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Funders Concerned about Shortened Census, Data Quality

On October 13, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) announced it was ending data collection for the decennial census by 15 days in order to meet a December 31 reporting deadline for apportionment data. The Funders Census Initiative, a working group of FCCP co-chaired by Marcia Avner, Bauman Foundation and Sol Marie Alfonso-Jones, Long Island Community Foundation, issued the following statement:

“We are alarmed by the Commerce Secretary’s decision to shorten the 2020 Census. Philanthropy has organized and invested in unprecedented ways to promote census participation with a focus on historically undercounted communities, including people of color, immigrants, low-income and limited English proficient households, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and young children. Accurate census data are critical for the fair distribution of resources and political representation for the next decade. These stakes were brought into even sharper focus with the spread of COVID-19 and the economic crisis, natural disasters, and racial justice uprisings.

Cutting short the enumeration and data processing undermine a fair and accurate census and the constitutional mandate to count every person. Due to significant operational delays and modifications caused by COVID-19, the Bureau announced an extended timeline in order to meet its obligations. The count ended early despite the fact that self-response rates lag significantly in many urban and rural areas, as well as in predominantly Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, and American Indian/ Alaska Native communities, compared to 2010.

Further, the Bureau’s professional staff have repeatedly said that they cannot produce census results that meet acceptable data quality standards by the December 31 deadline. Normally, the Bureau takes five months to process, review, and tabulate the data, but now it must rush to complete this work in half the time, even as processing census responses will be more complicated than usual due to pandemic-related delays and population displacement. Unfortunately, the census continues to be unnecessarily politicized. The Bureau needs additional time to do all it can to improve data quality and accuracy. The stakes are too high to rush this work. If the Bureau continues on this path, the country likely will be left with unacceptably flawed census results that reflect a distorted picture of our communities. Governments, businesses, researchers, nonprofits, foundations and other institutions will not be able to rely on the census for accurate data for the next decade.

FCCP’s Funders Census Initiative, along with our national, state, and local funders and partners remain deeply committed to the 2020 Census and communities most likely to be undercounted, under-resourced, and under-represented. We will continue to mobilize around this essential component of our democracy.”

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The Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) is a network that shares an underlying conviction that all people deserve a voice in our democratic process. FCCP serves leaders in the philanthropic community working to further this vision with heightened attention to issues of equity and historically disenfranchised and underrepresented communities. FCCP members support nonpartisan efforts to engage voters, eliminate structural barriers to voting, advance reforms to improve government and electoral systems, and inspire public involvement in civic life. For more information, visit www.funderscommittee.org.

The Funders Census Initiative is a working group of FCCP, which has mobilized hundreds of national, state, and community-based foundations and philanthropic institutions around a fair and accurate 2020 Census.