



April 2, 2020

## 2020 Census Fieldwork Delayed by COVID-19

### Introduction

In a March 18, 2020, press release (CB20-RTQ.08), U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham announced that the bureau was suspending all 2020 census field operations until April 1 (but see the more detailed schedule, issued on March 21, below). This action, a response to the novel coronavirus disease first observed in 2019 (COVID-19) and designated a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, came at a critical time for the census. Although April 1 is the official Census Day, early data collection began in remote Toksook Bay, Alaska, on January 21. Other tightly timed field operations were underway or imminent, including the bureau's personal outreach to hard-to-count areas and groups. In-person visits to nonresponding households, originally set for mid-May, have been delayed by two weeks. Dr. Dillingham stated on March 18 that if "additional adjustments" became necessary, the bureau would communicate them "broadly and promptly." The latest press release on the topic, dated March 28 (CB20-RTQ.14), announced an extended suspension of field operations, until April 15. The release did not present another revised schedule for the individual operations, but noted that the bureau "continues to evaluate" them and "will communicate any further updates as soon as possible."

This In Focus notes the various components of the bureau's 2020 census fieldwork, with their original and, as of March 21, adjusted schedules. Whether the bureau will have to make further adjustments in the timing of all, or some, components is uncertain. The In Focus will be updated to reflect any new delays or developments.

### The Original Operational Schedule and March 21, 2020, Revision

#### The Initial Response Phase

Invitations to answer the census were mailed to about 95% of U.S. households from March 12 to March 20, 2020. By April 1, 36.2% of the households had responded, according to a Census Bureau press release issued the same day (CB20-CN.36). The Census Bureau, before the pandemic, had strongly encouraged online responses as the fastest, easiest, most accurate way to complete the census, and lately is promoting the internet for these advantages, plus no associated risk of contracting COVID-19. In addition, the bureau is accepting completed paper questionnaires by mail and responses by telephone. This initial phase of the census, in which households are encouraged to respond soon after receiving their invitations, was to continue from March 12 to July 31. The adjusted schedule extends the initial phase until August 14.

#### Update Leave

Another operation, Update Leave, covers not quite 5% of households, located where residents are unlikely to receive mail at their homes. Examples include across Puerto Rico and in other areas that have recently experienced natural disasters. Enumerators update the addresses of these households for the bureau's master address file and drop off paper census forms, invitations, and instructions for those who choose to answer the census online, with telephone assistance if requested. Originally scheduled for March 15 to April 17, the operation has been delayed and reset to end on May 1.

#### Update Enumerate

During Update Enumerate, enumerators are to update the addresses of, and interview in person, about 2,000 households in remote areas of northern Maine and southeast Alaska. The operation began on March 16 and was to end on April 30. It has been suspended and the end date extended until May 14. The bureau, to protect both census takers and respondents from COVID-19, has directed that enumerators conduct interviews outside homes, six feet away from respondents.

#### Mobile Questionnaire Assistance

The plan for Mobile Questionnaire Assistance is to have bureau staff help the public answer the census online at places frequented by large numbers of people, such as community centers and grocery stores. The operation was to occur from March 30 to July 31. The start has been delayed until April 13—a date that now seems in question—and the end until August 14.

#### Early Nonresponse Follow-Up

The purpose of this operation is to contact off-campus households around colleges and universities that have not answered the census and reach students there before they depart for the summer or graduate. Originally set to begin on April 9 and end on July 31, the operation has been rescheduled to extend from May 7 until August 14.

#### Nonresponse Follow-Up

The major follow-up effort, in which enumerators across the nation are to visit nonrespondents and collect their census data in person, is considered essential for achieving a complete, accurate census. The operation was originally scheduled for May 13 to July 31. The start has been delayed to May 28 and the end until August 14.

#### Group Quarters: Campus Housing for Students

Students living on campus are to be counted through their colleges and universities as part of the bureau's Group Quarters enumeration. Alternatively, students can answer the census online or on paper forms delivered at campus

housing and picked up there. Students who have left campus housing, are staying elsewhere because of the COVID-19 situation, and intend to return to school still are to report this housing as where they live—that is, their usual residence.

### **Other Group Quarters: Nursing Homes, Prisons, and Other Institutional Facilities**

Census takers, in cooperation with the facilities' administrators, are to enumerate these residents at the facilities. The operation was to begin on April 2 and end on June 5. It has been rescheduled for April 16 to June 19, and the bureau has asked administrators to choose options for enumeration that will reduce in-person contact.

### **Service-Based Enumeration**

In this operation, enumerators are to work with service providers to count homeless people at soup kitchens, shelters, and food vans that make scheduled stops. Originally set for March 30 to April 1, the operation has been rescheduled for April 29 to May 1.

### **Count of People at Transitory Locations**

From April 9 to May 4, census takers were to enumerate people staying at campgrounds, recreational vehicle parks, hotels, and marinas, if they did not usually live elsewhere. The operation is now to begin on April 23 and end on May 18.

### **Count of Homeless People Outdoors**

On April 1, enumerators were to count homeless people living outdoors in locations where they are known to sleep, including under bridges and highway overpasses, in parks, at rest stops, and at businesses that stay open all night. The operation has been delayed until May 1.

### **The Apportionment Deadline**

By law (Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (b)), the 2020 state census counts for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives must be delivered to the President no later than December 31, 2020. The fieldwork and myriad other operations that support the census, resulting in the state counts and corresponding numbers of House seats allocated to the individual states, are timed to allow for their completion, including final checks, before the legal deadline. The March 21 revised timeline for fieldwork shows delivery of the apportionment numbers as remaining on schedule. Whether this schedule, too, may be affected if field operations are delayed further is uncertain.

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