

Updated April 16, 2020

2020 Census Fieldwork Delayed by COVID-19

Introduction

In a March 18, 2020, press release (CB20-RTQ.08), U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham announced that the bureau was suspending all 2020 census field operations until April 1. This action, a response to the novel coronavirus disease first observed in 2019 (COVID-19) and designated a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, came at a critical time for the census. Although April 1 was the official Census Day, early data collection began in remote Toksook Bay, Alaska, on January 21. Other tightly timed field operations were underway or imminent, including the bureau's personal outreach to hard-to-count areas and groups. In-person visits to nonresponding households, originally set for mid-May, were delayed by two weeks. Dr. Dillingham stated on March 18 that if "additional adjustments" became necessary, the bureau would communicate them "broadly and promptly."

A subsequent press release on the topic, dated March 28, 2020 (CB20-RTQ.14), announced an extended suspension of field operations, until April 15. The release did not present another revised schedule for the individual operations, but noted that the bureau continued "to evaluate" them and would "communicate any further updates as soon as possible."

The latest communication (CB20-RTQ.16) and accompanying schedule, issued on April 13, 2020, indicated that the bureau would delay release of the 2020 state census counts for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and the data for within-state redistricting past the respective December 31, 2020, and March 31, 2021, legal deadlines for these products (see Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (b) and (c)). The bureau gave three reasons for rescheduling: to "protect the health and safety of the American public and Census Bureau employees"; to "implement guidance from federal, state, and local authorities regarding COVID-19"; and to "ensure a complete and accurate count of all communities."

This In Focus notes the various major components of the bureau's 2020 census fieldwork, with their original and, as of April 13, 2020, latest schedules. The In Focus will be updated to reflect any additional developments.

The Original Operational Schedule and April 13, 2020, Revision

Field Office Operations

Census Bureau managers and staff at 2020 census field offices are to conduct, according to the bureau, "administrative, training, deployment, and support activities

for the "peak data collection" phase of the census. Part of the preparations involve "selecting and hiring field staff." The operations were to have begun on March 1 but have been postponed until June 1. The bureau's 2020 census recruitment site (2020census.gov/jobs) has posted, under a COVID-19 banner, a notice that the bureau "continues to accept applications for temporary part-time" census positions. "Applicants who have been offered" jobs "are still selected" for these positions and can continue checking the site for "additional information on how and when" they will be trained.

The Initial Response Phase

Invitations to answer the census were mailed to about 95% of U.S. households from March 12 to March 20, 2020. By April 13, more than 48% of the households had responded, according to Census Bureau press release CB20-RTQ.16. The bureau, before the pandemic, had strongly encouraged online responses as the fastest, easiest, most accurate way to complete the census, and lately is promoting the internet for these advantages, plus no associated risk of contracting COVID-19. In addition, the bureau is accepting completed paper questionnaires by mail and responses by telephone. This initial phase of the census, in which households are encouraged to respond soon after receiving their invitations, was to continue from March 12 to July 31. The adjusted schedule extends the initial phase until October 31.

Remote Alaska

The operation that began in Toksook Bay on January 21 was to end on April 30. It will be completed "mostly" on schedule, the bureau has reported, "though some areas with year-round populations will be enumerated when it is safe to do so."

Update Enumerate

During Update Enumerate, enumerators are to update the addresses of, and interview in person, about 2,000 households in remote areas of northern Maine and southeast Alaska. The operation began on March 16 and was to end on April 30. It has been suspended until June 14 and is to end on July 29. The bureau, to protect both census takers and respondents from COVID-19, has directed that enumerators conduct interviews outside homes, at least six feet away from respondents.

Update Leave

Another operation, Update Leave, covers not quite 5% of households, located where residents are unlikely to receive mail at their homes. Examples include across Puerto Rico and in other areas that have recently experienced natural disasters. Enumerators update the addresses of these households for the bureau's master address file and drop off

paper census forms, invitations, and instructions for those who choose to answer the census online, with telephone assistance if requested. Originally scheduled for March 15 to April 17 in the 50 states, the District of Columbia (DC), and Puerto Rico, the operation has been delayed and reset to begin on June 13 and end on July 9 in the states and DC. The Puerto Rican operation “needs further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders,” the bureau has noted.

Mobile Questionnaire Assistance

The plan for Mobile Questionnaire Assistance is to have bureau staff help the public answer the census online at places frequented by large numbers of people, such as community centers and grocery stores. The operation was to occur from March 30 to July 31. Currently suspended, it needs, according to the bureau, “further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

Early Nonresponse Follow-Up

The purpose of this operation is to contact off-campus households around colleges and universities that have not answered the census and reach students there before they depart for the summer or graduate. The bureau’s latest revised fieldwork schedule does not mention this operation, which originally was to begin on April 9 and end on July 31.

Nonresponse Follow-Up

The major follow-up effort, in which enumerators across the nation are to visit nonrespondents and collect their census data in person, is considered essential for achieving a complete, accurate census. The operation was originally scheduled for May 13 to July 31. The start has been delayed to August 11 and the end until October 31.

Group Quarters: Campus Housing for Students

Students living on campus are to be counted through their colleges and universities as part of the bureau’s Group Quarters enumeration. Alternatively, students can answer the census online or on paper forms delivered at campus housing and picked up there. Students who have left campus housing, are staying elsewhere because of the COVID-19 situation, and intend to return to school still are to report this housing as where they live—that is, their usual residence.

Other Group Quarters: Nursing Homes, Prisons, and Other Institutional Facilities

Census takers, in cooperation with the facilities’ administrators, are to enumerate these residents at the facilities. Online responses are another option. The in-person operation was to begin on April 2 and end on June 5. The revised schedule is July 1 to September 3, and the bureau has asked administrators to choose options for enumeration that will reduce direct personal contact.

Service-Based Enumeration

In this operation, enumerators are to work with service providers to count homeless people at soup kitchens, shelters, and food vans that make scheduled stops. Originally set for March 30 to April 1, the operation now,

in the bureau’s assessment, “needs further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

Count of People at Transitory Locations

From April 9 to May 4, census takers were to enumerate people staying at campgrounds, recreational vehicle parks, hotels, and marinas, if they did not usually live elsewhere. The operation has been rescheduled tentatively to begin on September 3 and end on September 28, but, according to the bureau, “may need further review and coordination.”

Count of Homeless People Outdoors

On April 1, enumerators were to count homeless people living outdoors in locations where they are known to sleep, including under bridges and highway overpasses, in parks, at rest stops, and at businesses that stay open all night. The bureau has reported that the operation now “needs further review and coordination with outside partners and stakeholders.”

The Data for Apportionment

Under Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (b), the 2020 state census counts for House apportionment must be delivered to the President no later than December 31, 2020. The fieldwork and myriad other operations that support the census, resulting in the state apportionment counts and corresponding numbers of House seats allocated to the individual states, are timed to allow for their completion, including final checks, before the legal deadline.

The bureau has summarized what generally happens after the end of census data collection: “Census Bureau experts run and review output from programs” to remove duplicate census responses, “determine final housing unit status, populate any missing housing unit data on household size, and finalize the universe to be included in the apportionment count file.” This process, which originally was to occur from July 31 to December 31, is now scheduled to start on October 31, 2020, and end on April 30, 2021, four months past the legal deadline.

The Data for Within-State Redistricting

Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (c), requires that the bureau, by April 1, 2021, deliver to the states tabulations of census data for use in redrawing state congressional and legislative districts. Delivery now is scheduled for no later than July 31, 2021, four months after the statutory deadline. A legislative remedy for the delays in providing the redistricting, as well as the apportionment, data remains to be announced.

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