

Preparations for the 2020 Census

The Constitution requires the federal government to take a census of the U.S. population every ten years. This is a massive and complex undertaking, which must accurately count more than 300 million residents living at more than 100 million addresses. An accurate census requires extensive testing, planning, outreach, and logistical preparation throughout the decade, with activities accelerating years before the actual count. Preparations for the 2020 census have already been delayed, curtailed, or canceled due to funding shortfalls, however, and the 2011 Budget Control Act's tight appropriations caps will likely lead to future shortfalls that worsen the damage.

The census is part of the foundation of the nation's economy and political system. It enables states and individuals to receive fair representation in Congress, governs the allocation of billions of dollars each year in federal funds, and forms the statistical backbone for numerous surveys that drive fact-based decision-making by businesses, communities, lawmakers, and voters.

The 2017 appropriations for the Census Bureau were \$164 million less than the \$1.6 billion the Obama Administration had requested for census preparations and other important work — and those appropriations were not enacted until the fiscal year was more than half over. The funding problems have already led to alarming cuts in key planning activities, forcing the bureau to:

- Cancel all on-site portions of the 2017 Census Test, which aimed to evaluate new methods and advanced technologies to improve data collection during the census. As one consequence, the bureau had to cancel the only scheduled tests of new methods for reaching remote and rural communities.
- Reduce its use of large databases to check address lists, forcing the bureau to rely on far costlier door-to-door address canvassing in 2019.
- Delay advertising and outreach that are crucial to building community support. These activities keep costs down by encouraging residents to respond without costly follow-up efforts. They also enhance the accuracy of the census by targeting historically hard-to-count communities with messages from trusted voices.
- Delay opening of three of six regional centers to provide logistical help in running the census.
- Pause a planned 2018 test of the Census Coverage Measurement program, which will measure the accuracy of the census and produce undercount and overcount estimates.

Based on lack of funding and technical challenges, in January the Government Accountability Office added the 2020 census to its “high risk” list of programs and agencies.⁶⁹

The situation could become more acute as the cost of ramping up for the 2020 count collides with the appropriations caps. During the next three years, the Census Bureau will need to test procedures and equipment, check address lists, rent field offices, solicit local support for completing the census, and hire and train staff. Figure 16 shows the pattern of funding needed to prepare for past decennial censuses, with substantial increases beginning several years before the census date.

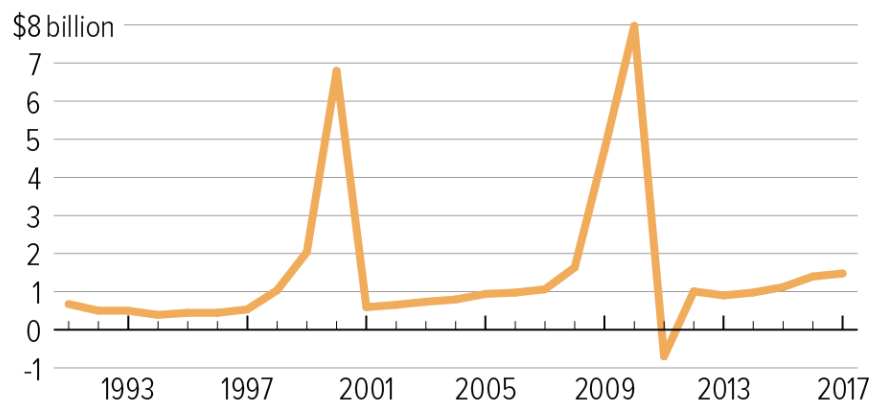
⁶⁹ Government Accountability Office, “High Risk List: 2020 Decennial Census,” http://www.gao.gov/highrisk/2020_decennial_census/why_did_study.

Providing those necessary increases would be difficult under current appropriations constraints, let alone tighter ones.

FIGURE 16

Census Bureau Will Need Spending Hike to Conduct 2020 Census

Census funding in 2017 dollars, by fiscal year



Source: CBPP based on Office of Management and Budget and enacted appropriations

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Census data is vital to fact-based decision-making for businesses, school boards, city planners, voters, public health officials, emergency planners and first responders, and others in society. For this reason, in 2016, diverse interest groups ranging from business groups like realtors and automobile dealers to civil rights groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged Congress to properly fund planning for the 2020 Census.⁷⁰

Similarly, in 2015, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) and American Enterprise Institute scholar Andrew Biggs joined to urge adequate funding for the census, writing:

No policy or philosophical outlook is well-served by a lack of accurate data. The alternative to accurate, detailed data on American households is policy-by-anecdote, in which lawmakers respond to perceived needs without data on how large or widespread a problem might be. Such a process would spend federal funds neither effectively nor wisely.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Letters can be accessed at <https://thecensusproject.org/letters/>.

⁷¹ American Enterprise Institute and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Letter to Chairman Thad Cochran, Chairman Richard Shelby, and Ranking Member Barbara Mikulski,” June 9, 2015, http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/6-10-15_censusletter.pdf.