

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Conference Call  
October 6, 2017  
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm EST**

**Statement on the Value and Importance of the U.S. Census  
(Prepared by SAA President Tanya Zanish-Belcher)**

**BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION**

Following the resignation of U.S. Census Bureau Director John H. Thompson after a relatively brief tenure (May 2013-May 2017) and in light of rumors about the likelihood of significant cuts to the Bureau as it ramps up for the 2020 Census, Council member Erin Lawrimore contacted Michelle Light and me (in our assigned roles as the Council’s “advocacy coordinators”) in May to consider whether SAA should make a statement on the U.S. Census. Michelle and I worked with Erin and Committee on Public Policy Chair Dennis Riley on a draft statement that was not brought forward to the Council at that time due to other priorities.

The ongoing importance of the Census as documentation of trends in and changes to American society, together with concerns about funding to ensure its sustainability and recent activity in the U.S. House of Representatives that may change the focus of the Census (summarized in this Leadership Conference [fact sheet](#)), makes it important that SAA weigh in on the critical value of the Census as a historical record.

**RECOMMENDATION**

**THAT the following Statement on the Value and Importance of the U.S. Census be approved.**

**Society of American Archivists  
Statement on the Value and Importance of the U.S. Census  
September 2017**

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) notes with concern three factors that may compromise the capacity of the U.S. Census Bureau to perform its long-standing and critically important work of documenting the nation’s population: the retirement of Census Bureau Director John H. Thompson, the current vacancy in the position of Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer, and the Trump Administration’s proposal to make significant cuts in non-defense-related federal funding. As the Bureau prepares for the 2020 Census, it must have the stable leadership and resources needed to fulfill its Constitutional mandate to conduct a decennial census and to continue its other important work (including the American Community Survey, the Economic Census, and other censuses and surveys).

SAA calls on Congress and the Administration to provide full funding and sufficient staff to ensure that the U.S. Census Bureau can meet its mandate efficiently and effectively. The U.S. Census Director must be a non-partisan professional who is qualified to perform the duties and responsibilities of the office.

## **Background**

Since 1790 the Census has served as a record of the American people, collecting valuable information related to numbers, geographical location, origin, race, immigration status, education, and employment. The data collected by the Census determine apportionment of seats in the United States House of Representatives; factor into school districting; provide age search information for qualifying for Social Security and other benefits; and serve as the basis for distribution of billions of dollars in federal funds to local, state, and tribal governments for such infrastructure improvements and services as:

- Hospitals and emergency services,
- Schools and job training centers,
- Senior centers, and
- Bridges, tunnels, and other public-works projects.

## **The Census as a Historical Record**

“It would be difficult to write history either social or economic or indeed political without statistics, and it would be a very defective economic or social history of the United States that ignored the statistics compiled by the United States census,” wrote Joseph Hill of the U.S. Census Bureau in 1908.<sup>1</sup>

The data collected during the decennial census is vital to the historical record and serves as the basis of other federal datasets, including the Bureau of Economic Analysis’ per capita income series. Genealogists rely on Census information to trace family histories. Social scientists and historians use Census data to track trends in and changes to American society over decades. Census information can be vital to researchers and advocates seeking data to support legislation and causes. Additionally, Census records capture information about individuals who otherwise might not leave historical records behind—such as immigrants, people of color, the illiterate, or the poor—and thus provide important documentation of marginalized communities.

SAA’s Public Policy Agenda notes that archival records created by government serve certain public needs that are fundamental to the nature of a democracy. These records:

- Ensure the transparency and accountability of government at all levels.
- Ensure the protection of citizens’ rights and individual privacy.
- Guarantee the administrative continuity necessary for good governance.
- Make accessible evidence of the diverse and complex elements of the human experience.
- Preserve historical documentation for the next generation.

U.S. Census records are among the most important in ensuring individuals’ rights, the accountability of our government, and the accessibility of historical information. Therefore, the Society of American Archivists calls on Congress and the Administration to provide the resources necessary to ensure that these records are created, preserved, and made accessible for future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Hill, "The Historical Value of the Census," Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1908, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1909), 1:199.

Approved by the SAA Council on [date.]

## Sources

What Is the Census: <https://www.census.gov/2010census/about/>

National Archives Information about the Census: <https://www.archives.gov/research/census>

Reamer, Andrew. "Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Distribution of Federal Funds." Brookings Institute, March 2010. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0309\\_census\\_report.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0309_census_report.pdf)

Strain, Michael R. "The Census Is a Valuable Economic Tool." American Enterprise Institute, June 15, 2012. <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-census-is-a-valuable-economic-tool/>

Swierenga, Robert P. "Historians and the Census: The Historiography of Census Research." *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (1990), 650-673. <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9478&context=annals-of-iowa>

**Support Statement:** SAA’s Public Policy Agenda notes that archival records created by government serve certain public needs that are fundamental to the nature of a democracy. U.S. Census records are among the most important in ensuring individuals’ rights, the accountability of our government, and the accessibility of historical information.

**Relation to SAA Priorities:** Supports SAA’s commitment to “providing leadership in ensuring the completeness, diversity, and accessibility of the historical record” (Goal 1.3.) as well as several priorities within the Public Policy Agenda (e.g., “Make accessible evidence of the diverse and complex elements of the human experience” and “preserve historical documentation for the next generation”).

**Fiscal Impact:** None.