

**An Open Letter to the Bipartisan Leadership of Congress and Congressional Appropriations Committees,
from former U.S. Census Bureau Directors**

As former directors of the U.S. Census Bureau, serving under both Republican and Democratic administrations, we appreciate your attention to the bureau's activities at the pivotal point in the decennial census process. The Census Bureau is conducting final preparations for the 2020 Census; launch of peak operations and a massive communications campaign are just months away.

Because we share your goal of a full, fair, and accurate census, as the Constitution requires, we urge you to allocate a full-year appropriation for the 2020 Census as soon as legislatively possible, to avoid disruptions in the launch and steady implementation of robust census operations. We are deeply concerned that the 2020 Census effort could be hampered if the Census Bureau does not have the certainty of a full year funding level soon, whether the vehicle for such funding is a final Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Appropriations bill (standing alone or in an Omnibus appropriations package) or a second Continuing Appropriations Resolution.

We know that Congress continues to work diligently on finalizing appropriations bills for Fiscal Year 2020, which started on October 1. In the meantime, most of the government — including the Census Bureau — is operating at prior year (FY 2019) funding levels under the FY 2020 Continuing Appropriations Resolution (P.L. 116-59). Federal agency officials and program administrators understand how to continue their respective functions under the interim measure, as do Census Bureau officials whenever Continuing Resolutions are necessary.

However, *this year is different because it is a census year*. There are both constitutional and statutory deadlines for completing the census and publishing certain datasets; the enumeration itself revolves around a specific Census Day — April 1, 2020. The bureau must plan and prepare *now* for final modifications, such as expanded communications, increased Partnership Program staff, and Questionnaire Assistance Centers (all of which Congress directed). Otherwise, the window of opportunity (already closing) will be lost as momentum and focus shifts to peak operations. Similarly, the Bureau may face hiring challenges stemming from the low-unemployment economy (as it did in 2000) — a barrier that is best addressed in advance, rather than during the flurry of peak census operations, by carefully considering variable pay increases.

We do not believe the Census Bureau can plan effectively for these types of improvements without knowing its full budget for the census year. The bureau may, in fact, have sufficient funds at present to conduct early field operations and implementation testing, and to finalize preparations at previously planned levels of effort, during the current period covered by the first Continuing Resolution. However, without the certainty of its total budget for conducting the 2020 Census, officials understandably will spend available funds cautiously on operations and activities that could benefit from additional investment, in order to avoid cost overruns or a resource drain if any of the numerous threats facing this census materialize. We note that the self-imposed constraints could be exacerbated because the President's FY 2020 budget request for the 2020 Census (\$5.3 billion in new funding) is substantially lower than the proposed funding levels approved by both the U.S. House of Representatives (\$7.5 billion) and the Senate Appropriations Committee (\$6.7 billion).

Historically, funding for the decennial census has roughly doubled from the fiscal year ending in "9" to the census year, when the Bureau makes the once-a-decade-only shift from planning to implementing the census. A cautious and incomplete census launch could have cascading adverse effects on subsequent operations, as the Census Bureau works to grab the public's attention amidst a presidential campaign and possible disinformation campaigns from numerous sources.

The Census Bureau is already laying the final groundwork for the census. The complex, intricate, and iterative design of a decennial census leaves little room for error or modifications once the process is moving, without consequences for data quality, cost-effectiveness, and public confidence. The certainty and flexibility a full-year appropriation would bring will go a long way towards ensuring both robust risk management and enhanced activities that are specifically designed to overcome barriers to an accurate count in harder-to-enumerate communities.

In summary, we believe that the Census Bureau stands the best chance of conducting a census that counts all states, localities, communities, and population groups at equal levels of accuracy and coverage, if the director and senior officials know the resources available for final preparations and the entire enumeration process as soon as possible. While we are in no way promoting unchecked spending on the census, we do believe that a budget that recognizes the challenges at hand is one of the most prudent investments this nation can make to strengthen our democracy, support informed decision-making in the public and private sectors, and offer transparency in resource allocation and policy outcomes. It appears that Members of both legislative chambers have recognized those challenges in their respective proposed funding levels for FY 2020. We urge lawmakers to set the final appropriation within those parameters at the next possible opportunity, knowing that such a significant funding ramp-up occurs only once a decade.

We hope our observations, born of experience through multiple decennial censuses, provide a useful perspective as lawmakers and the administration work to finish action on spending bills for the current fiscal year. Please let us know if we can answer any questions or be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Vincent P. Barabba (1973–1976; 1979–1981)

Bruce Chapman (1981–1983)

Martha Farnsworth Riche (1994–1998)

Kenneth Prewitt (1998–2001)

Steven H. Murdock (2008–2009)

Robert M. Groves (2009–2012)

John Thompson (2013–2017)