



September 28, 2020

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Steven D. Dillingham
Director
U.S. Census Bureau

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Zabarsky".

FROM: Mark H. Zabarsky
Principal Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Evaluation

SUBJECT: **2020 Census Alert:** *The Census Bureau's Program to Provide Awards to Nonresponse Followup Enumerators and Field Supervisors May Require Additional Quality Assurance of Cases to Ensure Data Accuracy*
Final Memorandum No. OIG-20-052-M

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) is issuing this 2020 Census Alert to bring to your attention our concern about the nonresponse followup operation (NRFU) employee awards program that requires attention. Delays and changes to 2020 Census operations as a result of the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have presented risks to an accurate and timely count of the population.

Enumerating nonresponsive households months later than originally scheduled—and scheduling completion of that work by September 30, 2020—prompted the Bureau to incentivize increased enumeration production by granting monetary awards to certain temporary employees. The program calculates awards based on the number of completed cases per hour and hours worked per week, regardless of whether the work was completed accurately. Awards on this basis may reward employees producing errors in completed cases—whether intentional or accidental—and lead to an increased number of reinterviews than would otherwise be required to ensure data quality.

Background

Schedule delays and changes to NRFU. The 2020 Census is comprised of several field operations to enumerate the population and housing of the United States.¹ The largest operation in terms of expense, NRFU, is carried out to determine the status of housing units for nonresponding addresses (whether vacant or occupied) and to enumerate housing units from which the Bureau did not receive a 2020 Census response. NRFU employs temporary enumerators, who report to Census field supervisors (CFSes), to collect

¹ The U. S. Constitution empowers Congress to carry out the census (Article I, section 2) and requires “counting the whole number of persons in each state” (Amendment XIV, section 2). Since 1790, the United States has conducted a census every 10 years. Data collected during the decennial census provides vital statistics for the nation. Census data are used, among other purposes, to apportion the seats of the U.S. House of Representatives; redraw congressional districts in each state; and allocate billions of dollars each year in federal financial assistance.

information from households that did not self-respond. These temporary workers operate out of 248 Area Census Offices (ACOs) across the United States and Puerto Rico.

To deliver the apportionment count to the President by December 31, as required by law,² the Bureau had originally scheduled NRFU to last from May 13 to July 31. However, due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau was forced to revise its schedule. Eventually, NRFU began on July 16 (with a soft launch at 6 ACOs), and is scheduled to end September 30.³ At the start of the operation, the Bureau estimated a NRFU workload of 60 million cases, to be completed by approximately 300,000 enumerators managed by approximately 15,000 CFSes.⁴

The Bureau institutes an awards policy for enumerators and CFSes. To accelerate the completion of NRFU cases, the Bureau instituted an awards program to incentivize both enumerators and CFSs with monetary payments. Enumerators and CFSes who worked during specific periods of NRFU are eligible to receive monetary payments rewarding production. Enumerators receive awards based on the number of completed cases per hour plus hours worked in a week.⁵ CFS awards are based only on the number of hours worked in a week.

Table I shows the thresholds required to earn (1) weekly awards for the period July 19–August 29, for enumerators only, and (2) a lump sum award for enumerators and CFSes for the period August 9–29.

² 13 U.S.C. § 141(b).

³ An initial revision to the NRFU schedule planned for the operation to end on October 31.

⁴ Figures reflect staffing for enumerators and CFSes of June 17, 2020.

⁵ As provided by the Bureau, an enumerator's completed case count may include (1) in-person interviews, (2) sufficient partial interviews (from which only partial information is collected), (3) cases coded and confirmed as vacant or not a housing unit, (4) completed reinterviews, (5) quality assurance interviews of completed self-response questionnaires, (6) completed field verification cases, and (7) proxy (e.g., neighbor or landlord) interviews.

Table 1. Criteria for Earning Production Awards, July 19–August 29, 2020

Awards for July 19–August 29, 2020				
Payment Frequency: Weekly				
Payment		Eligibility		
Category	Amount	Position	Completed Cases per Hour	Hours Worked per Week
Tier 1	\$50	Enumerator	0.75	15–24.49
	\$100	Enumerator	0.75	≥24.50
Awards for August 9–29, 2020				
Payment Frequency: Lump Sum				
Payment		Eligibility		
Category	Amount	Position	Completed Cases per Hour	Hours Worked per Week
Tier 2	\$500	Enumerator	0.75	≥24.50 for 3 consecutive weeks
Tier 3	\$750	CFS	N/A	≥32 for 3 consecutive weeks

Source: Production awards program policy, provided August 31, 2020

On August 28, the Bureau extended the award period through September 19 via an addendum to the existing policy. It eliminated the lump sum payment to enumerators and CFSes for working consecutive weeks—but continues to offer weekly awards for both enumerators and CFSes (see table 2).⁶

Table 2. Criteria for Earning Production Awards, August 30–September 19, 2020

Awards for August 30–September 19, 2020				
Payment Frequency: Weekly				
Payment		Eligibility		
Category	Amount	Position	Completed Cases per Hour	Hours Worked per Week
Tier 4	\$50	Enumerator	0.5	15–24.49
	\$100	Enumerator	0.5	≥24.50
	\$150	CFS	N/A	≥32

Source: Addendum to production awards program policy, provided August 31, 2020

To notify supervisors of possible issues involving enumerator performance and accuracy of the information collected, the Bureau’s Operational Control System (OCS) enables real-

⁶ Based on the criteria in tables 1 and 2, the maximum amount of monetary awards that an enumerator can earn for work performed between July 19 and September 19 is \$1,400. For CFSes, the maximum amount for work performed between August 9 and September 19 is \$1,200.

time monitoring through electronic alerts that are sent to CFSes' mobile devices (see table 3).⁷

Table 3. OCS Alerts Addressing Data Quality

Alert Triggered	Enumerator Behavior
<i>Short interview</i>	Completing interviews too quickly
<i>Long distance</i>	Completing an interview far from the location of the housing unit
<i>High completed case rate</i>	Completing significantly more cases compared to other enumerators in the area
<i>Unconfirmed vacant</i>	Marking cases as vacant without a proxy (e.g., neighbor or landlord) confirmation or confirmation by a second enumerator
<i>Unconfirmed delete</i>	Marking cases as deleted without a proxy confirmation or confirmation by a second enumerator
<i>“High Pop 1”</i>	Completing significantly more interviews for single-occupancy housing units compared to other enumerators in the area

Source: Bureau staff response to OIG inquiry, received August 20, 2020

In addition, the Bureau conducts quality control throughout the NRFU operation by following up on completed enumerator interviews. These reinterviews validate whether enumerators conducted interviews in accordance with established procedures. Reinterviews are selected based on one of the following four factors: analytic (based on statistical calculations), random, supplemental (if an enumerator is suspected of not following procedures), or rework (in cases of falsification).⁸ According to the Bureau management, enumerators found to have falsified data are terminated, and their previously submitted cases reworked to ensure data accuracy. Neither the OCS alerts addressing data quality, nor cases followed up by reinterviews, factor into enumerators' monetary awards—only completed cases per hour and hours worked.

⁷ The mobile devices are provided to enumerators and CFSes under a 2020 Census services contract. The Operational Control System is the IT system used to assign cases and manage data collection.

⁸ For the 2010 Census, the NRFU reinterview workload was nearly 1.9 million cases, of which more than 93,000 cases (5 percent) were performed because of confirmed or suspected data falsification. Of the nearly 529,000 enumerators who completed at least one case, more than 1,400 were found to have falsified data.

Emphasis on completing cases may require additional quality assurance reinterviews

Data quality of completed cases does not factor into enumerator monetary awards; instead, the number of completed cases per hour and the hours spent working them are considered. Per the Bureau, awards are granted for instances of production that are “above and beyond expectations” and an increase of hours worked that “boosts productivity.”⁹ However, these awards incentivize only production, potentially at the expense of accuracy.

With respect to enumerators, awards are not contingent upon those completed cases having undergone quality assurance processes such as reinterviews. It is also possible for enumerators to earn awards for having completed cases quickly—but then have their cases subsequently fail quality assurance, requiring reinterviews.

While the Bureau has a quality control process to rework cases producing erroneous results, monetary awards are issued—and not revoked—regardless of enumerator errors. If interviews are found to have unintentional errors or, worse, have been falsified, those cases are subject to reinterview. However, Bureau management informed us that, if an enumerator receives an award but the work performed is later found to be either inaccurate or falsified, the Bureau will not require that the award be returned. Further, the Bureau stated that it does not consider NRFU reinterview results before issuing an award, even if such results are available before an award is paid. Therefore, the Bureau risks incentivizing production at the expense of accuracy.

We are issuing a series of 2020 Census Alert memorandums to bring to the attention of the Bureau and its stakeholders immediate concerns with the 2020 Census that we have identified during our ongoing oversight. We prepared this memorandum in alignment with OIG’s quality control standards and the CIGIE Quality Standards for federal offices of inspector general, which require that we conduct our work with integrity, objectivity, and independence.

We are not requesting a formal response to this 2020 Census alert memorandum, as the key issues discussed in it were briefed to cognizant Bureau officials in advance of issuance. This memorandum will be posted to our public website.

If you have any questions or concerns about this memorandum, please contact me at (202) 482-3884 or Terry Storms, Division Director, at (202) 482-0055.

cc: Albert E. Fontenot Jr., Associate Director for Decennial Census Programs, Census Bureau
Deborah Stempowski, Assistant Director for Decennial Census Programs
(Operations and Schedule Management), Census Bureau
Colleen Holzbach, Program Manager for Oversight Engagement, Census Bureau
Corey J. Kane, Audit Liaison, Census Bureau
Kemi A. Williams, Program Analyst for Oversight Engagement, Census Bureau
Ken White, Audit Liaison, OUS/EA

⁹ Census Bureau, “Production Awards Program, 2020 Census Field Operations,” p. 1. received August 21, 2020.