CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest
NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY, & HEALTH FOR ALL

November 2, 2026

U.S. Census Bureau
Department of Commerce
Attn: Daniel Sweeney, Deputy General Counsel for Economic, Statistical, and Regulatory Affairs
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 220746

RE: USBC-2026-0628, Decennial Census of the Population of Americans; Proposed Residence Criteria and Proposed Regulations for Demographic Questions

Dear Mr. Sweeney,

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) appreciates the opportunity to provide a comment on the proposed changes to the regulations for residence criteria and demographic questions for the 2030 decennial census.[i] Our mission is to advocate for evidence-based and community-informed polices on nutrition, food safety and health, and in that work we rely on the integrity of large, publicly available datasets like the census for public health prioritization. The proposed changes, including the decision to no longer collect racial, ethnic and sexual orientation, and, potentially, to redefine residence, will undermine those aims. Moreover, the proposed new citizenship question could result in reduced access in certain locations to programs that improve the social determinants of health and health care access such as Medicaid, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). At CSPI, we have labored for decades to improve the reach and nutritional quality across many of these programs, particularly in populations adversely positioned to absorb the impact of these changes such as children.

Since 1790, the U.S. Census Bureau has collected critical population data that has various utilities including apportionment, federal funding allocation for public works such as schools, roads, and hospitals, and informing private sector decisions like determining grocery store placement or restaurant access. CSPI firmly opposes changes that would compromise the reliability of the largest publicly available population dataset and will detail our concerns with the current proposal in the following pages.

Prohibiting Questions About Race and Ethnicity

In 2023, we provided a comment to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget regarding proposed updates to 1997 Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (SPD15). As noted at the time, the diversity of the nation had changed substantially since 1997 and there was a resultant need for more refined data collection practices to improve public health programming. While we believed the final categories were an improvement over the previous minimum categories, we asserted they were not sufficient to adequately collect data on the demographics of the U.S. Unfortunately, the current proposal is a retreat from even the minimum categories established by OMB in 2024 and can have disastrous consequences for residents of the United States.

The proposal raises questions about, "...the meaning, significance, and impact of attempting to categorize persons by race and ethnicity." The prevailing national discourse and changes in the law were cited as examples of shifting norms around the usefulness of this data, and, in the view of the drafters, justifies the Census Bureau revisiting the inclusion of data on race and ethnicity. However, the Administration's attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and the state-level ripple effects should not be conflated with the longstanding reality that we are far from being a post-racial society.[ii]

There are chronic, systemic, well-documented inequities that are mediated by discriminatory practices due to a person's identity, such as access to healthcare, exposure to environmental hazards, and residential segregation.[iii] The US continues to suffer from marked disparities in the rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes, where prevalences among Black (17%), American Indian or Alaska Native (16%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (15%), and Hispanic (13%) adults are all higher than the rate for White Adults (12%).[iv]

Research has shown that the census is currently improperly counting many of these populations, which has implications for public and private investments. As revealed by the Census Bureau itself in 2022, the Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino populations had statistically significant undercounts at 3.30%, 5.64%, and 4.99% respectively in the 2020 Census, while Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and non-Hispanic White populations experienced statistically significant overcounts of 2.62%, 1.28%, and 1.64%, respectively.[v] These undercounts were actually increased over the 2010 undercounts. The worst part is that undercount was largely preventable and known years in advance, as data scientists and biostatisticians at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia documented funding shortfalls that canceled

census field test operations at several sites and leadership gaps following the resignation of Census Bureau director John Thompson[vi]

Undercounting specific populations already jeopardizes the distribution of federal funding for school meals, which depends on census data. For example, the University of California, Los Angeles Center for Health Policy Research estimates that an undercount (2-10%) of Latino school-age children within California would result in a loss of approximately $7.2 to $36 million in federal funding for free and reduced-price school meals for Los Angeles County alone.[vii]

For areas that have large populations that are Black, Indigenous, and/or Latine American, these challenges have been documented for decades. In the 1970s, Mayor Maynard Jackson noticed the Black population's undercount was affecting the federal allocation for the predominately Black American city of Atlanta. Compared to the 1980 Census, the mayor's team identified an additional 36,900 residents, an error that would have compromised the city's federal funding over the next decade.[viii] In 2022, the predominately Black city of Detroit filed a federal lawsuit after multiple data sources discovered a population undercount of more than 20,000 residents in the Census Bureau's population estimate, compromising the city's access to millions of dollars of funding to support affordable housing and more.[ix] W[x] this proposal will not, in and of itself, create an undercount based on race or ethnicity, it will make the undercounts based on race described here impossible to detect and thus extremely difficult to address.

Prohibiting Questions About Sexual Orientation

Same-sex couples were counted in the Census for the first time in U.S. history in the 2020 Census.[xi] Despite this progressive step, members of the LGBTQIA+ community who were single or not currently in same-sex relationships were not counted, as were people with transgender or nonbinary identities, since these categories were not offered.[xii] As with race and ethnicity, the lack of a question related to LGBTQIA+ is not expected to directly cause an undercount. But it will make existing undercounts difficult to identify and remedy.

Undercounting some populations while overcounting others can lead to the inequitable distribution of resources, promoting social, health, and economic inequities instead of working to reduce them. The census directs trillions of federal dollars from the federal government to states, districts, cities, Tribal nations, and other types of localities (which we understand as colonias, unincorporated areas, etc.) every year over the following decade.[xiii]

If these data do not reflect the true prevalence of racial, ethnic and LGBTQIA+ groups, the scene will be set for a denial of these groups their needed resources.

Changing the Definition of a Person's Usual Residence

The proposed changes to define usual residence will also impact the distribution of billions of dollars in federal funding in unpredictable ways. Instead of usual residence being defined as where someone spends the majority of their time, these changes propose counting individuals based on their location between January 3 and April 1 of the census year. This smaller, time-defined snapshot may misrepresent primary residence, especially for more mobile populations, notably those who are more or less active during the designated period. The proposed changes may have particular impacts for children, especially those whose residences change due to parents, grandparents, or other guardians living in separate locations between which children must split their time. Inaccurate data on residency may result in misallocations of funding, including reductions in certain state program allocations. We urge the administration to present any data it may have explaining why the shift to the new definition of usual residence is necessary, as well as any evidence establishing that the shift will not cause any harm.

Adding a Citizenship Question

Adding a citizenship question, could create a chilling effect among immigrant families and discourage people from even completing the census, leading to undercounts, particularly of certain ethnic groups. When families believe that government information could expose them or a loved one to adverse immigration consequences, they avoid programs they qualify for and rely on to keep food on the table.

This citizenship question would likely be used to exclude people who are not citizens or lawful permanent residents from the population count used to apportion Congressional seats and funding for many government programs. To do this, the Census Bureau would need to determine the legal status of every person it counts, and it proposes drawing on its "enormously broad access to administrative records," including federal, state, and local records, and adding a legal-status question to the short-form questionnaire.[xiv] In effect, the rule would turn the decennial census, and the government records it links together, into a legal status determination.

We have seen this dynamic before. The 2019 public charge rule did not change anyone's eligibility for SNAP, but it changed how SNAP receipt could be weighed in green card

decisions for a limited group of immigrants.[xv] Yet, in December 2019, after the rule was finalized but before it took effect, more than one in seven adults in immigrant families reported that they or a family member avoided a noncash government benefit program such as SNAP for fear of risking future green card status, and this was even higher (more than one in four) in immigrant families with low incomes. Notably, SNAP was among the programs families most often reported avoiding, and avoidance spilled over into programs that the rule did not cover at all, including WIC and free or reduced-price meals at school through the National School Lunch Program.[xvi] Chilling effects are driven by fear and uncertainty about how government information will be used, not only by a policy's formal reach.

A census that links administrative records to legal status risks deepening program avoidance in mixed-status households, where U.S. citizen children are eligible for SNAP even when their parents are not. In 2019, during the lead-up to the public charge rule, SNAP participation among citizen children living with a non-citizen fell 22.5% in a single year, over five times the decline among citizen children in citizen-only households.[xvii]

Avoiding programs that prevent food insecurity and provide nutritious meals can have long-lasting, costly harms to public health, particularly for children. Research shows that access to nutrition assistance in early childhood reduces the risk of obesity, high blood pressure, heart diseases, and diabetes in adulthood.[xviii] SNAP participation is also associated with lower health care spending among adults, including approximately $1,400 less per year among low-income adults nationally and $2,360 less in annual Medicaid spending per person among older adults enrolled in both Medicare and Medicaid.[xix,xx]

Conclusion

The proposed revisions to the 2030 decennial census could have the dual result of both worsening existing undercounts (the citizenship question) and in effect erasing existing disparities by the failure to collect data (the race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation questions).

We encourage the Census Bureau to carefully consider our concerns and recognize the implications of their proposal for generations to come. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

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