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Economy and national security depend on an accurate Census

By Major General Kendall P. Cox, U.S. Army (Retired)

Based on 36 years of experience as an engineer in the U.S. Army, I have three good reasons to worry that short-sighted planning for the 2020 Census is about to shortchange our economy and national security.

Reason One: Our ability to recover from natural disasters. Folks who read the Texas Almanac know we average over 130 tornadoes every year. Locals who've weathered so many storms here in Killeen know why we're part of what's known as "Flash Flood Alley." And we're all still reading headlines about Houston's struggles to rebuild after Hurricane Harvey.

Inaccurate census data endangers peoples' lives during these types of natural disasters. Among other things, the data spotlights the neighborhoods occupied by the elderly, the disabled, those living in mobile homes and other structures that don't do well in harsh weather. Without accurate data, we can't have sound evacuation plans.

Accurate data also ensures we've got the money we need to rebuild. A lot of the funding for disaster recovery comes from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) based on Census data. If our data isn't accurate, chances are we won't get enough money or know how to spend it where it's needed the most.

Reason Two: Economic jeopardy. Census data gives companies an accurate view of their customer base, the education level of a community's workforce and demographic information showing trends that impact their industries. If that data isn't sound, business leaders can make poor decisions that can ultimately impact unemployment and financial stability in local communities.

Reason Three: National security. Yes, you read that correctly. Right now, 71 percent of the nation's young adults cannot qualify for military service. That's because they don't have a high school diploma or can't pass our entrance exam, which assesses literacy and math skills. Or because they're physically unfit or have a criminal record.

Several taxpayer-funded programs – all of which have substantial bipartisan support – effectively address these problems. The National School Lunch Program ensures most students are eating healthier foods, which is the first step toward having a healthy weight. Head Start and state preschool programs build early math and early reading skills that improve long-term academic success. Health care made possible by the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) pays for mental health counseling that steers young people away from crime.

All of these programs are supposed to be funded based on proven need. That's why the U.S. Constitution mandates a Census to accurately determine how many children and teens in each community require these types of services.

Unfortunately, we're not prepared to implement the Census effectively. The U.S. Census Bureau wisely wants to use new technology to keep costs down and produce a more accurate count. Much of this technology hasn't been fully tested. While it should work, we don't know that it will. The stakes are high – in the 2015 fiscal year, for example, nearly \$600 billion was allocated for the programs listed above, and others, based on Census data.

The potential for inaccuracy is especially troubling to me as the former Deputy Commander of III Corps and Fort Hood and as the former U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Deputy Commander for Military and International Operations. Our mission at the Corps is to "deliver vital public and military engineering services . . . to strengthen our Nation's security, energize the economy and reduce risks from disasters."

We accomplish all of that with sound research and wise use of taxpayer dollars. We should expect the same of the U.S. Census, which is about \$3 billion short of what's required by 2020 to ensure the technology will deliver and people will participate in the Census. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross has requested an additional \$187 million for this fiscal year, but it's still millions less than what some experts say is needed.

The good news is that Congressman John Carter is a member of the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations' Commerce, Justice and Science Subcommittee, which influences Census funding. I support allocating the funding we need for a fair and accurate count. With hundreds of billions in taxpayer dollars at stake, we need to get this done right.

Kendall P. Cox retired from the U.S. Army as a Major General in 2015.