

THREATS TO THE COUNT:

Undermining Our Nation's Most Fundamental Data Tool

The census is the nation's largest, most complex peacetime mobilization. Conducted once every ten years by the Census Bureau, it provides a critical snapshot of who lives in America. Census data shape our communities and political voice, determining where services go and how representation is allocated. It is the federal government's first responsibility in the U.S. Constitution and it is carried out by the Census Bureau. There are no do-overs when it comes to taking the census; the Census Bureau has to get it right the first time.

However, there have been a number of efforts that, taken together, will significantly impede the ability to accurately count communities that have been historically and persistently undercounted, underserved and underrepresented. These actions, if not halted, could lead to a count that paints an inaccurate picture of who is in America and hamper our ability to understand these communities' contributions and lived experiences.

Inadequate Funding: The Census Bureau needs steady increased funding throughout the decennial cycle in order to properly innovate, research, plan, and resource a successful 2030 Census. In order to have a fair and accurate census, Census Bureau funding must be predictable and provide for proper operational planning and execution.

Preparatory Tests at Risk: Lack of funding certainty, combined with the federal hiring freeze, has put the 2026 Census Test at risk. This test is essential for evaluating new methods and technologies needed for a successful 2030 Census, especially critical for reaching historically undercounted populations. Without it, the Census Bureau may miss key opportunities to identify challenges, refine operations, and avoid higher costs or errors during the full count.

Termination of Census Advisory Committees: Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick disbanded the Census Bureau's main advisory committees, eliminating key sources of community and expert input. This move undermines efforts to ensure transparency, equity, and accuracy in 2030 Census planning, particularly for historically undercounted populations, and risks weakening public trust and participation.

Restrictions on Census Bureau Follow Up Efforts: Section 621 of the House CJS FY25 bill would limit the Census Bureau to only two follow-up inquiries for voluntary surveys, hindering its ability to reach non-respondents, particularly in hard-to-count communities. This restriction could lead to incomplete and inaccurate census data, resulting in undercounts that affect federal resource distribution and political representation, especially for marginalized populations.

Data Sharing: The IRS's agreement to share taxpayer data with DHS and ICE for immigration enforcement raises serious privacy concerns and may discourage participation in federal data collection efforts. Fear of data misuse could lead immigrant communities, especially those with mixed-status households, to avoid the census and other surveys, resulting in undercounts and compromised data accuracy.

Citizenship Question and Apportionment Exclusion Efforts: Lawmakers, through amendments, appropriations riders, and standalone bills, have sought to add a citizenship question to the decennial census and exclude non-citizens from congressional apportionment counts. These proposals threaten the accuracy of the census, risk undercounts in immigrant and mixed-status communities, and could lead to unconstitutional representation disparities, reducing federal resources and political influence for diverse, high-population states.

Making the ACS Voluntary: Legislation such as S. 265, the Freedom from Government Surveys Act, proposes making the American Community Survey (ACS) voluntary, which would reduce response rates and compromise data quality, particularly for underrepresented populations. This would weaken the ACS's value as a key source for informed policymaking and equitable allocation of resources in such areas such as health care, housing, and infrastructure.

Congress Must Act Now to Ensure a Fair and Accurate 2030 Census:

- 1. Ensure Consistent, Laddered Funding:** Advocate for a multi-year, predictable funding stream to allow for phased implementation of census preparations, ensuring adequate support for the 2026 Census Test and other critical phases leading up to the 2030 Census.
- 2. Support the 2026 Census Test:** Ensure sufficient funding and resources for the 2026 test to evaluate and refine new data collection methods, outreach strategies, and technologies before the full census is conducted.
- 3. Reinstate Advisory Committees:** Push for the reestablishment of key advisory committees to provide expert oversight and community feedback on census planning and execution.
- 4. Oppose Harmful Legislation:** Resist efforts to add a citizenship question, exclude undocumented individuals from apportionment, or make the ACS voluntary, all of which would undermine the accuracy and inclusiveness of the census.
- 5. Protect Privacy and Participation:** Address concerns related to IRS data-sharing agreements by ensuring that data collected by the government remain protected and are not misused for enforcement purposes.