The 2020 Decennial Census: Overview and Issues

What the Census Is and How the Data Are Used

The census is a count, as nearly complete and accurate as possible, of every person whose usual residence is in the United States. Article I, Section 2, clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution, as modified by Section 2 of the 14th Amendment, requires a population census every 10 years, conducted "in such Manner as they [Congress] shall by Law direct." Congress, in Title 13, *U.S. Code*, has delegated this responsibility to the Secretary of Commerce and, within the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Census Bureau. The first census took place in 1790; the next will be in 2020. The constitutional reason for taking a census is to have an updated basis for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Census data also are used to redraw legislative boundaries within states; to produce population estimates and projections; in formulas that help allocate more than $675 billion in federal funds annually to states and localities; and by subnational governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and researchers for myriad purposes.

Engaging the Population

The Census Bureau's mission for 2020 is complicated. It must cover a population that is large, tends to be mobile, is distributed over a wide geographic area, and, in the words of a former bureau director, has more "diversity and complexity" than in past decades. The need to avoid census miscounts, such as overcounts of people with more than one residence and undercounts of racial and ethnic minorities, makes the bureau's public outreach efforts before and during the census particularly important.

Innovations for 2020

Congress has directed the bureau to control the ever-rising cost of the census, now estimated at about $15.6 billion for 2020. The bureau has responded with four innovations designed to save money.

In-Office Address Canvassing

The Census Bureau's goal is to have the correct address and geospatial location of every housing unit in the United States. Accurate addresses and maps are essential for contacting the public initially and during nonresponse follow-up (NRFU). In the past, census workers had to walk and check about 11 million census blocks. For 2020, the bureau plans to replace roughly 70% of this expensive field work (which cost almost $450 million for the 2010 census) with in-office canvassing, using data from satellite imagery, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), subnational governments, and third-party sources.

Emphasis on Prompt Responses

The bureau is emphasizing prompt responses in the initial phase of the census, to limit the need for later follow-up by personal visits. NRFU has been, for decades, the most costly part of the census. The strategy for 2020 includes public outreach via advertising in print and on television, radio, and social media; and partnering with outside organizations, especially those trusted by harder-to-count population groups. The census also will feature a new internet response option, to make answering easier and replace as much of the more expensive mail-out, mail-back census operation as possible. Those who cannot or decline to respond online can call questionnaire assistance centers to provide their answers by telephone or can complete paper questionnaires.

Administrative Records to Limit NRFU

Before NRFU begins, the bureau will use governmental administrative records, mainly "Undeliverable-as-Addressed" information from USPS, to identify and remove the addresses of vacant housing units from the NRFU workload. In addition, the bureau may use records—such as those from the Internal Revenue Service, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Indian Health Service, and the Social Security Administration, plus information the bureau already has and commercial data—if feasible, to enumerate some occupied nonresponding households.

Technology to Streamline Fieldwork

The bureau expects that address canvassers and NRFU field staff will work remotely, using mobile devices for most administrative tasks and data collection. Supervisors, too, will use the devices for working and communicating with staff remotely. This technology, according to the bureau, will greatly reduce the physical space and staff needed for fieldwork, from 12 regional centers and almost 500 area offices for the 2010 census to six regional centers and just under 250 administrative support centers for 2020.

Issues for 2020

Funding Challenges

Heightened preparations for any census generally require corresponding increases in appropriations. During the earlier "ramp up" to 2020, enacted funding was less than requested and was delayed. The FY2016 budget request for the census was $662.6 million; the enacted amount was $598.9 million. The FY2017 request was $778.3 million; the Census Bureau's approved spend plan allocated $767.3 million to the census. In contrast, the FY2018 request for the census was $800.2 million; the spend plan approved $2,094.9 million. The amount for Periodic Censuses and Programs (PCP), the account that includes the census, was $2,545.4 million, available until September 30, 2020. For FY2019, the census request was $3,015.1 million. The House Committee on Appropriations, reporting H.R. 5952, recommended $4,529.7 million for PCP. The committee stated that the bill, together with the FY2018-approved

amount, would fund the census adequately in FY2019 and the first quarter of FY2020, but did not specify amounts. The Senate Appropriations Committee report on S. 3072 recommended the amount requested for the census. FY2018 ended without final action on the bureau's FY2019 appropriations. P.L. 115-245, Division C, the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2019, funds the bureau at the FY2018-approved level through December 7, 2018.

Reduced Testing

Throughout each decade, the Census Bureau tests parts of census operations and procedures to determine whether they will work as intended. Testing is considered essential for a successful enumeration; however, funding delays and shortfalls have truncated some 2020 census tests. In 2017, for example, the bureau tested new internet systems on a nationwide sample of about 80,000 housing units. The test was to have included field operations in Puerto Rico, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota, and the Colville Indian Reservation and off-reservation trust land in Washington. In late 2016, the bureau announced that it would not include these areas, due to uncertain FY2017 funding. Similarly, the 2018 census test of all major 2020 census components—the bureau's last chance to identify and correct problems ahead of the census—was to have covered more than 700,000 housing units in Pierce County, Washington; Providence County, Rhode Island; and nine West Virginia counties. Inadequate funding caused the bureau to test only address canvassing in all these areas; the full test, which will continue through April 2019, is limited to Providence County.

Citizenship Question

The 1950 census was the last one to date that collected citizenship information from the whole U.S. resident population. The 1960 census had no citizenship question per se but queried a sample of respondents about birthplace. From 1970 on, the Census Bureau asked a population sample about citizenship or naturalization status, first as part of the decennial census, then in the American Community Survey (ACS). Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and his staff reportedly asked the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) if it would request the Census Bureau to collect citizenship data in the 2020 census. DOJ made the request on December 12, 2017. Secretary Ross announced on March 26, 2018, that the 2020 census will ask the ACS question "Is this person a citizen of the United States?" The choice of ACS answers is "Yes, born in the United States"; "Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas"; "Yes, born abroad of U.S. citizen parent or parents"; "Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization—Print year of naturalization"; or "No, not a U.S. citizen." DOJ stated that the census, not a survey with associated sampling error, "is the most appropriate vehicle for collecting" citizenship data "critical to the Department's enforcement of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act" and its "protections against racial discrimination in voting."

Opponents of the citizenship question have expressed concern that it may depress immigrants' census response rates or cause them to falsify data, especially if their status in the United States, or that of their friends or families, is illegal. Census Bureau fieldworkers in 2017 noted heightened anxiety about data confidentiality among certain foreign-born respondents and reluctance to answer questions, particularly about citizenship status. Six former bureau directors, from both Republican and Democratic administrations, signed a January 26, 2018, letter to Secretary Ross, opposing the late-date introduction of an untested citizenship question. Multiple lawsuits were filed to block the question; Judge Jesse Furman, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, ruled on July 26, 2018, that the consolidated suit *State of New York et al. vs. U.S. Department of Commerce et al.* could proceed.

Technology Challenges

According to GAO, the Census Bureau plans heavy reliance on new and existing IT systems and infrastructure to support operations, first in the 2018 test, then in the actual census. During the test, the bureau is to deploy 44 systems that will support address canvassing; responses by internet, on paper, and by phone; field enumeration; and data tabulation and dissemination. By June 2018, 36 of the 44 systems for the test had been developed; development of the remaining 8 was progressing. As of August 2018, 11 of the systems were being developed or adapted as part of the bureau's new Census Enterprise Data Collection and Processing (CEDCaP) "system of systems." CEDCaP will provide, in the bureau's words, "shared data collection and processing across all censuses and surveys." GAO's February 2015 and February 2017 reports on "high-risk" programs, however, called CEDCaP "an IT investment in need of attention." The 2017 report added the 2020 census itself to the high-risk list, partly because of the bureau's continuing problems and delays in developing IT systems, testing them, correcting deficiencies, and making them secure; and challenges in managing IT contractors.

In June 2018, GAO reported one example of ongoing IT problems. Bureau officials knew from earlier census surveys that the software for address canvassing in the 2018 test sometimes would not transmit address and map updates from field workers' laptop computers back to headquarters, and that no system-generated warning existed to alert anyone when a transmission failed. The software flaw, the officials acknowledged, had persisted despite attempts to fix it and might not be corrected before the census.

Temporary Workforce

An additional challenge the Census Bureau has noted as 2020 approaches is the need for a large, diverse applicant pool from which to hire qualified temporary workers, such as address canvassers and NRFU enumerators. They may be in short supply if the current employment situation continues. The unemployment rate was 3.7% in September 2018, compared with 10.0% in October 2009 and 9.3% to 9.8% throughout 2010, when the bureau recruited about 3.9 million applicants. Especially for NRFU, the bureau will need workers proficient in English and other languages. Enumerators ideally will approximate the demographic makeup of the communities where they are assigned, so that they can win respondents' trust.

Jennifer D. Williams, jwilliams@crs.loc.gov, 7-8640

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