

United States Senate

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COMMITTEES:
FINANCE

BANKING, HOUSING, AND
URBAN AFFAIRS

BUDGET

INTELLIGENCE

RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

The Honorable Penny Pritzker
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

The Honorable John H. Thompson
Director
United States Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Secretary Pritzker and Director Thompson:

For the past year, I have been examining the development and growth of contingent work and the on-demand economy, engaging with workers, CEOs of new peer-to-peer platforms and marketplaces, academics and other experts. It has become clear to me that the federal government's definitions, data collection, and policies are still based on 20th century perceptions about work and income. In a 21st century economy, we need new and better information so we can understand the potential policy ramifications when more people, whether by personal choice or economic necessity, are making a living with no connection to a single employer, or without access to the safety net benefits and worker protections typically provided through traditional full-time employment.

We know that millions of Americans are eagerly participating in this dynamic new economy, but we don't have good information on the extent of that participation or the possible policy ramifications. Hundreds of thousands of people are driving for Uber, Lyft, and other ride-sharing platforms. Freelancers, independent contractors, and others are using platforms like Handy and TaskRabbit to more easily connect with additional work opportunities. Artists and collectors are making great use of platforms like Etsy to connect creators, buyers and sellers of art, crafts and vintage items. And many Americans occasionally monetize their spare rooms, apartments, and houses on Airbnb and other sites that facilitate short-term rentals.

An April 2015 report from the nonpartisan U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated anywhere from five-percent to nearly one-third of U.S. workers are involved in some form contingent work, but noted that Congress has not provided the Labor Department with adequate resources to conduct detailed surveys on the phenomenon since 2005. GAO's expansive definition of contingent work included the self-employed, multiple jobholders, part-time workers, retired persons who moonlight to supplement income, temporary and on-call workers. By GAO estimates, the contingent workforce ranges anywhere from nearly eight million people to more than 47 million American workers.

To fill the gap in our basic understanding of contingent employment, I would like Census to answer the following questions:

1. How does current Census data collection distinguish between workers in traditional employer-employee structures and those working as independent entrepreneurs?

2. Within the category of those working as independent entrepreneurs, is Census able to distinguish between those who make a full-time living in the contingent work-force versus those who use contingent work to supplement earnings in traditional employment? What about those working as independent contractors/self-employed versus those accessing contingent work and contracts through digital platforms?
3. What do existing survey and measurement tools at Census tell us about the demographics of the shifting workforce? How could these tools be augmented to shed light on emerging trends about how millennials and other demographic groups work?
4. Some surveys today indicate a significant percentage of the American workforce will receive some income through non-traditional sources by 2020. What tools – statutory or otherwise – would help Census keep pace with the measurement needs of the changing workforce?

This is a critical and pressing issue in our economy today. For that reason, I would like to receive a response within 30 days.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
U.S. Senator