

August 31, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy,

The undersigned organizations, representing metropolitan, regional, and rural planning organizations from across the nation, are writing to express significant concerns about specific elements related to the 2020 United States census, namely: the reduction, by one month, in the amount of time available for data collection; the implementation of differential privacy; and the treatment of population counts for communities with colleges, universities, and other educational institutions impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are particularly troubled by changes announced by the U.S. Census Bureau to reduce the time allotted for in-person and virtual data collection by one month. Moving up the date on which the Complete Count effort will end, from October 31 to September 30, will sacrifice data comprehensiveness and accuracy in the interest of speed. As recently as April, Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham sought statutory relief to allow for additional time to deliver its apportionment counts in response to challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to, in part, “ensure a complete and accurate count of all communities.” Most states and cities trail their response rate from 2010, and an abrupt change in the end of data collection makes it more likely that these response rates will not catch up to previous levels.

The shortened data collection period will result in a more significant undercount of so-called “hard to count” populations, including minority populations, young children, and those with no or poor internet access. This last category is particularly notable for the 2020 census, which relied much more heavily than in the past on virtual data collection. Minority and lower-income households lack internet connectivity at much higher rates, further exacerbating the ongoing challenge of properly counting these communities. Additional time is required, therefore, for the Census Bureau to properly conduct in-person interviews and other outreach with these households to ensure they are properly represented in the final counts.

Regional, rural, and metropolitan planning organizations, and the communities in which we operate, rely upon and are impacted by census data in several important ways. Census data are used to calibrate and validate the transportation and land-use models that we use to evaluate our transportation systems and prioritize projects; census data determines which communities have sufficient population to designate a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and which of those are designated as transportation management areas (TMAs); census data is necessary for our organizations to demonstrate compliance with Title VI, Environmental Justice, and Limited English Proficiency requirements of federal law; and

census data helps determine how trillions of dollars of federal funds will flow to states over the next 10 years and how funds will be distributed within states. As a result, an undercount caused by the reduction in time available for data collection can have significant impact on these communities and are particularly harmful for the “hard to count” populations. Communities with higher proportions of “hard to count” residents may not receive proper federal and state support due to an undercount.

Policymakers and practitioners utilize several tools and methods that rely on census data. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uses census data in its Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool. Tools such as this allow for decisionmakers to identify communities that are negatively and disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards and ensure that environmental statutes and protections such as the Clean Air Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act are equitably enforced. It is also important to note that there are several federal funding programs that rely on census data or census-derived data, including the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Capital Investment Grants. Without accurate census counts, critical tools, funding, and programs will be compromised and “hard to count” communities will suffer.

As organizations that rely on Census Bureau data to make informed policy and infrastructure investment decisions, the reduced census timeline raises troubling possibilities. Therefore, we strongly request that the administration reconsider this decision and provide additional time to ensure as comprehensive a survey as possible is performed.

In addition to the reduced census timeline, two other census-related issues raise concern for our organizations.

First, differential privacy (DP), the process by which the Census Bureau is attempting to ensure the confidentiality of individual respondents, may have similarly serious consequences on the allocation of federal funds, proportional representation, and the data that informs decision-making at every level of government and across the private sector. The use of DP will change important designations such as Opportunity Zones, Environmental Justice Areas, Qualified Census Tracts, and many others. DP appears to have particularly serious problems in very high population areas (where DP results in undercounts, undermining resource distribution) and very small population areas (where DP causes greater levels of data inaccuracy, undermining reliability). We encourage the Bureau to ensure that efforts to protect respondent confidentiality do not incorporate systematic biases that undermine the usability and reliability of census-derived data (including through the American Community Survey).

Second, the unprecedented situation regarding COVID-19 and its impact on university and college communities have altered response rates in those towns and cities. In the spring, millions of students were unable to remain at school when campuses were closed due to the coronavirus. Many of these students returned to the communities where their parents live and for those that remained, response rates in many cases remain far below historic levels. Given that the campus closures are a temporary measure, it would be grossly unfair to the many communities across the nation that house our colleges and universities to drastically undercount their population and deny them adequate funding and proportional representation as a result. While we appreciate the efforts the Census Bureau has taken to address this concern, student privacy requirements and other factors may yet prevent accurate counts in some communities. Reducing the Complete Count effort by 30 days will only serve to exacerbate this problem. We strongly request that the Census Bureau work to ensure an accurate count in each

community that houses a college, university, or other educational institution impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, given that the results of the decennial census will directly impact regional, rural, and metropolitan planning organizations, and the communities in which we operate, we recommend that the Census Bureau establish a working group with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as a way to mitigate the concerns outlined in this letter once the counts are completed.

The census process will impact every state, community, and region in the nation. It is in everybody's interest that the Census Bureau be given the time and resources necessary to complete its work in a comprehensive and accurate manner. We look forward to continuing our efforts, as partners with the Census Bureau, to help make this outcome a reality.

Sincerely,

Alabama

Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission
Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments

Arizona

Rural Transportation Advocacy Council
SouthEastern Arizona Governments Organization
City of Glendale
Maricopa Association of Governments

Arkansas

Central Arkansas Planning and Development District
Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District, Inc.
Western Arkansas Planning and Development District

California

Association of Bay Area Governments
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
San Diego Association of Governments
San Joaquin Council of Governments
San Luis Obispo Council of Governments
Southern California Association of Governments
Tulare County Association of Governments

Colorado

Archuleta County Complete County Committee
City of Cortez
La Plata County Board of County Commissioners
Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado

Southwest Colorado Council of Governments
Town of Bayfield

Connecticut

Capitol Region Council of Governments

Florida

Apalachee Regional Planning Council
Broward Metropolitan Organization
Central Florida Regional Planning Council
Emerald Coast Regional Council
MetroPlan Orlando
North Central Florida Regional Planning Council
Northeast Florida Regional Council
South Florida Regional Planning Council
Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council
Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council
Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council

Georgia

Atlanta Regional Commission
Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission
Northeast Georgia Regional Commission
River Valley Regional Commission
Southern Georgia Regional Commission
Southwest Georgia Regional Commission

Illinois

Champaign County Regional Planning Commission
Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning
Region 1 Planning Council
Southeastern Illinois Regional Planning & Development Commission

Indiana

Area Plan Commission of Tippecanoe County
Bloomington-Monroe County Metropolitan Planning Organization
East Central Indiana Regional Planning District
Evansville Metropolitan Planning Organization
Kankakee-Iroquois Regional Planning Commission
Michiana Area Council of Governments
North Central Indiana Regional Planning Council
Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission
Southern Indiana Development Commission

Iowa

Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization
Region XII Council of Governments
East Central Iowa Council of Governments

Kansas

Mid-America Regional Council* (Missouri & Kansas)

Kentucky

Barren River Area Development District
Buffalo Trace Area Development District
Cumberland Valley Area Development District
Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency
Kentucky River Area Development District
Lake Cumberland Area Development District
Lincoln Trail Area Development District
Pennyrile Area Development District

Maine

Eastern Maine Development Corporation
Greater Portland Council of Governments
Northern Maine Development Commission

Massachusetts

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
Cape Cod Commission
Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
Franklin Regional Council of Governments
Metropolitan Area Planning Council
Northern Middlesex Council of Governments
Old Colony Planning Council

Michigan

Networks Northwest
Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
Western U.P. Planning and Development Region
Eastern U.P. Regional Planning and Development Commission

Minnesota

Mid-Minnesota Development Commission
Northspan
Region Five Development Commission
Region Nine Development Commission

Mississippi

North Central Planning & Development District

Missouri

Missouri Association of Councils of Government

Mo-Kan Regional Council

Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission

Southeast Missouri Regional Planning & Economic Development Commission

Mid-America Regional Council* (Missouri & Kansas)

Montana

Bear Paw Development Corporation

Nebraska

Southeast Nebraska Development District

South Central Economic Development District, Inc.

Nevada

Western Nevada Development District

New Jersey

Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission* (Pennsylvania & New Jersey)

New Mexico

Southwest New Mexico Council of Governments

New York

Capital District Regional Planning Commission

Orange County Transportation Council

North Carolina

Land of Sky Regional Council

Lumber River Council of Governments

NC Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization

Southwestern Commission

Town of Cary

Triangle J Council of Governments

Ohio

Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission

Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association

Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission

Oklahoma

Association of South Central Oklahoma Governments
Southwest Oklahoma Regional Transportation Planning Organization

Oregon

NE Oregon Economic Development District
Oregon Cascades West Council of Governments
South Central Oregon Economic Development District

Pennsylvania

Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission
Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission* (Pennsylvania & New Jersey)

South Carolina

Grand Strand Area Transportation Study
Lowcountry Council of Governments
Santee-Lynches Regional Council of Governments
Waccamaw Regional Council of Governments

Tennessee

East Tennessee Development District

Texas

Brazos Valley Council of Governments
East Texas Council of Governments
Houston-Galveston Area Council
North Central Texas Council of Governments
Texarkana Metropolitan Planning Organization

Utah

Southeastern Utah Association of Governments
Uintah Basin Association of Governments
Wasatch Front Regional Council

Vermont

Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission
Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission
Windham Regional Commission

Virginia

New River Valley Regional Commission

Washington

Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments
Puget Sound Regional Council

West Virginia

KYOVA Interstate Planning Commission
Mid Ohio Valley Regional Planning and Development Council

Washington, D.C.

Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations
Community Transportation Association of America
National Association of Development Organizations
National Association of Regional Councils

** Denotes a multi-state agency*