



National Coalition for Literacy

11 November 2022

Ms. Shannon Wink
Program Analyst
Policy Coordination Office
U.S. Census Bureau

RE: Docket No. USBC-2022-0004, Input on 2030 Census Preliminary Research

Dear Ms. Wink:

I write on behalf of the National Coalition for Literacy (NCL) Board to thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Bureau's 2030 Census preliminary research. NCL is an alliance of the leading national and regional organizations dedicated to advancing adult education, workforce development, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the United States. The adults and communities served by programs in these areas are recognized by the Census Bureau as among those hardest to count; they include persons in low-income households, foreign-born residents, members of ethnic and racial minorities, and rural residents. An undercount of these hard-to-count populations diminishes access to resources that fund education for the adults and families served by NCL member organizations and their constituents, as well as social programs essential to the well-being of the individuals and families that the adult education community serves.

From September 2018 through September 2020, NCL carried out its Mobilizing the Adult Education Community project, which was designed to increase participation by adults with limited literacy in the 2020 Census through ensuring that they understood the importance of the Census and its implications for their families and communities; knew how to participate and how to complete the online questionnaire; could make informed decisions about the risks and benefits of completing the Census form; and were aware of Census enumerator job opportunities that might be available to them. NCL achieved the project's goals through outreach to and collaboration with adult education programs and practitioners, using their local connections to reach adults with limited literacy and their families, friends, and communities. NCL's perspectives on the preliminary research for the 2030 Census are informed by the successes of this project, as detailed in the four sections below.

A. Reaching and motivating everyone

NCL's experience has demonstrated that the challenges associated with distrust in government, concerns about privacy, and cultural diversity are strongly represented in the populations served by adult education and family literacy programs. The Mobilizing the Adult Education Community project showed that outreach through trusted sources of information had the power

to mitigate or offset those challenges. Accordingly, NCL recommends that the Bureau adopt two strategies that were effective in 2020:

- Outreach to and through adult education programs: This involves partnering with adult education providers in community-based organizations, libraries, schools and community colleges, and elsewhere so that staff have clear information on how Census completion supports their organizations and communities and well-defined, consistent guidelines for when and how a CBO or library staff person can assist a client with completion of the online or paper Census form. In 2020 the Bureau did provide excellent information in multiple formats on how Census data is protected, addressing common fears such as sharing of information with immigration authorities or landlords. NCL suggests that the Bureau provide similar informational materials in 2030, partnering with adult education providers to ensure that the language is accessible to adults with lower reading proficiency levels. NCL also recommends continuing the Census in Schools program, which is highly effective in disseminating information to parents and families, but adjusting it to address aspects of the Census in ways that are appropriate for adults.
- Development of Census Ambassador programs: This involves encouraging the development of cadres of adult education program participants who serve as Census Ambassadors, taking the message about the importance of Census completion to their families, friends, and communities. For the 2020 Census, NCL developed a training program to support adult education instructors in doing this. The training program was highly successful where it was implemented; it could be adapted to current conditions and scaled up for 2030.

B. Technology

The Bureau's goal of having the majority of respondents complete the Census online is essential to the efficiency and thoroughness of data collection and processing, but it means that people with limited access to technology resources and low levels of digital proficiency are at risk of being left out of the count. To address this challenge, the Mobilizing the Adult Education Community project adopted two strategies:

- Development of an online practice form that was identical to the actual online Census form, so that people with low levels of reading and technology proficiency, including those less familiar with how to interpret and complete an online form, could work with an instructor or independently to become familiar with the form's requirements before responding to the Census "for real."
- Provision of paper practice forms in English and Spanish for use with people who were unwilling to or had no way to complete the Census form online and did not want to participate in a telephone call.

These opportunities to become familiar with the nature and content of the Census form before completing and submitting it increased adult learners' confidence and the likelihood that they would provide accurate information. Although it is impossible to predict how technology will change over the next few years, it is highly likely that some segments of the U.S. population will have lower levels of access and proficiency than others. NCL recommends that the Bureau plan to provide similar options, particularly an online practice form, for use in adult education and related programs nationwide.

D. How the Bureau contacts respondents

As in the response on reaching and motivating everyone above, for this topic NCL recommends adopting the “trusted messenger” approach and collaborating with adult education programs and other social service organizations to develop outreach messages that will be effective in their specific communities. Messages that are tailored through the inclusion of locally relevant information, such as the way funding for local road and bridge maintenance or health care services was allocated on the basis of the 2020 Census, would be powerful. Establishing a general sense in the community that the Census is a good thing can increase the likelihood of completion. Finally, sad but true, one of the most effective messages in 2020 was, “If you complete and submit your Census form, the Census Bureau will go away and leave you alone.”

The experience of NCL and its member organizations indicates that contacts with respondents will be most effective if they are culturally sensitive and appropriate. The Bureau has developed strong collaborative relationships in many communities to assure that this is the case; NCL suggests that it continue this process over the period leading up to the 2030 Census so that contact methods continue to build on the preferences and perspectives of different communities with regard to phone/text, email, paper mail, and in-person contacts, as well as other contact methods that may develop in the future. As the diversity of the U.S. population increases, the Bureau will need to rely more and more on such community collaborations to inform the appropriate number and length of contact messages, the best choice(s) of contact method, and the appropriate language(s) to use for communication.

E. Respondent support services

For the 2020 Census, the Bureau provided phone-based assistance with completing the online form and the paper form in 12 languages in addition to English, and video and print completion guides and glossaries in 57 languages including American Sign Language, plus Braille and large-print materials in English. The choice of languages was made on the basis of population numbers derived from the American Community Survey.

NCL appreciates the intention that guided provision of these resources and understands the financial and staffing constraints that determined their scope. However, the continued growth in number and size of U.S. communities where languages other than English are spoken means that more and better such resources will be needed in the future. To expand the Bureau’s capacity in this area while remaining cognizant of the restrictions imposed by limited resources, NCL suggests investigation of three possibilities:

- Develop a specific policy for when and how vetted staff at adult education programs, libraries, and other social service agencies can provide in-person or phone-based assistance to individuals who are completing and submitting the online or paper Census form, with specific guidelines and procedures as appropriate.
- Draw on federal resources such as the FBI’s National Virtual Translation Center for support in developing and providing resources in additional languages.
- Monitor the development of updated and new technology tools that can provide real-time assistance (through pop-up translations and instructions, for example) with Census form completion.

For NCL, its member organizations, and the populations that we serve, a full and accurate count in the decennial Census is a matter of critical importance. NCL stands ready to provide further insight and support to the Bureau as and when needed, both as strategies for the 2030 Census are developed and when they are implemented. Please feel free to contact me for further information on collaboration possibilities.

Sincerely,

Deborah Kennedy

Deborah Kennedy
Executive Director