

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

July 20, 2020

The Hon. Wilbur Ross
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dr. Steven Dillingham
Director
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Suitland, MD 20746

Dear Secretary Ross and Director Dillingham:

We are writing to respectfully request information regarding the U.S. Department of Commerce (Department) and U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) plans to address the critically low 2020 Census participation rate in Puerto Rico. Given that the data collected from the census will play a major role in the allocation of federal funding and resources on the island for the next decade, it is imperative that the Department act quickly and effectively in addressing this issue.

As of July 20, 2020, less than 25 percent of Puerto Rico's population had completed the 2020 Census questionnaire.¹ Compared to Alaska's 48.4 percent participation, the lowest among the States, and Minnesota, which has the highest response of 71.6 percent among States,² the disparity is stark. In the 2010 Census, Puerto Rico had a participation rate of 54 percent which at the time was low compared to the 74 percent participation rate stateside.³ Yet, it was still considerably higher than the current rate of participation.⁴

Without a proper population count, Puerto Rico will lose out on the nearly \$900 billion in grants, direct payments, loans, and loan guarantees that the federal government distributes annually to states and individuals based on data collected in the census.⁵ The residents of Puerto Rico are still recovering from the devastating impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, a major January earthquake with continuous aftershocks, and the current coronavirus pandemic. Now is not the time to further jeopardize an already fragile populace by potentially reducing funding from major

¹ TABLEAU, *U.S. Census – 2020 Census Total Self-Report*

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/us.census.bureau#!/vizhome/2020CensusSelf-ResponseRankings/RankingsDashboard> (last visited June 26, 2020).

² *Id.*

³ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, *2010 Census of Puerto Rico Assessment Report*, 76 (Sep. 18, 2012)

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010_cpex_238.pdf.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ TAX POLICY CENTER, *The Census Is About Nearly \$1 Trillion In Federal Spending, Not Just Elections*,

<https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/census-about-nearly-1-trillion-federal-spending-not-just-elections#:~:text=Population%20counts%20directly%20affect%20the,annually%20to%20states%20and%20individuals> (last

visited June 26, 2020).

public services such as Medicaid, Medicare, the Nutrition Assistance Program, Federal Pell Grant Program, and many more.⁶

In 2012, the Department and Bureau published the *2010 Census of Puerto Rico Assessment Report*, which includes lessons learned and recommendations to improve the planning, development, and implementation of the 2020 Census on the island.⁷ The report recommended the development of materials and a training database with specific examples for Puerto Rico's geography and address format.⁸ It also recommends hiring bilingual staff at the Puerto Rico Local Census Offices to ensure that communication and troubleshooting processes are not delayed or interrupted.⁹ Given the low 2020 Census participation rate on the island so far, it is unclear whether these and other recommendations were implemented.

To assist the Committee with its oversight activities and to address how the U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S. Census Bureau plan on addressing the issue of low 2020 Census participation in Puerto Rico, please provide responses to the following questions as soon as possible, but no later than Friday, July 31, 2020:

1. What is the Bureau's target participation rate for Puerto Rico? How was this target participation rate determined?
2. What factors are contributing to the low 2020 Census participation rate in Puerto Rico compared to other jurisdictions?
3. Does the Department or Bureau have a plan in place to increase response rates in Puerto Rico? If so, please provide the Committee documentation detailing the measures and timeline for implementation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to a timely response.

Sincerely,



RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources



ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
Member of Congress

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, *2010 Census of Puerto Rico Assessment Report*, 1 (Sep. 18, 2012) https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010_cpex_238.pdf.

⁸ *Id.* at 90.

⁹ *Id.* at 91.

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