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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 decennial census field operations until April 1. 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 was 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. Dr. Dillingham stated on March 18 that if "additional adjustments" became necessary, the bureau would make them known "promptly."

A subsequent press release, dated March 28, 2020 (CB20-RTQ.14), gave notice that field operations would not resume until April 15.

An April 13, 2020, press release (CB20-RTQ.16) and new operations schedule indicated the bureau's need to delay release of the 2020 state census counts for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and the data for within-state redistricting past the respective December 31, 2020, and March 31, 2021, legal deadlines for these products (see Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (b) and (c)).

A May 4, 2020, press release (CB20-CN.44) and May 7 revised schedule announced a "phased restart" of certain 2020 census field operations, to begin immediately in selected areas "in coordination with federal, state, and local health officials." The bureau noted that field and Area Census Office (ACO) staff will receive training in safety measures to avoid contracting or transmitting COVID-19. Staff also are to receive personal protective equipment before operations restart. A list of the first ACOs chosen to reopen accompanied the release. The list, the bureau stated, is being updated weekly as more offices are added.

This In Focus notes the various major components of the bureau's 2020 census fieldwork; their original and latest schedules, as of May 7, 2020, with some subsequent updates; and relevant legislation.

The Original Operational Schedule and May 7, 2020, Revision, with Updates

Field Office Operations

Census Bureau managers and staff at 2020 census field offices are to conduct, according to the bureau, "administrative, training, deployment, and support activities" for the "peak data collection" phase of the

census. Part of the preparations involve "selecting and hiring field staff." The operations were to have begun on March 1, 2020, but were postponed until May 4 or later, depending on office location. The bureau, as noted on its 2020 census recruitment site (2020census.gov/jobs), "continues to accept applications for temporary part-time" census positions. "Applicants who have been offered" jobs "are still selected" for these positions and can continue checking the site for further information about when they will be fingerprinted and trained.

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 May 17, the Census Bureau reported, 59.6% of households had answered; 48.1% had responded online. The 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 answers by telephone. This initial phase of the census, in which households are asked to respond soon after receiving their invitations, was to continue from March 12 to July 31. The adjusted schedule extends the initial phase until October 31.

Remote Alaska

The operation that began in Toksook Bay on January 21, 2020, was to end on April 30. The tentative end date is now June 19, but, the bureau advised, "some areas with year-round populations will be enumerated" when enumeration "is safe to do."

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, 2020, and was to end on April 30. It has been suspended until June 14 and is to continue until July 29. The bureau, to protect both census takers and respondents from COVID-19, has directed that enumerators conduct interviews outside homes, at least six feet away from respondents.

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, 2020, in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, the operation was suspended. It restarted in selected ACOs stateside on May 4. The Puerto Rican operation resumed on May 22.

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, 2020. Currently suspended, it needs, according to the bureau, “further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

Early Nonresponse Follow-Up (Early NRFU)

The purpose of this operation was to contact off-campus households around colleges and universities that had not answered the census and reach students there before they departed for the summer or graduated. The bureau’s latest updated fieldwork schedule notes that NRFU (see below) now is to include the areas where Early NRFU would have been conducted, from April 9 to July 31, 2020.

Nonresponse Follow-Up (NRFU)

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. NRFU originally was scheduled for May 13 to July 31, 2020. The start has been delayed until August 11 and the end until October 31.

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. Online responses are another option. The in-person operation was to begin on April 2 and end on June 5, 2020. The revised schedule is July 1 to September 3, and the bureau has asked administrators to choose options for enumeration that will reduce direct personal contact.

Students living on campus were to be counted through their colleges and universities as part of Group Quarters enumeration; alternatively, they have been encouraged to answer the census online. Students who have left campus housing, are staying elsewhere because of the COVID-19 situation, and intend to return to school when the situation permits still are to report campus housing as their usual residence. The latest operational schedule does not discuss this enumeration.

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, 2020, the operation now, in the bureau’s assessment, “needs further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

Count of People at Transitory Locations

From April 9 to May 4, 2020, census takers were to enumerate people staying at campgrounds, recreational vehicle parks, hotels, and marinas, if they did not usually live elsewhere. The operation has been rescheduled tentatively to begin on September 3 and end on September 28, but, according to the bureau, “may need further review and coordination.”

Count of Homeless People Outdoors

On April 1, 2020, 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 bureau has reported that the operation now “needs further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

The Data for Apportionment

Under Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (b), the 2020 state census counts for House apportionment 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 apportionment 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. This process was to occur from July 31 to December 31. It now is scheduled to start on October 31, 2020, and end on April 30, 2021, four months past the legal deadline.

The Data for Within-State Redistricting

Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (c), requires that the bureau, by March 31, 2021, deliver to the states tabulations of census data for use in redrawing state congressional and legislative districts. The data now are to be delivered by July 31, 2021, four months after the statutory deadline.

Related Legislation

H.R. 6446 was introduced by Representative Clay Higgins on April 3, 2020, and referred to the House Oversight and Reform Committee, without further action. The bill would authorize the President to suspend 2020 census activities temporarily, until he determined that the COVID-19 situation warranted their resumption or until the national COVID-19 emergency, declared on March 13, 2020, ended.

On May 15, 2020, the House passed H.R. 6800, the fifth FY2020 emergency supplemental appropriations bill in response to COVID-19. The bill would provide \$400.0 million for the Census Bureau’s Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which funds the decennial census. (The bureau currently is drawing on a \$2.0 billion contingency fund designated in prior-year appropriations for emergencies that could arise during the census; see CRS In Focus IF11538, *Overview of FY2021 Appropriations for the Census Bureau*.) The legislation also would authorize a four-month extension of the deadlines for reporting apportionment and redistricting data, consistent with the reporting delays that the bureau announced on April 13.

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