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# Census Bureau kicks off once-a-decade head count



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WASHINGTON – The Census Bureau kicks off its \$300 million campaign Monday to prod, coax and cajole the nation's more than 300 million residents to fill out their once-a-decade census forms.

The bureau will mail out the 10-question forms to about 120 million households in March.

On Monday, Census Director Robert Groves starts the nationwide campaign with an event in New York City where he is scheduled to unveil a 46-foot trailer called "Mail It Back." In all, 13 vehicles are to be present at about 800 events around the country, from small community happenings to the Super Bowl and the NCAA Final Four.

"The whole purpose is to reach out to people at local events," Groves said.

Residents can expect to receive letters in early March notifying them that census forms will arrive between March 15-17. Residents who don't respond will get a follow-up postcard. Those who still don't respond can expect a visit from a census taker by early May.

In 2000, about 67 percent of households mailed back their forms, ending a three decade decline in the response rate. Follow-up visits are expensive. For every percentage point decrease in the response rate, the Census Bureau says it costs an additional \$85 million to find and count those people.

The Constitution requires the head count every 10 years to draw congressional districts and to dole out Electoral College votes to the states. Congress uses the count to distribute more than \$400 billion each year in federal aid to state, local and tribal governments.

Census data is used by government agencies and private companies alike, to locate pools of skilled workers, determine where schools and hospitals should be placed and to trace victims of natural disasters. In the Gulf Coast region, this year's census will provide the most accurate measure to date of how Hurricanes Katrina and Rita affected population trends.

"There's political power involved because of the Constitution," Groves said. "There's money involved as well."

The 10-question form is one of the shortest in the history of the census. Residents will be asked the number of people living in each household as well as their age, race and whether they own their home or rent. Other questions — on income, education levels and other characteristics — are addressed in the annual American Community Survey, which has been phased in over much of the past decade.

The Census Bureau faces special challenges locating residents because of the high number of foreclosures, as well as immigrants wary of government workers amid a crackdown on illegal immigration. Census officials emphasize that responses are confidential by law, meaning they cannot be shared with other federal agencies or law enforcement. Under the Constitution, the government is required to count everyone, regardless of their

immigration or citizenship status.

Advocates have urged the Commerce Department, which oversees the Census Bureau, to improve outreach to minority communities, which are typically undercounted.

This year, about 13 million forms in both English and Spanish will be sent to areas with high concentrations of people who speak Spanish. Residents can also request forms in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Russian.

"I don't think you can ever do enough," Groves said. "What we are doing, I think, is something to be proud of."

In 2000, the Census Bureau noted for the first time an overcount of 1.3 million people, mostly from duplicate counts of more affluent whites with multiple homes. About 4.5 million people were ultimately missed, mostly blacks and Hispanics.