Opinion: Don’t let California’s children be undercounted in 2020

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In less than two years, the 2020 Census will be underway and California’s children are at high risk of being undercounted again, especially our most vulnerable children. The 2020 Census will have a tremendous impact on federal funding that states and localities receive for the next decade. And that means our kids are in jeopardy of being shortchanged on funding for programs that help them thrive.

An estimated 1 million children were not counted in the 2010 Census, with young Latino and black children having the highest net undercount. Children under 5 are undercounted at a higher rate than any other age group. In fact, the undercount of young children has...
worsened since 1980. And California has a much larger population of young children than any other state. More than 1.5 million infants and toddlers live in California families, with 62 percent of them born into low-income households likely to rely on crucial support services that receive federal funding determined by the census.

Many young children face complex living arrangements, including transitional and temporary housing, foster care, and mixed-status immigrant households. Parents may face linguistic barriers or be unaware that they should list their young children as household residents on the questionnaire. According to the 2018 Kids Count Data Book by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 30 percent of California children under the age of 5 live in hard-to-count census tracts. That’s 700,000 California children at risk of undercounting.

The Kids Count Data Book ranks California 36th nationally in terms of kid’s well-being, which is unacceptably low considering we are the fifth largest economy in the world. An undercount would cause California’s ranking to drop. At stake in our state is more than $76 billion for federally funded programs like Medicaid, Head Start, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, Title I education funding, and special education grants.

Myriad factors stand in the way of an accurate census count, from the lack of a leader at the Census Bureau, to a new online survey, to the potential inclusion of a citizenship question that even the bureau’s chief scientist warned would produce an undercount and cost taxpayers millions of dollars in unnecessary implementation costs.

In California, more than 4.3 million children live in immigrant families, and in some regions like San Jose, 66 percent have at least one immigrant parent. With immigrants facing heightened fears of scrutiny and family separation, the citizenship question may deter some already hard-to-count households from participating.

California’s young kids needs to be a priority now and in the years to come. That’s why all Californians need to step up to make sure our kids aren’t shortchanged by an inaccurate census count. State, local, and grassroots leaders must focus on reaching parents in every community to inform them about the importance of completing the census. Childcare and preschool providers, public schools, libraries and local businesses can promote and offer incentives for families to fill out the census online. Most importantly, the government must address privacy and cybersecurity concerns and affirm its commitment to protecting respondents’ data.

When implemented as intended, the census is a tool for ensuring democracy, reducing disparities, and expanding opportunities for the next generation. If we truly believe every child counts, we must make sure we count every child.

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