

## High-tech 2020 Census: Grant it enough money to make it count

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By: [Seattle Times editorial board](#), *The Seattle Times*

### **The Census Bureau has come up with ways that could save \$5 billion when the 2020 head count takes place. But it needs money now to test those ways.**

THE 2020 national Census is taking its first tentative steps in Pierce County. Whether those steps ultimately lead to an accurate count of all within the country's borders depends on what the president and Congress do in the coming months.

Failure to adequately fund it would have far-reaching impacts around the nation. The Census is the basis of the nation's government, determining the apportionment of the House of Representatives and redistricting down to the local level. In 2015, it guided the distribution of at least [\\$14 billion](#) in federal money to Washington state. It is used by businesses to decide where to locate stores and plants and where to find customers and employees.

Pierce County is one of three test areas where Census workers are using mobile devices to verify and update the bureau's master list of addresses where U.S. residents may be living. The bureau says the collected data will help guide the official count in 2020, which would be considered the first "high-tech" U.S. census using mobile technology from start to finish, incorporating innovations from the geospatial industry and allowing Census forms to be completed using the internet.

Pierce County was not the only planned test site in Washington state, but the Colville Reservation was scrubbed as a proving grounds for field operations in October 2016 because, as a [Census memorandum](#) stated, "there is not yet clarity regarding funding for this program."

Continuing lack of adequate funding could endanger further Census plans and jeopardize the 2020 count.

After the 2010 Census weighed in as the most expensive in the nation's history, Congress in 2012 capped the spending for the 2020 effort — no more than the \$12.5 billion spent in the 10-year planning and execution "lifetime" of the 2010 tally.

So the Census Bureau started investigating ways to keep census workers off the streets (the most costly element of taking the census), either when they walk every road, lane and path to confirm addresses or go knock on doors where residents have failed to return a form. The bureau came up with several ideas it estimated could save \$5 billion. Those included using aerial surveys and Geographic Information System data to help verify addresses.

If people have the choice to use the convenience of the internet to complete Census forms, the need for in-person follow-up could be much reduced.

But with innovation comes risks, which can be lessened if equipment and procedures are first tested.

Going into 2020 with untested or minimally tested new equipment and procedures is flirting with disaster, which seems to be what Congress and the Trump administration are willing to do.

President Trump's [budget request](#) for 2018 calls for \$1.5 billion for the Census.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont and vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, says that's \$300 million short of what's needed for testing and development of technology and procedures.

In the [committee report](#) on the Fiscal Year 2018 appropriations bill, Leahy calls attention to a Census Bureau estimate that "repeating the same old paper-and-pencil Census in 2020 could cost more than \$17 billion."

Every 10 years, the Census Bureau gets one shot at getting the count right. The 2020 Census should not be treated as a practice session using inadequately tested technology and procedures. The president and Congress must prevent that from happening.