

Nancy Armbrust: Strong families and a strong economy depend on an accurate 2020 census

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As a longtime children's advocate and retired business person, I've spent decades urging lawmakers across the political spectrum to support programs that prepare kids to be healthy, well-educated and prepared for productive lives. Right now, however, I'm worried about a potential threat that few people are talking about: a 2020 Census that results in wasted taxpayer dollars and shortchanges the funding we need to provide these early childhood services.

Here's why: The U.S. Constitution calls for a census to be conducted every 10 years to count the number of men, women and children residing in the U.S. This information helps lawmakers determine where to allocate funds for education, health care, infrastructure and other investments to advance the public good.

Unfortunately, there have been many concerns that the nation may not be prepared to implement the 2020 Census effectively. Spurred by many factors, including the fact that about 1 million young children were undercounted in 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau wants to use new technology to keep costs down and produce a more accurate count. Among other things, this means more satellite data, handheld devices to coordinate field workers, and a call center to help people fill out the questionnaire.

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Some of these approaches still need to be fully tested. While they should work,

there's no guarantee at the moment that they will. There's also a possibility that people won't participate in the census because they don't want to share information they deem personal, or because they simply aren't reached, which makes funding for "get out the count" public education efforts important as well.

The good news is that Congress included more money in its Fiscal Year 2018 spending bill to enable the U.S. Census Bureau to stay on track in its planning efforts. That's important because at one point funding was \$3 billion short of what was needed.

The danger lies in what happens to Fiscal Year 2019 and 2020 spending. Out of the 12 appropriations-based bills that Congress has to pass every year, the bill that deals with census funding for next year hasn't been addressed.

All of this matters greatly to me as a member of the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council. In this role, I've come to understand how important census data is for the appropriate funding of Head Start, the National School Lunch Program, the Children's Health Insurance Program and the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which helps make child care available to millions of working parents across the nation. If the census undercounts the number of children who need these supports, we won't receive the funding they require.

As a retired business executive, I'm also concerned about the impact on our broader economy and workforce. Business people depend on census data that describes the education levels of potential workers, household incomes and where people live. This helps us determine where to locate our operations and what products to offer. It also supplies information about the help identify barriers and solutions to improve our local schools, health care system, and transportation options that our workers rely on.

I also want to note that, with few exceptions, business people make investments based on market research and other forms of sound data. We should expect our government to do the same. Without an accurate count of Wisconsin's children and families, we may not receive our fair share of federal resources.

Effective implementation of the 2020 Census should be important regardless of your political views. You can't successfully advocate for programs that help at-risk children if you don't base your arguments on sound data. Lawmakers across the spectrum should therefore make every effort to ensure appropriate funding and

oversight to ensure the 2020 Census lives up to its mandate for a correct count.

— *Nancy Armbrust is a member of ReadyNation and a community volunteer.*