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The U.S. Census Bureau

Overview

The United States Census Bureau is a federal agency that provides statistical data about the nation's people and economy. Article I, Section 2, clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution mandates a decennial census count of the population. The first count was conducted in 1790. Decennial census data are used to determine allocation of funding for numerous federal programs and for the reapportionment of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, among other purposes.

In addition to the decennial census, the Census Bureau collects and publishes data on several other population characteristics and produces relevant statistical products. The bureau also releases publicly available analyses throughout the year on the surveys it conducts. Congress has historically been interested in Census Bureau funding, oversight, data collection, and data usage. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2020 decennial census, as well as other issues related to the decennial census, were also matters of recent congressional interest.

Organizational History

In 1902, the Census Office became a permanent organization housed in the Department of Interior, and in 1903 it was moved to the newly established Department of Commerce and Labor. Subsequently in 1913, the Census Bureau moved to the Department of Commerce. Title 13 of the *U.S. Code* contains laws regarding the administration and organization of the Census Bureau.

Organizational Structure

The director of the Census Bureau is nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. A term for the director lasts five years, and directors can serve a maximum of two full terms. The current director, Robert L. Santos, was sworn in on January 5, 2022, and is the 26th director. The Census Bureau encompasses several divisions:

- **Communications:** leads internal and external communications for the bureau.
- **Field Operations:** responsible for data collection and data processing of surveys and censuses.
- **Economic Programs:** conducts over 60 monthly, quarterly, and annual surveys covering several sectors of the economy.
- **Demographic Programs:** provides information about the size, distribution, and characteristics of the overall population of the nation as well as information on income, poverty, and housing.

- **Decennial Census Programs:** oversees decennial census programs, the American Community Survey (ACS), and the bureau's geographic programs.
- **Research and Methodology:** develops the bureau's practice of economic and social measurement.

Congressional Oversight & Funding

The Census Bureau falls under the jurisdiction of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability. Both committees have broad responsibility for conducting oversight on government operations, which includes the Census Bureau. The House and Senate Committees on Appropriations' Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Subcommittees provide annual funding for the Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau received a total of \$1.485 billion from P.L. 117-328 in FY2023. This funding was divided between the bureau's two major accounts: the Current Surveys and Programs account, which received \$330 million, and the Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which received \$1.155 billion.

The Biden Administration proposed a FY2024 budget of \$1.606 billion for the Census Bureau. This budget request includes more than \$375 million for Current Surveys and Programs and more than \$1.230 billion for Periodic Census and Programs. Final FY2024 funding has yet to be appropriated as of this writing.

Major Statistical Products

The Census Bureau conducts several surveys ranging in size and scope of data collection. Census Bureau data are often publicly available, although it also maintains restricted-use microdata for social science research purposes.

The **decennial census** aims to count every resident where they lived in the country on April 1 of that year. The enumeration conducted every 10 years determines how seats in the House of Representatives are apportioned among the states. Any change in the number of House seats in a state is determined by population change measured during the census.

Following the decennial census, states conduct redistricting, redrawing congressional maps to reflect population change. Redistricting is carried out per each respective state's own process, though states can obtain population tabulations for certain geographic areas from the Census Bureau. The data gathered during the decennial census are additionally used

to allocate federal funding for various programs across a range of policy areas.

The **American Community Survey** is intended to measure several demographic, social, economic, and housing characteristics of the U.S. population. The ACS is sent to sample addresses across the nation on a rolling basis, with about 3.5 million surveys completed annually. Data collected from the ACS are used to produce one-year and five-year population estimates. Multiyear estimates increase the reliability of statistics for less populated areas and small population subgroups.

The **Current Population Survey** (CPS) is conducted in collaboration with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and serves as the primary source for statistics on the labor force in the United States. The CPS is conducted monthly and provides data on employment, unemployment, persons not in the labor force, hours worked, earnings, and other relevant demographic and labor force characteristics.

The **Economic Census**, conducted every five years, provides a measure of American businesses through national-, state-, and local-level statistics. The survey offers a benchmark for current economic activity, including the Gross Domestic Product and the Producer Price Index.

The **Census of Governments** began in 1957 and is conducted every five years, in years ending in 2 and 7. Data obtained from the Census of Governments examine how state and local governments are organized, as well as numbers of employees, payroll amounts, and government finances.

Overview of Issues for Congress

In addition to the annual appropriations cycle and preparations for the 2030 decennial census, the following may be of interest to Congress:

Data Accuracy and Related Issues

Some Members of Congress have expressed concern with the accuracy of the 2020 decennial census. The 2020 Census Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) released in 2022 found undercounts in Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Black or African American populations. The PES found overcounting in Delaware, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Utah. Undercounting occurred in Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. The PES is unable to indicate the reasons behind undercounts and overcounts. Overall, the PES did not find a statistically significant overcount or undercount of the total population.

Data confidentiality and privacy requirements can be in tension with statistical accuracy. To protect confidentiality of recorded data, the Census Bureau uses a disclosure avoidance approach known as “differential privacy,” which injects statistical “noise” into sub-state level data. Some studies have found that this practice has resulted in erroneous increases or decreases in some population sizes.

Data accuracy remains a concern due to the impacts inaccurate data may have on federal funding programs and congressional apportionment.

Agency Operations and Performance

In 2022, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 8326, the Ensuring a Fair and Accurate Census Act. This legislation, among other provisions, would have ensured research criteria were met prior to adding new questions to the decennial census; provided the Census Director with certain decisionmaking authority; required appointment of an employee to oversee racial and ethnic equity in the decennial census; and required the director to communicate certain budget estimates directly to Congress. This legislation did not pass the Senate during the 117th Congress.

In April 2023, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) removed the 2020 decennial census from its “high-risk list” (which indicates programs that are vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, or mismanagement, or need transformation), citing progress that the Census Bureau had made in addressing certain concerns and priority recommendations. GAO noted that it will continue to monitor the Census Bureau’s planning for the 2030 census.

Other Topics

Leading up to and following the 2020 decennial census, other prominent issues included whether to require respondents to indicate their citizenship status, whether to count incarcerated individuals at their preincarceration residence, and whether to include questions regarding sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI).

Recent Initiatives

Following the 2020 decennial census, the Census Bureau has redefined its criteria for urban areas. To be designated as urban, an area must encompass a minimum of 5,000 people or 2,000 housing units. The previous threshold was 2,500 people. Housing units are a new criterion. The change may impact the current designation of urban areas.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is considering revising statistical standards for collecting race and ethnicity data across federal agencies, which would impact Census Bureau surveys and products. Earlier this year, OMB requested public input on potential changes. These potential changes include consolidating the “race” and “ethnicity” questions; adding a “Middle Eastern or North African” category on surveys; and including more detailed racial and ethnic categories on questionnaires.

Additionally, the chief statistician of the United States has issued recommendations on best practices for collecting SOGI data on federal statistical surveys.

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