Dear Director Santos and Associate Director Stempowski,

We, child advocates who are deeply concerned about the growing undercount of young children in the U.S. census, and particularly young children of color, are writing to identify a few major areas of research that we believe need to be included in the Bureau’s 2030 research agenda. We know that strategies to improve the count must be researched now and developed soon in order to be included in the first operational plan for the 2030 Census. We also know that despite major, and much appreciated, new strategies for counting young children in the 2020 Census, the undercount of young children continued to get worse. We believe that now is the time to conduct more innovative research to test a wider range of strategies for counting young children and the communities they live in.

In particular, as discussed in more detail below, we believe that in order to improve the count of young children it is essential to:

- Test more ways to improve the count of young children beyond the use of administrative data, because we must use multiple approaches to reverse the 40-year trend.
- Conduct research to understand why the census undercounts people of color and test approaches to improve that count, because young children of color are missed at much higher rates than white young children.
- Research how to communicate about the census with people with low literacy skills in any language, including English, and what ways they are most comfortable and most likely to respond, because young children are more likely to be missed when in communities with large shares of people who do not have a high school degree or GED.
- Conduct substate analyses of the count of young children in 2020, including racial and ethnic differentiation, to identify factors that lead to missing young children and especially young children of color.
- Conduct research on how to make the post-enumeration survey more accurate for young children.
- Embed in the research projects a focus on quality of response, beyond just response rates.

We want to thank you for the detailed process you went through to collect recommendations on research for 2030, and for your very helpful public website sharing your current research agenda at https://www.census.gov/data/data-tools/decennial/2030-census-research-explorer/ .

We also want to thank you for the several projects underway that we consider to be invaluable in exploring ways to address the young child undercount, described in that website. These include the ones directly focused on young children, including:

- Improving the Coverage of Young Children in the 2030 Census
- Research on the Undercount of Young Children Using Administrative Data
• **Improving Within-Household Coverage Using Administrative Data**

We believe that the following research projects, although not directly focused on young children, could help improve the count of young children:

• **Household Roster Revision:** Research has shown that respondents with young children make errors when they complete their household rosters. An improved rostering method is needed for all young children. We particularly note that because many young children and their families are very poor, are often homeless, and move among different family and friends’ homes, an improved rostering method is needed to better enumerate these mobile populations. 2030 research on rostering should be closely connected to the tailored quality improvement research to be certain that any coverage or other follow up questions work in tandem with the initial roster questions.

• **Research to Improve Communications, Messaging, and Advertising Efforts:** We are encouraged that early research on this has included some specific questions about young children, and strongly recommend that this research address this topic in depth. The CBAMS research in advance of the 2020 Census signally failed to research anything about why families don’t count their young children, and what might persuade them to count them. We note that it is essential that this project includes focus groups and cognitive research with parents of young children. It is critical that the Bureau talk with the respondents that consistently make errors involving young children. Ask them why they do not include young children in their Census roster and what the Bureau can do better to make it clear that young children must be included.

However, more is needed. For forty years, the count of children has gotten steadily worse while the count of adults has improved. There is something critically different about counting children that must be addressed. Recent research by Dr. William O’Hare shows that there is very little correlation between the total population coverage in a state and the coverage of young children in that state. (See County-level Coverage Rates of Young Children in the 2020 Census: The National Level Data Do Not Tell the Full Story, Figure 3, [https://countallkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/County-level-Coverage-Rates-of-Young-Children-in-the-2020-Census-The-National-Level-Data-Do-Not-Tell-the-Full-Story-1.pdf](https://countallkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/County-level-Coverage-Rates-of-Young-Children-in-the-2020-Census-The-National-Level-Data-Do-Not-Tell-the-Full-Story-1.pdf)). The same research shows that nearly half of the net young child undercount in the 2020 Census occurred in counties of over a million people, and two-thirds in counties of over half a million, which may suggest strategies for improving the count by focusing on approaches for improving the count in urban areas.

While it is critical to focus on the specific impediments to counting young children separately from the total population, the Bureau frequently includes them with adults. For example, in a recent U.S. Census Bureau (2023) publication, the Bureau states, “We refer to a population as HTC when our traditional methods of counting may not be sufficient to fully include them in the census. Understanding the needs helps us identify how we need to adapt to count everyone. The Census Bureau considers a framework that places HTC populations and their households into four segments:

• **Hard to locate.** People who live in homes that are not currently on the Census Bureau’s list of addresses as well as people who want to remain hidden.

• **Hard to contact.** People who are highly mobile, are experiencing homelessness, or for whom physical access barriers prevent contact, such as in gated communities.

• **Hard to persuade.** People who are suspicious of the government or have low levels of civic engagement.
• **Hard to interview.** People whose participation is hindered by language barriers, low literacy, health issues, or technological barriers (e.g., lack of internet access)."

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2023/10/understanding-undercounted-populations.html

A few lines below this quote, it lists HTC populations and young children as the first such group. While this framework may be useful for most groups, it does not fully explain why young children have a net high undercount even when the adults in their household are counted. Young children need to be viewed as a special problem in the Census. Viewing young children as just another undercounted population group is not likely to solve the problem.

Therefore, in addition to the projects already planned, we urge you to conduct research on the following topics.

• **Test more ways to improve the count of young children beyond the use of administrative data, because we must try multiple approaches to reverse the negative trend.** Suggestions include:
  o In either the Optimize Census Mail Strategies project or the Tailored Content Strategies Project, to test whether the “Every Door Direct Mailer” used in 2020 to households in communities with large numbers of young children was effective in boosting response and improving the quality of self-responses with respect to young children. The Bureau should also test language for prospective future mailers.
  o Consulting with census experts from other countries about their strategies for counting young children, since we know that many other countries face the same problem. See O’Hare, An international perspective on the undercount of young children in the U.S. Census, Statistical Journal of the IAOS 33 (2017) 289–304.
  o Establish an ad-hoc expert committee of people from outside the Census Bureau to work with the Undercount of Young children team as you have for the BERT initiative and for preparing the 2020 DA estimates.
  o Testing whether the schools can be used more effectively for census outreach. We note particularly that the Statistics in Schools programs, while providing strong curriculum options for teachers, rarely closed the loop in the materials to explain that people need to fill out census materials in order for us to be able to develop these interesting curriculum-related statistics. We also suggest that the Bureau work early with schools to determine what ways they can easily support census outreach, including establishing before or after school census assistance centers, making computer facilities available, setting up translation opportunities, sending paper and electronic materials home, among other ideas. We also encourage the Bureau to explore what time of year these efforts are most likely to be effective; we think it may be important to send awareness materials at the start of school in August 2029, for example, when parents are most likely to be looking for critical school materials.
  o Repeat and expand the work that Population Reference Bureau undertook to identify areas with high risks of undercounting young children and then test unique mailings in specific communities targeting the factors that might lead to not counting young
children. Creative efforts should be undertaken to explain why including every child in the census count is so important, with examples of data uses, perhaps even how the 2020 Census in missing children led to negative impacts on communities, such as inaccurate distribution of federal resources. Build unique mailings in specific communities (even in multiple languages).

- As part of the project Improving Internet self-response and non-id data collection, research ways to improve enumeration of everyone in households with unrelated persons, multiple families and complex living arrangements. For example, develop and test internet questions, paths, which allow someone to respond for themselves or their family and acknowledge that there is another non-related person or persons living or staying at that address. Then, a path should be made for a separate response that would later be allowed to be combined with the other response as the full accounting of the people residing at a given address. There are strong indications that children are often missed as part of a subfamily so the research should test ways to be sure those subfamilies are counted.

- **Research why the census undercounts people of color and test approaches to improve that count.** Young children of color are missed at much higher rates than white young children. If we want to improve the count of young children, we have to address the problems in counting people of color. While some of the research already planned could improve the count of people of color -- notably the research on improving within household coverage using administrative data -- we also need research that directly looks at the racial and ethnic differences. In this context, one item that we believe needs research is usage of the three ways people could respond (internet, phone, and paper) broken out by major racial category and ethnicity. We are concerned that moving to an internet-only based data collection process might improve the count of white people but further reduce the count of people of color. The long-delayed Census Bureau report on 2020 Census response rates might help us get a better handle on response operations by race and ethnicity. We thank the Bureau for forming a Historically Undercounted Populations Working Group, and hope that it can play the same role in developing important research on this topic that the Young Child Working Group has played in developing research on counting young children.

- **Research how to count people with low literacy skills.** We are delighted to hear that the Bureau just added a project on reaching people with low literacy skills (as announced at the National Advisory Committee (NAC) meeting). The number of adults in this country with low literacy skills is very high. According to a recent study from the Department of Education, roughly half of U.S. adults, aged 16 to 74 years old — 130 million people — lack full literacy proficiency. That study shows 37 million adults lack literacy proficiency in English and another 11 million lack the ability to be tested for reasons such as language barriers. Another 66 million have higher skills but could still struggle with complex documents. The Bureau’s research should help improve the count of children because young children are more likely to be missed when in communities with large shares of people who do not have a high school degree or GED.

1 The best data on literacy in the US, we think, comes from this international study: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/index.asp. The 2017 results show 19 percent of US adults performing at Level 1 or below in literacy, and 48 percent performed at Level 3 or above. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/national_results.asp. Descriptions of what each level means can be found at https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/measure.asp?section=1&sub_section=3.
low literacy skills and seeking their advice on what research to conduct. This research should cover at least three topics:
  o where and how people with low literacy skills get information (for example, one expert has advised us that people with low literacy skills are regularly online, using YouTube and music stations),
  o what messages would appeal to them to respond, and
  o what method of response they prefer and are most likely to use.

• We also encourage consulting literacy experts on the structure of the census form language. Although the decennial census form is meant to be easily accessible, its design seems primarily to reflect attention to vocabulary and less attention to syntax and formatting which can compromise response among less literate potential respondents. The rostering instructions, crucial to assuring a complete count of children in a household, are particularly problematic as a result of multiple distractors and clauses that add cognitive burden. Research will need to include attention to the multiple dimensions of functional literacy (prose, document, and quantitative) as analyzed by Educational Testing Service research. https://nces.ed.gov/naal/literacytypes.asp . Particular attention needs to be given to formatting of the online questionnaire because uneven broadband access is likely to continue in the coming decade and many less literate low-income households will continue to rely on mobile devices with more limited screen “real estate” if they are to respond online. The issue of low literacy and census response is not simply one of English-language proficiency; it also is closely linked to prevailing levels of educational attainment among immigrants, especially Mexican and Central American immigrants from rural communities. There are, for example, about 11 million Mexican-born immigrants living in the U.S. and more than half have less than a high school education. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states-2019#age_education_employment . A particularly promising strategy to explore, for example, would be Census Bureau messaging to promote “collaborative literacy,” that is, messages that encourage and make it easier for family members, friends, schools, and community-based organizations to help less literate respondents respond to the census. (See national literacy expert Stephen Reder’s work for detailed discussion of the issues and the concept of “giving literacy away” https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED253775.pdf .)

• Conduct substate analyses of the count of young children in 2020, including racial and ethnic differentiation, to identify factors that lead to missing young children and especially young children of color. One such effort, for example, makes it clear that larger counties account for the vast majority of the national net undercount for the population age 0 to 4. In the 142 largest counties based on total population, there was a net undercount of 655,661 persons ages 0 to 4 which accounts for about two-thirds of the nationwide net undercount for this age group. https://countallkids.org/resources/county-level-coverage-rates-of-young-children-in-the-2020-census-the-national-level-data-do-not-tell-the-full-story/ . This kind of information can help the Census Bureau develop strategies specific to the communities where children are most at risk of being missed.

• Research how to improve the Post Enumeration Survey (PES) with respect to young children. Because the current PES is not an accurate assessment of the undercount of young children, we are unable to use it to get important data on components of coverage for young children, much less get those components by race and ethnicity. For the two projects on the post-enumeration survey, the Bureau should include a specific focus on improving the data for young children. This might involve assembling an ad-hoc advisory group for the 2030 PES and/or asking the National Academy of Sciences to focus on this issue.
• **Develop a measure of household response completeness.** The quality measures that were released shortly after the 2020 census were typically based on simple status codes that did not reflect within household coverage meaning whether everyone in the household was counted. [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/2020-census-operational-quality-metrics.html#:~:text=The%20metrics%20show%20how%20the,of%20addresses%20that%20responded%20online.](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/2020-census-operational-quality-metrics.html#:~:text=The%20metrics%20show%20how%20the,of%20addresses%20that%20responded%20online.) While important, they did not address the core issue at the heart of the undercount of young children or other communities such as immigrant communities, communities of color, or rural communities. A measure of household completeness could be an extension of some imputation and allocation rates that are usually published with the detailed population and Housing Characteristics data.

• **Increase the focus in existing projects on quality of response.** The Optimize Census Mail project and Tailored Contact Strategies project should include more than improving the number of responses. They should research improving the quality of response, specifically the best ways to accurately enumerate complete households. For example, moving everyone to respond via the web may not be the best idea for some groups. One example is the every-door-direct-mailer. It could be used to educate people about modes of response, residence rules, and other items identified as creating challenges for responses. It also could be used to remind people of the reasons for the census and why, for example, kids should be included. The targeted quality improvement project should work with the Undercount of Young Children team to be sure that special follow-ups, coverage probes, targeted mailings, reminders, etc. are maximized for households with children and households in areas with expected undercounts of children.

Thank you again for your attention to the count of young children and for the great openness you have shown to public stakeholders’ recommendations for research. We hope that this letter will help you further develop the essential research that will be needed to conduct a successful count of young children in 2030, and also improve the count of young children in the American Community Survey and other critical Bureau work.

Sincerely,

Coalition on Human Needs (contacts: Deborah Weinstein, dweinstein@chn.org and Deborah Stein, dstein@chn.org)

First Focus on Children (contact: Michelle Dallafiore, michelle@firstfocus.org)

Partnership for America’s Children (contacts: Marquita Little Numan, mnuman@foramericaschildren.org, Jasmine Jones, jjones@foramericaschildren.org)