Preparations for the 2020 Decennial Census Continue to Slide Downhill

Preparations for the 2020 decennial census continue on a downward slope, endangering the accuracy of the count of the Native population, along with the count for every other group in the US. The Administration's budget request for Fiscal Year 2018 would essentially flat line funding for the Census Bureau at a point in the run-up to the next nationwide head count that calls for a major increase in appropriations.

The June Update published by The Census Project, a broad-based advocacy group on Census Bureau issues, reports that the Bureau has now cancelled two of the three "end-to-end" (dress rehearsal) tests planned for 2018 because of prospective budget shortfalls. This leaves only one opportunity to test all the operational procedures planned for use in 2020. A number of these procedures will be new, never used before in a decennial census.

The "end-to-end" test in Providence County, RI is to go forward, but the ones originally scheduled for the Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill area, WV and Pierce County (Tacoma), WA will not take place.

The only tests scheduled for reservation areas, one on the Standing Rock reservation and a second on the Colville reservation, were cancelled earlier. This will make 2020 the first decennial in decades when there has been no testing of Census procedures in a reservation area.

As part of the reduction in the "end-to-end" testing, the Bureau plans to reduce its "outreach and promotion" efforts, activities intended to encourage everyone to be counted. The partnership program is one such effort.

This raises the question of whether the Bureau will cut back on the Tribal Liaison Program, a crucial part of the effort to make sure that every reservation resident is counted. The partnership program has been helpful to Native organizations in off-reservation communities in promoting participation in the Census.

These recent developments make it very clear that only an intensive effort by tribes and Native off-reservation organizations to insure that all Native people in their communities are counted can produce accurate data on the Native population nationwide. Tribes and off-reservation Native organizations cannot count on receiving the same extent of help from Census Bureau staff they have received in the past.

Other recent developments at the Bureau are also disturbing.
One is the absence of news from the agency.

There has been no announcement of the cancellation of the two "end-to-end" tests scheduled for 2018, unlike what happened when the two reservation tests scheduled for 2017 were cancelled. The monthly updates published by the Bureau on progress in 2020 preparations ceased with the one for March. This absence of news is a sharp departure for an agency that, in the past, has been among the more transparent in the federal government.

And there has been no news or even public speculation on who may be nominated by the Administration for the post of Census Bureau Director. The current Director, John Thompson, unexpectedly announced his resignation on May 9th, following a meeting with the new Secretary of Commerce. The resignation is effective at the end of June, just two weeks away.

Whoever may eventually be nominated for the Director position must be confirmed by the US Senate, a normally lengthy process.

The Bureau is certainly not leaderless; very experienced senior career staff continues to provide direction. However, without a permanent Director the agency is not in a position to chart a course for the future.

**ACS Also at Stake**

There is silence on what changes, if any, may lay in store for the Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is considered as part of the decennial census process even though it is a completely separate operation. It produces the data used to allocate funds for the Indian Housing Block Grant program, the Tribal Transportation Programs, and, quite possibly in the future, the special Native American workforce programs administered by the Labor Department, along with several others.

In previous Congresses, the majority members in the House of Representatives have moved to either totally eliminate funding for the ACS or at least make responses voluntary, an action that would effectively destroy the validity of the results.

Funding for the upcoming 2020 Census and the ACS is now in the hands of the Appropriations Committees of the House and Senate. The direction of the Bureau is in the hands of the Administration.

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