





TO: Cultural Education Committee

FROM: Mark Schaming 

SUBJECT: Libraries and the 2020 Census

DATE: August 29, 2019

AUTHORIZATION(S): 

SUMMARY

Issue for Discussion

New York State Library staff will discuss how public libraries will play a critical role in the 2020 census.

Reason(s) for Consideration

For information.

Background Information

In 2020, the United States will hold its first digital census. The Constitution mandates that every ten years the U.S. government must count every household in the country. The demographic and economic data collected is then used to decide \$700-\$900 billion in federal funding for federal and state programs and to redraw electoral districts at the federal and state levels.

The Census Bureau's plan to ask 80 percent of households to complete the 2020 survey over the internet raises concerns for digital equity advocates. Nearly 35 percent of U.S. adults still do not have internet at home¹, and the demographics of the digital divide— 53 percent of Latino and 43 percent of Black adults, more than half those earning under median income, 42 percent of rural residents, and half of elders age 65+² — correlate strongly with the profiles of the hardest to count New Yorkers. Lack of internet access or digital literacy raises the bar for participation in the Census for these households and adds to the risk of an undercount, especially for communities of color

¹ <https://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

² <https://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

and rural populations. There is also concern that an unfamiliar digital process may alienate populations that already tend to mistrust government or fear surveillance.

Libraries in New York understand that they will be a key determining factor in creating the most accurate count possible in 2020. Libraries are already a critical site for internet access and support for digitally marginal populations and hold the trust of their communities. Furthermore, a 2019 study by the CUNY mapping team³ found that nearly 99 percent of New York State's Hard to Count households in New York State live within one mile of a public library.

³ https://www.nyla.org/max/userfiles/Advocacy/Census_-_Libraries_Count_-_12.11.18.pdf