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# The Census Bureau Director

## Introduction

On February 14, 2025, Director of the Census (informally known as the Census Bureau director) Robert Santos resigned from his position as director. Santos was nominated by then-President Joe Biden, confirmed by the Senate on November 4, 2021, and sworn in for a five-year term on January 5, 2022. In September 2025, George Cook began performing the duties of director at the U.S. Census Bureau.

The decennial census is mandated by Article I, Section 2, clause 3, of the U.S. Constitution, as modified by Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Census Bureau's history website notes that although the census has been conducted since 1790, a permanent Census Office was not established until 1902. Initially in the Department of the Interior, the office moved to the new Department of Commerce and Labor in 1903. In 1913, when Commerce and Labor became separate departments, the Census Office remained in Commerce.

Census law is codified in Title 13 of the *U.S. Code*. Title 13, Section 21(a)(1), provides that the Census Bureau "shall be headed by a Director of the Census, appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, without regard to political affiliation." Section 21(a)(2) stipulates that "Such appointment shall be made from individuals who have a demonstrated ability in managing large organizations and experience in the collection, analysis, and use of statistical data." Section 21(b)(1) sets the director's term of office at five years, beginning on January 1, 2012, "and every fifth year thereafter" and specifies that "an individual may not serve more than 2 full terms as Director." Under Section 21(b)(2), "any individual appointed to fill a vacancy in such position, occurring before the expiration of the term for which such individual's predecessor was appointed, shall be appointed for the remainder of that term. The Director may serve after the end of the Director's term until reappointed or until a successor has been appointed, but in no event longer than 1 year after the end of such term." Section 21(b)(3) states that the President may remove a director, and shall communicate "in writing the reasons for any such removal to both Houses of Congress not later than 60 days before the removal."

Because the Census Bureau is a Commerce Department agency, the Secretary of Commerce has official responsibility for its functions. In practice, however, the Secretary delegates much of this responsibility to the bureau director. According to Title 13, Section 21(c), "The Director shall perform such duties as may be imposed upon the Director by law, regulations, or orders of the Secretary."

## Organizational Structure

The Census Bureau encompasses several divisions:

- **Communications:** leads internal and external communications for the bureau.
- **Field Operations:** responsible for data collection and data processing of surveys and censuses.
- **Economic Programs:** conducts over 60 monthly, quarterly, and annual surveys covering several sectors of the economy.
- **Demographic Programs:** provides information about the size, distribution, and characteristics of the overall population of the nation as well as information on income, poverty, and housing.
- **Decennial Census Programs:** oversees decennial census programs, the American Community Survey (ACS), and the bureau's geographic programs.
- **Research and Methodology:** develops the bureau's practice of economic and social measurement.

## Director's Responsibilities

The broad responsibilities delegated to the director—concerning data collection, processing, quality control, confidentiality protection, and dissemination—are summarized below.

### Decennial Census (recurring every 10 years)

The decennial census of population and housing, under Title 13, Section 141, is the largest and probably most visible of the director's responsibilities. The census is a count, as nearly complete and accurate as possible, at the start of every decade, of every person whose usual residence is in the United States. The constitutional reason for taking the census is to have an updated basis for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Census data also are used to redraw legislative boundaries within states; to produce population estimates and projections; in formulas that help allocate federal funds, estimated by nongovernmental research at more than \$1.5 trillion annually, to states and localities; and by subnational governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and researchers for many other purposes.

### American Community Survey

Closely related is the American Community Survey (ACS), which the bureau implemented nationwide in 2005 and 2006. The ACS replaced the decennial census long form that, from 1940 to 2000, collected detailed socioeconomic and housing data from a sample of U.S. residents as the

census was administered. The ACS is sent monthly to small population samples, and the results are aggregated to produce larger, generalizable samples. The survey covers more than 3.5 million households a year in every U.S. county and the District of Columbia.

### Quinquennial Censuses (recurring every 5 years)

The quinquennial economic census and census of governments also are under the director's purview.

The economic census originated when, according to the Census Bureau, "Congress responded to a rapid increase in industrial activity" by instructing 1810 census enumerators to take "an account of the several manufacturing establishments and manufactures" they were to visit. The contemporary economic census is authorized under Title 13, Section 131. The bureau calls this census "the foundation" for measuring "U.S. businesses and their economic impact." The census reaches "nearly 4 million businesses, large, medium, and small, covering most industries and all geographic areas of the United States."

The Census Bureau characterizes the census of governments, conducted since 1957, as providing "the most comprehensive and precise measure of government economic activity. It identifies the scope and nature of the nation's public sector" and presents "benchmark figures" on "public finance, pensions, and employment." It classifies "local government organizations, powers, and activities," and "measures federal, state, and local fiscal relationships."

Under Title 13, Section 161, this census is to include, but not be limited to, "data on taxes and tax valuations, governmental receipts, expenditures, indebtedness, and employees of States, counties, cities, and other governmental units."

### Population Estimates and Projections

Title 13, Section 181, authorizes the bureau's population estimates program, which provides "interim current data" in the years between decennial censuses. "To the extent feasible," the program is to produce and publish annually, "for each State, county, and local unit of general purpose government which has a population of fifty thousand or

more, current data on total population and population characteristics"; and biennially, "for other local units of general purpose government," "current data on total population." The bureau also produces projections of population into the future that are based on the most recent census.

### Surveys Beyond the ACS

According to the Census Bureau, it conducts more than 130 surveys of households and businesses every year. The bureau identifies the ACS as the nation's largest household survey. Some surveys are a shared responsibility between the bureau and other agencies. One notable example is the Current Population Survey (CPS), which the bureau calls "the primary source of monthly labor force statistics," including unemployment rates. Supplementary questions added to the basic CPS "vary month to month and cover a wide variety of topics such as child support, volunteerism, health insurance coverage, and school enrollment." The Census Bureau conducts the CPS for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and BLS provides about two-thirds of the survey's funding.

### Congressional Testimony

In addition, the director testifies before the bureau's congressional oversight committees, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, about various matters of concern to them, and before the Committees on Appropriations' Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Subcommittees about the Census Bureau's budget and associated matters.

*This Insight was originally authored by Jennifer D. Williams, former Specialist in American National Government. The listed author has updated the product and is available to answer questions from congressional clients.*

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