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General Comment

2020 Post-Census Group Quarters Review Comment from the City of Bloomington, Indiana
January 18, 2022

The City of Bloomington is in support of an additional opportunity to submit its case through the 2020 Post-Census Group Quarters Review (2020 PCGQR). As has been reported in numerous college towns including Bloomington, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and State College, Pennsylvania, student population counts were vastly underrepresented in the 2020 census.

An Associated Press review of 75 metro areas with the largest share of residents between 20 and 24 showed that the census results fell well below population estimates. The AP review showed that the population counts were below estimates by about 5% to 7% in the Mount Pleasant, Michigan; Greenville, North Carolina; and Bloomington, Indiana, metro areas, which are home to Central Michigan University, East Carolina University and Indiana University, respectively.

The 2020 census put the city of Bloomington at 79,168 residents, a decline from about 80,405 in 2010. The City expected a 2020 count of between 85,000 to 90,000 residents. All of the evidence we had in the years following the 2010 Census, including school enrollment and tax collection, was that Bloomington was adding approximately 6,000 people each year. This is particularly true in the heart of Bloomington, which is closest to Indiana University, and where the City saw the greatest reported population decline in the 2020 Census of 9%. Additionally, the number of rental units counted by the City of Bloomington's Housing and Neighborhood Development Department in the past four years has increased by nearly 1,000, or about 4%. And while census figures indicate a residential vacancy rate of 9%, a survey among local landlords showed a rental vacancy rate below 2%.

The 2020 Census was just beginning in March of 2020 when Indiana University told students not to return to campus in response to the spread of COVID-19. Most of the university's 48,000 students were

already on spring break when that directive was made.

The estimated growth of Bloomington from 2010 until 2020 should have put the City at about 86,000 residents--not contracting by 1,200 individuals. As a result, the City of Bloomington does not find the census count to be a credible number. As Mayor John Hamilton explained, "The simplest explanation is that the count was done after the university told students, 'Don't return to Bloomington and go back to your parents' homes.' I'm not blaming anybody. The university did the right thing to protect its students."

The City recognizes the difficulty in counting university students, but we have relied on the Census Bureau's policy that students should be counted at their living quarters within the city and towns in which their college or university is located. However, numerous issues arose in 2020 that could have affected the count, such as the timing of spring breaks, outreach efforts, or the percentage of students living on campus versus off. Universities such as Indiana University may have also been reluctant to cooperate when the Census Bureau asked for records on off-campus students because of privacy concerns or simply because they did not have the requested information. That is perhaps why only about half of colleges and universities replied. However, cities should not be punished for the unprecedented pandemic. A correct Census is critical to Bloomington having the resources to ensure the safety and health of its citizens.

College towns such as Bloomington need a mechanism through which to report the anomalous population counts, and it believes that the 2020 PCGQR will provide an invaluable opportunity to do just that.