

United States Senate

February 26, 2021

Dr. Ron Jarmin
Acting Director
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Acting Director Jarmin,

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing the American people to experience unprecedented economic difficulties, including struggling to pay for basic necessities such as electricity, water, and heat. Compounding this crisis are the increased severe weather events caused by climate change, which significantly affect the energy grid and can cause dramatic and unexpected spikes in utility bills.¹ Yet, we do not have nationwide, comprehensive data on the extent of these problems, which makes it more difficult to formulate a response at the appropriate scale. The Census Bureau's Pulse Survey measuring the pandemic's impact on American families and small businesses have been critical sources of information for policymakers. We therefore write to ask the U.S. Census Bureau to continue its Household Pulse Survey, *Measuring Household Experiences during the Coronavirus Pandemic*, and, to the extent possible, include questions regarding American households' experiences with paying utility and delivered fuels bills during the pandemic.

The number of utility and delivered fuels companies nationwide and varying state regulations have made it extraordinarily challenging to collect and assess the data needed to understand the scope of the challenge Americans now face in paying their utility bills. Although we lack a comprehensive federal effort to collect accurate data on this issue, there is some evidence of a serious and widespread problem. The National Energy Assistance Directors Association estimated that electric and natural gas arrearages would reach \$32 billion by the end of 2020, with 15 to 20 percent of residential customers at least 60 days behind on their utility bills.²

Mandatory or voluntary shutoff moratoria currently cover some of those Americans, but they will still be expected to pay their missed bills when the moratoria expire.³ This will be a daunting—and in some cases impossible—task for many households. Without adequate relief funding, the consequences could be severe for families that have fallen behind when moratoria end. The more we know about Americans' access to electric, gas, delivered fuels, and water service and ongoing utility debt burdens, the better we can help them meet their needs, forestall economic disaster for utilities and ratepayers, and slow the

¹ Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio, *His Lights Stayed on During Texas' Storm. Now He Owes \$16,752*, N.Y. Times (Feb. 20, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/us/texas-storm-electric-bills.html>.

² Letter from NEADA et al. to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (Dec. 15, 2020), <https://neada.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/liheap10bjoint.pdf>.

³ NARUC, *Map of Disconnection Moratoria*, <https://www.naruc.org/compilation-of-covid-19-news-resources/map-of-disconnection-moratoria/> (last visited Feb. 10, 2021).

spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Although the Household Pulse Survey currently includes questions asking Americans whether they have had “difficulty paying for usual household expenses during the coronavirus pandemic,”⁵ there are no specific survey questions about utility and delivered fuels bills. As part of any future Household Pulse Survey, we respectfully request that you consider including questions in the survey to collect data related to the following experiences:

1. Whether a household can comfortably afford electric, gas, water, or delivered fuels bills.
2. Whether a household has had to reduce, delay the purchase of, or forgo food or medicine to pay for electric, gas, water, or delivered fuels bills.
3. Whether a household has had to take any steps to reduce or stop household energy or water use because it could not pay.
4. Whether a household has missed one or more payments on an energy or water bill (i.e. water, electricity, heating oil, propane) over the past 12 months.
5. Whether a household has had its electric, gas water, or delivered fuel service terminated or received a disconnect notice over the past 12 months.

We request a response by March 3, 2021. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter, and we stand ready to work with you to ensure the accuracy and success of the Census Bureau’s data collection activities.

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Patty Murray

Patty Murray
United States Senator

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed

Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

⁴ Duke Nicholas Institute, *Policy in the Pandemic: Housing Security Policies Reduce U.S. COVID-19 Infection Rates*, <https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/articles/policy-pandemic-housing-security-policies-reduce-us-covid-19-infection-rates> (last visited Feb. 10, 2021).

⁵ Census Bureau, *Week 21 Household Pulse Survey: December 9 – December 21*, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp21.html> (last visited Feb. 10, 2021).