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## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6025  
<http://appropriations.senate.gov>

August 17, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write regarding our concerns about the U.S. Census Bureau's recent decision to rush the 2020 Decennial Census data collection and processing operations.<sup>1</sup> We believe that truncating data collection operations during a global pandemic could cause a massive undercount in historically hard-to-count areas, including Native American, rural, and immigrant communities. We therefore request that, as the data collection operations continue, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) assess the completeness and quality of these activities compared to the original 2020 Decennial Census detailed operational plans and 2010 Decennial Census results, including use of administrative records, proxy interviews and statistical imputation for enumeration and item nonresponse to finish the nonresponse followup (NRFU) operation.

On August 3, 2020, Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham announced that the 2020 field data collection and self-response operations would end September 30, 2020, a month earlier than previously planned. We are concerned that cutting short these critical operations will necessitate changes that will be detrimental to the accuracy and completeness of the 2020 Decennial Census, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already greatly complicated Census operations.

In particular, we are concerned that the Census Bureau may have to reduce the number of times enumerators visit individual households or increase the use of proxy interviews or administrative records. Most concerning of all would be a significant increase of statistical imputation, which produces markedly lower-quality data. If the aforementioned changes occur, we could be facing a substantial undercount, especially in hard-to-count communities, undermining the accuracy and fairness of the count.

As members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, we have worked to ensure that the Census Bureau has the resources needed to uphold the agency's mandate to count everyone, once, where they live. The 2020 Decennial Census will dictate apportionment of the House of

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<sup>1</sup> "Statement from U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham: Delivering a Complete and Accurate 2020 Census Count," U.S. Census Bureau, 3 August 2020, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/delivering-complete-accurate-count.html>.

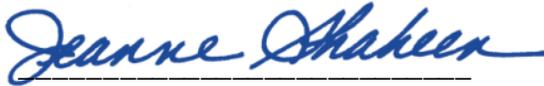
Representatives for the next decade and the distribution of \$1.5 trillion annually in Federal funding to states, localities, individuals, and businesses. We have to get it right. We are concerned that the decision to rush data collection and processing operations could risk the accuracy of the Constitutionally-mandated count. Therefore, we request that GAO monitor and assess the following benchmarks and operations, as compared to the original 2020 Decennial Census detailed operational plans, the Census Bureau's projections for various aspects of the enumeration, the pandemic-adjusted 2020 Census operational plan, other announced enhancements to the 2020 Decennial Census in light of disrupted operations and the 2010 Decennial Census results, as appropriate:

1. With respect to the NRFU operation, the number of housing units identified as vacant through the U.S. Postal Service "Unauthorized As Addressed" file that enumerators determined were occupied; the number of households enumerated using Federal administrative records; the number of households enumerated through proxy interviews; the number of whole household imputations; and the number of in-person visits to unresponsive household allowed. If possible, please separate these indicators of data completeness and quality by mail-out and Update/Leave areas.
2. With respect to the NRFU Reinterview component, any deviation from the scope and metrics of the original operational plan for this quality check activity.
3. With respect to hiring, the number of enumerators and field supervisors hired for NRFU, Service-Based Enumeration, Targeted Non-Sheltered Outdoor Locations, Update/Enumerate, In-Person Group Quarters and Enumeration of Transitory Locations operations, as well as for the Post-Enumeration Survey.
4. Also with respect to hiring, the Census Bureau's success in meeting hiring goals, and retention and drop-out rates, by Area Census Office.
5. With respect to the Service-Based Enumeration, enumeration of Targeted Non-Sheltered Outdoor Locations, and Enumeration of Transitory Locations, the timing, completeness and consistency of data collection compared to the original and April 2020 pandemic-adjusted operational schedule and plans.
6. With respect to the enumeration of Group Quarters, the consistency and completeness of data collected or transferred electronically or on paper, for each major type of Group Quarters facility, such as college or university housing, adult correctional facilities and nursing homes.
7. With respect to late enhancements to boost self-response, publicized by the Census Bureau before the August 3, 2020, announcement of the new end date for self-response, a description of the scope of the seventh mailing to unresponsive households and an assessment of its success. Further, a description of the email and text outreach to unresponsive households and an assessment of the success of this effort. For both these programs, please evaluate how, or whether, the decision to cut short the self-response period affected their implementation and outcomes.

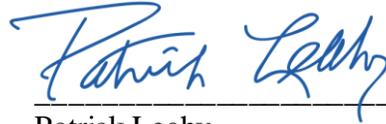
8. With respect to the Count Review Operation, any deviation from the timetable and scope of this external review program and an analysis of how a compressed schedule may have affected the quality of the review and the Census Bureau's ability to correct identified errors in the preliminary housing unit and population counts.
9. With respect to State and local Complete Count Committees, how a compressed data collection schedule may have affected the operation and efficacy of these and other community partners in boosting response rates.
10. With respect to response rates at locations of Census tests, how the Census Bureau's decision to compress data collection, after announcing an extension, may have contributed to confusion among respondents, community partners, and stakeholders – possibly resulting in lower response rates.

We look forward to working with your staff and to receiving regular updates on GAO's work.

Sincerely,



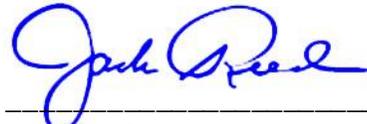
Jeanne Shaheen  
Vice Chair, Subcommittee on Commerce  
Justice, Science and Related Agencies



Patrick Leahy  
Vice Chairman



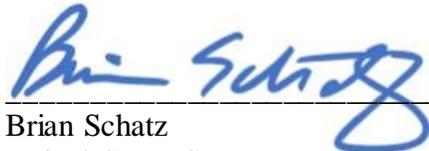
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United States Senator



Jack Reed  
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons  
United States Senator



Brian Schatz  
United States Senator



Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator

/s/

Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator