The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20150

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

April 3, 2020

Dear Leaders:

The 21 undersigned organizations respectfully request that Congress prioritize the need for valid, reliable data about the challenges facing our country in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. By supporting a trusted and robust data infrastructure, we will better understand the impacts of the pandemic and policy interventions, and hopefully, be able to better address current and future challenges using evidence-based approaches.

Specifically, the coronavirus pandemic necessitates further action on the unanimous recommendations from the 2017 bipartisan U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. Doing so will help ensure elected leaders have critical information to understand the impacts of the virus long-term on our economy and population, as well as to study and learn from the policies being implemented today to mitigate the pandemic's effects.

The following suggestions are intended to provide rapid prioritization of data to support decision-makers, many of which align with or are complementary to the Evidence Commission's recommendations. The Data Coalition previously sent an open letter to Congress, on March 23rd, which elaborated on some of these ideas with additional recommendations for specific approaches.

1) Enable Improved Privacy-Protected Data Sharing for Research.
Congress should rapidly act to begin establishing a National Secure Data Service,
enabling improved data sharing, linkage, and analysis within a privacy-protective
framework. As designed by the Evidence Commission, the Data Service should be
designated as a federal statistical agency and use the privacy framework reauthorized by
Congress as part of the Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency
Act of 2018 (Title III of P.L. 115-435).

In addition, Congress should explore options to rapidly enable access to certain data
already collected by the government to understand the economic impacts on
households, including income and earnings data. Two rapid strategies to better use
existing data could include enabling research access to the National Directory of New
Hires or allowing for access to tax records, as proposed in the Measuring Real Income
Growth Act of 2019.

Congress should also encourage the White House Office of Management and Budget to
quickly deploy the legal authorities for privacy-protected data sharing provided in
Section 303 of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (P.L.
115-435).

2) Prioritize Funding for Critical Needs in the Evidence Ecosystem. Congress
should appropriate supplemental funding to support implementation of the
Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-435) and related
purposes. These resources should be targeted to support agencies in rapidly building the
capacity and infrastructure for statistical activities, data governance, and program
evaluation and be flexible enough to support federal statistical agencies in unique
challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additional resources can also support specific health-related efforts to understand the
incidence rates of COVID-19 as well as ensure agencies like the National Center for
Health Statistics (NCHS) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have the capability
to collect high-quality data for analyses in the current pandemic. For example, NCHS
should rapidly enhance its Vital Statistics Reporting System to ensure COVID-19
information is captured adequately, and report information in near real-time. NCHS
and the CDC could publicly issue this real-time reporting to inform the American public
while protecting privacy and maintaining public trust in the information.

In addition, Congress should make available additional resources to promote household and establishment surveys that can improve our collective understanding of the impacts of the pandemic.

3) Promote Transparency for Supplemental COVID-19 Spending.
Congress has already taken some meaningful steps to ensure oversight, transparency, and accountability of supplemental appropriations. These oversight mechanisms should take advantage of the groundwork laid by the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act, P.L. 113-101) and the recently-enacted Grant Reporting Efficiency and Agreement Transparency Act (GREAT Act, P.L. 116-103). These laws support the implementation of certain data standards for government spending, making the information more open and accurate. We encourage Congress to continue to incorporate strong data transparency and accountability provisions in future supplemental appropriations bills.

Thank you for your consideration of these critical data priorities as our country responds to the coronavirus pandemic. We recognize the gravity of the situation before us, which is why we need good data as a priority at every stage of our decision-making process.

For more information, please contact the Data Coalition's policy manager, Corinna Turbes (corinna.turbes@datacoalition.org).

Respectfully,

American Anthropological Association
American Evaluation Association
American Sociological Association
American Statistical Association
Association for Psychological Science
Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM)
Association of Population Centers
Association of Public Data Users
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

Crime & Justice Research Alliance
Data Coalition
Data Foundation
Denodo Technologies
Elder Research, Inc.
Grant Thornton Public Sector LLC
Informatica
Knowledge Alliance
Population Association of America
Results For America
Society for Research in Child Development