December 5, 2008

The Honorable Barack Obama
President-Elect of the United States of America

Dear President-Elect Obama:

On behalf of the over 3,000 scientists who belong to the Population Association of America (PAA) (www.popassoc.org) and over 30 population research centers nationwide comprising the Association of Population Centers (APC) (www.popcenters.org), we congratulate you on your election and look forward to working with your new Administration. During this transition period, we want to raise several issues important to our organizations.

Our members are united in our quest to foster and disseminate the highest quality population research and to ensure the integrity and value of the Federal data collection system. Thus, our list of issues is diverse and reflects the interests of our members whose research relates to the missions of the following federal agencies: National Institutes of Health, National Center for Health Statistics, National Science Foundation, Census Bureau, and US Agency for International Development.

**Appoint Assistant to the President for Science and Technology**

In October 2008, PAA and APC signed onto a letter with hundreds of other scientific organizations, urging the creation of a new cabinet-level position, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology. The letter also encouraged the next President to appoint this advisor by January 20, “so this individual can participate immediately in coordinating relevant policy and personnel decisions relating to science and technology.” All federal scientific research agencies would benefit from effective leadership in the White House. By appointing a qualified science advisor at the beginning of your Administration, you will be sending an important message about the role science and technology will play during your presidency.

**Appoint Census Bureau Director and Support 2010 Census**

The Census Bureau cannot afford to be without strong, knowledgeable leadership this close to the 2010 Decennial Census. We encourage you to nominate a director soon, so the Senate can initiate the confirmation process and approve a nominee early in 2009. Ideally, the nominee should be someone who has strong management expertise, statistical acumen, and an intimate understanding of all of the Bureau’s programs and surveys and not just its decennial census operations. Also, we encourage your Administration to devote necessary resources to ensure the 2010 Decennial Census is implemented successfully and that its results are accurate and inclusive of all sub-populations in the United States.
Support the National Center for Health Statistics

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is the nation’s foremost health statistics agency, responsible for collecting, disseminating, and maintaining data on the health of the American people and on all aspects of our health care system. PAA/APC members use NCHS data to inform policy recommendations, track the health of the population, monitor health trends, and identify disparities in health status and use of health care by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, region, and other population characteristics.

Despite the agency’s important mission, it has failed to be adequately and consistently funded. In 2008, after enduring several years of flat funding, NCHS announced its intention to cancel and curtail some of its major surveys, including the National Health Interview Survey. In addition, NCHS stated that as of April 2009, it would purchase only “core items” of birth and death data from states through the National Vital Statistics System—a decision that would result in the loss of nearly all data items that are routinely used to monitor maternal and infant health.

We hope your Administration will recommend NCHS receive $137.5 million in FY 2010 as a down payment toward a funding level of $175 million in 2013. NCHS needs this funding now to restore these and other data collection efforts and to revise, pretest, and plan data collection activities for calendar year 2010 and beyond.

We also hope your Administration will consider the challenges NCHS faces given its location within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Committee on Population Statistics (COPS) of the Population Association of America issued a report titled Safeguarding Vital and Health Statistics in October 2007 on the organizational placement of NCHS. The report is posted at: http://www.popassoc.org/files/public/COPS-NCHSfinal.doc. The report details some of the implications of the agency’s location within CDC, providing some evidence that the placement of NCHS within a service agency may compromise its independence and impact its control over resources. The report also discusses potential options for relocating the agency within HHS. We hope your transition team and new administration will review this information and consider how elevating NCHS as an independent statistical agency within HHS could better serve the nation’s data needs.

Appoint NIH Director and Support NIH funding

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is the primary source of discretionary research funding for the field of demographic research. Two Institutes, the National Institute on Aging and Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, support programs devoted to understanding the implications of an aging population and the causes and consequences of changing population dynamics, including fertility, marriage and divorce, immigration and migration.

We urge your Administration to nominate an NIH Director who, like the current Acting Director, Dr. Raynard Kington, understands the complexity and breadth of the NIH mission to improve the public’s health through first-class biomedical, behavioral and social science research. We also encourage you to support funding for the NIH that reflects, at a minimum, the rate of biomedical inflation and enables the agency to reinvest in training and research programs critical to strengthening our nation’s medical research enterprise.
Support Population and Health programs at USAID

Continued support for the U.S. Agency for International Development, especially for its population and health program, is also a matter of concern to the demographic community. USAID-sponsored research provides data for the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that directly affect the welfare of the poorest citizens in countries throughout the developing world. The Demographic and Health Surveys, for example, are a very important source of information on the populations of developing countries and their needs. Results of DHS surveys have enriched our understanding of childbearing, child mortality, educational attainment, household structure, and the HIV epidemic. USAID-supported research has enabled developing country governments and international donors to improve health and family planning services and allocate funds much more effectively than they would otherwise be able.

PAA is the premier professional organization for social and behavioral scientists who conduct research on the implications of population change. PAA members include demographers, sociologists, economists, health scientists, and statisticians. The Association of Population Centers (APC) (www.popcenters.org) is comprised of over 30 universities and research groups nationwide whose mission includes fostering collaborative demographic research and data sharing and translating basic population research for policy makers. If our members can ever be of assistance to your Administration, please contact our Washington, DC office at 202-939-5456 or via email at paaapc@crosslink.net

Sincerely,

Greg Duncan, Ph.D.  Michael White, Ph.D.
President     President
Population Association of America  Association of Population Centers