

DATE: March 13, 2020
TO: Census stakeholders and census funders
FROM: Census Counts Campaign
RE: Updates on census outreach in the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID 19)

In this memo, we will share what we know about a rapidly changing [coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#) response landscape and how it will impact [Census Bureau operations](#), census stakeholder outreach and the wellbeing of communities that have been historically missed in the census. The health and safety of the communities we serve — as well that of the coalition partners and our staff who are so deeply engaged in this work — is paramount. For years, stakeholders have been preparing for the start of the 2020 Census and now long **planned activities may need to shift** due to this unanticipated new threat. We know this is hard work. We are here to strategize and help. It is our hope that the updates laid out in the below distill what we know about a fast moving landscape and spark ideas on how to respond. We are **all in this together to ensure that our communities are safe and counted.**

On March 13th there was a joint stakeholder/funder call on updates on census outreach in the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). A recording of that call is [available here](#) (updates on this call are accurate as of March 13 at 1 p.m. ET). As a reminder, weekly census counts campaign calls will continue on Tuesdays at noon (RSVP at bit.ly/rsvpcensuscall.)

This memo covers the latest available updates on census operations, as well as an overview of census field guidance, digital tools and training, and information for funders. The memo includes:

- Messaging Guidance (Page 1)
- Updates to Census Bureau Operations (Page 2)
- Field Guidance and Resources to Plan Remote and Digital Outreach (Page 6)
- Resources for Funder Engagement (Page 7)

We will keep census stakeholders updated as this guidance evolves.

Messaging Guidance

This is a great time to elevate the ways to respond to the census without interacting with people during the self response phase. A few messages to lift:

- **There are three ways to respond to the 2020 Census from the comfort of your own home - online, by phone or by returning the paper questionnaire! Just a reminder, the website accepting census responses will go live on March 12 at 2020Census.gov. Households will begin receiving invitations to participate in the 2020 Census March 12-20.**
- **People can get questions answered and respond to the 2020 Census in English and 12 non English languages by calling [phone questionnaire assistance](#).**

- The Census Bureau has plans in place for *if/when* a pandemic occurs during census operations - this includes the coronavirus. They will continue to stay up-to-date on the status of the virus and adjust their plans accordingly. [See the most recent Census Bureau Statement here.](#)

Additional message resources:

- [Census Count GOTC Toolkit Messaging Guide](#)
- FCI Briefing Series: Census 2020 Messaging Testing Results presented by Census Counts, Color of Change, NAACP, NALEO Educational Fund, Racial Equity Anchor Collaborative, and United We Dream
 - [Click Here for the Recording](#)
 - [Click Here for the Slides](#)

If you have additional questions about census messaging, contact Tamika Turner at turner@civilrights.org or Josh Cohen at josh@newheightscommunications.com.

Updates to Census Bureau Operations

The health emergency could impact operations in various ways, depending on how the epidemic develops over the coming weeks and months. **The Census Bureau's response necessarily will vary depending on how states and local areas are affected and what restrictions any state/local governments have put in place,** since some areas are not yet experiencing problems with the virus.

Included in this section are updates about the following:

- Census Timeline;
- Census Bureau Staffing ;
- Special Enumerations;
- College Students;
- People experiencing homelessness (Service Based Enumeration, March 30 – April 1); and
- Other "in-person" and group quarters operations.

Census Timeline

State and congressional leaders have begun asking whether the census period should be extended past the current end of July planned end date, due to concerns about the potential impact of the virus on the count. Congress does not need to take action for the Census Bureau to extend the "enumeration period." That is an operational decision that is completely within the Census Bureau's discretion. **And please keep in mind that it may not be necessary, since households can self-respond on-line, by phone, or by mailing back the paper form they received, until July 31, 2020, under the current plan!**

If it becomes necessary, the more difficult question is whether the Census Bureau will be able to collect, process, tabulate, and report data to Congress in accordance with the two statutory deadlines (Title 13, U.S.C., sections 141(b) and (c)): state population totals by December 1, 2020, for congressional apportionment; and (2) Redistricting Data Files to the states by April 1, 2021. It is too soon to know whether that will be necessary. We understand that people are interested in, and possibly confused, by proposals to "delay the census" or extend census operations. There are two issues involved here:

1. Delaying certain operations or extending the deadlines for finishing operations; and

2. Modifying the statutory deadlines for reporting census results.

In both cases, we know that the proposals made so far sound reasonable and are well-intentioned, but they are not silver bullets, and some of them could have unintended consequences. There are significant implications for data quality and, in the end, the accuracy of the results, of extending census operations.

Some issues to consider related to delaying or extending some operations:

- How close in time to Census Day, April 1, data are collected. The date is set in law; all census data collection revolves around that date (e.g. the residence rules), and all materials highlight that fact.
- Extending the enumeration into the Fall raises a number of factors that affect data quality and consistency. Consider, for example, the availability of qualified census takers at different times of the year; changes in the weather as we move into August and the fall (most of the major hurricanes of the past decade or longer occurred in August, September, and October); “recall bias” the further in time we get from April 1; an increase in the number of households occupied by people who moved in after April 1, 2020; the movement of mobile populations, such as migrant farmworkers; and so forth.
- How consistent is data collection across the country? Is the level of effort the same, especially during NRFU, and enumeration of transitory locations and group quarters? Does a delay in *some* places compromise the quality of data relative to other areas? Must the bureau use more administrative records and statistical imputation to “finish” the count in some areas than in others? *Consistency of the process and level of effort across states and communities is an important factor in evaluating not only whether the census is acceptably accurate, but whether it is fair.*
- Most importantly, the consequences for data quality and accuracy of extending counting operations into the Fall are broad and deep. We think they must be the subject of in-depth evaluation and discussion among key players, including the Census Bureau, Congress, GAO, outside experts (such as the National Academy of Sciences 2020 Census Task Force), and stakeholders.

Modifying the statutory deadlines for reporting census results

This issue has deep and broad implications, primarily political and conceivably partisan. It must be approached carefully and knowledgeably for those reasons. Here are the relevant facts:

- There are two deadlines for reporting decennial census data in statute, and Congress would need to pass legislation that the president would sign (or else override a presidential veto) to change either one:
 - First, the Census Bureau must report the state population totals used for congressional apportionment to the president by 12/31/20, and then the president transmits to the Clerk of the House of Representatives after the new Congress convenes in January.
 - Second, the bureau must transmit to each state its respective Redistricting Data Files (which also are made public) by April 1, 2020. The bureau does that on a rolling basis as

the files are available and states needed the data soonest for off-year state legislative elections receiving their data first.

Moving back either of these deadlines would have a seismic ripple effect throughout the political system. We can assure you that census advocates who work with Congress and on census policy issues are engaged in the relevant discussions, and we will keep everyone informed of developments as soon as appropriate.

Census Bureau Staffing

During the Self-Response Operation (March 12—April 30), the staff most likely affected are Partnership Specialists and Census Response Representatives assigned to the new Mobile Questionnaire Assistance (MQA) operation. In areas where there is risk, partnership specialists are allowed to work from home, doing outreach and providing technical assistance by phone rather than traveling and participating in events. Hiring and on-boarding (March) and training (April) of enumerators is still taking place as planned. For the 2020 Census, most enumerator training is being conducted on-line; however, at least one planned 'module' is an in-person session. In places where a group training session could be risky or even discouraged by local/state officials, the Census Bureau could modify the training protocols to ensure safety. (We don't know if that is happening yet.)

Launch of the MQA operation, originally scheduled as a "soft launch" in late March and more widely in early April, will now start everywhere in early April. Regional Census Offices may adjust their targeting of locations for the new Mobile Questionnaire Assistance (MQA) operation, since large public events and 'high-traffic' places, including some libraries, clearly may no longer be appropriate sites. Census partner organizations, including local governments, should continue to suggest to their Partnership Specialists appropriate sites and events for Census Response Representatives to visit once the operation gets underway.

Special Enumerations

The Bureau is focused on encouraging households to self-respond and has bought additional ad time to elevate this message. (We do not know whether, how, or where this advertising is targeted, or if it is spread throughout the country.) The self-response operation likely will not be significantly affected, except to the extent that the virus requires cancellation or modification of planned GOTC events, which makes effective outreach more difficult. One caveat: the Update/Leave Operation, in which census workers hand-deliver census materials to households and update the address list as they go, could face challenges if (1) the Census Bureau has difficulty hiring/retaining enough workers to do this; and/or (2) if traveling house to house in a given area is restricted or discouraged due to the virus. We are not aware of any changes to the Update/Leave operation as of this writing.

However, there are two other major counting operations that are starting soon and could be modified or even compromised in places hit hard by the virus. One is the **Group Quarters (GQ) Operation**, which covers group facilities such as college dorms and residence halls, prisons, skilled nursing homes, halfway houses, and military barracks. A subset of GQ is the **Service-based Enumeration (SBE)** of people experiencing homelessness who are not otherwise living in a household. The second is the **Enumeration of Transitory Locations**, which covers RV parks, hotels/motels, carnivals and racetracks, marinas, and other places where people live for a period of time before moving to another location.

College students

Cities and towns that are home to large numbers of college students are especially worried about where students will be counted if their institution has suspended classes and even sent students home in some cases, for a short term or the rest of the semester. Rules that govern *where* people should be counted say that college students should be counted at the place they live while attending school. *Here is what you need to know first: that rule is not changing. College students will still be counted at the address where they were living while attending school, even if they were sent home early and are not there on Census Day.* This is important since there are significant implications for the distribution of resources and representation at all levels of government if they aren't counted in the right place.

The census form starts with a reminder that certain people, including college students living away from home while attending school, should not be included on a household form (even if they happen to be home on Census Day). Students who live in college-run housing (dorms, residence halls, many frats and sororities), whether on or off campus, are counted through the GQ operation. Students living off-campus in their own housing, such as in apartments or rented houses with roommates, self-respond through the regular household enumeration and are visited during the door-knocking follow-up operation if they don't.

For the GQ operation, colleges have the option of submitting administrative records electronically or delivering and collecting Individual Census Questionnaires (ICQ, a modified version of the household form) to/from their students. According to senior Census Bureau staff, 60% of colleges/universities already opted to use the electronic data records transfer option. Local census staff assigned to the GQ operation will now re-contact the schools that selected the ICQ method and urge them to shift to the e-Transfer method, especially if their students have been sent home or student movement is restricted due to the virus. In the growing number of situations where college students have returned home "prematurely," the risk of census overcounting grows because parents/guardians might think they should include their college student due to the changed circumstances. (In other words, these students would be counted both at their college residence and at their parent/s' home, a problem that has contributed in the past to disproportionate overcounting of non-Hispanic Whites.) The bureau will try to catch duplications during processing, but that is not always easy, especially for students who live off-campus and self-respond for that address while their parents are including them on their own household form. *Therefore, additional outreach, education, and communications -- from the Census Bureau, colleges and universities, local officials, and nonprofit partners -- will be required to minimize that problem and to help college students understand where and how they should be counted in this census.*

Finally (and this is "new" information): U.S. college students who are studying abroad at the time of the census usually are not counted in the census at all. However, many apparently have come home early due to COVID-19. *Any students who have come back to the U.S. by April 1, 2020, CAN be counted at the place considered their "usual residence" as of Census Day, which often is their parents' home.*

People experiencing homelessness (Service Based Enumeration, March 30 – April 1)

The Census Bureau is currently assessing its Service-based Enumeration operation in areas hit by the coronavirus. This operation is always difficult, and it largely involves in-person interviewing of people experiencing homelessness at (1) locations that serve this population, such as shelters, soup kitchens,

and mobile food vans; and (2) “targeted” (that is, pre-identified) outdoor locations, such as parks and encampments under bridges. The bureau will try to determine if some service-based locations are able to provide administrative records about the people they serve during the March 30-April 1 time period, either electronically or on paper. This will be problematic for people who are reached at mobile food vans and soup kitchens, of course. It’s possible that the bureau will delay the SBE in *some* areas, but no decisions have been announced yet. None of these options for modifying an already-difficult operation are ideal, and none are set in stone. We are sharing possibilities with you for information purposes only at this point.

There is an action item to consider to help ensure a better count of this population. **After April 1** (because I think it’s important to give the bureau a chance to pull off this operation to the best of its ability), **GOTC partners can reach out to people experiencing homelessness, through your own communications channels, and urge/facilitate on-line or phone non-ID response for anyone who thinks they weren’t counted during the SBE.** They simply will need to provide a description of the location and/or an address where they would usually stay at night, such as in a park or at a shelter, and they would need to provide name and birthdate, in particular, so that the bureau can accept the response and try to unduplicate, as needed.

Other “in-person” and group quarters operations

Both the Enumeration of Transitory Locations and **the Nonresponse Follow-up (NRFU)** operation (the second part of the household count) involve in-person data collection from households, including people living in hotel rooms, RVs, and other transitory homes. These operations **could be affected by a shortage of qualified census takers who are willing to do this job, constraints on travel in some cities or neighborhoods, or even unwillingness of people to speak to census takers (strangers, essentially) in person.** The Census Bureau is assessing all of these operations as the census unfolds and the health crisis develops, and it will determine further modifications to operations as warranted. Those could include extending the time period for these operations, everywhere or in affected areas. The bureau also could consider shifting to more telephone interviewing; that could be problematic in terms of communicating such a significant operational change and taking action to minimize scams. **(Under the current census plan, the bureau will call households to collect or clarify information on a very limited basis, most notably when a household responds using a paper form and has more than 6 household members, to confirm non-ID submissions not verifiable through administrative records, and for the Self-response quality check operation . The paper form indicates that someone from the Census Bureau will call to collect additional demographic data about persons 7 – 10, as applicable.)**

Field Guidance and Resources to Plan Remote and Digital Outreach

We are not suggesting you fully change your on-the-ground strategies. you know your community best and can determine where and when this becomes a necessity. It’s always **good to ensure you have a plan B or backup plan when it comes to outreach so that you can quickly shift and still support the census** in any case. You should **connect with your community leaders, state officials and organizational leadership on any changes to your outreach plans.** However, given that many cities and localities are asking for people to limit the number of large gatherings and many events are being cancelled, we wanted to share existing practices that are being utilized by GOTC efforts and some ideas for ways you can potentially divert your resources to still reach your communities!

- Instead of tabling in-person, use that time to phone bank, text bank, leverage digital organizing, or even spend time to create a presence online. All of these activities can be done from home or in an office. There are vendors who can help implement these activities.
- Organizations can also create group events like tele town halls, Facebook Live streams, or Zoom meetings. There are vendors who can help implement these activities.
- Ensure there are informational flyers, palm cards, and materials at grocery stores, community centers, clinics and other essential locations with your website, ways to engage online or by phone
- Drop-off literature with information on how to self-respond so that people are still hearing about the census
- Consider creating digital ad campaigns for Twitter or Facebook to spread more information about the census. You can use the Census Counts Campaign in a Box toolkit. Similarly, your organization might want to think about working with local radio, print, and TV outlets to place free PSAs. Prioritize “warm” contact opportunities where existing relationships can be utilized
- Be vigilant of mis and dis information. Ensure best practices are followed and false information isn’t pushed out.
- Institute privacy and security practices. Ensure staff and volunteers are familiar with basic phishing scams.
- Consider utilizing the Melissa data set for additional GOTC contacts and resources for accessing additional phone numbers, MAID information.

See [Census Counts Toolkit](#) for more guidance on digital organizing best practices and resources

If you have further questions about changing field strategies please reach out to the GOTC field co-chairs:

- Elena Langworthy, State Voices, elena@statevoices.org
- Diali Avila, The Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, davilia@civilrights.org
- Vivian Chang, APALA, vivian@apalanet.org
- Nick Chedli Carter, Census Digital Organizing Group Chair, ncarter@2020visionventures.com

Funder Engagement

The spread of COVID-19 is impacting organizations’ ability to undertake high impact census Get-Out-the-Count strategies, including events, kiosks, and door-to-door canvassing. As a result, activities that groups were funded to conduct might no longer be executed as originally envisioned. In light of this, here are three recommendations to funders engaged in the census, identified by Gary Bass, chair of the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup:

- Work with grantees to revise grantee requirements
- Provide emergency funding for census outreach
- Provide appropriate guidance to grantees

Funders are sharing with each other the need to be flexible, and support programmatic and operational changes that are necessary for the health and well-being of groups' staff and the communities they serve. Some funders have already set aside rapid response resources that they will deploy over the coming weeks and months. Further, where government contracts are involved, some funders have expressed a need to help their partners and grantees -- where appropriate -- work with government agencies to determine feasible alternatives. During this time of uncertainty, funders can be partners in centering racial and social equity and speaking out against xenophobia and racism.

If you are a funder or philanthropy serving organization interested in staying connected on how the philanthropic community is taking action and tracking census progress -- or if you have questions, resources, or examples of how your philanthropic institution is supporting grantees and shifting strategies, please contact:

- Jocelyn Bissonnette, Funders Census Initiative, FCCP: jbissonnette@funderscommittee.org
- Karen Narasaki, Bauman Foundation: karen@narasakijustice.com
- Maggie Gunther Osborn, United Philanthropy Forum: maggie@unitedphilforum.org

Nick Chedli Carter, chair of the Census Digital Organizing Group, is also happy to talk through ideas to scale up digital outreach practices like SMS, digital peer to peer outreach, and use of FB Messenger. ncarter@2020visionventures.com.

Philanthropic Resources

- Center for Disaster Philanthropy: March 5 webinar recording — [COVID-19 Coronavirus: How Philanthropy Can Respond](#)
- The California Endowment: [Get the Facts: Novel Coronavirus 19 Resources for Partners](#)
- Candid: [Philanthropy's response to the novel coronavirus](#)
- FSG: COVID-19 — [Seven Things Philanthropy Can Do](#)