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President Joe Biden speaks during an event at the White House in Washington Jan. 21, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

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The leaders of two U.S. bishops' committees applauded President Joe Biden's executive order reversing a policy of the previous administration that excluded unauthorized immigrants from the census count.

"We welcome this return to more than a century of American precedent that ensures all residents will be counted and included in the census and apportionment," said Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Auxiliary Bishop Mario Dorsonville of Washington, chairman of the Committee on Migration.

"This return to our previous policy reflects the inalienable truth that all people matter and are imbued with human dignity," they said in a joint statement Jan. 22.

Biden's census order — among several that he signed his first day in office — reversed two of President Donald Trump's directives related to the 2020 census.

The former administration had sought to determine the citizenship status of every U.S. resident through administrative records and also planned to exclude those in the U.S. illegally from being counted in the process of apportioning state congressional seats.

The former policy also would have impacted the allocation of federal appropriations funds for programs around the country.

Two days after Biden's order was signed, the Census Bureau said 2020 census data would not include information on citizenship or immigration status at any level.

The bishops' statement pointed out that the process of counting people for purposes of apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives "has not always been free of injustice," but it said Biden's executive order "stands as a testament to the

indisputable reality that immigration status does not negate the inherent value of a human life, nor should it undermine any person's ability to contribute to the growth and well-being of our nation."

Church leaders have been speaking up against Trump's census policies since last year when they were first announced and when a census case came to the Supreme Court last fall.

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Weeks after oral arguments in *Trump* v. *New York*, the court failed to give a definitive ruling on it, saying the case was "riddled with contingencies and speculation that impede judicial review."

The day the case was argued before the court in late November, Bishop Dorsonville said: "Denying the undocumented and the states in which they reside their rightful representation in Congress is counter to the Constitution and makes people feel invisible and not valued as human beings."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, along with other Catholic organizations, filed a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that excluding those without legal documentation from the apportionment base of the census sends a message these individuals are not equal members of the human family.

This contradicts the dignity of all people and violates the U.S. Constitution and the Census Act, they said.

New York challenged Trump's census order along with several other states, cities, counties and immigrant activist groups stressing the administration's action could leave several million people uncounted and could cause Texas, California and New Jersey to lose seats in the House of Representatives. The number of House seats accorded to the states is based on state population numbers.

Since the census started in 1790, its practice has been to count all people living in the United States. Currently, an estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants are living in this country.

In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 against Trump's effort to add a citizenship question to the census. Critics said the question was intended to frighten immigrants from taking part in the population count and artificially reduce population numbers in heavily Democratic areas to the benefit of Republicans.

After Trump issued his order to exclude unauthorized immigrants from the census count, the chairmen of two USCCB committees said this was "simply wrong and divisive." They urged him to rescind it and make "efforts to protect and heal our nation and all who are living in our country."

Catholic groups advocating for immigrant communities similarly expressed displeasure.

"This is nothing but an unconstitutional and xenophobic attempt to weaponize the census to silence and scare immigrants. The immigrant community will not be silenced," Cabrini Immigrant Services of New York City tweeted last summer.

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