Tribes and the Census

House and Senate Appropriators Approve Skimpy Increase for 2020 Census in FY 2018

In a late May blog post The Census Project, a broad information network of professional associations, civil rights, business and other interests, reviewed the Administration's request for funding for the 2020 Census in the coming federal Fiscal Year. It pointed out that the amount requested was far below the money usually provided as the Census Bureau "ramps up" several years before a coming decennial census. The blog concluded: "If President Trump's budget is enacted, the nation could be facing an historic census disaster. It's up to Congress to save the 2020 Census!"

The Appropriations Committees in the House and the Senate have now finalized their funding recommendations for the Census Bureau in federal Fiscal Year 2018. They have each decided not to save the 2020 Census.

Back in May the Administration asked for just $1,251,000,000 to fund the Census Bureau's account that covers the upcoming decennial census and the ACS in FY 2018. In separate actions the full House Appropriations Committee and its counterpart in the Senate recommended exactly that amount in their respective funding bills for the Commerce Department.

That represents an increase of just $251 million over the level approved for the current year. By one account the Bureau needs an overall increase in its total budget for FY 2018 on the order of $385 million more in order to cover necessary "ramp up" costs for the 2020 Census, along with other Bureau functions.

For Indian Country the consequences of the approval of the Administration's requested level in the pending House and Senate appropriations bills will fall squarely on the shoulders of tribes and off-reservation Native organizations at the local, regional and national levels. It will be up to the tribes and other Native groups to insure that all Native people answer the 2020 Census, avoiding a serious undercount.

That task will be even more urgent if, as expected, the Office of Management and Budget approves a change in the Census questionnaire for 2020. The change involves combining the previously separate questions on race and Hispanic origin (ethnicity). Such a change has the potential to reduce the American Indian/Alaska Native only ("alone" in Census terminology) count by over 700,000 from what it was in 2010. The change would have the effect of shifting the count of persons who say they are both Hispanic and AI/AN only into the AI/AN multi-racial category instead.
As is true of nearly all legislation, full Committee appropriations bills are accompanied by a formal report. In the case of appropriations bills these reports explain the funding levels the Committees are recommending for approval to their respective houses of Congress. The reports also describe what the Committees want the agencies to do with the money available to them for the coming fiscal year.

The report of the House Committee pointed to the serious risk that the complex computerization tasks necessary for the 2020 Census, with a major on-line response component, pose for the success of that count. It called for periodic updates on the way the Bureau will manage those risks, but added no funds to mitigate them.

Despite the serious underfunding of the 2020 Census that the House Committee approved, its report called on the Bureau to reconsider its cancellation of two dress rehearsal tests previously planned for Pierce County, WA (Tacoma and the surrounding area) and a rural area including Beckley, WV. Nothing was said about the three tests cancelled in 2017, including two that had been planned for reservation areas but were called off because of budget shortfalls.

The Senate Committee report did express concern that the amount being recommended for the 2020 Census might not be enough, saying that the Committee will reevaluate the amount that should be provided after an ongoing review by OMB and the Bureau is complete. The report also called on the Bureau to ensure that the new enumeration methods (emphasizing on-line responses to the Census questionnaire) do not lead to an undercount of often undercounted populations, such as the on-reservation AI/AN population.

**Committee Views Differ on the ACS**

Both reports also touched on the Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). As has been the case in previous years, the House Appropriations Committee took a dim view of the ACS, calling it "burdensome." It urged the Bureau to direct its focus on "its core, constitutionally mandated decennial Census activities."

The Senate Committee report, on the other hand, expressed its support for the ACS. At the same time the Committee urged the Bureau to reduce the number of questions asked.

Final action on the FY 2018 appropriations bills by both houses of the Congress may not happen until or even after the new federal Fiscal Year begins this coming October.
Census Bureau Releases Detailed ACS Tables for AI/AN Groups

In mid-July the Census Bureau released a new set of tables with American Community Survey (ACS) data for specific AI/AN groups, including most individual tribes and for the AI/AN multi-racial population. The tables cover the 5-year period from 2011 to 2015.

This is only the second release of such tables from the ACS. The earlier one covered information collected on ACS questionnaires for the years 2006 through 2010. Future releases at five year intervals are planned.

The tables, referred to in Census jargon as the "AIANT" or American Indian Alaska Native Tables, provide information on the socio-economic characteristics such as education, income and employment of individual tribal groupings.

Data is available at the national, state, reservation and metropolitan area level. However, if there are very small numbers of people in individual groups at smaller levels of geography, such as a single reservation area, the data is suppressed for confidentiality reasons.

One use of the data in the AIANT tables is to separate out the information on individual characteristics, like employment status, for persons who said on their ACS questionnaires that their only race is AI/AN (the AI/AN "alone" population) from the characteristics of those who identified with one or more other races in addition to AI/AN. This is not possible with the usual annual releases of ACS information, which show characteristics data just for the AI/AN only population.

The 151 detailed AIANT tables provide numbers for over 1,100 separate groups including the total population of all races, those identifying with just one tribal group, those identifying with more than one tribal group and those identifying with individual Alaska Native villages.

The data are based exclusively on self-identification. No proof of enrollment in a particular tribe is either sought or verified. **The only official record of who is a member/citizen of any tribe is the enrollment data of that tribe.**

The data is available on the Census Bureau's "American FactFinder" Web site (https://factfinder.census.gov/). Use the "Guided Search" or "Advanced Search" functions or contact me for help at the e-mail below.

Norm DeWeaver     norm_deweaver@rocketmail.com     August 3, 2017

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