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Southern Rural Sociological Association Statement on the 2020 Census

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Cover Page Footnote

This statement was drafted and approved by the 2020 Southern Rural Sociological Association Officers.
(This statement was originally released in August 2020 prior to completion of the 2020 Census.)



The Southern Rural Sociological Association joins the Rural Sociological Society and numerous other organizations in calling for the necessary time to conduct an accurate Census.

The U.S. Constitution (Article 1, Section 2) requires the Decennial Census for apportioning representatives in our national government, and the Decennial Census has been taking place since 1790. These data are also used for drawing political districts at multiple levels of government, from the local and state to the federal. Census data are used as the basis for a range of other statistics, including population estimates, population projections, and rates of diseases and other health concerns.

Furthermore, Census data are used to determine the allocation of funding and to make eligibility decisions for programs addressing health, food assistance, education, workforce development, housing, infrastructure, and environmental protection, just to name a few.

At the start of the 2020 data collection period, it looked like a good year for participation in the Census. The hard work of complete count committees combined with numerous agencies, nonprofits, churches and other houses of worship, and businesses working along with Census Bureau staff was proving successful in early self-participation rates. However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Census efforts in numerous ways, including:

- o Diverted attention and resources from the Census process;
- o Slowed hiring and forced many Census Bureau staff members to work remotely;
- o Made many people temporarily leave their usual place of residence;

- o Halted public outreach and community engagement activities; and,
- o Resulted in alternative 2020 Census timelines.

The overwhelming impact the pandemic and associated economic challenges have presented to our families, communities, state, and nation, it made great sense to extend the data collection period for the Census.

However, just as we are seeing a rise in infection rates in many states, including rural areas, and families are juggling the challenges with back to school schedules, Census Bureau leaders announced the extremely problematic plan to end all Census data collection as of September 30, 2020. We know that state and national response rates are too low for the accurate count that is demanded of us by the Constitution. This is particularly troubling for rural areas where Census participation tends to be lower, especially among those places with higher rural minority populations, high levels of poverty and limited broadband internet access. In our increasingly data-driven world in the midst of a pandemic, we need more, rather than less, accurate data.

It would be nearly impossible to overstate the point that rural places are particularly vulnerable to the negative outcomes that will result from an undercount of the population. Not only is representation in national government at stake, so too is access to resources for rural and community development. Given the high levels of poverty that persist coupled with education, health, and infrastructure needs that we would face in “normal times” are now exacerbated by a public health crisis, the pandemic-related low response to the 2020 Census will negatively impact rural America for the next decade, as well as subsequent decades.

Southern Rural Sociological Association Officers