

Building a con-Census in AAPI communities

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With [nearly 30%](#) of Fresno's population living in poverty, it's crucial for families to complete the 10-minute survey that determines how \$675 billion of federal funding will be distributed to their communities each year for the next 10 years.

It's the easiest it's ever been to complete the Census, yet Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)—specifically Southeast Asian—communities continue to face the complexities of not being counted.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are several community segments in Fresno County that are considered "[hard to count](#)," and many of them are immigrant or refugee families of color located south of Shaw who are in need of governmental resources and support.

Hard-to-count populations are considered to be communities that have a response rate of less than [75 percent](#) based on difficulties in four categories of hard to: locate, contact, persuade, or interview.

The main issues faced by immigrant and refugee families of color often fit into the categories of hard to persuade and interview.

Regarding the hard-to-persuade communities, Tammy Vang, Hmong Innovating Politics (HIP) Fresno Team Lead, explains the perspective of governmental dissidents resisting participation.

"The number one issue community members are unwilling to participate in the Census is due to confidentiality and the fear of their personal information being leaked to the public," Vang said. "The second biggest concern is citizenship; with the ongoing deportations, many folxs don't want to fill out the Census in the case it may be given to ICE."

Although the information submitted to the Census Bureau is protected under the [U.S. Code Title 13](#) and states that the responses cannot be legally used against the respondents by any government department, agency, or court, taking the necessary precautions and addressing these myths are crucial when interacting with immigrant and refugee households.

Even after overcoming the barrier of persuading, another wall stands between hard-to-count Southeast Asian community members and the Census: the process of interview.

While the U.S. does not have an official language, English is notably the most established language in this country.

As a result, the Census paper applications are mass distributed in English, and the only Southeast Asian languages offered on the [online application](#) are Vietnamese and Tagalog.

Jennifer Xiong, HIP Central Valley Civic Engagement Organizer, says rampant misinformation or lack thereof is a direct result of the insufficient proper in-language support services.

"There's an absence of telephonic support lines for communities that speak indigenous languages like Mixteco, Punjabi, and other Southeast Asian languages such as Hmong, Laotian, and Thai," Xiong said. "These services need to be expanded to help establish strategies and move communities to the most important step of actually completing the Census to ensure a complete count of everyone in their household."

Jennifer Vang, Fresno State economics major, agrees that it is essential to provide services like these for there to be proper representation and distribution of resources for undermined communities in Fresno who are in dire need of these capital assets.

"Minority groups tend to be overlooked or forgotten, which is problematic when we are trying to be an inclusive system," Jennifer said. "There are lots of status-quo rules that we need to break if we want to improve our society."

Filling out the Census is the first step to improving the public's resources, and Xiong highlights the importance of how the federal funding's distribution directly influences communities through public services and imperative demands of growing populations.

"Most community members are unaware that federal funding shapes and impacts the free school lunches that their loved ones receive at public schools, financial aid for students pursuing higher education, and city decisions to build more schools and hospitals," Xiong said.

As a testimonial, Xiong says the deprivation of knowledge and information from language barriers must be addressed in the form of access in order to mobilize underrepresented communities to voice their needs and concerns.

Dr. Jenny Banh, Fresno State assistant professor and Asian American studies program coordinator, agrees with Xiong.

"One can see how the Southeast Asian Americans are disadvantaged in comparison to other groups," Dr. Banh said. "They need many resources that have a huge impact on their

communities including but not limited to increased funding for pre-K programs like Head Start, second language classes, and AVID.”

Born and raised in Fresno county, Vang attests to the necessities of capital in AAPI groups and says being undercounted has resulted in the prevention of an economic boom for these populations.

"Within our community, we have disenfranchised and underserved community members who do not have the same access as other folxs when it comes to government resources and services," Vang said. "This is because of the language barriers and cultural differences."

Vang provides an example of a language barrier: the phrase for Census in Hmong is “daim ntawv suav neeg,” which directly translates back to English as “the paper that counts people.”

Due to the strain of language barriers, English-speaking first-generation students like Hnub Lee, Fresno State Asian American studies minor, have taken the lead in their families in the responsibility of filling out the Census for their households and recognize the significance of being counted.

As Lee completed the Census for the very first time, she shared it was a surprisingly simple process that did not ask for personal information.

"I did it for my family because it is important to be counted so that the government knows how many people need resources," Lee said. "For instance, it will help revamp school systems and services in areas of low-income families like mine."

Dr. Banh says that obstacles like these that are not discussed outside of community familiarities are not an individual story but more of structural factors that need to be addressed.

"I see Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian American females, in particular, who are moving mountains as trailblazers," Dr. Banh said. "They are their own mentors. I see them in class everyday, and they inspire me a lot, but they still need to be financially supported."

Since districts are shaped and impacted by the participation in the Census, community organizers like Xiong and Vang are working relentlessly to empower the AAPI population to be counted and receive proper distribution of federal funding in the attempts to narrow the gaps between disparities.

Acknowledging her privilege of accessibility to the vast information and significance of the Census, Xiong wants to be able to provide support beyond herself and her family.

"I feel an innate duty to advocate for my communities because I know that the victories have more meaning when it is considered for all people who are constantly marginalized and overlooked by our elected officials and political leaders," Xiong said. "I want to ensure their voices are heard, their needs are met, and that they thrive."

In the attempt to educate the Southeast Asian population about the services the Census is connected to, Xiong's outreach efforts have reached mainstream media platforms in the AAPI community.

She has been interviewed on a popular Hmong radio station, KBIF 900 AM, that has been serving the Hmong community with information for over 30 years.

With only one shot to record a strong segment for an older generation who has limited to no English proficiency, Xiong was determined to build a strong rapport and engaging experience with the listeners.

Immediately after the successful segment, Xiong received a call from an elderly Hmong uncle who had just finished listening to her on the radio. She translates her conversation from Hmong to English.

"I just listened to you talking about counting people in the U.S., and my family and I participated in getting counted back when we lived in Laos," the elderly Hmong uncle said. "I don't think I have ever completed the U.S. Census before, and I would like your help."

After receiving assistance in finishing the Census, the elderly Hmong uncle thanked Xiong for walking him through the process and praised young folks for doing important work in their communities.

"I was overwhelmed with joy and disbelief," Xiong said. "It's these small but powerful moments that will always be engraved in my heart and continue to humble me as we strengthen our efforts to advocate for and build leadership in our communities."

Lee says she appreciates outreach activists like Xiong and Vang because they provide an essential service to assist communities who are not given the luxury of learning the English language.

"Filling out the Census is key in our oppressed communities when receiving adequate federal funding since it heavily impacts the futures of families like mine for better or for worse," Lee said. "Not to mention, the Census is really easy to do online, so I hope people do it."

Both Xiong and Vang also say the experience of completing the Census' brief and non-intrusive questions are extremely simple, quick, and easy and took less than 10 minutes for their households of six and ten.

"If you haven't completed the Census yet, you have until October 31 to do so," Xiong said. "Get counted!"

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