The Census Undercount Limits Florida's Political Influence

July 2025

Florida TaxWatch

Census Institute

Ensuring a Complete Census Count In 2030

Introduction

In the days of American colonialism, colonialist nations saw the census as a means to maintaining power. England, France, and Denmark conducted census counts on their colonies in the Americas and Caribbeans to determine military needs and impose taxes. The countries did not conduct censuses of their own countries, however, because the noble class feared a census could threaten the existing social order.[1]

The Founding Fathers, meanwhile, saw the census as critical to protecting democracy. The United States was the first country to institute a regular national census for the purpose of reapportioning legislative seats to adjust to changing population size and distribution. The first census count was worn as a point of pride for the fledgling nation, "as a proof of that felicity in the situation of our Country, which favors so unexampled a rapidity in its growth."[2]

Today, the census continues to uphold the power structure of the United States. The population count is used to apportion legislative seats at a similar ratio of representatives to residents for every state…but what if the census count is wrong?

In 2020, Florida was one of six states with a statistically significant census undercount. Florida missed an estimated 750,000 residents, 3.48 percent of its population. These failed-to-count residents were not considered in apportionment calculations, costing Florida taxpayers the representation they deserve. Meanwhile, other states enjoyed census overcounts, potentially providing their residents with a greater share of representation. To uphold a fair democratic republic, every state should count its residents in the same way.

In this briefing, Florida TaxWatch uses the U.S. Census Bureau's Post-Enumeration Survey to calculate which states would have lost or gained a seat if populations were more accurately counted during the 2020 Census. Using the most recent presidential election as an example, the briefing explores the political ramifications of the census miscount.

Effects of the Census Miscount on Apportionment

The U.S. Constitution requires every state to hold at least one seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The remaining 385 seats are distributed among the 50 states through the "Method of Equal Proportions." Using this method, the U.S. Census Bureau is able to identify how many seats should be apportioned to each state to maintain a similar ratio of representatives to residents.

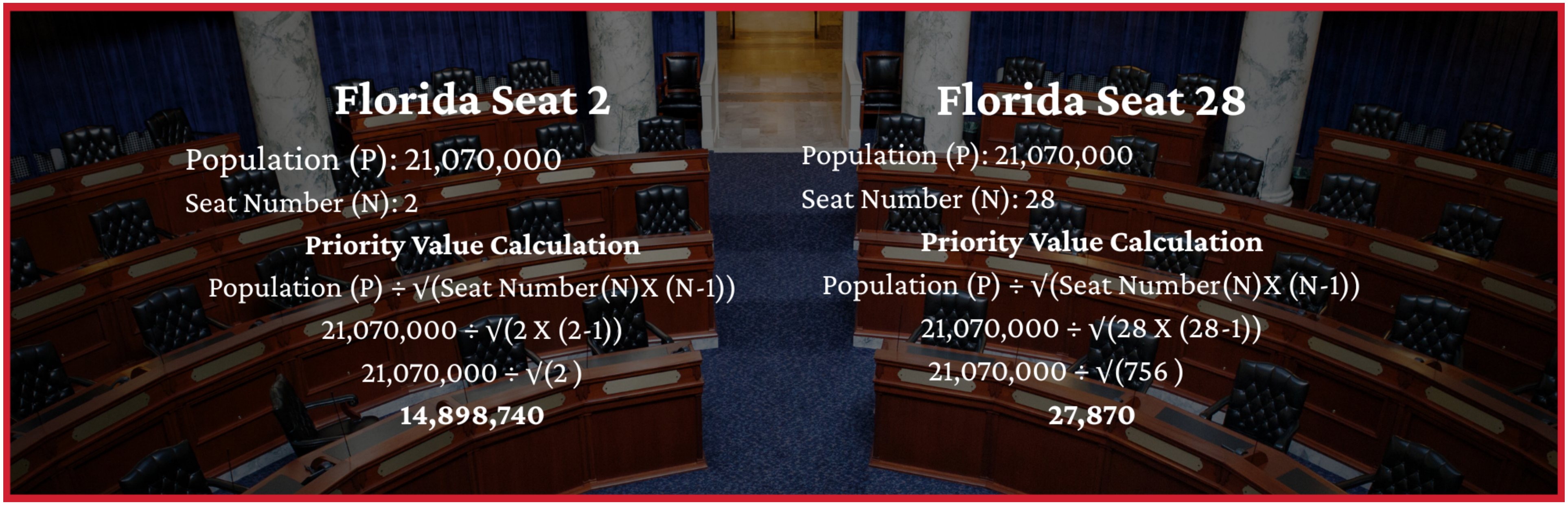
First, the U.S. Census Bureau calculates a "priority value." The priority value demonstrates a state's need for each seat number. The calculation is as follows:

$$\text{Priority Value (V)} = \text{Population (P)} \div \sqrt{(\text{Seat Number(N)X (N-1)})}$$

This calculation is conducted for every possible seat (N) that could be apportioned to a state (Figure 1). The denominator increases with each seat, resulting in lower priority values as the seat number grows. Out of an abundance of caution, the U.S. Census Bureau calculates priority values for seats two through 70 for every state.

1 Population Reference Bureau, "Milestones and Moments in Global Census History," retrieved from https://www.prb.org/resources/milestones-and-moments-in-global-census-history/#:~:text=1790%20Enumerators%20on%20horseback%20begin,counted%20at%20all%20until%201860., accessed on June 16, 2025.
2 Cynthia A. Kierner, "First United States Census, 1790," retrieved from https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/first-united-states-census-1790, accessed on June 16, 2025.

Figure 1.
Priority Values Decrease as the Ratio of Representatives to Residents Decrease



After the priority values are calculated, they are ranked from highest to lowest. Ultimately, the 385 seats with the highest priority values are apportioned to the states. In 2020, Florida received 28 seats during apportionment, meaning all 28 seats had a priority value within the top 385 values.

In accordance with the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Census Bureau uses each state's census count as the population variable during apportionment. After the census count is complete, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the Post-Enumeration Survey to determine the accuracy of the census. *Even if the U.S. Census Bureau finds inaccuracies, they cannot change the seats apportioned to each state.*

Using the net coverage error estimated in the Post-Enumeration Survey, Florida TaxWatch recalculated priority values to illustrate how apportionment would change if all state populations were accurately counted. Florida TaxWatch calculated priority values for seats two through 70 for every state, totaling to more than 3,000 priority values (see, Methodology).

After ranking the priority values and identifying the highest 385 values, Florida TaxWatch identified three seats that shifted to different states (Table 1). If the census were more accurate, Colorado, Minnesota, and Rhode Island would each lose one seat. Florida, Tennessee, and Texas would each gain one seat.

Table 1.
With a Complete Census Count, Florida Would Have Gained an Additional Seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

State	2020 Apportionment	Adjusted Apportionment
Alabama	7	7
Alaska	1	1
Arizona	9	9
Arkansas	4	4
California	52	52
Colorado	8	7
Connecticut	5	5
Delaware	1	1
Florida	28	29
Georgia	14	14
Hawaii	2	2
Idaho	2	2
Illinois	17	17
Indiana	9	9
Iowa	4	4
Kansas	4	4
Kentucky	6	6
Louisiana	6	6
Maine	2	2
Maryland	8	8
Massachusetts	9	9
Michigan	13	13
Minnesota	8	7
Mississippi	4	4
Missouri	8	8
Montana	2	2
Nebraska	3	3
Nevada	4	4
New Hampshire	2	2
New Jersey	12	12
New Mexico	3	3
New York	26	26
North Carolina	14	14
North Dakota	1	1
Ohio	15	15
Oklahoma	5	5
Oregon	6	6
Pennsylvania	17	17
Rhode Island	2	1
South Carolina	7	7
South Dakota	1	1
Tennessee	9	10
Texas	38	39
Utah	4	4
Vermont	1	1
Virginia	11	11
Washington	10	10
West Virginia	2	2
Wisconsin	8	8
Wyoming	1	1

Florida’s Missing Seat: Why Every Resident Counts

- **1 seat, 1 electoral vote lost.**

A full 2020 Census count would have raised Florida’s delegation from 28 to 29 U.S. House seats—boosting our Electoral College clout from 30 to 31 votes.

- **Representation shifted elsewhere.**

The undercount moved seats (and the political weight that comes with them) from Florida, Texas, and Tennessee to Colorado, Minnesota, and Rhode Island.

- **Real-world stakes.**

In the razor-thin 2024 election, those three redirected electoral votes were enough to swing the national outcome.

When Floridians aren’t counted, Florida’s voice in Congress and the White House gets quieter—and taxpayers pay the price.

Why it Matters

Electoral College

To win a presidential election, candidates race to 270 electoral votes. During the 2024 presidential election, the Republican candidate received 312 electoral votes (Figure 2). The final determinant of the race was the fall of the "blue wall." Three states that typically vote for a Democratic candidate—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—would have provided the Democratic candidate with the electoral college votes needed to win the election. These states, however, were flipped by the Republican candidate but only by a small margin, ranging from 0.9 to 2.1 percentage points. **If Florida had a complete census count, these states would not have held the power to choose the winning candidate.**

The number of electoral votes in each state is equivalent to the state's number of senators and representatives. The census count is used to apportion seats in the House of Representatives, thus impacting the number of electoral votes received by each state. **The 2020 Census miscount lost Florida—along with Tennessee and Texas—an additional seat in the House of Representatives.** Instead, these seats were apportioned to Colorado, Minnesota, and Rhode Island.

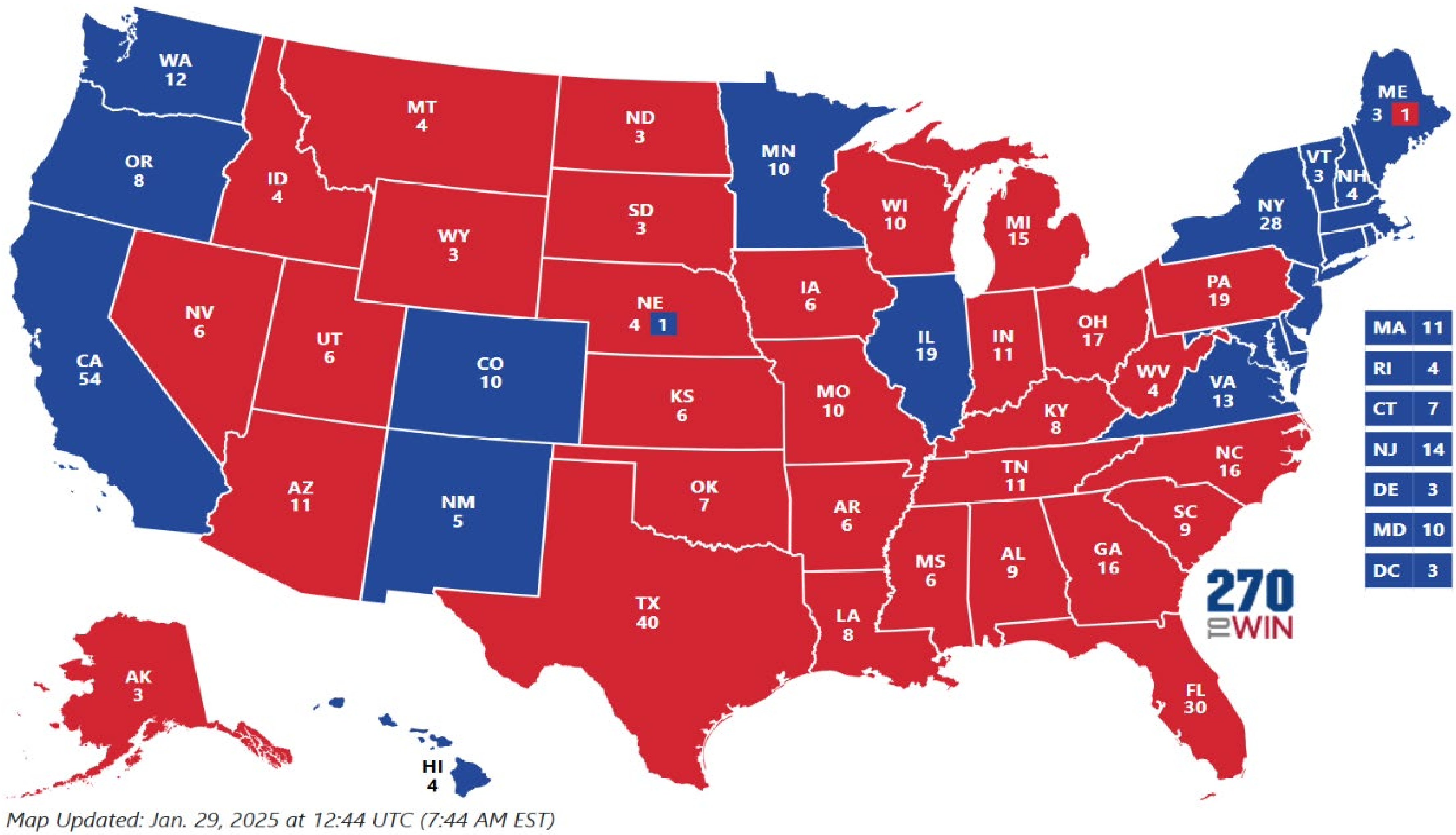
In the 2024 presidential election, a complete census count would have added three electoral votes to the Republican candidate—enough to sway an election red even if the blue wall prevailed for the Democratic candidate. This election is an example of how the census undercount could result in the loss of Florida's favored candidate. ***Regardless of which party wins the election, Florida taxpayers deserve to be fairly represented in federal elections.***

Congressional Votes

In the same way that Florida voices are lost in electoral votes, the missing legislative seat could affect congressional votes. This is especially true when legislators vote along party lines. In June 2025, the 119th Congress of the U.S. House of Representatives had 220 Republicans and 212 Democrats, which has resulted in close party-line votes. For example, in May 2025, the House of Representatives passed a budget reconciliation bill—commonly known as One Big Beautiful Bill Act—with a 215 to 214 vote.[3] Whether the new congressional district elected a Republican or Democratic representative, an extra vote could impart significant impacts in such a narrowly divided Congress.

3 One Big Beautiful Bill Act, H.R. 1, 119th Cong. (2025).

FIGURE 2.
DURING THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 312 ELECTORAL VOTES WERE CAST FOR THE REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE (RED STATES).



Source: 270 to Win, accessed July 2025.

Looking Ahead to 2030

Florida is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Even with a perfect census count, Florida's ratio of representatives to residents would again quickly grow out of proportion with other states midway through the decade. Florida taxpayers at least deserve a fair start. For the census to be truly fair, every state must count their residents in the same way. Data suggest hesitancy from immigrant communities to respond to the census survey is part of the reason for Florida's census undercount.[4] As the nation prepares for 2030, policymakers must develop a strategy to better count every person or effectively restrict illegal immigrants from participation.

To protect the voice of Florida taxpayers, business and community leaders should take actions that will prepare residents for full participation in the 2030 Census:

1) Stay up-to-date on census-related issues. The Florida TaxWatch Census Institute provides a resource hub and engagement opportunities to help you stay current on census related issues and connect with organizations that can help your business promote a complete census count.

2) Act as a trusted messenger. Encourage friends, families, colleagues, employees, or customers to spread awareness about the importance of decennial censuses. All information is private and cannot be seen by other government agencies.

3) Lend your voice. Use your voice to encourage involvement by businesses and government officials. Awareness campaigns and increased governmental funding for grassroot efforts bring the state closer to a complete census count. Consider amplifying your voice by joining or creating a Complete Count Committee.[5]

4) Invest in your community. Whether directly or through philanthropic organizations, invest in grassroots efforts that help residents complete their census surveys. Even with 2030 a few years away, an early investment in grassroots efforts allows time to organize and develop effective plans to support a complete census count.

Connect with Florida TaxWatch

As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog for more than forty years, Florida TaxWatch works to improve the productivity and accountability of Florida government. Its research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of fiscal and economic policies and practices on residents and businesses. To learn more about the Florida TaxWatch Census Institute, please visit: https://floridataxwatch.org/Programs/Census-Institute.

4 U.S. Census Bureau, Real-Time 2020 Administrative Record Census Simulation

5 As described by the U.S. Census Bureau, "Complete Count Committees (CCC) are volunteer committees established by tribal, state, and local governments and community leaders or organizations to increase awareness and motivate residents to respond to the [2030] Census." See, U.S. Census Bureau, "2020 Census Complete Count Committee Guide."

Methodology

Data Sources

United States Census Bureau, *2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Estimation Report*, June 2022.

United States Census Bureau, "How Apportionment is Calculated," retrieved from https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/04/how-apportionment-is-calculated.html, accessed on June 17, 2025.

Research Approach and Design

The U.S. Constitution requires the nation to conduct a decennial census to serve as the basis for the apportionment of U.S. House of Representatives among the states. Every state holds at least one seat, and the remaining 385 seats are distributed through the Method of Equal Proportions.

The Method of Equal Proportions identifies how many seats each state needs to maintain a relatively equal ratio of representatives to residents across the states. Since the formula uses the census count as its population size, the final results are impacted by census miscounts.

Florida TaxWatch conducted this calculation to show the impact of the census miscount on apportionment. Using the same formula as the U.S. Census Bureau, Florida TaxWatch repeats the calculations with population sizes adjusted for net coverage error rate of the census count.

Assumptions and Limitations

- The population count for every state is rounded to the nearest thousandths.
- The net coverage error rate for each state has a different standard error, the uncertainty of which the estimate is accurate. For the sake of the calculation, it is assumed the net coverage error rate is accurate for every state.

Calculations

I. Adjusted Population Count

To determine the number of people who should have been counted during the 2020 Census, the census count was multiplied by the net error coverage rate. The product is multiplied by negative one and added back to the census population. In doing so, the adjusted population count for each state reduces the population size of states with an overcount and increases the population size of states with an undercount. The final result represents the population if the census were accurately counted. The calculation for Florida is illustrated below:

-1(Census Count Population X Net Error Coverage Rate) + Census Count Population

-1(21,070,000 X -3.48%) + 21,070,000

-1(-733,236) + 21,070,000

21,803,236

This calculation was repeated for every state.

II. Adjusted Apportionment

The U.S. Census Bureau uses the "Method of Equal Proportions" to determine the apportionment of seats. This method calculates a "priority value" to demonstrate a state's need for each seat number. The calculation is as follows:

Priority Value (V) = Population (P) ÷ √*(Seat Number(N)X (N-1))*

To calculate priority values, the population of each state is divided by a divisor that is based on the possible seat number (N). The divisor is calculated by taking the square root of the seat number multiplied by the preceding seat number. For example, for Florida's second congressional seat, the divisor would be the square root of two multiplied by one. For Florida's third congressional seat, the divisor would be the square root of three multiplied by two, and so on.

This calculation is conducted for every possible seat (N) that could be apportioned to a state. Using the adjusted census populations (see *Adjusted Population Count*), Florida TaxWatch calculated the priority value for seats two through 70 for every state. The calculations for Florida are depicted in Table A.

After calculating the priority value for seats two through 70 in every state, Florida TaxWatch ranked the list from highest priority value to lowest. The top 385 possible seats are identified as the seats that would have been apportioned. Florida seats two through 29 were among the top 385 seats. Florida's 30th seat was ranked 387.

Table A.
The Priority Values for Possible Florida Seats.

Seat	Divisor	Priority Value
2	1.414214	15,417,216.03
3	2.44949	8,901,133.82
4	3.464102	6,294,052.09
5	4.472136	4,875,351.78
6	5.477226	3,980,708.06
7	6.480741	3,364,312.35
8	7.483315	2,913,579.97
9	8.485281	2,569,536.00
10	9.486833	2,298,262.87
11	10.48809	2,078,856.99
12	11.48913	1,897,728.11
13	12.49	1,745,655.96
14	13.49074	1,616,163.38
15	14.49138	1,504,566.22
16	15.49193	1,407,392.83
17	16.49242	1,322,015.37
18	17.49286	1,246,408.04
19	18.49324	1,178,983.98
20	19.49359	1,118,482.41
21	20.4939	1,063,888.98
22	21.49419	1,014,378.34
23	22.49444	969,272.07
24	23.49468	928,007.35
25	24.4949	890,113.38
26	25.4951	855,193.28
27	26.49528	822,910.11
28	27.49545	792,976.03
29	28.49561	765,143.58
30	29.49576	739,198.93
31	30.4959	714,956.27
32	31.49603	692,253.44
33	32.49615	670,948.21
34	33.49627	650,915.37
35	34.49638	632,044.24
36	35.49648	614,236.59
37	36.49658	597,404.99
38	37.49667	581,471.32
39	38.49675	566,365.58
40	39.49684	552,024.89
41	40.49691	538,392.54
42	41.49699	525,417.32
43	42.49706	513,052.82
44	43.49713	501,256.93
45	44.49719	489,991.29
46	45.49725	479,220.94
47	46.49731	468,913.90
48	47.49737	459,040.93
49	48.49742	449,575.15
50	49.49747	440,491.89
51	50.49752	431,768.41
52	51.49757	423,383.76
53	52.49762	415,318.57
54	53.49766	407,554.92
55	54.49771	400,076.21
56	55.49775	392,867.04
57	56.49779	385,913.09
58	57.49783	379,201.05
59	58.49786	372,718.50
60	59.4979	366,453.88
61	60.49793	360,396.37
62	61.49797	354,535.88
63	62.498	348,862.94
64	63.49803	343,368.69
65	64.49806	338,044.82
66	65.49809	332,883.53
67	66.49812	327,877.48
68	67.49815	323,019.77
69	68.49818	318,303.90
70	69.4982	313,723.74

About Florida TaxWatch

As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog, it is the mission of Florida TaxWatch to provide the taxpayers of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and analysis of issues related to state and local government taxation, expenditures, policies, and programs. Florida TaxWatch works to improve the productivity and accountability of Florida government. Its research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of fiscal and economic policies and practices on citizens and businesses.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible donations and private grants. Donations provide a solid, lasting foundation that has enabled Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves since 1979.

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All Florida TaxWatch research is done under the direction of Dominic M. Calabro, President, CEO, Publisher & Editor.

The findings in this Report are based on the data and sources referenced. Florida TaxWatch research is conducted with every reasonable attempt to verify the accuracy and reliability of the data, and the calculations and assumptions made herein. Please contact us if you believe that this paper contains any factual inaccuracies.

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The Eyes and Ears of Florida Taxpayers.

See more at FloridaTaxWatch.org/Research

The Florida TaxWatch Census Institute delivers data-driven analysis of the 2020 Census undercount to help ensure every Floridian is accurately counted and represented in 2030. Our mission is to present the challenges and opportunities inherent in census data collection to business and community leaders. Accurate census data is vital for fair representation, proper allocation of federal dollars, economic growth, and infrastructure planning. It takes all Floridians to secure a complete count in 2030.

As the lead author of this report, **Meg Cannan—Senior Research Analyst & Director of the Florida TaxWatch Census Institute—** invites inquiries and engagement from government officials, community leaders, academics, and concerned citizens. For additional information or to discuss our findings further, please email Meg Cannan at mcannan@floridataxwatch.org.

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