



PREPARED STATEMENT OF

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“U.S. Census Bureau: Addressing Data Collection Vulnerabilities”

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Good afternoon. On behalf of the U.S. Census Bureau, I want to thank Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Lynch, and the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, U.S. Postal Service & the Census for the opportunity to discuss the data collection and quality assurance procedures used in the Current Population Survey (CPS).

The Census Bureau’s mission is to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation’s people and economy. We collect numerous business and household surveys, including the CPS. In doing so, we promote statistical rigor, confidentiality, and objectivity because we have an obligation to the nation to produce reliable statistics and information that informs both public and private decision-making.

The CPS is a voluntary household survey sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the Census Bureau, and has been in continuous production since 1940. The CPS is the basis for the monthly unemployment rate reported by BLS. The Census Bureau also sponsors an annual supplement to the CPS that is the basis for annual estimates of income and poverty, which serve as a threshold for many federal aid programs, as well as the estimates of health insurance coverage. Each month, the Census Bureau sends field representatives to collect information from about 65,000 households. Field representatives have approximately ten days to collect the information before the Census Bureau has to process and send the micro data to BLS to calculate the employment and unemployment statistics that are released the first Friday of each month.

When a household initially falls into the CPS sample, we send a letter explaining the survey, the confidentiality of their information, and that a field representative will be contacting them. The field representatives conduct the initial interviews in person and can conduct the follow-up months interviews in-person or over the phone. In both instances, the field representatives conduct the interviews using an encrypted laptop issued by the Census Bureau. The field representatives are required to transmit their cases back to the Census Bureau once a day. We train and expect our survey workforce to be professional and courteous, as we rely on these employees to do one of the most fundamental tasks, which is to help encourage and maintain respondent participation throughout the duration of the survey. Prior to working on the CPS, each field representative receives extensive on-the-job training on interviewing skills, how to handle

non-interview situations, how to probe for information and ask questions as worded, and to implement both face-to-face and telephone interview techniques. Part of the on-the-job training includes observation by a supervisor of their initial interviews. Observation is an important component of both training and continued employee evaluation as supervisors monitor work for performance and to ensure procedures are uniformly followed by the field representatives.

The Census Bureau employs more than 7,000 field representatives in total. Approximately 2,700 of them work on the CPS. On average, each CPS field representative is responsible for 25-30 cases each month. The typical Census Bureau field representative is a GS-3 or GS-4, earning on average \$15.00 an hour, working part time for a total of 60-70 hours per month, often as a second job or to supplement retirement or other income. Their average age is 57 and they are members of their local communities, hailing from every county in the nation. They work in all weather during evenings and weekends when respondents are at home. We hold the field representatives to high performance standards, which include production rates and performance. We expect the field representatives to be persistent, outgoing, and knowledgeable, as well as professional and courteous, because, in fact, they are the “face” of the Census Bureau with each and every house they visit.

Therefore, the Census Bureau emphasizes integrity in every data collection effort we conduct on behalf of other Federal agencies or for ourselves, including the CPS. We incorporate procedures to detect data quality issues – and most importantly to deter and assess instances of falsification. As part of this, the Census Bureau conducts “reinterviews” with a sample of CPS cases each month. A reinterview is a second, independent interview of the household by a different interviewer. During each reinterview the independent interviewer asks questions to determine whether the original field representative conducted an interview and followed proper procedures. The Census Bureau conducts reinterviews to evaluate data quality, including response error, and to monitor the quality of the field representatives’ work. This quality control process is designed to ensure the field representatives are conducting the survey correctly and to deter and detect falsification. As part of the quality control reinterview process, the Census Bureau reviews each field representative’s work at least once and up to four times in a 15 month reinterview cycle. The Census Bureau also conducts “targeted reinterviews” if there is reason to believe a field representative has falsified data.

Most recently, the Department of Commerce’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) undertook a rigorous investigation of alleged data falsification and the Census Bureau’s procedures for detecting and addressing data falsification. The OIG’s investigation followed allegations reported to their hotline and in the media in the fall of 2013 of organized data falsification in the Census Bureau’s Philadelphia Regional Office. After months of investigating and interviewing more than 100 current and former staff, including using polygraphs, the OIG concluded that the allegations were unfounded, and no evidence that management had instructed the staff to falsify or manipulate data. The OIG also reviewed the computer audit trails and procedures the Census Bureau had used to detect falsification, including the reporting mechanisms, quality assurance processes, and employee policies.

The OIG ultimately recommended six improvements to the Census Bureau’s current practices, which we agree will enhance our ability to deter and detect potential data falsification. We are addressing those recommendations as follows:

Recommendation #1: Implement a reporting mechanism for confirmed data falsifications to survey sponsors.

The Census Bureau has reviewed its practices for providing timely and transparent feedback to its survey sponsors for confirmed cases of data falsification. The Census Bureau now provides a quarterly reinterview report to BLS which includes summary results of the reinterview process, including the number of interviewers checked with the status, outcomes, and resolutions of the investigations, as well as a list of the specific cases that were confirmed as falsified, if any.

Recommendation #2: Implement a formal policy that prohibits employees suspected of falsification from collecting survey data during the investigative process.

In the past, field representatives were permitted to continue working during a period where suspected falsification on their part was under investigation. The Census Bureau has changed its policies such that field representatives who are suspected of falsifying data are given no further field assignments until 1) the falsification investigation has been completed; and 2) the determination has been made that the field representative did not falsify field data. If the investigation confirms that the employee falsified survey data, then appropriate administrative action, such as termination from employment, is taken against the employee.

Recommendation #3: Update procedural manuals and training materials to reflect current regional office field structure and inform field representatives about survey data falsification and the consequences of committing falsification.

The Census Bureau is updating its training materials to strengthen our emphasis on quality control procedures, the importance of collecting quality data, and the consequences of falsifying data. We believe the first defense against falsification is deterrence, and effective training can help ensure the field representatives understand the importance of ensuring the integrity of the data we collect. Effective with the rating year beginning this October and every rating year thereafter, all 7,000+ field representatives will review and sign a data quality agreement that lays out the expectations for maintaining data integrity and the consequences for not doing so. Newly hired field representatives will sign the agreement as well.

Recommendation #4: Implement an independent quality assurance process for all survey operations.

Development is underway to establish a two-phased approach for implementing a centralized quality control reinterview process for the CPS that operates independently from the Regional Offices where the initial data collection takes place. Starting July 2014, the Census Bureau initiated a pilot whereby the reinterview operation from one Regional Office was moved to the Jeffersonville Contact Center (JCC). This pilot effort involves randomly selecting reinterview cases from CPS and having the cases administered by JCC interviewers, instead of interviewers in the Regional Office. The JCC interviewers are independent from the Regional Office staff. To expedite this pilot and enable us to fine-tune operational procedures, we are using existing Regional Office control systems and laptops in the JCC. Cases that cannot be resolved by the JCC (e.g., they have no phone numbers) and must be resolved by the Regional Office and will be handled by a staff member other than the supervisor directly responsible for the interviewer who conducted the original interview. With refinements of the operational process, we are expanding the reinterview to include additional Regional Offices in the fall and winter.

The Bureau's goal is that by April 2015, we are using the Contact Centers exclusively for centralized quality control reinterview. Development of a system to manage centralized control of reinterview cases within the JCC's own computer-assisted telephone interview systems is currently underway.

Once implemented for CPS, these centralized systems and operational procedures will provide the foundation for other surveys to transition to an independent, centralized reinterview process.

Recommendation #5: Ensure that all survey supervisors tasked with detecting and preventing survey data falsification are properly utilizing all available tools to safeguard against such misconduct.

The Census Bureau supervisors, managers, and analysts currently used several innovative tools to deter and detect interviewer falsification. We continue to enhance the utility of each of these tools by reaching out to users and other stakeholders to identify improvements to reports and ways to enhance training on these tools.

The Census Bureau's *Unified Tracking System (UTS)* is a data warehouse that provides a view of near real-time indicators of cost, progress, and data quality, consolidating data from other production systems over time and across surveys. Managers/analysts in the Regional Offices and Census Headquarters can review data such as response rates, contact attempts, item nonresponse rates, and cost. Among other uses, UTS data can highlight performance by field representatives that seems "too good to be true," indicating the need to investigate cases for potential falsification.

The Census Bureau monitoring tools include a system used to record all of the telephone interviews at the National Processing Center and employs coaches to monitor the calls. These coaches unobtrusively listen, observe, and assess the interaction between the interviewer and respondent. The Census Bureau also uses a similar technology with the field representatives. The *Computer-Audio Recorded Interview (CARI)* system enables audio recordings during in-person interviews. The Census Bureau is currently using CARI for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and we plan to begin using it for the CPS and other surveys. We use the tools to monitor the quality of the interviews and they also can be used to investigate alleged falsification.

Recommendation #6: Implement internal controls to effectively monitor and limit Field Representative workloads in order to reduce the risk of falsification.

The Census Bureau issued a memorandum in July directing the Regional Offices to monitor and limit the size of an interviewer's workload, and if necessary to redistribute the workload to avoid having field representatives experience circumstances that may encourage short cuts, such as falsification. Deviation from the workload standard (e.g., a very large monthly workload by a field representative) will require a written explanation for the reason for the deviation from the Regional Director to the Chief of the Field Division. In addition, the Chief of Field Division will have management staff at Headquarters evaluate monthly survey data for results that appear to be out of the norm and indicative of potential falsification, and will take appropriate follow-up action with the Regional Director to further investigate these issues.

I can reassure you that the Census Bureau has taken the recommendations of the OIG seriously and we are fully committed to effectively detecting and addressing falsification. The Census Bureau is committed to continuous improvement and these steps are crucial part of an on-going effort to utilize stakeholder input and technological capabilities to ensure that the data we produce meets the high expectations and needs of its customers, which include not only its sponsors, such as BLS, but also public and private data users. Thank you for the opportunity to share our processes and discuss the improvements.