

Consortium of Social Science Associations Webinar

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

May 22, 2024

INTRODUCTION

- Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Robert Santos, director of the U.S. Census Bureau. It's a pleasure to be with you today to talk about what's happening at our agency.
- As I'm sure you know, the Census Bureau is the leading provider of quality data about the nation's people and economy.
- We conduct three censuses and over 130 annual and monthly surveys, collecting data on the population, demographics, business and the economy, education, employment, health, international trade, and more.
- We provide a wealth of data by a variety of key demographic variables, such as race, ethnicity, sex, disability, income, veteran status, and others.
- And these data are often broken down by geography. Importantly, these data can help to assess equity and identify underserved communities.
- They can inform the public, businesses, and policymakers in advancing equity and proposing effective, data-driven solutions. And we use these data to make great tools that can help data users get information you need in a digestible, timely, and accurate way.

TRANSFORMATION AND MODERNIZATION

- This is a time of great change for the federal statistical system. The Census Bureau, and all our fellow statistical agencies, is facing new and complex challenges.
- As we advance into the 21st century, we are faced with a new statistical universe that comes with new and complex data user needs, data collection challenges, the demand for doing more with less, the need for improved collaboration with stakeholders and partners, stronger computing power, the proliferation of alternative unofficial data products, and new technologies.
- The Census Bureau has a long proud history of innovation, which helps us deliver on our mission to serve as the nation's leading provider of quality data about its people, places, and economy.
- Our mission exists to answer simple and complex questions, which we have historically done by conducting censuses and surveys.
- But censuses and surveys alone, while still critical, can no longer answer the questions completely or quickly enough to satisfy the modern need for data. We need a better approach that combines new and traditional data sources and aligns our talent and resources to meet these challenges.
- To adapt in this changing environment, we understand the need for new innovations and approaches to help us transform and modernize how we do our work.
- And threats aside, modernization introduces new opportunities to increase the timeliness, relevance, and value of official statistics. Many facets of our data production, even ordinary processes, stand to benefit from modernization.

- But the modernization of official statistics requires more than the latest technology or the latest statistical methods. It requires a transformation in our thinking—how we think about data, their relevance in a rapidly evolving society, and how the needs of the public can be met.
- That’s why the Census Bureau is engaged in an enterprise-level transformation and modernization initiative.
- This is a multiyear, enterprise-wide effort to evaluate and improve current processes, infrastructures, and mindsets to ensure that we equitably collect, analyze, and disseminate valuable information that reflects the changing nature of our nation’s population and economy.
- While this effort doesn’t focus on any single initiative or program, it seeks to assess and improve the universe of current and future Census Bureau activities.
- The Census Bureau is the largest federal statistical agency, and as I mentioned, we conduct many censuses and surveys. As such, the path to modernization is necessarily multipronged and complex.
- It involves an enterprise-wide, community of the whole approach—one that combines both an internal common strategy of modernization, with continuous external outreach to stakeholders and partners. This outreach is meant to share and reinforce the value of the data we produce and to grow trust within hard-to-count and historically undercounted populations.
- So, as we go about our work, it’s critical that I—and more importantly, we, at the Census Bureau—connect with our partners, stakeholders, data users, policymakers, and the public. We need to understand their needs, concerns, and more generally their perspectives on matters related to statistical data products.
- That is why a principal priority of mine as the director is to seek out, listen to and converse with the multitude of diverse voices across our nation. We are actively engaging the public.
- We recognize the value and importance of different perspectives. They help us to be innovative and creative, and ultimately produce accurate, relevant and useful data on our nation’s people, places and economy.
- Toward that end, I continue to make a concerted effort to engage stakeholders, partners, and local communities across the nation.
- I have met with hundreds of users of Census Bureau data across America. This includes our partners; state, local, and tribal government officials; community groups; and businesses.
- In all this, our goal is to strategically organize and engage a widening diversity of talent and stakeholders to achieving our transformation and modernization goals. By leveraging our core values of scientific integrity, objectivity, transparency, and independence, we can strengthen our data portfolio.
- The key is to combine technological advances and rigorous research with innovation and creativity through promoting diverse perspectives and engaging communities.
- As I said before, this is a multiyear, enterprise-wide effort to evaluate and improve current processes, infrastructures, and mindsets to ensure that we equitably collect, analyze, and disseminate valuable information that reflects the changing nature of our nation’s population and economy.
- Currently planned through FY2027, our efforts are not focused around any one single program, activity, or initiative. They are structured around three integrated anchors to produce a cohesive environment for transforming and modernizing.
- First, our greatest asset is our employees. Through numerous engagements, our diverse employees are shaping the Census Bureau into the 21st century premier statistical agency.
- Second, we are committed to being the leader in advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility as a necessary part of producing quality data. A core component of our approach is developing processes that support continuous improvement of how we conduct our work as we address emergent needs. In conjunction we are designing and advancing towards developing human capital strategies to recruit, develop, and retain a dynamic and diverse workforce.

- And finally, a modern, product-focused ecosystem for modernizing and integrating the tools and technology needed to shift the agency into a data centric organization.
- The three anchors of Census transformation and modernization are based on principles that:
 - Support the evolution of our current state into a 21st century data-centric organization with the capabilities needed to adapt to this ever-changing environment.
 - Help us determine how to make the best use of our talent and resources in the organization and engage employees at all levels to innovate.
- By examining our scientific methods, technology, human capital, and infrastructure, we are empowered to continue to be the nation's trusted data provider and design future programs that complement alternative data sources.

MEETING DATA USERS' NEEDS

- It's important to note that transformation and modernization are part of a journey, not a destination.
- Our approach has allowed us to progress towards meeting the needs of our customers in new and innovative ways.
- We've already taken steps to develop new products and advances to meet our goals, which include:
 - Advancing a culture that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion to help spur opportunity, innovation, and excellence.
 - We're developing our workforce and leveraging existing data sets, programs, and activities while we develop and implement new strategies to advance equity with data, both internally and externally.
 - We are reaching new end users. For example:
 - The Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes tool was developed for students, parents, and educational institutions to help answer questions like: How are program graduates performing in the labor market? Are they working in the industries they trained for?
 - Supporting Emergency Management and COVID-19 Response: an integrated data resource that informs all aspects of emergency management: mitigation/preparedness, response, and recovery, pulling together existing geographic, demographic, and economic data to provide a comprehensive picture for decision-makers.
 - We are providing more adaptable, timely and relevant data products. For example:
 - Household and Business Pulse Surveys which focus on quickly and efficiently collecting data on ways in which people's lives have been impacted by the pandemic in areas including employment, spending, vaccination, health access, mental health, food sufficiency, housing, rent assistance, energy assistance, transportation, and education.
 - The Pulse surveys laid the groundwork for higher frequency, rapid data collections.
 - We are using new techniques to produce new products without increasing burden. For example:
 - Community Resilience Estimates which were developed to measure the capacity of individuals to cope with the external stresses and impacts of a disaster.
 - Estimate the number of individuals by the number of risk factors they are living with (in each state, county, and tract), which are currently used by FEMA, HHS, and EDA.
 - Provide actionable data with increased granularity, timeliness, and accuracy without additional data collection, while adhering to strict privacy protections.
 - And, we are aligning our tools, processes, and products toward our vision for the future.

- At the Census Bureau, we are striving for excellence. Listening to and collaborating with our customers and partners is an important part of that journey, and will help us to innovate, spur creativity, and think critically.
- I know that through these efforts to transform and modernize, we will become a 21st century, premier statistical agency that can provide the nation with data that are of even higher quality, relevance, and utility.

ACS UPDATES: DISABILITY CONTENT AND SOGI TESTING

- So, that's the broad overview of our agency and where we're going.
- Now I want to get into some specifics about some of our programs—namely, things that are happening with our American Community Survey and the 2030 Census.
- Firstly, I want to go over where we are in our current process to revise questions on the ACS, particularly as it relates to the disability content. I know many stakeholders and members of the public care deeply about this topic.
- The process for altering ACS content is designed to help ensure that any proposed changes are necessary and will produce quality, useful information for the nation. An important step in the process is providing an opportunity for the public to provide feedback.
- In October 2023, we posted a Federal Register notice seeking public feedback on the current ACS content revision cycle for several topics: disability, household roster, educational attainment, health insurance coverage, labor force questions and the addition of three new questions on solar panels, electric vehicles and sewage disposal. These changes would begin in 2025.
- In response, we received more than 12,000 comments—the majority of which expressed concerns with the proposed changes to the disability questions.
- The Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics, or NCHS, carefully reviewed the public feedback. Based on that feedback, we plan to retain the current ACS disability questions for collection year 2025. So, we are not implementing the proposed changes.
- Along with our colleagues throughout the federal government, we will continue our work with stakeholders and the public to better understand data needs on disability and assess which, if any, revisions are needed across the federal statistical system to better address those needs.
- The Census Bureau has submitted the final proposal to OMB for approval regarding the changes proposed to the other topics. The final proposal was accompanied by a Federal Register notice in March, detailing the final recommendations and again sought public comment and reviewed the feedback. Again, this proposal does not include any changes to the existing disability questions.
- We also want to engage further with the public on the disability topic specifically. A significant theme in the Federal Register notice comments is a desire for more comprehensive engagement.
- In the spirit of a whole-of-government approach, the Census Bureau, NCHS, OMB, and other federal partners are working together to make that happen. This type of engagement is critical to providing the highest quality data to our nation.
- Moreover, this summer, the Census Bureau, NCHS, and OMB are pleased to work with the National Council on Disabilities, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, National Disability Rights Network, and the Consortium of Constituents with Disabilities to convene a meeting with federal agency disability stakeholders, disability community representatives, data users, researchers, and disability advocates. The purpose is to discuss data needs and data uses surrounding the topic of disability. More details on the meeting will be provided soon.
- We look forward to meeting, learning, and further exploring the informational and data needs of the disability community.

- I also wanted to note that earlier this month, we released a second Federal Register notice that gives the public a 30-day period to comment on the proposed plan for testing ACS questions on sexual orientation and gender identity, or SOGI. You can find this notice at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov), and I encourage you to provide your feedback during the comment period.
- Cognitive testing for SOGI questions has begun, and reports are due at the end of 2024. The self-response test is on track to occur later this summer, and nonresponse follow-up is scheduled to be conducted via phone and in-person interviewing in spring 2025.

2030 CENSUS PREPARATIONS

- Of course, another key area of work this year will be our preparations for the 2030 Census. We're doing a lot of exciting work and research ahead of the next census.
- In January, we announced that our initial operational plan for the 2030 Census will be released in 2025, and we'll hold a major field test in 2026. We released details about the 2026 Census Test in a webinar on April 30.
- In March, we announced the 23 members of our new 2030 Census Advisory Committee, which will begin meeting this summer. And in April, we released strategy documents outlining how we're approaching fundamental aspects of our census preparations, including stakeholder engagement.
- I want to point out our redesigned website at www.census.gov/2030census. The content there will give you a better idea of all the work that we're doing, and many of the resources I've mentioned, such as the strategy documents, are posted there.
- And as part of our commitment to open and transparent communication, we will be continuing our series of webinars to share information about our preparations. I hope that you will follow along on those webinars.
- Our main goal for the 2030 Census, and for every decennial census, is a complete and accurate count of the nation's population. To accomplish that, it's so important that we engage with diverse voices and perspectives.
- After 2020, stakeholders asked us to do more to engage with them earlier in the decade—and we listened, and are acting on that.
- Over the last several months, we've held a series of community meetings about the 2030 Census with various stakeholder groups. These include community-based organizations; Complete Count Committees and State Complete Count Commissions; rural and migrant stakeholders; immigrant advocacy groups; disability rights and low-literacy stakeholders; and finally, state and local governments.
- We need to hear from people across our nation about how to reach hard-to-count and historically undercounted populations, how to leverage technology, how to collect information in an easy and efficient manner. We need to work with stakeholders to identify hard to find populations and tailor our strategies to reach them.
- For example, as you may be aware, young children ages 0 to 4 had the largest undercount in 2020 of any age group. In early April, we released experimental state and county Demographic Analysis estimates of net coverage error of young children in the 2020 Census.
- These estimates will help us prepare for the 2030 Census. Understanding the geographic distribution of the coverage of young children in 2020 can help us better understand where and why young children were missed.
- As we move toward 2030, we cannot complete our mission alone. We need a community-of-the-whole approach that involves support from the wonderfully diverse people of our nation.
- I hope you will join us on our journey to the next decennial count, and provide your valuable input and feedback.

CONCLUSION

- Thank you again for hosting me today. It's been a pleasure to tell you about how modernization is reinvigorating the Census Bureau's purpose and its relationship to stakeholders, data users, and communities.
- I look forward to working together in a future where official statistics are stronger, organizations are more resilient, and products are more specific and responsive to 21st century data needs.
- I look forward to answering your questions.