

BIG CHALLENGES FOR THE 2020 U.S. CENSUS

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Anthony Marx | President of The New York
Public Library

PANELISTS

Margo Anderson | Distinguished Professor
Emerita of History & Urban Studies at the
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

James Treat | Assistant Director for
Decennial Census Programs

danah boyd | Principal Researcher at
Microsoft Research; Founder and President
of Data & Society; Visiting Professor at NYU

Mark Hansen | David & Helen Gurley Brown
Professor of Journalism at Columbia
University; Director of Brown Institute for
Media Innovation

Melva M. Miller | Executive Vice President at
the Association for a Better New York
(ABNY)

Moderator: Kyley McGeeney | Vice President
at PSB; Founder/Editor of MissionMichelin

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ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

Chair, The Roper Center

President, The Academy of Political Science

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

ANTHONY MARX

President, The New York Public Library

- Libraries are in every community and every neighborhood. Members of the community have developed trusting relationships with the library.
- To help the 2020 census get a more accurate count, The New York Public Library (NYPL) wants to work with the current patrons of the library and to bring more of the public in.
- The library is the perfect place for members of typically undercounted or “hard-to-count” communities to participate in the 2020 census. The NYPL has computers available and trusted staff to help.
- Counting is the basis of the census. Counting is important in both the literal and figurative sense. Every individual has something to offer and deserves respect—this is the foundation of the liberal society we are still living in. Every person counts, even though this concept is under threat in ways that seem unimaginable.

A Brief History of the U.S. Census

MARGO ANDERSON

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION calls for a decennial census in Article I Section II Paragraph III. Referencing her book, *The American Census: A Social History*, Anderson discusses the origins of the census and the mounting challenges that face the census as the population has increased.

ORIGINS OF THE U.S. CENSUS

- After the British left in the early 1780s, a new government needed to be formed. This was accomplished through the Articles of Confederation, under which a singular body voted on all issues—there was neither an executive nor a judicial branch.
- The army had disbanded and there was concern of British troops returning. The government was falling apart. The Framers drafted the U.S. Constitution in 1787. Article I called for a decennial census.
- As per the Constitution, all free persons were to be counted. Slaves were to be counted as three-fifths of a person and American Indians were excluded from the count. Thus, the U.S. Constitution itself laid out distinctions between people based on race and ethnicity.
- Congress authorized the first census in 1790. This function was not left to the states.
- As the United States expanded westward, new states were added and treated as equal to the original 13 states. Power began to shift westward, resulting in the reallocation of congressional seats and Electoral College votes as well as the redistribution of funding. Demographic developments tie directly into U.S. politics.

THE CENSUS IN TODAY'S UNITED STATES

- The 2020 census will be the 24th since 1790. Every ten years involves a process of getting the public to remember the previous census. There is a discrepancy between the unobtrusiveness of the administration of the count and the big political implications the census truly has.
- In 1790, the United States had approximately 3.9 million inhabitants. Today, there are roughly 330 million. Thus, there are about 25–30 percent more people who need to be integrated into the political system every decade.
- There are a lot of questions that come into play when planning the census. Who are the people that need to be counted? Should certain people be counted? Where should certain groups, such as GI's, college students, homeless individuals, and prisoners, be counted?
- Every census tries to address the problems of the last one.
- The methodology of the census in itself is a political discussion.

Promoting Participation in the 2020 U.S. Census

JAMES TREAT

THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU will be conducting various activities to solicit public participation in the 2020 census. Treat explains how the Bureau is engaging in programs designed to raise awareness, motivate self-response, and encourage cooperation during the field data-collection operations.

DEVELOPING THE 2020 CENSUS

- For the 2020 census, the majority of the population will be invited first to complete the form online and then on paper. The final measure will be door-to-door enumeration.
- Diversity is one of the great features of the United States, but poses significant challenges for the census.
- Over a year of research—including focus groups on barriers, attitudes, and awareness concerning the census—has gone into creating a complete set of materials for the 2020 census.
- An expansive language program has developed support for those who solely speak a language other than English. The online census form comes in English as well as 12 other languages. There are support materials, such as tutorials and guides on how to complete the census form, in 59 other languages.
- The Census Bureau is well aware that not everyone in the United States speaks English. It is still very important for those who do not speak English to complete the census, because hard-to-count populations need to be enumerated.

ADVERTISING THE 2020 CENSUS

- Major planning is involved in figuring out how to contact everyone across the United States. The Census Bureau has to understand why some people are hard to locate and how it can persuade people into participating in the census. This involves 35 distinct operations.
- The Census Bureau utilizes a partnership program at the national and local levels. There are about 1,500 employees working with grassroots organizations to promote the census.
- Many people do not know that the census is coming. This major issue will be addressed through paid advertising campaigns between January and March 2020. Advertising efforts will include national and local television ads, radio advertisements, social media posts, print ads, billboards, and ads on public transportation.
- Due to the diversity of the United States, paid local advertisements will appear in 12 languages other than English: Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, Arabic, Tagalog, Polish, French, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Japanese.
- The Census Bureau has spent over a year developing communications efforts to reach the U.S.-Hispanic, Puerto Rican, African American, American-Indian, Alaskan-Indian, and American-Pacific Islander populations.
- There are also efforts to reach the “diverse mass”—everyone else who has not yet been adequately covered by micro-targeted advertising.

Data Legitimacy and the U.S. Census

DANAH BOYD

THE LEGITIMACY OF CENSUS DATA has long been challenged. While demonstrating that these are not new concerns, boyd looks ahead at how to tackle questions of legitimacy regarding the upcoming 2020 census.

PAST CENSUS DATA CONCERNS

- After the 1920 census was completed, the House of Representatives did not reapportion its seats. Members of Congress questioned if the data was legitimate. However, concerns about the operation itself were only surface-level. On a much deeper level, elites simply did not like that so many immigrants were enumerated. It was ultimately decided that the data was “flawed” and that seats could not be reapportioned, with Congress framing it as “an issue of quality”.
- The census suffers from systematic disparities due to differential undercount. The 1920 census undercounted at least 3 percent of the total population, with black individuals undercounted by about 15 percent. The census has always been political in nature.

PREPARING FOR THE 2020 CENSUS

- The idealization of data is at an all-time high. There are constant questions of who collects data, who has access to it, and on what terms.
- Counting all the inhabitants of the United States is a herculean task. The process becomes difficult when the invisible data infrastructure becomes brittle over time—it requires maintenance.
- There are layers to the legitimacy of the census data. Do we trust the infrastructure and are we willing to continually maintain it?

PREVALENT ISSUES FOR THE UPCOMING CENSUS

Fear

- People may find the census process invasive. Will people trust the process if they do not like their data being collected?
- Fear can be utilized for political purposes. Presumably, politicians spread fear. Thus, trustworthy community partnerships are so important to the census. It is a time to utilize those already-established partnerships.
- Recently, an internet hoax spread that census workers coming door-to-door were not legitimate, and had instead malicious intentions. This was factually inaccurate, but the misinformation spread across social media and was picked up by mainstream media outlets. In a climate of uncertainty and angst, nuggets of fear can spread fast.

Differential Privacy

- People want to be sure that the census will be confidential. How do you ensure confidentiality while simultaneously maintaining accessibility?
- Legally, census participants cannot be identified for 72 years. However, with today’s technology, there are concerns that it will be easier to match and re-identify individuals.
- Differential privacy is both a technological and political project. The data will be contested—either by asking honest questions about the quality *or* by dismissing it entirely for political purposes. The ability to come together and believe the data is imperative.

U.S. Census Data and Privacy

MARK HANSEN

AFTER THE DATA HAS BEEN COLLECTED and the U.S. Census Bureau determines that it has achieved a good count, the Bureau publishes the data in tables of aggregate statistics. Hansen describes privacy measures taken by the Bureau and the impact on data end-users.

DATA COLLECTED BY THE U.S. CENSUS

- After the 2010 census was completed, the Bureau released approximately 8 billion numbers. This averages out to roughly 25 stats per person. The Bureau managed to release more data than was collected.
- The census collects data about a person's location, age, sex, race, and ethnicity.
- The released data leaks small amounts of information about individuals, to the point where an individual can be completely identified. Overly accurate information about individuals is like a death by 1,000 cuts—one or two will not matter, but combined will take a serious toll.
- Following the release of 2010 census data, Hansen and a co-researcher conducted a reconstruction experiment that utilized all of the available data. Within a week, they had astoundingly accurate results on the individual level.
- The Census Bureau was not blind to privacy concerns, but they did enough to meet Title 13 requirements.
- Title 13 of the U.S. Code states, "All responses to Census Bureau surveys and censuses are confidential and protected . . . the Census Bureau is required to keep respondent information confidential . . . The results from any census or survey are reported in statistical format only."

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU PRIVACY METHODS

- A technique the Census Bureau utilizes to mitigate privacy concerns is "swapping." Certain key variables are retained by the individual, while some can be swapped with someone else's without interfering with the accuracy of the data.
- The Bureau does have a formal privacy policy. Adding uncertainty based on how much privacy loss a person will experience is new.
- After adding noise to the data, the Bureau can release the code to show their process and maintain transparency. This is a function of differential privacy.
- The Census Bureau is purposefully adding noise to the data to protect individual privacy, but it raises a question of whether the final dataset will be fit for end users.
- The inserted noise is more prevalent at the block level and is less noticeable at the state or national level.
- The Census Bureau has not yet determined the proper trade-off between differential privacy parameters and the appropriate amount of noise to add. Adding too much noise could change the true makeup and composition of certain neighborhoods.

New York City and the U.S. Census

MELVA M. MILLER

NEW YORK CITY (NYC) and the Association for a Better New York (ABNY) have identified the 2020 census as a top priority. Miller discusses NYC's efforts to ensure the census gains an accurate count of the city's residents.

NYC'S COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVING AN ACCURATE COUNT

- Billions of dollars of federal funding go into the census count. The count affects congressional seats, research, and resources for vulnerable communities.
- The national self-response rate is about 72 percent. NYC's falls a bit below that at 67 percent. Raising the self-response rate across all communities for proper enumeration of the city is a priority.
- In the 2010 census, response rates in some NYC communities hovered closer to 50 percent. The Hasidic community's self-response rate was roughly 48 percent and Afro-Caribbean community's was about 52 percent. Both of these communities are politically active, but remained hesitant to respond to the census.
- City Hall opened a new NYC Office of the Census to help with the operations side and with outreach efforts. \$40 million has been devoted to census outreach. Specifically, \$1.4 million is going to libraries. As Anthony Marx said, libraries are trusted fixtures in all communities. Additionally, the city is expanding its field operations team.
- The City Council has put \$14 million towards a census task force. Four borough presidents have created Complete Count Committees.
- Beyond the NYC government, philanthropies are instrumental by offering grants to community-based organizations for census outreach and research. Organizations across the city, such as the New York Immigration Coalition, aim to reach hard-to-count communities.

ABNY'S PLAN TO SUPPORT NYC'S CENSUS EFFORTS

- ABNY is helping to support the census infrastructure with a comprehensive outreach program.
- ABNY has a five anchor plan to help ensure an accurate count:
 - *Coordination*: Act as a bridge between the government, private organizations, and non-profits to coordinate efforts. This includes the Census Summit, Get out the Count (GOTC), and public awareness campaigns.
 - *Research*: To understand what the hard-to-count communities are thinking by facilitating focus groups with trusted voices. Research is crucial when it comes to micro-targeted messaging.
 - *Communication*: How do you convey the importance of the census? Micro-targeted messaging based on community make-up is part of a comprehensive strategy to reach everyone.
 - *Accessibility*: The 2020 census form can be completed online. ABNY has developed partnerships with institutions like libraries and hospitals to grant access to safe and secure equipment for the public to participate in the census.
 - *Advocacy*: ABNY is involved in all facets of advocacy work. This includes writing op-ed pieces, testifying in hearings, and advocating alongside local elected officials.

Question and Answer Takeaways

ATTENDEES HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to ask the panelists census-related questions following the panel discussion.

FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF THE 2020 CENSUS

- The census helps to determine how \$675 billion in annual funding will be distributed to states and localities. Thus, with each decennial census, trillions of federal dollars are at stake.

2020 CENSUS RESPONSE

- The Census Bureau can monitor and map the response rate in real time. If particular areas are exhibiting low-response rates, additional measures will be taken to reach those communities.
- The unit of measurement for the census is by household, not by individual. Thus, if you live in a complex household or with non-relatives, it is essential to include everyone living in the household on the form.
- 144 million households need to be accounted for. Misinformation campaigns discouraging online participation will push accountability onto human non-response activities (door-to-door census takers).
- The internet form will not work for the homeless population, because an address is required to complete it. However, there are operations that will try to enumerate the homeless population.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- Grassroots and community-based organizations are vital to achieving an accurate count.
- It is important for the Bureau to exhibit cultural competency by building trusted partnerships between hard-to-count communities and community-based organizations.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE 2020 CENSUS

- With enhancements in technology, it is important for the Census Bureau to look at infrastructure maintenance to protect individual privacy.
- The Bureau is anticipating that Ring doorbells are going to create difficulty for door-to-door enumerators—people will not open the door to a stranger.
- Everyone will have the opportunity to participate in the census online. The Bureau is trying to make the online form as easy, safe, and secure as possible.
- Technically, someone could fill out an online form for a different address. However, the Bureau has behind-the-scenes mechanisms and protocols if it suspects falsified responses.
- The Census Bureau has procedures in place for monitoring social media and handling hoaxes or misinformation.
- News outlets should be prepared for alerts of a data hack. These alerts could be fake, potentially with malicious intent. News media should verify these stories before broadcasting them to prevent amplifying a falsehood to the public.
- Vulnerability is low if using a mobile device to complete the online form. Information put into the form will not go to any apps. No input is stored on the device. The data is encrypted both in transit and at rest. As long as users go to the official census website, their data should be safe. Privacy is more likely to be compromised by losing a completed paper form than by completing the form online. Furthermore, the census is only collecting mostly observable characteristics.
- The data will never be 100 percent perfect, but it can be considered good enough and fit-for-use.