



# WHY CONGRESS CAN'T FREEZE OR CUT FUNDING FOR THE DECENNIAL CENSUS

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**Overview:** The U.S. Constitution (Article I, Sec. 2) requires a census every 10 years to apportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among the 50 states. The Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal representation based on census results to draw legislative districts implies that the census must be as accurate as possible. It takes 10+ years to plan and execute a census, with a necessary funding ramp-up over the course of each decade.

The U.S. Census Bureau must spend resources wisely. At the same time, it cannot cut corners in the effort to achieve a fair and accurate census. Unfortunately, the success of the 2030 Census is threatened if Census Bureau funding is frozen or reduced between now and 2030. The Census Bureau cannot plan and prepare for an accurate count in all communities — and produce other statistics required to administer federal programs, enforce civil rights laws, and steer economic policy — without appropriate funding increases year over year throughout the decade. **Congress must find a way to ensure adequate funding for the 2030 Census every year; it is constitutionally obligated to do so.**

## Background:

- Planning for the next national headcount will be one-third complete in 2024.
- In fiscal year 2024, the Census Bureau will choose a design and release an initial operational plan for the 2030 Census.
- For the subsequent three years, the bureau must test and refine new methods and operations in the field to make sure the next census will count all communities equally well. That is what the U.S. Constitution envisions, and it's up to Congress to make that happen.

The window of opportunity to research improvements that will reduce undercounts in rural areas; low-income neighborhoods; Black, Hispanic, and other historically undercounted communities; and Indian country will close soon. Modern counting methods are needed to increase accuracy and contain overall costs. But the only way to ensure these new methods improve the count and overcome present-day challenges is for Congress to invest in comprehensive testing and ongoing partnerships with local governments, trusted nonprofits, and businesses.

In plain budget terms, this means funding for 2030 Census planning must increase every year, *reasonably but consistently*, through mid-decade. Subsequent year-over-year increases will be larger as the census year approaches to pay for a final dress rehearsal, the hiring of census workers, local and regional census offices, address list updating, and an effective communications campaign to encourage participation.



## **Costs of failing to prepare:**

### Skewed and inaccurate data.

The 10-year cost of conducting a census — the very first responsibility of the federal government (Congress, specifically) in the Constitution — pales in comparison to the public, business, and philanthropic investments that are based on census results and other Census Bureau data. Data that reflect large and uneven undercounts and miscounts will skew the decisions based on those numbers; some communities will get more than their fair share of public services, economic development, and representation, while others will be shortchanged. Every lawmaker represents communities that get the short end of the stick when the census is not fair and accurate.

### Undercounts of rural communities and American Indian reservations.

Thorough testing of operations in a census-like environment, in different types of communities and counting situations, is critical to improving accuracy in historically undercounted communities. Last decade, Congress failed to meet the administration's request for 2020 Census planning in Fiscal Years 2012–2017, and annual funding ramp-ups often were delayed. Consequently, the Census Bureau was forced to *cancel every planned test in a rural area and on American Indian reservations*, including two of three dress rehearsal sites in 2018. Later, the bureau's check of its own work showed a net undercount of 5.64 percent on American Indian reservations, and a net undercount of 2.58 percent in areas counted with a modified census packet delivery method called "Update/Leave," which is used primarily in rural areas.

### Group facilities shortfalls.

Further, prior to the 2020 Census the bureau was unable to test new methods to count group facilities (e.g., college dorms, prisons, and nursing homes) electronically, instead falling back on more costly, time-consuming, and less accurate paper-based procedures. The bureau acknowledged an undercount of people living in Group Quarters and offered localities a chance to submit more data after the census was finished to update those numbers going forward.

As we look toward the 2030 Census, the Census Bureau, in consultation with Congress, must address many challenges to counting a growing and geographically, economically, and demographically diverse population fairly and accurately.

- Policymakers, researchers, and businesses increasingly demand more information to support their work, but traditional data collection methods are falling short.
- Questions on the census and related American Community Survey (ACS) are included because Congress established a need for the data in law.
- Modern operations and methods could help reduce the burden of response on members of your community and improve data quality, while meeting the information needs of lawmakers.
- The bureau also must reassure everyone that their personal information will remain confidential, especially if it is collected outside of the census and then used to improve census accuracy.
- Achieving these goals requires robust research and testing up front, and that work requires sufficient funding now and in the future.
- We call on Congress to recognize the threat to a successful 2030 Census, and the important policy decisions those data support, if federal spending is reduced or frozen across the board. Congress must ensure that planning and preparation for the next decennial count is fully funded every year.