

## Did you return your census paperwork?

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HOUMA — It probably arrived at your home earlier this month, the once-a-decade survey that tallies the nation's population.

The list of questions seems unassuming but dictates the spending of about \$400 billion in federal aid annually, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Each person who returns the questionnaire brings in about \$1,300 per year to their community.

More than \$118 million in federal aid was funneled into Terrebonne Parish in 2008 for programs with budgets are driven by census-related statistics, according to the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Lafourche Parish got about \$120 million that year.

The strength of education, transportation and health programs and more are at stake.

The deadline to return the 2010 census form by mail is April 1. If you haven't completed it, expect a knock on your door in early May from a census worker who will quiz you in person.

“The numbers affect all aspects of the programs coming into your parish,” said Darrel Waire, Terrebonne Parish Housing and Human Services Director. “Pretty much any funding coming from the federal government, there is a tie-back to the numbers in the census.”

Louisiana has had a historically low participation in the census. In 2000, 72 percent of households in the country responded to mailed census forms, compared to only about 65 percent in the state.

Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes were higher than the state's average with 70 and 68 percent, respectively.

The Census Bureau aims to spur participation this year. Among the tactics used were \$2.5 million in ads that aired during the Super Bowl.

A law against failing to respond to the census carries a \$5,000 fine. It's rarely enforced.

The reasons some avoid filling out the form vary, but many who work with census data chalk it up to wariness of giving personal information to the federal government.

“They may be suspicious of providing information,” said Karen Paterson, the state demographer. Her officer distributes census data to parishes. “They may not trust who this person is who is coming to ask them questions.”

Census workers trust that educating the public can change that attitude.

“People do respond when they get beyond the fear of filling out the form and look at the true reason we do the census,” said Andrea Loyola, a Metairie-based spokeswoman for the agency.

The survey asks for your name, address, phone number, age, race, ethnicity, gender, living arrangements and home ownership. It's available in about 59 languages, including Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese.

A less-trumpeted reason to return the survey is that it gives businesses considering a move to a community a snapshot of the area, said Andrew Reamer, a Brookings Institution policy analyst. Demographic information could mean the difference between a shopping center being built here or the next parish over.

“It's really essential for the proper effective functioning of our economy,” Reamer said. “Without those numbers, the private sector would be flying blind.”

Most experts predict the state will lose a congressional district once the results of the 2010 census are reported early next year. Bill Blair, director of demographic service for the state Legislature, said census results have forced Louisiana to redraw its districts after at least two previous counts.

“This is in many ways a continuation of a story that has been going on for decades,” Blair said, “a very slow population growth in the state compared to the national average and other southern states. We just lag behind and, because of that, we continue to lose congressional districts.”

Though the districts are likely to change despite census participation, returning the survey is still important, said Ann Heath, who works for the Public Affairs Research Council for Louisiana.

“Even if we do lose a seat, it's still important for us to understand the make up of the state,” she said. “If you want your vote to count, answer your census so we get a good picture of where people live,”

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