

Updated December 22, 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 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 from Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and Dr. Dillingham (CB20-RTQ.16), with a 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 would receive training in safety measures to avoid contracting or transmitting COVID-19. Staff also were to receive personal protective equipment before operations restarted. A list of the first ACOs to reopen accompanied the release. The list was updated weekly through June 9 as more offices were added.

Dr. Dillingham, in an August 3, 2020, press release (CB20-RTQ.23), announced a revision of the earlier plan to delay releasing the apportionment numbers past December 31. The latest plan, the announcement stated, was to meet the deadline, "as required by law and directed by the Secretary of Commerce." The operations schedule was revised accordingly.

A press release dated October 13, 2020 (CB20-CN.119), stated that all 2020 census data collection operations would end not later than October 15, and the deadline held.

This In Focus discusses the various major components of the bureau's 2020 census fieldwork, their original and adjusted schedules, and related issues.

The Original Operations Schedule and Revisions

Field Office Operations

Census Bureau managers and staff at 2020 census field offices conducted, the bureau stated, "administrative, training, deployment, and support activities" for the "peak data collection" phase of the census. Part of the preparations involved "selecting and hiring field staff." The operations were to have begun on March 1, 2020, but were postponed until phased reopening occurred, from May 4 to June 12. By October 1, the bureau had stopped accepting new applications for 2020 census employment.

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 August 12, the Census Bureau reported, 63.5% of households had answered; 50.8% 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 continued citing these advantages, plus no associated risk of contracting COVID-19. In addition, the bureau accepted paper questionnaires by mail and answers by telephone. The initial phase of the census, in which households were asked to respond without further prompting by the bureau, was to continue from March 12 to July 31. After schedule adjustments, this phase concluded on October 15.

Remote Alaska

The operation that began in Toksook Bay on January 21, 2020, was to end on August 31 and was expected to be completed mostly on schedule, but, the bureau advised, "some areas with year-round populations" were to be enumerated when enumeration was "safe to do."

Update Enumerate

During Update Enumerate, enumerators were 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 was suspended until June 14, then was to continue until July 29. The bureau, to protect both census takers and respondents from COVID-19, directed that enumerators conduct interviews outside homes, at least six feet away from respondents.

Update Leave

Another operation, Update Leave, covered about 5 million households stateside and about 1.7 million in Puerto Rico, located where residents were unlikely to receive mail at their homes. Enumerators were to 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 chose to answer the census online, with telephone assistance if requested. Originally scheduled for March 15 to April 17, 2020, the operation was suspended. It restarted stateside in phases between May 4 and June 12, and in Puerto Rico on May 22.

Mobile Questionnaire Assistance

During Mobile Questionnaire Assistance, the bureau stated in a July 14, 2020, press release (CB20-CN.80), more than 3,000 bureau staff were to help the public answer the census online, using their own devices or a 2020 census tablet, in areas determined to have the lowest response rates and in weekly "coordination with local partners." The operation had been scheduled for March 30 to July 31 and was reset to run from July 13 through September 18.

Nonresponse Follow-Up

This major effort, in which enumerators across the nation visited about 56 million nonresponding households to collect their census data in person (while contacting others by telephone), was considered essential for a complete, accurate census. Nonresponse follow-up (NRFU) originally was scheduled for May 13 to July 31, 2020. The start was delayed until August 11 (except for a trial "soft launch" that began on July 16) and the end until October 31, but, as announced on October 13, NRFU and all other data collection operations ended on October 15. NRFU included nonresponding off-campus households around colleges and universities that originally were slated for early NRFU, from April 9 to July 31.

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

Census takers, in cooperation with the facilities' administrators, were to enumerate these residents at the facilities. Online responses were another option. The in-person operation was to begin on April 2 and end on June 5, 2020. The revised schedule was July 1 to September 3, and the bureau asked administrators to choose options for enumeration that would 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 were encouraged to answer the census online. Students who had left campus housing, were staying elsewhere because of the COVID-19 situation, and intended to return to school when the situation allowed still were to report campus housing as their usual residence. As Dr. Dillingham reported in July 29, 2020, testimony to the House Oversight and Reform Committee, the Census Bureau asked colleges and universities to provide records for off-campus students to improve their likelihood of inclusion in the census.

Service-Based Enumeration

In this operation, enumerators were to work with service providers to count homeless people at soup kitchens,

shelters, and food vans that made scheduled stops. Originally set for March 30 to April 1, 2020, the delayed operation was to occur from September 22 to September 24.

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 was rescheduled to begin on September 3 and end on September 28.

Count of Homeless People Outdoors

On April 1, 2020, enumerators were to count homeless people living outdoors in locations where they were known to sleep, including under bridges and highway overpasses, in parks, at rest stops, and at all-night businesses. The operation was rescheduled for September 23 and September 24.

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 apportionment counts and corresponding numbers of House seats allocated to the states, were timed to allow for their completion, including final quality checks and data corrections, before the legal deadline. This process was to occur from July 31 to December 31, then was rescheduled to begin on October 31, 2020, and end on April 30, 2021, four months past the legal deadline. As of August 3, 2020, the bureau was to release the apportionment data on time, but stated in an October 13 press release (CB20-CN.119) that it was "working hard" to process and deliver these data "as close to" December 31 as possible.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) testified at a December 3, 2020, House Oversight and Reform Committee hearing (GAO-21-262T) about the risks to 2020 census data quality through late-date operational and schedule changes caused by COVID-19 and related developments. Of particular concern, GAO noted, was the compressed time frame for post-data collection operations in order to meet statutory deadlines, resulting in some telephone calls instead of personal visits and more use of proxy responses to obtain NRFU data; fewer NRFU reinterviews for quality control; and less time to review the apportionment counts and resolve anomalies, such as duplicate responses and data mismatches.

The Data for Within-State Redistricting

Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (c), requires that by March 31, 2021, the tabulations of census data for use in redrawing state congressional and legislative districts be delivered to the states that have requested them. Under the adjusted schedule announced on April 13, 2020, the data were to be delivered by July 31, 2021, four months after the statutory deadline, but now are to be ready on the original schedule.

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