

Why the 2030 Census is Critical for Native Communities, Tribal Nations and Native-led Organizations

An accurate count of Native Peoples is a federal obligation. Tribal Nations are self-determining rights-holders with a distinct political status. The census is one of the systems through which the federal trust responsibility is carried out, and that system is failing. The Census Bureau has canceled Tribal test sites for the second consecutive decade, restricted travel for its Tribal relations specialists, and allowed the survey infrastructure that once tracked Native public opinion to disappear. These facts must be elevated to the public consciousness.

The undercount is persistent and expensive. The Bureau's own 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey found American Indians and Alaska Natives living on reservations were undercounted by an estimated 5.64 percent, the highest of any group measured. Census data drives allocation for health care, housing, education, transportation, and emergency response. Every undercounted person is a decade of lost resources for a Tribal Nation or an urban Native community, compounded across programs.

The data itself is now at risk. A June 2026 Department of Commerce directive restricts the disclosure avoidance methods the Bureau has relied on for decades, forcing a fallback to coarsening and suppression of published data. Small-area, detailed demographic data, the data Native communities depend on to be counted and resourced, is the most exposed. A known structural limitation compounds this: Bureau data does not map cleanly onto Tribal lands that cross state, county, and national lines.

The legal landscape raises the stakes. After *Callais v. Louisiana* gutted Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act in April 2026, proving discrimination now requires evidence of intent. Litigation, redistricting advocacy, and consultation all depend on credible, granular data about Native populations. Census data is the evidentiary foundation for nearly every other fight.