



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

MAR 15 2013

Mr. Peter Wagner
Executive Director
Prison Policy Initiative
P.O. Box 127
Northampton, MA 01601

Dear Mr. Wagner:

This is in response to your letter of February 14, 2013, representing the views of 210 criminal justice, voting rights, and civil rights organizations concerning the way we count and tabulate prisoners in the decennial census and our other surveys. We will give these views careful consideration as we conduct our research and planning efforts for the 2020 Census. As to the timing and nature of any research that we might do on this issue, not a great deal has changed since your conference call last April with Mr. Frank Vitrano, Ms. Catherine McCully, and some other staff here at the U.S. Census Bureau. Because most of the co-signers of your letter may not be familiar with that information, we would like to use this response to provide both a summary and an update on these matters.

Over the last few years, the Census Bureau has been looking for many ways to be more efficient with all of our programs. Two examples of these efficiencies are closing six of our twelve regional offices, and undertaking major changes in the collection of reimbursable and other survey data. Congress has made it clear, and the Census Bureau agrees, that the rising cost of the decennial census in recent decades cannot be sustained. For the 2020 Census, we must find a way to maintain the quality of data produced by the decennial census while increasing efficiency and controlling costs. Accordingly, we have embarked on a research and testing program focused on major innovations to the design of the census, oriented around the major cost drivers of the 2010 Census.

Officially, 2020 research began in October 2011 with broad research goals established to support the 2020 “reduce cost/maintain efficiency” goal. To address the major cost drivers for the decennial census, we currently have focused our research in four areas:

- Administrative Records – using government and commercial sources of data in support of several operations [e.g., quality control efforts, nonresponse follow-up, and the Local Update of Census Addresses].
- Streamlining and Automating Field Management and Operations – the development of better information technology systems for controlling work in the field, and leveraging mobile applications on hand held devices for managing and conducting field operations.
- Optimizing Self-Response – maximizing self-response and leveraging the Internet to reduce data capture costs.
- Targeted Address Canvassing – finding ways to update our Master Address File continuously over the decade and to find other ways to avoid the need for a nationwide canvass of all addresses just prior to the 2020 Census.

We will research other aspects of the next decennial census beginning in 2015, after the Census Bureau settles on a high-level design for the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau has attempted to inform Congress that to design a 2020 Census that tries to meet both quality and cost reduction goals, we need to make changes that are more significant than merely tinkering with the 2010 Census plan. For example, our 2020 Census plan needs to address ways to successfully target address canvassing. In order to do so, we must test in advance which quality indicators provide the Census Bureau with an accurate picture of the geographies that we would recommend for inclusion/exclusion in a targeted canvassing in 2019.

As to researching any changes to our usual residence rule, the first Census Act of 1790 established the manner of conducting the enumeration by counting and tabulating people at their usual residence as of Census Day. This rule has been in place since that first census, as each successive census act has built on the provisions of the Census Act of 1790. The residence rule guides the count of various population groups living in group quarters, including prisoners, college students, people staying in long-term care facilities, and similarly-situated individuals. Many of these people have other addresses where they may have lived at other times, but their usual residence (defined as the place where the person lives and sleeps most of the time on April 1 of the Census year) is where they are tabulated for the census. Usual residence is not necessarily the same as a person's voting residence or legal residence.

As we have done prior to the most recent censuses and should our budget permit, we will start reviewing our residence rule in Fiscal Year 2015. In advance of each census, we consider the rule and the ways that people live today, within the context of our statutory precepts. We must also explore the possibility of considering or making significant changes to our residence rule with many stakeholders. The Census Bureau will not make this decision alone. We understand fully the major impact on different states as well as counties and municipalities that would occur during apportionment and redistricting, if we considered changing the residence rule. In particular, we must inform and try to ascertain the will of the Congress on such a major change, particularly regarding apportionment.

As you state in your letter, states and jurisdictions are adjusting census data to meet their redistricting obligations. The presentation of the advanced group quarters file shortly after the release the 2010 Census redistricting data summary files, permitted states to work with the data in the allocation of students, military and prisoners. While several states took advantage of the advanced group quarter data, most states did not do so. Resources permitting, we would like to explore ways to improve this effort for the next census.

Thank you for your interest and support of our efforts in planning the 2020 Census. We appreciate hearing your concerns at the outset of our research and planning efforts for the next census. We look forward to working with you as we move forward in our preparations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas L. Mesenbourg, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Thomas L. Mesenbourg, Jr.
Senior Advisor Performing the
Duties of the Director