

The Census Is In Trouble: What You Need to Know About Proposed Changes

September 18, 2026

Co-Hosts

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American Association for Public Opinion Research

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Census Quality Reinforcement Task Force

The Census Project

Fair Count

The Leadership Conference Education Fund

Population Association of America

Speakers

Denice Ross: co-founder, dataindex.us; Director, Federation of American Scientists Data Policy Institute; former U.S. Chief Data Scientist

Mary Jo Mitchell: Director of Gov't Affairs, Population Association of America; Co-Director, The Census Project

Ryan Coady: Legislative Associate, Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations

Dr. Jeanine Abrams McLean: President, Fair Count; Co-Chair, Census Quality Reinforcement Task Force

Robert Santos: former Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Dr. Amy O'Hara: Director, Massive Data Institute at Georgetown; President, Association of Public Data Users

Beth Jarosz: Vice President, Association of Public Data Users; Senior Fellow, Massive Data Institute

Meeta Anand: Senior Director of Census & Data Equity, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Caroline Medina: Senior Advisor for Data Policy and Strategy, Movement Advancement Project (MAP)

Chris Dick: co-founder, dataindex.us; former Chief of Population Evaluation, U.S. Census Bureau

Proposed Rule: [tinyurl.com/decennial-census-FRN](https://www.tinyurl.com/decennial-census-FRN)

SUMMARY:

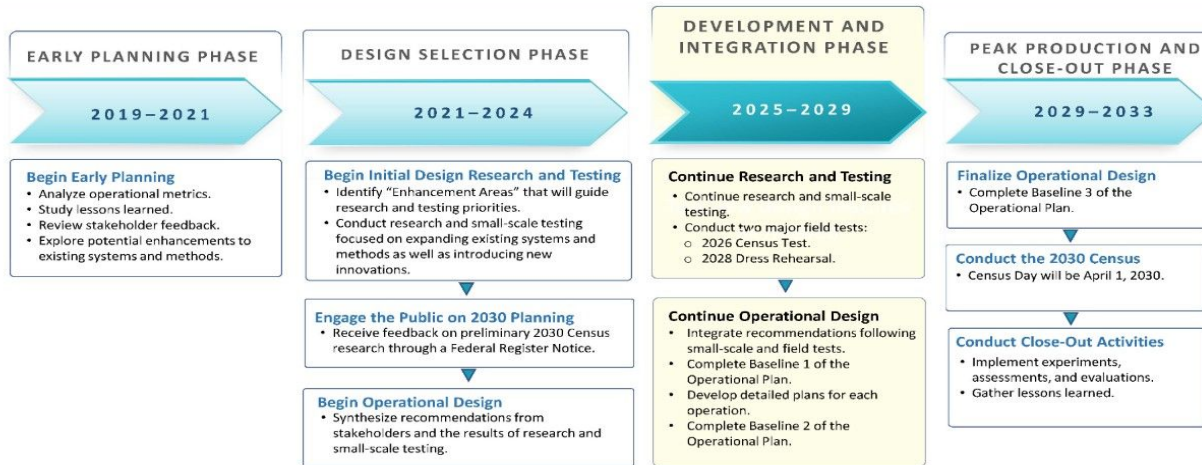
The Census Bureau is proposing to add two new parts to the Code of Federal Regulations governing the decennial census of population and housing. First, the Census Bureau is proposing to add a part outlining the residence criteria used for identifying each person's "usual residence," as needed to determine whether and where to count them in the census of the population throughout the United States. Second, the Census Bureau is proposing to add a part establishing standards and restrictions for the inclusion of certain demographic questions on the decennial census short-form questionnaire and any other questionnaire used for the enumeration of the population. The Census Bureau is considering these two additions to better prioritize and fulfill its Constitutional mandate to count for apportionment the "whole number of persons in each State" based on the concept of "usual residence"—a process that factors in an element of allegiance but otherwise should be colorblind and should not be distorted in any way by questions about immaterial personal characteristics, such as race. Although these two parts are somewhat related and complementary, each is being proposed independently based on its own merits. These proposals are intended to ensure fidelity to the Constitution, improve and protect the core decennial census data, and promote efficiency.

What is this rule proposing?

- Changes to “residence criteria” that will influence the accuracy of the count
- Changes to demographic questions that restrict what the Census Bureau can ask

Decennial census is the U.S. government's largest peacetime civilian operation.

2030 Census Planning Timeline



Why is an accurate census so important?

- Required by Constitution and Title 13 of U.S. Code
- Used for apportionment and redistricting
- “Common denominator” in nearly every aspect of American life
 - Allocating funds
 - Emergency preparation and disaster response
 - Planning for schools, roads, and hospitals
 - Tracking crime rates and monitoring public health
 - Understanding employment patterns, economic opportunity, and whether we are making progress in alleviating historic patterns of discrimination
 - Analyzing workforce and customer base to make sound business investments

Why is an accurate census so important?

Underpins all regional planning—including planning for transportation and housing



Images: Alex Reynolds, Jared Murray, and Joshua Leong via Unsplash

What are residence criteria?

Rules that determine where people are counted during a census based on the concept of “usual residence.”

Examples of why we need criteria:

- People traveling for work or vacation on Census Day (April 1)
- People with more than one home
- Transient populations (e.g., seasonal workers, adventurers, unhoused persons)
- Deployed military personnel
- College students
- Incarcerated persons

Census goal

*“Count everyone once, only once, and
in the right place.”*

Not counting everyone: Citizenship status

- Constitution and Title 13 of U.S. Code require counting the “whole number of persons in each State”
- Adding the question would increase operational cost and undermine quality of the 2030 Census count

Once? In the right place? Administrative record challenges

Opportunities

- Can help fill data gaps, especially for households that do not self-respond
- Tax records cover a substantial share of the U.S. population
- *May* help with deduplication

Risks

- Records do not cover ALL of the U.S. population
- Not always aligned with “usual residence”
 - Tax records require current *mailing* address, not *residential* address
 - Address information may be out-of-date
- Unclear which military records systems will be used (many do not align with “usual residence”)
- Linkage introduces error: False positive (linked to wrong person) and false negative (missed)
- CFR is not the right place to mandate which records should be used

Changes from 2020 residence criteria

- Introduces the concept of a *reference period* (January 3 to April 1)

What is this reference period?

(a) A person's "usual residence" is the residence at which they have **lawfully spent the greatest number of days during the census enumeration period**. A person's "usual residence" should be consistent with, and evidenced by, their tax records (e.g., tax returns, W-2 forms).

(b) A person is considered to have spent a day at a residence if he or she spent **at least one hour physically and lawfully present** there that day. A person may spend a certain day at more than one residence.

(c) The census enumeration period runs from **January 3 to April 1** during decennial census years. April 1 is referred to as "Census Day."

Changes from 2020 residence criteria

- Introduces the concept of a reference period (January 3 to April 1)
 - People who move on or before Census Day counted... where they were in January?
 - Tax records may not align with “usual residence” based on the reference period.
 - What’s a “residence?” (Boat, home-based daycare or healthcare

Changes from 2020 residence criteria

- Nearly all specific examples were removed. Some moves from specific-to-general would represent a substantial shift...
 - Children in boarding schools... Counted at school?
 - Foster children... Counted at all?
 - Domestic violence shelter... Counted at “home” if counted at all?
 - People in religious group quarters on Census Day... Counted elsewhere?
 - College students with student visas... Not counted.
 - And more...
- Crews of U.S. flag vessels docked in a foreign port or sailing from one foreign port to another foreign port on Census Day... counted at their onshore usual residence in the U.S. (previously not counted)
- Details for military servicemembers

Prohibiting collection of race and ethnicity data

- Race has been asked in every U.S. census since 1790.

Importance of race and ethnicity data

- Fundamental for enforcing civil rights, distributing government funds, and guiding public policy and other decision-making endeavors
 - Civil Rights/Anti-Discrimination Enforcement: Used to identify areas where minority groups may face systemic disadvantages
 - Resource allocation: Census Bureau reported more than \$2.8 trillion in federal funding was distributed in FY2021 based on census data; POGO reported more than \$2.24 trillion in FY2023
 - Guiding Policy & Other Decision-making: Used to identify problems and needs for specific communities and to develop efficient and effective solutions tailored to those needs
- Respect for self-identification/visibility
 - Individuals are the most authoritative sources of their own identities
 - All communities are important and should be able to “see” themselves in the fabric of America

Learn more...

The Leadership Conference Advocates and Data Users Webinar

Proposed Census Residence Rule: What It Means for Communities and Data Users

September 22, 2026 at 2pm ET

Prohibiting collection of sexual orientation data

- The Proposed Rule would prohibit questions about sexual orientation on the decennial census, which does not currently include an explicit, standalone sexual orientation measure
- The Proposed Rule does not provide sufficient evidence, legal citations, or reasoning for the prohibition
- The Census Bureau should not preclude such a measure from being added to future censuses if deemed necessary and feasible
- Decisions about adding new demographic questions should be guided by a deliberative process grounded in rigorous research, testing, and stakeholder input

Prohibiting collection of sexual orientation data

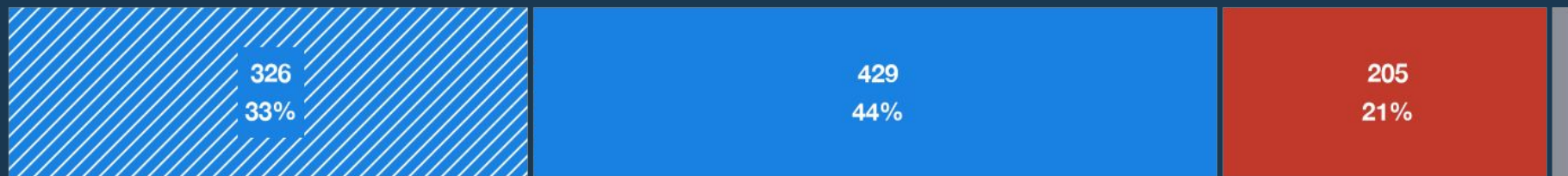
- The ban on sexual orientation questions raises concerns about how data on same-sex couples will continue to be collected and reported
- Same-sex couples have been counted through the household relationship question for decades
- The 2020 redesigned question addressed known measurement errors by adding separate response categories for same-sex couples and a consistency check, improving data accuracy
- The Census Bureau should not restrict the collection or publication of data on same-sex couples, which would undermine data quality

Other issues and questions

- Weakens mandatory response
- Status question is untested
- Inconsistent language within document
- Impact on American Indian and Alaska Native populations
- Only 33 days for comment, despite being a “significant” regulatory action
- Also read the PRIA

We encourage you to read the proposed rule and related regulatory impact analysis in detail.

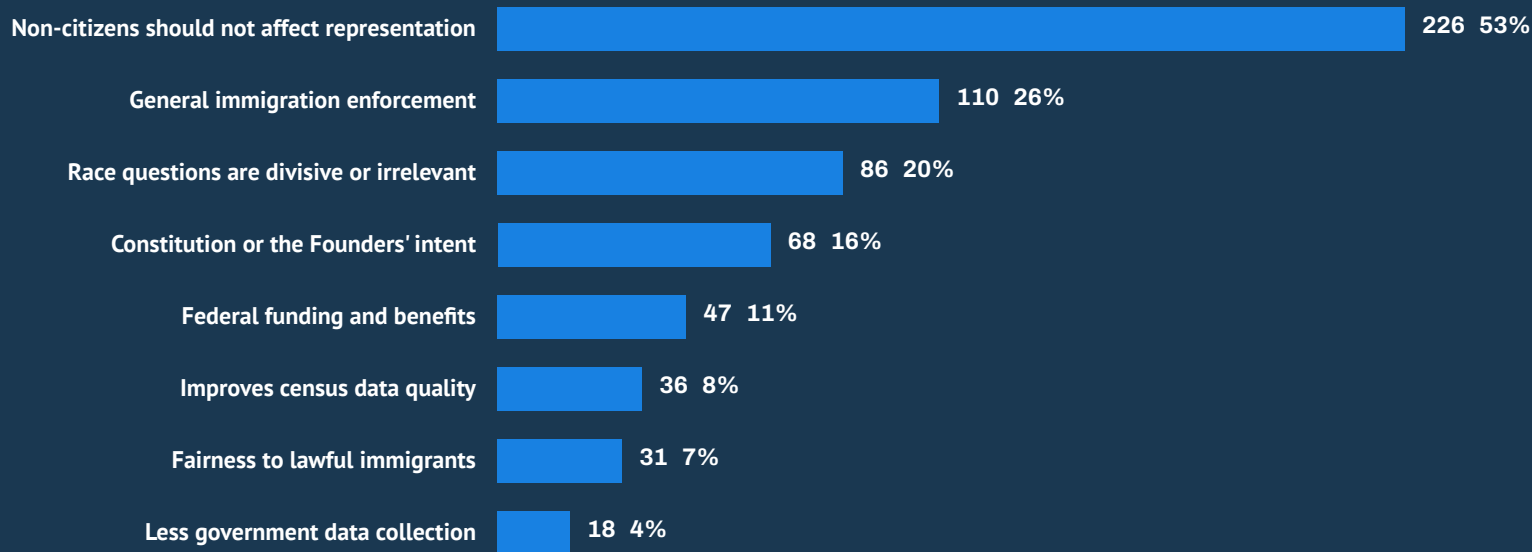
Comments so far



 Support — form-letter campaign  Support — independently written  Oppose  No clear position

What the supporting comments argue

Arguments across the 429 independently written supporting comments, excluding the form-letter campaign. A comment may make more than one argument.



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SUPPORT

USBC-2026-0628 X Search

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REFINE DOCUMENTS RESULTS ?

☐ Only show documents open for comment (1)

Document Type —

☐ Proposed Rule (1)
☐ Supporting & Related Material (1)

Posted —

Last 7 Days (2)
Last 15 Days (2)
Last 30 Days (2)
Last 90 Days (2)
Custom Dates

SEARCH RESULTS SORT BY: Best Match

SUPPORTING & RELATED MATERIAL
Preliminary Regulatory Impact Analysis (PRIA)
Agency Bureau of the Census | Posted Sep 10, 2026 | ID USBC-2026-0628-0002

PROPOSED RULE
Decennial Census of the Population of Americans; Proposed Residence Criteria and Proposed Regulations for Demographic Questions
Agency Bureau of the Census | Posted Sep 10, 2026 | ID USBC-2026-0628-0001

Open for Comments

Comment Period Ends: **Oct 13, 2026 at 11:59 PM EDT**

Comment

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USBC-2026-0628

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PUBLIC COMMENT CLOSES OCT 13, 2026

HANDS OFF OUR CENSUS

The Census Bureau has proposed unprecedented changes to how the 2030 Census counts the country. Everyone who is counted, and everyone who relies on the count, can weigh in until October 13.



Take Action

Submit a comment tinyurl.com/2030-Census-FRN

- Submit a comment requesting to extend the comment period until 12/10
- Submit your thoughts on any/every part of the proposed rule

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- [Roadmap to 2030](#)
- federaldataforum.prb.org

Send questions to info@dataindex.us