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House of Representatives

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Ranking Member Jamie Raskin Committee on Oversight and Accountability Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery Hearing on “Oversight of the U.S. Census Bureau” December 5, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Comer, and thank you Director Santos for your time this morning.

The Census is an essential constitutional and governmental function that was conducted in 2020 under the Trump Administration, not the Biden Administration.

The Bureau faced some giant and unprecedented challenges in conducting the 2020 Census. The census took place in the COVID-19 global pandemic, which significantly complicated the work of Census staff as huge parts of the public were worried about contracting COVID-19. Many Census activities were suspended or shifted, and in many states and localities, lockdowns and travel restrictions stopped the Census Bureau from accessing entire communities.

A number of other problems caused by the pandemic further affected the count, such as double-counting people who had temporarily moved in with family or friends to weather the crisis, or college students being counted twice after being sent home from school early or not being counted at all. Overcounts can also occur when members of a family with a second home list their primary address differently, or when a landlord lists a tenant as living in an apartment even as the tenant lists another residence as their primary address.

Overcounts and undercounts are not a new problem, but there is always a new variety of challenges emerging in different settings. The 2020 Census also had to contend with hurricanes and wildfires affecting multiple states, and it was conducted following limited tests because of substantial budget cuts in the years prior to the Census.

There is no reason to see these undercounts and overcounts as anything more than errors made during exceptionally difficult circumstances complicating the census, but the usual profusion of conspiracy theories have proliferated from people not interested in making the Census work better but simply in scaring the public and tearing the government down.

The Post-Enumeration Survey is only intended to measure accuracy for a subset of the population. For example, it does not include people living in college dormitories or military barracks. Moreover, it draws its conclusions from a survey of approximately 170,000 housing units out of 145 million in the country. In other words, the Post-Enumeration Survey is a tool to help inform and guide further Census activities; it is not a recount of the Census, nor can or should it be used to supplant or alter census data for purposes of apportionment.

I appreciate the Chairman calling this hearing today because we should all want a complete and accurate 2030 Census. But the solutions to achieve it are no mystery. Instead of cutting funding for the Census Bureau, as House Republicans have tried to do this year and in years past, we need to make sure the Bureau has the resources it needs to conduct the planning and preparatory work that are essential to a successful count. Instead of threatening to add a citizenship question to the census—which experts have warned will depress participation in the count, including by American citizens—we should support the Census Bureau in fulfilling the clear constitutional mandate of counting the whole number of persons in each State.

The census must be an independent nonpolitical exercise conducted by career statisticians and qualified professionals, not an arm of whichever Administration happens to be in charge. And we must ensure that the census never becomes a grossly inaccurate, starkly authoritarian tool of fear and control. The Decennial Census must always remain a tool to nourish and improve our democracy by empowering Americans through equal representation and equal access to resources and opportunity.

The Decennial Census plays a critical role in American democracy, guaranteeing that there will be a fair allocation of House seats in the country and House Districts of equal population within every state. It also assures that government resources and benefits will be distributed fairly.

It is not easy to find and count 334.9 million people in the world’s greatest multi-racial, multi-ethnic constitutional democracy and the Census must constantly innovate and improve its methods. This should be the grounds for analysis, engagement and celebration—not partisan-motivated conspiracy theory and fear-mongering.

I want to thank Director Santos and his staff for their hard work on behalf of all Americans and for appearing here today. I look forward to a productive and substantive exchange.

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