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## 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 decennial 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. Dr. Dillingham stated on March 18 that if "additional adjustments" became necessary, the bureau would make them known "promptly."

A subsequent press release, dated March 28, 2020 (CB20-RTQ.14), gave notice that field operations would not resume until April 15.

An April 13, 2020, press release from Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and Dr. Dillingham (CB20-RTQ.16), with a new operations schedule, indicated the bureau's need to 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)).

A May 4, 2020, press release (CB20-CN.44) and May 7 revised schedule announced a "phased restart" of certain 2020 census field operations, to begin immediately in selected areas "in coordination with federal, state, and local health officials." The bureau noted that field and Area Census Office (ACO) staff would receive training in safety measures to avoid contracting or transmitting COVID-19. Staff also were to receive personal protective equipment before operations restarted. A list of the first ACOs to reopen accompanied the release. The list was updated weekly through June 9 as more offices were added.

Dr. Dillingham, in an August 3, 2020, press release (CB20-RTQ.23), announced a revision of the earlier plan to delay releasing the apportionment numbers past December 31. The latest plan, the announcement stated, was to meet the deadline, "as required by law and directed by the Secretary of Commerce." The operations schedule was revised accordingly. It noted that OMB "recently submitted" a \$1 billion supplemental request for the 2020 census, for more hiring, "pay incentives, additional outreach and advertising, and replenished contingency funding to provide needed flexibility" as the bureau conducts its largest field

operation, Nonresponse Follow-Up (NRFU), covered below.

This In Focus discusses the various major components of the bureau's 2020 census field work, their original and latest schedules, and relevant legislation.

### The Original Operations Schedule and Latest Revision

#### Field Office Operations

Census Bureau managers and staff at 2020 census field offices are conducting, the bureau stated, "administrative, training, deployment, and support activities" for the "peak data collection" phase of the census. Part of the preparations involves "selecting and hiring field staff." The operations were to have begun on March 1, 2020, but were postponed until phased reopening occurred, from May 4 to June 12. The bureau, its 2020 census recruitment site (2020census.gov/jobs) indicates, still wants applicants for temporary, part-time census work, especially in certain counties identified on the site.

#### 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 August 12, the Census Bureau reported, 63.5% of households had answered; 50.8% had responded online. 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 answers by telephone. The initial phase of the census, in which households are asked to respond without further prompting by the bureau, was to continue from March 12 to July 31. The adjusted schedule shows this phase concluding on September 30.

#### Remote Alaska

The operation that began in Toksook Bay on January 21, 2020, is to end on August 31 and is expected to be completed mostly on schedule, but, the bureau advised, "some areas with year-round populations will be enumerated" when enumeration "is safe to do."

#### 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, 2020, and was to end on April 30. It was suspended until June 14, then was to continue until July 29. The bureau, to protect both census

takers and respondents from COVID-19, directed that enumerators conduct interviews outside homes, at least six feet away from respondents.

### Update Leave

Another operation, Update Leave, covers about 5 million households stateside and about 1.7 million in Puerto Rico, located where residents are unlikely to receive mail at their homes. 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, 2020, the operation was suspended. It restarted stateside in phases between May 4 and June 12, and in Puerto Rico on May 22.

### Mobile Questionnaire Assistance

During Mobile Questionnaire Assistance, the bureau stated in a July 14, 2020, press release (CB20-CN.80), more than 3,000 bureau staff were to help the public answer the census online, using their own devices or a 2020 census tablet, in areas determined to have the lowest response rates and in weekly "coordination with local partners." The operation was to occur from March 30 to July 31, 2020, but the latest schedule states that it is "being modified to reflect the current environment."

### Nonresponse Follow-Up

This major effort, in which enumerators across the nation visit nonrespondents and collect their census data in person, is considered essential for achieving a complete, accurate census. NRFU originally was scheduled for May 13 to July 31, 2020. The start was delayed until August 11 (except for a trial "soft launch" that began on July 16) and the end until October 31, but NRFU and all other data collection operations now are to end no later than September 30. NRFU currently is to include nonresponding off-campus households around colleges and universities that originally were slated for early NRFU, from April 9 to July 31.

### 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, 2020. 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.

Students living on campus were to be counted through their colleges and universities as part of Group Quarters enumeration; alternatively, they have been encouraged to answer the census online. Students who have left campus housing, are staying elsewhere because of the COVID-19 situation, and intend to return to school when the situation permits still are to report campus housing as their usual residence. The latest operations schedule does not discuss this enumeration.

### 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, 2020, the operation now is to occur from September 22 to September 24.

### Count of People at Transitory Locations

From April 9 to May 4, 2020, 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 to begin on September 3 and end on September 28.

### Count of Homeless People Outdoors

On April 1, 2020, 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 operation now is scheduled for September 23 and September 24.

### 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 states, are timed to allow for their completion, including final checks, before the legal deadline. This process was to occur from July 31 to December 31, then was rescheduled to begin on October 31, 2020, and end on April 30, 2021, four months past the legal deadline. As of August 3, 2020, the bureau is to release the apportionment data on time.

### The Data for Within-State Redistricting

Title 13, *U.S. Code*, Section 141 (c), requires that by March 31, 2021, the tabulations of census data for use in redrawing state congressional and legislative districts be delivered to the states that have requested them. Under the adjusted schedule announced on April 13, 2020, the data were to be delivered by July 31, 2021, four months after the statutory deadline, but now are to be ready on the original schedule.

### Related Legislation

H.R. 6800, the fifth FY2020 emergency supplemental appropriations bill in response to COVID-19 (the Heroes Act), passed the House on May 15, 2020, and was placed on the Senate calendar on June 1. The legislation would provide an extra \$400.0 million for the Census Bureau's Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which funds the decennial census, and would authorize a four-month extension of the deadlines for reporting the apportionment and redistricting data, consistent with the delays that Secretary Ross and Dr. Dillingham, on April 13, announced were necessary.

Additional bills that, among other purposes, would extend the deadlines have not advanced beyond committee referrals. They are H.R. 6446 (Higgins), H.R. 7034 and H.R. 7974 (Maloney), and S. 4048 (Harris).

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