

# **An open letter from 51 economists to Congress urging robust funding of the 2020 census**

April 2, 2018

The decennial census is a constitutionally mandated exercise that serves as a cornerstone of our democracy. The census plays a central role in allocating political representation and federal government resources across states and localities. The census and its companion, the American Community Survey, are also essential tools used by social scientists to improve our understanding of the country's economic and social reality.

We, the undersigned economists, are writing to express our strong support for robust funding of the 2020 census sufficient to ensure a fair and accurate count of the U.S. population. While we commend Congress for providing funding for fiscal year 2018 above the administration's request for the Census Bureau, we remain concerned about the cumulative effects on census readiness of underfunding (in comparison with the Census Bureau's funding requests) in all previous years in this census cycle, which started in fiscal year 2012. In concrete terms, the Census Bureau has two immediate needs: a significant increase in funding for fiscal year 2019 and the authority to spend at the necessary level in the absence of an appropriation.

The situation leaves the Census Bureau underprepared for the 2020 census and makes adequate funding in these last two years before 2020 all the more crucial.

In the short time that remains before the peak of census activities in April 2020, the Census Bureau faces two significant challenges.

First, the 2020 census will employ new technologies (including internet and telephone questionnaire options) that, if properly implemented, promise to increase the fairness and accuracy of the count and reduce the costs of future censuses. The implementation of these new technologies, however, will inevitably present start-up challenges, including the potential for cyber threats.

Second, a fair census requires that the Census Bureau connect with many hard-to-reach populations. These populations have traditionally included those living in low-income rural areas and low-income urban areas, frequent movers (especially military families, young adults, and migrant workers), the precariously housed, residents of Native American reservations, recent immigrants, and people with limited English-language skills. More recent issues include counting individuals with significant fears of government authorities, members of communities suffering from drug epidemics, and people without reliable access to the internet.

Both of these challenges are best addressed with long-term planning and adequate financing. Over the last decade, the Census Bureau has engaged in careful planning and spelled out the funding that would be required to implement those plans. Now is the time for Congress and the administration to provide the necessary financial support.

Signed,  
*(in alphabetical order, affiliation given for identification purposes only)*

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