**Submit the Survey, Maybe Save a Life: Science Needs Census Data to Fight Epidemics**

Census data is critical for public health in America – especially for fighting epidemics and pandemics, such as the one we are in right now.

As the President declares states as disaster areas from the disease, the amount of aid the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) sends depends on the losses per person in the regions affected. “Per person” can only be calculated correctly if the people in that area were counted in the last census. Damages per person can also determine the rate at which FEMA matches its dollars to other sources of funds. Millions of dollars can be at stake in those calculations.

Just as important, census information can determine where health care resources are sent to fight an epidemic. For instance, this novel coronavirus (COVID-19) often affects older persons more severely than younger. So it makes sense to put more disease-fighting supplies and medical teams in places that have higher numbers of senior citizens. How do we know where those places are? Census data. People who don’t fill out the forms could be unwittingly enabling help to go to the wrong places.

These are examples of the power of census data, in addition to the billions of dollars in continuing public health spending that are distributed according to population – in other words, according to census counts. Dr. Andrew Reamer, a research professor at the George Washington Institute of Public Policy, keeps a list of those programs, and it is a long one. It includes obvious programs for healthy communities, school breakfasts, rural health care, and research. The list also includes less obvious programs to promote public health, such as those aimed at reducing the dangers of lead paint in homes, improving wastewater treatment, cleaning up water pollution, and managing hazardous waste.

Reamer says the current coronavirus pandemic provides a dramatic example of how our basic understanding of infectious diseases also depends on the census. The scientists who are frantically trying to understand the spread of the coronavirus are keeping track of who and where every case occurs. To make sense of that information they have to know the rate of infection – that is, how many cases of COVID-19 per 1,000 people living in an area. How do they know how many people live an area? Census counts. “To respond to infectious diseases it is critically important to have accurate census data,” said Reamer. “Without it we are flying blind.”

Fighting the coronavirus is going on at the same time as the 2020 Census. When people fill out their 2020 Census forms, they are providing information that will help the country fight health crises for the next ten years. As Reamer states starkly, “If you don’t care whether a lot more people die, don’t fill out the census.”

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