

## **House Committee on Oversight and Reform**

**December 3, 2020**

### **Testimony of Joseph J. Salvo**

Good Morning Chair Maloney and members of the Committee. On behalf of the mayor and the nearly 8.5 million people in the City of New York, I thank you for having me here today. As New York City's chief demographer my message today is twofold:

1. The schedule for the decennial census must provide the Census Bureau professional staff with enough time to do their jobs well and in accordance with the rigorous statistical standards we expect.
2. The Census Bureau must be transparent, by releasing key indicators and giving Americans confidence in the census.

After the fourth census of my career, I can say that I am still amazed at the engineering marvel that is the decennial census -- several hundred procedures and processes to create what demographers regard as the gold standard for data on the nation. At the outset, it is important to recognize that the census process has served the country well because of careful planning, testing and adherence to an organized and predictable timetable, which keeps this symphony of moving parts in sync.

The census has been presented with challenges in the past, but few have been as formidable as those posed by the 2020 Census. Among the challenges we have faced, the most pressing has been the toxic mix of fear among many immigrants and their families, combined with a devastating pandemic. Thus, the challenge of overcoming fear in many immigrant communities

was hampered by the very absence of physical on-the-ground outreach that has been shown to encourage response, especially self-response.

In an effort to cope with these extraordinary circumstances, the Secretary of Commerce and the Census Bureau leadership wisely reset the schedule for the 2020 census last April, delaying the conclusion of the census until the end of October and proposed delivery of the first product by the early spring of 2021. This provided more time for the all-important Non-Response Follow-Up (NRFU), when Census workers knock on doors in order to enumerate those who did not respond on their own. In addition, the revised schedule allowed for ample time after data collection ended to check and process the data. This is important, given an anticipated increase in problems that need to be resolved, such as residency issues, address anomalies and other glitches due to the pandemic.

Unfortunately, this revised schedule was upended this past summer, greatly abbreviating the time the Bureau had in the field for NRFU and the time to process the data on the back end. So, why should we be concerned? Simply put, the abbreviated timeline for data collection, combined with the execution of a census during a pandemic is a formula for problems:

First, the very definition of “usual residence” was likely upended for many because of movement due to the pandemic. Many persons were not enumerated at their usual residence as of April 1, 2020, but in other locations – some students and others, for example, in temporary locations with other family members or friends, or in second homes. For those whose usual residence was in New York City on April 1st, the Census Bureau needs time on the back end to adjust their residence to reflect an off-campus location (in the case of students) or

other apartments on that date. Moreover, such confusion among respondents over where they were supposed to be enumerated in the middle of a pandemic is a virtual guarantee that large-scale duplication of responses will occur. De-duplication using data on forms that sometimes lack important information (e.g. name), is laborious, with substantial time required for successful completion of the process.

Second, in an effort to increase response, the Bureau allowed respondents to write-in their addresses without a census ID. This is fine for those who have regular known addresses that can be easily linked to the Census Bureau's Master Address File (MAF) but not for those who have irregular addresses, where apartment numbers do not formally exist (think about those basement apartments throughout the city). Now, the Department of City Planning worked for more than two years identifying these addresses, assigning them apartment designators, and getting them on the Bureau's address list; but without a census ID, the Bureau needs to conduct additional work in the field during NRFU to match these irregular addresses to the MAF. With less time in the field as a result of the abbreviated schedule, it is very likely that many of these cases need to be resolved by the Census Bureau as part of back-end processing, which has been truncated.

Third, there is a serious concern about how the Census Bureau, in the midst of a pandemic, achieved a 99+ percent completion rate in parts of the city, where self-response over a period of five months was less than 50%, given a shortened NRFU timetable. The answer is that "completed" or "resolved" does not necessarily mean "enumerated by a household member"; but, what does it mean? It could mean that the enumerator determined the unit to be "non-

existent” or vacant. The cases could have been resolved by contact with a proxy respondent or via administrative records (e.g. tax returns, social security records), or the final determination could be an outright refusal or no determination could be made for what was believed to be an occupied unit. The Census Bureau needs the time to assess these cases, to evaluate the use of administrative records or to assign a count of persons to households known to exist using a procedure called statistical imputation. Moreover, metrics need to be produced that reflect how the census was completed. This should include measures that reflect: the level of de-duplication; reassignment of persons to their usual place of residence; housing units on the address list that were deleted in NRFU or later in back-end processing; the use of administrative records to complete the enumeration; and the use of statistical imputation.

To conclude,

1. The schedule for the decennial census must provide the Census Bureau professional staff with enough time to process, evaluate, and correct what we all suspect will be an increased volume of problems with the census, due to the pandemic;
2. The Census Bureau must be transparent, by releasing key indicators endorsed by the *Census Quality Indicators Task Force* of the American Statistical Association, like those mentioned above. Moreover, these metrics should be provided for sub-state geographic areas. This will not only provide data users with confidence in the quality of the data but will allow the Bureau to maintain its credibility as the nation’s premier statistical agency.