



Steven Choi, New York Counts 2020
Testimony to the House Oversight Committee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Tuesday, May 28, 2019

Thank you, Chair Raskin and members of the committee for holding this hearing in New York City and for inviting me to discuss Census 2020. Thank you also to Congressman Maloney, who has been a champion for everyone's right to be counted, especially those of us here in New York.

I am Steven Choi, Executive Director of the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), which serves as the convener for New York Counts 2020.

New York Counts 2020 officially launched on March 28th, 2018. New York Counts 2020 is a statewide coalition now comprised of over 200 organizations across New York State, including social service providers, advocacy and civic participation organizations, business groups, health organizations, housing advocates, faith-based organizations, children's advocates, and groups focused on racial justice and immigrant rights – all dedicated to counting as many New Yorkers in Census 2020 as we can.

The statewide coordination between New York Counts 2020, government at all levels, and the business community is unprecedented for Census efforts in New York. As a structural model, it represents the best way to maximize the Census count in New York State, because we have brought together an inclusive and diverse set of stakeholders who provide organizing and technical assistance to work locally, on the ground, in communities and with populations at risk of being undercounted, or not counted at all. This model allows us to better ensure a fair and accurate Census count while protecting the privacy of respondents.

In order to build a collective and comprehensive strategy, we created several committees composed and led by subject matter experts to drive the work of the coalition. Together with partners in the business community, we engaged in large and sustained budget advocacy campaigns at the state and city level. As the work of the coalition is rapidly shifting away from budget advocacy and into the Get Out the Count phase, we will continue to work together to coordinate with government at all levels, and ensure funding and resources are allocated where they are most effective: to community-based organizations (CBOs).

The reason we have come together as a coalition is because we recognize the tremendous stakes with Census 2020. This includes a huge amount of funding and resources, including \$73 billion that New York State has received per year for vital programs such as Medicaid, Medicare Part B, Section 8 housing, Title 1 grants, school lunches, highway planning and construction, and SNAP.

The consequences of a lesser Census count – and fewer resources – would be catastrophic. 6.5 million New Yorkers, roughly 1 in 3, are enrolled in Medicaid and S-CHIP (known as Child Health Plus in New York State). And of the 1.5 million kids in the state who are themselves citizens but whose parents are immigrants, 704,000 - nearly half - are enrolled in Medicaid or Child Health Plus. And roughly 3.8 million New Yorkers statewide are enrolled in Medicaid.

Title I programs are particularly important as they provide financial assistance to schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. These federal funds are allocated to high need schools according to Census poverty data. Nationally, 5.9 percent of Title I's formula-eligible children were in New York.

Fluctuations in school breakfast and lunch programs would be particularly problematic for New Yorkers, as they are directly tied to the nutritional (and thus academic and health) outcomes of New York's most vulnerable students. New York City has universal free lunch and breakfast programs, since almost 80% of students qualify for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch. 274,156 students are eating school breakfast and 527,550 students rely on lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Any changes in funding due to an undercount directly jeopardizes the food security of these over 800,000 New York City students, and potentially all 1.1 million public school students.

Post-secondary school, 457,142 New Yorkers around the state are recipients of Pell Grants at a cost of just under \$1.9 million. Simply put, many students in this state, and in particular here in the city, could not afford college if these federal funds were not available.

The wealth of information contained in the Census data is also used by businesses, trade associations, and chambers of commerce to make decisions about where to create new jobs, build new offices or retail stores, and invest in communities. The demographic and other information contained within the Census is also used to attract investment and track the demographic and other trends that factor heavily into research used to inform marketing strategies. City planning agencies use Census data to decide where to build new infrastructure and provide community services such as roads, public transit, hospitals, health centers, schools, and senior centers.

But perhaps a more important consequence is political power and representation for communities of color - who have historically been undercounted, and are at risk of being undercounted again. This is a particularly acute problem for New York City, with high concentrations of communities of color, renters, immigrants and the 17.2 percent of the city who are non-citizens, and every other identified population that is hard to count.

New York City has been undercounted before, particularly in Brooklyn and Queens, and we have consistently lost Congressional seats –and power - as a result. Our City and State simply cannot afford to keep losing representatives due to Census undercounts.

So given what is at stake, how can we ensure there is a full count of New Yorkers for Census 2020?

First, we must build trust in New York's communities to ensure that the climate of fear and intimidation does not spoil the Census effort before it starts. This is an especially hard task given the rhetoric and actions of the Trump Administration toward immigrants, communities of color and marginalized communities over the last two and half years. The sad reality is that this Administration has no credibility within so many communities in this country, and that goes for New York as well. That lack of credibility and trust is a factor that makes this perhaps the most difficult Census effort to date, and there are real and valid concerns about the Administration's motives and what they plan to do with Census information.

In order to address these concerns, the Census Bureau must:

- Explain what information from other agencies will be shared with them and what the Bureau plans to do with it;
- Commit that any information and data received from any federal agency will not be shared with ICE/DHS and will not be used for immigration enforcement;

- Make public a comprehensive plan for how they intend to safeguard all Census information; and
- Describe all completed, pending, or under discussion information sharing agreements they are currently involved in with other agencies

Secondly, funding will be critical to overcome these monumental obstacles – on a Federal, state and local level.

On a Federal level, we need a fully funded Census Bureau, which means \$8.45 billion to fund 2020 Census operations, enhance outreach activities to maximize participation in the 2020 Census, and support other vital ongoing surveys and programs that the Census Bureau conducts.

On the state level, New York Counts 2020 has advocated for the State to invest \$40 million for community-based organizations (CBOs) for Census outreach and education. This was based on the work of the Fiscal Policy Institute, who calculated three tiers of hard-to-count populations and, based on feedback from CBOs, determined how much funding was needed to reach each tier and the community engagement work necessary to do so. We were extremely disappointed the State only allocated \$20 million for Census 2020, with no specific amount set aside for CBOs. We are disappointed further that, nearly two months after the budget was finalized, Governor Cuomo and the state have released no details about where and how that \$20 million will be spent. This confusion leaves each level of government, including New York City, at a disadvantage when trying to plan resources and the scope of the work through summer 2020.

The City of New York has taken Census 2020 more seriously than the State. The Mayor has already committed to investing \$26 million dollars, which is a significant first step and notably much more than what the Governor has committed for all of New York State, but unfortunately has indicated that only \$8 million will be set aside for CBOs; the City Council has proposed \$40 million, with \$20 million for CBOs. The \$8 million that the Mayor has signaled will be given to CBOs, is not nearly enough to achieve a fair and accurate count. The Mayor must not repeat the mistake made by the State.

Finally, it is vital that CBOs and grassroots community organizations are placed at the forefront of this fight. CBOs are in the best position to reach hard-to-count communities – they are already on the ground, have the language and cultural competency needed to reach our diverse populations, and the earned trust that comes with years and decades of working within communities. But they need funding to do this work. It is vital that as much of the funding as possible go toward CBOs, and New York Counts 2020 supports the Council's proposal, as an investment of \$40 million dollars of City funds will allow CBOs to hold public forums, provide information, and outreach directly to engage the community to fill out the Census. This is why CBOs are an absolutely critical part of Census 2020.

Census 2020 is a monumental undertaking. And there are no do-overs. If we make mistakes, we have to live with those mistakes for the next 10 years. We have to get this right. Everyone has a right to be counted and New York Counts 2020 remains dedicated to achieving a fair and accurate count for every New Yorker.

Thank you.