



Florida TaxWatch

COMMENTARY

A KEY TO OVERCOMING DISASTERS: COMPLETE CENSUS DATA REINFORCES RESILIENCY

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FLORIDA BEACHES ARE A TREASURE TO THE STATE, AND AS SUCH, MANY RESIDENTS STRIVE TO REMAIN IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE SHORELINE. Statewide, 64.2 percent of employment and 79.2 percent of businesses are found within Florida's 35 coastal counties.¹ Unfortunately, the luring lifestyle of beaches comes at a cost; the homes and livelihoods of most Floridians are tied to areas susceptible to hurricane havoc.

At the end of September, nine counties were struck by the most recent hurricane to hit Florida. As Hurricane Ian—a Category 4 hurricane—crept toward land, Floridians across the state took necessary precautions in response to the changing path of the storm. After Hurricane Ian made landfall, Floridians worked together to evaluate the damage and support impacted residents.

Many homes were left uninhabitable, leaving residents desperate to secure the means for repairs or a new place to live. The week following the storm, 1,700 Floridians remained in emergency shelters and countless others remained with family and friends. Floridians already face a shortage of low-income and middle-class housing, exacerbating the challenge of finding new shelter.²

Many businesses were rendered inoperable, faced with property damage, disrupted transportation networks, loss of electricity, and displaced employees. Currently, local businesses are encouraged to complete a Business Damage Assessment Survey, which will provide greater insight as to the needs for an economic recovery.³ Many

businesses will need assistance before they are able to regain normal operations, as well as the means to survive until normal operations resume.

The loss of business activity will impact the economy. A preliminary estimate projects that Florida will lose about \$62 billion in total expenditures and \$27 billion in gross product. The loss of business activity from areas damaged by Hurricane Ian, as well as areas affected by disrupted trade, will hurt the national economy. The national economy is projected to lose about \$84 billion in total expenditures and \$37 billion in gross product.⁴

Throughout Hurricane Ian's wreckage, a very important tool has been vital to planning, response, and recovery efforts: census data. As the best available population data, census data are crucial during every step of addressing disaster, from forming emergency management plans to securing necessary funds for recovery. As Floridians consider the impacts of Hurricane Ian and how to better prepare for future disasters, census data deserve significant attention.

PLANNING

"The Census Bureau produces timely local data that are critical to emergency planning, preparedness, and recovery efforts for all types of emergencies." -U.S. Census Bureau⁵

Population data equip leaders to properly account for all residents within emergency management plans. The data from the U.S. Census Bureau not only tells leaders how many people should be included but also who they are.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "A Look at Businesses in Coastline Counties During Hurricane Season," July 2020.

² The Washington Post, "Florida faced a housing crisis. Ian has made it worse."

³ If your business was damaged, visit <https://floridadisaster.biz/BusinessDamageAssessments>

⁴ The Perryman Group, "Economic Costs of Hurricane Ian Include an Estimated \$36.7 Billion Net Loss in US Output," September 2022.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "From COVID-10 to Hurricanes, Census Surveys Help Areas Prepare and Recover," April 2020.

The decennial census count is the backbone of the American Community Survey (ACS) estimates, which share the economic, demographic, and social characteristics of residents. The ACS estimates can share narrow but important details about communities, such as how many people may struggle to afford transportation during an evacuation or how many people lack internet access as a means of tracking the storm. This information is invaluable to decision-makers, helping them create nuanced, thorough plans.

RESPONSE

The U.S. Census Bureau prioritizes making its population data accessible and comprehensible by providing a tool that includes the context of the emergency. The award-winning tool *OnTheMap* for Emergency Management brings together pertinent information from sources such as the National Weather Service's National Hurricane Center (NHC), FEMA, and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). This means data users are seeing the full picture, digesting the census data as it specifically relates to the current disaster.⁶

After the disaster hits, census data maintain its value by identifying the areas of greatest vulnerability. This helps leaders determine where to start their rescue missions as well as what structures can be easily adapted into makeshift shelters or response centers. Some structures host critical functions—such as hospitals—so census data are used to identify where quick action is needed to protect critical needs from disruption.⁷

RECOVERY

An early estimate projects that the storm surge and winds caused by Hurricane Ian produced \$28 billion to \$47 billion of loss for residential and commercial properties. If the greater side of the range is accurate, Ian will be the 8th costliest hurricane in the history of the United States. As Floridians try to build back their communities following the wreckage of Hurricane Ian, census-derived federal funding provides crucial support.⁸

One source of census-derived funding is the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The agency offers Disaster Community Development Block Grants (D-CDBG), which helps aid disaster recovery by providing funds for housing and economic development. The allocation of these grants can accumulate to billions of dollars.⁹

The aftermath of hurricanes also places pressure upon federal assistance programs that were already utilized. For example, in the months following Hurricane Katrina, the Mississippi counties hit by the hurricane saw the percent of households with food stamps rise from 10.9 percent to 21.7 percent.¹⁰ The allocations for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the program that provides food stamps, are influenced by the census count.

The affected regions will witness effects for years, and to assess the damage and track progress, stakeholders will rely upon census data. The data share many essential indicators that tend to waver after a disaster, such as the number of people using federal assistance, changes in homeownership, estimated poverty levels, commute times to work, and changes in employment. This data will also help emergency planners understand vulnerabilities to consider before the next disaster approaches.

FLORIDA'S MISSED OPPORTUNITY: A COMPLETE CENSUS COUNT SUPPORTS RESILIENCE

Census data is an important tool for maintaining resilience in the face of disaster. From informing evacuations to securing federal funds, the value of complete and accurate census data is irrefutable. So what are the consequences when a state's census data is incomplete?

In 2020, Florida was one of only six states with a statistically significant undercount. States with a statistically significant undercount have a completely negative percent net coverage error, indicating that even if the estimation is not accurate, the state likely experienced an undercount regardless. In Florida, an estimated 750,000 residents were left uncounted.¹¹

Florida's undercount limits data and resources, restraining its full potential to overcome disasters. A census undercount means emergency plans are based upon population counts smaller than reality, creating a blind spot for evacuation strategies, recovery efforts, and attempts to track the changing needs of the community. Federal spending is allocated without consideration for the uncounted individuals, leaving money on the table that should be used to help Floridians.

While disaster funding is a present concern, receiving a fair share of yearly federal funding allocations is especially important to areas in dire need of resources. Due to a decennial census undercount, Floridians could

6 U.S. Census Bureau, "Center for Economic Studies Research Data Centers Research Report: 2013," May 2014.

7 U.S. Census Bureau, "Key Player in Disaster Response: The U.S. Census Bureau," October 2019.

8 CoreLogic, "CoreLogic: Estimated Losses from Hurricane Ian Wind, Storm Surge are Between \$28 Billion and \$47 Billion in Costliest Florida Storm Since Hurricane Andrew," September 29, 2022.

9 U.S. Census Bureau, "Uses of Census Bureau Data in Federal Funds Distribution," September 2017.

10 Economics and Statistics Administration (ESA), "The Gulf Coast: Economic Impact & Recovery One Year after the Hurricanes," U.S. Department of Commerce, October 2006.

11 Florida TaxWatch, "Looking Back at Census 2020: What Florida's Business and Community Leaders Need to Know," July 2022.

lose up to \$2.1 billion per year of census-derived federal funding, money that could have been used to help strained counties.¹² As they try to revitalize their homes and reorient their economy, Floridians lack a penny to spare.

While the U.S. Census Bureau did not release data regarding the estimated undercount for counties, it did publish counties' self-response rates, the percentage of people who completed their surveys without prompting. Higher self-response rates are correlated with more complete census data. Reviewing the counties struck by Hurricane Ian, about a third or more did not respond to their census survey on their own accord (Table 1), threatening the accuracy of crucial data.

TABLE 1. AS FLORIDA COUNTIES OVERCOME HURRICANE IAN, CENSUS UNDERCOUNTS THREATEN VALUABLE DATA AND FUNDING

COUNTY	SELF-RESPONSE	HOUSEHOLD INTERVIEW	PROXY	ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS	IMPUTATION
CHARLOTTE	64.5%	52.4%	26.5%	21.6%	0.5%
COLLIER	56.5%	58.8%	25.9%	15.1%	0.6%
DESOTO	47.1%	62.2%	21.2%	15.7%	0.9%
HARDEE	45.1%	60.6%	20.9%	17.1%	0.4%
HILLSBOROUGH	64.3%	51.8%	28.6%	19.6%	0.8%
LEE	60.7%	53.9%	27.3%	18.8%	0.5%
MANATEE	59.9%	52.3%	30.3%	17.1%	1.1%
PINELLAS	66.4%	44.7%	31.2%	24.0%	0.9%
SARASOTA	66.1%	46.1%	30.6%	23.2%	0.7%

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2020 CENSUS OPERATIONAL QUALITY METRICS FOR COUNTIES AND TRACTS

Self-response rates correlate with more complete census data because the remaining methods for data collection are less reliable. When census enumerators knock on residents' doors, they are impeded by incorrect addresses and residents who are unwilling to complete household interviews. When knocking fails, the U.S. Census Bureau uses proxies (interviews with neighbors) or administrative records to attempt filling the gaps, which can fail to capture recent changes to households (i.e., residents who moved or newborn babies) or untraditional living arrangements (i.e., extended family or friends living in household). When all other methods are exhausted, the U.S. Census Bureau uses count imputation, a statistical guess based upon the characteristics of neighbors, to finalize the data collection.

LOOKING AHEAD

Florida will always be at the mercy of hurricanes. As Florida's climate continues to change, the threat of more frequent and intense coastal storms will increase. To secure the best information for planning and rescues, as well as to ensure the state has abundant funding to rebuild, residents should be encouraged to complete their census surveys. Completing a census survey is a civic duty, and as Floridians face inevitable storms like Hurricane Ian, they deserve accurate and complete data to bolster optimal outcomes.

¹² Florida TaxWatch, "Looking Back at Census 2020: What Florida's Business and Community Leaders Need to Know," July 2022.



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