerable residents annually. This is why the census is critical.

These trends in our business sector and government policies place an additional responsibility on local non-profit organizations to respond to the needs of families living in poverty. Our business is the business of transforming lives. Community Action Partnerships across the nation are gathering the resources needed to provide vulnerable families. You can help us provide Hope for the Holidays when you invest in our year end efforts to support our strategies and approach to eradicating poverty. We are pleased to offer you meaningful opportunities to have a positive impact on the life of a less fortunate person through Adopt-A-Family, donating food, volunteering, and providing financial support. Please consider your gift of time, talent, and treasure at www.capoc.org. Together, we can impact people's lives and break the cycle of poverty.