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## The Agenda

### **Trump's threat to the 2020 Census**

Says one expert: 'We could be heading for a train wreck.'

By **DANNY VINIK** | 04/09/2017 07:37 AM EDT

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It's three years away and still a year from its scheduled dress rehearsal, but nervous observers are already asking: What happens to the 2020 U.S. census under President Donald Trump?

The first day of this month marked three years until Census Day: April 1, 2020. Though it may sound like one of the driest bureaucratic responsibilities of the federal government, the census has crucial implications for national politics—and requires years of planning, hundreds of thousands of new employees and even a marketing campaign to ensure the broadest possible snapshot of the American population.

Already, Congress' inability to agree on a full-year funding measure for fiscal 2017 has forced the Census Bureau to cancel multiple field tests and delay opening three field offices. It also had to cut back on new, less labor-intensive methods for verifying household addresses, a critical undertaking that was supposed to make the 2020 census more cost-effective and accurate.

And more broadly, the Trump administration's hard-line rhetoric and executive orders cracking down on undocumented immigrants may already be creating a major new risk for the census, making members of minority and immigrant communities less likely to respond.

“If you imagine that the federal government is asking for personal information and you feel that the federal government is hostile and that if you were to answer this, perhaps they would use this against you,” said Terry Ao Minnis, director of the census and voting programs at Asian Americans Advancing Justice. “That, of course, will make people less inclined to participate.”

The U.S. census is the largest civic action undertaken by the entire country—a decennial event enshrined in the Constitution that aims to count every person living in the United States, regardless of race, gender or citizenship status. At least, that's been its intent since James Madison helped design the first census in 1790.

But census-watchers are increasingly warning that the 2020 census could be hobbled. The census requires a huge administrative ramp-up in the three years leading up to the national count, hiring hundreds of thousands of people and opening dozens of offices nationwide. The Census Bureau was one of few federal agencies outside the Pentagon to get an increase in Trump's 2018 budget—but that \$100 million increase is misleading, because the House and Senate had already each proposed to increase the Census Bureau's funding by about that amount for 2017. So at a time when the census needs to be ramping up sharply—it had requested a 21 percent increase for 2017, or \$290 million—Trump's 2018 budget represents no increase at all.

Based on lack of funding and technical challenges, in January, the Government Accountability Office added the 2020 census to its “high risk” list of programs and agencies. Without extra money to ramp up, “I am increasingly worried about a higher undercount in many communities,” said Terri Ann Lowenthal, the former co-director of the Census Project, an organization that tracks the census. “We could be headed for a train wreck if the Census Bureau doesn't get the resources it needs.”

The census affects every corner of America, determining where hundreds of billions of federal dollars flow annually, where businesses open new stores and which states gain—or lose—seats in the House of Representatives in 2020 reapportionment. Businesses, trade groups and local communities have been tracking the progress for the 2020 census for years, since its preparations first began *before* the completion of the 2010 census.

But counting everyone is expensive, and especially so for hard-to-reach people, such as poor families who move frequently or immigrants fearful of government authorities. The government spends billions of dollars tracking down these people, eventually sending human enumerators into the field to follow up with nonrespondents.

Each step of the process is fraught with political landmines, from where advertising dollars are spent to what kind of questions to ask people. At the end of March, for instance, the Census Bureau initially included sexual orientation questions in its list of planned topics for the 2020 census before quickly publishing a revised version that omitted any reference to such topics, drawing sharp rebukes from LGBTQ groups and Democrats on Capitol Hill. (The Census Bureau says the original inclusion was a simple mistake.)

Immigrant-rights groups, too, have been watching with concern. The decennial census doesn't traditionally ask about immigration status, but Republicans, led by former Sen. David Vitter, have long wanted to do so. In January, a leaked draft executive order proposed directing the Census Bureau to include a question on immigration status on the “long-form” census, known as the American Community Survey, which is a longer, detailed survey for a subset of people living in the United States and is scheduled to be conducted in 2018. If the Census Bureau included an immigration-related question on the ACS but not on the census itself, it would raise questions about whether the White House intends to use the information collected on both the ACS and census to track down and deport undocumented immigrants. That could further discourage immigrants from participating in the census.

White House spokesperson Michael Short did not respond to questions about whether the White House's policies and rhetoric could discourage participation in the census, but said, “The administration has been very clear about its enforcement priorities, which are to focus on those

here illegally who have criminal records as well as those who pose a threat to public safety or national security.” The Census Bureau and Commerce Department did not respond to detailed questions about their plans for the 2020 census.

One other twist in the 2020 census could raise trust issues: For the first time, Americans will be asked to respond online. This raises new cybersecurity concerns, as the Census Bureau will not only have to secure all the collected data, with tens of millions of online responses coming in in just a few days, but it will also have to convince Americans that the data they submit online won’t be hacked, the way other major federal personnel records systems have been. “We have never done an internet census. We presume it won’t be hacked, but if it gets hacked and it gets out right away, for heaven’s sakes, people aren’t going to send it in,” said Kenneth Prewitt, a former director of the Census Bureau. If that happens, he added, the Census Bureau won’t have trained enough human enumerators to go into the field and manually follow up with households.

The Census Bureau has had costly tech snafus before. In 2010, the agency commissioned a specially designed handheld computer for its employees going house to house to conduct follow-up surveys for nonrespondents. Thanks to missed deadlines and technical problems, they abandoned the device late in the process—instead sending census-takers out with paper forms. That failure ended up costing an additional \$3 billion.

This time, Congress has told the Census Bureau it can’t exceed the \$12 billion it spent in 2010. It has made some major changes intended to save costs, from online forms to more efficiently updating its address book. By all accounts, it’s a well-designed plan. Overall, the Census Bureau says these changes will save \$5 billion—though both the GAO and the Department of Commerce inspector general have questioned the census’ cost estimates. But experts said those savings will not happen unless Congress adequately funds the agency in the next few years so it can employ new techniques in updating its address book and test out its new technology.

“They are missing out on some important preparation steps, and it’s going to cause problems,” said Howard Fienberg, a lobbyist at the Insights Association, a trade group that represents the research industry.

The White House rejected that critique, and says the Census Bureau has the money it needs to build out its systems now. “The increase proposed in the budget blueprint provides adequate funding for the Census Bureau to support IT system investments to conduct a modernized decennial census in 2020,” said Coalter Baker, a spokesperson for the White House budget office.

The census is one of the most impressive attempts any country makes to count its own people, a crucial building block for the world’s largest economy that informs important business decisions, such as where to open a new store or whether a state is a good place to invest. “Our census data

provides a level of transparency for our economy that gives our country a competitive edge over other countries, and a failed census puts that at risk,” said a former congressional staffer who worked on census issues. “It all starts with statistics.”

“That’s the gold standard,” said Ken Fears, an economist at the National Association of Realtors, which produces a monthly housing report that uses census data for its baseline. “If the gold standard becomes silver, you have a problem.”





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The travel ban got all the headlines, but experts are realizing another provision could clamp down on normal tourism and even diplomats.

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