



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

February 2, 2023

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Krishnamoorthi:

I write in response to your December 5, 2022, and January 5, 2023, letters conveying your concerns about the American Community Survey, a potential population undercount of the state of Illinois during the 2020 Census, and Vintage 2022 Population Estimates.

The 2020 Decennial Census – a Historic Census

As you know, every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a census to determine the number of people living in the United States. The 2020 Census conducted a count of residents of the United States and five U.S. territories. It marked the 24th census in U.S. history and the first time that all households were invited to respond to the census online. It was also a census unlike any other, with the United States and much of the world facing the COVID-19 pandemic. But thanks to hundreds of thousands of people and partners, we all came together to finish the count.

Despite our best efforts every decade, we know that no census can be perfect. The 2020 Census undercounted many of the same population groups we have historically undercounted while overcounting others. Our staff, our partners, and communities across the nation went to extraordinary lengths to get as complete a count as possible while also confronting new challenges posed by a once-in-a-century pandemic. When the pandemic hit, we adapted quickly. We benefitted greatly from the success of the online response option, which was available for people to respond even when the nation was locked down for the pandemic. Four out of five households that responded on their own did so online. We believe those online efforts made a difference in reaching people but understand they could not fully overcome the unprecedented challenges of 2020. Looking forward, we are committed to providing quality data about the nation's people. To that end, we welcome your ideas on how we can do better in the future to improve the census and address possible overcounts and undercounts.

The 2020 Demographic Analysis and Post-Enumeration Survey

In addition to all the efforts we make to conduct a quality census, we also conduct extensive work each decade to measure and understand where coverage errors occurred, what might

have caused them, and how to use such information to plan research and operations for 2030. Four major areas of focus are: (1) conducting a series of planned assessments and evaluations of 2020 census operations; (2) providing quality indicators in the form of operational metrics and preliminary response data; (3) comparing census results to the 2020 Demographic Analysis Estimates; and (4) conducting a Post-Enumeration Survey. For instance, Demographic Analysis (DA) and the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) offer insights into how well a decennial census counted the population. Although these statistical products cannot be used to change the final census count, they are useful in assessing the current census, determining how best to estimate the population between now and 2030, and helping to improve future censuses.

DA is one method used to evaluate the quality of the census. We use current and historical vital records, data on international migration, and Medicare records to produce national estimates of the population on April 1 by age, sex, broad race categories, and Hispanic origin. The DA population estimates are independent of the decennial census. The results are used to produce estimates of net coverage error, which are calculated as the percent difference between the census counts and the DA population estimates.

DA provides a range of net coverage errors—low, middle, and high—by varying the level of historical births, international migration, and Medicare enrollment records across the three series. Depending on the series, DA results show both an undercount and overcount nationally: the low series has a net coverage error estimate of 0.22 percent (a slight overcount); the middle series estimates net coverage error at -0.35 percent (a slight undercount); and the high series shows a net coverage error of -1.21 percent. Importantly, DA estimates are only available for the national level, so these results do not provide insight into coverage for the state of Illinois or any other sub-national area or group.

The Census Bureau also uses PES to measure the accuracy of the census by independently surveying a sample of the population. The PES is a separate and independent survey of a sample of households that we match against census results for the same households. The results of those comparisons then allow us to estimate undercounts and overcounts in the census.

As in the past, PES results suggest that in 2020, some states experienced undercounts and some experienced overcounts. It also suggested that the 2020 Census undercounted many of the same population groups we have historically undercounted, such as the Black or African American population, the American Indian or Alaska Native population living on a reservation, the Hispanic or Latino population, and people who reported being of Some Other Race. Young children, particularly ages 0 to 4, have been persistently undercounted in previous decennial censuses. The PES does not tell us why there may have been undercounts or overcounts for any particular person or household, but does provide a valuable tool that helps us gain insight into the quality of the 2020 Census, and where to focus efforts in the future in order to reduce census errors.

In addition to these efforts we've conducted in previous decades, the Census Bureau established a team of experts, the Base Evaluation and Research Team (BERT), to research the feasibility of taking coverage measures from 2020 DA, PES, and other sources into account in the development of the official population estimates. Although the team's research has been progressing over recent months, the specific timeline for potential adjustments to the estimates is not yet known and will be necessarily dependent on the findings as they relate to coverage measures (and other data sources), strategy of incorporation, and development that will need to occur before any changes to the April 1, 2020, estimates base may be made. Contingent on the research findings, the soonest potential adjustments could be implemented into the estimates base would be for the Vintage 2023 estimates series, which is scheduled to be released on a rolling basis from December 2023 through June 2024. As such, coverage results were not incorporated into the population estimates from the Vintage 2022 series that were released in December 2022.

American Community Survey (ACS)

The ACS is an ongoing survey that provides vital information on a yearly basis about our nation and its people. This is in contrast to the decennial census, which occurs every ten years. Through the ACS, the Census Bureau knows more about jobs and occupations, educational attainment, veterans, whether people own or rent their homes, and other topics. Public officials, planners, and entrepreneurs use this information to assess the past and plan for the future. When individuals respond to the ACS, they are helping their community plan for hospitals and schools, support school lunch programs, improve emergency services, build bridges, and inform businesses looking to add jobs and expand to new markets, and more.

The concept of an overcount or undercount does not apply to the ACS because the data collected from the ACS are from a sample of the population. Unlike the decennial census, which contacts every household in the nation, the ACS samples approximately 3.5 million housing unit addresses each year. The information obtained from the sample is used to estimate characteristics about the total population, which is then controlled to the Census Bureau's official population estimates from the Population Estimates Program (PEP). Thus, the ACS estimates will follow the estimates supplied by the PEP, including any future enhancements being considered.

Road to the 2030 Census

Planning for the 2030 Census is underway. As part of these efforts, the Census Bureau is committed to learning from the 2020 Census so that, should we face the same or similar challenges, we can overcome them in 2030. To help us improve the census, we are committed to actively listening to diverse perspectives from across the United States. The better we understand the people we measure, the more prepared we can be to produce better, more

relevant, and more useful data. Therefore, we welcome feedback, and hope you engage with us as we plan for the 2030 Census.

Within the 2030 Census planning, we are currently in the Design Selection Phase. This phase includes research, testing, and operational planning and design work to inform the selection of the initial 2030 Census operational design—the big-picture plan for conducting the census. We posted a Federal Register Notice (FRN) to engage with our stakeholders on the development and implementation strategies that improve the way people participate in the 2030 Census. The comment period (from August 17 to November 15, 2022) resulted in more than 8,000 comments from the public. The responses from the FRN, along with all the quality assessments and metrics, will provide critical input on how to improve the 2030 Census as we prepare for April 1, 2030.

Thank you again for your inquiry and your continued support of the Decennial Census Program. Should you have any questions, please contact me at 301-763-6100 or cao@census.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Lang', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Alan Lang,
Acting Chief
Office of Congressional
and Intergovernmental Affairs