Census

Midwest Regional Hearing of the National Latino Commission on Census 2020

Daniel Ortiz

Good morning ladies and gentlemen of the commission. My name is Daniel Ortiz and I am outreach director for Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working for a more vibrant, equitable, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the upcoming census and for convening these field hearings.

Data from the Census Bureau is vital to Policy Matters' work. We rely on the census, the Current Population Survey (CPS), and the American Community Survey (ACS) to conduct research that forms our understanding of ordinary Ohioans' lives, how their wellbeing has changed over time, and how policy can impact them. Our organization uses data from the census to inform analysis as we advocate for policies like Medicaid, SNAP and CHIP, that strengthen the economy and enable all Ohioans to thrive. This year, the Trump administration is considering adding a question about citizenship status, which would be the first time such a question appeared on the census since 1950. Including a controversial citizenship question would result in under-counting of the Latino community and other hard-to-count communities across the country and in Ohio. The Census Bureau's own Chief Scientist, John Abowd, testified that the citizenship question would be likely to produce a drop in the initial self-response rate and make the count more costly. The 2020 census should provide a fair and accurate count of all communities and do no harm to the children and families who rely on vital government programs whether black, brown, or white.

The citizenship question is designed to intimidate Americans with immigrant backgrounds, whether they are citizens or not. That fear is grounded in real history: The United States used census information to intern Japanese citizens during World War II. Questions about citizenship have no place in the U.S. Census.

Making respondents report their citizenship status would lower response rates, raise administrative overhead, and reduce the accuracy of census data, but the highest costs would fall on underserved communities that are disproportionately black, brown and immigrant. The question would erode confidence in government, intimidate families into skipping the census and push people further into the shadows. If the citizenship question is included there will undoubtedly be a decrease in the count of the Latino community. Leaving people out of the count means fewer health and human services dollars to states, political under-representation, and lower data quality to measure American families' well-being. Census data are used to distribute more than $33 billion in federal funding to Ohio.[1] A census that does not count everyone and reduces federal funding for vital programs and services deepens systematic inequality and further drives hunger and poverty in underserved communities. The root causes of these vexing problems become harder to identify without data that accurately represents our communities.

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[1] Counting for Dollars 2020: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds, Andrew Reamer, https://gwipp.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2181/f/downloads/IPP-1819-3%20CountingforDollars_OH.pdf

Not long ago, I was optimistic for changes to the 2020 census. The Census Bureau, under the Obama administration and the Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards made thoughtful revisions to the Statistical Policy Directive on Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting. These reforms would structure race and ethnic data into one clear, combined question that is more intuitive in capturing accurate responses for hard-to-count communities. This is an example of the census responding to a well-documented problem. It gave many hope that we could attain a more complete count. Sadly, those recommendations were rejected. Going forward we have multiple questions for race and ethnicity and now have to wrestle with a citizenship question that could lead to an undercount that hurts children and families. According to reports from the Children's Defense Fund, "the undercount of young children has gotten worse with every census since 1980. In Ohio, 106,000 children live in an area the U.S. Census Bureau considers "hard-to-count"—only nine other states have more young children at risk of being uncounted."[2] Without an accurate count of children our state and local government could lose billions of dollars in resources we need to reduce child poverty, hunger, and infant mortality.

Like many of you, I am worried about the consequences of a census that proposes drastic changes without time for review and resources for robust oversight. The Latino community across the United States and in Ohio has reason to be skeptical and many feel intimidated by changes that may skew participation and compromise data integrity. Ohio's immigrant population experienced specific trauma in 2018. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided the Corso's Flower and Garden Center in Sandusky, detaining 114 workers last June. Just two weeks later ICE raided Fresh Mark meatpacking plants in Salem, Massillon and Canton, detaining another 146 workers.[3] Also, there has been an increase of recent arrivals from Puerto Rico to the cities of Cleveland, Lorain and Youngstown since the humanitarian crisis caused by hurricanes in the fall of 2017. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, but they too have been harmed by an administration that refused to allocate sufficient aid for actual disaster relief, before declaring it would seek to misallocate emergency funding to build a wall spanning just one of our borders: the one we share with Mexico. These recent bad experiences with government agencies presents unique challenges for reaching members of the Latino community. The workers administering the census field survey should be well staffed, resourced and prepared to contextualize the survey in an informative and culturally sensitive approach for these hard-to-count communities.

A fair and accurate census requires a complete count. If the 2020 census contains a citizenship question, it will be less fair, less accurate and incomplete. If we believe everyone counts, then let's continue to acknowledge the obstacles to a complete count and speak clearly to the Latino community about what is at stake. I hope that together, with this commission, we can achieve greater transparency and awareness of the process, involvement of informed elected officials to face challenges together, and the resources necessary to prepare hard-to-count communities for the challenges that lay ahead.

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[2] The 2020 Census Could Miss More Than 100,000 Ohio Children, Tracy Nájera and Ashon McKenzie, https://cdfohio.org/2018/the-2020-census-could-miss-more-than-100000-ohio-children/
[3] Major Raids of the Trump Presidency, Zachary Mueller, https://americasvoice.org/blog/raids/