Don’t Rush the 2020 Census

A rushed census during the COVID-19 pandemic will harm every government, business, and industry in the country relying upon the resulting data.

The pandemic has severely disrupted the 2020 Census. Earlier this year, the Census Bureau had to suspend field activities and postpone counting operations. Those operations only recently resumed.

After requesting an extension of the legal deadlines for reporting census data on April 131 so that the Census Bureau could adapt to COVID-19 and collect data in the field and via self-response until October 31, the Administration now wants all counting ended a month early (September 30). This will also dramatically reduce the time available for data processing and quality control procedures before the decennial census data is finalized.

The shortened timeline is forcing the Census Bureau to compress vital quality check and data processing activities from five months into three months. The Bureau will have to cut back on data review that spots duplicates and misses.

Currently, there are low response areas in every region and state. This includes not just urban centers, but also many outlying rural areas. Self-response rates in rural areas are particularly anemic, presenting the possibility of the biggest undercount of rural America in modern times.

**Congress needs to approve legislation as soon as possible to extend the statutory reporting deadlines for the 2020 Census by four months.** This would give the Census Bureau until October 31 to conduct non-response follow-up and five months for data quality control and improvement, as previously planned.

Those most at risk of an undercount include: rural, American Indian and Alaska native communities; immigrant households (legal and illegal); urban minority neighborhoods; and young children.

Accurate Census data underpin every statistically representative study in the U.S., including other government surveys. The trickle-down impact of an inaccurate 2020 Census would be severe -- and last the whole decade. Further, census data determines the geographic distribution of $1.5 trillion in federal funding per year, the apportionment of Congressional districts, state legislative redistricting, and investment and policy decisions across the country by the private and public sector.

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1 On April 13, 2020, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Census Director Steven Dillingham announced that, “[i]n order to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau is seeking statutory relief from Congress of 120 additional calendar days to deliver final apportionment counts. Under this plan, the Census Bureau would extend the window for field data collection and self-response to October 31, 2020, which will allow for apportionment counts to be delivered to the President by April 30, 2021, and redistricting data to be delivered to the states no later than July 31, 2021.” President Donald Trump supported the extension, as reported in The Hill on April 13: “This is called an act of god...I don’t think 120 days is nearly enough.”