

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 17, 2017

Mr. Ron Jarmin, Ph.D.  
Acting Director  
U.S. Census Bureau  
4600 Silver Hill Road  
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Dr. Jarmin:

We write to request information about the Census Bureau's plan to verify responses submitted through the Internet self-response system for the 2020 Decennial Census. The Bureau estimates that 45 percent of households will choose this option.<sup>1</sup> The Bureau projects the use of an internet self-response system to yield cost savings of \$400 million.<sup>2</sup> While these potential savings are crucial to stemming rising costs associated with administering the decennial census, we are concerned the Bureau has not adequately planned to mitigate the risk of duplicate or fraudulent Internet responses.

The 2020 Census is the first decennial census that will allow the public to respond online.<sup>3</sup> While each household will be mailed a unique identification number ("ID") for use on the 2020 Census website,<sup>4</sup> the Bureau will still accept online responses without the unique ID (termed a "non-ID response").<sup>5</sup> The Bureau will then attempt to match the non-ID response to an address in its mapping databases to confirm whether or not the address is real.<sup>6</sup>

The acceptance of non-ID responses increases the likelihood that households will submit duplicate legitimate responses and "the likelihood of fraudulent responses," according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO).<sup>7</sup> The Bureau itself acknowledges these risks in its 2020 Census Operational plans.<sup>8</sup> While the Bureau will send all responses through a series of tests to determine whether they are legitimate and accurate,<sup>9</sup> GAO has raised concerns that the

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Dep't. of Commerce, 2020 Census Operational Plan 95 (Sept. 2017), *available at* <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/2020-oper-plan3.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 99. The cost savings are the result of reduced costs compared to carrying out the Census using the same methods as in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 56.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-16-623, Information Technology: Better Management of Interdependencies between Programs Supporting 2020 Census Is Needed 47 (Aug. 2016), *available at* <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/678905.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Dep't. of Commerce, *supra* note 1, at 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 123.

Bureau has yet to determine important details about what fraud and duplication metrics these tests will include.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the systems needed to test the non-ID response accuracy will not be fully tested prior to the 2020 Census.<sup>11</sup> If the Bureau does not execute these systems in a timely and effective manner, or if it is not prepared for the volume of responses the tests will need to verify, duplicate or fraudulent responses may be included in the final population count.

The 2020 Census must be fair and accurate to ensure the equitable apportionment of government spending, the number of representatives serving each community, and the overall value of the demographic information. To assist in the Committees' oversight of the 2020 Census we respectfully request that you respond with the following information as soon as possible but no later than 5:00 p.m. on December 1, 2017:

1. The total number of duplicate self-responses the Bureau projects will be submitted for the 2020 Census.
2. The total number of fraudulent self-responses the Bureau projects will be submitted for the 2020 Census.
3. Based on results of the 2015 and 2016 Census tests<sup>12</sup>:
  - a. The percentage of households the Bureau currently anticipates will respond to the 2020 Census using non-ID Internet self-response.
  - b. The total number of non-ID response attempts the Bureau projects for the 2020 Census, and of these, the projected number of responses that the Bureau will not be able to match to an address in real time.
  - c. The total number of individual internet self-responses, both with ID and non-ID, including potential duplicate or fraudulent responses that Census technology will have to validate.
4. A description of how the Bureau will handle non-ID responses that cannot be automatically or manually matched to an address in the Master Address File.
5. A description of how the Bureau will identify fraudulent responses submitted to the 2020 Census, including the specific criteria and thresholds the Bureau will use to determine whether further investigations, such as in-person follow-ups, are necessary.

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, *supra* note 7, at 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 28, 33.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Dep't. of Commerce, 2015 Census Tests, *available at* <https://www.census.gov/2015censustests> (last visited Nov. 14, 2017); *see also* U.S. Dep't. of Commerce, 2016 Census Tests, *available at* <https://www.census.gov/2016censustests> (last visited Nov. 14, 2017).

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6. The Bureau's guidance for how respondents should contact the Bureau if they believe their unique ID is missing or stolen, and how the Bureau will integrate claims of missing or stolen IDs into its follow-up process to investigate the integrity of responses.
7. The Bureau's plan, including a timetable, to address GAO's recommendation that the Bureau "make developing a better understanding of and identifying requirements related to non-ID response validation a high and immediate priority, or consider alternatives to avoid late definition of such requirements."<sup>13</sup>

If you have any questions regarding this letter, please ask your staff to contact Jennifer Selde of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee majority staff at (202) 224-4751 or Julie Dunne of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform majority staff at (202) 225-5074. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson  
Chairman  
Homeland Security and  
Governmental Affairs Committee  
U.S. Senate



Trey Gowdy  
Chairman  
Committee on Oversight and  
Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives

cc: The Honorable Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, *supra* note 7, at 45.