

**TESTIMONY OF DR. MARTHA FARNSWORTH RICHE  
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Chairwomen Maloney and members of the Joint Economic Committee, thank you for providing this opportunity to testify on my experiences as a director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In my testimony I want to make the case that the Department of Commerce, which currently has line responsibility for supervising the activities of the Bureau, has an inherent management conflict. I believe the other former directors of the Bureau who are here today share this view, regardless of the political affiliation of the administration in which they served.

Like every cabinet agency, the Department of Commerce is made up of many offices and bureaus, all vying for federal funds each year to perform their responsibilities. But none of these other branches has a constitutionally mandated responsibility to conduct the nation's largest peacetime mobilization of money and manpower every 10 years—the decennial census.

As each census approaches, the Census Bureau's annual request for funds jumps quickly from hundreds of millions of dollars to many billions of dollars. That circumstance alone throws the entire Department of Commerce budget off track every decade. This year the Bureau's budget request includes more than \$7 billion dollars for the forthcoming census. Three years ago, before the final decennial ramp-up began, the Bureau received \$512 million for Census 2010.

The census thus inevitably causes conflict between the Census Bureau and the Department of Commerce, which has to manage an overall departmental budget according to quite different priorities. For instance, during my tenure as director of the Census Bureau, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) wanted a new weather satellite just at the time we were starting to ramp-up our funding requests for Census 2000. So budget conflicts are inevitable, and one result is that Commerce tries to defer important Census activities, often until it is too late to undertake them efficiently or effectively.

There are three additional issues that I would like to address:

**1. Content:** The inventory of statistics and demographic measures needs to be constantly updated to reflect changing needs, but it takes about 20 years between perceiving an important need and getting the data on the street...if all goes well.

Only the federal government can collect “official” statistics. Only the federal government has the resources and the authority to get the job done. But policy questions that call for new general-purpose data tend to be asked by different agencies, not the Department of Commerce.

For instance, low-skilled American workers are now in competition with low-wage workers around the world. Policymakers are looking for measures of education, occupations, and incomes across the work life, not just at a point in time, to probe for ways to improve the outlook for Americans whose economic wellbeing is stagnant at best.

Developing such complex measures effectively requires regular advisory input from stakeholders, statistical professionals, and measurement experts, as well as oversight from Congress, its Government Accountability Office (GAO), and, in the executive branch, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which has coordinating responsibility for federal statistics and measurement burdens.

This task calls for constant listening and communications activities, requiring direct access, in both directions. My experience as a former Director is that the Department of Commerce too often seeks to shield the Census Bureau from some of these conversations and in the process ends up isolating the Bureau instead.

**2. Resources:** Resources are always limited, so the Census Bureau’s resources need to be addressed in the context of statistical priorities. As I indicated earlier, right now the Census Bureau is contained within a cabinet-level department that has its own priorities, and a multi-agency appropriations sub-committee with an even broader focus.

I believe that this calls for situating the Census Bureau in a resource context that is focused on producing federal information, and thus in a position to prioritize effectively. This is especially important given the development process for producing new measures, and the ongoing evolution of measurement techniques and technology.

**3. Independence:** The decennial census is very political; that’s the point of it. For that matter, all government statistics are political: the word “statistics” means “measures of state,” or metrics used for governance.

The issue at hand is how to maintain the Census Bureau and other statistical agencies’ independence in pursuit of accurate data. We need a set of regular processes built on transparency, collaboration with other measurement agencies and professionals, and regular reporting, and that are not subject to political appointees, no matter how well intentioned.

Finally, successful measurement depends on willing respondents. Federal statisticians have very little control over respondent attitudes created by other actors, with varying motives and expertise. This increases the value to the Census Bureau of advertising, outreach, and stakeholder relationships, as well as innovative data collection methods. It

also heightens the value of an untroubled reputation for guarding confidentiality, especially as technology and security concerns challenge standards for maintaining respondents' privacy.

I think these results would be much more achievable if the Census Bureau were an independent agency.

This concludes my testimony.

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