

Getting ready for 2020

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) December 21, 2017



The U. S. Constitution, in Article 1, Section 2, set in motion the process of counting all of the nation's inhabitants every 10 years. In calling for this census, our founding document states: "The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the [first Meeting](#) of the [Congress of the United States](#), and within every subsequent Term of ten Years." While Thomas Jefferson, in his capacity as secretary of state, was nominally in charge of conducting the first census in 1790, the actual enumeration was conducted by U.S. marshals of the respective judicial districts. The responsibility for carrying out the decennial census now resides with the Bureau of the Census, housed in the Department of Commerce.

In his testimony on Oct. 12, 2017, before the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross reminded the members of the critical importance of the census stating, "The census is the bedrock upon which we construct our system of democratic representation. It provides for apportionment, redistricting, and the distribution on hundreds of billions of dollars of federal funding." Ross noted to the committee that he himself had been a census taker while in college and that he had "first-hand knowledge of the unique challenges of conducting a census."

Although Ross engaged in hyperbole when claiming "the 2020 census will be the first decennial census to incorporate innovative methods and technologies into our work" (virtually every census has adopted innovative methods since at least the introduction of Hollerith punch cards that were used in the 1890 census tabulation), many changes are being proposed. They include decisions to introduce and promote internet responses; using telephone call centers as an additional channel for responses; using aerial imagery to conduct in-office address canvassing; and automating field procedures with mobile devices.

Need for additional funds

The introduction and testing of these innovative technologies will cost money. Ross' mission in testifying before the committee was to make sure that *an additional \$187 million is in the final FY2018 budget to fund the 2020 census. As of this writing it is not clear if that funding has been secured.*

We are just weeks away from 2018 when preparations for the decennial census should be in full gear. Already, there are three end-to-end test sites where address canvassing is underway in Pierce County, Washington, Providence County, Rhode Island, and the Bluefield, West Virginia, area. Although the process is called end-to-end, only in the Providence test site will the process lead to 2020 census-type tabulations. Was this due to budget constraints?

Questions about leadership

There is also concern about leadership at the Census Bureau since John Thompson abruptly resigned his post as director of the agency in May. Asked about this situation, a Commerce Department spokesperson responding on background stated, “Secretary Ross recently named Ron Jarmin and Enrique Lamas to interim leadership positions at the Census Bureau. Both have decades of experience at census. The secretary has the utmost confidence in their abilities to lead the Bureau, including preparations for the 2020 census, until the Senate confirms new leadership.”

‘Hard-to-count’ populations

Then there is the matter of reaching the “hard-to-count” populations. For example, in Maryland’s 7th Congressional District, represented by Rep. Elijah Cummings, the bureau reports that, “In the 2010 decennial census, 78.7 percent of this district’s households mailed back their questionnaire, requiring more costly and difficult in-person follow up from the Census Bureau to count the remaining 21.3 percent.”

Compounding this issue is the matter of those residing in the country without legally protected immigration status. Under the current climate of fear within certain immigrant communities, both they and their citizen relatives may opt not to be counted.

An accurate count

With all these concerns, the U.S. Government Accountability Office has [declared the 2020 Decennial Census at “high risk” of failure](#). For nearly 230 years, through Civil War, the threat and reality of international conflicts and the depths of the Great Depression, the work of the decennial census has been carried out and has achieved its constitutionally mandated mission. Can that record be sustained?

Planetizen, a planning-related news website, writes that the ongoing effort aimed at “dismantling of the administrative state” is having an effect at the Census Bureau — “with potentially disastrous consequences for governments of all shapes and sizes.”

Robert Shapiro, a former undersecretary of commerce for economic affairs, shares in that concern, writing, “Congress and now the Trump administration have set the 2020 decennial on a course that threatens its basic accuracy.”

Joe Nathanson heads Urban Information Associates, Inc., a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He writes a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.