

Why Census matters to Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders

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Body

I am proud to be Asian American; I am proud to be Chinese American. I am proud to be the daughter of immigrants who came to the United States over 50 years ago. I have seen and I know what it feels like to be dismissed, ignored, looked past or misunderstood. In my life's work, including now as the secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services, I have tried to help amplify voices of the marginalized.

Too often, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders — individuals with a rich heritage from dozens of different countries and cultures — are lumped into one monolithic entity. This diminishes our diversity, our unique perspectives and our varied policy priorities. There is a crucial way, however, for members of the AAPI community to combat discrimination and ensure their indispensable contributions are recognized: fill out the 2020 Census. Unfortunately, many people of AAPI descent may have internalized "otherness" and have become less inclined to participate in crucial civic activities. Only 55% of Asian Americans said they were "extremely" or "very" likely to fill out the Census, compared to 64% of Blacks, 65% of the Latinx population and 69% of whites, according to a study referenced by AAPI Data. The Census is vital for everyone in Illinois, especially members of the AAPI community. The Asian American population in the U.S. has increased by 72% since 2000 and by 24% in Illinois since 2010, yet we are still overlooked. For instance, clinical research efforts focused on Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations have made up only 0.17% of the National Institutes of Health budget since 1992. An accurate Census count would give these populations more visibility — and likely proportional health resources. Nearly a third of Asian immigrants arrived in the United States in the last 10 years and, as a result, they have little or no prior experience with the Census. This may be one reason that 41% of Asians incorrectly believe their Census answers "will be used against them." This is untrue, as the Census can only be used for statistical purposes and will not be shared with any other federal agency. Based on recent figures, the state receives about \$34 billion based on the decennial census. Those funds have been used to improve our roads, schools, hospitals and other important services. Every person who doesn't fill out the Census denies the state almost \$2,000 every year over 10 years. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn, it is more critical than ever that Illinois receives the federal resources our state deserves. Illinois has already gotten some bad news — the state is likely to lose one congressional seat due to population loss. That means one less voice speaking out and fighting for critical services on our behalf. More Census responses mean more representation in Congress to advocate for Illinois residents. Given the recent arrival of many Asian immigrants, language issues are a perceived barrier. However, Census responses can be provided in languages that include Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, Urdu and Vietnamese, among 59 total languages. Finally, many may also mistakenly believe they must be an American citizen to answer the Census. Let me be clear: if you live here, you count. Period. Ultimately, a feeling of societal isolation may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But Illinoisans, including Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, are only hurting themselves by not participating in the Census. If we want to be better recognized, we have to be counted and fill it

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out. In the end, we are not monolithic. We are Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese and many other proud ethnicities. And we count. Let's make sure of that by participating in the 2020 Census. Please visit my2020census.gov to fill it out today. * Grace Hou is secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services.

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