November 22, 2013

The Honorable Patty Murray  
The Honorable Paul Ryan  
Chair, Senate Budget Committee  
Chair, House Budget Committee  
United States Senate  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murray and Chairman Ryan:

As the Presidents of the Population Association of America (PAA) and Association of Population Centers (APC), we are writing to encourage you and your colleagues to agree to a balanced budget plan that will end sequestration, preclude future government shutdowns, and restore stability to our nation’s long-term fiscal outlook. We ask you to consider how declining federal funding, the recent government shutdown, and the threat of future funding instability are affecting the nation’s scientific and information infrastructure, including research on the health and productivity of our population and the data systems that provide essential information for business, government, academia, and the general public.

The PAA and APC are two affiliated organizations that together represent over 4,000 social and behavioral scientists and over 40 population research centers nationwide (including two at the University of Washington and University of Wisconsin) that conduct research on the implications of population change. Our members, which include demographers, economists, sociologists, and statisticians, rely directly and indirectly on a number of federal programs, including the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), Census Bureau, and other statistical agencies, to conduct scientific research, analyze changing demographic and socio-economic trends, develop policy recommendations, and train undergraduate and graduate students. In recent years, our federal agencies of primary interest have been woefully underfunded due to declining funding levels and sequestration. These incessant cuts have begun to affect adversely the services that these agencies provide and the productivity of population scientists. The prospect of additional cuts under sequestration threatens to further undermine not only the field of population research, but also the nation’s entire scientific enterprise.

The NIH is the largest source of discretionary funding for the population sciences. In Fiscal Year 2013, the NIH lost $1.5 billion due to sequestration, resulting in approximately 640 fewer competitive research project grants and a historically low success rate of 17 percent. Sequestration hit NIH at the end of a decade in which the agency’s budget had fallen by almost 25 percent after adjusting for inflation. The NSF is another important source of funding for the population sciences, and like the NIH, its reduced funding under sequestration has also had negative consequences. The most striking outcome has been the agency’s decision to award 1,000 fewer grants in Fiscal Year 2013 directly as a result of sequestration.

The ripple effect of these cuts at NIH and NSF is apparent at the nation’s research universities. According to a recent survey sponsored by the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Science Coalition, 81 percent of responding institutions (which included 74 public and private research universities) reported that sequestration was directly affecting their research activities, forcing them to lay off research-related personnel, delay projects, and admit fewer graduate students. These outcomes are consistent with what population research centers, whose existing NIH awards have been cut by at least an
additional 5 percent, are experiencing. If sequestration continues, the impact on universities will be more detrimental than the first round of cuts given that many institutions employed one-time cost cutting measures to soften the blow of the first round of sequestration.

Federal statistical agencies, which PAA and APC members rely on for key socio-economic and demographic data, have also felt the adverse effects of sequestration. For example, as a result of sequestration and recent funding cutbacks, the Census Bureau’s budget is 11 percent below its request for FY2013. This dramatic shortfall in funding has compelled the agency to push back critical Census 2020 milestones by one year, including selection of the 2020 Census design framework to 2015 and the National Content Test to 2016. In addition, the Bureau has suspended work on several 2020 research and testing projects and “temporarily” reassigned 86 employees to other divisions because of current funding shortfalls. Unless the agency gets sufficient funding in Fiscal Year 2014, the Bureau won’t fill a similar number of vacancies for 2020 Census planning. Delaying key Census 2020 evaluation activities and reassigning staff increase the risk that the Census Bureau will resort to more costly methods later in the decade, jeopardizing its ability to conduct a cost efficient, accurate decennial census.

The future of large-scale longitudinal studies, including the American Time Use Study and National Longitudinal Study, which are supported largely by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, are also imperiled if sequestration continues. These datasets are invaluable to the population sciences because they include decades of intergenerational data that provide unique insights into how complex factors, such as changes in work status, income, and education, interact to affect health and achievement outcomes in children and adults. Once these data are lost, they cannot be easily or reliably collected, and we lose critical scientific infrastructure representing decades of investment.

These are just a few examples of the widespread impact sequestration is having on federal agencies whose support is essential to the population sciences. We hope you and your colleagues will work together to develop a balanced agreement that will not only replace sequestration, but also restore stability to the annual budget and appropriations process. The cycle of continuing resolutions, threats of government shutdowns, and actual shutdowns are very disruptive to our field. During last month’s shutdown, federal grants were delayed, review panels were canceled, scientific workshops and informal collaborations between the public and private sectors were suspended, and data were not collected. While the NIH, NSF, and statistical agencies are working hard to address the backlog and other challenges caused by the shutdown, the long-term effects of the shutdown, lost data and declining morale of population scientists, especially the next generation of population scientists, may never recover.

We appreciate the difficulty of your task, but we urge you to reach an agreement that will benefit the entire nation and put us on a course towards more economic stability. Thank you for considering our views during your deliberations.

Respectfully,

Christine Bachrach, Ph.D.

Pamela Smock, Ph.D.