

April 4, 2024

4600 Silver Hill Rd, Washington, DC 20233

To: Robert L. Santos, Director, U.S. Census Bureau

CC: Neera Tanden, Assistant to the President and Domestic Policy Advisor, White House

CC: Sallie Keller, Associate Director for Research and Methodology, U.S. Census Bureau

CC: Karin Orvis, Chief Statistician of the United States, Office of Management and Budget

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Re: Survey data to establish a national housing loss rate

The undersigned 17 affordable housing, civil rights, public data, community development and philanthropic organizations urge the U.S. Census Bureau to add questions that measure residential displacement to an existing survey, as a first step in establishing a national housing loss rate. A combined rate measuring foreclosures, evictions and other forms of home loss would serve as a key indicator of our country's social and economic well-being, alongside the national unemployment rate.

The need for a national housing loss rate

Each year in America, an estimated 10 to 20 million people involuntarily [lose their homes](#) through evictions, mortgage foreclosures, tax sales, eminent domain, heirs' property sales, post-disaster displacement and other less-studied forms of housing loss. These destabilizing events disproportionately impact Black and Latino communities, as well as families with small children, and lead to homelessness, job loss, adverse mental and physical health impacts, educational attainment gaps for children and downward economic mobility.

And yet we do not know the full scale of this crisis because America does not track housing loss, otherwise known as residential displacement. There is no national database of evictions or foreclosures, and research from New America [found](#) that one in three U.S. counties have no available annual eviction figures. A 2021 survey by the National League of Cities [found](#) that 38 percent of rural officials and 22 percent of urban officials did not know whether evictions had increased or decreased from the prior year. Data on less-studied forms of housing loss simply do not exist.

Without a clear picture of housing loss across the country, it is nearly impossible to pass data-driven policies that keep people housed.

If the United States is serious about ensuring that Americans are stably housed, then it

should establish a national housing loss rate to stand alongside the national unemployment rate as a key indicator of social and economic well-being. A housing loss rate—a metric of how many people lose their homes involuntarily over a given period of time, and why—would provide a unified benchmark to track this problem and hold leaders accountable for reducing it. It would also provide actionable data that allow federal, state and local decision-makers to allocate proper resources, pass responsive policies, calibrate housing supply initiatives and otherwise intervene to keep people housed.

A survey-based approach to tracking housing loss

In the long term, establishing a reliable measure of involuntary home loss will require two parallel, mutually reinforcing tracks. The first track, which can begin immediately, would employ a survey-based approach to establish a national housing loss rate, building off of existing federal-level data collection efforts. The second, longer-term effort would build local and federal infrastructure to collect and analyze administrative and stakeholder data on actual incidences of housing loss.

The U.S. Census Bureau can make rapid and measurable progress on a survey-based approach to tracking housing loss. We urge the Census Bureau, in consultation with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the federal housing agencies, to add supplemental modules or additional questions to an existing survey—for example, the next American Community Survey, a forthcoming Household Purpose Survey or the next American Housing Survey—to measure the rate of involuntary residential displacement, and the reasons for such displacement.

Conclusion

Developing a national housing loss rate will take time and resources, and may require congressional action and funding. However, as with the U.S. unemployment rate, which took decades to establish, the urgent need for such a metric justifies short-term efforts to begin this process. A housing loss metric, if rigorous and regularly updated with national, state and local data, would have profound impacts on our understanding of the causes and consequences of home loss and improve our ability to develop policies and programs that keep people more securely housed.

We would like to request a meeting to discuss the above request. Thank you to and your staff for engaging with us, in order to keep more families in the U.S. stably and securely housed. For further discussion, please contact Yuliya Panfil (panfil@newamerica.org).

Sincerely,

New America
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)
Americans for Financial Reform Education Fund
Bright Community Trust
Community Solutions
Eviction Lab
Georgetown University's Massive Data Institute
Grounded Solutions Network
Federation of American Scientists
Lincoln Institute for Land Policy
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF)
National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (CAPACD)
National Community Stabilization Trust
National Fair Housing Alliance
National Housing Law Project
Root Policy Research
The Turner Center for Housing Innovation