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STATEMENT

Former Census Bureau Director John Thompson ‘deeply concerned’ regarding the addition of a new question to the 2020 Census.

Monday night, the Census Bureau announced that it will be adding a question regarding citizenship status to the 2020 Census, after the single end-to-end Census test has already gotten underway in Providence County, Rhode Island. Adding a question this late in the process has caused deep concern for the accuracy of the 2020 count for former Census Director, John Thompson.

It is highly risky to ask untested questions in the context of the complete 2020 Census design. There is a great deal of evidence that even minor changes in survey question order, wording, and instructions can have significant, and often unexpected, consequences for the rate, quality, and truthfulness of response. The effect of adding a citizenship question to the 2020 Census on data quality and census accuracy, therefore, is completely unknown.

“Preparations for a census are complex, with each component related to and built upon previous research and tests,” said Thompson, “Adding a citizenship question without a testing opportunity in a contemporary, census-like environment will run the risk of introducing serious undercounts for many population groups in the 2020 Census.”

It is also worth noting that overcoming unexpected obstacles that a new question could cause as 2020 Census operations unfold would add to the cost. Key assumptions underlying estimates of self-response, staffing needs, local office sites, and communication strategies will no longer be sound, calling into question cost projections that the Census Bureau worked hard to validate and update. All this is without any guarantee of a more accurate count.

Adding an untested question on citizenship status at this late point in the decennial planning process would put the accuracy of the enumeration and success of the census in all communities at grave risk.

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