

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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July 25, 2023

The Honorable Robert L. Santos  
Director  
U.S. Census Bureau  
4600 Silver Hill Road  
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Director Santos:

I am writing to request more details about the Census Bureau's ongoing efforts to address systemic coverage errors (undercounts) in the 2020 Census, that continue to impact census data products and communities. I am concerned about the impact of undercounts and urge the Bureau to expedite research and efforts to address them, within the next year.

The 2020 Census encountered unprecedented pandemic-related delays, as well as interference, schedule changes, and other challenges. This census resulted in significant undercounts at the national level for certain demographic groups, including children, African Americans, and the Hispanic or Latino population, according to the Bureau's Post-Enumeration Survey.<sup>1</sup> There was also a total estimated undercount in certain states.<sup>2</sup> Although the Bureau does not release local coverage measures, localities are also impacted by these undercounts. Cities and towns across the nation have observed discrepancies and filed formal challenges to their 2020 Census data.<sup>3</sup>

The Bureau has taken some steps to address unique problems arising from the 2020 Census. In 2022, after public feedback and efforts by myself and other census stakeholders,<sup>4</sup> the Bureau

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Estimation Report, National Census Coverage Estimates for People in the United States by Demographic Characteristics*, PES20-G-01 (March 2022) (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/coverage-measurement/pes/national-census-coverage-estimates-by-demographic-characteristics.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Estimation Report, Census Coverage Estimates for People in the United States by State and Census Operations*, PES20-G-02 (May 2022) (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/coverage-measurement/pes/census-coverage-estimates-for-people-in-the-united-states-by-state-and-census-operations.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup> *The Census Missed Some Folks. These Cities Want Them Counted*, Stateline (Apr. 4, 2022) (<https://stateline.org/2022/04/04/the-census-missed-some-folks-these-cities-want-them-counted/>); *Census rejecting some big-city complaints of 2020 undercounts*, Associated Press (May 13, 2023) (<https://apnews.com/article/census-austin-boston-detroit-phoenix-memphis-milwaukee-cb854fb05f87978fd86f143a56d7aac6>).

<sup>4</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Reviewing the 2020 Census: Local Perspectives in Michigan*, 117th Cong., at 27 (July 25, 2022) (S. Hrg. 117-654) (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg51545/pdf/CHRG-117shrg51545.pdf>).

created the Post-Census Group Quarters Review (PCGQR) Program, which allows jurisdictions to submit data on missed or miscounted Group Quarters (such as dorms and nursing homes).<sup>5</sup>

In addition, I have pushed the Bureau to improve the Population Estimates Program in response to 2020 Census concerns. The annual population estimates are a critical opportunity to respond to issues in the 2020 Census, since these estimates are based on the census and are used to distribute federal funds. The FY 2023 omnibus appropriations bill recognized that the annual estimates should be as accurate as possible, and that pandemic-related census disruptions “may have resulted in significant undercounts in some localities.” It directed the Bureau to “consider more flexible methodologies and broader use of administrative data to ensure meaningful opportunities to improve the accuracy of the estimates, including appropriate improvements to the estimates base” as the Bureau “reinstates the Population Estimates Challenge Program this decade.”<sup>6</sup>

The Bureau has now taken some steps toward improving the Population Estimates Program. It is working on efforts to strengthen the program through “critical research to improve the quality of the estimates,” including research on “taking coverage measures [e.g. undercount measures] into account” and using alternative data sources.<sup>7</sup> However, the Bureau did not make significant changes to expand the Challenge Program in 2022,<sup>8</sup> and did not make significant methodology changes to the Vintage 2022 Population Estimates (published December 2022-June 2023).<sup>9</sup> The Bureau has cited the need for additional research and testing. It is continuing to research ways to improve the Population Estimates and Challenge Program. The next opportunity to implement findings would be the Vintage 2023 Estimates (published December 2023-May 2024).<sup>10</sup>

I appreciate these efforts toward addressing 2020 Census concerns and undercounts, in unprecedented circumstances. However, I am concerned that many jurisdictions and populations have now been suffering from likely 2020 undercounts for multiple years, affecting resources to communities. The Bureau’s ongoing efforts should address these problems as quickly as possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Census Bureau, *Census Bureau Launches Operation to Review Group Quarters Count: A New Way for Governmental Units to Request Review of 2020 Census Group Quarters Counts Potentially Affected by Pandemic* (May 31, 2022) (<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/census-bureau-launches-program-to-review-group-quarters-counts.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Pub. L. 117-328, *Joint Explanatory Statement* (<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Division%20B%20-%20CJS%20Statement%20FY23.pdf>). See also H. Rept. 117-395 at 19 (<https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt395/CRPT-117hrpt395.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> Census Bureau, *Budget Fiscal Year 2024*, at CEN-75 (Mar. 2023) (<https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/Census-FY2024-Congressional-Budget-Submission.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> Census Bureau, *Population Estimates Challenge Program*, 88 Fed. Reg. 17696 (Mar. 24, 2023) (final rule).

<sup>9</sup> Census Bureau, *Population and Housing Unit Estimates* (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html>) (accessed May 30, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 8; Census Bureau, *Incorporating 2020 Census Data into the Population Estimates* (Apr. 13, 2023) (<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/press-kits/2023/paa/2023-paa-presentation-incorporating-2020-census-data-into-the-population-estimates.pdf>).

I urge the Bureau to complete remaining research on the Population Estimates Program expeditiously, so that it can finalize and incorporate all significant and necessary program changes into the Population Estimates Program before the next estimates are released. In addition to researching gaps in 2020 Census data and adjustments to the base, the Bureau should also strive to implement alternative data sources and methodologies by the Vintage 2023 Estimates, as well as any essential updates to the Challenge Program. I have supported resources for this effort and stand ready to help provide additional support, as necessary.

The Bureau must prioritize resources to this program and work to ensure expeditious results, given the long-lasting impacts on communities. I understand the Bureau has faced barriers to quick recovery from the 2020 Census. Delays in 2020 Census data products (including pandemic-related delays) have complicated efforts to quantify detailed local-level undercounts and research solutions. The Bureau also has limited resources, and has already devoted additional resources to this research. However, these barriers and delays thus far only exacerbate the need to quickly make changes that respond to 2020 Census concerns.

To that end, I ask that you also provide the following information by August 25:

- 1) How can the Bureau expedite the Population Estimates research to ensure all substantial methodology changes to address undercounts are fully researched and incorporated by Vintage 2023? Do any barriers currently exist to this goal, and are additional resources necessary to address them?
- 2) Would the Bureau implement changes to the Challenge Program in any year mid-decade (prior to the next decennial census), if its research indicates such changes are warranted?
- 3) Has the Bureau considered measures to improve communication with local officials about the Estimates and the results of filed census challenges?
- 4) Do the updated components of the 2022 Estimates (updated since Vintage 2021) help address data quality concerns including undercounts? Why was the Bureau unable to further address undercounts in this Vintage?
- 5) Delays in 2020 Census data products (including pandemic-related delays and time needed to apply “disclosure avoidance system” privacy measures) have delayed access to certain detailed, local data. For example, the Bureau did not finalize processing of detailed race and ethnicity data until May 2023, later than initially expected.<sup>11</sup> How have the delivery times for these products affected the Bureau’s efforts to research and apply Population Estimates improvements?
  - a) Please describe why the time needed to process 2020 data products and apply the disclosure avoidance system has generally been longer than anticipated, including what proportion of delays are due to disclosure avoidance, versus other factors.

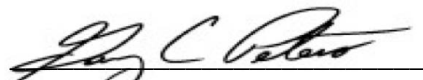
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<sup>11</sup> Census Bureau: *Next 2020 Census Data Products to be Released in 2023* (Apr. 27, 2022) (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/2020-census-data-products-schedule-2023.html>). The Demographic and Housing Characteristics File was released in May 2023, rather than late 2022, and multiple other product release dates have been delayed.

- 6) How have limited staff resources (and other resources, if applicable) contributed to the timeline for completing census data products and applying privacy measures; the deferral of changes to the Challenge Program; and the research timeline for Population Estimate improvements?
- 7) Many localities have received PCGQR results, which can help correct their population counts. The results will be incorporated in Vintage 2023.<sup>12</sup> Please explain why the Bureau could not incorporate PCGQR results into the 2022 Estimates (released December 2022-May 2023), though some PCGQR cases were received in 2022.
- 8) The Bureau's 2020 Census Non-Response Follow-Up operation was disrupted by schedule changes, political interference, and staffing shortages. This could have contributed to errors such as households identified as vacant or miscounted. While the Bureau's initial operational metrics did not find significant enumerator error, the Bureau's in-depth evaluations of 2020 Census operations are ongoing. If the Bureau finds significant local disparities in operational metrics, how will it address these?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Gary C. Peters

Chairman

Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs

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<sup>12</sup> Census Bureau, 2020 Post-Census Group Quarter Review (PCGQR) (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/planning-management/evaluate/pcgqr.html>) (accessed June 1, 2023); Census Bureau, 2020 Post-Census Group Quarters Review (PCGQR) Cases Status (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/pcgqr/pcgqr-cases-received.pdf>) (accessed June 1, 2023).