

# How the U.S. Census Impacts the Vietnamese Community

By Anh Nguyen  
Ethnic Media Services

As states and cities prepare for the 2020 Census, all eyes are trained on the fourth-largest Asian ethnic group, Vietnamese Americans.

Despite Asian Americans being the fastest growing racial category, many experts [are concerned](#) (<https://tinyurl.com/AAPIdata>) that this year's first "digital" version of the U.S. census, a once-every-10-year event where everyone living in the United States gets counted, will miss a huge portion of Vietnamese and other Asian immigrants who live in low-income communities and have little English proficiency.

The drive for political representation and a fair share of tax spending via a complete headcount continues.

- **When was Vietnamese recognized as its own ethnic category in the U.S. census?**

The Vietnamese ethnic box appeared on the census for the first time [in 1980](#), just five years after the end of the Vietnam War, when an estimated 125,000 Vietnamese refugees resettled in America.

Compared to the 80 years it took to add the "Chinese" category in 1870 -- the first ever Asian ethnicity included in the census -- the U.S. Census Bureau has learned to more quickly identify new populations.

Still, only six ethnic Asian groups have their own box: Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese and Asian Indians. There is also a write-in box for "Other Asian" with instructions suggesting possible responses such as "Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc."

There also are three Asian Pacific Islander boxes: Native Hawaiian, Samoan and Chamorro, plus "Other Pacific Islander" above the write-in spot that suggests as possible responses: "Tongan, Fijian Marshallese, etc."

- **How much has the Vietnamese population grown in the last 40-plus years?**

According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, the United States admitted only 4,561 Vietnam-born persons between 1961 and 1970. The estimate grew

[three-fold \(https://tinyurl.com/VietnamtoUS\)](https://tinyurl.com/VietnamtoUS) in the early 1970s, but most had non-immigrant status.

After the Vietnam War ended in April 1975, people from the countries affected by U.S. intervention -- Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos -- resettled in America, an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia that increased in the following decades. By the 2010 census, the estimated number of Vietnamese Americans was 2.1 million.

However, the real number could be a lot bigger. Many Vietnamese households were, and still are, at risk for being undercounted in census data. This is especially likely for those living in immigrant and low-income communities [with limited English proficiency \(https://tinyurl.com/350languages\)](https://tinyurl.com/350languages).

**1. Do all Vietnamese come from the same ethnic group?**

No. Vietnam is a very diverse country with more than 54 ethnic minorities. Due to the geopolitical impact of the Vietnam War, ethnic Chinese, Khmer and Hmong in Vietnam also became refugees and immigrants in the U.S. In the census, respondents can check “Vietnamese” as their ethnicity and also check “Chinese,” for example. They may also write in “Khmer” or any other identity.

The U.S. Census Bureau’s job is to ensure that everyone is counted, [regardless of their race and ethnicity, immigration status or how long they have lived in the country \(https://tinyurl.com/censusHTC\)](https://tinyurl.com/censusHTC).

**1. How does the 2020 census affect Vietnamese political representation?**

Census data will be used to decide the number of U.S. House of Representatives each state has by redrawing congressional districts to equalize the number of people each one represents (currently about 750,000). When the data is misused, locally or nationally, to redraw districts to favor or exclude certain voters, that’s called gerrymandering. When a minority group is singled out in this way, it becomes racial discrimination.

Vietnamese have long been living in highly concentrated communities, making them an easy target for this practice when their census count is fewer than their actual numbers. Simply put, the more people who are counted in the census, the more representation they’ll get.

This is also the chance for populations that aren’t eligible to vote to assert their strength in numbers without fearing any government repercussions. Census data are confidential and protected by Congress to the extent that the data will be locked away for 72 years and will not be shared with law enforcement.

Stephanie Reid is executive director of Philly Counts, the complete count committee of Philadelphia, where there’s a significant Vietnamese population. She said that for every person who spends the approximately 10 minutes it takes to fill out the census questionnaire, the city

will get back [\\$21,000 in funding](https://tinyurl.com/PhillyCounts) over the course of 10 years (<https://tinyurl.com/PhillyCounts>). Those funds support many public programs, including Medicaid and Medicare, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), school lunches and housing vouchers.

Nationwide, estimates of federal funding based on census data range [as high as \\$1.5 trillion](https://tinyurl.com/SpendingViaCensus) annually (<https://tinyurl.com/SpendingViaCensus>).

Author Bio:



Anh Nguyen is a Philadelphia-based reporter covering immigration and the Vietnamese American community. She has previously worked for the Los Angeles Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer. Her most recent creative nonfiction is included in the companion book to the Apple original series, “Little America.”