Advocates for Children and Youth improves the lives and experiences of Maryland's children and youth by advancing policies and programs across multiple issue areas that tackle racial disparities and improve outcomes to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Testimony before the Senate Budget and Tax Committee

Maryland Department of Planning Budget Hearing
February 8, 2019

Over the coming year, the Department of Planning has a critical task ahead of it: to ensure that Maryland has a robust and accurate census count in 2020. We ask that the Budget and Tax Committee protects both the full $5 million allocated for the 2020 Census Grant Program and also the full $1.3 million allocated for MDP to oversee and implement census activities.

2020 Census Grant Program

A robust and accurate census is critical for Maryland's children and youth. Billions of dollars in federal funds that support the health and wellbeing of our children are determined by the census count. We commend the legislature for its foresight last year in establishing the 2020 Census Grant Program. Given the challenges at the national level, both in policy and funding, it is clear that the state, local jurisdictions, and nonprofit organizations must do more to ensure a complete count in 2020. The Panel has been working diligently and has displayed a deep understanding of the importance of, and challenges in, reaching hard to count populations. We trust this Committee understands the importance of protecting the $5 million allocated for this program.

Young Children

To ensure a full and accurate count, the Department of Planning must focus on reaching hard to count or traditionally under-counted populations. But we encourage the Department to focus specifically on the undercount of young children, who are historically the most undercounted group in the census by a significant margin.

Quoting from the Partnership for America's Children:
"The 2010 Census missed nearly one in ten children aged 0-4, or about 2 million children; the net young child undercount (after eliminating duplications) was nearly 5% or almost one million children. This age group had by far the worst undercount of any age group. This trend of missing young children has been growing over the last several Decennial Censuses even as our ability to count other age groups has improved."[1]

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[1] https://countallkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Partnership-For-Americas-Children-Comments-on-the-Census.pdf

The undercount of young children compounds the undercount of other populations, because the children that are missed are disproportionately children of color and children living in poverty. However, young children are missed for different reasons than other hard to count populations; for that reason, specific strategies and messaging must be deployed.

In four out of five cases young children were missed because they were not counted even when someone living in their household has completed the form. This often happens because children live in large households, or in complicated living arrangements, and while some people in the household are counted the young children are missed. There is wide-spread confusion around who should be counted, which is compounded when language barriers exist, as those completing the form may not understand they should count all children in the household.

This means that the approach to count young children must be different than that usually used to count adults. Specifically, the Census Bureau focuses on areas where few people return the forms, and their messages are designed to persuade them to return the form. However, young children may live in areas with high response rates, and the messages to ensure they are counted need to make it clear that everyone, particularly young children, must be counted.

We request that this committee protects the full $1.3 million needed for census activities and works with the Department to ensure that some of funding is spent specifically on messages and strategies that will address the young child undercount.